

# Dehonians in Asia

## The Present and Future

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### Continental meetings: their rationale

*The title* of the Conference: *SCJ in Asia: Growth and Challenges in Asian Context* expresses well what the General Administration had in mind when it proposed SCJ continental meetings. When we prepared the six-year plan of this administration, we decided to do the visits of the General Superior by continent and conclude them with an assembly of representatives of the Entities of the continent. The purpose was to summarize the situation of each continent, to identify the major challenges and to determine a response that suited this particularly challenging time. This is the first of these continental meetings.

Beyond dealing with the life and mission of the scj's in each continent, *these continental meetings* can lead to a style of participation and collaboration in the governance of the Congregation without centralizing it. The continental understanding, planning and collaboration in formation and mission are playing a growing role in the organization of the Congregation. I am convinced that their importance will only grow.

I will not attempt to give you general considerations about Asia. Others have done this and done it better than I. I would rather concentrate my observations on the situation of the Dehonian Entities in Asia, and in their relationship with the whole Congregation.

These observations come mostly from what I have seen and heard during my visit with Fr. Sugino last year and from the reflection of the General Council. I don't pretend to know the reality of Asia better than you. But I realize that at times someone coming from outside can see things that the locals cannot see and bring to you the vision of other confreres, who strive to live the same charismatic heritage and have found other ways to make it present. Therefore, I ask you to accept these notes as a contribution to your own reflection so that you may grow together with all the confreres around the world.

## 1. Features of the Church in Asia

### 1.1 Significant traits

- ❖ In previous letters, we reflected with you about some of the features of the Asian continent, underlining its huge geographic and human dimensions, the richness of its history

and culture, the quick and deep transformation it is now undergoing and the growing role in the international arena.

- ❖ Being the biggest and the most populous continent on the planet, it is not surprising to see the enormous ***diversity*** and wealth in history, traditions, religions, political systems and economy.
- ❖ What was striking was the traditional Asian search for a ***peaceful settlement of differences***, but this must be balanced with the troubling presence of ***conflicts***, tensions, fanatical movements and wars, frequently worsened by foreign interventions.
- ❖ Equally strong are the tremendous, natural ***wealth and technological development*** in Asia on the one hand and, on the other hand, the ***crying misery*** of the majority of the population, living at the very limits of survival, as was clearly exposed by Ms Ery Seda.
- ❖ In my view, however, in spite of all the difficulties, generally there is a ***positive sense of optimism and pride***, especially among the young generation and particularly in the eastern part of Asia. Sometimes these feelings are accompanied by flags of nationalism and ideology, but they represent a desire or exigency for dignity, a better standard of life, democracy, a fair treatment and an active role inside the international community.

## 1.2 ***The presence and challenge of Christians***

- ❖ In Asia, Christians are a ***small minority***. Except in the Philippines and East Timor, Christian communities represent only a minor part of the population and have little chance to determine the politics of their governments. Nonetheless, in some countries like Indonesia and India, in spite of their small size, the Christian communities play an important role, not only because of their faith, but also by their commitment in the social field, such as education, health and closeness to the poor.
- ❖ In many of Asian countries, Christian faith is still considered ***foreign***, because of its ties to the colonial powers. The universality of the Catholic Church and her unity under the pastoral authority of the Pope has become, for some governments, a big obstacle and a danger because it is not fully under their control. The economic dependence of the majority of Asian Churches and religious institutions on outside sources makes our faith and the Church as an institution to look not really Asian and mainly controlled from the outside.
- ❖ This situation presents a big challenge for Christians. ***Spreading the Gospel in Asia*** is a priority for the whole Church. However, it must not look like a desire to conquer Asia. We feel that "the love of Christ compels us" to bring his Word to the men and women in Asia. However, this is not to dominate but to offer the seed of the Gospel in order to participate in the new world that is being built here.
- ❖ Being small in number in the midst of strong religious traditions and jealous political powers may pose many difficulties, but it can also lead to more ***friendly and inculturated ways of spreading the Gospel and building the Church***. In our awareness of the mistakes of the past, but also of the value of our message, we find ourselves today in a better position to offer the witness of the Gospel in Asia and to enrich the Church with its cultures and traditions.
- ❖ These traits of the Asian reality also play a role in the scj presence in Asia. So let us look at the appeals, challenges and suggestions that they pose to us and to our spirituality. How can they help to guide us in our Asian project?

## 2 Dehonians in Asia

### 2.1 *A glance at the past*

- ❖ For a long time, our *Congregation didn't pay much attention to this continent*. For many decades, Indonesia was the only scj presence in Asia. And even then, it was difficult to see a really Asian color of this presence.
- ❖ Gradually however *Indonesia* began to develop not only in the number of members but also in its capacity for self-governance, formation, growth, economic autonomy and international collaboration. At this moment, Indonesia is the third biggest scj Province in the Congregation and is becoming a key partner in the mission, not only in Asia, but also in other continents.
- ❖ It was the insistence of the Indonesian Province to develop the presence of the Congregation in Asia that led to the missions in the *Philippines* (1989) and *India* (1994). In both cases the General Administration took the initiative with the help of confreres from several Entities of the Congregation. To them, more recently, were added *Vietnam* (2005) and *Taiwan* (2007) to complete the picture of Dehonians in Asia.
- ❖ Through this work and its results *Asia is now on top of the agenda of the Congregation*. It has led to new ways of thinking and preparing for new missions.
  - Close participation by the General Administration (pro and contra).
  - International participation in missions.
  - Resolving the special situations in Vietnam and Angola
  - Need to look for new solutions...
- ❖ It was mainly through the participation of Asia (PHI, INA) that the mission in *Vietnam* was allowed to develop.
- ❖ The new presence in *Taiwan*, at the initiative of the Indonesian Province, is a very significant step toward northern Asia bringing us closer to the Chinese culture. As they are in the process of implanting the Congregation there, we are discovering the important role of immigration in the spreading of the Congregation. In the last century, the presence of the Congregation in Canada, USA and Brazil, was connected with the desire to provide religious assistance to the immigrant populations. Today this human mobility continues to be an important factor. It is both a challenge and a chance for evangelization.
- ❖ We are currently studying the possibility of a scj presence in *China*. It was requested by the last General Chapter. It will be a new chapter in the development of the Congregation in Asia.

### 2.2 *Some other traits*

- ❖ I can assure you that the whole Congregation, and not only the general Administration, looks toward Asia with joy, care and hope. Together with Africa, here is the strongest development of the Congregation in terms of vocations and future possibilities.
- ❖ Because of the recent date of the founding of these entities and vocation work, in Asia we have the *youngest average age in the Congregation* (37,03 versus 52,25 for the whole Congregation).

<i>Continent</i>	<i>Members</i>	<i>Students</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>% Percent</i>
<b>1AG</b>	9		57,56	0,41
Africa	325	134	44,07	14,94
North America	114	5	66,54	5,24
South America	464	86	51,56	21,32
Asia	285	98	37,03	13,10
Europe	979	62	60,71	44,99
<b>Total</b>	<b>2.176</b>	<b>385</b>	<b>52,25</b>	<b>100%</b>

- ❖ This trait is generally present in Asia as we can see from the general picture of the Continent:

	<i>70-79</i>	<i>60-69</i>	<i>50-59</i>	<i>40-49</i>	<i>30-39</i>	<i>20-29</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Age av.</i>
INA	10	11	22	38	56	39	176	41,15
IND	1	2	2	6	15	34	60	33,05
PHI (VIE)		1	4	10	24	10	49	36,90
<b>Total</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>54</b>	<b>95</b>	<b>83</b>	<b>285</b>	<b>37,03</b>

- ❖ In Indonesia, about 25% percent of the members (40 out of 176) are students. This percentage climbs to 50% of the membership in the Philippines (24 out of 49) and in India (34 out of 60). This gives us a positive outlook for the future. However, it is also a big challenge for the formation, sustenance and development of so many young people.
- ❖ This is a result of the great *commitment to vocational work and formation* in all the Asian entities. In fact, in your varying ways, you have given much energy to promoting, accompanying and helping the discernment of young people. In some of your countries, however, society and the attitudes of young people are changing. It will require new efforts in the vocation ministry so that the younger generation will continue to hear the call of God.
- ❖ In India, the Philippines and Vietnam we are *forming the very first generation of local Dehonians*. It means dealing in new ways with the inculturation of our charism, the shaping of a life-style, adapted to the culture of the country, without losing our own values and identity.
- ❖ In Indonesia, this process of inculturation, after a long missionary epoch, has blended into the character of the Province. In spite of her lengthy existence, the Province is young not only in its members but also in its assumption of full responsibility by the local confreres.
- ❖ In India and Vietnam we will have to be attentive to the difficulties of foreign missionaries to work there. There the *transition* will be less smooth. In India we were confronted with this in a very tough way; in Vietnam we face similar difficulties and we should be prepared to have the same happen elsewhere in the future.
- ❖ We are also experiencing *difficulties for a free pastoral work* in a number of Asian countries. With the exception of the Philippines, we are experiencing limitations imposed by governments and other religious traditions. We note, however, that such difficulties have not discouraged the Christian communities in their faith and commitment.

This challenge is very much in line with the transmission of the Gospel during the centuries.

- ❖ Because the Christian message is granted such free space, the **Philippines** is becoming for us, as for the majority of the Congregations and for the entire Church, ***an important platform for the spread of the Gospel in Asia***. It plays this role already and will only increase in the future.
- ❖ These difficulties are also ***a new and important experience for the entire Congregation***. We have worked mostly in countries where Christians are (or have been) traditionally the majority of the population or enjoyed a quite secure place in society. The situation in Asia teaches us to see the announcement of the Gospel and the building of the Church in a different way. A new situation is now emerging in countries of the older Christian tradition, where believers are becoming a minority. They will look at your experience and recognize there a new way of being Church in dialogue with a multi-faith and multi-cultural society.
- ❖ If we take a look at the ***concrete works of the Congregation in Asia***, we will find that each entity has a different history and development.
  - In *India* we are just starting taking on pastoral responsibilities other than formation. Formation has been the main and almost exclusive work of the scj in India until now. Only in recent months have we been given the responsibility of some parishes and the possibility to erect a spiritual center in Punalur.
  - In *Vietnam* we are currently engaged in vocational work, youth ministry in University, and helping out in parishes ...
  - *Taiwan* the emphasis is on immigrants.
  - *Philippines* our work is with the poor, exploited women (Kasanag Daughters) and in Higaonon and in parishes.
  - As a longer established and mature Province, *Indonesia* has a range of diversified ministries. Traditionally, parish work absorbed most of the energies, as is normal for the stage of first evangelization. This is still the main field of work in the Province. It doesn't mean that the missionaries and the Indonesian brothers did not develop social and educational works. But in the majority of the cases, these works were put under the responsibility of the dioceses. Gradually, new possibilities emerged, and the Province is now taking on a very interesting role in a variety of ministries: schools, university, social assistance, communications ...
  - Programming the ministry of the scj's in a country is one of the most important things to consider, discuss and decide.

### 3. Challenges

- ❖ Such a huge and diversified continent as Asia presents a great number of opportunities and challenges for our life and mission. It is not possible to deal with all of them here, but I want to consider some priorities that, in my opinion, can help to strengthen our presence in Asia.

### 3.1 Consolidation and development

- ❖ More than a single priority, the double concept of consolidation and development is a way of looking at the Asia project in the coming years. They are particular actions, but a framework for the planning, decisions and organization of our life and mission.
- ❖ **Consolidation** was a concept that we used frequently during our visit to the Entities of Asia last year. Most of the entities are young and have only experienced a short period of development. That is why consolidation is an important idea to keep in mind. What is important are not just the numbers or the geographical expansion, but the quality of life and witness. It means:
  - To create the conditions for a personal and communitarian maturation of our religious and Dehonian life;
  - To pay special attention to initial and ongoing formation;
  - To prepare our members carefully for the pastoral work;
  - To grow in the capacity of economical sharing and self-sufficiency.
- ❖ Consolidation does not mean, however, to become immobile. It can only function well if it is placed alongside the concept of **development**. It implies:
  - The capacity to reflect and present the Gospel and our spirituality in the cultural environment of each Entity;
  - The openness to see the needs of the local Church and society and try to respond to them according to our charism and possibility;
  - The courage to take decisions and to engage in new fields of apostolate inside each Entity, according to our priorities;
  - The missionary spirit to set out for new horizons to announce the Gospel, in Asia and the other continents.

### 3.2 Inculturation of Dehonian spirituality in Asia

- ❖ This must be the **starting point and focus of all our strategies**. Through the deepening of our consecration and our relationship with God, who called us, we must find the nucleus of our unity, the significance of our life and our specific contribution to Church and society.
- ❖ You must reflect on the theological, social and cultural dimension of the Dehonian Charism and enrich it in relationship with each **culture**.
- ❖ Christianity is often perceived in Asia as a **foreign, western import**. Therefore it is of great importance to find ways of expressing our spiritual heritage in the language and symbolic structures of each culture. For that we need to know the local culture, but, at the same time, the true content of our charism.
- ❖ It is, therefore of particular importance to make sure that there are **specialized persons** in every Entity, who will be able to help the spiritual growth of the other confreres, offer the Dehonian charisma to lay people and offer their contribution to the reflection of all the Congregation.
- ❖ The deepening and the search for new and inculturated expressions of our spirituality is not just a question of theory or mysticism. Our spirituality must **permeate and characterize our personal and communal lives**: the style of our relationships, the way we offer



the service of authority; the free and brotherly sharing of material goods; our pastoral attentiveness and preferences...

- ❖ **The "way of the heart"** of our spirituality which invites us to shape our life according to the Heart of Christ, represents a pedagogy for growing together, enriching each other with the diversity of our original cultures and offering the Church and the society living signs of the love of God for this world.

### 3.3 Formation

- ❖ In our times, characterized as they are by deep and rapid changes, formation plays a crucial role in any institution that wishes to be active in society. There is a real threat that one becomes quickly outdated.
- ❖ Formation must be given particular priority at this time in Asia. As we have said above, the membership is young and the main need lies in the internal life of the communities and of the ministry. To do this well requires preparation.
- ❖ As mentioned before, a lot of effort has been given to assure the quality of **initial formation**, both in the structures and in the preparation of persons. This attention should not slacken, especially in the formation of formators and in the on-going reflection on our goals. For this we ought to use not only the available structures of each entity, but, more and more, also the help of the international community, especially at continental level.
- ❖ The **ongoing formation** of the members is also key for improving the level of personal and community life and to assure a good pastoral service. In this context, it is important to develop the sense of belonging and the universal communion within the Congregation. Continental and international collaboration can play an important role here.
- ❖ **Specialized formation** is more and more required, for the life of the communities and for our contribution to the Church and to society.
- ❖ Formation must be a key element in the planning of every Entity.

### 3.4 Community life

- ❖ I do not intend to speak at length about community life. I want to draw your attention only to one of its features because it connects formation with community life.
- ❖ Specific and formal formation is very important to consolidate our personal life and mission, but, I believe, what we experience and practice in everyday life inside the **community** plays even a greater role. The way we pray together, consult one another, discuss the community issues, practice the fraternal and caring service of authority, pay attention to the most needy persons, plan and execute our apostolate, share honestly and transparently our economical resources, and show an interest in the entire Congregation, are key ways in which the community is formative. They are essential elements that form our heart and mind and express our concrete values and spirituality to the younger generation.
- ❖ Especially in the Districts and younger Entities making their first steps in religious life, it is of paramount importance to start with a rich and fraternal style of life. **Two particu-**

*lar elements* play a key role in the building of a healthy and evangelical community: the service of authority and the sharing of goods.

- ❖ The service of **authority**, because of its importance, must be given special care and formation. It may never become a struggle for personal or group power or dominance. It ought to reflect the fraternal care for the others, the capacity to listen, the desire for unity and co-responsibility and the need for the entire community to search for and practise the ways of God.
- ❖ The **sharing of goods**, is another important issue, not only for obtaining and administering the resources of the community but also for involving the entire community. Without a serious and transparent administration of goods and co-responsibility of all confreres, a true spirit of community is impossible. The growth in economical autonomy in the Asian Entities is important because it avoids our religious life being seen as a foreign institution surviving only on outside funding.

### 3.5 **Continental/International openness and collaboration**

- ❖ The **history of the SCJs in Asia** came about only through international collaboration. Even the first mission of Indonesia, mainly by the Dutch Province, had the support of other Entities, such as Poland and the USA, not to mention the financial support from the entire Congregation. All the other Entities, from that time onwards, have been the fruit of international participation mostly under the guidance of the General Administration.
- ❖ A more recent development is the growing **collaboration among the Asian Entities**. This type of collaboration is seen by the General Administration as an important way of animating the Congregation. It makes use of our capabilities, without centralizing the administration.
- ❖ We know that, despite the public declarations about an "Asian spirit" and unity, the reality is somewhat different. There are also **deep divisions, antipathies and conflicts**. These can also be found inside the Congregation. Even inside every Entity, as we have seen, we often find strong obstacles to unity and collaboration, due to ethnic, linguistic and cultural diversity.
- ❖ As Prophets of the love of God and ministers of his reconciliation, we feel called to open our understanding to the dimensions of the Heart of God. God goes beyond all our borders and destroys our walls of discrimination. **Working together in Asia** means be faithful to our charism and to continue the spirit of love in this continent.
- ❖ In the continent, we encounter many **difficulties**, from close nationalism and prejudice to legal obstacles for traveling and getting visas. Our project of communion and collaboration should not be abandoned because of such difficulties. On the contrary, the spirit of "reparation" must move us to find ways to make these difficulties fruitful so that they can contribute to peaceful understanding on the continent.
- ❖ Many elements play a role to make this **collaboration** possible:
  - By developing a common language for communication;
  - By meeting at different levels: superiors, formators, commissions...
  - By introducing internationality at the different stages of formation (initial, ongoing, specialized)...



- By working together in the area of specialization, persons and structures such as places and programs for specialized formation and reflection;
  - By collaborating in the mission from first planning to its execution.
- ❖ To be effective, such a plan for collaboration needs a certain degree of **organization and a coordinating structure**. This is important for the entire continent, but also for the accompaniment of new missions (Vietnam, Taiwan, China...). What kind of organization should be put in place?
  - ❖ The **mission in Asia** must go on. We support very much the Taiwan initiative of the Indonesian Province. We have also a clear recommendation of the last Chapter for a mission to China. Where will the support structures come from to make all this possible?
  - ❖ The mission of the Asian confreres is not confined to the continent. It is good to see how missionaries even from the newer entities are already giving a precious collaboration **to other parts of the Congregation**, in America, Africa and Europe. This spirit we need to cultivate and develop. The Congregation of the future will certainly be more intercultural and international.

## Conclusion

- ❖ Asia is a very **dynamic part of the Congregation**. It raises many hopes for the future of the Congregation and the Church. It also represents a huge challenge for our capability to collaborate and to adapt to new languages, cultures and political situations.
- ❖ This is a **very crucial moment** of our development in Asia. We have passed from the missionary era to that of native responsibility. We face a fast-changing society that is struggling to find ways and structures to face the complex situations of the continent.
- ❖ There is a need for finding a common way of **understanding, collaboration and mission in Asia**. That can only be developed at the continental level and with the help of confreres from other continents. The General Administration can help making contacts and promote cooperation.
- ❖ Special attention has to be given to the **formation and fostering of communion** among us. We must create a special culture among us, based in the spirituality of the Heart of Jesus, who is the fruit of the Spirit of God. We must be open to share his love and to be at his service to build a new world, inspired by his Gospel.