

Editorial

Contemporary Asian Family: Its Crisis and Opportunity

Asia is traditionally known for the stability of the family system. In spite of the growing disintegration of the family in many parts of the world, to a great extent Asia can still boast of its stable families. Religious and cultural traditions in Asia have been giving great importance to family and its well being. However, drastic changes in the structure of the families, their life-style and values are visible in recent decades.

In general, in the traditional joint family system, more importance was given to the "roles" in the family than personal fulfilment. Today, people consider important personal fulfilment and satisfaction. Economic development and employment opportunities also have changed the life-style and value system. Greater openness to other cultures and perspectives prompt people to critically evaluate their own traditional family systems and values and to consider whether changes are needed. These changes may not be accepted by those who have lived and are used to the traditional systems and life-style. For example, a growing number of young people prefer "love marriages" to arranged marriages and this creates tensions between them and their parents. Inter-faith, inter-cultural and inter-caste marriages are on the increase in Asian societies. Such marriages may lead to tensions not only between the parents' families and the new couple, but as they live together also between the couple whose roots are in different cultural and religious traditions. Migration to large cities in search of education, employment and more comfortable living conditions pose a number of challenges. Shift from large and joint families to nuclear families, which is characteristic of many Asian societies today, bring about the change

not only in the number of family members, but in the whole life-style. Traditional practices like dowry continue to exert influence in Asian countries. Such practices facilitate the continuation of patriarchal concepts and structures and women are treated inferior. Domestic violence against women is not curbed. It seems that violence against women, both inside and outside home, is on the increase. The number of divorced or separated couples is rapidly growing in many Asian countries. When people feel that the marriage is no more rewarding, or when interpersonal conflicts cross the limits of tolerance, they are no more willing to continue to suffer for the sake of keeping the 'reputation' of the family or to avoid the 'stigma', but prefer to be separated. Women, especially the educated and financially independent women, are bold enough to be divorced or separated than to suffer silently. Though the traditional Asian societies are struggling to cope up with such changes, they are beginning to accept divorce as a normal fact of life. Poverty that continues to threaten the well being and stability of millions of families, population explosion and subsequent government policies that come in conflict with the family and religious values, etc. also deserve special attention. On the other hand, consumerism, materialism, sexual permissiveness, etc. also have their impact on the Asian families, bringing about drastic changes in life-style and relationships.

FABC statement reflects these challenges faced by the Asian family:

Perhaps, the greatest challenge to the Church in Asia is that posed by the Asian family. The Asian family is the cellular receptacle of all Asia's problems, poverty, repression, exploitation and degradation, divisions and conflicts. The family is directly affected by the religious, political, economic, social and cultural problems of Asia, by the problems relating to women, health, work, business, education, etc.¹

Many think that these developments and rapid changes have led to a crisis in the Asian family. Evidently, their concerns deserve serious attention. However, we also have to understand that traditional family systems and values had their merits, but together with their demerits. Changes in life-style, value system, gender perspectives, greater role of women in the family as well in the public sphere, higher levels of education, new opportunities of employment and

¹The Final Statement of the 4th FABC Plenary Assembly, Tokyo, 1986, no. 3.4.1, in *For All the Peoples of Asia*, Rosales and Alvares, ed., 1992, 184: As cited in FABC, *The Asian Family towards a Culture of Integral Life*, no. 48, http://www.fabc.org/plenary%20assembly/final%20statement_plenary%20assembly%2004.pdf

career development, etc. offer new challenges, but as well as possibilities of building up family life based on the values of love, mutuality, reciprocity, higher levels of fulfilment, leading to creative changes in society and the Church. Crises need not be considered as threats and problems, but as new possibilities of growth and development. What matters is how the family, the Church and the society positively and creatively respond to the challenges posed by the changing patterns of life.

The Church has considered the family as the domestic Church. In spite of the present day challenges, FABC expresses hope in Asian families. Similarly, while expressing concern over the “negative aspects of the media and the entertainment industries” which threaten the “traditional values, and in particular the sacredness of marriage and the stability of the family,”² *Ecclesia in Asia* shows great appreciation for the values held by Asian families: “The family occupies a very important place in Asian cultures; and, as the Synod Fathers noted, family values like filial respect, love and care for the aged and the sick, love of children and harmony are held in high esteem in all Asian cultures and religious traditions.”³

The current issue of *Asian Horizons* reflects on the challenges and crises that Asian families face, as well as the opportunities that these crises offer. Even when challenges appear, we do not lose hope that they will help us discern new and deeper values and meanings.

Levy Lara Lanaria, in his paper, “The Filipino Family: Lights and Shadows — Challenges to the Domestic Church,” giving a sociological appraisal of the contemporary Filipino family, argues that the magisterial recognition of the ecclesial nature of the family inspires the families to “consider seriously their church-ness, sustain and nourish its growth.” Lanaria suggests that the positive native socio-ethical values can be harnessed for the well-being of community and society. The Filipino family is called upon to transform itself into the new family of Jesus, profoundly Filipino but faith-inspired. According to him, the gospel vision challenges the Filipino homes to become inclusive, dialogical and egalitarian. Catherine Bernard, in light of her rich and varied experience of

²John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Asia*, 7, 39: http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_06111999_ecclesia-in-asia_en.html

³John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Asia*, 46.

working for families in many Asian countries, depicts the changes that affect the family. In her article, "Asian Family's Struggle for Life," beginning with a discussion on the global scenario and the risks that Asian family faces, she recommends an action programme to help the families to cope up with the changing world. Catherine Bernard underscores that, "the family is alive, despite the rapidity of change and being under siege from various forces."

Mervyn Fernando holds that the well-being of marriage and family life should take high priority in the policies and plans of both Church and State. Reflecting on "Challenges to Christian Marriage and Family Life in Asia Today," he shows the impact of modernity and post-modernity on marriage and family and underscores that there is a "paradigm shift" in family and sexual mores. Whereas in the past success of family life was assessed in terms of the fulfilment "roles", today what matters is the personal happiness of the partners. "'Growth-Based Mutuality': A Fresh Look at Marital Love," by Augustine Kallely analyses the implications of the personalist approach that gives importance to personal relationship in marriage. The primary reason for marriage is no longer familial or social, but interpersonal love. However, he considers the criticism that this approach limits marriage to the narrow context of interpersonal space and says that the challenge before theology is to promote a balance between various loving relationships in marriage. According to him, there is no conflict between these two dimensions. Evidently, this perspective is of vital importance in the consideration of Asian families today, since personalist values in marriage are becoming increasingly important in Asian societies as well.

Patricia Santos, in her article "Internal Circular Migration in India: An Opportunity and a Challenge for Marginalized Families," explores the impact of migration, especially on families. She says that migration, which is on the increase, results in a lack of rootedness and poses the threat of increased exploitation and discrimination especially for women. The challenges of migration are not only external; there are also challenges within the family that affect the very fabric of family life. Santos underscores that migrant families require good support systems and timely social interventions to help them cope with the struggles and distress of shifting and unstable living conditions. R.P. Coelho, in light of his long experience in family apostolate, argues that in 50 years after Vatican II, the Church has hardly realized the vision of marriage presented by the Council.

In the article, "Catholic Family Crisis in India," he holds that this is due to the lack of understanding of the new reality presented by the Council as well as the inadequate interest to learn what the Council has taught. Beginning with the aims of marriage, he examines the current situation of the culture and the dynamics of personality development. According to him, the average Indian Catholic has a confused view of marriage, especially due to the influence of the media. This is aggravated by the inadequate pastoral care of the family. Coelho argues that marriage preparation programmes have to be redesigned in light of the teaching of the Vatican II and Post-Conciliar documents, as well as the challenges raised by the changed socio-cultural context. Paulachan Kochappilly reflects on the important role that family plays in formation. In his essay, "Family as the Foundation of Formation," he describes how family is the cradle of virtues and values. Family is the foundation of ethics from three ethical horizons, namely, ethics of love, ethics of life and ethics of light. He highlights the imagery of the world as a family, especially in the Indian tradition. He also underscores the importance of character formation in families by pointing out that the root causes of many of the contemporary ethical issues may be traced back to the lack of formation in families.

"The Impact of Dowry System in the Christian Communities," is the report of a field study conducted by the Licentiate moral theology students of DVK. In spite of a number of laws prohibiting it, dowry continues to be practised in India and many other Asian countries. Dowry related violence, suicides and murders frequently happen in India. Dowry is widely practised among Christians, threatening peace and harmony in the family and leading to physical and mental harassment and violence. Dowry is against Christian ideals of marriage, since love and care for the spouse are ignored or denied for financial benefits. Besides denying the dignity and equality of the woman/wife, dowry leads to a number of evils. However, the response of the Christian community is not sufficient to eradicate this evil. Based on the field study, the authors argue that more definite steps are to be taken by the Christian community to abolish the practice of dowry and to actualise the Christian vision of marriage and family.

This issue also presents three articles dealing with other important themes. Moses Asaah Awinongya discusses in his article, "The Marriage Institution in Ghana and Ecclesial Membership," how the

Catholic Church in Ghana is working off the legacy of early missionaries especially in areas related to differences in the perception of cultural values. A challenging issue is the administration of the sacrament of baptism. The dilemma, according to him, is this: To allow the baptism of the man and of all the wives would mean the acceptance of polygyny in the Church. On the other hand, if some members of the society are excluded from the life of the Church because of their life in polygamous relationships, it may question not only the authenticity of the Christian message but also strengthen criticism that the Church brings dissension into society. "Vision of the Biblical City of God and Pragmatic Issues Involved in Understanding Ecologically," based on the biblical notion of the city, discusses how the city of God is perceived in an ecological as well as alternative perspective and how the vision of 'new heaven and new earth' could be a green new perspective. According to Solomon Victus, "it is not out of aversion to the city but out of a sustainability point of view the present city model is discouraged." Without proposing any polarization between the two models, he argues that what is required is to develop a new liberative culture which emerges out of the merger of two valuable cultures. Julian Saldanha, in his challenging article, "East is East," explores the difference of perspective and approach towards other religions, between the Asian and Roman mentalities. Once Europe became 'Christian', there was no place for other religions. But, Asia continued to live in a multi-religious and multi-cultural environment. The Asian churches have developed a more open approach to other religions, realizing that to be fully religious, one needs to be inter-religious. Thus, 'a new way of being Church' has taken shape in Asia, understanding and relating to followers of other religions. According to Saldanha, this can be called Asia's, especially India's, contribution to the universal Church.

We hope that the reflection on the contemporary Asian family will contribute to the strengthening of the Asian family and thus the society as a whole. Though there are concerns and anxieties over the crisis that Asian families face today, we share the hope that family will continue to occupy a prominent place in the Asian societies as a source of life and love.

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