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[OPINION] Response to Cardinal Tagle: Appreciating Pope Francis' Asian trip

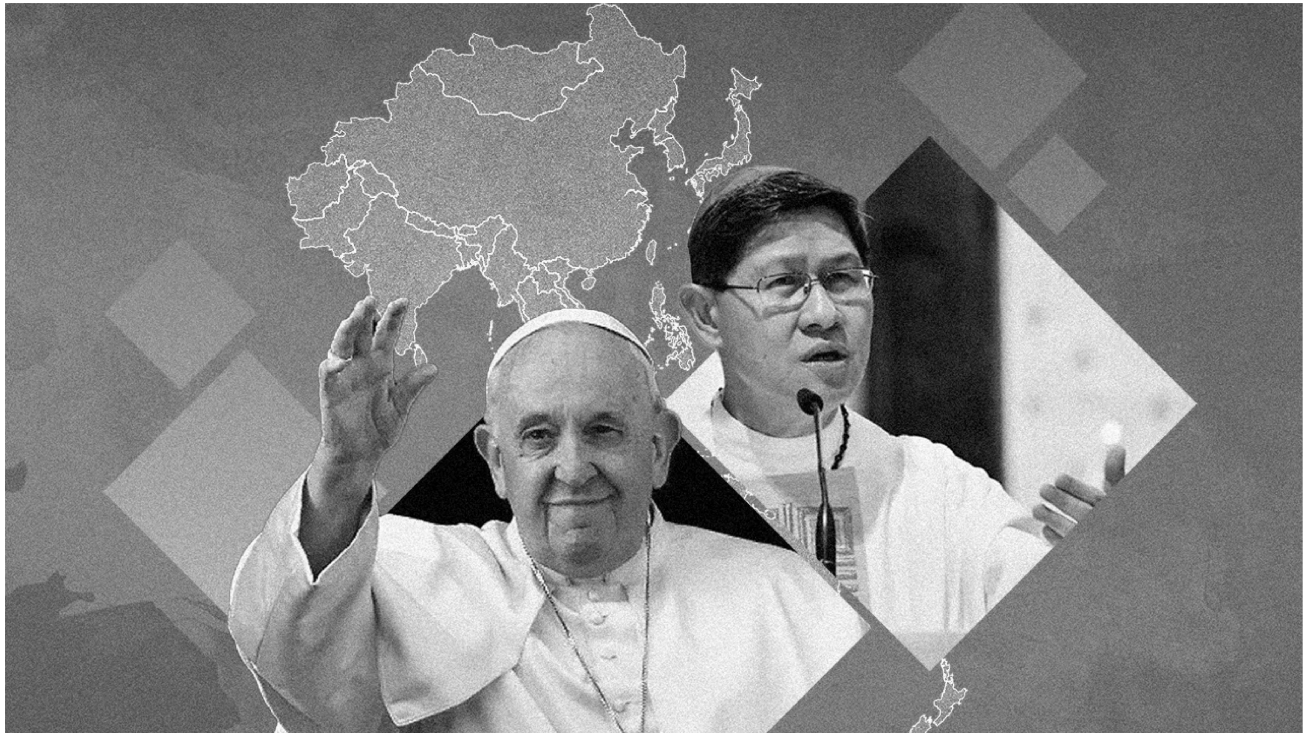
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'Pope Francis is inviting us to carefully listen to the Church in Asia, question our representations about Asian people, and renew ecclesial governance'

From September 3 to 13, Pope Francis returns to Asia-Pacific and visits Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, Timor-Leste, and Singapore. This is the longest trip of his papacy and a massive investment for the Vatican and local countries. It is set to touch on key issues for Asia and the Church. Therefore, it deserves meticulous attention.

To provide analysis on the significance of this Asia-Pacific trip, several media outlets of the Vatican released an interview with His Eminence Cardinal Luis Antonio Tagle, pro-prefect of the Dicastery for Evangelization. This interview offers a series of thought-provoking insights on each visited country as well as on Asia and Asian Catholicism.

As Cardinal Tagle is the third highest official of the Vatican, one understands the importance of his comments and the food for thought that they represent. Here, I would like to select six takeaways to deepen the conversation on Catholicism in Asia.

First, **Asian poverty**. Cardinal Tagle explains that a majority of Asians are poor and that “there are many baptisms among the poor.” Spiritually, there is a connection between poverty and Asian Catholicism.

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At the same time, there is much more than poverty in Asia. While encountering heads of state, members of the civil society, and various groups of youth, Pope Francis is inviting us to renew our vision of Asia and look at the richness, dynamism, and resilience of Asian people.

Among Asian Catholics, many have significant access to wealth. Some even belong to the privileged classes. And in numerous situations, Asian Catholic networks have real economic leverage. This is something we need to meditate on.

Second, **Asian Catholicism as a minority religion**. Referring to the upcoming trip of Pope Francis to Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, Timor-Leste, and Singapore, His Eminence affirms that “in those countries, Christian communities are a minority almost everywhere, a ‘small flock.’”



Yes, more attention is need to the size of Christianity in Asia, and its significance. In Timor-Leste, Catholics represent more than 97% of the population. In Papua New Guinea, the nation is almost entirely Christian (26% Catholics, 64% Protestant). In Indonesia, Catholics might represent 3% of the total population only but their sociopolitical contribution is much more significant than what demography suggests. In some parts of the archipelago, they are the ruling majority of local politics. In other parts, they run excellent schools and universities. They participate actively in the making of contemporary Indonesia. And the same can be said about Singaporean Catholics who often belong to a privileged class and deploy significant influence on Singapore sociocultural evolutions.

Third, **Asian ecumenism**. When commenting on Indonesia, His Eminence reflects on Christian-Muslim dialogue — a relation between the majority and the minority religions. To listen to God, cultivate harmony, and foster socioeconomic growth, building good relations with religious others is essential.

With this important reminder, Papua New Guinea stands as an inspiration. There, Protestants are the majority of the population. And tensions exist between the Catholic Church and Protestant communities.

As our Muslim brothers, Asian Protestants — who are also very influential in Indonesia and Singapore — call for more attention and proximity. For the Vatican and the rest of the Church, they are an opportunity for dialogue and growth.

Fourth, **Filipinos abroad**. When commenting on Singapore, His Eminence talks about the achievements of the city-state and its beautiful success. This is certainly an invitation to also give thanks for Cardinal Tagle's co-citizens, the 200,000 Filipinos who live there and contribute so much to its church.

In many parts of the world, Filipinos occupy a real diversity of socioeconomic status and actively contribute to their adoptive society and Church. Often, they play a vital role for the Church.

Yet, a number of them face discrimination and are made invisible, even within the Church. Some live in very poor conditions and face various forms of abuse. An interview with a cardinal from the Philippines is certainly an opportunity to recognize and appreciate the contribution of all Filipinos around Asia.

Fifth, **Church-State relations**. Commenting on Timor-Leste, Cardinal Tagle explains that "the relationship between the local Church and the government is very good there." Indeed, the Church has played a major role for the independence of Timor. And today, the Church occupies a privileged position.

For Timorese people who are looking for renewal, this is precious. Twenty years after independence, an increasing proportion of the youth has growing doubts about the capacity of the Church to fight corruption, foster social justice, and help economic growth.

But in Timor-Leste like in many parts of Asia, Catholic leaders can be close to ruling elites. This should be a gift for all. This very good relationship with the state is certainly an opportunity to facilitate the transformation of society and the well-being of all.

Sixth and last takeaway, **martyrdom and missionaries**. Invited to comment on the mysterious bond between mission and martyrdom, Cardinal Tagle reminds us that "missionaries are a gift to the Church." Indeed, gifts are very precious, and they must be well taken care of.

For instance, if a missionary who sexually abuses children is not disciplined, he is not a gift anymore, quite the opposite. The recent stories of rape allegedly perpetrated by Bishop Carlos Filipe Ximenes Belo in Timor-Leste and French MEP missionaries in other parts of Asia illustrate this challenge. The Dicastery of Cardinal Tagle which has direct jurisdiction over this matter, plays a key role in preserving the gift of the missionaries.

Earlier in his interview, Cardinal Tagle states, "History teaches us to be careful that law enforcement does not end up contradicting the very values that laws are supposed to

protect.” In the Church, discipline is important. When predatory clergy members remain unchecked, Asian children are the martyrs.

In conclusion, by visiting Asia again and calling for a synodal Church, Pope Francis is inviting us to carefully listen to the Church in Asia, question our representations about Asian people, and renew ecclesial governance. We cannot spread colonial and paternalist discourses which not only misrepresent the continent but harm its people. As this papal trip mobilizes massive human and financial resources, it also stands as a public opportunity and a moral obligation to foster multilateral engagement and open dialogue. This trip must benefit everyone. I want to thank Cardinal Tagle for his interview and his inspiring insights. – **Rappler.com**

Michel Chambon is a Catholic theologian and cultural anthropology. He is one of the coordinators of ISAC, the Initiative for the Study of Asian Catholics.

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