

## FABC'S VISION FOR EUCHARISTIC FAMILIES: INTEGRATING ONAM AND EUCHARISTIC VALUES IN ASIA

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### **Abstract**

The paper explores the integration of Eucharistic values with traditional cultural practices in Asian families, with a specific focus on the celebration of *Onam* in Kerala, India. It examines the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) vision for "Eucharistic families" and the challenges they face, including religious persecution, poverty, and cultural conflicts. By aligning the Eucharist with the cultural richness of *Onam*, the paper aims to highlight how these values can foster community solidarity, social justice, and spiritual renewal. It considers Pope Benedict XVI's emphasis on the transformative power of the Eucharist and proposes practical ways to integrate these values into the *Onam* festival. The approach includes promoting community over individualism, enhancing support systems, and blending Eucharistic themes with local traditions. Through this integration, the Church seeks to build a unified and spiritually enriched community in Kerala, addressing contemporary social issues and reinforcing a culture of compassion and solidarity.

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## Introduction

The Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) envisions a vibrant, inculturated Church in Asia where the Eucharist is central to daily life and family dynamics. This vision highlights the family as a fundamental unit for nurturing faith and solidarity, emphasizing the integration of Eucharistic values with local cultural practices. The Ninth Plenary Assembly of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences, convened in Manila, Philippines in 2009, focused on "Living the Eucharist in Asia."<sup>1</sup> The assembly sought to deepen the comprehension, celebration, and incorporation of the Eucharist within the varied cultural and social landscapes of Asia. It recognized the active presence of the Holy Spirit in the religious, social, cultural, political, and economic movements that protect the rights of the poor, children, women, migrants, labourers, and the integrity of creation.<sup>2</sup> The FABC emphasized the family as the cornerstone of society and the Church, highlighting its role in fostering love, solidarity, and faith. Families are envisioned as sanctuaries where individuals cultivate virtue, mutual respect, and support, contributing positively to society and the Church. During the IX FABC Plenary Assembly, the concept of an "Eucharistic Family" was emphasized, encouraging families in Asia to embody the Eucharist through acts of love, sharing, and service, particularly towards the poor and needy.

The XI FABC Plenary Assembly in Colombo, Sri Lanka, echoed similar sentiments, emphasizing the importance of living the Eucharist within the context of family life in Asia. Jesus sacrificed His life "for the many" and gave us His Body and Blood in the Sacrament of the Eucharist. Through this complete sacrifice, He showed us how to love, share, and serve others, particularly the poor and needy.<sup>3</sup> FABC 50 General Conference, *Journeying Together as Peoples of Asia* also highlighted the numerous challenges facing Asian families. The essence of family life in Asia is encapsulated in the concept of "living

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<sup>1</sup> Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences, *Ninth Plenary Assembly: Eucharist in Asia* (Manila: Philippines, August 10-16, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences, *Ninth Plenary Assembly: Eucharist in Asia*.

<sup>3</sup> Federation of Asian Bishops' Conference, *Eleventh Plenary Assembly: Catholic Family in Asia: Domestic Church of the Poor on a Mission of Mercy*, Colombo, Sri Lanka, November 28 - December 4, 2016.

the Eucharist” and embodying a “Eucharistic” spirit through acts of love, sharing, and service, especially towards the less fortunate.<sup>4</sup> Pope Benedict XVI’s Apostolic Exhortation *Sacramentum Caritatis* underscores the Eucharistic dimension of mission and testimony, particularly in its inculturation into local culture.<sup>5</sup> Integrating Eucharistic values into the *Onam* celebration can enhance its social-transformative character while preserving cultural heritage and embracing diversity. This paper explores how FABC’s vision can be embodied in Asian families, particularly through the fusion of Eucharistic values with traditional celebrations like *Onam* in Kerala. By addressing contemporary challenges and promoting social justice, the Church aims to foster a unified and spiritually enriched community.

## A. FABC’s Vision of Eucharistic Families in Asia

The vision of the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences (FABC) is deeply rooted in the mission of the Church to evangelize and foster a genuine, lived Christian faith within the diverse cultural contexts of Asia. The family is nothing less than the “focal point of evangelization towards a culture of integral life” (VIII FABC Plenary Assembly, Daejeon, 2004).<sup>6</sup> The FABC seeks to create a vibrant, inculturated Church that embraces the rich traditions and values of Asian societies while promoting the core tenets of the Catholic faith. Here are key aspects of the FABC’s vision:

### 1. Living the Eucharist

The FABC emphasizes the Eucharist as the heart of Christian life, advocating for its deep integration into the daily lives of Asian Catholics. This includes fostering a Eucharistic spirituality that is lived out through acts of love, service, and solidarity, particularly towards the poor and marginalized. John Paul II states that “the Church draws her life from the Eucharist. This truth does not simply express a daily experience of faith, but recapitulates the heart of the mystery of the Church.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Pope Francis, “Message for FABC 50,” in *FABC 50 General Conference: Journeying Together as Peoples of Asia*, vol. 1, ed. Pablito A. Baybado, Jr. (Bangkok, Thailand: FABC, 2023), 72.

<sup>5</sup> Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis*, Post-Synodal Exhortation, February 22, 2007, 54.

<sup>6</sup> Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conference, *Eleventh Plenary Assembly: Catholic Family in Asia: Domestic Church of the Poor on a Mission of Mercy*.

<sup>7</sup> John Paul II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, Encyclical Letter, (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, April 17, 2003) 1.

## 2. Family as the Cornerstone

The FABC envisions the family as the fundamental unit of both society and the Church. Families are seen as domestic churches where faith, love, and values are nurtured, contributing positively to the broader community. The concept of an “Eucharistic family” is central, encouraging families to embody the self-giving love of the Eucharist. Pope Benedict XVI in *Sacramentum Caritatis* says, “The Eucharist draws us into Jesus' act of self-oblation. Rather than merely receiving the incarnate Logos passively, we become participants in the dynamic act of His self-giving.”<sup>8</sup>

## 3. Inculturation

Recognizing the cultural diversity of Asia, the FABC promotes the inculturation of the Christian faith. This involves integrating local cultural elements into the practice of faith, making the Gospel more relevant and meaningful to the people. Festivals like *Onam* are seen as opportunities to blend Eucharistic values with local traditions. Inculturation signifies “an intimate transformation of the authentic cultural values by their integration into Christianity and the implantation of Christianity into different human cultures.”<sup>9</sup>

## 4. Basic Ecclesial Communities

The FABC supports the formation and strengthening of Basic Ecclesial Communities (BECs) as models of Eucharistic communities. BECs are small groups of believers who gather regularly for worship, sharing, and service, reflecting the communal and participatory nature of the Church. A fundamental task for church institutions is to provide families with the doctrinal and moral formation and guidance that would assist them in responding effectively to the challenges. Such formation can be done most effectively in Basic Ecclesial Communities, where families themselves can initiate concrete action to address the pastoral challenges they confront.<sup>10</sup>

## 5. Social Justice and Advocacy

The FABC is committed to addressing social injustices and advocating for the rights and dignity of all people, particularly the

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<sup>8</sup> Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis*, Post-Synodal Exhortation, 11.

<sup>9</sup> “Instruction: Inculturation and the Roman Liturgy | EWTN,” EWTN Global Catholic Television Network, accessed August 2, 2024, <https://www.ewtn.com/catholicism/library/instruction-inculturation-and-the-roman-liturgy-2180>.

<sup>10</sup> Federation of Asian Bishops' Conference, *Eleventh Plenary Assembly: Catholic Family in Asia: Domestic Church of the Poor on a Mission of Mercy*.

poor and marginalized. This includes responding to issues such as persecution, poverty, migration, and cultural conflicts with compassion and active support. In his encyclical letter *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis also emphasizes that remembering past injustices encourages us to create a more just and fraternal future. He urges us not to forget the ongoing persecutions, slave trade, and ethnic violence in various countries, along with other historical events that bring shame to humanity.<sup>11</sup>

## 6. Unity and Solidarity

Emphasizing the Eucharist's unifying power, the FABC aims to foster a sense of community and solidarity among believers. This includes overcoming social divisions such as caste and ethnicity, promoting inclusivity, and encouraging dialogue and cooperation among different cultural and religious groups. Pope Benedict XVI states in *Sacramentum Caritatis*, that inspired by the Eucharist, the sacrament of charity, they become a concrete expression of that charity; they are to be praised and encouraged for their commitment to solidarity in our world.<sup>12</sup> Again in *Sacramentum Caritatis*, the Pope repeats the Church's solidarity with those who are denied freedom of worship. He emphasizes that the absence of religious freedom deprives people of the most significant form of freedom, as faith allows individuals to express their deepest convictions about the ultimate meaning of their lives.<sup>13</sup>

## 7. Pastoral Care and Leadership

The FABC advocates for pastoral care that is attentive, compassionate, and inclusive. Priests and pastoral leaders are encouraged to cultivate a sense of family within their congregations, reaching out especially to those who feel marginalized or excluded. In *Gaudium et Spes*, Paul VI asserts that it is the responsibility of well-trained priests to support the vocation of married couples through various pastoral methods. These include preaching God's word, leading liturgical worship, and providing other spiritual assistance for married and family life. Priests are encouraged to support couples

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. Pope Francis, Message for FABC 50 General Conference, Journeying Together as Peoples of Asia. See also, Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, Encyclical Letter, (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, October 3, 2020), 248.

<sup>12</sup> Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis*, Post-Synodal Exhortation, 90.

<sup>13</sup> Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis*, Post-Synodal Exhortation, 87.

sympathetically and patiently during difficulties and to inspire them with love, fostering the formation of exemplary families.<sup>14</sup>

## 8. Continuous Renewal

The FABC calls for the continual renewal of the Church, inspired by the Holy Spirit, to meet the evolving needs and challenges of the Asian context. This involves innovative pastoral approaches, deeper faith formation, and a renewed commitment to the Church's mission. The IX Plenary Assembly of the FABC, titled "Living the Eucharist in Asia," states, "We commend it to our Priests and Religious in Asia for their ongoing formation on the Eucharist. We also endorse it for diocesan ministries related to the Liturgy, Catechesis and Faith Formation, the training of lay leaders, the formation of Basic Ecclesial Communities and other faith communities."<sup>15</sup>

In summary, the vision of the FABC is to create a dynamic, inculturated, and compassionate Church in Asia that lives out the Eucharist in everyday life, supports families as the bedrock of faith and society, and actively engages in promoting justice, unity, and renewal.

### B. FABC's Challenges of the Eucharistic Family

The Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences was founded to address the unique pastoral and social challenges faced by the Catholic Church in Asia. With its diverse cultural, social, and political landscape, Asia presents a complex environment for the Church's mission. Pope Francis emphasizes that "everything is interconnected" (*Laudato Si'* 70), highlighting that we live within "one complex crisis that is both social and environmental" (*Laudato Si'* 139). He calls for acknowledging our "common and differentiated responsibilities" (*Laudato Si'* 170). An "integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the marginalized, and protecting nature" is essential (*Laudato Si'* 139). Moreover, he urges a "restoration through the long path of renewal" (*Laudato Si'* 202).<sup>16</sup> The FABC aims to

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<sup>14</sup> Pope Paul VI. *Gaudium et Spes* Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, on December 7, 1965, 52. See also, FABC Office of Theological Concerns, *A Few Theological and Pastoral Perspectives of Inter-faith Marriages* (Hong Kong: FABC Office of Theological Concerns, 2009).

<sup>15</sup> Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences, *Ninth Plenary Assembly: Eucharist in Asia*. Also see, *Federation of Asian Bishop' Conference: Eleventh Plenary Assembly/ Catholic family in Asia: Domestic Church of the Poor on a mission of Mercy*.

<sup>16</sup> Bishop Allwyn D'Silva, "Laudato Si' - A Call for Responsible Stewardship," in *FABC 50 General Conference: Journeying Together as Peoples of Asia*, vol. 1, ed. Pablito A. Baybado, Jr. (Bangkok, Thailand: FABC, 2023), 119.

navigate these complexities by fostering dialogue, solidarity, and collaboration among the Asian bishops. Here are some of the key challenges identified by the FABC:

### **1. Religious Persecution and Threats to Religious Freedom**

In many Asian countries, Christians and other religious minorities face persecution and discrimination. This can result in social exclusion, violence, and severe restrictions on religious practices. The FABC acknowledges the importance of promoting religious freedom and tolerance to protect the safety and well-being of all believers. In its IX Plenary Assembly, titled "Living the Eucharist in Asia," the FABC noted troubling instances of religious intolerance, violations of religious freedom, and direct persecution of Christians.<sup>17</sup> Pope Benedict XVI in his encyclical letter *Deus Caritas Est*, states that while the State should not enforce any particular religion, it must ensure that religious freedom is upheld and that there is harmony among different religious groups. Additionally, the Church, representing the social aspect of Christian faith, operates independently based on its beliefs, and the State must acknowledge this autonomy.<sup>18</sup>

### **2. Widespread Poverty and Economic Disparities**

Economic hardship is a significant challenge in many parts of Asia, affecting millions of families. Poverty leads to inadequate access to food, healthcare, education, and shelter, impacting the overall stability and well-being of communities. The article "Well-Being and Stability among Low-income Families" states that poverty significantly obstructs family well-being, which is crucial for the effective operation of communities and societies.<sup>19</sup> The FABC calls for concerted efforts to address poverty through social justice initiatives, charitable activities, and advocacy for economic policies that promote equity and inclusion.

### **3. Migration and Displacement**

In "*Amoris Laetitia: On the Family*," Pope Francis highlights that "Migration is another sign of the times to be faced and understood in

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<sup>17</sup> Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences, *Ninth Plenary Assembly: Eucharist in Asia*.

<sup>18</sup> Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, Encyclical Letter (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2005), 28.

<sup>19</sup> Yoshie Sano, Sheila Mammen, and Myah Houghten, "Well-Being and Stability among Low-Income Families: A 10-Year Review of Research," *Journal of Family and Economic Issues* 42, no. Suppl 1 (2021): 107-17, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10834-020-09715-7>.

terms of its negative effects on family life.”<sup>20</sup> Rapid urbanization and economic opportunities often lead to migration, both within and across countries. This can cause family separation, cultural dislocation, and challenges in maintaining family ties. The FABC emphasizes the importance of pastoral care for migrants and displaced persons, providing them with support and integrating them into local faith communities. The FABC Eleventh Plenary Assembly's document, “Catholic Family in Asia: Domestic Church of the Poor on a Mission of Mercy,” also addresses issues of poverty, migration, and dislocation. Despite regional economic disparities, such as higher development in East Asia, Singapore, and Malaysia, widespread and severe poverty affects millions of families across South Asia and Southeast Asia.<sup>21</sup>

#### **4. Political, Ideological, and Cultural Conflicts**

Political instability, ideological differences, and cultural divisions can strain relationships within families and communities. These conflicts often result in violence, social fragmentation, and marginalization of certain groups. The FABC Eleventh Plenary Assembly noted the increasing occurrence of refugees driven by political, economic, cultural, climatic, and religious factors in various Asian countries, a situation that has raised international concern. The FABC stresses the need for peace building, dialogue, and reconciliation efforts to foster harmony and unity. The FABC 50 General Conference in Bangkok highlighted that Asia is a diverse continent with numerous religions and cultures. In this multi-religious environment, where each faith seeks its own space and autonomy, a competitive spirit may arise. However, Christians, inspired by Christ and the Gospel, should avoid competing with other religions. Instead, they should focus on revitalizing their own faith and embodying Gospel values in their daily lives, thereby serving as living witnesses of Christ.<sup>22</sup>

#### **5. Deterioration of Religious Faith and Spiritual Values**

Rapid social changes and modernization can lead to a decline in religious faith and spiritual values, especially among the younger generation. This weakening of faith can diminish the moral fabric of

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<sup>20</sup> Pope Francis, *Amoris Laetitia: Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on the Family* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2016), 38.

<sup>21</sup> Federation of Asian Bishops' Conference, *Eleventh Plenary Assembly: Catholic Family in Asia: Domestic Church of the Poor on a Mission of Mercy*, 9.

<sup>22</sup> FABC 50 General Conference: *Journeying Together as Peoples of Asia*, vol. 1, ed. Pablito A. Baybado, Jr. (Bangkok, Thailand: FABC, 2023), 20.



society and reduce the sense of purpose and meaning within families. The XI Plenary Assembly of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences observed that the rising global culture of secularism is adversely affecting treasured Asian family values. In certain countries, the pursuit of higher living standards has led to a decline in respect for the elderly and disabled, who are often seen as burdens to their families. Consumerism is supplanting Gospel values of simplicity and responsible stewardship of resources. As Pope Francis describes it, a "throw away" culture is emerging.<sup>23</sup> The FABC underscores the importance of faith formation, spiritual renewal, and catechesis to revitalize religious commitment.

## 6. Impact of Globalization and Secularization

Globalization and secularization often lead to cultural homogenization and the erosion of traditional values. This can pose a challenge to the Church's efforts to maintain its identity and relevance in a rapidly changing world. The FABC advocates for a balanced approach that embraces positive aspects of modernization while preserving the rich cultural and spiritual heritage of Asia. Similarly, in his Apostolic Exhortation *Africae Munus*, Pope Benedict XVI conveyed the Synod Fathers' concerns about globalization. They emphasized that the true nature and ethical basis of globalization should be rooted in the unity of the human family and its advancement towards goodness. The Church aspires to see the globalization of solidarity advance to the extent that it integrates the principle of gratuitousness and the logic of gift into commercial relationships, reflecting a spirit of fraternity.<sup>24</sup>

## 7. Environmental Degradation and Climate Change

Environmental issues such as deforestation, pollution, and climate change have significant impacts on the livelihoods and health of many communities in Asia. Pope Francis also highlighted this in his Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si'*, stating, "Climate change is a global problem with grave implications: environmental, social, economic, political and for the distribution of goods. It represents one of the principal challenges facing humanity in our day. Its worst impact will

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<sup>23</sup> Federation of Asian Bishops' Conference, *Eleventh Plenary Assembly: Catholic Family in Asia: Domestic Church of the Poor on a Mission of Mercy*, 15.

<sup>24</sup> Benedict XVI, *Africae Munus*, Post-Synodal Exhortation, November 19, 2011, no. 86.

probably be felt by developing countries in the coming decades.”<sup>25</sup> The FABC calls for heightened awareness and action on ecological issues, promoting stewardship of creation and sustainable development practices.

## 8. Enhancing Inculturation and Dialogue

The diverse cultural landscape of Asia presents both opportunities and challenges for the Church’s mission. Inculturation – integrating the Christian faith into local cultures – is essential for making the faith relevant and meaningful. The FABC encourages dialogue with other religions and cultures to foster mutual understanding and respect. Pope Benedict XVI, in his Apostolic Exhortation *Sacramentum Caritatis*, states, “In the mystery of the Incarnation, the Lord Jesus, born of woman and fully human (cf. Gal 4:4), entered directly into a relationship not only with the expectations present within the Old Testament, but also with those of all peoples. He thus showed that God wishes to encounter us in our own concrete situation. A more effective participation of the faithful in the holy mysteries will thus benefit from the continued inculturation of the Eucharistic celebration.”<sup>26</sup>

### C. Pope Benedict XVI’s Transformative Power of the Eucharist

Pope Benedict XVI profoundly emphasized the transformative nature of the Eucharist in his theological writings. He believed the Eucharist fosters a deep spiritual transformation, allowing believers to encounter the living Christ and be united with Him. In his Apostolic Exhortation *Sacramentum Caritatis*, he highlighted that the Eucharist bestows a transformative power, enabling individuals to experience eternal life in the present. He stated, “[I]t is not the Eucharistic food that is changed into us, but rather we who are mysteriously transformed by it.”<sup>27</sup>

This transformation extends beyond individuals to encompass history and the cosmos, infusing divine meaning into human existence. Pope Benedict drew from thinkers like Romano Guardini and St. Augustine, underscoring that Christianity is an encounter with Christ, which liberates and renews individuals from within. The Eucharist, he argued, is a profound experience of unity with God, leading believers

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<sup>25</sup> Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, Encyclical Letter, May 24, 2015, accessed August 4, 2024, [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150524\\_enciclica-laudato-si.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html)

<sup>26</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis: Post-Synodal Exhortation* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, February 22, 2007), 54.

<sup>27</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis: Post-Synodal Exhortation*, 70.

to embrace a new, Christ-like nature through faith, conversion, repentance, and metanoia. This encounter calls for a continuous journey of self-examination and spiritual renewal, reflecting a deepening relationship with God and a commitment to living in harmony with His will. We can experience the presence of Christ intimately, feeling His touch upon our hearts as we reach out to Him. It is through this personal relationship and encounter with the Risen Christ that we truly become Christians.<sup>28</sup> Encountering Christ leads to a profound transformation, involving a renewal and a decisive shift away from our former ways toward a new way of living. As St. Paul expressed in the Second Letter to the Corinthians, "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come" (2 Corinthians 5:17).

#### **D. A Short History of *Onam* Celebration**

*Onam* is a major festival celebrated by Malayalees worldwide, regardless of religion, to honour the mythical King Mahabali's golden rule. Falling in the Malayalam month of Chingam (August-September), it commemorates Mahabali's annual visit from the underworld, granted by Lord Vishnu who had previously banished him. The festival, rooted in a harvest celebration, signifies unity and prosperity. It features a ten-day celebration starting with Atham and culminating in Thiruvonam, marked by rituals, feasts, and communal harmony. *Onam's* cultural inclusivity sees participation from Hindus, Christians, and Muslims alike. The legend tells of Mahabali's generosity being tested by Vishnu in the form of Vamana, who, after receiving the king's head as the third step of his request, granted Mahabali's wish to visit his people yearly.<sup>29</sup> This visit is celebrated with grandeur, recalling Mahabali's reign of equality, justice, and happiness.<sup>30</sup>

#### **E. FABC's Transformative Unity: Integrating Eucharistic and *Onam* Values in Asian Families**

The Asian Church, guided by the Second Vatican Council's call for inculturation, is exploring ways to blend its Eucharistic values with

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<sup>28</sup> Benedict XVI, *St Paul's Conversion*. Audience, September 3, 2008.

<sup>29</sup> "Onam: The Legend Behind Kerala's State Festival," News18, March 21, 2023, <https://www.news18.com/news/india/onam-the-legend-behind-keralas-state-festiva.html>.

<sup>30</sup> Subhashini Ali, "Despite Sangh Efforts to Project it as 'Hindu' Festival, Story of Onam Prevails in Kerala," <https://thewire.in/communalism/despite-sangh-efforts-to-project-it-as-hindu-festival-story-of-onam-prevails-in-kerala>.

local cultural traditions.<sup>31</sup> In Kerala, India, this integration is exemplified through the *Onam* festival a cultural celebration rooted in the legend of King Mahabali. The Catholic Church can harmoniously weave Eucharistic values into *Onam* celebrations to address social issues, promote unity, and reinforce community bonds.

### 1. Emphasizing Community over Individualism

The Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences stresses the importance of community in Eucharistic participation. In Kerala, this can be actualized by encouraging families to view the Eucharist as a communal event that strengthens social and familial bonds. Pope Benedict XVI, in his post-synodal exhortation *Sacramentum Caritatis*, highlights that on the Lord's Day, every Christian rediscovers the communal aspect of their life as one who has been redeemed.<sup>32</sup> By fostering solidarity through community-centered Eucharistic celebrations, the Church can build a stronger sense of collective responsibility. Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences, Eleventh Plenary Assembly, quoted from Pope Francis' Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, states that the entire community of the faithful, including every household and family, is called to lead a life characterized by simplicity and sharing, similar to the early Christian community in Jerusalem described in Acts 2:42-46 and 4:32-35.<sup>33</sup>

### 2. Eucharist as a Source of Solidarity and Support

Pope Benedict XVI highlighted the Eucharist as a foundation for solidarity and communion. In *Onam*, this can be reflected in acts of practical solidarity, such as community support and advocacy for justice. By integrating Eucharistic themes into *Onam*, the Church can inspire actions that embody Christ's love and sacrifice, providing aid to those in need and fostering a sense of unity. Pope Benedict XVI, in his *Sacramentum Caritatis*, states that those inspired by the Eucharist, the sacrament of charity, become a tangible expression of that charity. Their dedication to solidarity in our world is commendable and should be encouraged.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis: Post-Synodal Exhortation*, 54.

<sup>32</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis: Post-Synodal Exhortation*, 76.

<sup>33</sup> Federation of Asian Bishops' Conference, *Eleventh Plenary Assembly: Catholic Family in Asia: Domestic Church of the Poor on a Mission of Mercy*, 21.

<sup>34</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis: Post-Synodal Exhortation*, 90.

### 3. Integrating Eucharistic Values into Cultural Practices

The FABC advocates for the incorporation of Eucharistic values into local cultural practices. During *Onam*, this could involve organizing Eucharistic celebrations that emphasize themes of thanksgiving and community. Incorporating traditional cultural expressions with Eucharistic symbolism can enrich the spiritual experience of the festival, aligning it with the broader mission of the Church. Bridge-builders and bridges, instruments of dialogue and reconciliation in Asia: The mission of the Church in Asia, and the Good News we share with our people and the world, is best represented by the image of becoming "bridges and bridge-builders."<sup>35</sup>

### 4. Supporting Families in Times of Difficulty

The Eucharist calls for practical acts of love and support, especially for families facing challenges. *Onam's* spirit of giving can be aligned with this call by establishing support networks and initiatives that provide both material and spiritual aid. Reconciliation services and family counselling can draw on Eucharistic themes of forgiveness and communal harmony. The Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences, Eleventh Plenary Assembly, states: "The divine presence impels the family to be Eucharistic in the manner of the Eucharistic Jesus who sacrificed his very life 'for the many' and then bequeathed his own Body and Blood to us in the Sacrament of the Eucharist. By this total sacrifice, he demonstrated for us how to love, share, and serve others, especially the poor and the needy. The family has likewise to have a spirit of sacrifice as it mightily struggles daily for a better life and strives to respond to the needs of others."<sup>36</sup>

### 5. Innovative Pastoral Approaches

The FABC encourages innovative approaches to address contemporary challenges.<sup>37</sup> *Onam's* renewal and celebratory nature provide a platform for introducing new pastoral initiatives. Engaging youth and community members in blending traditional *Onam* celebrations with modern Eucharistic expressions can foster a dynamic and vibrant Church.

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<sup>35</sup> FABC 50 General Conference: *Journeying Together as Peoples of Asia*, vol. 1, ed. Pablito A. Baybado, Jr. (Bangkok, Thailand: FABC, 2023), 36.

<sup>36</sup> Federation of Asian Bishops' Conference, *Eleventh Plenary Assembly: Catholic Family in Asia: Domestic Church of the Poor on a Mission of Mercy*, 20.

<sup>37</sup> Cardinal Oswald Gracias, FABC 50 General Conference, *Journeying Together as Peoples of Asia*, 70.

By integrating Eucharistic values with Onam's cultural significance, the Church can build a unified and spiritually enriched community. This approach will not only celebrate Kerala's rich cultural heritage but also address social challenges, promoting a more inclusive and harmonious society. Pope John Paul II, in his Encyclical Letter *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, also states, "In my numerous Pastoral Visits I have seen, throughout the world, the great vitality which the celebration of the Eucharist can have when marked by the forms, styles and sensibilities of different cultures. By adaptation to the changing conditions of time and place, the Eucharist offers sustenance not only to individuals but to entire peoples, and it shapes cultures inspired by Christianity."<sup>38</sup>

### **F. Transforming Asian Families: The Eucharist as a Catalyst for Social Justice**

Jesus redefined family not by blood but by faith, proclaiming that those who do the will of God are His true family (cf. Mt 12:46-48).<sup>39</sup> This shift from biological to faith-based family underscores the concept of "domestic churches" where love and faith transform familial bonds. Pope Francis emphasizes a Church of solidarity with the poor (*Evangelii Gaudium*)<sup>40</sup> and Pope Benedict XVI highlights the call for Christians to aid the needy and promote justice (*Sacramentum Caritatis*).<sup>41</sup> In his work "Theology of Liturgy," Pope Benedict XVI emphasizes the significance of a real transformation in the Eucharist. He asserts that what has always been important to the Church is that something truly and genuinely occurs during the Eucharistic celebration.<sup>42</sup> The Eucharist, central to Christian life, inspires families to address social injustices, advocate for marginalized groups, and foster a culture of compassion.

Asian families face challenges such as persecution, poverty, and migration.<sup>43</sup> By embracing the Eucharist's message of love and solidarity, they can address these issues effectively. The FABC and

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<sup>38</sup> John Paul II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, Encyclical Letter, (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, April 17, 2003), 51.

<sup>39</sup> Federation of Asian Bishops' Conference, *Eleventh Plenary Assembly: Catholic Family in Asia: Domestic Church of the Poor on a Mission of Mercy*, 21.

<sup>40</sup> Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, Apostolic Exhortation, November 24, 2013, 58, 65.

<sup>41</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis: Post-Synodal Exhortation*, 90.

<sup>42</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, *The Theology of Liturgy. Collected Works*, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2014), 395.

<sup>43</sup> Federation of Asian Bishops' Conference, *Eleventh Plenary Assembly: Catholic Family in Asia: Domestic Church of the Poor on a Mission of Mercy*, 8, 9.

Pope Benedict XVI's insights on the Eucharist offer a framework for social transformation through:

1. **Fostering Solidarity and Community:** The Eucharist encourages mutual support, prompting families to strengthen communal bonds and aid those in need.
2. **Promoting Social Justice:** The Eucharist calls for addressing root causes of poverty and injustice, aligning with Jesus' identification with the marginalized.
3. **Witnessing to God's Love and Mercy:** Families can embody God's mercy through acts of kindness and compassion, inspiring others.
4. **Hospitality and Sharing:** Emphasize welcoming others and sharing resources generously, mirroring the Eucharistic spirit.
5. **Education and Formation:** Focus on integral faith formation, especially on how the Eucharist calls for communal living and cooperation with other faiths.

## G. Integrating Eucharistic and Cultural Values in Kerala

To renew communities in Kerala, integrate the Eucharist with local cultural practices, like the *Onam* festival. This involves:

1. **Community over Individualism:** Promote the Eucharist as a communal event to strengthen family and community bonds.
2. **Eucharist as Support:** Enhance Eucharistic celebrations to inspire solidarity and practical support for those in need.
3. **Cultural Integration:** Infuse *Onam* with Eucharistic themes of thanksgiving and divine providence, incorporating traditional cultural expressions. Embrace diverse cultures within the Church and work towards peace and unity among different groups.
4. **Supporting Families:** Use *Onam's* spirit of giving to support families facing challenges, through material aid and reconciliation services.
5. **Innovative Pastoral Approaches:** Engage the community in new pastoral initiatives that blend traditional and modern expressions of faith. Equip leaders to foster a sense of belonging and address the needs of marginalized individuals with compassion.

By integrating these elements, the Church can foster a vibrant, united Eucharistic community in Kerala, addressing contemporary challenges and building solidarity and justice.

## H. Recommendations and Practical implications

The practical implications of integrating Eucharistic values with the *Onam* festival in Kerala can be significant for both the Church and the

community. Here are some concrete actions and strategies that could be implemented:

### 1. Community-Centered Eucharistic Celebrations

- **Organize Community Eucharistic Services:** Host special Masses during *Onam* that focus on community unity, shared values, and mutual support. Encourage families to participate together, reinforcing the sense of collective responsibility.
- **Promote Shared Meals:** Coordinate community meals or potlucks where families come together to share food, symbolizing the Eucharist's call for communal sharing and solidarity.

### 2. Social Transformation

- **Establish Support Programs:** Create or enhance programs that provide material and spiritual support to families in need, especially during *Onam*. This could include food drives, financial aid, or counselling services.
- **Social Justice Initiatives:** Address social issues such as inequality and injustice through Eucharistic-inspired community actions during *Onam*. Advocate for policies and practices that promote human dignity and the common good.

### 3. Contextualizing Faith

- **Eucharistic Unity:** Adapt Eucharistic celebrations to local cultures, making them more accessible and meaningful to the people.
- **Cultural Integration:** Respect and incorporate local traditions into the liturgy, enhancing the cultural relevance of the Eucharist.

### 4. Supporting Families Facing Challenges

- **Family Assistance Programs:** Develop programs that offer practical help to struggling families during *Onam*. This could include emergency relief, family counselling, or educational support for children.
- **Reconciliation and Healing Services:** Offer special services for reconciliation and healing, drawing on the Eucharistic themes of forgiveness and renewal to help families mend relationships and overcome difficulties.



## 5. Innovative Pastoral Approaches

- **Engage Youth and Young Families:** Create engaging activities and educational programs for young people and new families that integrate Eucharistic values with *Onam* traditions. This could include workshops, youth groups, or cultural events.
- **Adapt Traditional Practices:** Develop new ways to celebrate *Onam* that incorporate Eucharistic themes, such as integrating Eucharistic prayers into traditional *Onam* rituals or using modern media to enhance participation.

## 6. Education and Formation

- **Faith Formation Programs:** Offer educational programs that help families understand and live out the connection between the Eucharist and their cultural practices. This might include workshops, Bible studies, or seminars on the significance of the Eucharist.
- **Interfaith Dialogue:** Promote dialogue with other religious communities to explore how Eucharistic values can resonate with and enhance shared cultural and social values.

## 7. Leadership and Pastoral Care

- **Train Pastoral Leaders:** Equip priests and pastoral leaders with the tools and knowledge to foster a sense of belonging and effectively address the needs of marginalized individuals. This includes training in pastoral care that emphasizes compassion and community-building.
- **Encourage Collaborative Leadership:** Foster collaboration among different church groups, community organizations, and local leaders to address social issues and implement support initiatives effectively.

## 8. Fostering Interreligious Harmony

- **Encourage dialogue:** Promote dialogue and cooperation with other faith communities during *Onam*, using the Eucharist as a basis for mutual understanding and respect.
- **Shared Celebrations:** Organize interfaith events that celebrate common values and shared humanity.

By integrating these practical implications and FABC recommendations, the Church can effectively blend Eucharistic values

with *Onam* celebrations, fostering a more inclusive, supportive, and culturally relevant community.

### **Conclusion**

The integration of Eucharistic values with traditional cultural practices, such as *Onam* in Kerala, offers a profound opportunity for the Church to address contemporary social challenges and reinforce community bonds. By aligning the Eucharist with the cultural richness of *Onam*, the Church can foster a sense of unity, solidarity, and social justice. The Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences envisions a vibrant, inculturated Church where the Eucharist transforms daily life, supporting families and communities in their journey of faith and service.

Through community-centered celebrations, support networks, and the integration of Eucharistic themes into *Onam*, the Church can address issues like poverty, migration, and cultural conflicts. Practical initiatives, such as community meals, support programs, and innovative pastoral approaches, can enhance the spiritual and social impact of the festival. By embracing both Eucharistic and cultural values, the Church in Kerala can build a more compassionate and united community, reflecting the transformative power of the Eucharist and responding effectively to the needs of its members.