

Asian Forum on Celebrating Synodality and Indigenous Living Traditions in the Church in Asia



FINAL STATEMENT

We, the participants of the Asian Forum on Celebrating Synodality and Indigenous Living Traditions in the Church in Asia, a gathering of lay faithful, priests, religious men and women and bishops from 13 Asian countries, gathered from 10-16 November, 2024 in Kathmandu, Nepal. United in our diversity as Indigenous Peoples, ethnic and faith communities across Asia, we wish to share this statement with the Church universal and local Churches in Asia.¹

This forum provided a sacred space to celebrate the religio-cultural resilience of indigenous wisdom conveyed through notions like *mogitatabang* (sharing of best seeds among neighbors), *lakēta* (welcome), *tenhag* (co-responsibility), and practices like *lumaagon* (healing of relational ruptures)² and *Kroh Yee* (village closure).³ We acknowledge their rich cultural heritage in the ongoing journey of negotiating, resisting and liberating themselves from all forms of discrimination and marginalization, genocide and violence in society, occasioned by class and caste. It is in acknowledging these struggles that we root our journey forward, guided by the Word of God, the wisdom of Indigenous Traditions, the transformative power of God's Spirit, in response to the Church's call to synodality that foregrounds the importance of inclusion and discernment. The Forum's objectives are to celebrate the face of Jesus in the Indigenous Peoples of Asia, creating a platform for dialogue and discernment among various living traditions, learning from the ongoing approaches and models of the triple dialogue with cultures, religions and poor; inculturation and supporting the Church in Asia to walk with the Indigenous Peoples. We acknowledged the fact that while 63% of Christians worldwide and 73% of Asian Christians are Indigenous, the face of the

¹ Participants are from Bangladesh, Cambodia, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, Philippines, South Korea, Thailand, Timor Leste and Vietnam. Representing all indigenous peoples, there were participants from Ahka, Ati, Ayta, Dusun Bundu, Fataluku, Gurung, Hmong, Jarai, Kadazan, Kasi, Kayan, Kharias, Mao, Oraon, Paskari, Pulangiyēn, Santal, Subanen, Tamang, Tangkhul, and Tetum Indigenous nations.

² Kadazan, Dusun Bundu, Murut, Orang Asli (Malaysia).

³ Karen of Chiangmai (Thailand).

Church, both in Asia and globally, have yet to become indigenous. It is imperative to recognize that Indigenous Peoples are not on the periphery but at the heart of the Church.

Indigenous Peoples share profound commonalities with the tribes of Yahweh, as described in Scripture, through the foundational elements of land, lineage, and the covenant. For the biblical tribes, land was central to their identity, symbolizing divine blessings and protection, with ownership understood as God's alone and hence a sacred "gift from God and from their ancestors" (*Laudato Si'*/LS§146) which provides for their sustenance and prosperity. Similarly, Indigenous worldviews regard land not as a resource but as a sacred inheritance, deeply intertwined with identity, community, and spirituality. This connection is further reflected in God's covenant to Noah (Gen 8:20-9:17), which, like Indigenous traditions, extends beyond humanity to embrace all of creation. Both worldviews celebrate the interconnectedness (LS §16, §70b, §73, §91, §111, §117, §138) of all beings and things, recognizing a harmonious unity within the seamless web of life in indigenous visions. Salvation, in both traditions, is rooted in relationships—with God, creation, one another and the community within their homeland.

Our deliberations emphasized the need for reconciliation, not only between the Church and Indigenous Peoples but also within the Church itself, acknowledging our collective failures to promptly and proactively respond to the struggles of Indigenous communities in Asia. While we have journeyed together, and acknowledge the contributions of the Church to the Indigenous Peoples in the areas of education and healthcare, development of vernacular languages and literature, there remains an urgent need for the Church to amplify Indigenous voices, learn from their socio-cultural resources, their ancient wisdom, folk media, healing systems with their "native forms of expression in song, dance, rituals, gestures and symbols" (*Querida Amazonia*/QA §82), languages, stories with nature and creation myths. Indigenous governance systems, which inherently practices synodality naturally, offer valuable insights into communal discernment by consensus and shared leadership.

Inculturation is a vital pathway for the encounter of the Gospel and Indigenous cultures (FABC 1974, §12; LS §144). This process must be led by local and Indigenous peoples, respecting and celebrating a reverential relationship with nature, alive and vibrant with the presence of God's Spirit. Interreligious and intercultural dialogue, as emphasized in the magisterium of the Church, is crucial for fostering unity across diverse traditions.⁴

Inspired by *Laudato Si'*, we urge the Church to take a proactive role in advancing environmental guardianship by advocating for policies that recognize Indigenous territories as sacred spaces vital to the preservation and promotion of biodiversity and the well-being of future generations. The Church can amplify the voices of Indigenous Peoples by supporting dialogue that integrate their ecological wisdom into broader environmental strategies.

⁴ Magisterial teachings of Vatican II documents *Nostra Aetate* §2, *Ad gentes* §3, §7, §9, §11; *Gaudium et spes*, §22; *Lumen Gentium* §16, §17, and *Redemptoris Missio*, §5, §10, §28, *Dialogue & Proclamation* §29.

Furthermore, we urge the Church to develop a contextual hermeneutics for understanding indigenous eco-spirituality of sustainability of nature. We encourage dioceses and parishes to adopt practices that reflect the interconnectedness of faith, creation, and human responsibility. We call upon all those perpetrators to urgently cease all forms of discrimination against indigenous communities, the dispossession of land, the forced displacement of populations, the illegal destruction of their ecosystems, exploitation of their biodiversity, violation of human rights, the methodical processes of acculturation and destruction of indigenous cultures. We call upon local and national authorities to initiate fraternal dialogue to respect their guardianship in environmental conservation as 80% of the Earth's land is under their care.

In this synodal journey, we affirm the equal dignity of all people, emphasizing the vital role of women as equal partners created in the image and likeness of God (Gen 1:27) in this synodal journey. Women, in the Indigenous communities in Asia, are recognised as custodians of traditions and guardians of cultures, who play a pivotal role in the preservation and transmission of traditional practices, languages, and ecological knowledge. Their contribution is indispensable to the Church's mission and it is essential that their voices be heard and their participation is fully acknowledged. Both in Indigenous communities and the Catholic Church, women are seen as pillars of strength, wisdom, and compassion, driving forward the mission and values of their respective communities (QA§103).

Similarly, the importance of young people in our Indigenous Communities in Asia can be compared to the role of young saplings in a forest. Just as saplings are vital for the renewal and future growth of the forests, young people are crucial for the continuity and vitality of their communities. They carry forward traditions, bring fresh perspectives, and ensure the survival of religio-cultural practices and knowledge. The Church needs to respond to their clarion call for pastoral accompaniment, guidance and faith formation that deepens their theological knowledge in harmony with the Indigenous cultural beliefs and ritual practices.

In the Catholic Indigenous communities in Asia, the lay faithful play a crucial role in the life and mission of the Church. They are often deeply involved in various ministries, including education, catechesis, and pastoral care (QA §§91-98) manifesting the pluriformity in lay ministerial-ity as in community mobilization and social services which enjoins the Church to give them formal recognition. Such ecclesial recognition is vital for the Church's engagement with the broader community, helping to bridge cultural and spiritual gaps in the civil society. The importance of lay people in these communities can be compared to the role of elders in our Asian Indigenous Peoples. Elders are revered for their wisdom, guidance, and leadership, much like how lay people are respected for their active participation and leadership within the Church. Both are essential for preserving the living traditions, fostering community cohesion, integration between cultures and faith, thus ensuring the transmission of cultural and spiritual knowledge to future generations. The laity serve as bridges between the Church and communities, fostering inclusion and mutual learning.

We, the participants of the Asian Forum, have listened to one another, prayed together, discerned the movement of the Spirit through Conversations in the Spirit in small

groups and participated in Indigenous ritual celebrations which highlighted the primacy of God, the Creator, and Divine Spirit, reconciliation and peace in Asia.

We have resolved to continue to journey on the path of a synodal Church with a preferential option for Indigenous Peoples, with renewed hope and determination to celebrate and safeguard Indigenous living traditions within the local Churches in Asia. Rooted in the spirit of synodality that fosters reconciliation, inclusion, discernment, equal dignity of all baptized, we commit ourselves to walking together in solidarity. Inspired by God's all-pervasive Spirit, we embrace the "ancestral wisdom" (QA§51) of Indigenous cultures as we strive to build a Church and a world that reflects God's reign whence "we are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:28), enjoying fullness of life, with justice, respect, and shared humanity.

Recommendations

The participants have made the following recommendations:

1. Synodality as a Natural Way of Life in Indigenous Cultures: Networking and Communication:

- Advocate for Indigenous media, governance, and customs, embodying synodality and living traditions without alienating indigenous Christians or encroaching on neighboring cultures.
- Raise collaborative awareness among lay faithful, religious men and women, priests, bishops, and church leaders globally.
- Train local leaders and identify partners in the church and civil society to expand our network by modifying structures, procedures, and processes.
- Share resources within our network through website, publications, case study reports, documentation and research.
- Highlight ongoing initiatives in indigenous cultures and faith, creating opportunities to learn about these cultures through Catholic social events and movements.
- Disseminate documents (especially of the Church's Magisterium and FABC) in accessible, local languages to empower the Church as a "small flock" in Asia.
- Reflect on and learn from local contexts in relation to the Christian faith, guided by the Gospel and magisterial teachings.
- Study indigenous rituals related to the spirit-world and promote best practices and outcomes of the dialogue in Asia with cultures, religions, and Mother Earth.
- Contextualize formation and training, especially for pastoral personnel and the young, in the "ground realities" of ethnic and indigenous cultures.

2. Pathways for Evangelization, Catechesis, Liturgy, and Research:

- Establish a unit for inculturation and faith formation, initiating local indigenous liturgies that align with catechesis at the Asian level.
- Form study groups with experts to address thematic areas, such as reconciling communal tensions caused by syncretism, before presenting proposals to the Bishops' Conference.
- Develop pastoral guidelines for engaging with Indigenous Peoples' religions and cultures, discerning how to integrate these into Church practices.
- Compile magisterial teachings on Indigenous Peoples and create a sourcebook from official Catholic Church teachings.
- Explore Indigenous Hermeneutics and Theology by drawing wisdom from Indigenous Traditions and the Sacred Scripture, reflecting Indigenous and tribal experiences.
- Investigate Indigenous spirituality through creation myths, ancestor beliefs, and rituals of healing and thanksgiving, emphasizing oneness with nature.
- Incorporate Indigenous media and cultural expressions into liturgy, faith formation, and theological reflections to promote synodality.
- Conduct transdisciplinary studies, using contextual hermeneutics to deconstruct derogatory terminology in indigenous spiritualities pertaining to shamanism and focus on commonalities in relation to ministerial priesthood as we retrieve indigenous oral knowledge and deepen our knowledge of the priesthood of Christ in the Asian context.
- Develop indigenous and Asian hermeneutics to better understand and interpret religio-cultural terms such as "spiritual leader" in indigenous communities.
- Examine the fourfold aspects of a ritual specialists related to blessings, exorcism, communion with ancestors, and the Supreme Being
- Convene similar Asian Forums with scholars involved in Indigenous Peoples' ministry in order to build up academic resources and ongoing reflection.

3. Issues to be Addressed:

- Religious Traditions and Inculturation: Address the multiplicity of religious traditions in Asia to find commonalities, such as the understanding of shamans or spiritual leaders. Inculturate the catechesis and liturgy to reflect these traditions.
- Faith Formation and Theology: promote pastoral work assisted by contextual theological reflection and faith formation that advocates indigenous land rights and formulate pastoral guidelines for integrating indigenous rituals into the liturgy and sacraments, inspired by the wisdom of *Querida Amazonia*.

- Pastoral Actions and Advocacy: Study and implement actions to end all forms of discrimination based on caste and class while promoting the dignity and rights of the Indigenous Peoples and Tribal communities.
- Youth and Women Programs: Develop programs focusing on indigenous spirituality and synodality for both ethnic and indigenous youths and women at the national and regional levels.
- Theologizing and Research that engages in (a) Contextual Transdisciplinary Theologizing and Training with theologians and social scientists, (b) training of ethnic and indigenous leaders of ecclesial communities in Asia and (c) initiating processes that can lead to the organization of a pan-Asian Synod on the Indigenous Peoples of Asia.

Issued in Kathmandu, Nepal, at the Caritas Nepal Center in the traditional mountainous town of Dhulikhel, on 8 December, Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception, in the year 2024.

ROOTS: Catholic Network Among Indigenous Peoples of Asia.