

73/6

Rome, 16th February, 1973

To all Superiors General  
 To all their Delegates for SEDOS  
 To all Members of the SEDOS Group

This week:

The final instalment of our Executive Secretary's impressions after his exposure to the Orient. The Muslim world is represented by Malaysia, Indonesia (and Singapore). The Buddhist world by Thailand and Burma. And in the background, China the political giant, Japan the economic monster. Are the Philippines a Christian centre? Or a Christian "island"?

I.	MACAU	pp. 65/6
II.	PHILIPPINES	67/8
III.	JAPAN	69/71
IV.	INDONESIA	72/3
V.	SINGAPORE	74/5
VI.	MALAYSIA	76/7
VII.	THAILAND	78/9
VIII.	BURMA	80/1

=====

COMING EVENTS :

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE - February 19th - 4.00 pm - SEDOS Secretariat  
 SOCIAL COMMUNICATIONS - " 19th - 4.00 pm - OMI Generalate, via Aurelia, 290  
 DEVELOPMENT WORKING GROUP - " 21st - 4.00 pm - SEDOS Secretariat

Yours sincerely,  
 P. Leonzio BANO, fscj

M A C A U

=====

a) The People

1. One can find good reasons to justify the persistence of Hong Kong. But it requires a superhuman effort to accept the survival of Macau. All around is Mao's China and yet Macau is Portuguese. It is another of the Chinese patterns of thought and action we should accept rather than try to explain: an anachronistic imperialist appendix which anti-imperialist China allows to exist on its border.
2. Macau has a glorious past - which somehow breaks through the creeping decay of its tree lined, wide avenues, its falling churches, its commerce, its beautiful planning and architecture. But it also brought me back to the absurdities of the whole colonial exercise: thousands of Chinese massing for the dog races, foreigners and locals going in and out of the round the clock official gambling houses - casinos, a small street which is the world's best market for gold.
3. Local Portuguese kept reminding me ruefully that, since the Communist riots, the local government practically has given up trying to rule. And so the decay is accelerating: the streets are littered, the services in pieces. In a way it is the Chinese Communists who call the tune. I was surprised to see lorries cross the border at will: they could do it because they had double number plates: Macau and China! And right near the border, another most unusual sight: a huge morgue where the Chinese "outside" China wait in the peace of death to be buried "inside", with their kin.

b) The Church

4. The Church also has a glorious past. Macau was once destined to be the base for the evangelization of China and Japan. A sight which keeps haunting me was the exquisite facade, almost intact, of the central Church. Beyond it...nothing, because the building was burned... but framed by the doorless entrance in the facade, a magnificent view of Mao's China. Is the door still open?
5. St. Francis Xavier died here and he is the patron saint of the Mission. Is the work he started going on - in some mysterious way? I asked a young Priest: do you think God has a plan for China? Yes! Do you think there is a place for Macau, in it? No! The climate is certainly discouraging. The Church carries on with its traditional work: schools, welfare, press (censored!), seminary, Parishes. The Government controls its moves. Everybody seems very prudent. The future is a Chinese enigma. I really admired these people - the way they manage to go on despite all the odds.

c) Dialogue

6. This lethargy (which sometimes takes the form of a creeping despair) does not allow much room for constructive dialogue. And yet this would be possible. There are Chinese Catholics who would follow a determined lead from their Pastors. The younger Pastors know the people, speak their language, practically live with them.

I did my best to challenge them. But they are still tied up with the juridical approach (which they enthusiastically condemned). If the Macau Catholic community does not learn dialogue now, will it conduct it when China absorbs Macau? And yet it did seem obvious to me that, with Hong Kong and Taiwan, these local Churches already have a special mandate for Mission in China.

d) Evangelization

7. This dialogue could lead to a serious thrust towards evangelization in Macau itself. As things are, Macau seems engrossed with the familiar, internal problems of any "old" Church. This is part of the whole anomaly - indeed, fiction, of being a part of Portugal on the border of China! A determined move toward the non Christians could shake the Catholics out of the present impasse into the realities of the contemporary world. It would certainly give more meaning to what they are trying to do now - indeed to what they are! In terms of God's Plan of Salvation.

Fr. B. Tonna

THE PHILIPPINESa) The People

1. The people of the Philippines impressed me by their eagerness to be friendly, by their willingness to be helpful. They certainly merit better social structures than they seem to have. The problem of un- and under-employment, in fact, stems from the failure of these structures to distribute the huge investment pie more equitably. I was there when the Government was still collecting the guns and I could take in the uncommitted "wait and see" attitude. The very poor, of course, seem to have nothing to lose, right now, from martial law. At worst, it is a change from their bleak status quo.
2. I spent as much time as I could in the slums. There the people have set up their own system: enforcing their own law and order, helping one another, making (subsistence) ends meet. The kinship network - as in other strata of Filipino society - dominates the scene. And leads people with huge families to take in children of dead cousins and so continue to divide the same, meagre, resources - (hoping that the children will add to them!). I saw the whole thing come to life when a boy fell down from the roof of a block of flats, and the whole community spontaneously joined in to organize the funeral and to support the mother. We have such a lot of things to learn from these people! All the time I felt I ought to curse the huge fenced off factory building which overshadows the area and sucks its cheap labour in order to produce soap and what not for a multi-national company! The violence of the unjust, anonymous structures was very visible here.
3. The few who are very rich, the many who are very poor were evident all over. It happened to me, as I escorted a Sister from the slums to her destination - the cultural centre. My curiosity made me pause at the foyer, to see the whole, shining thing. And an exquisite Filipino lady lured me into staying for a first class presentation of Bizet's Carmen - in French! How could it be? A few minutes before I had been in the heart of the slums! But this was Manila: a city of gaping contrasts. The imposing avenues run parallel - and quite close - to the people's hovels they ingenuously hide. The smiles of the people cover up their sufferings. Noble ideas coexist with dirty practice.

b) The Church

4. In the midst of these, the Church lives, shares and apparently thrives. The Church, in fact, has all one can desire. It is well structured. Its traditions go deep and popular support is wide. Its ideas already influence other Asian, indeed, non Asian Churches. Its current experiments are breath taking. All these are firm, starting off, points which should not be forgotten in the self criticism which, at least as I could sense, is currently going on among the more dynamic leaders.

5. Looming on the horizon, however I could sense a struggle on the part of the local Pastors and Religions to shake off any remaining "colonialist" residues. Fortunately, the signs are that it will be conducted in the Filipino style - where person-to-person relationships will take precedence over efficiency, where charity will animate justice. This is all in line with the dynamism of the local culture - (In a short time, in fact, the Philippines will symbolically change their name).
6. I could also sense the Church was heading towards an internal split over the question of martial law. Some leaders were open and "waiting to see". Others were in despair at the turn events had taken - away from freedom and participation. My hope is that the two sides if they ever emerge into the open - do not use up all their energy in hair splitting debate on words and concepts. The Filipino Church is the only one in Asia which commands a wide base and it would be a pity if it does not take up the cue given by the nation's thirst for integral human development.

c) Dialogue and Evangelization

7. The dialogue and evangelization processes here take on distinct forms. If we exclude the smaller ethnic and other groups, we can say that most of the population has been evangelized. But has the Church been loyal to the call to "evangelize the poor?" Have not its schools been producing an elite for the ranks of the rich? Or rather: is the Church in dialogue with the poor? The heart of the current challenge seemed to me to lie here. Many far sighted, courageous Religions men and women, local and overseas, have read the signs of God's plan and have gone into dialogue with the poor. They merit all the understanding, all the support, all the encouragement, the other Catholics can muster. It is only with such backing that the formidable obstacles (which they will encounter) can be surmounted.
8. Dialogue with the poor means sharing the fate of the poor. This does not mean a recrudescence of the class struggle - though the Church could do with less investment with the richer classes! It means simply a response to the Christian call for maximum openness. Sociologically, we tend to close up - consciously and unconsciously - to the marginal groups. And "marginal", in this case, equals "the poor". It is simply a consequence of the Mission of the Church to be a channel of salvation to all.
9. A final strong point about the Filipino Church is that, so often, it performs the function of a natural meeting point for Asian Catholics. The East Asian Pastoral Institute is a living example of this "international" role of the Filipino community. The most recent addition to the "family" is the Office for Human Development of the Asian Bishops. As usual, these high level services seem to cut themselves off from the local grass roots. This is a pity - because dialogue between them and the Filipino Church could bring extremely rich dividends, to both sides, in terms of ideas and experiences.

Fr. B. TONNA

## J A P A N

### a) The People

1. It was a great change, from Hong Kong to Tokyo. The people here were more relaxed, more sophisticated, more diversified in their dress, their perfumes, their manners. The old-new dichotomy seemed to be surmounted here: ladies flitted by in traditional garb followed by others in contemporary fashions. Sky scrapers sat side by side with small, wooden houses. School girls were trying to test their English on me, as I waited for the train, without any embarrassment about their XIX century western school uniforms.
2. Japan seems to have accepted Western technology without upsetting its centuries old way of life. Has there been an industrial revolution in Japan? Or merely a symbiosis? And yet their technology is very much like ours - if not better: I was told they will have video-telephones in 1973. This was remarkable because we take for granted that the old and the new cannot coexist. And yet, in Japan the most diverse, architectural styles (often borrowed from the West) sit side by side in sprawling, ultra modern Tokyo which is under serene, old Fuji. I was told the Government had plans to check pollution. I hope they manage. Because the November country scenery was stupendous: miles of mandarin dotted hills, romantic lakes, all sorts of shades in the woods, blue skies, snow capped peaks. And all this in a network of unobtrusive villages, mountain roads, frequent bus, train and ferry services.
3. In terms of human relationships the symbiosis appears again under the form of living, centuries old, family loyalty tradition and discipline mobilized to set up a rational, efficient, dependable organization of whatever can be organized. Indeed I was sometimes taken aback by the reappearance of organization in all sorts of unexpected situations - like those of taking your shoes before entering a house! In the buses, on the ferries, aboard the trains, a loud-speaker system kept passengers informed about all sorts of things!
4. Capitalism thrives because the consumer society is all over. I can never forget the day I lost my bearings in the Shinyuku station. I could pronounce my destination but could not read it in Japanese character. People were very helpful but the network of subways and moving staircases was too much for me. And thus I was sucked by a huge department store - the Odakyu - floors and floors of impeccably presented products from all corners of the world with exquisite attendants trying to help you into buying with their smiling "hey hey". And there are tens and tens of these huge stores. Outside them, the consumer is constantly reminded of big papa Mitsubishi - the omnipresent three diamonds!
5. This symbiosis could be, of course, artificial. At times I was suddenly struck by the naïve way in which people "borrowed" ideas and methods. I was left with the impression of a translation which was no good because it was too literal. It could be a sign that there was a danger that Japan could again make serious mistakes by failing to catch the spirit of man's drama on earth.

6. In fact, in other parts of Asia I could sense a certain apprehension about Japan. Hong Kong friends were trying to dampen my enthusiasm about Japanese products. In Thailand people were clamouring against the dominance of Japanese business. Asians know only too well that their history is going to be conditioned by this industrial super power. Fortunately, the more illuminated Japanese are very aware of this problem.
7. Meanwhile Japan moves on: its peace with China, its continuing expansion, its urbanization schemes, its new role in the economic development of Asia are major expressions of its dynamism.

b) The Church

8. The Japanese Church is still heavily dependent on expatriates. Most of the missionary Institutes have invested heavily in Japan, well aware of the strategic place this occupies in Asia. But the outcome looks lopsided. The hierarchy and the representative posts may be in the hands of Japanese churchmen. But so many of the institutions continue to be manned by overseas personnel.
9. This, of course, is an internal problem which could be solved - if approached in a spirit of sincere cooperation. Unfortunately my impression is that this will be difficult. I could catch signals of divisions under the surface - between the local and overseas churchmen, among and within the Institutes, on ideas and strategy, in the different sectors. This is really a pity. How can we be open to the world outside the Church if we are not open to the world of people within it?
10. The exercise would involve a major review of the modes of insertion of the Christian group in the total culture. Successful as it certainly is, is our presence in the kindergarten sector, for example, really meaningful? Are we not inserting ourselves as a social service rather than as a Church? Such questions are embarrassing and can only be tackled by the people there - (which however means by all the people there and not just by Church or even Catholic people). But they do open the way to the major reassessment which current trends in Japan seem to warrant.
11. Meanwhile the Church seems engrossed by problems of maintenance and organization - often of a financial nature. Its involvement in the educational, health and social services is necessarily limited: Japan is a developed country and does not need foreign aid. This reduces its "built in" contacts - institutional and otherwise - with the environment. As a result I felt I was moving in a closed, inward looking Church, over concerned with its housekeeping. And yet it is this Church which has to be the Sign to Japan. Conversely, this Church can only find itself (and solve its internal problems) when it forgets itself to focus on its Mission.

c) Dialogue

12. The main problem then becomes one of dialogue in view of evangelization. Could the Message of the Church permeate Japanese society the way technology has penetrated it? This is, of course, a wrong question. But it kept coming back to me as I tried to expose myself to Japanese culture and realized the capacity of this culture to take in new dimensions. What was worrying me was the apparent over-concern of the Japanese Catholics over internal problems. A question like this could provoke ideas about the shape they have to give the Gospel leaven in their particular society. After all, dialogue is the channel through which this leaven can operate.
13. I put myself corollary questions like: with whom should Catholics try to dialogue? It could be the artists of Japan. It could be the trade unions, now seriously concerned about the meaning of life of the workers. In other words, it need not be the intelligentsia.
14. With that question tackled (even if not resolved) we could proceed with the search for the point of contact of the Gospel value system and that of Japan.
15. What struck me was the fact that the scene seemed set for all this - at least from the side of generally liberal and open environment. And yet I am not so sure the local Church is ready for it. There are Catholics who are trying - groping and testing for that subsystem of the total culture where the leaven of Gospel Message could be injected. This is the case, for example, of the various initiatives in the social communications field.

d) Evangelization

16. The evangelization of Japan has a glorious past. But the present is rather bleak. It is not a problem of numbers (though these are still very small: one third of a million Catholics for a population of 103 million.). It is one of the penetration of the Gospel in the day to day lives of the people.
17. And yet the time might be already ripe. There are signals that the people are starting to put the more fundamental questions (about the quality of their life) now that the past war burst of reconstruction is over and that the battle for survival and self-assertion is won. Is the Catholic community ready and willing to make a proposal? In Japanese terms? Can the Gospel invitation become another dimension of the rich, total, Japanese way of life or culture? How?
18. As a whole the Church seemed to me to be too overwhelmed by the magnitude of the task and by the scarcity of its achievements to take such questioning seriously. The hope lies in those courageous and often lone pioneers who make an effort to capture the signals of God's Plan for Japan and to respond to them. Let us give them all the support they merit.



INDONESIAa) The People

1. The magnitude of the human development challenge becomes very visible in Indonesia. There is the sheer quantitative side: hundreds and hundreds of eager people begging silently to give you a ride in their three wheeler for a few cents. And these are only a drop in the sea of 123 m. Then there is the qualitative side: the country is fragmented into so many islands, so far apart as to make the quick communication necessary for development almost impossible; when this problem is solved, a host of others remain: the land ownership system, the hold of the "big men", the passive acceptance of adverse conditions and so many others.
2. Fortunately Indonesia now has a stable regime which seems really concerned with the economy. Some people tell you progress has been made. Others show you the ubiquitous unemployed. It is like the man who tells you the bottle is half full while his friend reminds you it is half empty. One thing is certain: it cannot be done overnight. Still, the period will be too long if the pace is not accelerated. And the most urgent thing right now is to distribute better what already exists. This would also include "brain power" - so many capable men are still held in a political jail!
3. I was deeply moved by the openness and kindness and enthusiasm of the people. In particular because I knew well enough that they were innocent victims of cruel, impersonal, forces acting to keep them in chains. A Sister told me, for example, that in the Jakarta area, as much as 60% of the children may already be mentally maimed for life - because of malnutrition. And then the horrid sight of mass un- and under-employment: so many willing hands and hearts abandoned by the roadside. Is this connected with the population problem? Undoubtedly - though the real answer would be more complex. But even in the demographic area, we Catholics have assumed tremendous responsibilities.
4. Indonesia, of course, exudes its own brand of a relaxed Islam. The mosques are very visible and the people seem to establish a very firm relationship with the divinity. Every now and then, fanaticism does rear its ugly head but, on the whole, the basic tenets of the Constitution for freedom of religion are respected.

b) The Church

5. In many respects the Indonesian Church merits much more attention than it usually receives. It is very sensitive to the needs of the people and has adopted a very visible stance of service. The range of its involvement in the socio-economic field is wide, indeed: from a manager training institute to a nutrition programme, from a rural leadership course to urban betterment initiatives. The effort is backed by good, international relations and by an intelligent use of the mass media

6. It is perhaps because of its strength that this Church does not receive the necessary attention. Internally, the 1.8 m Catholics are well organized - in spite of their great diversity and their uneven distribution. The post-Vatican structures are all there - with good, supporting, secretariats. The documentation centre in Jakarta is a beautiful job - and it is used. Ideas sound and courageous experimentation thrives. Cooperation with other Christian groups and with Muslims is moving ahead.
7. In this context I was struck by the achievements of a Muslim-Catholic-Protestant group involved in the slum areas. The people on the project take a hut - in the midst of the thousands of huts of the people - and, with great discretion, establish a welcome presence which painlessly develops into a point of reference for conscientization and eventual improvement of the sub human living conditions.

c) Dialogue

8. Dialogue seems to prefer focusing on "doing things together" rather than sharing ideas and experiences on religious problems. The example just quoted is a case in point. In practice this is what is actually happening in the ecumenical movement - which, after all, is dialogue among Christians belonging to different confessions. Indonesia, of course, constitutes a challenge for dialogue with Islam. But this is an area where timing becomes very important and where too much haste may be counter productive.

d) Evangelization

9. The fruits of the evangelization effort can be gauged from the results: 1.8 m RC's, the biggest Church after the Philippines and Viet-Nam, in this part of the world. Is the thrust still on? Undoubtedly - and with an eye on quality. The times of mass "conversions" are obviously over. As elsewhere, it is a new missionary epoch and an Indonesian model for the new era will certainly emerge. Meanwhile the Sign of Salvation has been constituted: the Church is quite visible in this predominantly Muslim country. The problem right now is that of making its "signals" intelligible to the national culture (or, rather, cultures!) and to a maximum of individuals.

Fr. B. Tonna

S I N G A P O R Ea) The People

1. The "regime" marks the people of Singapore. It is smart. And the people are smart. In terms of effectiveness, of efficiency. A new pattern of social interaction had to be invented in order to face radically new realities: the end of the British Colonial presence in Asia and thus of a major source of earning a living; the self government of a multi racial community; fears of the Chinese among the political forces in neighbouring Malaysia and Indonesia; the challenge of Hong Kong and other emerging communities as a SE free port and manufacturing power.
2. The peculiar mix of socialism-cum-capitalism (called moderate socialism) has prove highly effective. The economy of Singapore continues to thrive - and to change in order to skirt the dangers ahead. The Government, under able and far sighted Mr. Lee Kwan Yew can devote all its time and energy to the welfare of the people because, in practice, it has no substantial opposition in parliament.
3. Its efficiency can be seen from the rows and rows of neat, housing estates surrounded by the flowers and greenery of impeccably clean gardens and parks. The city is brisk and eager to help. The prices are very attractive for the streams of tourists and travellers who stop to enjoy this "air conditioned island on the equator". The people are served by advanced educational health and welfare services which, with the dominance of the large, Chinese majority, seem to be ironing out the deep ethnic differences.

b) The Church

4. On the surface the Church seems to have caught this mood of effectiveness and efficiency. But the accent is more on efficiency. Catholics seem less smart in seizing the opportunities in terms of their mission of dialogue. When I was there, a local inter-faith centre had just concluded a series of public sessions in which representatives of the religions (and they all seem to be in Singapore!) were invited to expound their views about the weight of religious motivation in the current Government campaign to mobilize all citizens in its nation building effort. Significantly the Catholics were only represented by a far sighted Sister.
5. In terms of institutional efficiency, RC's come out much better. Indeed, with the Government flogging them, they are sorely tempted to devote too much of their resources to their schools and to their other institutional involvement. I met a Sister who was running an adult education class - at three shifts a day! I could imagine that little was left for creative innovation in other promising sectors - at least for her.

6. The inner life of the Church is, again, efficient. The liturgy, sacramental life, instruction, lay apostolic movements are taken seriously. The local people are steadily taking over.

c) Dialogue

7. If there is a hunting ground for formal dialogue with men of other faiths, it seems to be Singapore! As mentioned above (4) there is even a regular agency to promote it! The fact that no major faith has a hegemony makes the whole climate more conducive to serene "give and take". But are the Catholics responding to the implicit invitation? Or rather: are they responding with sufficient interest and vigour? That remains the question. The very obvious fact that they already have too much on their hands is really no excuse: "woe to me if I do not evangelize!"

d) Evangelization

8. That holds, of course, for the institutionalized level. I have no doubt that a lot of "unofficial", uninstitutional, person-to-person dialogue has been, (is, will be!) going on. It was really an experience to watch how non-Catholic - from Sikhs to Buddhists - spontaneously greet Catholic Religious Women whom they consider as the "women of God". If evangelization is the discovery by the other of our relationship with the Transcendent, then here it is! But the point is, again, that this is not sufficient. It is, after all, the duty of the institutional side of the Church not only to undertake and conduct dialogue for evangelization but also to educate and train its individual members to its person-to-person activation.

Fr. B. TONNA

M A L A Y S I Aa) The People

1. The people of Malaysia are on the move. Their economy has shown one of the fastest growth rates of Asia. Investment has been high. Despite its multi-racial character and its delicate balance, the political system has proved relatively stable. The country is, of course, rich in natural resources and, given enough of this stability, and this growth, is bound to make it.
2. The culture is dominated by Islam. The ultra modern, national Mosque is the show piece of Kuala Lumpur. But the atmosphere is relaxed. I was even invited to a Muslim wedding! And people helped me (with my religion!) as soon as I entered a Mosque.
3. The British period has left its mark. English is spoken freely and well. The communication and other services are efficient and somehow "get you there". Cricket is played right in the heart of Kuala Lumpur! But the general atmosphere is oriental: the open (and night!) markets, the bazaars, the peddlers, the people in small groups in the streets.

b) The Church

4. By force of circumstances, the Church has to be timid. Still, its institutions are respected for their quality. And the stance of the Catholics is appreciated. In one instance, Government was moving to nationalize a particular RC foundation. The RC's in charge were willing and gracious - but very firm in their stand about the fate of the hundreds of non Malay employees. Because they knew that the Malay group (in Government) would replace them by Malays as soon as it took over.
5. I noticed a high degree of expectancy of -and search for- new models of Church life in the situation. Especially among Religious Women who seem to be moving towards small, intensive, Church groups. And a plea for "visitors" - to update the local and overseas pastoral and missionary personnel on models which are being tried in other parts of the world. I was literarily bombarded with questions! There is certainly scope for the much quoted "mobile formation teams" this part of the world!
6. Is the Church opening up to others? This is the question I myself kept asking them. Because I was convinced that the basic answer to all their questions was this "opening up" to the Other's Plans, to the others. I was assuming all the time that the first step should come from us Christians.

c) Dialogue

7. But the tables were turned on me, at least in a particular instance, in Malaysia. I was squatting in a Mosque, having duly left my shoes at the gate (the notice was very clear!) when a man crawled close, attracted by my European face, to ask if I was a Muslim. I told him the truth and then he started to "evangelize" me, making it abundantly clear, though not saying it in so many words, that, to him, I was an "anonymous Muslim". I was impressed - less by the threat to my theological defence system than by the ease and grace with which he involved me in dialogue, without in any way, forcing it on me. It was a pity there was no time to pursue it.
8. Was it a sign that we should be less timid? What shall we do when -as many seem to wish secretly- we are freed of our institutions? Shall we be ready for dialogue - in attitude, in skills, in follow up? These are questions which keep coming back when I remember Malaysia and its pleasant, interested, ethnically diversified people. Certainly, it would not be right to adopt, as an institutional policy, the naïve, frontal "attack" of my man in the mosque. But it should be such a policy to educate all Catholics to that attitude which would spontaneously produce his particular, personalized, ease and grace in opening up to men of other faiths.

d) Evangelization

9. Meanwhile, the person-to-person dialogue does go on and people are being evangelized. A stray conversation with a young man revealed that he was one of the very few Catholics - and that he had become one after meeting his girl friend. The Spirit has his own, discreet way of moving on.
10. But each of his moves should be read as a sign. A sign to follow up, on our part, his openings. This does not mean relinquishing what we have - in order to sit in our churches and wait until people come in "for dialogue" (7). But to open them up, to push them one step further, to make them occasions of dialogue (and therefore of evangelization) with the other institutions of the Malaysian culture.

Fr. B. Tonna

THAILANDa) The People

1. Thailand is different, sophisticated, Buddhist. The people might have borrowed a lot of Western ideas and gadgets; (which, coming to a climax in shining Bangkok tended to put me on the wrong track). But beneath it all, they are carrying on a centuries old tradition of a complex, jealously guarded, culture, symbolized by the royal family and the elite. And, of course, by the very evident Buddhist tone of the whole way of life.
2. To me, especially as I roamed around the markets, Thailand brought back childhood images of the exotic Orient. But again, that is not all: the Government has been busy on the economic infrastructures: roads, communication systems, investment. Political stability has been ensured-again in a typical Thai way - education, and health services are now well spread. Other needs of the population are being tackled. Undoubtedly, the country has still a long way to go - especially in its remote, peripheral areas - but a good start has obviously been made.

b) The Church

3. The Church seems to be lagging behind in catching up with the national mood. I noticed signs of division - in ideas, methods, attitudes - between the local and overseas personnel. The local clergy still invests in expensive buildings which, to the younger generation of overseas helpers, is taboo.
4. Meanwhile it is firmly established through its schools, hospitals and other institutions. These are its "entry" into the local culture and will probably remain so. The danger is that they are allowed to capture and monopolize all our attention and resources.

c) Dialogue

5. A very promising move was the decision to take local Buddhism more seriously, a decision taken by the more advanced professional missionaries. Buddhism is not just a religiously interesting set up which will "naturally" collapse as soon as the Christian message gains a strong foothold. It is much more than that: it is itself a carrier of God's message to men.
6. Consequently, the more illuminated Christians are now involved in catching the sense of this Message. In the process their own understanding of Christianity, as one of them told me, has developed. To the extent of a deeper knowledge of God, of a sharper insight into Christ, of a better distinction between religion and faith, theology and truth. For example, an overseas missionary recently started by taking on a "job" as an assistant to a Buddhist monk. He then moved on to teach in a Buddhist seminary, at present he spends most of his time at the feet of the country's great Buddhist masters - in short and long retreats and other situations.

This is only one example but it reveals what can be done to break the self inflicted bonds of our over-involvement with the minor, marginal groups of the Thai culture.

d) Evangelization

7. The Church, in fact, seems to be geared to serve the already evangelized (outside the country) Viet Nameese (and, perhaps Chinese) rather than to proclaim the good news to the Thai majority.

Much good work however is going on in the fringe areas of the country, where people do not come under the influence of the central Government.

Fr. B. TONNA



B U R M Aa) The People

1. Burma is a beautiful country with a startling variety of exciting people: there are eight major races, speaking a hundred odd languages, living in plains and mountains, by the sea and in the forest. Rangoon itself is a huge garden - sparkling with pools, flowers, tropical vegetation.
2. The "Burmese way to socialism" has effectively cleared the country of the "foreigner". This is a place where you can escape the insolent publicity of the multinational producers. The price, however, is high: Government has practically nationalized everything - including the shopping facilities. And the effect is an austere, at times drab, way of life. Right now, the economy is in bad shape, probably because of the strains of military spending and of rigid isolation.
3. Still, the people's serene and amiable character invariable pierces through. The people cling to their traditions - and especially to their Buddhism. There must be thousands of orange, toga - clad, monks in Rangoon alone. The pagodas are fantastic - not only from the point of view of their architectural, decorative splendour and wealth but also from that of the religious activity which goes on inside them. The celebrations organized around the pagodas and in the memories of holy monks go on day after day and involve many aspects of the social life of the man in the street.

b) The Church

4. In many ways, the Church of Burma answered many of the unanswered questions raised by my other "experiences" of Asia. What happens if the overseas missionaries leave? What happens if RC's leave their schools, hospitals and social services? Is dialogue with men of other faiths really feasible?

Seven years after the departure of most of the overseas missionaries, the Church is very much alive - and growing. The seminary has doubled its population and is now really a sign - gathering in one, happy, group members of all the different races of Burma, a feat which any leader would envy.

5. The local pastoral and missionary personnel have left their schools and other institutions and are now enthusiastically devoting their time to break new ground in the direct apostolic field. They are ready to go for small group work, for dialogue with Buddhists and socialists. The right spirit is there.

6. They are aware that they may lack the necessary skills. But these can be passed on and, I think, we have a great responsibility to build bridges between this isolated Church and other churches where the things they need are "happening". This cannot, of course, be done unless we stop thinking of other local churches as "my mandate" and "your area". Because it can only be done for its own sake - for the Catholics there - and not for the "glory" of an Institute.
7. We will certainly be paid back a hundredfold. In the area of ecumenism, for example, things are taking shape very fast and the experience, if read as a sign, could open up current blockages in the movement towards unity.

c) Dialogue

8. At the institutional level dialogue is desired but not conducted systematically. The RC's tend to shy off because, they say, they lack the expertise - having been deprived of the overseas scholars. And, of course, they do not want to upset the delicate balance. Still, a lot can be done when the leaders realise that expertise in terms of intellectual systems and conceptual finesse is no longer the one and first ingredient of dialogue. The existential approach is more rewarding because it takes man as he is - in his very being. At the person to person level dialogue is progressing apace - though progress cannot be measured.

d) Evangelization

9. Some of the effects, however, are already visible: there is one ethnic group which is now 80% Catholic. The Church leaders of some areas are enthusiastic about the response of other groups to the Gospel proposal. Some of the old models seem to be still valid here. But the Church is busily seeking for new ones.
10. I will be ever grateful to the Catholics of Burma because they removed my remaining doubts about the future of a local Church when it is deprived of power, institutional and direct foreign support. They confirmed my hunch that it is a time when we have to have less faith in our 'ecclesiastical technology' in order to have more faith in the Lord. Who seems to have designed the Church to be strong when she is weak. To find itself when it gives up its props and pretences.

Fr. B. Tonna