

# THE IMPACT OF *GAUDIUM ET SPES* ON THE SOCIAL MISSION OF THE CHURCH IN ASIA WITH PARTICULAR REFERENCE TO CATHOLIC STUDENTS AND WORKERS MOVEMENTS

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## Abstract of the paper

The Catholic Church in Asia responded to the teachings of *Gaudium et spes* in a positive manner particularly the Catholic Action Movements such as the International Movement of the Catholic Students [IMCS] and the International Young Christian Workers [IYCS]. The Catholic Action Movements have given enlightened laity to the Church in Asia. The movement was inspired by the *Gaudium et spes*. The Worker and student movement were greatly inspired by the social thought of the Church as observed by the document in the following words, “Joys and hopes, sorrows and anxieties” of the people of the world are the concerns of the people of God [# 1] The concrete outcome of the document and its impact can very well be seen to-day in Asia in terms of struggles against injustice in the form of human rights violations and the human rights movement in which many catholic laity have played and continue to play a key role.

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**“signs of the times”** Sixties were a turbulent period for Asia as the events in and outside Asia affected the movements such as the Vietnam war, the US supported right wing governments in Latin America, de-colonization process in Africa with much bloodshed, accepted validity of Marxism in the academic and intellectual circles, Paulo Freire’s cultural action for freedom and the conscientization method, the post Franco and Salazar reign. The other events that were taking place include the Prague spring and the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, the student and the worker uprisings of ‘May 1968’ in France and elsewhere; the massacre of students by the military in Tlatelolco Plaza in Mexico city in October and the hardening of the military dictatorship in Brazil. The above were the “signs of the times” (# 4 *Gaudium et spes*) in Asia to which the Student, Workers and Intellectual Movement of the Catholic Church responded. The primary reality of Asia during the 60’s was poverty and most of the countries were reeling under dictatorships such as Philippines where Ferdinand Marcos assumed power in 1965 heralding an undemocratic government for nearly 20 years. In South Korea there was a military coup in 1961 and there was another coup in Indonesia in 1966 that replaced the democratically elected President Sukarno. Pakistan witnessed the seizing of power by a military General Ayub Khan in 1958. In 1969, the Cultural Revolution in Maoist China

reached its climax; the Viet Cong and North Vietnam had stolen the initiative in the Vietnam War from the Americans and the South Vietnam following the Tet offensive of early 1968. India's war with Pakistan that resulted in the liberation of Bangladesh in 1971. A brutally suppressed youth insurgency took place in Sri Lanka giving rise to a Sinhala militant movement known as JVP. Repressive regimes were the order of the day in several countries. In short Asia was divided by colonialism, history and culture and 'united' in terms of poverty, injustice and foreign domination.

### Vatican II and the Catholic student and Workers Movement.

During the Second Vatican Council, IMCS and ICMICA (Pax Romana) played a key role. Secretary General of Pax Romana Ramon Sugranyes de Franch was chosen as one of the 12 lay Auditors of the Council. A former IMCS chaplain a Jesuit Father John Courtney Murray assisted by former IMCS President Ed. Kirchner played a key role in the writing of the Declaration of Religious Freedom.

During the first session of the Vatican Council II, founder of the Young Christian Workers movement Fr. Cardijn participated as an auditor, then once he had become a bishop and Cardinal he became a full council member. Mr. Bartolo Perez, who was President of the IYCW at that time, also participated as a lay auditor, a position that enabled him to make contact with Bishops from many dioceses where the YCW existed and with a number of former YCW chaplains who had become bishops. With Cardijn, they attempted to insert the principles of the YCW into the decree on the lay apostolate.

### Response of the International Young Catholic Workers

The IYCW in Asia inspired by the outcome of the Vatican II in the form of *Gaudium et spes* started involving in several activities particularly highlighting the issues related to workers such as unemployment, temporary casual labour, apprentice system and the need for a trade union. Pioneering work in the trade union for the unorganized workers were started in many countries in Asia. Young catholic workers went through formation and exchange programmes. Many of them were involved in militant action for example the chaplain of the Vietnam YCW Fr. Phan Khac Tu who was imprisoned in 1972-73 in South Vietnam as a result of their support for workers and justice issues. The YCW organized workers in the factories, plantations, unemployed, sales people, teachers, tricycle drivers, domestic workers etc. The teachings of the *Gaudium et spes* that human labour is superior to other elements of economic life; economic activity detrimental to the workers is wrong and inhuman. [#67] workers should participate in running an enterprise [# 67] It was an on going struggle for the young worker to reconcile between 'truth of reality vs. truth of faith'. [Cardijn's principle]

Many YCW leaders (who were also workers) especially in the countries of India, Sri Lanka, Malaysia and Singapore were active in Trade Unions, which in the main were controlled by the Communist party or 'Socialist' political parties. This became an issue when conservative elements in these countries began to question and dispute the role of the YCW in Trade Unions. The position of the YCW was that it is not a trade union but

it had the responsibility to encourage and support its workers leaders and the young workers to join and be active in Trade unions in order to enhance and improve working conditions. This position was not always understood nor accepted in 'Church' circles. Indeed even in the trade union movement this caused confusion and created difficulties and the majority of YCW worker leaders continued their involvement in Trade Unions. The sixties were a period of expansion and strengthening of YCW in Asia. This meant reaching out to different categories of workers. It also involved young workers of other faiths.

The YCW sought to organize young workers in various 'categories' such as factories and plantations as well as the unemployed. In many places the parish-based units/organizations were abandoned leading to conflicts over the movement's direction. It was also during this period (late sixties and seventies) the girls and boys YCW's in many countries merged together in mixed movements. The international dimension was sharpened by solidarity action and the first and widespread being action in favor of the imprisoned Vietnamese YCWers.

**Young workers of other faiths:** one of the concrete impacts of Vatican II on the young Christian workers movement was on the involvement of workers of other faiths development of actions in either the community or workplace. During the regional key leaders meeting in 1978 the experiences of the national movements were presented and discussed. The question of young workers in the movement who were not Christians was seen as part of the ongoing study and reality of the YCW and was to be studied from the perspective of the questions coming from the national movements. The involvement of non-Christians in the movement was not seen as a problem by the national movements themselves, but rather the questions were from the exterior of the movement namely other Christian organizations, religious leaders and community. Experience developed in India, Japan, South Korea and Sri Lanka showed that the Christian character was not a problem in limiting the ability of the YCW to play a role among young workers.

The militants understanding of faith was as seen as coming from their experience in the movement and as part of the whole process of change in the young worker through the process of action and reflection. Through their action and reflection the young workers in the movement were discovering that the aspect of faith and spirituality as something they shared in common, and not confined to any one particular belief. The orientation of the action of the movement its worker character influenced each national movements perception of the faith dimension and its expression.

The IYCW was invited by the Church to extend the movement to Indonesia. One of the objectives of the extension work that was set in common was that the movement must involve from the beginning young workers of Muslim faith. At the regional level, the team saw the need to continue to accumulate the actual experiences of the national movements and reflections on their experiences. This was seen as the practical process to discover the 'lived' Christian character of the movement.<sup>1</sup>

Tomio Hara, President of the Japanese YCW in 1986, made the following observation about 'What is your Religion?' when YCW celebrated 50 years in Japan. "In the beginning we had vigorous debates about the name of the new movement, in particular concerning the 'C'. As a result of the name we chose, many did not want to join the movement. Finally however, however, we kept the 'C' and I was one of those who supported this option. In my view, the reason was for more than 50 years Catholicism had accepted and supported the YCW in which people like me who were not catholic could take a full part. It was in the YCW that I learnt human values and where I matured as a man. I understood that the spirit of the YCW was that of a man named Jesus Christ who had a lifestyle close to the poor and who had taken their side, living among them. This spirit of welcome, respect, tolerance and openness to the World constitute the 'C' of the YCW".<sup>2</sup>

While talking about the 'Christian Dimension' after the Vatican II the young Christian workers are challenged to re-articulate what it means to be Christian in an ecumenical and inter-religious society. Ecumenism and inter-religious dialogue are the two cornerstones of Vatican II. To strengthen the Christian characteristic in a new way means to emphasize the spiritual dimension of life, which is common to all people. As Cardijn would say, so the IYCW can be for all young workers of the World.

### Response of the IMCS

The IMCS played a key role after the 1960's in organizing the University students. The *Gaudium et spes* had a great impact on the students, particularly the realization that 'option for the poor' is not a choice but a historical compulsion. The events that followed demonstrated the student activism against the undeclared war in the Vietnam, dictatorial governments in the Asian countries, National security laws and in general they condemned the human rights violations. The titles of the Plenary Assemblies such as 'The student movement as a creative agent of social change' and 'the students in the struggle for the Church of the poor in Asia' are clear indication of the impact of Vatican II particularly the document *Gaudium et spes*. On the students

The second Vatican Council confronted with these same realities and following up on many efforts by Christians involved in this long process, influenced the rapid development of IMCS, emphasizing the importance of "temporal involvement" of Christians in society. The most dynamic federations of IMCS seriously welcomed Christian responsibility in the socio-political field. This contributed to their presence in the life of the student movement, which was mostly concerned with the problems of inside the University, and afterwards by the overall situation of the society. Theological reflection carried out in the Church and in the movement influenced the form of involvement, which would go from a kind of "Christian Democracy" to the involvement of Christians in non-confessional socio-political action, respecting the autonomy of temporal or of the society.

The key question that was raised by students in the 1971 Inter-Federal Assembly was "Liberation how?"<sup>3</sup> This question was a signal that IMCS was in the midst of a profound

search that had been provoked by all these tensions in the milieu and in the society by all these changes in the church. The affirmed desire to “want to be present in the process of liberation”, which is to say, be present in the history of people, their struggles signified the deep questioning which the movement was doing in respect to its own reason for existence and for its own identity.

It was this movement, which introduced for the first time the ‘immersion programme’ [Exposure programme], any workshop of the Catholic students started with an exposure followed by an analysis, theological reflection, planning and evaluation. This methodology of IMCS has become almost a standard methodology for almost all the workshops today in Asia for the students. The seventies and eighties witnessed the movements another great contribution namely the social/structural analysis of the society. The tool used by the students became the tool for analyzing the society for the activists and civil society groups.

The theological reflections of the Student Movement particularly at the Asian level reflected the beginning of reforms in the Church. The student leaders during their workshops highlighted the teachings of the Vatican II document that in the council the Fathers accepted that other religions too have the elements of sanctification and holiness. “The Church did not pretend to have the monopoly of salvation and the church is becoming more open that other religions too share in the sacramentality of God’s presence in the World”<sup>4</sup>. What followed Vatican II in Latin America in terms of Medellin Conference in 1968, Synod of the Bishops of 1971 resulted in the formation of Federation of Asian Bishops Conference.

The Taipei conference with its theme ‘Evangelization in the modern day Asia’ highlighted the new focus of the church in Asian by initiating a ‘Triple dialogue’ namely with the other religions, cultures and with the poor. Once a part-time Chaplain of IMCS Asia Parish Foreign Missionaries Father Olivier Chegaray observed “ Today the Church, especially the Church in Asia insists on saying that there is no way of being fully and integrally human without being rooted in a tradition and a culture which is indispensable part of people’s life. Moreover, the church often reminds us of the fact that being a Christian does not mean alienating oneself from one’s culture but rather finding oneself and one’s life in the collective experience and cultural expression of the people. On the other hand Church invites us to openness and active dialogue with all the other cultures including religions. Such a dialogue allows a deep communion where all the differences are respected for a mutual enrichment”<sup>5</sup>

**Vatican II and the Liberation Theology:** in the 1960’s and 1970’s inspired by the Vatican Council, the encyclicals of former IMCS – Italy chaplain, Pope Paul VI and Pope John XXIII, and more importantly the experiences of its members focused its attention on the poor and the marginalized. At this time IMCS in Latin America was growing closer to IYCS. A number of IMCS federations were in fact YCS groups in the University and were affiliated to both. In Latin America the two movements worked very closely and took leading roles in Liberation Theology, a former IMCS member and IMCS Peruvian chaplain, Gustavo Gutierrez, who made significant impact on IMCS, the Church and the

World. With a writing of “A Theology of Liberation” in 1971. OMI order Fr. Tissa Balasuriya of Sri Lanka was the chaplain of Asia-Pacific IMCS from 1969-76 who heralded a movement for liberation theology from the Asian context.<sup>6</sup>

**Students’ view of the Church:** At the end Pan-Asian Conference Pax-Romana- IMCS on “Student movement as creative Agent of Social Change in Asia” held in Hong Kong between 25<sup>th</sup> July and 5<sup>th</sup> August 1970, the students made the following observation on the Church. “ Youth in Asia are genuinely concerned about the future and are determined to create a ‘new living church’, which will reflect the aspirations of the millions in Asia and bear real witness to the teachings of Christ”. The students warned that if the church is not going to take serious note of existing situation, many of them, particularly the ‘youth and intellectuals will find it extremely difficult to remain within the church’. They categorized the church as ‘highly institutionalized structure which in some cases does not really practice what it preaches. This is due to the fact that the bureaucracy in the church is often too slow and resistant to change’. After making an analysis of the existing church in Asia, the students expressed happiness over Vatican II that has given pastoral priority to ‘renew the temporal order according to Christian principles’. The document of Vatican II according to the students ‘despite their generally progressive stance are still in quite a few places not fully and completely adequate to meet the exigencies of our rapidly changing society’<sup>7</sup>

Father Pelegri who was the International Chaplain since 1975 made the following observation “ we have seen that after Vatican II many courageous attitudes towards the defense of human rights were consolidated within the Church, chiefly but not only in Latin America; we have also seen the presence of many Christians in the struggle for liberation, supported by theological trends of thinking which are themselves a liberating force and express a true revolution in the theological field. We are living in a new era of martyrs in the Church. Many Christians have been deprived of their freedom, of their fundamental human rights, tortured and killed not only because they were struggling for liberation, but-and with special fury-because they were doing that as Christians”<sup>8</sup>

### The Impact of Vatican II on the two Movements

The activities following the Vatican II in some countries by the worker and student movements made the governments of some of the Asian countries to look at the church with suspicion. In Singapore, the government arrested some of the lay leaders like Mr. Vincent Cheng under the internal security law; there were many others who underwent such difficulties in Malaysia, Hong Kong and Singapore. The office of the IMCS Asia Pacific was raided in Thailand and Fr. Pelegre, Chaplain/adviser to the movement had to flee.

Many of those students and workers from ‘middle class’ were victimized and arbitrarily detained by the Malaysian and Singaporean governments for posing a threat to the powers. A significant number of them were also church workers and committed

Christians who were deemed “enemies of the State” under the draconian Internal Security Act (ISA) of these two countries.

There was a general pattern of repression of grassroots organizations and Christian social activists were emerging in Asia particularly in the ASEAN countries. First time student and worker activists were charged under the ISA and detained without a trial. The committed student and worker activists faced opposition not only from the government but also from the church. Very often the Church and the State viewed themselves as two separate entities.

The Catholic Action Movements have given enlightened laity to the Church in Asia. The movement was inspired by the *Gaudium et spes*. The Worker and student movement were greatly inspired by the social thought of the Church as observed by the document in the following words, “Joys and hopes, sorrows and anxieties” of the people of the world are the concerns of the people of God [# 1] The concrete outcome of the document and its impact can very well be seen to-day in Asia in terms of struggles against injustice in the form of human rights violations and the human rights movement in which many catholic laity have played and continue to play a key role.

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<sup>1</sup> The IYCW in Asia-Pacific 1929-2000 – published by International Cardijn Foundation, Brussels, Belgium, 2000

<sup>2</sup> IYCW – 75 Years of Action, International Cardijn Foundation, Brussels, 2000

<sup>3</sup> The Movement: Report of the World Study Session, IYCS-IMCS Valladolid, Spain 1978

<sup>4</sup> ‘No more tears for crying’, a publication based on a sub-regional formation program for the Southeast Asian Students held in Cebu city, Philippines on October 16- November 2, 1983

<sup>5</sup> IMCS Asia Newsletter, Vol 6, No1, June 1989

<sup>6</sup> Behind and beyond – reenergized for the dawn of a new era of struggle – 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary publication of IMCS Asia Pacific, 2004

<sup>7</sup> Student Movement as a creative agent of social change –IMCS Pax-Romana Pan-Asian Conference 1970, Hong Kong.

<sup>8</sup> Buenaventura Pelegri, ‘ IMCS-IYCS their option their pedagogy’ published by Asian Secretariat, Hong Kong, 1979

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