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THE ASIAN FAMILY'S STRUGGLE FOR LIFE

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Introduction

Thirty-seven years of varied experience in dealing with families has led me to the conclusion that families are as alike as they are different.

I have worked with families in most countries in Asia, including India, many countries of the Americas, Europe, Africa and in Australia; I have talked with students; addressed the medical fraternity in the USA; prepared papers and guided workshops of the Federation of Asian Bishops Conferences at several of their Assemblies and presented reports at conferences on The Family at the Vatican, and statements at the United Nations. This consistency of work has led me to understand the dynamics of family life and relationships from "within the family" and the impact of "change" affecting this cornerstone and indispensable unit of humanity.

These experiences helped me understand that the Family is a living, evolving institution. It is affected by all factors in the milieu in which it exists and functions and, in Asia, as in the world, change is

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not confined to demography or geography, or to the emotional support of its members. Change has impacted us in our culture, our outlook on life, our world view, our ways of living, the food we eat, the places we live in, the clothes we wear. Many of these rapid and acute changes have displaced the legitimacy of the influence of the family over its members, oftentimes leaving them in a state of confusion, uncertainty and instability, with a lack of identity and skewed values.

In short, “our life and ways of living have been impacted by change. In this the links of connectedness even among families have weakened or been lost, which in turn has brought about fragmentation at the levels of the individual, the family and the larger society.”¹ “The impact of these factors, individually and / or collectively, varies greatly from country to country, and, with the advent of newer technologies, there are many driving forces in the creation of new family structures, roles, cultural values, socio-economic conditions and lifestyles which often make a mockery of continuity of families and the community.”²

It is against this backdrop that this paper is presented. It has been divided into four sections. The first section will briefly present a global scenario. The second will focus on the Asian family and the risks it faces. This section will include a sharing of my experiences during ground assessment trips. The third section will consist of a reflection on the plight of most Asian families and the fourth will offer recommendations for action.

The Family and the Global Crises

The global scenario and available socio-political statistics reveal conditions that are profoundly disturbing. Further, the speed of change invested in the process of globalization and ways in which it is progressing offer a grim picture of the path this trend will take, a trend that is not yet decided nor can be measured.³

¹Catherine Bernard, *Family – Heart of Society*, Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2013, “Introduction.”

²C. Nataraja, Paper presented at “Communications Technology and the Family,” International Conference at SERFAC, Chennai, “Families Facing Globalisation 1979.” (Unpublished)

³Ervin Laslo, Paper presented at International Advisory Board Meeting –SERFAC, Chennai, 1997. (Unpublished)

Nicholas Stinnett says:

As we look back in history we see that the quality of family life is more important to the strength of nations. There is a pattern in the rise and fall of great societies. When these societies were at the peak of their power and prosperity, the family was strong and highly valued. When family life became weak in these societies and the family was not valued — when, goals became extremely individualistic — the society began to deteriorate and eventually fall.⁴

Against these two statements, if we take a look at some of the issues that face most countries of the world and the growing economic disparity in and among nations, between the Eastern and Western hemispheres often referred to the North and the South, we see a need for growing concern. In brief, there has been a 'usurping of global space,' in which families are commercially exploited, their rights violated, especially those of women and children, and they are manipulated by self-centeredness and profit-making motives. "It needs to be noted that such global disparity and injustice lead to imbalance and are morally unacceptable and politically unstable."⁵

Other aspects that intensify global imbalances and newer forms of degradation, including the spread of HIV-AIDS, are misplaced investments by nations in militarization, commodification and marketization and unsustainable productive distribution and consumption systems that leave an exploited and degraded future to generations. This degradation is also felt in developed countries where the divide between advertisements-led aspirations and unfulfilled desire is not bridged. This leads to instabilities, and, linked with weakening parental influence, affects the actual aspirations and fulfilment of young people who additionally have unmet emotional needs / reasons such as neglect or abuse to cope with that can lead to extreme behavioural problems, including suicide. These are signs of a society under strain.

The last word cannot be said on the global scenario, but it needs to be realized that neither Asia as a continent, nor each country in Asia, are immune to global phenomena.

⁴Nicholas Stinnett, "Family Enrichment Programs for Health Family Development," *United Nations Occasional Papers Series* No. 8, 1993, 6.

⁵Clive Hurley, "The Family in the Change and Challenges of the 80's", Paper presented at the first International Conference, "Family at the Service of Human Life," 1983, 36.

The Family in Asia at Risk

To help understand the risks the 'Family' in Asia is faced with, it might be appropriate to share my experiences during many ground assessment visits between 1988 and 2013, and other work that has a direct bearing on the Asian continent.

I will share with readers some true life stories I heard in places ranging from rural Tamil Nadu, through the slums of Bombay, to tribal areas of Gujarat and Rajasthan. We have data from schools in Delhi where surveys were conducted on Parent-Child relationships. My work with the Indian Council of Medical Research, New Delhi, took me to different locations in India, including medical colleges in Pondicherry, Bihar and Madhya Pradesh. Several other programs and work visits arranged by various dioceses, hospitals and non-Governmental organizations in different parts of the country have given me additional insights. Working with families in geographical areas (too many to be named) brought me face to face with women who were dumped in sheds after having been sterilized at unethical field trials by foreign agencies and groups, with instances of exploitation of the ignorance of people, with families cheated of their rights and properties, etc. We have data from a survey on women who have had abortions which shows that several women have had as many as eleven abortions, mainly to control the size of the family. A survey in India shows that the acceptance of contraception is low because women in rural areas prefer a method that is natural. Most of the women who were interviewed said contraceptives are invasive, and it was not what they or their husbands wanted. In many instances, overnight stay in the villages gave more time to talk with the women and their husbands, many of whom were alcoholics. The dearth of workers in natural family planning (NFP) methods has not received the attention it needs — for instance, I'm sure teachers could be trained to work successfully with illiterate populations. SERFAC's work demonstrates the success of NFP among rural, poor and illiterate couples when the method is correctly taught. Many couples have spoken of how it has helped their marriages and were keen on sharing the information with others. NFP data shows that it is accepted among non-Catholics / Christians and is best followed by Hindus and Muslims.

The experiences are too many and too real to unfold in detail. Here is a bird's eye view:

Visits to Malaysia, including the east, were many and frequent. The main purpose was to train teachers in family life and NFP. Seminars were organized in different parishes. Many couples were sent to SERFAC in India for training.

During these visits, meetings were held with politicians, Government officials, church leaders, medical personnel and university professors. I visited palm oil plantations where pregnant women were exposed to toxic insecticides sprayed on the plants. These women knew the dangers but had to continue to do the work for survival. The matter was brought up with the Supervisor of the place for policy formulation on this issue. Visiting the tin industries was a different experience, but as painful. At all times, couples accompanied me and this travelling together helped me listen to their experiences and their lives as a unit. There are many more impressions to share, but I need to move on.

Visiting the poorest areas of West Singapore was a revelation. No one easily believes that Singapore has poor people. It does. They live in slum-like conditions, but are also taken care of by the State, by way of employment and wages which are meagre. And they are socially isolated. A Cannosian Sister works there and unfolded their stories to me.

Thailand had too much happening. The St Luke's Medical Guild invited me and during the five days I spent there I met with HIV-AIDS patients who each had a story, visited rehabilitation centres for alcoholics and drug addicts and homes for rehabilitating unwed mothers under the tender care of Sisters of the Good Shepherd. I visited orphanages and played a while with the children, had lunch with them and listened to their stories. There were several meetings with the St Luke's Medical Guild and I visited many of their rural clinics. There are sad memories and also heartening instances of care given by Good Samaritans, a group of lay missionaries in different parts of Thailand.

In Hong Kong, staying with the Sisters of The Good Shepherd offered the chance of three days of travel by train to meet families in high-rise flats and see their conditions of living, health, amenities, etc. Two or three committed lay persons who worked with these families were my companions on these trips. When I was sitting in a restaurant with a medical colleague, she pleaded to be taught NFP because she strongly felt that contraceptives were wrecking the lives

of many women and many marriages. It was ruining the health of many and leading to promiscuity among young adults

During my stay in Hong Kong, a day in *Macau* offered different perspectives of families there. Discussions were held on starting programs on family life.

The next stop was to South Korea. The experiences were varied. I held discussions with authorities of the Catholic Medical College on research in NFP and visited couples who were using NFP for spacing and achieving pregnancy. All were satisfied users. I joined couples who were celebrating their silver wedding anniversary. Dressed in native attire and pronouncing their marriage vows again made the occasion memorable. Visiting the red light areas at night, I was heartbroken to see women waiting for pimps and customers. We could not speak to them. The look on their face made it obvious that they were sad and lonely... prostitution was their only means of survival. Visiting some of the army camps inhabited by the American soldiers was also informative.

In the Philippines, the Cannosian Community offered hospitality. However I was always accompanied by lay persons on visits to families. I visited families in the barrios (villages), and enjoyed the sight of children playing. Many were school dropouts and unemployed. Visiting foundling homes where abandoned children were housed formed part of my visit to the Philippines. We walked over thousands of hectares of pineapple plantations to meet the many men and women who toiled there for meagre wages. Even while their lives were filled with deprivation, there was contentment. The smoky mountains where thousands of people, particularly children, stay, was indeed pathetic. Many families were separated because members had taken employment overseas to be able to send money home. Many of them were employed as servants and nannies and poorly treated. Many of them do not return for several years because of work constraints.

From the Philippines, I travelled to Taiwan where couples from the Marriage Encounter shared their experiences. I also met with religious leaders. Indeed, it was a contrast to other visits in Asia.

In Indonesia, the first program was addressing senior students and later, college students, and holding discussions with the medical fraternity in Surabaya. The four-day work visit consisted of trips to orphanages in Jog Jakarta, rehabilitation centres for abused women

and social service centres where women were taught sewing and other crafts. All visits included talking with the employers and inmates of the institutions.

Bangladesh: The interesting three-day trip included early morning visits to work homes where women made articles from jute to sell in the market. An evening spent with Marriage Encounter couples was enriching and it helped me to better understand the country and the many couples who belonged to the movement. Travelling to rural areas and meeting families and children had its own charm. Each family had a story to tell — the work that was available, the need to travel for long hours to work spots, insufficient and meagre wages or no wages at all for work done, and how these ills affected their homes. The health and education of their children was a major concern. Many of them spoke of surviving storms and floods and searching for new areas to live in.

Pakistan: The experience was positive. The port of entry was Karachi and I was the guest of the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary Sisters, one of whom worked at the Pastoral Centre. Visiting Muslim and Hindu families who were using NFP for birth regulation, addressing the members of the Catechetical Centre in Karachi and a day's seminar for Seminarians of the diocese were part of the agenda. One memory which stands out is that of half a dozen young lads sitting on a wall with rifles. What were they doing with them?

Travelling to Lahore, I visited the Caritas head office and was shown some of the handicrafts that were made by women employed at this centre. It earned them the wages that would help maintain their families. Many of these women were either abandoned or bereaved.

Nepal: The trip concentrated on visits to SOS Villages, as the number of abandoned children in Nepal is enormous. One of the main concerns is the trafficking of children and many of these children are placed in homes. I visited several Government offices that worked with women and children and held discussions with them on what needs to be done and the possibility of collaboration with SERFAC.

Sri Lanka: Invited by The St Luke's Medical Guild to conduct seminars, I took the opportunity to visit some refugee camps and talk to inmates, who shared with me their worries about the uncertainty of their lives and the future of their children, the fear of continued

war and trauma of having to listen to the constant sound of firing. These families were braving it though, despite poverty and extreme uncertainty.

The most recent visit was to Cambodia, for a workshop organized by the Fredrich Egbert Stiftung, Germany, for developing a roadmap for the future of Asia.

I met with 24 delegates from 11 countries, who shared their experiences of work and work conditions among different groups of people, such as domestic workers, inmates of old aged homes, trade unions, prisoners and their families, garment unit workers, college students, etc., which offered a bird's eye view of Asia. A documentary on the garment industry in Cambodia was screened. The conditions and exploitation are beyond words. Cambodia is a country still recovering from the Khmer genocide.

Surveys taken in Asia: In 1998-1999 and 2004-2005 SERFAC conducted two major surveys. A total of 1000 questionnaires were prepared and sent, of which a total of 842 replies were received. The replies showed that there are negligible services or programs for families. There are social relief programs but none that address the problems of alcoholism, broken marriages, delinquent children, parenting, etc. The salient findings were sent to lay authorities, a few clergy and religious institutions in most Asian nations.

Federation of Asian Bishops Conferences: I was invited on three occasions to be a resource person for the FABC Plenary assemblies held in the Philippines, Thailand and Korea. Apart from presentation of background papers, workshops were held, which were attended by bishops interested in the topic of discussion. An average of 12 bishops would be present at these workshops. The sessions indicated that there was a lot to learn.

Training of Asian Bishops For Pastoral Care of the Family: In August 1999 a 10-day training program-cum-meeting was held for 14 bishops in Asia, particularly Chairmen of the Commission for the Family. The President for the Pontifical Council for the Family attended the sessions. The title of the seminar was Pastoral Care of the Family. As preparation for the seminar, each bishop was requested to interview two families and bring the findings to the meet. This helped them better understand the issues discussed at the seminar.

Asian Training Programs for Coordinators of FLP in Asia: Four one-month-long training programs were held for Coordinators of Country or Diocesan programs of the Catholic Church. In all, 114 persons were trained. The workshop sessions brought out clearly the difficulties of the work and that the real needs of families were not being addressed.

International/Global Conferences: SERFAC has organized 13 International and global conferences in India and abroad and has enlisted over 1300 participants from over 60 countries of the world, including representatives of Governments, the Vatican and the United Nations. The participating countries were mainly from Asia. The interactions and discussions along with the workshop findings indicated that much more needs to be done. While highlighting the tragedies of Asian families, they also indicated a dearth of adequately trained people to handle the tasks at hand. Some of these conferences included 'exposure programs' to the rural areas of the countries in which the conferences were being held.

Having set up two Family Life Centres in India — *The Society for Family Integrity and Development at Tiruchirapalli* and *Service and Research Institute on Family and Children* — the experience gained has been enormous. SERFAC in Chennai was specifically established at the request of the Asian participants who attended the first International Conference in Chennai in 1983. Their request was "to set up an Asian centre that was Asia-focused, as Asian problems need to be viewed with Asian eyes." SERFAC was the response and has since consistently championed the cause of the family in India, in Asia and the world at large.

Reflections on the Realities of the Family in Asia

What we seek to do is not merely to 'tell the story' but enable an understanding of the Asian peoples and the continual risks faced by over 60% of the Asian population who are constantly on the move in search of work, or are displaced and are in search of livelihood. We are aware of the intense poverty in most countries, the increasing trafficking of women and children, the growing chasm between the poor and the rich, the eroding of traditional lifestyles and creation of a cultural vacuum in all countries. Employment possibilities are bleak for vast numbers of people often replaced by technological developments and mechanical lifestyles. The process of globalization has thrown the Asian peoples into profound speeds of change. In all

this, it is important not to lose focus on what such displacements are doing to the family — both to its constituent members and to it as a unit — and its future.

This being so, it is important to acknowledge that families and individuals in Asia live in a complex, problematic world. Families are mobile in order to earn better livelihoods. Many members are in destitute centres and old age homes because they cannot count on the extended family for support or because there is no extended family support available due to mobility and migration. The fragmentation and dissolution of extended families and increase of families headed by single parents or absent parents are all issues in today's Asia. Environmental issues, mal-distribution of population and economic recession, along with infiltration, war, crime, fundamentalism, violence, terrorism, political upheavals, rampant corruption, lack or absence of basic amenities for existence, famine, the spread of HIV-AIDS and the resettlement of refugees are some of the serious problems in Asia. Family life in Asia today is unlike that of any other period in history and is changing more rapidly than ever before. Such changes are influenced by technological developments, including transportation, telecommunication and computers.

While there is no data available from around the world on marital breakdown, the growing global trend of monogamy has resulted in fewer and fewer children having the opportunity of growing up in stable and predictable family settings. Large numbers of children spend at least some years of their lives in one-parent families. This scenario brings in its wake new problems. Available data indicates that children from these families are two to three times as likely to have emotional or behavioural problems. They are more likely to give birth out of wedlock and there is greater risk of abortions, violence, rape and other serious crimes. Marital breakdown in any form, especially divorce, does not end with one single event; it starts a chain of events where children face many additional burdens, including psychological ones.

It needs to be recognized that various forces at work in the present scenario in Asia are crippling and disabling the family from carrying out its essential functions. Such developments incapacitate its members in particular and society in general from carrying out their responsibilities and providing an ambience of security, protection and well-being to its members. In other words,

society is losing its most basic social safety net and reaping the consequences. It is important that we and Catholic leadership groups come to terms with the need to defend the Family and protect it from forces that seek to undermine its importance and destroy it.

In Asia, one of the most glaring examples of rapid change is migration — from rural to urban, from urban to trans- and multiple-urban areas, and inter- and pan-country migration. Consequently, in all areas the extended family is now becoming nuclear, its productive limits are reduced and the ability of the family to support itself is hit. In this process, whether the family and/or its members live in developed or developing countries, their lives are more de-standardized, more individuated and certainly less securely anchored to children, age or life-course markers than ever before. In brief, “in these recurrent and profound changes families are facing difficult challenges and their life patterns and values seem insecure bridges for tomorrow.”⁶

In a recent paper sent to the United Nations I have stated:

Family breakdown is the womb of social ills, of which poverty is primary. Poverty in turn becomes the social incubator for hunger, deprivation, prostitution and social unrest against women and children in its myriad forms in society, licenses promiscuous sexual behavior, which contributes to the spread of AIDS, pollutes the environment, destroys peace and harmony and leaves a bleak future as a legacy for humanity. These ills are cyclic in nature.⁷

The following quote from Armand Nicholas summarizes the struggle of the Asian Family:

The breakdown of the family contributes significantly to the major problems confronting our society today. Research data makes unmistakably clear a strong relationship between broken families and drug epidemic, the increase of out of wedlock pregnancies, the rise in violence and crime, and the unprecedented epidemic of suicides among children and adolescents... We need a radical change in our thinking about family.⁸

This applies to the Asian family too.

⁶UN IYF Occasional Papers series, *Family Bridges from Past to Future*, 1995, 2.

⁷Catherine Bernard, “Will the MDGs Succeed?,” Paper prepared for the United Nations: February 2013.

⁸Armand Nicholas, UN IYF *Occasional Papers Series*, No. 8, 1993, 6.

Platform for Action

In these conditions of Asia, how can sustainability in society and the Church ever come into existence? Hence it is necessary to recognize that any form of dysfunctional family life (many of which are not the fault of individuals but a systemic problem) is a potent contributor to poverty, instability, lack of motivation and commitment. The urgent need is to recognize that no other institution, not even the Church with its theological explanations and vision, can ever replace a stable family or fulfil its roles and functions. How can dysfunctional families pass down faith? How can dysfunctional families give to the Church integrated men and women as priests and nuns? Therefore it is important to realize that faith and the Catholic Doctrine cannot be passed down or achieved by teaching Catechism and exhortations or frequent visits to the Church or regular attendance at Sunday Mass. All this must be accompanied simultaneously by efforts to create stable families and robust systems that protect the value of its members, especially women and children. As a result of stable family life, the Church will function more effectively, priests and nuns will be more dedicated to human wellbeing and socio-economic prosperity and respect socio-cultural diversity and social autonomy, which in turn will become intergenerational and lasting. For such an exercise to fall in place and for the Church to be revitalized, we need authentic leadership at all levels — leadership that will be realistic, work assiduously to bridge the chasm between reality and faith life, empathize with and understand the rough, lonely, rugged road that is the lot of more than 60% of Asia's population who live in dehumanizing conditions condemned to a life of subsistence, helplessness and powerlessness, lacking a voice for their future and the future of their children.

In this context, many questions can be raised on the impact of globalization. There is only one answer: We need not accept the inbuilt inequalities and injustices, exploitative structures and policies of the present form of globalization. We need not unquestioningly accept the unequal playing field between the developed and the developing. We need not passively or unquestioningly accept the policies and protocols that favour the rich — which are again destructive to family life. We need to create alternate structures and systems that will respect the sanctity and dignity of the human being, the family, community and environment.

It means:

- The Family is different from social and religious institutions
- Committed spousal relationships, strong sense of bonding and belongingness among its members
- A sense of identification with family values, a spirituality and fundamental belief in family strengths

This will enable the family to fulfil its sacred role of Stewardship, because a climate of security and stability will prevail.

Social and religious institutions in Asia, must be pro-family, with family policies that will facilitate employment and livelihood, adequate facilities to meet the needs of food, nutrition, leisure, housing and health and provide support for the emotional and spiritual development of its members, which in turn will promote stability.

Family and institutions need a change in mindset through effective family life and marriage preparation programs, through educational institutions, churches and NGOs.

Social and religious structures must ensure equality, liberty, equity, democracy and justice.

The Family needs a place in society and the Church needs to provide a sense of belonging, a sense of self-esteem and dignity capable of protecting and preserving family values.

These needs of the Family can be met only from the social, religious, cultural, economic, technological, political, emotional, psychological and moral milieu in which the family is placed.

Hence the Family needs to be a priority on the agenda of humanity. It is the most effective institution for promoting the oneness of humanity, the primary educator and potent transmitter of culture and intergenerational bonding.

Conclusion

The family is alive, despite the rapidity of change and being under siege from various forces. Despite poverty and uncertain living conditions, Family remains the most basic social institution in Asia and still remains the dominant source of shelter and social support for its members. It is therefore necessary to empower the family in order to deal with the struggles of life in this vast and varied continent. The brief statement in the Occasional Papers series of the

United Nations 1992 makes an ideal concluding note for this paper: "Families are affected by and are at the source of change in the attitudes and values that lie at the very heart of social change."⁹ (UNIYF)⁹

Therefore action on the personal, national, regional and international levels to make family empowerment needs to be prioritized and encouraged.

⁹UN IYF, *Occasional Papers Series*, No 1/92, 1992,10.