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NEW INITIATIVE IN ASIA — A CALL OF THE SPIRIT TO US

Of the estimated 5.76 billion people in the world, 3.5 billion live in Asia. China alone has now reached 1.2 billion or more than the total number of the world’s Catholics. Despite rapid economic growth in some countries, a huge number of the world’s poor live in Asia. Asia is the cradle of the world’s great religions, Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Taoism, Judaism, Confucianism and Shintoism as well as Christianity itself. At the moment Catholics represent only 2.8% of its population.

A. Asia and the Congregation: Our Story so Far

1. The Society of the Holy Spirit and Asia

Already in the eighteenth century, missionaries from the Holy Spirit Seminary in Paris had, under the auspices of the PEM (Foreign Missions of Paris), done very valuable work when much of Asia was without other missionaries and the persecution of Christians was widespread. However, with the focus of the Congregation firmly on Africa, the last Spiritans left India at the beginning of 1888.

2. The past is prologue

We have heard two challenging calls in our recent history. The edition of I/D No. 7, summarising the Enlarged General Council of 1976, tells us of a very significant happening in our history.

“The eve of Pentecost was the day when three projects of highest priority were voted unanimously - Angola, Paraguay and Pakistan. Three projects, three continents! Three projects undertaken in coresponsibility by all the major Superiors. Three projects which, taken together, will test some of our options in Mission today and our will to begin anew: urgent missionary situations; international teams; poverty and liberation; first evangelization; dialogue with Islam and an opening to the Far East! There was great happiness indeed, on the eve of Pentecost”.

Is the present moment in our history not something remarkably similar as we further open ourselves to Asia while, as the Enlarged General Council in Dakar put it “still maintaining our privileged ties with Africa”?

3. Indian Ocean Foundation (FOI)

Inspired particularly by the presence of some of the Great World Religious, notably Islam and Hinduism in Mauritius, the District of Mauritius together with Reunion and Madagascar, began a formation programme in 1969. The special interest of the “Indian Ocean Foundation” was, and continues to be, the formation of confreres for mission
in Asia or among Asian minorities in other countries. Today, two of its members are part of the team in Pakistan.

4. Pakistan

For almost twenty years our confreres have worked in Pakistan with a minority Church amongst people who themselves are also ethnic minorities in the country. They live in two communities in Rahim Yar Khan and in Sukkur. Their ministry takes two forms. Their principal aim is a commitment to the Marwari Bhils and the second is ministry among the Punjabi Christians.

Our confreres will hand over the ministry in Sukkur and found a new community in Sadiqabad, committed to the Marwari people. They have set a most relevant example of deep community life, where each member is valued for what he is and not for what he has or can do. Each is free to develop and express his own gifts in teamwork both with his confreres and with others.

5. Elsewhere in the Congregation

Over the years our Congregation has been enriched by the presence of confreres of Asiatic origin. The original mission to Paraguay by Trinidad included such. The present Provincial of the Brazilian Province is of Japanese origin. Most recently, Vietnamese entered our formation programmes in the Province of Germany, and of U.S.A/West.

6. The call at Itaici

As they arrived in Itaici the question in the forefront of the delegates’ minds was: "Where is the Spirit leading us?" The very methodology chosen for the Chapter underlined the openness to identify, and attempt to respond to the call of the Spirit at this moment of our history.

"We heard a call for an extension of our missionary activity in the Asiatic world. The presentations from Pakistan and Mauritius and the reports from the Indian Ocean Foundation drew our attention to the enormous missionary task in Asia and the relatively small response of our Congregation so far to the needs of the people in that vast area. As yet the message of the Gospel has scarcely found a home there. These facts cannot simply be overlooked by an international congregation which is missionary by nature.

Hence the plea that the Congregation should consider another initiative in Asia. The ultimate aim of this initiative would be to contribute to making the Asian Church more missionary and self-evangelising" (Itaici, No.7)

7. The importance of this call

As has happened many times in our history, we are called to risk and stretch ourselves. This comes at a time when many are preoccupied with dwindling numbers and a rapidly ageing section of the Congregation. Many places are seeking personnel and, yet, the Spirit calls us to "launch into the deep" once more. We are asked to broaden our horizons and, particularly, to enter into closer contact with some of the great world religions and to transcend cultural and linguistic divides.

In doing this, we seek an important experience which will be mutually enriching for ourselves and for the places and people to whom we go. It will offer us a different missionary experience as we go to learn and to share the lives, culture and spirituality of other people. We will help some of the local churches there to become more missionary and self-evangelising. It could also become an enrichment of the Congregation should it result in the foundation there of the Congregation itself. It will be helpful to have Asian Spiritans as missionaries in their own continent or elsewhere.
B. Responding to the Call of the Chapter

1. Gathering Information and Defining Initial Criteria

As a first step to help us answer the call of the Chapter, the General Council asked Fr Brian McLaughlin to carry out the preliminary research. We did not have specific invitations but only heard of Bishops of Asian countries who would welcome missionaries. He began, over a period of ten weeks, gathering information through contacts with fifteen Congregations, entities and individuals in U.S., France, Ireland and Rome and with confreres who work in Asia or have special links with it.

Fr McLaughlin then came to Rome to have a meeting with the Council. During our reflections we tried to establish some initial criteria to determine which countries were to be visited. The criteria below were to be checked out during the visits to enable us to make the choice for our missions:

- the possibility of getting a visa as missionaries;
- the possibility of contact and encounter with Asian cultures and the great world religions;
- the possibility of contributing something significant to the local church;
- directed to an area of high density population;
- work with the poor and underprivileged;
- the possibility of community life;
- the possibility of teamwork, with others and among ourselves;
- places which offer the possibility of our African confreres being part of the new initiative, given that in fifteen years' time we will be very much dependent on them for personnel;
- the degree of difficulty involved in language learning and inculturation.

On the basis of these and the information received, the Council decided that he should visit Thailand, Philippines, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Japan. He would also make a brief visit from Hong Kong to Macau and mainland China.

Do we need Asia or does Asia need us, or both? As an international missionary society, should we be more widely spread in "the other half of the world"? Can we afford not to be in touch with the great world religions of Buddhism Confucianism and Hinduism. Missiology and spirituality today are so influenced by these great and ancient faiths, can we remain impervious to them? (Spiritan Research and Animation Centre. 1991!SRAC)

Although, according to the initial criteria, we decided not to include countries where missionaries could not obtain entry visas because of the current political regimes, exceptions were made for Vietnam and China. Of particular significance for us at the moment is the interest in our Congregation of some Vietnamese, living outside their own country. Going to China must also remain a hope for the future, given its cultural and religious richness, importance and challenges. Thus, Vietnam and China are places where we believe we should go if and when this becomes possible.

2. Visits

a. Exploratory visit by Fr McLaughlin

From mid-January during a period of eighteen weeks, Fr McLaughlin visited the selected countries. He was warmly received by other missionaries, the clergy and religious in the different countries.

In the course of his contacts he tried to assess the situation in each place against the above criteria as agreed beforehand with the Council. Reading and listening to his report which he gave us in June following this first visit, we got a sense of a "new world". We were struck by the huge cultural and language differences. But, the most striking feeling was one of excitement.

We then had to decide between the different countries to be revisited for more detailed research to help us arrive at more precise missionary projects. There were no firm invitations received from Thailand and Japan.

After many hours of reading, studying and discussing, we opted for Vietnam, Philippines and Taiwan as countries that met our initial criteria. It was then decided that the Superior General together with Brian McLaughlin would
visit these three countries for a more in-depth study, getting in touch with the different bishops, priests and laypeople, visiting dioceses and parishes and other works.

b. Visitation by the Superior General together with Fr McLaughlin

On August 01, Fr Schouver arrived in Ho Chi Minh City, where he was met by our Vietnamese confere, Fr. Binh Thê Quach, of the USA/W Province, who was in the country to visit his family. He was

"enchanted by what he had witnessed in a few, short days: a dignified and hard-working people, a poor Church which suffers and resists but which is still full of signs of Christian generosity among the religious met."

On August 06, he travelled on to Philippines. During the rest of August, he and Fr McLaughlin, who joined him in Manila, visited five Dioceses in Philippines and three in Taiwan which had seemed to meet our criteria and where we were assured of a welcome by the local church.

They underlined our position with the various Bishops:

"We come as missionaries with a vision of evangelization and of helping the local church itself to be more missionary. Our option is to be with the poor and those on the margin, to meet people in society beyond the borders of the established Church, to share our faith with people of other religions and cultures. Initially, this could be from a parish base, as we are new in the country and new to its culture. A parish could provide a rich inculturation experience. However, we are not coming to "plug gaps". We want, again probably after a period of adaptation, to be available to the local church for more specialised ministries e.g. youth, justice, formation at all levels, minorities, interreligious dialogue etc. Community is an essential part of our lifestyle. We also emphasise teamwork and want to collaborate closely with others."

They felt these points were understood and well accepted by the diocesan authorities. They were brought on visits to specific places in line with our charism and much discussion took place about the possible involvement of our conferees in a variety of specific ministries.

On September 01, Fr Schouver continued on to visit our conferees in Pakistan and to reflect with them on the new initiative.

3. Echoes of the Visits

A. VIETNAM

It is a poor country, whose people have suffered much over the centuries, but particularly since 1954. Its needs, material and pastoral, are great. Apart from these needs, it could be a base also for future evangelization in Asia. Inculturation in other countries of Asia would be much easier for Vietnamese than for Africans, Europeans and Americans, North and South. Moreover, people from Vietnam in Europe and North America are already interested in the Congregation.

B. PHILIPPINES

The decision to include the Philippines in the first visit done by Fr McLaughlin followed a rethinking of an earlier one to omit it. The reasons for the doubts surrounding it were the large number of Catholics there already - around 80% of the population - the impression that it has a well-established Church with a serious effort being made to implement the vision of the second "Pastoral Council of the Philippines" of 1990, and the fact that the local Church is already sending missionaries abroad. Also, the only "World Religion", other than Christianity, to be found there is Islam, with 5% of the population.

Against these were placed the ideas that, as newcomers to that part of the world, it would be an "easier" place to start, given the Catholic ambience. It would be a good place to get a "feel" of Asia and to give support to conferees working in a non-Christian environment in other Asian countries. Notwithstanding the fact that the country is regarded as being a catholic country, there is a huge need to deepen the faith of the Catholics in practically all areas. Despite the structures and pastoral plans, very many people would fall into the category of those who have "scarcely heard" the gospel message.

However, precisely because it is the only "Catholic" country in Asia, it would be a place where we might attract
missionary vocations for work outside the country, whether as members of the Congregation or not. There are some six million Filipinos, nearly 10% of the total population, already working, mostly on a temporary, but some on a permanent basis, outside the country. There are large numbers in other Asian countries - e.g. Hong Kong, Japan, Taiwan, Saudi Arabia. A Jesuit in Hong Kong remarked, in the context of the number of Filipinos who travel abroad: "It is not an accident that the Philippines is the only Catholic country in Asia. The Filipinos are 'ready-made' missionaries". Congregations consulted spoke of special needs - e.g. ecology, justice, first evangelization among the cultural minorities, migrants, dialogue with Islam. Further, there were certain Bishops seeking missionaries because of the shortage of priests. In certain areas the ratio of priests to people is 1 to 18,000 Catholics.

About the possibilities of African confreres working in Asia, the CICM (Congregatio Immaculati Cordis Mariae) took the initiative of appointing African members to the Philippines. Zairian members of the CICM have settled well there and they are very much appreciated.

By and large these impressions were confirmed during the first visit. Pressing invitations were made by 5 Bishops - 2 in the major southern island of Mindanao, where the Muslim minority live, and 3 in the north of the country, where many of the Tribal peoples live.

i. Visit of IPIIL

In the Philippines the first place visited by the Superior General and Fr McLaughlin was the Prelature of Ipiil, situated in the civil province of Zamboanga del Sur in the south-western part of the island of Mindanao.

The major problems in the area are:

- disturbed peace and order situations, due to tensions between Muslims and the Government and Catholics as Muslims seek independence for all or sections of Mindanao.

ii. Visit of ILIGAN

The diocese of Iligan lies north-west of Ipiil. Frs Schouwer and McLaughlin arrived, after 6 hours of very bumpy travel, covered with light brown dust! The journey confirmed the problem of "bad roads and public transport".

The Columban Missionaries were formerly, responsible for this and the neighbouring dioceses. Some twenty years ago a section of Ilijan was cut off and set up as the Vicariate of Marawi. In Marawi the population is 95% Muslim, which calls for a very sensitive approach by the Catholic missionaries. All the sisters of a Carmelite convent there, were kidnapped some years ago, as was a MEP priest on two occasions. Two attempts have been made to kidnap the present Bishop. While there, during the first visit, Fr McLaughlin had to stay indoors, keeping his European features well out of sight!

iii. Visit of MANILA

From Ilijan the visitors made a journey of an hour and a half to the airport at Cagayan de Oro, from where they flew to Manila. There they enjoyed the hospitality of the CICM community. The two dioceses and vicariate they were to visit in the northern part of the island of Luzon were part of the area traditionally evangelized by this Congregation.

iv. Visit of BAYOMBONG

Six hours by bus from Manila, this time on much better roads brought them to Bayombong. The diocese is ringed by mountains in all directions. It is a melting pot of different cultures. There is a specific outreach to the Tribal people, under the responsibility of a female religious congregation, founded specifically for this mission and itself made up of Tribal members. Four places were visited, two of them very much on the periphery of the diocese. One
Bayombong, the Philippines: In school at Castañeda.
L-R: Fr General, Florence, Catechist, School Worker,
Fr Edwin, School Worker, Lay Member, Fr Brian.

was a very attractive area in the mountains, some four
hours by car from Bayombong. Of its ten outstations, seven
are accessible only on foot. At the moment it is looked after
by a very competent twenty two years old catechist who is
there on mission from the provincial capital, Tuguergarao.

v. Visit of ILAGAN

It takes three hours by public transport to go from Bayombong to Ilagan. The diocese covers a very large area -
10,665 km2 - and has a population of over a million. In contrast with its neighbours, it is very flat. However, there is
an area with some 20,000 people on the Pacific side of its
one mountain range, the “Sierra Madre” and which is
accessible only by plane or a very roundabout route by bus
and boat. Various people pointed to this as offering the
greatest missionary challenge. However, overall it was not
considered a good place to start because, as newcomers, we
would need to be nearer the centre of the diocese initially.
The Bishop was very flexible about where we might begin
if we went there.

vi. Visit of TABUK

The seat of the Vicariate of Tabuk was a further two hours
on. This was erected as an independent ecclesiastical entity
in 1992 with the appointment of a dynamic Bishop, Mgr
Carlito Czenz, CICM, a Filipino who formerly worked in
Brazil. It is extremely mountainous and very many of the
villages in the southern part can be reached only on foot. It
is made up, almost entirely, of members of the Apayao and
Kalinga Tribes. One of the major issues is war between
different villages. The notion of vendetta is very much a
feature of the Kalinga culture. Elaborate, but precarious,
peace pacts are in place. While they were there, the Bishop
had to be “at the ready” during a whole day, waiting to be
called to continue his role as a mediator between two
groups at war with each other. Again, the Bishop here
showed himself very open to work out the details of their
mission with a team who might go there.

vii. Back in MANILA

Tabuk is ninety minutes drive from Tuguergarao, where
they took the plane back to Manila. They met Cardinal Sin
who, somewhat surprisingly, immediately took the initia-
tive and strongly encouraged the Spiritans to come there
with a view to founding the Congregation and preparing
missionaries for China

C. TAIWAN

The challenges of Taiwan are quite different. It has a very
small Catholic group. Catholics numbered some 15,000 up
to 1949. Then with the influx of people and missionaries
from the Mainland, there was a growth up to some 300,000
over the last twenty years, principally among the recent
immigrants and the Aborigines. This remains the number
today in a population of some 21,400,000. The
“Taiwanese”, or those who trace their origins to the Chi-
nese who came to the island from the 10th to the 12th
century, constitute over 80% of the population but less than
one third of the Catholics. Thus, many would say that the
Church has never really inculturated. The Church and so-
ciety, tend to be very hierarchical and so the formation of
an active, involved, outward-looking laity remains a task to
be done. This was underlined by the three bishops who
invited us to work in their Dioceses. The Catholic Church
is responsible for the running of many Institutions - e.g.
kindergartens, centres for the handicapped and aged, hos-
pitals, etc. schools, orphanages or centres for children from
broken homes

There are good reasons to claim that the economic de-
velopment of the country has not satisfied all the aspira-
tions of the people. This is confirmed by the revival of Bud-
dhism and the widespread involvement in Popular Relig-
ion. There seems to be an increasing search for “meaning”
in life beyond that which an upwardly mobile society pro-
vides. Similarly, the economic growth has left some people
and groups more on the margin - e.g. Aborigines, migrant
workers, aged, handicapped etc. The basic challenge, like
that increasingly of modern Europe and the U.S., is how to
evangelise this society - what witness do we present to it,
how can Christian values find roots in it?

Contact with youth presents a special problem. There is
great competition to get into the “better” Universities and
courses. Thus, very many young people go to “crum schools” at night in order to supplement what they have
already learned during the day at normal school and to
better prepare them for examinations. Their lives become
almost totally absorbed with study and school-related ac-
tivities.
On the other hand, Taiwan also offers real possibilities of inter-religious dialogue. Given the origins of 98% of the population, it is a very "Chinese" society. While we would go there for the purpose of mission on the spot, it would also provide an immersion in Chinese culture and language which would be relevant to any possible, future presence on the Mainland. Mandarin and the local Taiwanese languages present a very significant challenge. To learn the basics of either takes two years of full-time study!

i. Visit of KAOSHIUNG

On August 23 the Superior General and Fr. McLaughlin flew to Kaohsiung in the South of Taiwan. This is the second largest city in the country: 1.5 million people. of the 3.5 millions of the area covered by the Diocese, live there. One third of the area, mainly in the mountain section, is inhabited by Aborigines, who also constitute about 1/3 of the 46,700 Catholics in the Diocese.

They visited various areas of the Diocese, including the large Buddhist Monastery of Fokuangshan or "Buddha's Light Mountain". This is typical of the revival of Buddhism. In its 30 years of existence it has opened some 120 centres worldwide. In the monastery itself there are 900 nuns and 400 monks.

Another interesting visit was to the Church at Wanchin, built in 1865 and the second oldest in the country. The possibilities presented to us by Archbishop Shan, S.J., who is also President of the Bishops’ Conference, were first evangelization in the south-east, the urban apostolate as new areas open up in Kaohsiung itself or working out of established parishes.

ii. Visit of HSINCHU

From Kaohsiung they travelled on by train to Hsinchu which is near the coast in the north-west of the country. The four hour trip gave them a chance to note the very high population density in the country. 64% of the country's 36,000 km2 is under forest-covered mountains, with summits of up to 4,000 metres. This runs like a spine almost the complete length of the country. It divides unequally the country with 19.5 millions on the western side, along which the train travelled, and 1.9 millions on the eastern side. The impression they got from the journey, was almost like going through one continuous city. During the visits within Hsinchu Diocese they had the opportunity to go to this very beautiful mountainous area and see something of the pastoral work of an Italian Franciscan with the 8,000 Aborigines in the parish.

iii. Visit of TAIPEI

The final stop was the Archdiocese of Taipei, which is just an hour by train from Hsinchu. The Archbishop showed himself to be very flexible about where we might work and underlined the importance of bringing something new to the church and not just maintaining the status quo.

At the Pastoral Centre they met a laywoman with a degree in Theology, who with another laywoman and a sister travels around the country, giving renewal courses to groups of clergy, religious and laity. She believes the principal task of a new missionary group would also be to bring a new sense of openness to a church which is closed in on itself and very traditional.

One of the highlights of the visit was a day and a half spent with Fr. Albert Poulet-Mathis, S.J., former Secretary of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conference on inter-religious dialogue and a member of the Pontifical Commission. Currently, he is President of the Taiwan Conference on Religion and Peace. With him they visited a Centre of Buddhist Studies, where some very profound inter-religious research is going on, and two Buddhist Monasteries. The second of these was on a hilltop overlooking the sea. The Master, who is also the Founder of the monastery, is an exceptional person and they had the opportunity of some faith-sharing with him and some of the 80 member community.

Two interesting developments of this monastery are that, impressed by the example of Catholic religious, they are becoming more involved in social activities and secondly, there is a project to build a "Museum of World Religions" close to the monastery. Finally, they went to a Centre of "Popular Religion" in the centre of Taipei. It is estimated that between seventy and eighty per cent of Taiwanese participate, at one time or another, in these rites. Fr. Albert is very convinced about the opportunities, and need, for inter-religious dialogue. He does not see it as an exercise alongside others, but as fundamental in today's world. He is convinced that Catholics have much to learn from Buddhism, as he himself has in his forty years of encounter with it.
C. Discernment and Decision

1. Redefining Our Criteria

Following on the two visits, the Council felt that sufficient research had been done and that it was time to make a careful discernment towards taking decisions. We tried to redefine the criteria for the selection of the places where we should start. In doing this:

• We looked first of all at the Spiritan Rule of Life, especially the articles of Chapter 2;
• We took account of what we heard from all those, individuals and institutes, which were contacted during the research period to give information about Asia and their experiences there;
• We reviewed our initial criteria;
• Considered the results of the first journey by Fr McLaughlin and the second one of the Superior General together with Fr. McLaughlin;
• The significant guidelines which had come up in discussions of the project over the last year.

Then the General Council arrived at the following criteria for choosing between different possibilities.

1. While going to any place will be an enrichment for us, we are not going to "plug gaps". There must be real needs in each of the places and in the spirit of SRL 12, we give preference to:
   • first evangelization or some specific/specialised service to the local church or society, or a parish situation, at least initially, as long as it permits the possibility of other outreaches;
   • those oppressed and most disadvantaged, as a group or as individuals: "we must make ourselves the advocates, the supporters and the defenders of the weak and the little ones against all who oppress them (SRL 14)"
   • where we can help to make the local church more missionary and self-evangelising

2. There is the possibility in collaboration with the Local Church, of contributing something significant to it, as summarised in SRL 18 and 18.1.

2.1. Fostering Christian communities, educating and training responsible laity;
2.2. Vocations' ministry; training for ministries and for missionary and religious life;
2.3. Social and educational work;
2.4. Conscientisation re justice and reconciliation between people;
2.5. Youth;
2.6. The poor and marginalized, notably refugees and immigrants, underprivileged.

3. In certain circumstances our presence is witness and service in the name of the gospel for the Kingdom (SRL 15.3).
4. Contact and encounter with Asian cultures and the great world religions.
5. The possibility of awakening missionary vocations. While we are not going to Asia specifically to find vocations, this objective is not to be excluded in the context of our presence and development there.
6. The importance and possibility of community life and teamwork. If four confreres living together were not possible, then two communities of two in close proximity would be guaranteed.
7. The acceptance of our African confreres in the centres of population, considering the fact that the Congregation will depend very much on them for personnel in the next fifteen years. The positive experience of some African CICM in some of the countries visited shows that there would be good acceptance by the catholic community. They have done exceptionally well at the language.
8. The leadership and pastoral approach or planning of the diocese.
9. The financial implications.

Archbishop Shan spoke about a group of 13 different religions which meets every two months. Already there are some signs of mutual influence - e.g. the new social outreaches of Buddhists monasteries and the projected museum of world religions near the Ling Chiu Shan Wu-sheng Monastery. There seem to be real possibilities of encounter with Buddhism, Taoism and popular religion.
2. Decisions

After due reflection and discernment based on the above criteria, the Council felt that it was time to take the following decisions:

1. We will take new initiatives in Asia.
   a) An initial team (group) of four will be assigned to the Philippines to work in the diocese of Iligan.
   b) A presence in Manila, Philippines, is envisaged for a later stage.
   c) An initial team (group) of four will be assigned to Taiwan to work in the diocese of Hsinchu.
   d) A process for the selection of personnel is being set up.
   e) We continue to seek ways of having a presence in Vietnam in the future especially through educational and development projects.

2. We encourage confreres, who are willing and have the required aptitudes, to become involved as teachers in Continental China.

3. We will strive to establish a network of confreres and groups of circumscriptions who have a particular interest or involvement in mission in the Orient. Through this network, we can disseminate information, reflections and proposals.

4. Fr. B. Kelly was appointed as the Correspondent for Asia within the General Council. Part of his brief will be to coordinate the above network.

5. Concrete steps were decided on in order to inform all confreres, and especially Superiors and those in Formation, as fully as possible, about these new initiatives.

6. An overall financial plan, particularly regarding the expenses for the immediate years, will be drawn up.

We have kept along the way of Providence up to now. Providence alone has guided us. I have never been able to put any plan into execution that I dreamt up myself, while I have always brought to execution as if my magic, in the midst of crosses and sufferings it is true, everything which came our way providentially. (N.D. XIII, 199, 1850)

3. Detailed Description of the Choices

a. ILIGAN in the Philippines

There are 660,000 people in the area covered by the Diocese with just over 250,000 in the City and its immediate surrounds. This last is export-driven, with a good port and large factories - e.g. cement, vinyl, coconut, steel. However, it has not developed as quickly over the last fifteen years as neighbouring Cagayan de Oro.

A total of 16,000 third-level students in five non-denominational Institutes and one denominational, live in the city. One of the apostolates is to these students and there is a good “Catholic Centre Campus Ministry”, presently being coordinated by a French MEP priest.

The city itself increasingly faces the problems of most large urban centres - e.g. new poor, migrant workers, street children, drugs, gambling, prostitution.

There are 18 parishes. The majority are along the coast in a valley between the mountains and the sea. But, there are

Chapel at Digkilaan, Iligan Diocese. L-R: Fr Nazar, Minister of Cult, Fr General, Barangay and Church President.
many communities/chapels also in the mountains - e.g. the majority of the seventy two attached to the parish of San Roque. Parishes normally have an elementary school attached. However, due to tensions with Muslims, three of these have had to close down. While Catholics constitute 78% of the overall population, the percentage of Muslims in some parts could be up to 40%, but is considered to be 20% overall.

There are 7 female religious congregations and 4 male - Columbans 4 members, Sacred Heart 2, MEP 1, Redemptorist 2. The current ratio of priests to Catholics is around 1 to 23,000.

Our possible coming had been discussed with the clergy. We would be very welcome. Two specific options were suggested. The first would be an area presently made up of 3 parishes, called Lala, Lanipao and Salvador, where we would have a team of four living and working together. Lala is some ninety minutes by car from Iligan but will be quicker in the future as road improvements continue.

The area outlined has approximately 18,000 Catholics divided into some fifty eight smaller units or "chapels". The Muslim presence in parts is up to 50%. The people are a mixture of urban, farmers and fisherfolk.

The second would combine two commitments: one among people in the mountains, and one in the nearby city of Iligan. It would mean dividing the group into two smaller ones of two each, which would meet together each week for a day. One group would base itself at Digkilaan, which is an hour from Iligan, and in the mountains. The idea would be to start a new pastoral area made up of some thirty small centres, currently part of two neighbouring parishes, which have had very little attention over the years.

At present the terrain is quite difficult, with public transport to Iligan three times a day. Most of the people are tenants and poor. There is no electricity in the area as yet. However, it is likely that it will develop in the near future given that a new asphalted road to the capital of the neighbouring province is projected and will pass through Digkilaan. The second group would base itself in Iligan city and, probably, become immediately involved in more specialised ministries. The General Council prefers the second option and has communicated this fact to the Bishop.

b. HSINCHU in TAIWAN

The population of the area covered by the Diocese is 2.4 millions. It consists of three major urban centres, Hsinchu with 400,000, Miaoli with 100,000 and Taoyuan, which is, effectively, part of greater Taipei. The Diocese also stretches eastward from these cities towards the mountains where some parishes are made up entirely of Aborigines. There is, however, a tendency for these peoples to move towards the urban centres in search of employment and education.

In Hsinchu city there are various industries and, hence, immigrant workers. It has five third level educational institutes with a Buddhist University projected. Miaoli also has industries but only one technical college. It is not growing as a city. Taoyuan attracts many workers, both from Taiwan itself and from overseas.
The Catholic population is 50,700, scattered around 82 parishes. Some of these have a very small weekly attendance - e.g. 6 - 10 people. Eight male missionary or religious congregations are present. As is the tradition in the country, many institutions are under the responsibility of the Diocese. Included in these are four centres for migrant workers and three student hostels. The Diocese has a number of pastoral centres, one of which is the "Chinese Catholic Pastoral Centre" which provides a two-year residential training course in pastoral catechetics.

Some of the pastoral challenges have a familiar ring for those experienced in missionary work in developed countries: formation of an active outward-looking laity; responding to a spiritual hunger in an atmosphere of materialism; helping young people, especially in dealing with the heavy pressure of study as the only way to succeed. Other pastoral challenges may be less familiar, such as that of inter-religious dialogue. All of them become dramatically unfamiliar because they are in Taiwan, where one decisively enters the ambit of the Chinese world.

We will be expected to make a contribution to a society with few committed Christians and our presence will be like that of a mustard seed. This is an experience which could prove to be very useful in the long term in view of similar ministry in the Northern hemisphere and in Africa.

The Bishop and Vicar General were very flexible about where we might work. The conclusion we arrived at was a preference for either the cities of Hsinchu or Taoyuan, but that the final decision would be left to the team itself, after it has had time to evaluate the situation during the language course.

4. Profiles

Based on our reflections on the type of mission and the challenges involved in the new initiative, the General Council has prepared a missionary profile for the members of each of the missions. This has been sent to the Superiors.

At this point there seem to be certain qualities and skills which, if included in the team as a whole, would considerably benefit the initiatives. Not every member need have all these but they might be a goal for initial and on-going formation. An integral part of our method will be language learning and on-going serious effort at personal inculturation and the inculturation of the Gospel.

Thus, certain proficiency for language learning and a humble and open disposition to learn and receive people of other cultures will be indispensable. Interest and openness to inter-religious dialogue, capability of living in an international community and working as a team with others will be necessary. Almost certainly, the teams themselves will, after some time in the concrete situations, be able to focus more clearly on what is most useful.

D. Continuing Openness to Asia

The above decisions underline that we think that, as a Congregation, we are being called by the Holy Spirit to become more involved in Asia. The basic impulse comes from the decision of Itaici which was greatly influenced by the presentations of our conferees in Pakistan and of the Foundation of the Indian Ocean.
Each of the new ventures has been chosen on its own merits. While it may result in the foundation of the Congregation there, our going to the Philippines is not primarily for this reason. Hence, while Cardinal Sin’s invitation to begin in Manila is attractive, we felt that a beginning in a more rural setting might ultimately be more advantageous and in keeping with our Spiritan tradition.

Usually, we like to get to know the background and tradition of people through working and living with them before we start on a vocation apostolate. Our primary aim for going to the Philippines is for what we hope to receive from, and give to, the Filipino culture and Church. Similarly, our experience in Taiwan will be helpful if there is a future opening in China, but we are not going there to “China watch” or use it as a springboard.

By now, you are probably acutely aware of “challenges”! However, we would like to underline three which seem particularly important to us.

1. These new initiatives urge us to rethink the values and attitudes which orientate our mission today. The Superior General has already elaborated on this in his Christmas letter.

2. The new initiatives demand real solidarity within the Congregation. The General Council believes that it has honestly tried to follow up the decision of Itaici to “consider another initiative in Asia”. Following our research, we are convinced we should expand there. But, the lifeblood of the project will be personnel. Here, we are aware of our limitations. We would like to stress the importance of the Asian initiatives for the whole Congregation at this point in our history. As “new initiatives” we would appeal for their sincere consideration by individual confreres and superiors.

Solidarity with the project will also, almost certainly, involve finances. We have set up a special current account for missionary projects, especially those which may need a financial injection to get going e.g. our most recent initiative in Mozambique. Obviously, this current account will need continual topping up.

3. Finally, our special relationship with Africa should mark this new venture. The future of the project depends greatly on the response of our African confreres. Without their commitment we will not be able to sustain it. As was mentioned by Bishops and others many times during the visitations, their going to Asia will offer the possibility of a very rich intercultural dialogue. They will also present to Asia the challenge that Africa is for our world today.

E. Challenges

"Our leaving Pondicherry was an event of considerable importance for that small country. The local administration, as well as the children and their families, were united in their expression of appreciation and regret. The governor, Mr Manes, had entrusted to us the education of his youngest son. He insisted on presiding at the prize-giving ceremony. It was a simple celebration, without any official address or singing. He told the assembled group which was larger than usual, that he felt the need deeply to express on behalf of the administration, on behalf of the families and on his own behalf, the highest appreciation and heartfelt regrets to the distinguished teachers which the colony was going to lose”.

On July 18, our students, their parents and many of the most important citizens of the town, accompanied us as far as the port. After many trials we were leaving the country, carrying with us the esteem and the love of everyone." (Gen. Bul., July 1887)