An Australian View of Asia

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Since its foundation ten years ago the AsiaNews service has become an indispensable source of information on social, political, economic and religious life in Asia. Several times throughout the day AsiaNews provides bulletins on events from across this enormous continent, covering developments from the Middle East to Russia, to the Philippines and Papua New Guinea, through South East Asia and China, and on to India and the countries of central Asia. In addition to providing news from some places in the world which are generally not closely watched by people and the media in the West, AsiaNews has played a distinguished part in highlighting issues of human rights and economic and social development, and the tireless and regularly heroic work of the missionary Church in Asia.

AsiaNews has also become an important source of news and analysis on a subject that many Western journalists still find difficult to understand or take seriously: the strength, resilience and inescapability of the religious impulse in the human heart. In so successfully covering the fascinating concatenation of conflict and hope, of endurance and self-sacrifice, of community and service, that religious life brings into being in Asia, the AsiaNews service has made a significant contribution to the Church and the world in its first ten years. It is a great achievement and it is an honour for me to take part in this Symposium today to offer a few reflections on Asia from an Australian perspective.

Geographically Australia forms part of Oceania rather than Asia, and it is helpful to recall just how far removed physically Australia is from major centres in Asia. There are a number of jumping-off points from Australia to Asia, but our northern-most capital city is Darwin (also an expanding military base for Australian and US forces). From there it is only 720km to Dili in Timor Leste, and 1800km to Port Moresby in Papua New Guinea; important centres, but neither of them is a major Asian city. Jakarta is 2,700km from Darwin, and after that Manila, Kuala Lumpar and Singapore are more than 3000km away; Taipei, Bangkok, Hanoi and Hong Kong are more than 4000km away; and Tokyo and Seoul more

than 5000km away. Shanghai is almost 5000km from Darwin and Beijing almost 6000km, while New Delhi is more than 7000km away. To put this in a European context, Dublin to Moscow is a distance of 2800km, and it is 4300km from Murmansk to Gibraltar.

While these distances suggest it might be a small exaggeration to say that Asia is on Australia's doorstep, there is no doubt that Asia is a lot closer to us than Europe or the United States. In 2011 seven of Australia's top ten two-way trading partners were Asian countries, with China and Japan topping the list. The United States came in at number three and the United Kingdom at number six. Four of our top five export partners are in Asia, and three of our top five import partners. Over seventy per cent of Australia's trade in 2011 was with countries in the Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation group (APEC)[1]. Earlier this year it was reported that our trade with China had grown to $130 billion a year.

The composition of our population increasingly reflects our proximity to Asia. In 2010 Australia's population was approximately 22.3 million people, of which 27 per cent (or more than six million) were born overseas. Of the six million people in Australia born overseas, a little more than two million were born in Asia, double the number in 2000. In 1947 less than half of one per cent (0.3 per cent) of Australia's population was born in Asia. Since then the number of Asian-born Australians has doubled every decade to the point that those born in Asia make up nine per cent of the population[2]. While most Australians born overseas are from the United Kingdom and New Zealand, those born in China and India alone make up a little over 800,000 people, with Vietnam, the Philippines and Malaysia also contributing significantly among Asian countries[3].

Australia is an immigrant society and a major part of the Australian achievement has been to welcome successive waves of immigrants while maintaining and strengthening a decent, prosperous and cohesive society. This has been helped not least by the possibilities of social and physical mobility which have characterised Australia more or less from the beginning. Naturally there have always been differences in wealth and social standing, and there continues to be a worrying level of poverty and dysfunction in the outer suburbs of Australia's major cities and in rural and remote areas. This is also a particular problem in some Aboriginal communities, where the situation in some places is absolutely tragic.

1. Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, *Trade at a Glance 2012* (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Canberra: 2012).
2. Data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics reported in "Asian migration a tour de force", *The Age*, 17 June 2011.
3. Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Reflecting a Nation: Stories from the 2011 Census, 2012–2013* (Catalogue no. 2071.0)

By and large, however, immigrant communities are not part of this story. The broad historical pattern with migrant groups in Australia seems to be that the first and second generations work hard to establish themselves and negotiate the differences of language and culture, creating in the process a firm foundation for their children and grand children to move ahead and into the Australian mainstream. Initially they are assisted in this by the natural inclination to stick together and to help each other out, a feature of migrant communities in the early years that always has the potential to generate uneasiness among some in the majority population. This has been the case with the Chinese, the Irish, the Italians and Greeks, the Vietnamese and other immigrants from East Asia, and now with Muslim immigrants, particularly those from the Middle East (which is also part of Asia).

Islam as we know brings it own unique challenges. Muslim immigration to Australia is heterogeneous, encompassing many ethnic and language groups and many forms of Islamic devotion and practice. The 2011 census estimates Muslims represent 2.2 per cent of the Australian population, or 476,000 people, 61.5 per cent of whom were born overseas[4]. There have been tensions and some flashpoints, and Muslim leaders have condemned violence and violent protests. My hope is that if we continue to support and encourage the moderate Muslim leaders, to treat Muslims fairly just as other Australians are treated, and show that the opportunities all Australians have are also open them, then Muslim immigrants and their children will follow the same pattern as other groups and become Australian first of all and part of the country's mainstream.

Australian history has had its share of division and exclusion along social, religious and racial lines and immigrants have often been on the receiving end. For those affected, the injustice and hardship caused has been real and significant. Aboriginal Australians were not entitled to vote until the early 1960s and it was not until 1967 that the Australian constitution was amended (supported by over ninety per cent of the electorate) to remove discriminatory provisions against them. Immigration was governed by the White Australia policy, directed primarily against Asian immigration, until after the Second World War, and was not finally done away with until the late 1960s and early 1970s. An often bitter sectarianism and a more generalised mistrust coloured relations between the Protestant majority and the Catholic minority into the 1970s, fading away with the ebbing of faith on both sides and the diffusion of Catholic tribal identity through upward mobility.

However, generally in Australia social, religious and racial divides do not seem to run as deep or as intractably as they do in different places in Europe or the United States — to say nothing of many Asian countries. Part of the explanation is that rigid social stratification has not really

4. Ibid.

been part of the Australian story (although a significant part of our history concerns the hard struggle between a strong and well-organised labour movement and determined employers). Without mythologising and without overlooking the episodes of genuine ugliness that have occurred and continue to occur, part of the explanation also lies in the Australian ethos of "a fair go" and the pragmatism that characterises the Australian approach to most things. We do not usually pursue our ideas to logical or extreme conclusions, managing in most cases to come to a practical compromise somewhere in the middle. Whatever fear or misgivings there may be from time to time about immigration or refugees, the basic principle that everyone should be given a fair go, treated justly and decently, usually prevails in the end and sometimes only after a struggle.

Among the many blessings that immigration has brought to Australia is a new source of vitality and strength for the Catholic community. The Church in Australia would be much weaker than it is without the infusion of vigour and enthusiasm from migrant communities such as the Maltese, Italians, Lebanese and Croatians, more recently the Catholic immigrants from Vietnam, the Philippines and India. The Vietnamese community is a growing source of vocations to the priesthood, and in 2011 Bishop Vincent Long Van Ngyen, who came to Australia as a refugee, became Australian's first Vietnamese bishop. In Australia 23.6 per cent of the Catholic population was born overseas, 17.6 per cent in a non-English speaking country[5]. In my Archdiocese half the Catholics are migrants or children of migrants. Last year I ordained eight new priests from Sydney from seven different cultural backgrounds. These communities remain sources of hope.

Some of the Catholic communities from Asia which are now enriching the Church in Australia remind me of the Lord's parable of the mustard seed. Apparently the mustard seed grows into a very hardy bush, about three metres high; like a small tree, which explains why all the birds of the sky dwell in its branches (Mt. 13:31-32). It is a tree that is also particularly hard to uproot. The more you cut it down the stronger it grows. Australian Catholics from Vietnam, Korea, China and Japan witness to this, since the Church in their countries has not only survived terrible persecutions with many martyrs, but grown stronger. Their vitality in Australia is a proof of this and a great gift to us. Part of our challenge is to support these communities in keeping the faith strong among their young people so that they will continue to be a source of energy and renewal for some time to come.

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5. Australian Catholic Bishops Conference Pastoral Research Office, *E-News Bulletin*, 3 August 2012.

As I was preparing these remarks, the redoubtable Fr Cervellera reminded me of the Australian Government's policy paper ("White Paper") titled *Australia in the Asian Century*, which was published last October. It received a mixed response when it was published and I do not want to enter into the debate about the merits of its analysis. But it provides a helpful compendium of information about some of the significant developments and challenges facing Asia. For example:

- Asia will very soon be the largest producer and consumer of goods and services in the world[6];
- While it took the United Kingdom more than fifty years to double income per person during the Industrial Revolution, Japan, South Korea, Singapore, China and India all did so within a decade[7];
- In Indonesia today 18 per cent of people are living in poverty, compared with 68 per cent in the late 1980s[8];
- Participation rates in primary, secondary and post-secondary education in many East Asian countries have risen significantly since the 1970s, as has the quality of education. The education systems in Hong Kong, South Korea, Singapore and Shanghai are four of the world's best[9];
- The situation varies of course. Countries such as India and Indonesia, with two of the largest education systems in the world, continue to face challenges in improving the quality of education and access to it. In the Philippines, however, the primary school enrolment rate is nearly 90 per cent[10];
- In higher education, participation rates have increased significantly in Thailand, Malaysia and Hong Kong, and in South Korea some form of post-secondary education is almost universal[11];
- The benefits of favourable demographics, rising levels of education, improvements in laws and institutions, and economic restructuring and liberalisation have become most apparent over the last two decades. In 2010 Asia generated 40 per cent of the world's manufacturing output, compared to 12 or 13 per cent in 1970[12];

6. Australian Government, *Australia in the Asian Century,* (White Paper) October 2012, 2.
7. Ibid. 30.
8. Ibid. 33.
9. Ibid. 34.
10. Ibid. 34-35.
11. Ibid. 34.
12. Ibid. 36-38 & 40-41.

- In the decade before the Asian financial crisis in 2008, there were high levels of investment from Asia in the United States and Europe. Growing foreign exchange reserves and private investment have made Asia a major net exporter of capital to the rest of the world. Asian countries account for almost two thirds of the world's accumulated foreign reserves. Japan alone accounts for one third of global reserves, and China one tenth but the pattern of accumulation is consistent across other Asian countries[13].

The paper also acknowledges the importance of the United States in the region, not least the defence and security guarantees it has provided. These have played a crucial part in generating confidence for business and contributed to the growth of stability and confidence in the region[14].

The immensely impressive achievements, with all the benefits they bring to ordinary people and families living in Asian countries, also bring significant challenges. Among some of the more important identified in the Australian government's paper are:

- the enormous rate of urbanisation. 44 million people each year in Asia move from rural areas to cities. China's rate of urbanisation is estimated to be one hundred times the scale, and occurring at ten times the speed, of British urbanisation during the Industrial Revolution. It is estimated that in 2025 two billion people in Asia will live in cities, accounting for half the world's urban population[15].
- degradation of arable land and desertification. This is a problem especially in India, Pakistan and China. China is already one-quarter desert and 2,500 square kilometres of land are being lost to desertification annually[16].
- water scarcity. A 65 per cent increase in water use by industry is anticipated by 2030, while demand for water could exceed supply by 50 per cent in China and 25 per cent in India that year[17].
- water quality is also a problem. 412 rivers in the Philippines and 50 in Indonesia classified as "dead", and half the water in the Hai River basin in China classified as unusable. The seven main rivers in West Java are heavily polluted and the water along half the length of the Ganges and Yellow rivers is unusable for agriculture[18].

13. Ibid. 43.
14. Ibid. 40.
15. Ibid. 43 & 66.
16. Ibid. 71.
17. Ibid. 70-71.
18. Ibid. 71.

- these issues will impact on food production and could lead to greater volatility in food prices. By 2050 food production in Asia will need to be 70 per cent higher than it is today. While it is expected that higher yields and cropping intensity will meet the increased world demand for food, in Asia there are important challenges to be met in the areas of water, soil and agricultural and transport infrastructure[19].
- significant disparities of wealth and opportunity. While incomes have risen, they have done so unevenly between rich and poor, between coastal and interior regions, between cities and rural districts, between men and women and along caste and ethnic lines. In some countries poverty rates are significantly higher among ethnic minorities, and women enjoy far fewer opportunities for education and work than men[20].

Each of these issues is vitally important for human flourishing and continuing growth in Asia. Successfully addressing gross disparities in wealth and opportunity is essential for sustainable and long-term development in the region; and reducing competition for food, water and energy by ensuring that they are in sufficient and secure supply is increasingly important for continuing stability and peace. This last point goes to the emerging global issue of food security, about which the former Australian ambassador to the Holy See, His Excellency Tim Fischer, has done much to raise awareness.

The Australian government's policy paper highlights how a young and growing population created a favourable opportunity which many governments in east and south Asia understood and seized upon[21]. A favourable demographic situation has played an essential part in Asia's success, but demography is changing in Asia. While the working-age population of Asia is expected to grow by 0.8 per cent per year over the next two decades, this is half the growth rate of the past two decades. Fertility rates have been falling and population decline is projected to begin in the second half of the century. A preference for boys combined with having only one or two children has led also to the gendercide of baby girls and a dramatic imbalance of the sexes in some Asian countries[22].

19. Ibid. 70.
20. Ibid. 59-60.
21. Ibid. 32-33.
22. See for example "Gendercide: The Worldwide War on Baby Girls", *The Economist*, 4 March 2010; and the documentary film *It's a Girl* <<www.itsagirlmovie.com>>.

The United Nations' latest world population estimates capture this shift from "demographic dividend" to "demographic drag" by plotting the changes caused by declining fertility to the "dependency ratio", or the number of dependent children and elderly people to the number of working age adults. Dependency ratios in many Asian countries were higher throughout most of the second half of the twentieth century than they are today because of higher fertility rates. Most of the dependency arose from a large proportion of children in the population. Today the dependency ratio is lower or as low as it has ever been because the proportion of children in the population has fallen. But the dependency ratio is now beginning to increase again, but this time the larger part is made up of the dependent elderly rather than dependent children.

To give a few examples: in 1970 China had 79 dependents for every 100 adults of working age. 72 were children and 7 were elderly people. In 2010 the dependency ratio was 36, comprising 25 children and 11 elderly. By 2050 it is projected to be 63, comprising 24 children and 39 elderly[23]. In 2010 countries such as India, Pakistan, Indonesia, Malaysia and Vietnam all had total dependency ratios between 43 and 66, with old age dependency ratios between 7 and 9. This means most of their dependents were children, but in each case the child dependency ratio in 2010 was significantly lower than it was in 1970, reflecting lower fertility rates. By 2050 the UN estimates these countries will have dependency ratios between 60 and 85; up by a half or a third on the ratios in 2010. Elderly dependency ratios will rise from single digits to between 34 and 58, and child dependency ratios will fall from between 41 to 65 in 2010 to between 26 to 28.

To highlight just how rapidly the population will age in many Asian countries, the elderly dependency ratio in Europe in 2010 was 24. In the United States it was 19, and in Australia it was 20 — all significantly higher than the countries in Asia was have just discussed. By 2050 however their total dependency ratios and elderly dependency ratios will be lower than some of these Asian countries, and their child dependency ratios will be about the same as all of them (or higher in the case of the US)[24]. Japan's total dependency ratio and elderly dependency ratio are already higher than Europe's, and its child dependency ratio is lower. By mid-century its elderly dependency ratio will be significantly higher

23. United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, *World Population Prospects: the 2012 Revision* (United Nations, New York: 2013), Vol 1. *Comprehensive Tables,* Table A.33. "Dependency ratios by major area, region and country: estimates and medium variant, 1950-2100"

24. Ibid. In 2010 Europe's dependency ratio of 47 was made up of 23 child dependents and 24 elderly dependents. In 2050, the UN estimates that its total dependency ratio will be 80, comprising 28 children and 52 elderly. For the US in 2010, the total dependency ratio was 49 (30 children plus 19 elderly. In 2050 it is projected to be 77 (30 children and 47 elderly). In Australia, the dependency ratio was 48 in 2010 (28 children and 20 elderly), and forecast to rise to 82 in 2050 (28 children and 55 elderly).

still (72 compared to 52). Singapore is projected to have a total dependency ratio of 103 dependents to every 100 people of working age, with four fifths of them being elderly[25].

As a 2012 report from the Asian Development Bank observed, "What sets Asia apart from earlier episodes of aging in other parts of the world is the sheer scale and speed of its aging[26]. How this issue plays out in Asia, as in Europe and other parts of the world, we will have to wait and see, but it promises to change things significantly.

China has always been a country and society of particular interest to me. The success of Australia's economy depends heavily on the Chinese colossus, not least on the demand for coal and other mining products which is driven by China's efforts to continually expand its economy. Of course, that China needs to expand its economy is no guarantee that it will always be able to do so. If China catches a cold, Australia will catch influenza and possibly even pneumonia. Markets have never risen for ever in the past and already in Australia we are entering into a phase of relatively mild contraction. China has some hundreds of millions outside the market and half of its army is needed to contain the tens of thousands of incidents of civil unrest which occur each year.

I do not believe that China will inevitably achieve economic supremacy over the United States — more than twenty years ago we were ascribing that honour to Japan. China is a radically different culture, nourished for two thousand years by the teachings of Buddha and Confucius before the destructive barbarism of Mao and the Red Guards; a nation which is now searching for the secrets of Western vitality and for a code or codes to provide decency and social cohesion that is compatible with economic development.

In 2002 a group of American tourists visited the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing to hear a talk by a Chinese academic. Speaking in the plural for unnamed fellow thinkers, he described their search for what accounted for the pre-eminence, the success of the West all over the world. Their studies ranged widely. Originally they thought the main reason was more powerful guns; then it was Western political systems, before considering the claims of the Western economic system. Finally, and I quote "in the past twenty years, we have realized that

25. Ibid. Japan's total dependency ratio in 2010 was 57 (21 children plus 36 elderly). In 2050 it is expected to be 96 (25 children and 72 elderly). Singapore in 2010 had a total dependency ratio of 36 (24 children to 12 elderly); by 2050 it will be 103 (22 children and 81 elderly). South Korea is another striking case of the shift from child to elderly dependency. In 1970 its total dependency ratio was 83 (77 children and 6 elderly); in 2010 it was 38 (22 children and 15 elderly); in 2050 it will be 88 (23 children and 66 elderly).

26. Donghyun Park (ed.) *Pension Systems and Old-Age Income Support in East and Southeast Asia* (Asian Development Bank & Routledge, London & New York: 2012) xiv.

the heart of your culture is your religion: Christianity. . . . The Christian moral foundation of social and cultural life was what made possible the emergence of capitalism and then the transition to democratic politics. We don't have any doubt about this"[27].

The Chinese official is right of course, but his diagnosis could not have been more politically incorrect in the English-speaking world, as many of our best and brightest labour to diminish our Christian inheritance. Both the wisdom of Asia about the West, and the problems Asia is confronting, particularly in the area of respect for human rights and especially respect for life and the rights and dignity of women, should help us in the West think again about what makes for and sustains a just and free society, and the contribution that religion and Christianity in particular makes to this.

Given the main focus of the work of AsiaNews, it is appropriate to conclude with some reflections on the missionary opportunities in Asia, which vary greatly. It is not well known that Christianity, especially Protestantism, is spreading through China at a much faster rate than Christianity spread through the pagan Roman Empire. In 1949 there were almost one million Protestants in China. The World Christian Database has claimed there are nearly 100 million Protestants. The CIA World Fact Book estimates the number of Christians in China at 3 or 4 per cent of a total population of 1.349 billion (lower than the UN estimate of 1.385 billion), which suggests a figure between 40 and almost 54 million. If this level of expansion continues, China will become the third largest Christian country in the world after the United States and Brazil. There are still pockets of religious persecution in China, often influenced by local factors, although the general level of freedom has improved. But the Catholic Church's position is still not regularized. While there has been steady growth in the number of Chinese Catholics throughout Asia (for example, in Indonesia), most estimate there are only about 12 million Catholics in mainland China, four times the number when the Communists came to power.

Christianity is growing strongly in South Korea, with Christians comprising 31.6 per cent of the population of almost 48 or 49 million. Most are Protestants (24 per cent), but the Catholic population is growing strongly too, now at 7.6 per cent according to the CIA World Fact Book. South Korea has a high abortion rate and a very low fertility rate, and I hope that the growth of Christianity in South Korea will help to turn things in a more life-giving direction. In Japan the Catholic community remains very small, despite the role of St Francis Xavier in bringing the faith to the country in the middle of the sixteenth century and the witness of the martyrs a few decades after he had done so. It remains difficult missionary terrain.

27. David Aikman, *Jesus in Beijing: How Christianity is Transforming China and Changing the Global Balance of Power* (Washington DC: Regnery, 2003), 5.

India is predominantly a Hindu country, with a significant Muslim population (13.4 per cent of a total population of 1.22 or 1.25 billion), one of the largest in the world. Christians make up only 2.3 per cent of the population, and persecution because of the Church's uplifting work with those at the bottom of the caste system is not uncommon. Indonesia is another important country where the Christian population is small (5.7 per cent Protestant, 3 per cent Catholic of a total population of 250 or 251 million) and where persecution, in this case because of the influence of extreme versions of Islam, is no longer unknown.

The growth of Christianity in Asia and the challenges facing those involved in missionary work in the region is varied and complex. In some places the faith seems to spread like wildfire; in others growth is slow and steady from a small base; and in others again the soil is hard. Persecution in different forms is real and troubling in different parts of the continent, and should recall us to the importance of supporting the churches of Asia and the missionaries and local priests and religious who serve them with our prayers as well as practical help. We are blessed in this to have the AsiaNews service to keep "the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties" of the Church and the people in Asia before us so closely and immediately. My hope and prayer is that the magnificent work of AsiaNews will go from strength to strength over the next ten years, and that the Lord will continue to bless all those involved in its efforts.