

Iloilo Declaration
Sixth Congress of Asian Theologians (CATS VI)

I. Introduction

Asian theologians, seventy nine women and men from fifteen different countries, gathered together in Iloilo City, Philippines from February 8–14, 2009 at Central Philippine University, for the Sixth Congress of Asian Theologians (CATS VI). Earlier Congresses were held in Suwon, Bangalore, Yogyakarta, Chiangmai and Hong Kong. Under the theme “Doing Mission from the Underside: A Challenge to the Understanding of Mission since 1910,” delegates to the Sixth Congress shared moments of reflection and worship and exchanged views, insights, visions and hopes. Together we sought to articulate new paradigms for Christian mission suitable to the challenges of our day.

The Philippines, along with other countries, is suffering under the effects of global recession and poverty. This was a primary reality in which CATS VI articulated our faith and named our struggles. The blood of those who are murdered or silenced for defending those on the underside of history cries out for justice. Asian theologians must grapple with unjust social, political and economic structures in society and respond prophetically, struggling for abundant life for all. CATS is a safe, creative and open space for Asian theologians to bring life stories, experiences and reflections, struggles and hopes of the underside in order to articulate and appropriate meaningful faith for transformation of our Asian context.

II. Mission Paradigms in Context: From 1910 to the Present

Christianity in Asia was for the most part brought by Western missionaries especially between the 16th and 19th centuries. Our churches therefore appreciate their courage, sacrifice and care in laying the foundation. Mission in the past, however, often betrayed triumphalistic attitudes and a sense of superiority. Such a mentality often led to an emphasis on mere statistical growth of church membership with little respect for the religions and cultures of Asia. Furthermore, these missionary efforts coincided with and were complicit with the colonial projects of the West.

Next year we commemorate the centenary of the World Missionary Conference, held in Edinburgh in 1910. This was a starting point of the modern ecumenical movement. But it was also a continuing manifestation of Christian triumphalism, Eurocentrism, and gender bias. Its centenary invites us to reconsider our understanding of mission and repent. The conception and practice of missions in the past left many peoples of Asia deeply offended and hurt.

In response, churches in Asia are developing their own approaches to mission in dialogue with Asian religions and cultures. We acknowledge that the growing contribution of Asian Christians to mission efforts in Asia and beyond has not sufficiently practiced a truly contextual theology. We are also challenged to articulate a theology more responsive to the massive poverty and suffering of the majority of peoples in Asia.

III. Voices from the Underside: Sources of Our Theology

At the present Congress, we Asian theologians from various social backgrounds had a particular focus on the reality of “the underside,” especially in Asia. The people on the underside are our people, our family. We not only express our wholehearted concern and solidarity with our people, but also ask ourselves if we and our churches are ready to take the risk of being put on the underside. We are challenged to become one with these suffering people as bearers of the Good News of Christ, our Suffering Servant.

During the course of the Congress, we heard cries of pain and suffering from various communities in different parts of Asia. These included: violations of human dignity and justice by governments in several Asian countries; widespread destruction of our natural environments; conflicts and violence between different religious communities; uses of biotechnology that threaten the meaning and integrity of the lives of those on the underside; oppression of women in our daily lives and our churches; discrimination against socially and economically marginalized groups such as the differently abled, migrant workers, people living with HIV-AIDS, ethnic minorities, indigenous and tribal people, Dalits and other social “outcasts.” We are particularly concerned with the effects of the recent global financial crisis on these peoples who are most vulnerable to the economic changes in our societies. These are not isolated cases but result from an interconnected system of worldwide, political, economic, religious and social powers.

The present Congress was especially aware of the situation of people in our host country, the Philippines. In recent years, many cases have been reported of extra-judicial killings and forced disappearances under the present government, including many church workers and human rights activists. Indeed, we are holding the present Congress in the Philippines to express our concern about these incidents and solidarity with the victims of injustice. As Asian theologians we strongly condemn these killings and disappearances and urge the government to take effective measures to stop them. We call for international churches and governments to join us to urge the same to the Philippine government.

IV. Changing Paradigms in the Vocation of the Church in Asia

As Asian theologians, we are called to follow the model of Jesus in proclaiming and working for the reign of God. In light of the imperative to take seriously the voices of people from the “underside” as agents of transformation towards peace, justice and wholeness, we are called to explore new paradigms for mission and vocation. Therefore we commit ourselves to the following changes in the practices of our calling. God’s people should:

1. Rather than cultivating the approval of those in power ... ***identify and struggle with those on the “underside of history”;**
2. Rather than primarily seeking to increase the numbers of our own communities ... ***recognize that the heart of the Gospel is the Great Commandment to love God and our neighbors;**
3. Rather than “crossing lands and oceans to proselytize” (Matt. 23:15) ... ***become conscious that Jesus charged his followers to make disciples of all peoples;**
4. Rather than seeking power in cooperation with the dominant powers of the current economic, political and religious orders of the world ... ***recognize that the mark of a true disciple is to serve the “least of these my sisters and brothers” (Matt. 25);**
5. Rather than always teaching and guiding others ... ***put ourselves in the place of those who listen and learn;**
6. Rather than supporting the status quo of religious and social institutions dominated by men ... ***work for gender justice including sharing of power between women and men;**
7. Rather than focusing on religion as simply a private and personal matter ... ***struggle to change the structures of economic, political, religious and social power that victimize the great majority of Asian peoples;**
8. Rather than regarding other religious communities as simply recipients, competitors or even enemies ... ***honour and respect them, affirming what is good, true and beautiful in other religious traditions;**
9. Rather than collaborating with or remaining silent towards those who use violence to achieve their aims ... ***resist all forms of violence in our own community as well as the wider society;**

10. Rather than being arrogant about our own education, presumed wisdom and accomplishments ... ***have humility about the limitations of our knowledge and critical consciousness about our own prejudices and inherited structures of understanding;**

11. Rather than compromising with the agenda of national and international elites ... ***have prophetic courage to act with those who are on the underside of history.**

12. Rather than perpetuating the historic inherited Western divisions of the church... ***work towards the day when all Christians can share Eucharistic fellowship together.**

V. Conclusion

We are grateful to God for the critical and open nature of this Congress. Asian theologians do not agree on everything and although there was great diversity in this Congress, we are also aware that many people and issues were not represented. However all the delegates were enriched by listening to new perspectives and challenges to their own viewpoints as well as by spiritual and artistic presentations that are also deep ways of expressing faith. In the Congress we formed and strengthened new friendships. With thankfulness to God we confess our many limitations and return to our many nations with renewed hope and energy to participate in God's gracious work among us and the world.

13 February 2009
Iloilo, Philippines