

# A REPORT: The Church in Asia

By PAUL ARMAND  
(NC News Service)

Paris — (NC) — When Pope Paul VI goes out again to the Far East this fall, a message from the nearby Asian continent will surely grow insistent for him: Asia is where history is being made—but the Church may be out of step with that history.

Asians can point out to the traveler to the Philippines and Australia that they now comprise 56 percent of the world's people. They can say that more than half of all Asians are now less than 20 years old, and that this is a number greater than the combined overall populations of North and South America and Africa.

They could tell Pope Paul that the Church has had pioneers in Asia, but they have been pioneers whose work was sabotaged by absurd quarrels

about Chinese rites, Indian rites, by an unrestrained and anti-evangelical Westernism whose aftermath is still a great burden today.

Nevertheless, the efforts and the heroism of the missionaries have produced results that are not negligible. Although it is a tiny minority in Asia — 46 million Catholics in a population of 1.85 billion — the Church is present everywhere. Since the Second Vatican Council, it has even been constitutionally established there, with 14 bishops' conferences that are more and more composed of Asians.

But the Church in Asia is living in conditions that are generally difficult and quite different from one country to another. With the exception of the Philippines, where it is the religion of 80 per cent of the population, Catholicism is often

regarded as a religion of foreigners.

It took the impetus of the Second Vatican Council to push the beginning of Indianizing, Japanizing, Vietnamizing, etc. the liturgy, to stop ignoring in seminaries the cultural riches of the varied civilizations of each country, to become interested, otherwise than negatively, in the great religious currents of Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam.

In Bombay, India, in December, 1964, Pope Paul was not afraid to go forward in this direction in seeking contact with the representatives of the major non-Christian religions.

One of the problems of the Church in Asia is the lack of priests. But no less grave is the absence of a sufficiently numerous and responsible laity to take in hand the destinies of the Church, despite the excellent Young Christian Workers'

organizations in Japan and Vietnam.

But the Christian communities have given admirable testimonies of fidelity and fervor. Those of China and Indochina stand out.

Pope Paul VI publicly expressed the wish in 1967 "to renew contacts with the Chinese peoples of the continent. With those who direct China today, we would like to speak of peace, in the knowledge of how much this elevated ideal of humanity and civilization is intimately linked to the spirit of the Chinese people."

While the Church is esteemed in Indonesia, it is once again facing difficult times in Ceylon with the return to power of the communist-backed coalition headed by Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike.

In India, anti-conversion laws paralyze missionary work in several regions.

The problems of the bishops of Australia and Oceania with their five million Catholics are somewhat different. There are the questions of difficult communications with isolated islands, of the invasion of materialism, of ecumenical collaboration with Protestant missions.

Australia, moreover, has its own problems; the word "Catholic" is still a synonym there for second-class immigrant. Nevertheless, the Catholic population (30 percent of Australians) is constantly growing there as well as in New Zealand.

## Pitch-Man for 'God Squad'

Mount Vernon, N.Y.—(RNS) Balloons, bumper stickers, trick telephones and rock music are just part of the repertoire of a super-salesman for the Catholic priesthood bent on reversing dire predictions for tomorrow's clergy.

In an era of some distress for the religious life, Father Bede Ferrara's unusual approach may seem out of place to some as he attempts to reach as many young people as possible in as many ways as possible — radio, TV, the press, posters and the like — always pushing the positive in vocations.

Father Bede thrives on the positive approach.

He not only teaches a course in "creative problem solving," he lives it. He claims a person can solve any problem with ideas and confidence, and this is how he goes about the problem of vocations — he attacks it boldly but happily.

Father Bede, who is vocations director for Immaculate Conception province of the Franciscan Fathers and works from a parish base here in Mount Vernon is a rarity in a job that has a "high frustration" level.

As he thrusts a lively-looking "God Squad" button and a few "commercial" balloons into his listener's hand, the priest's use of gimmicks begins to come through.

It's all part of his continuing attempt to reach as many young people as possible, not to coerce, but to make them aware of vocations. He feels that he must reach at least a thousand youngsters to obtain a few commitments to the religious life.

During local TV appearances he is often accompanied by a rock music group from Immaculate Conception Seminary in Troy, N.Y. and he allows their obvious commitment to religious vocations tell his story.

After a low-key pitch to youngsters in their own "mod" style, the Franciscan recruiter might pass out his not-so-subtle bumper stickers, exhibiting mottoes like "Don't Kick the Habit" or "Don't Be Chicken — Be a Friar."

Balloons he distributes contain his name and address for future contact, and he claims they have a more lasting impact than holy pictures.

Gadgets — one is a fake telephone "with God on the line" — help break the ice for Father Bede and serve as a means to launch serious discussions about the young people's future. He always stresses in his talks that real vocations are years away,



Father Bede Ferrara uses a turtle to explain a message, but he might as well be using a balloon or a button to get his point across. The provincial vocations director of the Franciscans uses sales gimmicks of all types to promote priesthood. (RNS Photo)

but it gives them "something to think about."

"Today," Father Bede observed, "a boy doesn't have to go to the seminary with the exclusive idea of becoming a priest. That's only one of the choices available to him. Instead, we try to train young people to become Christian leaders in the community."

He feels that those who do go on to become priests are just so much frosting on the cake.

"Desire," he said, "is the es-

sential qualification for a religious vocation. If an individual doesn't have that, it doesn't matter how intelligent or capable he might be, he would be a bad priest."

Ironically, Father Bede sees many youngsters turning away from vocations to the religious life because they don't promise enough of a challenge or for fear that the clergy may be too close to the establishment, which they often equate with the materialism of American society.

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