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## Religious Renewal

H. de la Costa, S.J.

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## Religious Renewal: An Asian View\*

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H. DE LA COSTA, S.J.

OUR Father General, Father Pedro Arrupe, has a well developed sense of humor. You had invited him to address you, and he would have been glad to do so, except that he is very much involved these days in an assembly somewhat similar to yours being held in the new Audience Hall. That is why he cannot share with you, as you requested, his insights into the religious life as it is lived, and as it might be lived, in the context of Asia—that Asia where he labored for so long, which he loves so deeply, and which he has recently visited.

So he said to himself, "Our dear Sisters want an Asian view of religious renewal—fine!—we will send them an Asian." Of course; what could be more logical? But he does not tell you that the Asian he is sending comes from the Philippines; and this is his little joke.

For the Philippines is an archipelago consisting of some seven thousand islands and a great deal of salt water, lying off the southeastern coast of the great Asian land mass, but far enough away from it to be just beyond the great trade routes, the seaways running east and west and north and south, from India to Indonesia, from Indonesia to China, from China to Japan, by which, from the beginning of recorded time, the

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\* Paper read to the General Chapter of the Roman Union of the Order of Saint Ursula, 14 October 1971.

ancient civilizations of the East intermingled with and enriched each other. Until the coming of Western man, these islands were a barbarian fringe beyond the pale of the civilized world, peopled by primitives who traded pepper for palanquins at Malacca, or pearls for porcelain with the occasional Chinese merchantman, but otherwise acknowledged neither emperor nor maharajah, and so knew neither the Way of the Buddha nor the Sayings of the Sage.

And so you will not find in the Philippines any of the monuments which the great religions of the East have scattered throughout the length and breadth of Asia. You will not find anything even remotely resembling the magnificence of Angkor or the majesty of Borobudur. What is it, then, that you will find? Why, you will find in every principal town, and even in little towns, a church. A church built in the style of imperial Spain, but adapted to a land of volcanoes, to a *terra firma* not quite as firm as one would like, and therefore aptly designated "earthquake baroque."

For all practical purposes our history as a people—as distinct from a mere collection of clans—begins when these churches began to be built—by missionaries from the West. And because these missionaries came and stayed, eight out of ten Filipinos are Catholics; not very good Catholics, many of us, but, for good or ill, Catholics. Our civil law is derived, through the Napoleonic Code, from the Roman jurisprudence; our system of government from the English political tradition, mediated by Spain's successor as colonial ruler, the United States. We are in process of developing a national language; but since our seven principal languages are mutually unintelligible, we often speak with one another in English—which continues to be the medium of instruction in our schools. Nevertheless, our basic social institutions, and our deepest and most spontaneous reactions to life continue to be Indonesian, as our racial stock remains Malay; because of this, we have added the most unexpected variations and arpeggios to what we have imported from the West; our Christianity is not quite Greco-Roman, our democracy not quite American, just as our churches are not quite Spanish baroque.

This is the kind of mixed-up Asians we Filipinos are; so much so, that our Asian friends sometimes ask us, with a directness at once devastating and disarming, whether we Filipinos are, in fact, Asians at all. And this is the kind of mixed-up Asian that Father Arrupe, with that puckish unpredictability which seems to be a charism of Superiors General, has sent to address you in his stead.

Well, let us do what we can to extricate ourselves from this imbroglio. In doing so, we may find—who knows?—that the merry mix-up has a hidden meaning; that there is, after all, a point to the joke.

For many of us the Second Vatican Council has become a point of reference in time; we speak of the pre-Vatican and the post-Vatican Church, of a pre-Vatican and a post-Vatican mentality, of pre-Vatican prudence and post-Vatican *élan*. It has become a milestone; or, better still, a gateway. The gateway image is better, I think, because it recalls the Roman god of gateways: Janus, who faced both ways at once; whose vision embraced both the road by which the traveller has come and the road that still lies before him. It was on the gatepost of the Second Vatican Council that the pilgrim Church leaned for a moment to look back on the travelled road; to perceive, with something of a shock, that she has been moving through a rapidly changing landscape, which becomes even less familiar and reassuring as she peers ahead; and to realize, with mingled fear and hope, that now more than ever she must depend on the vision vouchsafed her in the beginning, if she is to make her way through this trackless future from which the old reliable landmarks have disappeared.

Nowhere is this effort to comprehend in a single vision past experience and future direction, initial insights and present problems, more evident than in *Perfectae caritatis*, the conciliar decree on the renewal of the religious life. One has only to refer to the passage (n. 2) which I am sure you must know by heart:

The appropriate renewal of the religious life involves two simultaneous processes: (1) a continuous return to the sources of all Christian life and to the original inspiration behind a given community, and (2) an adjustment of the community to the changed condition of the times.

About the first of these two processes I can, obviously, have nothing of value to say to you. You are the best judges of what in the authentic Ursuline spirit you must preserve intact. But not only preserve, as it were in mothballs, but reactivate, revitalize, make operative, give vigorous expression to, without distortion or dilution, amid "the changed condition of the times." For this is the other aspect of the simultaneous process of renewal that the Vatican Council speaks of; and about it we might perhaps suggest a few lines of thought.

One feature of the changed condition of our times is certainly a greater appreciation of pluralism, especially the pluralism of cultures and societies. It is the paradox of our world that the more closely science and technology bring us together, the more clearly we perceive how different we are from one another, and in what a variety of modes and forms our common humanity finds expression. Until fairly recent times, the concept of civilization has been pretty generally regarded as a univocal concept. It was simply assumed not only by Westerners but by non-Westerners as well, that civilization is that development of man which took place around the Mediterranean basin; that was brought to a high point of perfection by the ancient Greeks; that Rome extended to Western Europe; and that Europeans brought across the Atlantic by migration, and to the rest of the world by conquest and colonization. There were those who did not quite agree with this view; Matteo Ricci was one, Mahatma Gandhi was another. But, in general, the basic assumption behind the expansion of Europe, the central fact of what we call modern history, was that for all practical purposes civilization was synonymous with westernization.

And not only of the expansion of Europe. It was also, to a very large extent, implicit in the expansion of Christianity. To "convert the heathen" meant, not only to convert him to Christianity, but to civilize him; and *that* meant to make of him not only a Christian, but, to the extent of his obviously limited capacity, a European.

No need for us now to rehearse the successive historical stages whereby this assumption was questioned, challenged,

discarded; whereby this thesis generated of itself sharp antitheses, which in turn provoked attempts at synthesis, such as those of Marx and Mao Tse-tung. It is sufficient to note, among the "changed conditions" of our times, the widespread conviction that civilization is not, after all, a univocal but an analogous concept; that to be civilized is to be human, to be fully human, agreed; but that if there is a European mode of being fully human, there is also an American, an African, an Asian mode.

This deeper and more realistic appreciation of the pluralism of cultures has naturally led to a revision of views formerly taken for granted as to what it means to christianize, and what it means to be a christian. We are much more conscious today of the distinction between the gospel message in itself, as the Father has revealed it in his Son, for the enlightenment and salvation of all men by the power of the Spirit, and the particular cultural context in which that message is proclaimed, received, and lived.

Such a distinction between gospel message and cultural context does not by any means tend to minimize the valuable contribution that a specific cultural context, say the European, has contributed and contributes to Christianity; one does not, on the strength of it, throw aside Augustine and Aquinas, Theresa of Avila and Catherine of Siena, as simply irrelevant. No; but it does bring out the fact that the contribution of the cultural context is a contribution to our human, and therefore progressive understanding of the gospel message; they are not part of the message itself.

And, therefore, it also opens up the possibility of imbedding, enshrining, incarnating if you will, the gospel message in other cultural contexts, so that they too can make their own specific contribution to our human and progressive understanding of the original revelation. And not only the possibility, but the necessity of such incarnation; for if God's message is for all men, then surely he expects that all men should contribute, from their own resources, from their own cultures, to our understanding of it.

This is well brought out in the 12th and 13th resolutions of the Asian Bishops' Meeting held in Manila in November 1969:

We pledge ourselves [the Bishops said] to an open, sincere, and continuing dialogue with our brothers of other great religions of Asia, that we may learn from one another how to enrich ourselves spiritually and how to work more effectively together on our common task of total human development.

We also pledge ourselves to develop an indigenous theology and to do what we can so that the life and message of the Gospel may be ever more incarnate in the rich historic cultures of Asia, so that in the necessary process of modernization and development, Asian Christianity may help to promote all that is "authentically human in these cultures."

It is possible, then, according to our bishops of Asia, for us christians to learn from, to become spiritually enriched by, the great religions that have their origin in our Asian cultures. For this reason, they go on to say, we must develop an indigenous theology: a theology fully and authentically christian, certainly, but one that incarnates the life and message of the gospel in the rich historic cultures of Asia, in the same way and to the same extent that the life and message of the gospel has been incarnated in the rich historic culture of the West.

And why should this be attempted, why is this task important? For two reasons: because it is the saving power of the gospel that will bring out all that is authentically human in these Asian cultures, precisely as it has brought out all that was authentically human in the Greco-Roman culture; and because it is by the Asian vision of what is authentically human, not by any other vision, that the development and modernization of Asia must be accomplished. Asia needs modernization, yes; but modernization need not be westernization. Its term should be Asian man: more fully man, but also more fully Asian, not a blurred carbon copy of European man. Such is the conviction, such is the hope of our Asian bishops.

This, then, is the task before us. This is that *renovatio accommodata*, that *aggiornamento* which the Council asks of us religious. It is at least one essential aspect of it. For it

seems to me that *aggiornamento* has not only a temporal but a spatial dimension. It does not mean merely "bringing up to date," but also "putting in context," precisely because the whole movement of the pilgrim Church in time is toward putting the gospel of Christ in context, imbedding, incarnating it in all the human situations, the societies, the cultures, the civilizations that she encounters in the course of her pilgrimage.

This is our present task. It will require a revision not only of our external ministries, but also, and more importantly, our inner religious life. In the performance of this task there are two pitfalls we must avoid: externalism and historicism.

*Externalism.* The adaptation of the religious life to a given culture is not merely a matter of externals. For a sisterhood working in the South Pacific to discard the winter costume worn by Dutch housewives in the seventeenth century, and to adopt one more suited to a tropical climate is a good thing, but it is not the heart of the matter. Similarly, the employment of indigenous music and indigenous gestures in the liturgy, and the visual representation of Our Lady and the saints according to the canons of indigenous art, are good things; but they too do not go to the heart of the matter. What, then, is the heart of the matter? I suppose one could say that the heart of the matter is the heart; that is, the mind and the spirit.

The Council itself tells us this when it says that "the manner of living, praying, and working should be suitably adapted to the physical and psychological conditions of today's religious and also, to the extent required by the nature of each community, to the needs of the apostolate, the requirements of a given culture, the social and economic circumstances anywhere, but especially in missionary territories" (*Perfectae caritatis*, n. 3). Again, "religious habits . . . should meet the requirements of health and be suited to the circumstances of time and place as well as to the services required of those who wear them." (n. 17). But having said this, the Council goes on to say that "lest the adaptations of religious life to the needs of our time be merely superficial . . . religious should be properly



instructed, according to the intellectual gifts and personal endowments of each, in the prevailing manners of contemporary social life, and in its characteristic ways of feeling and thinking." (n. 18).

We must adapt the religious life, then, not merely to the externals, but to the "characteristic ways of feeling and thinking" of "contemporary social life", and here again, I think it is within the meaning of the Council to understand by "contemporary" not just today as different from yesterday, but this concrete cultural context as different from that other.

How can we do this? The Council says by the proper instruction of young religious. True enough; but I think more is required. This adaptation of the specific charism of a religious community to the culture in which it is lived cannot come from reading books, much less from issuing regulations. It can only be the result of lived experience. Before the renewal of the religious life can be legislated, it must first be lived. *Accommodata renovatio*, in the last analysis is not a task. It is a growth.

This means that Asians who join religious communities must exert every effort to avoid becoming alienated from their own native cultures; every effort, for the process of education as at present structured in the underdeveloped countries of Asia, and therefore also, in part, the process of religious formation, very often becomes a process of alienation, unless one consciously takes measures to neutralize this side-effect. We must by all means ensure that in becoming committed christians we do not become strangers to our own people.

It means, too, that religious who come from the West to serve in Asia should exert every effort to make "characteristic ways of feeling and thinking" which are alien to them somehow their own; to become really and truly at home in the culture of the people they serve. This is, in some ways, a much more difficult achievement; but not an impossible one. It cannot be impossible, because it must be done.

In this connection, may I cite two rather extreme examples from my own experience. From my own experience, and so you will forgive me if they are both Jesuit examples. Extreme

examples, because they are more or less in the category of canonized sanctity; one is not expected to make the three hundred genuflections a day that some medieval saint is supposed to have made to the Holy Trinity, one is simply asked to get into the spirit of the thing.

Well, then, there is Father Hugo Lasalle, of our Japanese Province. For many years, he put himself to school under the Japanese masters of Zen meditation, and is now recognized by them as himself a master. His experience has convinced him that not only is Zen meditation, properly understood, not inconsistent with the Christian doctrine on prayer, but is capable of adding unexplored dimensions to the methods of prayer developed in the West.

May I also mention Father Yves Raguin, of our China Province, who has spent the better part of thirty years on the study of the Chinese classics. His studies have convinced him that as far as humanism is concerned, the Chinese philosophers had insights which do not seem to have been given to the humanists of the European Renaissance. He cites in particular, as being especially relevant to our times, the fact that the Confucian concept of man is pre-eminently that he is a man-for-others; unless a man recognizes and fulfills his relationship of love and service for the other, he is nothing. Is this not the counterpart, the missing half, if you will, of the Renaissance ideal of *virtú*, of man self-possessed and dominant, man the measure of all things?

Father Raguin adds that Confucian humanism goes further. If man has this horizontal dimension of being man-for-others, he has a vertical dimension also; he is man-who-looks-into-himself, as into a well. And there, in the depths of his own heart, what does he find? He finds Heaven; that is, God. To this effect Father Raguin quotes Mencius:

He who plumbs the depths of his own heart, attains knowledge of what man is. He who attains knowledge of what man is, attains knowledge of God.

In this vision of man as the focal point of two lines of force, the one line stretching out his arms to all the world—"within

the four corners of the earth all men are brothers"—the other bringing highest heaven to the innermost depths of his being, like the reflection in a well of a star at its zenith; in this vision of the Confucians, is there not some kind of foreshadowing of a Cross? And let us not say that this "characteristic way of feeling and thinking" is limited to the scholars of a vanished age. Father Raguin has found it in hundreds of quite ordinary people in the island of Taiwan, as he shows in his little book on how to pray, *Chemins de la contemplation*, which I commend to your attention.

*Historicism.* Thus, there are depths in the cultures of Asia which warn us against an adaptation of the religious life limited to mere externals. There are also variations, confusions, tensions in them, *as they are today*, which must warn us against a facile historicism. Being a student of history myself, I must urge you to treat historians with caution. For the Asia of the historians is the Asia of the past; and the remoter the past, the more enthusiastically they write about it. But what we have to deal with, what we must adapt ourselves to, is not the Asia of the past but the Asia of today.

Not Nara, Japan, where court ladies launched candle-lie paper boats on the streams of the palace gardens, each one chanting a piece of verse, composed at the spur of the moment as the boats float past, but Japan today, with an industrial complex producing tiny transistor radios you can dangle on your wrist, and the biggest oil tankers in the world. Not Ming China, sending forth a fleet to collect peacocks and giraffes for the zoo of the Son of Heaven, but China today, engaged in the gigantic task of transforming an impoverished and ignorant peasantry into enlightened citizens of a classless society—even if it kills them. Not the Spanish Philippines, where a happy-go-lucky people leaned against their palm trees, strumming guitars while waiting for the nuts to fall and be toasted into copra, but the Philippines today, torn by factional strife, and desperately in search of a national identity that still eludes them.

*Asia today.* Listen once again to the Bishops of Asia, and see it through their eyes:

In our meetings and discussions we have tried to look upon the face of Asia—or, perhaps more rightly, upon the many faces of today's Asia, and contemporary Asian man.

For there is, first of all, the face of Asia, continent of the teeming masses. Asia is nearly two billion people—almost two-thirds of mankind. It is a face largely marked with poverty, with undernourishment and ill health, scarred by war and suffering, troubled and restless.

There is, secondly, the face of Asia, continent of the young. Nearly sixty percent of its people are below twenty-five years of age — the world of the youth of mankind.

There is, too, the face of Asia that is the continent of ancient and diverse cultures, religions, histories and traditions, a region like Joseph's coat of many colors.

Most prominent in our time, there is the face of Asia in its hour of reawakening, of the continent where the history of the next age of mankind is already being written.

This is the Asia that our bishops see; the Asia in whose midst we religious must bear witness to Christ as Savior, and bear witness in such a way that we shall be understood and loved; or not we, but Christ in us. But—as Father Arrupe does not tire of saying—how to do? *What* to do—bring Christ to the culture, to the contemporary culture—is easy enough to see; but *how* to do? That is more difficult.

We must put Christ in context; but what is the context? In this whirling kaleidoscope that is Asia, how discern a pattern? How plot a flight plan through this massive turbulence? There is no ready-made answer; but we might find in *Perfectae caritatis* a hint as to how to arrive at one. "Successful renewal and proper adaptation," the Council says, "cannot be achieved unless every member of a community cooperates." It is true that "in the work of appropriate renewal, it is the responsibility of competent authorities alone, especially of general chapters, to issue norms, to pass laws, and to allow for a right amount of prudent experimentation"; but having said this, the Council immediately goes on to say that "in decisions which involve the future of an institute as a whole, superiors should in appropriate manner consult the members and give them a hearing" (n. 4).

This involvement of the entire religious community in the process of arriving at a key decision is what is called in Jesuit

circles "communitarian discernment." We surely do not have a Jesuit patent on it, since we see the Council commending it to all religious communities. But I am sure that if Father Arrupe were here this is what he would emphasize as the most promising path to appropriate renewal and adaptation, if only because it was by communitarian discernment that there is a Society of Jesus.

For this is how it was with us in the beginning: a small band of good companions who, of an evening, after the labors of the day, met to pray together, to say with simplicity to each other what the Spirit puts in each one's heart, to listen to the Spirit in what the other says, and so to discern what the Spirit wanted them to be and to do together. And this is how we would like it to be with us again; and also with you.

But in all this, please do not forget Asia. Not Asia as a map in an atlas, but Asia as people; and most especially, the common people, of where we have a great many. There is a prose poem composed in the fourth century B.C. by the Chinese poet Sung Yu with which we may appropriately end. It is called "The Man-Wind and the Woman-Wind." It seems that Hsiang, King of Ch'u, was feasting in his palace with Sung Yu to wait on him.

A gust of wind blew in and the king bared his breast to meet it, saying: "How pleasant a thing is this wind which I share with the common people." Sung Yu answered: "This is the Great King's wind. The common people cannot share it." The king said: "Wind is a spirit of Heaven and Earth. It comes wide-spread and does not choose between noble and base or between high and low. How can you say, "This is the King's wind?" "...Where is the wind born?"

Sung answered: "The wind is born in the ground. . . It rages at the mouth of the pass. . . It rushes in fiery anger. . . tearing down rocks and trees, smiting forests and grasses. But at last, abating, it spreads abroad, seeks empty places . . . and so, growing gentler and clearer . . . falls and rises till it climbs the high walls of the castle and enters the gardens of the inner palace. It bends the flowers and leaves with its breath. . . It pauses in the courtyard. . . goes up to the Jade Hall, shakes the hanging curtains and lightly passes into the inner room. And so it becomes the Great King's wind.

"Now such a wind is fresh and sweet to breathe and its gentle murmuring cures the diseases of men . . . sharpens sight and hearing and refreshes the body. This is what is called the Great King's wind."

The king said: "You have well described it. Now tell me of the common people's wind." Sung said: "The common people's wind rises from the narrow lanes and streets, carrying clouds of dust. Rushing to empty spaces it attacks the gateway, scatters the dust-heap, sends the cinders flying, pokes among foul and rotting things, till at last it enters the tiled windows and reaches the rooms of the cottage. Now this wind is heavy and turgid, oppressing man's heart. It brings fever to his body, ulcers to his lips and dimness to his eyes. It shakes him with coughing; it kills him before his time. Such is the Woman-wind of the common people."

Now, may we not say that it is the task of Christians in Asia to make the Man-wind, the Great King's wind, the wind of the common people also, so that, breathing the same sweet air as princes and potentates, captains and kings, the fever may no longer burn them, nor the cough shake them, and kill them before their time?

And if the Great King's wind should ever blow through the cottages and rice fields of Asia, will it not be, miraculously, a Woman's-wind still, because it will be women who will bring it, the women who have followed Christ to minister to him?