NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Maryknoll Missioner captures valuable Asian scholarship

Thomas C. Fox | Jun. 25, 2010

Maryknoll Fr. James H. Kroeger (NCR photo/Thomas C. Fox)

MANILA, PHILIPPINES -- Call this a work of the heart from a missioner with a solid mind.

Maryknoll Fr. James H. Kroeger?s work assures that even some of the more obscure scholarly efforts about the Asian church will not be overlooked. In turn, it offers valuable guidance to future historians, theologians and pastoral workers who will want to understand and build on the successes of Asia?s continent-wide episcopal conference.

A two-volume set called *Theology from the Heart of Asia* represents the first comprehensive outline of Asian Catholic scholarship, from 1985 to 2008, focused upon the Federation of Asian Bishops? Conferences (FABC). Published by Claretian Publications, these are reference books and are not aimed at the general reading audience. At the same time these books are invaluable for scholars and others who understand the importance of the federation and its vision of church.

Theology from the Heart of Asia contains the outlines of 27 FABC-focused dissertations. It comes with equally important footnote references. Together these books assure that future scholars will be able to build on these materials.

It has been demanding work for author-editor Kroeger, who teaches systematic and mission theology at the Loyola School of Theology, Ateneo de Manila University in the Philippines. ?None of these references are now going to be lost,? he said earlier this year in an interview in his Manila office. ?How people will mine these resources, that remains to be seen.?

Kroeger has been a missioner in Asia since 1970. His service in Asia therefore parallels the period during which the Asian bishops? federation was born and later came to life.

Until the early 1970s, the local churches of Asia had little communication. That changed after the November 1970 pastoral visit by Pope Paul VI to Asia. Bishops throughout Asia came to Manila for that visit. Out of it came the idea to form a pan-Asia Catholic episcopal conference, which eventually took the name Federation of Asian Bishops? Conferences.

Though the organization ran into early opposition from some Vatican prelates, it had the backing of the Paul VI. Within years it was asserting new pastoral leadership, so new that locals began to call it ?a new way of being church.?

The federation?s vision has been centered on a triple dialogue and the importance of the local church. The Asian bishops, emerging from colonialism, shared a realization that for their local churches to grow, they needed to be in dialogue with their local cultures, with the other religions of Asia, and with the poor, who make up the vast majority of Asians.

Kroeger says the local churches of Asia have a lot to teach the wider church.

In the United States, Catholics don?t necessarily see themselves as part of a ?local church,? but it would be helpful it they did.

The missioner says that once you grasp the idea of being a local church you find yourself asking other questions, like ?If we are a local church, then what is our culture, what is our history, what is our identity??

In today?s ever more pluralistic societies, these are important questions to keep asking, Kroeger says.

The dialogue that the Asian churches support, Kroeger said, also can teach that people from various religions are ?in a common journey.?

He said that it took him two years to track down the dissertations written by scholars in Asia, Europe and America in order to complete the project. Part of the effort was learning where the dissertations were written; the other part was finding ways to get them in his hands.

?I?d say five or six of them were really hard to get. Once I learned where they were I had to convince someone to send them to me. It wasn?t easy. Sometimes they would arrive with missing pages and I?d have to start again.?

Kroeger, at 64, says he has a lot of energy and continues to enjoy his work as scholar and teacher. He says he also likes to be a counselor, advisor and friend to younger Catholics, members of a new and up-and-coming generation of Asian intellectuals.

?I?m so fortunate to be with young people, to be engaging them,? he said.

Kroeger has written other books and manuscripts. He is coeditor of the widely selling *Once Upon a Time in Asia: Stories of Harmony and Peace*, a book initially published by Orbis in 2006 and translated into 10 languages. It gathers together Asian stories aimed at awakening the heart, mind and soul.

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