

## Asia Pacific Mission Studies

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### 60 Years of EAPI - Cum Ecclesia

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# 60 YEARS OF EAPI - CUM ECCLESIA

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## Unity in Diversity

A New Caledonian priest looks like a giant, but once you talk to him, you realize, he is as simple-hearted as one of the rural peasants in Korea. A Marist priest from Vanuatu has tasted turtle meat. Vanuatu has 80 languages, and the north and south are culturally distinct. Tonga's population is about 130,000, yet on Sundays the houses are empty—because everyone is either at the Catholic church or the Protestant one. To me, Oceania had been nothing more than tiny dots scattered across the South Pacific. At EAPI, those dots come alive in the Pacific Islanders; we meet, talk, laugh, and share life together.

At EAPI, Myanmar's military coup is not a distant fire across the river. The war between Thailand and Cambodia is a real threat to the mission of a Thai sister who has worked in Cambodia for 20 years. Almost every participant's country has its own Independence Day, carrying the shared scars of foreign invasion and colonial experience. Naturally, EAPI

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opens our hearts and minds to a wider world. Historical and cultural diversity blends with each participant's individuality, making EAPI a rainbow, a festival of many colors. This universal Church experience converges into the Paschal mystery of Jesus, allowing us to taste unity in diversity in a very tangible way.

## **Rediscovering the Importance of the Residential Program**

The pandemic in 2020 was a shock and brought fear to EAPI as well. It was only in 2021, the second year of the pandemic, did we manage to hold a 10-week online program with 40 participants. The second online program had 30 participants. In March 2022, we planned a third online program, but with only three applicants, so it had to be canceled. For three years we worried about the uncertain fate of EAPI.

Then, in September 2022, we decided to test the waters with a 10-week, short, sabbatical program, which drew 14 participants from 10 countries. After that, in 2023, the January program had 36 participants, and the August program had 49. From 2024 onward, each program has had more than 50 participants, and the January 2026 program welcomed 60 participants from 26 countries. Through this experience, we realized that the greatest strength of EAPI lies in its residential programs, which foster not just knowledge but embodied Church spirit through shared living.

Residential programs have been central to EAPI from the beginning. When we say this year marks the 60th anniversary, the question arises: what is the starting point? The Jesuit EAPI community began on August 15, 1965. But the launch of the 7-month Pastoral Renewal Course, the first major structured program, was only possible a year later, on September 15, 1966. Therefore, we decided to commemorate both starting points and celebrate the 60th anniversary over a full year, from August 15, 2025 to September 15, 2026.

## The Beginning of EAPI – God’s Providence

EAPI is understood to have been founded by Divine Providence. The most significant event in its pre-history was the expulsion of Jesuits from China in 1949. As a result, Jesuits active in China fled to Taiwan, Vietnam, and the Philippines. Even in temporary exile, they continued their missionary and pastoral work. In Manila, they established *Missio Apologetica (Institute of Mission Apologetics)* in Mandaluyong, offering liturgical education and catechists’ training.

At that time, the Second Vatican Council, convened by Pope John XXIII, gave wings to their efforts. The mission of EAPI—to form Church leaders who embody the spirit of Vatican II—took shape. The presence of many members free for apostolic work allowed them to respond to the signs of the times. The missionaries expelled from China must have deeply resonated with the saying: “When one door of happiness closes, another door opens.”

## A New Way of Being Church

EAPI boldly introduced a new liturgical life and offered courses in the humanities, such as psychology and sociology, in addition to biblical and theological studies, all reflecting the fruits of post-Vatican II research. These were carried out in residential programs, where priests, religious, and lay people studied together in the same classroom and shared meals from the same pot—an unprecedented innovation. EAPI presented a groundbreaking and forward-looking lifestyle and formation process. The response was positive and lasting, and its effects continue to this day. Over the past 60 years, an average of 120 participants per year have received training at EAPI.

The quarterly journal *EAPR (East Asian Pastoral Review)*, published four times a year, also played a major role in spreading the spirit of Vatican II until it ceased publication with Volume 53 in 2016. In 2019, it was revived as the online journal *APMS (Asia Pacific Mission Studies)*, published twice a year.

## Three Crises and EAPI's Response

EAPI's history has not been one of uninterrupted success. There were turning points—three in particular. The first came in the late 1990s, when participant numbers began to decline. In response, the seven month residential Pastoral Renewal course was shortened, and new thematic short programs were introduced, such as leadership training, media education, and biblical studies, along with programs tailored to the needs of local churches.

The second turning point came in the mid-2010s. The number of participants was decreasing constantly. On the occasion of its approaching 50th anniversary, EAPI began a serious process of apostolic discernment. The subject of discernment was whether EAPI should continue its mission, or whether, having fulfilled its mission statement related to the Second Vatican Council, it should retire honorably. The conclusion was that EAPI should continue to serve the Church, adapting to the signs of the times. In 2018, alongside facility improvements, EAPI undertook communal reflection and program restructuring. Then came the third crisis: the pandemic. This was a challenge faced by all, but as mentioned earlier, EAPI managed to navigate it successfully. Following the new program framework established before the pandemic, EAPI now offers three courses: the six-month *PLMM (Pastoral Leadership and Management for Mission)*, the four-month *PRD (Pastoral Renewal for Discipleship)*, and the four-month *SRE (Sabbatical Renewal Experience)*. Demand for SRE has steadily grown, and it is now offered twice a year.

## The Meaning and Role of EAPI

What contribution does EAPI make to the Church, and how does it understand its role?

First, it believes it fulfills a healing function. Its participants are those who have labored in the Church as parish pastors, overseas missionaries,

hospital and social workers, or in service, administration and formation within religious orders and communities. A parish priest who has wandered for days through mountains to reach chapels for 12 years, a sister who has served as missionary in South Africa and Ethiopia for 24 years, sisters who have worked in hospitals for 10 years or more—these are the kinds of people who come to EAPI. Through sabbatical programs, EAPI accompanies them in reflecting on and organizing their missionary and pastoral experiences, and, through leadership programs, provides opportunities to cultivate the knowledge and skills needed for mission.

Participants sometimes come to EAPI from problematic situations. Some arrive bearing wounds from conflicts or misunderstandings with superiors or pastors. More serious issues also exist. Surveys conducted in Brazil, France, and Italy reveal that many priests struggle with overwork and isolation. The problem of isolation is not merely human or psychological loneliness, but also pastoral and ecclesial loneliness stemming from the lack of priestly fraternity. Priestly life often lacks supervision in pastoral ministry and in opportunities to grow through sharing experiences with fellow priests. As a result, many face their problems alone. A significant number of priests are exposed to risks of depression and addiction. When loss of motivation or accusations of sexual misconduct are added, some even fall into suicide. While it is difficult to present exact statistics, diocesan and national figures show that the number of priests who take their own lives cannot be ignored.

EAPI cannot solve every problem, but it finds meaning in accompanying and sharing the burdens of priests, religious, and lay leaders who, in today's society, carry the heavy load of mission and pastoral work.

Second, EAPI plays a complementary role in anthropology, theology, and the social sciences. It offers courses that supplement gaps in theoretical or practical knowledge and skills acquired in seminaries and religious formation. It provides venues for integrating pastoral experience from the field with

academic and practical education. For example, developmental psychology is applied to spiritual life to foster faith-based self-reflection, while sociology and organizational management are applied to parish and church administration to build knowledge and skills in governance. This approach aligns with the direction of Vatican II. For instance, social teaching and the principle of synodality serve as compasses for the whole Church; making it all the more necessary to form leaders who combine theory with practice.

## Desired Profile of EAPI Leader and Primary Frame of the Program

We identify six key characteristics as the desired profile of the EAPI missionary and pastoral leader. These also serve as criteria for curriculum design:

- (1) Integrated
- (2) Spiritually Mature
- (3) Christ-Centered
- (4) Church-Grounded
- (5) Critically Reflective and Creative
- (6) Dialogically Life-Giving

To achieve these goals, weekly modules are structured within the 4-month or 6-month courses. The common framework includes:

- (1) Two weeks of orientation and prayer
- (2) An 8-day retreat in the middle
- (3) A final week of prayerful integration

The curriculum is organized around the retreat: before it, modules focus on *ad intra* themes such as reflection, spiritual journey, and self-care; after it, modules shift toward *ad extra* themes. For *ad extra*, synodality is considered the fundamental framework and compass, completing the realization of Vatican II ecclesiology. Respect is given to Ignatian Spiritual

Exercises, while attention is devoted to preserving the environment as our common home, accompanying the youth in opening their future, and fostering care for the poor in line with Jesus' desire.

## Future Prospects

We hope to continue nurturing the positive aspects of EAPI culture. For example, EAPI has a strong communal spirit. Within less than the first two weeks of the program, participants become friends and accept one another as family, brothers, and sisters. They learn not only from weekly facilitators but also from one another. Here, the teaching Church and the practicing Church are not separated, nor are priests and laypeople. They embody a living synodal Church.

Two factors make this possible. First, participants' original cultures are family-oriented and communal. Most come from Asia, Oceania, and Africa, with about 80% from Asia. Rice cultivation and communal living in Asia harmonize well with this lifestyle. Participants from Oceania and Africa also bring communal traditions rooted in their history and culture. Healing and mutual learning occur here, embodying synodality's vision. We hope this voluntary communal life continues.

Second, the Philippine context must be valued. As the most Catholic culture in Asia, Filipinos—including staff and employees—generally show kindness, gentleness, and hospitality.

Marking the 60th anniversary, we plan to form an Alumni Association to serve as a spiritual support group among participants. Beyond batch associations, regional associations will be encouraged where possible.

Extension programs will also be strengthened, seeking opportunities to serve locally in China, Myanmar, Cambodia, Oceania, and other regions. We continue to pray and work toward realizing, in some form, the Jesuits' original dream of mission in China.

Finally, as EAPI celebrates its 60th anniversary, facilities have been reviewed and upgraded. This work will continue to reduce inconvenience for participants.

## Concluding with Gratitude

EAPI's tuition fees are relatively affordable compared to similar institutions. Nevertheless, many dioceses and religious congregations of our participants struggle to cover even these costs, so necessary scholarships have been provided. We are grateful to *Missio Aachen* and *Porticus* for making this possible. In particular, *Missio Aachen* has supported EAPI financially since its early years, enabling more participants to join with manageable financial burden. To *Missio Aachen* and *Porticus*, and all others who have supported EAPI and its participants in different ways through the years, we extend our heartfelt gratitude.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

FATHER JOHN CHECHON CHONG, SJ, is Director of East Asian Pastoral Institute since 2022. Formerly Provincial Superior of the Korea Province of the Society of Jesus, he holds a doctorate in Sacred Theology, specializing in Spirituality. He is also the former Director of the Institute for Ignatian Spirituality and Chairperson of the Board of Trustees of the Gipum Nanum Foundation. He has been involved in translating and assisting in high-level pastoral leadership and previously served as a translator and secretary to Pope Francis. Fr. Chong has emphasized the role of religious life in serving context-sensitive missions and has spoken on the importance of leadership, vulnerability, and pastoral care in the church.