

# Synodality & Academics of 'Asian Catholicism'



A Report by the **Initiative for the Study of Asian Catholics**

Singapore, 14 June 2024

### ***Introduction***

In late 2021, Pope Francis announced a ‘Synod on Synodality’, an initiative to promote consultation and mutual listening within the Catholic Church. While the methodology and framework of this synod have evolved, it is set to conclude in October 2024 through a Second Session of the Synodal Assembly in Rome.

In the guidelines ‘*Towards October 2024*’ given by the General Secretariat of the Synod on 11 December 2023, local Churches were invited to conduct a new round of consultation before sending a summary to the General Secretariat of the Synod by 15 May 2024.

In the section ‘*A Guiding Question to Deepen Reflection*’ one can read:

*“At the local level as well as at the level of the groupings of Churches, the prospect of an authentically synodal discernment also requires **the contribution of theological and canonical expertise, as well as of the human and social sciences**, involving experts in these disciplines and academic institutions in the area.”*

The report of the First Session of the Synodal Assembly (Oct. 2023), similarly highlighted the need to involve academic institutions and their human social science departments.

As an academic consortium supporting social scientific research on Asian Catholics, the *Initiative for the Study of Asian Catholics* (ISAC) has generated a survey to evaluate the ways in which academics with knowledge of Asian Catholicism have been involved in the Synod on Synodality.

This survey is a first attempt to map out the state of the field of research on Asian Catholicism from an interdisciplinary perspective. It aims at identifying scholars interested in Asian Catholics by nationality, age, discipline, scholarly interest and academic achievement.

### ***Methodology***

To better understand the kind of scholarship on Asian Catholicism included in the Synod on Synodality, ISAC designed a short survey of thirty questions. The survey items were composed of both open-ended and close-ended questions (see Annex). The ethical framework of the survey was approved by the *Institutional Review Board* of the National University of Singapore, with Dr. Michel Chambon as Principal Investigator.

During the second half of May 2024, **the survey was sent to 292 individual academics** who were emailed an invitation to participate in the online survey (and a total of 325 scholars were identified through snow ball sampling).<sup>1</sup> Participation was voluntary and respondents were

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<sup>1</sup> After two years of operation, ISAC has been able to identify 325 researchers working on Asian Catholics – out of which more than one third (36.6%) responded to our survey (119 valid responses).

ensured confidentiality. Although ISAC focuses on social science, this survey also included historians, theologians, canon lawyers, etc. It targeted scholars with at least a Master's degree and one publication related to Asian Catholics. Their current location and employment status were not discriminatory. The survey was conducted until May 31, 2024 and the call for participants was shared through emails, ISAC social media, as well as a few other academic and ecclesial networks. Data gathered through this survey was systematically anonymized.

### ***Results***

By 1 June 2024, **119 scholars answered the survey and met the inclusion criteria.**<sup>2</sup> Their responses represent a very wide range of academic expertise, geographical realities, and ecclesial involvement. While these 119 academics do not constitute the total number of scholars with knowledge of Catholicism in Asia, they provide a rich, diverse, and representative pool of academics of Asian Catholicism.

The following two sections summarize some of the key findings of the survey. It provides a broad overview of researchers interested in Asian Catholicism.

For more information, you can contact ISAC coordinators at [research.isac@gmail.com](mailto:research.isac@gmail.com)

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<sup>2</sup> We removed about a dozen responses: the survey was partially filled, the respondent did not meet the criteria (one publication on Asian Catholics), etc.

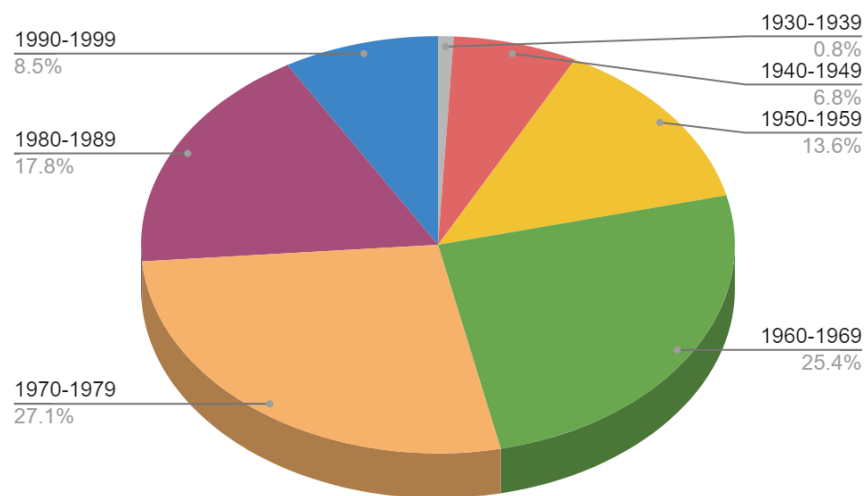
## PART I: ACADEMICS OF ASIAN CATHOLICISM<sup>3</sup>

### 1.1 Five Facts about Academics of Asian Catholicism

- ✓ 79% have a Ph.D. (21% had a Master’s or equivalent as their highest education degree): most academics of Asian Catholicism have achieved high educational attainment and have the **professional expertise** to sustain high-quality scholarly research.
- ✓ 75% layperson and 25% members of clergy/religious orders: in 21st-century Asia, knowledge and research on Asian Catholics are produced by a diversity of actors, with most of them positioned outside of the clerical sphere. Some academics of Asian Catholicism are not practicing Catholics. This illustrates how this field of research is **gradually migrating into the public domain**.
- ✓ 65% male, 30% female (5% do not say).
- ✓ 64% of them are still active in research on Asian Catholicism.
- ✓ 25% have been approached to provide expertise for the Synod on Synodality.

### 1.2 Age of the Respondents

The age of our 119 respondents is distributed across different cohorts. While most were born between 1960 and 1979, 33 respondents (27%) are below 45 years old. This diversity of generations suggests that scholarship on Asian Catholicism has been built over multiple decades and continues to attract the interest of the next generation of scholars.

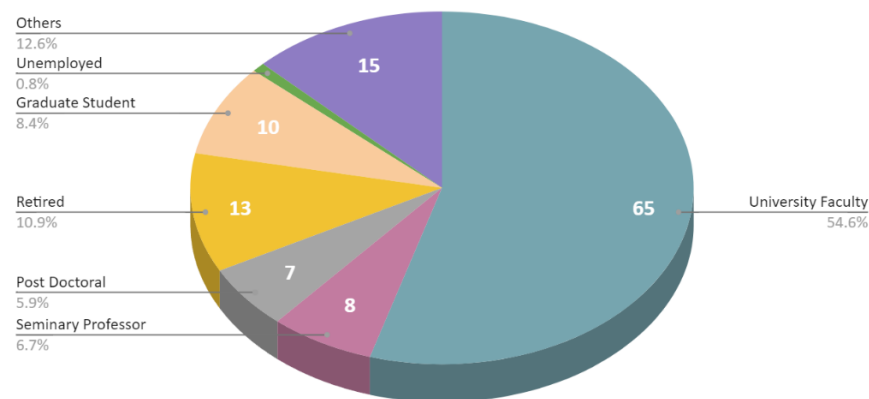


Year of Birth of the Respondents

<sup>3</sup> By ‘*Academics of Asian Catholicism*’, we refer to the pool of the 119 respondents.

### 1.3 Professional Status of Academics of Asian Catholicism

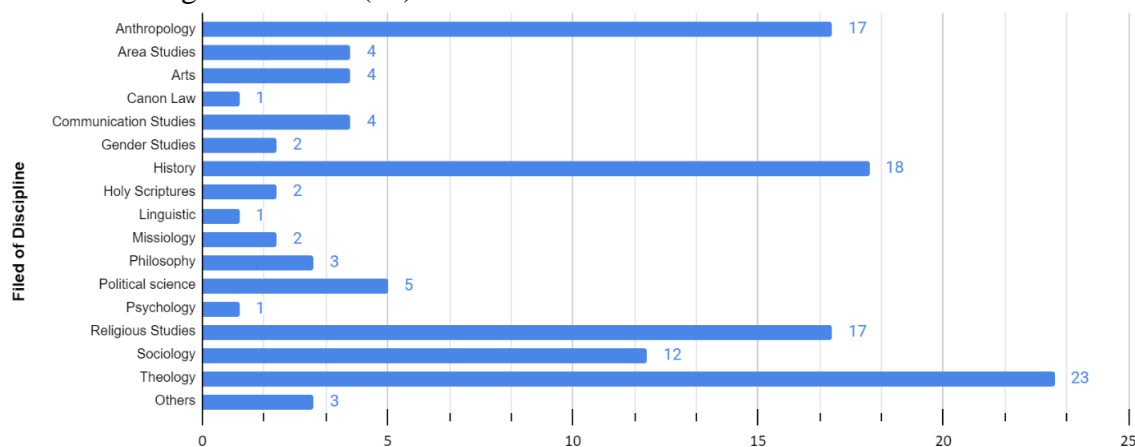
Among the 119 respondents, more than half (54.6%) are faculty members teaching at universities, 5.9% are postdoctoral fellows, and 6.7% are seminary professors. While faculty members, postdoctoral fellows, and seminary professors engage with students from various backgrounds and academic conversations, they also have the financial means to support their research efforts. The diversity of professional status of academics of Asian Catholicism highlights the intellectual dynamism, professional commitment, and scholarly potential of the field.



### 1.4 Disciplines of Expertise

The 119 respondents come from a rich variety of disciplinary backgrounds. Research on Asian Catholicism belong to multiple academic disciplines.<sup>4</sup> Among them, four main fields of study can be identified:

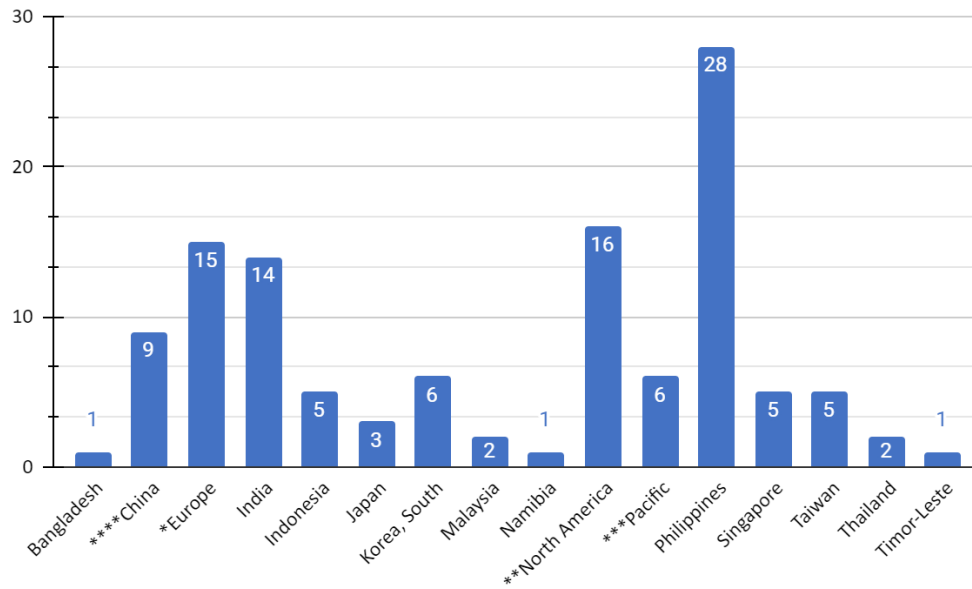
- Social Sciences (34 academics)
- Theology (28)
- History (18)
- Religious Studies (17)



<sup>4</sup> One may note that there was only one canon lawyer who responded to the survey, suggesting that the contemporary making of Canon Law barely intersects with on-going research on Asian Catholicism. Similarly, no academic of Asian Catholicism claimed ecclesiology as his/her disciplinary background.

### 1.5. Locations of Academics of Asian Catholicism

Academics of Asian Catholicism are mostly located in Asia and the West (broadly conceived). In the data collected in this survey, no respondents (except one) indicated to be in Africa and Latin America. Despite the strong Catholic presence in these two regions, **scholars established in Africa and Latin America remain underrepresented in scholarship on Asian Catholicism.**



LOCATION OF ACADEMICS OF ASIAN CATHOLICISM <sup>5</sup>



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\*Merged data from Czech Republic, Germany, Ireland, Belgium, Italy, UK, and France

\*\*Merged data from USA and Canada

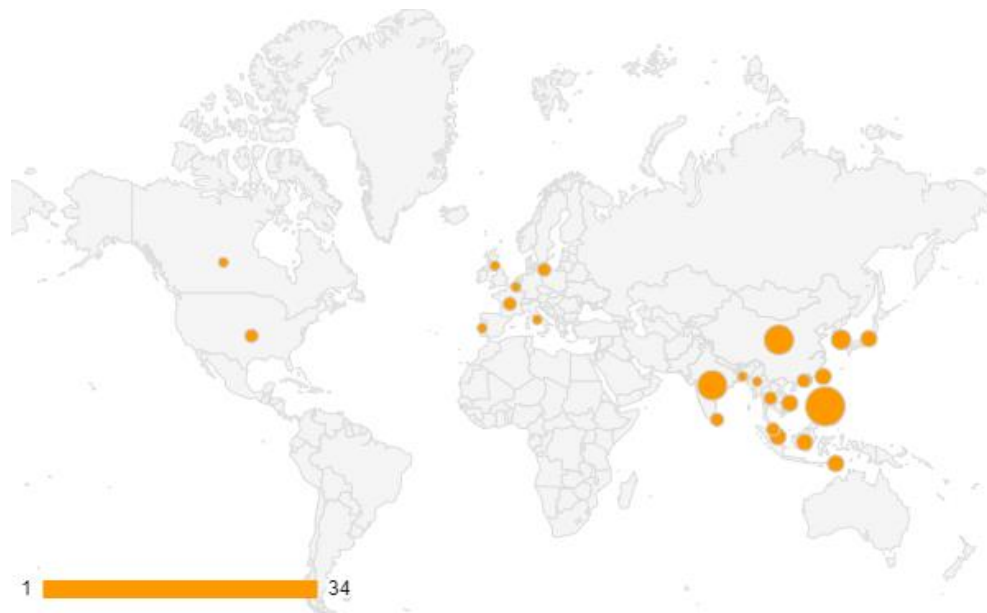
\*\*\*Merged data from New Zealand and Australia

\*\*\*\*Merged data from China, Hong Kong, and Macau

## 1.6 Geography of Knowledge

Academics of Asian Catholicism have scholarly expertise of most Catholic populations in Asia. With the exception of Central Asia which has received scant scholarly attention, **almost all Asian countries have academic literature on local Catholics**. Similarly, there is a body of scholarship discussing Asian Catholics established in the West (for instance, Vietnamese American Catholics). Thus, there is an overlap between where scholars are located and where research is conducted. However, there is apparently very little, if any, research on Asian Catholics in Latin America and Africa.

**In Asian Catholic Studies, the geography of knowledge is mostly driven by Asian and Western actors.**



Places where Asian Catholics are Objects of Academic Research

## 1.7 The Question of Language

In Asia, there is no single, obvious, and predominant language for cross regional research and scholarly conversations. However, our survey suggests that when it comes to scholarship on Asian Catholicism, a vast majority of academics uses English as their main language for publication.

While the survey was circulated in English and some respondents mentioned other languages as their primary medium of publication (Chinese and Korean), **English appears to remain the *lingua franca* of scholarship on Asian Catholicism**. Notwithstanding the primary use of English for publication, some respondents indicated four European languages (French, Italian, German, Portuguese, and Czech) and six Asian Languages (Chinese, Indonesian, Korean, Vietnamese, Malayalam, and Japanese) as additional languages used.

## PART II: SYNODALITY & ACADEMICS OF ASIAN CATHOLICISM

### 2.1 Voluntary Engagement in the Synod of Synodality

Among the 119 respondents, **well over one third (41%) have voluntarily engaged with activities and events related to the Synod on Synodality** (49 scholars). A large proportion of academics of Asian Catholicism are personally involved in or/and identify with activities of the Catholic Church. They are not simply external analysts of the Catholic Church but also participant observers.

Among the 49 individuals who have voluntarily engaged with activities and events related to the Synod on Synodality:

- 23 academics belong to the clergy, out of a total population of 30 members of Catholic clergy/religious order. This means that **three fourths of ‘clerical academics’** (76%) took the initiative to join activities related to the synod.
- 26 academics belong to the laity, out of 89 individuals who identify as lay people. This means that **less than one third of the ‘lay academics’** (only 29%) took the initiative to join activities related to the Synod on Synodality.

The synod on Synodality appears to attract higher interest from scholars who are members of clergy/religious order than those of the laity.

Besides the voluntary engagement of academics with activities related to the synod, we also looked at the proportion of academics who have been sought out by ecclesial entities and consulted as experts to provide scholarly insights.

Among the 119 respondents, only a quarter of them, 30 academics i.e., were consulted by ecclesial bodies to provide expertise for the Synod on Synodality. Among the 89 academics who were not consulted, vast majority of them (78/89, i.e, 87%) declared that they would have been willing to contribute to the synod, if consulted, as long as they had enough time (54 respondents) and there were clear terms of reference in which their expertise would be involved (48 respondents).



## 2.2 Consulted Academics

The following section focuses on these **30 consulted academics** who were approached to provide expertise and insights on Asian Catholicism for the Synod on Synodality. Consulted academics represent one quarter (25%) of academics of Asian Catholicism.

### 2.2.1 Five Facts About Consulted Academics

#### *The Gender Non-Effect*

Among consulted academics, 66.6% identified as male while 23.3% identified as female (7), 6.6 % preferred not to say (2), and 3.33% self-describe. This is very close to the gender ratio of the general population of academics on Asian Catholicism. Therefore, **gender identity has apparently not influenced the selection of consulted academics.**

#### *Publication Status*

Among consulted scholars, just over two fifths (43%) have published between 1 to 5 publications (article, books, etc.) one tenth (10%) have published between 6 to 10 publications. And nearly half (47%) have published more than 11 publications. This suggests that **both established and emerging academics have been consulted.**

#### *The Clerical Effect*

Among consulted academics, **two fifths (40%) are also members of the clergy/religious order** (12 respondents). Yet, among the general population of Academics of Asian Catholics, only a quarter of them (25%) are members of the clergy/religious order. This suggests that, while synodal entities have consulted a significant range of academics, **the ecclesial status has influenced the selection process of consulted academics.** Academics who are clergy members are more likely to be consulted by the Catholic Church for matters related to synodality.

#### *Fluid Contribution*

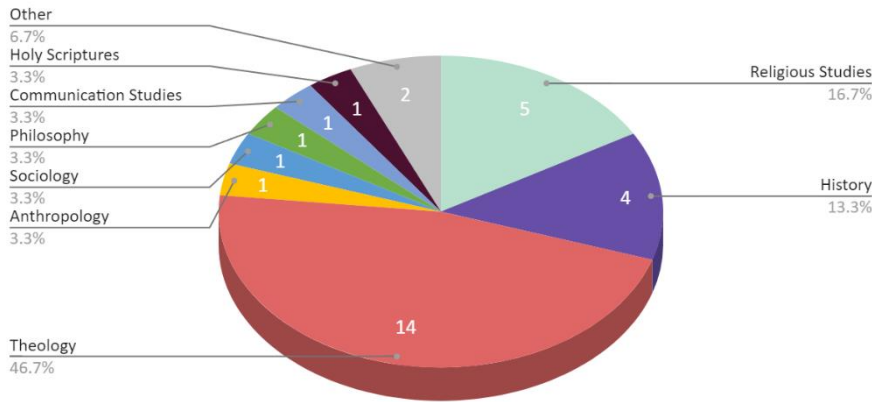
Of consulted academics, two thirds (66%) are still active in this collaboration on Synodality (20 academics). Eight have been involved since 2021, five since 2022, six since 2023, and one since 2024. This suggests a real fluidity in the integration of consulted academics. During four years, academic have come in and out of the Synod on Synodality for short and long periods of time.

#### *Professional Compensation*

Of the consulted academics, well over half (16 respondents, i.e. 53%) specified that they did not receive compensation in any form for their contribution (meals, remuneration, etc.). In almost one case out of two, synodal entities have expected that academics will deliver scholarly expertise for free. Yet, among these 16 non-compensated academics, 10 are still active in this collaboration (6 of them being laypeople).

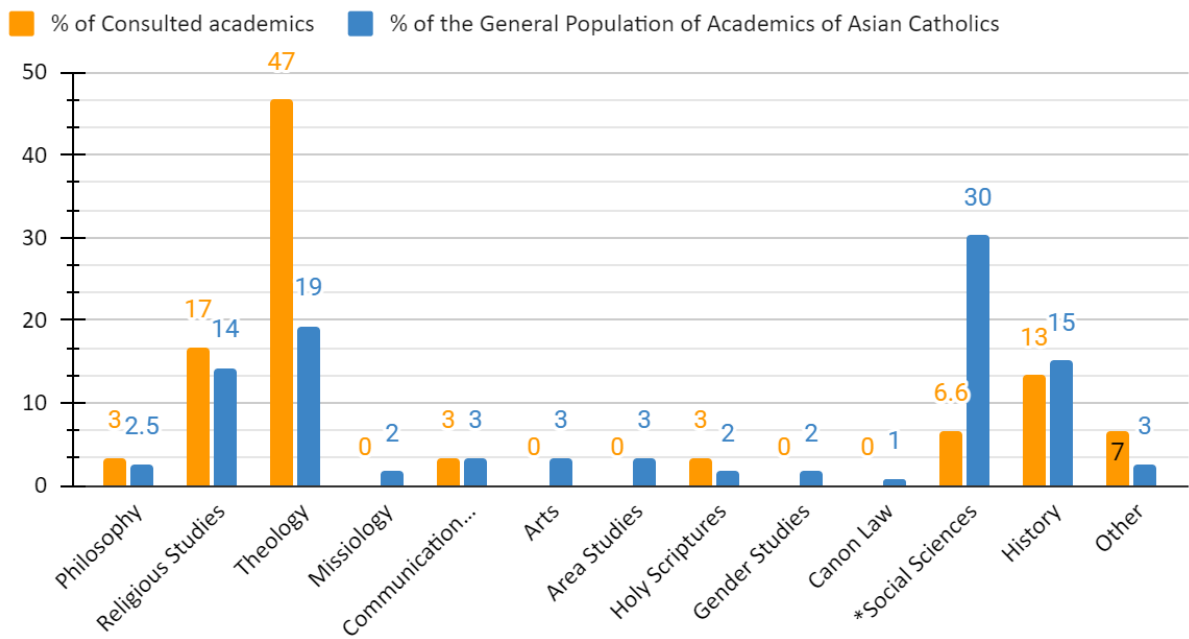
### 2.2.2 Scholarly Background: The Disciplinary Effect

Among consulted academics, almost half are theologians (46.67%). Five belong to Religious Studies (16.7%), and four are historians (13.3%). In the field of social sciences (11% of consulted academics), there was one respondent for Anthropology, Sociology, and Communication Studies, respectively.



Disciplinary Background of Consulted Academics

If one compares this finding to the disciplinary background of academics of Asian Catholicism in general, significant differences emerge. Theologians who represent only less than one fifth of the academics of Asian Catholicism (i.e. 19%) are much more likely to be consulted. Meanwhile, social scientists who represent close to one third of academics of Asian Catholicism (i.e 30.2%) make only 6.6% of the consulted academics. In other words, **theology seems to be prioritized over social sciences, and academic background plays a role in the selection of consulted academics.**

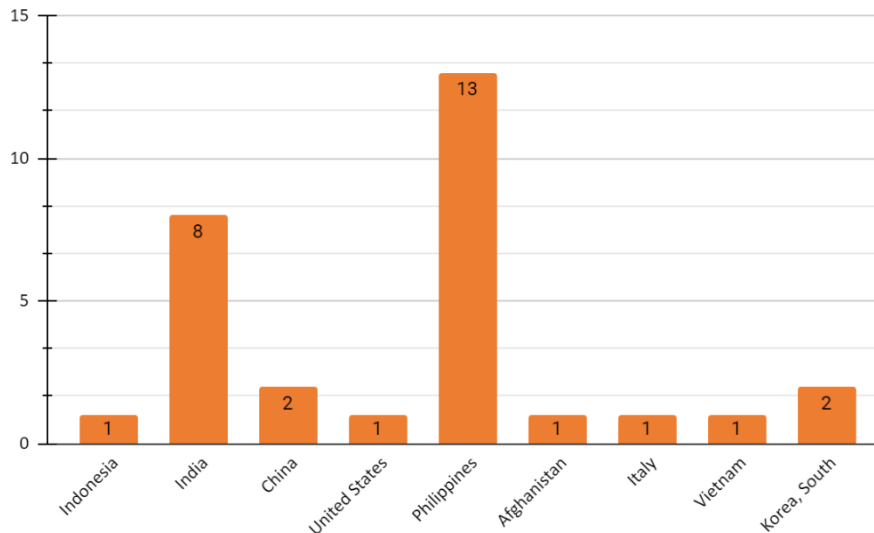


Comparing Academic Background between Consulted Academics and the General Population of Academics

\*Social sciences (Sociology, Political Science, Anthropology, Linguistic, Psychology)

### 2.2.3 Location of the Consulting Entities

The ecclesial entities which consulted academics during the Synod on Synodality are mostly located in Asia. Although two of them are located in the West (Italy and USA), it was mostly Asian ecclesial entities – national and regional – which consulted academics of Asian Catholicism.



Numbers of Consulted Academics by Countries of Consulting Entities

### 2.2.4 Nature of the Consulting Entities

When one looks at the kind of ecclesial entities which consulted academics of Asian Catholicism, it appears that it was mostly **larger structures** (bishops conference, national team, continental structure, international movement, pontifical committee) and academic institutions (school of theology, academic journal) who approached academics to impart their expertise and acumens pertinent to issues and discussions related to synodality.

Smaller entities such as individual dioceses, parishes, convents, etc. were rarely mentioned as consulting entities by consulted academics.

*More details from this survey will be published later this year through a peer-review journal. To receive it, subscribe to ISAC newsletter: <https://www.isac-research.org/contact>*

## ANNEX: QUESTIONS OF THE SURVEY

- Your year of birth?
- Your citizenship?
- Your country of residency?
- Your gender?
- Your religion (if any)?
- Your ecclesial status?
- Your current professional status?
- What is your highest academic degree?
- What is your main field / discipline of scholarship?
- What is your subfield of scholarship?
- Have you published at least one publication related to an Asian Catholic population?
- How many publications (papers, books, etc.) do you have that are related to Asian Catholics?
- In which year (approximately) did you publish your first publication about an Asian Catholic population?
- Where is this Asian Catholic population located?
- In which language(s) have you mostly published about Asian Catholics?
- Are you currently conducting any research related to Asian Catholics?
- Have you heard of the “Synod on Synodality”?
- Have you voluntarily involved yourself in any activity related to the Synod on Synodality?
- Are you part of any organization or commission in charge of implementing the Synod on Synodality?
- As an academic with knowledge related to Asian Catholics, have you been approached to provide expertise and insights for the Synod on Synodality?
  - If NO
    - In case an ecclesial entity would have approached you for your expertise, would you have been willing to contribute?
    - Under which conditions?
  - If YES
    - Which kind of ecclesial group, entity, or figure has approached you?
    - In which country this ecclesial entity is located?
    - When were you approached? (year)
    - Could you briefly describe the nature of your contribution?
    - Have you received any compensation for your contribution?
    - Are you still active in this collaboration?
- If you would like to receive the final report of this survey, please provide your email:
- If you would like to disclose your identity, please write your name below (Optional)

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