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## Spiritan Mission in Asia

Pat Palmer C.S.Sp.

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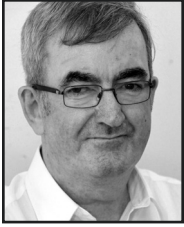
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Pat Palmer, C.S.Sp. Fr. Pat Palmer, C.S.Sp., is from Dublin and was ordained in 1976. He worked as a missionary and formator in Sierra Leone, Ghana, and in Ireland. He was Provincial in Ireland from 2000 to 2006. In 2007, Pat took up an appointment to Vietnam where he has worked since then.

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## SPIRITAN MISSION IN ASIA

Asia is still a relatively new mission for the Spiritans. For much of its history the focus of Spiritan mission was Africa and then South America with the missionaries coming from Europe and North America. This focus began to change, or rather expand, in the early 1970s when a group of Spiritans arrived in Papua New Guinea and in 1977 when a Spiritan mission was established in Pakistan. This turn towards Asia was supported by the publication of Pope John Paul II’s Apostolic Letter of 1994, “*Tertio Millennio Adveniente*.” The letter set out the preparations for the Jubilee Year of 2000 and the challenges facing the Church. It spoke of the need to engage with the great monotheistic religions and the need for interreligious dialogue. In 1997, Spiritans opened missions in the Philippines and Taiwan. These missions anticipated the recommendation of the Synod of Bish-ops for Asia in 1998 when Pope John Paul called on mission-ary institutes to look to Asia in the new millennium.<sup>1</sup> Further Spiritan missions were set up later in Vietnam in 2007, and in India in 2010. The Spiritan missions from the beginning were international in make-up with members coming from Europe, Africa, the Americas, and Asia itself.

Of all the continents, Asia is the most diverse culturally and religiously. It is the birthplace of all the great world religions. Pope John Paul reminded us that Jesus took flesh as an Asian; despite this, Christianity is still seen as a foreign religion by many Asians. Periodic attempts at evangelization in Asia, for example the Jesuits in China and Japan, had little success. But the small, and in some cases tiny, Christian communities which did emerge, managed to survive over the centuries despite intense persecution. The only country where Christianity took root is the Philippines, a Spanish colony for over 300 years and an American one for 50 years. India is also different. Despite its strong Hindu/Buddhist culture, a significant Christian presence, both Catholic and Protestant, grew thanks to the work of missionaries. Something either not known, or forgotten, is that Spiritans worked in India in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Confreres from France and Ireland ministered in education and parish work in the French enclaves of Pondicherry and Chandernagor. The Congregation withdrew them in 1888 to concentrate its efforts on Africa.

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## ECCLESIA IN ASIA

The document which emerged from the Synod of 1998, “*Ecclesia in Asia*,” attempted to set out an approach to missionary work in Asia. Because of the sheer diversity of cultures and religions in Asia, it is difficult to make generalized statements that apply everywhere. But we have to start with our basic beliefs and with what we wish to do as missionaries in Asia. The mission of the Church is to proclaim the Kingdom of God and Jesus as the Incarnate Word of God. We proclaim Jesus as Savior and Redeemer; however, proclaiming Jesus as Savior in an Asian context needs careful working out. The document states clearly, “*Christ is the one mediator between God and man and the sole Redeemer of the world to be clearly distinguished from the founders of other great religions.*”<sup>2</sup> This is not a starting point for dialogue. Some of the followers of the great religions have no difficulty in seeing Jesus as a manifestation of the Divine but not as the only one. The cult of the “holy man” and “holy woman” or guru is very strong, and Jesus can be seen as another version of this “...*the effort to share the gift of faith in Jesus as the only Savior is fraught with philosophical, cultural and theological difficulties, especially in the light of the beliefs of Asia’s great religions, deeply intertwined with cultural values and specific world views.*”<sup>3</sup> The document proposes that it is therefore better to present Jesus in his relational, historical, and cosmic perspective, and also as the defender of the lowly, the weak, the outcast. It is here that the Christian message becomes central, challenging the casteism, nationalism, tribalism, and elitism which are found in Asian societies.

## INTER-RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

Two words describe a missionary approach in any culture-dialogue, more specifically inter-religious dialogue, and inculturation. In Asia we can add a third word, inclusivism. Pope John Paul said, “dialogue is a characteristic mode of the Church’s life in Asia.”<sup>4</sup> Inter-religious dialogue aims at mutual understanding and acceptance. It must also include mutual learning. Even the document “*Ecclesia in Asia*” of 1998 saw Asia as a recipient, not as a communicator of theological ideas. It underestimated the depth of influence which the ancient religions of Asia had and has on culture and outlook. Throughout history these religions have played the role of guardians of culture in critical times. The Church needs to be more aware of what other world religions can teach us and what Asian Christian theologians are saying. This is vital now

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when a new culture of materialism, technology, and secularism is affecting these traditions.

Inter-religious dialogue presupposes a strong belief in God, but this is not always so obvious in dialogue. Dialogue with Buddhists can focus more on issues such as the environment and psychological questions and not theological issues. Dialogue also presupposes, on the Christian side, a belief in the action of the Holy Spirit in all people of faith. This type of dialogue can and does take place on an institutional and formal level, but also on an individual and informal level. It does not always lead to positive results. An experience of dialogue with a Buddhist monk in Vietnam left me with the belief that the two religions had not so much in common apart from our humanity. The other type of dialogue has been called the “dialogue of life,” describing the daily life of a missionary in his or her interactions with people. This is where missionaries come into their own, establishing connections and friendships with the local people. It is here that we realize our common humanity, that we, the missionaries, are not the “other,” the stranger, or the foreigner. This dialogue of life frequently involves sharing poverty and insecurity and, when it is politically possible, searching for justice and liberation. It is also where “the option for the poor” becomes central. *“Such an option frequently brings its own rewards: a deeper awareness of the bonds of humanity which unite all men and women, a deepening of one’s own faith, and liberation from a ghetto mentality.”*<sup>5</sup>

## INCULTURATION

Pope John Paul II asked how we can enable the cultures of Asia to grasp the universal significance of the mystery of Jesus and the Church. Inculturation is always seen as a necessary approach: inculturation of the liturgy, Scriptures, and formation of laity and of future priests. But even here, Asia presents special challenges. Spiritans in Pakistan encountered two different reactions among the Christians to adaptations of the liturgy – one group enthusiastic about the changes and the other group more anxious to keep to the more traditional and socially-accepted liturgy. The Spiritans discovered that the poor were more open to changes; those on a slightly higher social scale were more interested in fitting into what was familiar.<sup>6</sup> In Vietnam, adaptation of the liturgy was limited during the years of oppression; in such circumstances sticking with the known and the universal was the best policy.

In a Buddhist culture such as Vietnam and less so in secularized Taiwan, contemplation is central to their religious practice, and it is here that cooperation between religions is possible. "Mission is contemplative action and active contemplation,"<sup>7</sup> but it is more in the process of contemplation or prayer rather than the object of the exercise that the sides can dialogue. When I asked a Buddhist monk what he meditated on, the answer came back immediately, "nothing."

### INCLUSIVITY

The third approach to mission in Asia focuses on the idea of inclusivity. Missionaries coming from the Western Church have imbibed the notion that one size fits all when it comes to being a Catholic. In Asian religious thinking, "the boundaries are not rigidly marked, structures not rigorously fixed and conditions of belonging not strictly laid down." "What is important to most people is not so much external religious identity but the deeper religious experience and the path you take to attain it."<sup>8</sup> This can be seen in the structure of a typical Buddhist monastery which can include fulltime, celibate monks and nuns, temporary members, married people, and people who come and go. In Vietnam, the only locally-founded religion is Cao Dai which has three major prophets, Buddha, Jesus, and Victor Hugo, with a strong dose of Confucianism thrown in. Its headquarters is called the Holy See. In India, this approach can be seen in the large number of Hindus who attend regular lectures on Jesus and the Scriptures. They have no intention of converting, but they are interested in different spiritual ways. Missionaries have to be open to different levels of commitment, an idea that needs to be taken up in the Western Church. In the Philippines, which is predominantly Catholic, people move easily between evangelical Churches as often as not beginning and ending with the Catholic version. It also needs to be said that in the established Churches of Vietnam and India, inclusivity is not an issue. Their model of the Church is that of the Western Church brought by missionaries in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

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### FABC 2018

The Federation of Asian Bishops Conferences (FABC) at its meeting in 2018 spoke of a triple dialogue; culture, other religions, and the poor, and set out a five-point roadmap for evangelization in Asia.

- 1) Evangelization/building the Kingdom of God in the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium belongs to the Asian Church. While this may be an acknowledgment that the era of missionaries from the West is over, it also implies that Asians need to be missionaries to each other. This is already happening with missionaries from Vietnam, Philippines, India, and other countries working throughout the continent. There is always the inclination of a church to become inward looking, especially where there has been persecution. One of the tasks of Spiritans and other missionary groups is to develop a missionary outreach in the local church.
- 2) Economic and environmental justice are central to our proclamation. While the economies of Asia are developing rapidly, many people are being left behind. In India, the high-tech industry exists side by side with poverty. Environmental degradation, air pollution in the cities, and the dreadful damage being done to the seas are daily issues for people and have to be concerns for the Church. Vietnam has a long coastline with the busiest and most polluted sea in the world, the South China Sea. There is a real clash between the desire to develop industry and technology while at the same time trying to protect the environment. A recent major fish kill underlined this.
- 3) The rights of indigenous peoples must be supported and defended. One of the features of many countries in Asia is the presence of large populations of indigenous groups who have a different culture and language, and sometimes, religion, to the majority population and who have suffered discrimination in their own countries as a result. This is true in Pakistan, India, Philippines, and China and, to a lesser extent, in Vietnam and Taiwan where the groups are more integrated. Minority ethnic groups have always made up the bulk of poor and uneducated people and are a source of cheap labor.
- 4) The Church must enter into dialogue with poverty, culture, and other religions. The poor have always been found among the ethnic minorities but now increasingly they are found among migrants. Migrants are an increasing phenomenon in the countries where Spiritans work. In Vietnam and India, it is internal migration, from the rural areas to the cities. In Taiwan, it is foreign migration, mostly from the Philippines, Vietnam, and Indonesia to work in the factories and houses of the Taiwanese. They are the strangers in a foreign culture and can experience hostility, loneliness, and a disconnect from society. In a society like Taiwan, it can be difficult to identify who are the poor in the general population. It is not the poverty of lack of finances but of loneliness and lack of meaning in life.

*The Spiritan way of mission is characterized by active involvement with people.*

- 5) Mainstreaming reconciliation in areas where racism, casteism, and violence, especially against minorities and women, are present. Violence against women and religious minorities is still a feature of life in Pakistan and India. It is in this area that the Christian message is at its most relevant. Catholic social teaching, with its emphasis on equality, human rights, and liberation from unjust structures, challenges not just political entities but also religious entities. It is where Christianity can differ from other world religions. The difference has been described as the difference between anthropomorphic and cosmic religion. For Christians, God is the incarnate One who has come among us and is concerned for the sufferings of the people. This goes against the strong element of fatalism and predeterminism found in other religions.

## THE SPIRITANS

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This is the world in which Spiritan missionaries are called to serve. They are a small element in what is already a minority Church, except in the Philippines. The Spiritan way of mission is characterized by active involvement with people, witness in their community and personal life, unity in diversity, collaborative ministry, closeness to the poor, and a prophetic voice in society. This is their identity and charism and is relevant to the world of Asia just as the Gospel never ceases to be relevant in their lives, in their communities and in society.

The Spiritan charism is a call to work with the “poor and abandoned,” the marginalized and excluded. In the countries where they work, two trends are influencing the emergence of new forms of poverty. They are urbanization and continual technological advances which leave many people struggling to catch up. These trends are leading to some groups becoming more marginalized, more numerous, and poorer. Senior citizens, the elderly, feel increasingly isolated in society. In Taiwan, they live out their days in old folk homes or on their own at home. In Vietnam and India, the only people found in villages and the rural areas are the elderly and children.

Another group of people are those with mental health issues arising from work pressures, competitiveness, family breakdown, and isolation sometimes leading to suicide. This is particularly true in Taiwan. Another group is one which would be expected to cope best with changes, young people. In the huge cities

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of Asia, many young people can experience isolation, loneliness, and a lack of deeper connection with their society. They may have many friends on social media, but often they do not have a deeper connection with others resulting in isolation, boredom, and loneliness. At the same time, discovering a deeper meaning and goal in life is more difficult with the declining influence of religion and traditional values.

### ***Papua New Guinea***

The first Spiritan mission was to Papua New Guinea (PNG) in the early 1970s. Confreres from the Irish Province were invited to work there and were followed by confreres from the Province of Trans-Canada. Now the Spiritan missionaries come from Africa and, in particular, from Nigeria and Madagascar. PNG has a significant percentage of Christians, both Catholic and Protestant, but is also a center of traditional, tribal beliefs. Parish ministry is the main work of the Spiritans. Difficulties in travel because of the terrain and a high level of violence are part of the challenge for missionaries. PNG and Australia form what is now called the Oceania community.

### ***Pakistan***

The work of the Spiritans varies greatly in each of the countries where they live. In Pakistan, Christians have always been treated as second-class citizens and unimportant. The Spiritans work with two groups, the small Christian community and the tribal Hindus. Because of the overwhelming presence of Islam, whatever dialogue takes place is not with Islam as such but with individual Muslims. Living with people who are discriminated against at the level of race, religion, gender, and caste, the Spiritans work to bring a sense of dignity to the people and a conviction of God's love for them. This is where the Christian beliefs in equality, brotherhood and sisterhood become central.

### ***Philippines***

In the Philippines, Spiritans minister in parishes, chaplaincies to hospitals, schools and prisons, and in formation of future members of the congregation. They are challenged by the huge inequalities in a society where the power and the money are controlled by a handful of families which are often Catholic. They work with minority groups within an already poor society.



They also have to cope with an increasing presence of evangelical and Pentecostal groups who attract many young people to their churches. Spiritans and the Church have to respond with a more Scripture-based catechesis and an openness to laity involvement in church structures. Two young men have already been ordained as Spiritans and appointed to mission outside their country.

### *Taiwan*

In Taiwan, the Spiritans are often torn between responding to the requests of the local dioceses to maintain parishes and their call to work with particular groups. They have their own parishes, but also have taken on chaplaincies to prisons, universities, and youth, as well as to migrant workers. One of the challenges for the group is to reach out to the ethnic groups living in the mountainous interior of the country. Ministry in a rich, materialistic, secular society which has an increasingly weak Buddhist/Taoist tradition, demands the witness of a life of prayer, contemplation, and active charity.

### *India*

Spiritans in Vietnam and India have common priorities in their ministry arising from the political situation in the two countries. Their presence in both countries is semi-legal and, as a result, they occupy a marginal area in an already marginal church. Their usual environment is within the Catholic community and contact with non-Catholics is of an informal kind. The Church in India has to cope with an increasingly aggressive Hindu nationalistic movement which believes that to be Indian is to be Hindu. This impacts on the very large populations of Muslims in India and the smaller population of Christians, both Catholic and Protestant, and other religions. Foreign missionaries are officially not allowed in India, but the Indian Church sends out many Catholic missionaries all over the world. The Spiritan apostolate in India is in formation. It is training young Indian men to become Spiritan missionaries, and already three members have been ordained and gone on mission to Kenya, Zambia, and England.

### *Vietnam*

The Church in Vietnam has, in its 400-year history, had to cope with periods of strong persecution and oppression. This has largely ceased, but it is still eyed with some suspicion by the political authorities. Despite these difficulties, or maybe because of them, it is

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strong and dynamic. At present, Vietnam has twenty-six dioceses, approximately eight million Catholics, and six senior seminaries, all of which are full to capacity. Relations between Church and State have improved and a *modus vivendi* worked out. The Church looks after its affairs and is not involved in politics, but occasionally there are tensions over property and justice and peace issues. There is a real challenge for the Church to know when it should speak out on these issues.

Catholics in Vietnam are proud of their identity and attached to their traditions. While the liturgy is “very Roman,” it is enhanced by a myriad of prayers, hymns, and devotions that are part of the expression of the people’s faith. Devotion to Mary is central to their faith, as well as devotion to St. Joseph. Marrying outside the group is not encouraged, and many foreigners with Vietnamese brides find they also have to get a new religion. Also central to them is the veneration of the martyrs; since the arrival of Christianity in the sixteenth century, an estimated 100,000 people have died as martyrs. Martyrdom remained an issue until the middle of the last century. In 1988, Pope John Paul II canonized one hundred and seventeen Vietnamese martyrs.

*Formation is the main occupation of the Spiritans.*

The main work of the Spiritans in Vietnam since their arrival in 2007, is the formation of future members of the congregation. Vietnam has been experiencing a vocations boom for the last twenty years that has resulted in dozens of religious institutes, both women and men, coming to the country looking for vocations. When the Spiritans arrived in Vietnam, they were blessed to have Vietnamese ordained members already in the group. These are men who had done their formation and studies in the US. They already spoke the language and had family connections in the country. This was a major advantage when the group took on the vocation’s apostolate. Because of their semi-legal status, the Spiritans do not have their own parishes but, from the beginning, they made themselves available informally to help out in parishes in retreat ministry, the expatriate Catholic community, and counselling services. Their charity outreach involved providing scholarship for children to attend schools, funding water purification systems, and building simple houses for the poor.

Since formation is the main occupation of the Spiritans, one of the first decisions made by the group was not to accept candidates who had just finished High School. They had to have worked for some time or done third level studies before they would be

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accepted. From the beginning, the Spiritans emphasized that they were a missionary Congregation and anyone wishing to join them had to be ready to leave their own country. This is a challenge for a people who love their own country and their own language, but many generous young men decided they were ready to accept this challenge. There are now fifty in the formation program. The first cycle of formation takes place in Vietnam. The novitiate also takes place here, but it is international with novices coming from India, Hong Kong and, in the future, from the Philippines. After that, all newly professed members spend two years on apostolic experience in a Spiritan mission, usually in West or East Africa or in the UK. The students study theology in Manila and live in the Spiritan International Community house. In 2020, the Spiritans had their first six candidates ready for ordination, but this was postponed until 2021 because of the pandemic. Every year from now on, more students will make final profession, be ordained, and sent on mission.

## CONCLUSION

It is difficult to make generalized statements about Asia, but what can be said is that cultures and societies are changing and there is a danger that the ancient religions and traditions will be undermined by the new technocratic and consumeristic sub culture. Materialism and secularism are as much parts of society there as they are in the West. As one writer has pointed out, the most dangerous ideology in the world today is to imagine that there is but one way of knowing or interpreting reality, one model of human progress, one way of living and being human.<sup>9</sup> Religions in Asia have always played the role of guardians of culture, especially in critical times. Today the ancient religions of Asia, including Christianity, are called to work together to resist this cultural imperialism.

Spiritans in Asia, small in number though they may be, are called to be part of this work and should see it as part of the work of evangelization. “Thus, the task of proclaiming Jesus in a way which enables the peoples of Asia to identify with him while remaining faithful both to the Church’s theological doctrine and to their own Asian origins is a paramount challenge.”<sup>10</sup> This task emphasizes a witnessing Church, witnessing in an Asian way through prayer, contemplation, love of silence, harmony with creation, and a simple lifestyle; and in a Catholic way through its

works for charity, justice and peace, and through the witness of the life of the missionary, the Christian family, and the ecclesial community which reveals a new way of living - always keeping in mind that “*There can be no true evangelization without the explicit proclamation of Jesus as Lord.*”<sup>11</sup>

*Pat Palmer, C.S.Sp.  
Vietnam.*

## **ENDNOTES**

1. *Ecclesia in Asia*, Pope John Paul II. Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, 1998.
2. *Ibid.*, 2.
3. *Ibid.*, 20.
4. *Ibid.*, 4.
5. Felix, Wilfred. “Emerging Trends Challenge the Churches of Asia.” In *Trends in Mission: Toward the Third Millennium: Essays in Celebration of Twenty-Five Years of SEDOS*, edited by William Jenkinson, Helene O’Sullivan. New York: Orbis Books, 1991, 46-52.
6. O’Brien, John, C.S.Sp. “Proclamation is Dialogical.” *Spiritana Life*, no. 24 (2014).
7. *Ecclesia in Asia*, 23.
8. Wilfred, Felix op. cit.
9. “Dialogue Gasping for Breath? Towards New Frontiers in Interreligious Dialogue”, Wilfred, Felix in “Living and Working with Sisters and Brothers of Other Faiths in Asia.” FABC, 1987.
10. *Ecclesia in Asia*, 20.
11. *Ibid.*, 19

