

*Report on my participation, as invited delegate from IMWAC, to the AYA/ATF (Asian Youth Academy/ Asian Theology Forum) held in Suratthani (South Thailand) on August 17 to 27, 2016.*

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The last AYA/ATF meetings took place:

In 2013 in Changmai (northern Thailand) Didier Vanhoutte participated as IMWAC representative

In 2014 in Manila (Philippines)

In 2015 in Kerala (South India)

In 2016 in Suratthani, the specific themes were the following :

Youth Forum (AYA): "Solidarity with Migrants suffering poverty and inhumane living conditions.

Asian Theology Forum (ATF): "Sustainable development and integral ecology for peace on Asia"

### **General purpose of AYA/ATF as defined by Paul Hwang, main responsible of event organization.**

Paul Hwang is director of the Center for Asia Peace and Solidarity under Woori Theology Institute, Chairperson of Theological Committee of Pax Romana- ICMICA, co-creator of ALL (Asian Lay Leader Forum)

*Young lay activists in Asia are being called to strengthen their Christian identity as they embrace their local, traditional cultures, histories and religions. Although it is a complex work, it is necessary work. For Catholics to succeed in justice activities they need to cooperate with other religions similarly seeking a more just world order. This is yet another reason Asian lay Catholics need solid formation. Inter-religious work begins with solid Catholic formation. It is why AYA/ATF program put much emphasis on "Triple Dialogue" of FABC (Federation of Asian Bishops Conference) namely dialogue with the poor, diverse religious and cultural traditions in Asia, as well as Christian spirituality. Unfortunately, because of a lack of resources, they don't get adequate support from their Church. In some cases they have been largely abandoned by some ones in the Church hierarchy who do not understand or do not agree with the idea of "the People of God" from Vatican II and Pope Francis' vision of the "synodal church". While our Church eagerly provides support for seminarians who want to enter the priesthood, it does very little for young lay leaders in great need of Catholic formation.*

### **Participants:**

Around 50 young participants coming from the following countries :

Mostly Muslim: Indonesia (N° 1 in the world in terms of Muslim population), Pakistan, Malaysia

Mostly Buddhist: Thailand, Myanmar

Mixed religions: India, China, Vietnam, Cambodia, Sri Lanka, South Korea, Mongolia

Mostly Catholic: Philippines

Two young representatives from USA (Call To Action) also attended

15 participants are members of IFF Asia Fondacio (Youth Leadership and Development Center) and 4 others members of Pax Romana ICMS Asia Pacific.

English was the common language for all, but mother language only for Philippines.

In all those countries, except Philippines, Christians are a very small minority and their situation is sometimes due to persecutions, e.g. in Pakistan.

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---

It was recalled that 60% of the world population are Asian, almost half being urban. Only 3% of Catholics in the world are Asian. Therefore, inter-religions are vital for Christians in Asia.

I attended the whole session, as well as Fr Paul Steffen, German Theologian teaching in Rome and Fr Suwat Luangsa-ard, Director of the Diocesan Social Action Center (DISAC).

Other priests, living in Thailand, India and Philippines and other speakers attended partly.

### **Venue**

The meetings were held at the DISAC in Suratthani (South Thailand)

The bishop Joseph Prathan Sridarunsil of Suratthani Diocese visited and delivered a welcome address on the first day.

### **My main impressions**

This is what I wrote to the organizers, at their request, at the end of the meetings :

“First I highly appreciated the active participation of the young generation. Representatives from around 12 Asian countries were present and took charge of the animation. The contact between generations was easy and I was impressed to hear that everybody is not reluctant to talk about his, or her, personal situation, rather than spending time in theoretical considerations.

For me, it was a great discovery since I am used to meetings in which the average of participants is over 60 or 65.

My participation to the exposure in a school for children refugees was a strong experience which I can't forget.

The main topic of the meetings was migrants and refugees. Due to the fact that we were in Thailand, attention was concentrated on people originated from Myanmar. In Europe, we are now experiencing similar problems with the people coming from Middle East and African countries.

I was very interested in all what has been said regarding the various minorities of indigenous people, and especially by the situation of Indian Dalit (untouchables) who are fighting to recover their lands from which they had been kicked out by international corporates in the south of India.

One of my main concerns was to explain the exact meaning of “We Are Church”. I strongly insisted on this in my speech as well as in many conversations explaining that the Church should mean the whole Christians including the lay people, so really the “people of God”; not only the pope, the bishops and the hierarchy. I feel there is now a better understanding on this.

Four participants, including me, were present at the Council 50 event held in Rome in November 2015. The young AYA/ATF participants, who were not born at that time, know very few about Vatican II Council and can't realize the tremendous renewal shock it was for those who had known the Catholic Church before. I tried to explain what happened in Council 50 as a new start in view of new actions in the coming years.

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I really believe that the seeds left in AYA/ATF meetings will produce fruits in the future. This should be continued.”

Reply from Paul Hwang:

“Glad to hear that you have safely been back home in Paris. Now I am writing in WTI in Seoul and taking care of things I left here. Thanks for your active participation once again and the written sharing too! Hope that our friendship and solidarity be deepened and strengthened for the future.”

### **Exposures**

During the three first days, we were split up into small groups for an "immersion" with migrants communities, mainly from Burma, living and working in the countryside. Some participants helped in activities like fishing, plantations (rubber, bananas) and construction.

I was with a small group in a learning center for Burma kids, aged 5 to 14.

We could participate to the school life with teachers and kids, and spend two nights in class rooms. We visited the nearby village where most of the children live with their families and the small harbor which is the base of fishing activities.

We were really impressed by the warm welcome and how enthusiastic they are despite difficult life conditions. In that area, the tsunami occurred in December 2004, sea water level arose 6 m above beaches and surrounding areas. Casualties number was very high, as well as damages, some are still visible, leaving many people homeless.

This is what Sophie Vodvarka (USA) wrote about her Exposure experience, under title:

“Lessons in Humility at AYA/ATF 2016”

The room was 12'x12'. Its walls were of stained plywood and the ceiling's drywall was brown and crumbling. The room was in the exact center of building. There were no windows and no air circulation, which in Phuket, Thailand, meant the room was sweltering all night.

Here I spent two nights with four other men during our “exposure” experience as a part of the 2016 ATF/AYA Conference. The “exposure” is meant to deepen participants emotional and intellectual connection to the poverty and social injustices embedded in Thai society. Our hosts were an incredible gracious migrant family from Myanmar. They lived in the room next to us. There were about four families in our building, each living in a room the size of the one we shared. The families cooked, ate, slept, talked, and watched TV in these rooms. When it was time for bed everything was moved to the side and mats were rolled out on the floor.

A vast majority of people living in Southern Thailand are migrant laborers. Thailand offers more job opportunities and political stability than several countries near its

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---

borders. However in Thailand the vulnerable and desperate laborers are often taken advantage of, signing contracts that are often broken by employers, forced to work jobs that are incredibly dangerous, and are at the chaotic whims of the Thai market. The families in the area we stayed were migrants working in the fishing industry. Fishing is one of the most dangerous and notoriously exploitative industries in Thailand. We were told by some of the fishermen that last week one of the boats capsized and the neither their Thai bosses nor the police sent out rescue ship. Almost the whole crew drowned.

### **Country reports**

For each represented country, a report was given

Here-below are my notes for some of those reports

#### **Thailand:**

Lecture by Htoo Chit, Director of Foundation for education and development.

Himself a migrant from Myanmar.

He explained the reasons of migrations: human rights violations, civil war, suppression of freedoms.

Most of the migrants settled in the south, not far from the border with Myanmar.

His organization tries to help in the following:

Emergency assistance, health care, temporary safe shelters, education, security, obtaining regular documents.

Current expression about migrants situation is 3 D : Dangerous, Dirty, Difficult.

Up to now in Thailand 3 millions Burma people are documented and 2 millions not documented.

Most of those people live in hard and poor conditions.

However, it seems Thailand people accepts that situation since they need the migrants as the economy of the country is growing up.

It is recognized that important efforts are to be made for education, not only at school, to improve relations between migrants and Thai citizens.

#### **Philippines**

Presentation from Ms Perpy C. Tio Mindawon Initiative for Cultural Dialogue

Ateneo de Davao University

The country is composed of more than 7000 islands. The 3 main are: Luzon (Manila), Visayas and Mindanao (Davao) in the south.

Total population : 100.9 millions

Indigenous people (IP) 14 to 17 millions

110 ethno-linguistic groups in 65 out 78 provinces.

Their rights are recognized and defined in IPRA (Indigenous People Rights Act)

There are also IDP (Internally Displaced Persons) who are migrants in their own country) due to big projects, such as mining.

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---

### China

Same problem of IDP in China due to :

Handwork replaced by machines in agricultural activities

Huge projects such construction of the Three Gorges dam (1.3 million people relocated)

Millions of people were displaced from countryside to the big cities.

Catholic parishes in some small villages disappeared.

Consequences: parents have no more time to look after the children. Old people are left alone with nothing else to do than waiting for death. Some commit suicide.

Main reactions from participants were to say they learn much and highly appreciate. The word "enlightenment" was used.

The question is not only what we can do, but what we should do.

Last word from a Pakistan participant: "I can now think in a broader perspective"

It was impressive that most of the speakers and those who intervene in the debates talk about their personal experience, not only general considerations.

### Pakistan

200 millions people (6<sup>th</sup> in the world)

Difficult political situation due terrorist activities in the countries and in neighboring Afghanistan.

Conflict with India about Cashmere not resolved.

Around 15000 refugees from Pakistan in Thailand.

Critical situation for the Christians, especially women who are often persecuted. Christians are excluded from high positions in Administration

### Myanmar

After a 50 years period of civil war and tough military dictatorship, the political situation in Myanmar is now getting better.

Conflicts and fights are still going on in some parts of the country.

The Christians are 6.6 % of the population (4.9% in 1983), Baptists in majority.

Christianity in Myanmar is growing despite threats from Buddhist nationals

Buddhists are 88%

Aung San Suu Kyi is a symbol for the progress of women's conditions.

Poverty is still important, 3.6 million people homeless, electricity supply not sufficient.

Some economy sectors offer good prospects : natural resources, tourism potential

### **Main lines in the various speeches**

I was asked to deliver a speech on the theme :

*Church as a "Field Hospital" : Where we are in implementing Church Reform in Vatican and in World*

*Report on my participation, as invited delegate from IMWAC, to the AYA/ATF (Asian Youth Academy/ Asian Theology Forum) held in Suratthani (South Thailand) on August 17 to 27, 2016.*

---

On September 24, 2016, I sent to IMWAC the following message :

“On the CAPS (Center for Asia Peace and Solidarity) Website

<http://caps.wti.or.kr/?cat=22>

you will find reports and photos on the 2016 AYA/ATF event, in particular the document that I had sent to the organizers a few weeks before.

I prepared that document using largely what I received from IMWAC members, especially Irish and German.

I don't know why, the parts of the document concerning Council 50 and on the other hand my association FHEDLES have been mixed up on those website pages.

Due to limited time, I was not able to say everything in my speech. But I said more in private talks with participants.”

Several speakers underlined the differences, but also some similarities between Asian and occidental views in various fields such as culture, theology, ecology etc...

Their speeches were prepared specially for the event.

Here are some significant extracts:

“Hindu Views and Spirituality on Sustainable Development

India's Economic Growth vs. Ecological Sustainability”

Anthony Kalliath

India

“While embracing as an overarching context and constant while doing theology there is an imperative of a paradigm shift in the concept of God from a transcendent Immutible Patriarchal God – Sky-God- remaining outside of the flux of existence to a God who is embedded in the travails of humanity as well as the groans of cosmos - an immanent matriarchal God who inserts herself in the struggles of humanity and in the cosmic process as an enduring inner principle steering both the history of mankind and the evolution of the cosmos as self-generating principle.”

The most distinctive aspect of the Judeo-Christian tradition is its understanding of a personal God. The Western theology portrays this personal God as a liberator or redeemer of humanity and circumscribe Him in the domains of persons and history, leaving much of the cosmos unaddressed. Besides, the metaphors like King, Ruler, Lord, Master which represent this personal God entail the ideas of separation and control; they are hierarchical, imperialistic and dualistic, emphasizing the gap between God and he world, and the total dependence of the world on a transcendent Patriarchal God who gears the history and cosmic progress as an outsider (God of Hosts on the Skies).

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---

In this context Indian insight of Interiority can play a crucial role of supplying a credible unifying theological referral of the complicated web of eco-relations, operating from “within” of reality.”

### **“Empowerment from Within for the Transformation of Self and Society”**

By Fr. Niphot Thienwiharn

Director of Research and Training Centre for Religio-Cultural Community )RTRC(,  
Chiang Mai, Thailand

“Then, a process of constructing local theologies has been developed to explain the transcendence and faith derived from experience within faith communities that is called primal religion. It is a worldview and perception of the world with the sacred in the world which is the origin of relationships between people-the nature-the supernatural. It is a relationship contrary to the world view of modern materialism that disenchant the sacred from human being and the world. This paradigm is called *Cosmic Spirituality*”

“In short, this is a dimension of transcendence. It is the dimension of the highest immanent value in material, such as the mother of land, the spirit ‘Kwan’ of human being, gods of forest and mountain, mother of water. When the modern world uses rational and mechanical sciences as tools, it only turns everything into materials that can be traded for money, and finally ends up into consumerism. In this manner, it results in the process of disenchantment of the world, making beliefs and mystic or the invisible that protect materials and the nature as meaningless, nonsense and inexistent. It gives preference on progress and technologies, and claims that the nature is not sacred but only material goods that can be traded. When the dimension of mystic and sacredness in materials are taken away from the belief of the people, then capitalism creates new belief, i.e. capital or money”

**“Buddhist Countermeasure against Obstacles to Sustainable Development”,  
professor Lee Do-Heum (Hanyang University, Seoul)**

**This speaker expresses views which are close to the Asian Christian theology.**

“Unlike the substantialism of the West, Buddhism interprets the world on the basis of dependent origination between humans and nature. Unlike Newtonian mechanical paradigm and Descartes notion of mind-body dualism that dominated the modern times, Buddhism develops the ecological paradigm for coexistence of all living things and the life view not to kill even microorganisms. Therefore, many people utilize Buddhism as a paradigm or logic for sustainable development.”

.....

“Since the capitalism system relies on expansive reproduction as its movement principle, it cannot survive without development and growth. In this system, capitals can be maintained only by securing profits by exploiting value and converting the profits into capitals to accumulate it. In this system, the state where everybody worships a fetish and plunders others things to satisfy her/his desire becomes a natural routine unless the acts violate the law.

*Report on my participation, as invited delegate from IMWAC, to the AYA/ATF (Asian Youth Academy/Asian Theology Forum) held in Suratthani (South Thailand) on August 17 to 27, 2016.*

---

On the contrary, Buddhism is anti-capitalistic because it pursues non-possession, encourages sharing, requests to eliminate greed, and pursues altruistic life."

References were made to Pope François "Laudato si" encyclical letter.

Speech from Felix Wilfried  
 "Ecology and Sustainable Development  
 An Asian Reading of Laudato Si."

He points out that "The pope who defines himself as Bishop of Rome willingly listens to other local Churches across the world and discovers how they have come to terms with the environmental issues".

.....

"This Western Christian, renaissance and Enlightenment tradition stands in contrast to the larger Asian vision and its understanding of the world of the humans as intertwined with nature. The life of the humans in Asian tradition is one with the elements of nature. Therefore, when Pope Francis attempts to correct a deeply embedded Western theological and anthropological tradition and speaks of integral anthropology, Asians can understand him without difficulty. For, what he says, reverberates with the Asian experience, reflects the vision of Hindu, Buddhist and Taoist traditions; and the way Asian tribal and indigenous people see the reality as interconnected and bonded together. One of the thoughts running through *Laudato si* is the interconnection of the entire reality."

Since the general subject was on Migrants and Refugees, the question of land rights and related conflicts was a major issue during many of the speeches and debates.

Highly significant in this regard was situation of the Dalit (Untouchables) people in the State of Tamil Nadu (South India) described by Nicholas Chinnappan from TNLRF (Tamil Nadu Land Rights Federation). Those people are struggling to recover their lands from which they have been expelled.

. Brutal attacks on the Dalits lead to many number of killings of Dalits and burning down of their huts by the caste Hindus.

. When we mention 'land' it does not mean only agricultural lands. Land has different usages. It has different dimensions. Land to produce, land to set up habitats, lands to foster and protect animals and other species, lands to accommodate the coastal communities, lands which nurtures medicinal plants and herbs, lands which is source of water and lands which are rich in minerals. Land is a natural resource which is organically linking the humans and the nature. It is this organic link between these two which has been protecting both the humans and the nature. In this way we feel that land is food, land is employment, and land is education land is health and land is everything.

In the recent past in all the regions of Tamil Nadu agricultural lands, common lands like grazing lands, community forests, reserve forests, water bodies like lakes and tanks, coastal lands and habitats are indiscriminately grabbed by the State and private companies to set up their industrial ventures like construction of high ways, tiger reserves, mines, commercial ports, power plants, tourist resorts,...

*Report on my participation, as invited delegate from IMWAC, to the AYA/ATF (Asian Youth Academy/ Asian Theology Forum) held in Suratthani (South Thailand) on August 17 to 27, 2016.*

---

TNLRF is guided by the words of the Indian American Tribal Chief Seattle who mentioned that the “man belongs to the earth and the earth does not belong to the man” . In this way we strongly feel that the land can be used by humans and it cannot be exploited by the humans to make immediate profits at the cost of destruction of the ecology and environment in which we live. We do not see the land as something which has commercial values but something which is organically linked to the humans. Therefore we feel the need to promote the lands in which we live to satisfy both the needs of the humans and the nature.

The movie “Radical Grace” was shown at the end of the meetings.

Extracts from Huffington Post

"RADICAL GRACE follows three extraordinary nuns who faithfully honor their vow of obedience to God, even when it means angering the Church hierarchy. What does it mean for the sisters to be both devoted to, and in conflict, with a powerful religious institution? Feminists in a patriarchal faith? Why stay? Will the hard-line hierarchy dominate the Church in the 21st century, or will the sisters' values of social justice and inclusion prevail?

.....

The feature-length documentary Radical Grace follows three feminist nuns who are so devoted to social justice that they'll risk their place in the Church they love in order to remain true to their beliefs."

Even though Asian Catholics are not keen to criticize their hierarchy, the documentary was watched with high attention and followed by a very interesting and even passionate debate.

#### Conclusions and suggested actions:

- Communications means

Such contacts and mutual exchanges between Asian and Occidental cultures and spiritualities are very beneficial to all, and we should try to increase them. Of course getting together is the best as it happened in Thailand and last year during Council 50. But some obstacles remain: languages barriers, travel costs, availability of concerned people,...

We may think over other possible ways of communication: exchange of information and publications, Skype meetings.... Contacts with foreign friends living temporarily in our countries (students for example) may also be more frequent.

- Improved understanding:

Some words and expressions are not well understood by the other party and need to be clarified.

I give two examples:

I had discussion with one speaker on what he said about secularism in the western world and in particular *laïcité* in France which, according to what he said, would be enemy of religion. I expressed my disagreement and he recognized that in such matter more attention should be given to specific historical contexts.

Of course, I also admit that such word is subject of controversy even between us in IMWAC.

The words “mission” and “missionaries” were often used by speakers and participants. I said that, in our countries, we are a bit reluctant to such language which is somewhat linked to the colonial history (Spain in South America, France in Africa, Great Britain in India etc.) even though some missionaries did a wonderful job.

*Report on my participation, as invited delegate from IMWAC, to the AYA/ATF (Asian Youth Academy/ Asian Theology Forum) held in Suratthani (South Thailand) on August 17 to 27, 2016.*

---

I strongly insisted on our designation “**WE** are Church” explaining that in our view lay people are not less important than the hierarchy in the Church Institution. It seems that the message was received.

- Concrete actions:

Most of those young lay participants to the meetings were engaged in their countries in concrete actions such as ecological fights, help to refugees. It would be much more efficient to cooperate with them in that kind of actions rather than asking them to participate to theoretical or theological discussions.

- Ecology:

We should deepen our knowledge of ecological issues, and realize that this involves much more than environmental, political and societal concerns, but also implies a spiritual dimension which is essential for our Asian friends.

- Gospel message

As Paul Hwang suggested, the Gospel should be “whispered” rather than taught as the Truth with no way of interpretation.

Maybe a good conclusion !