

THE CHRISTIAN FAMILY IN ASIA:

In Stewardship, For Mission

At the threshold of the third millennium, as early as 1995, Blessed John Paul II prophesied: "Just as in the first millennium the Cross was planted on the soil of Europe, and in the second on that of the Americas and Africa, we can pray that in the Third Christian Millennium *a great harvest of faith* will be reaped in this vast and vital continent" of Asia. (*John Paul II, Address to the Sixth Plenary Assembly of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC), Manila (15 January 1995)*). Just as Christianity was born in Asia, we in Asia claim that the third millennium will see the return of Christianity to its cradle. Indeed there is Good News in Asia!

Culture and religion blend well in Asia influencing the concept of the family. Confucian, Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist and Christian teachings intertwine to weave a lovely tapestry of Asian traditions, obligations, practices and beliefs about family.

The Lights

As confirmed by the Unesco study of 1992, the Asian family is traditionally monogamous, patrilineal and patriarchal. The traditional Asian husband has only one wife, descent is reckoned only through the paternal line and authority resides in the father of the household. It is also traditionally patrilocal, in the sense that the wives usually move into the household of their husbands although it is not uncommon to put up households when the children are born. The most treasured relationship is father and son; the second is mother and son.

The most treasured duty within the Asian family is that of care—financial, physical and emotional—both for the children especially the sick ones and for the aging grandparents and parents. It is an Asian act of filial piety to respect elders and to take care of aging grandparents. It is not uncommon for aging parents to even do some minor house chores in the homes of their children without feeling abused or humiliated. The duty to give care in the family extends even to siblings and even to the families of siblings. It is not rare to see financial support for siblings by shelling out money for a common business, health care and even the education of nephews and nieces. Within this widened kinship, advice and emotional support is generously exchanged. On some life cycle events such as funerals, weddings and birthing, the wider kinship is admirably activated to share in the pain and joy of the situation. If families are not living together, it is considered a family obligation to visit as much as the resources will allow and such family reunions are celebrated by the neighborhood. From this inborn culture of caring, the Christian commandment to "Love one another" is not hard for Asians to understand, to assimilate and to live by.

The Asian family is perceived by Asians as a social rather than a biological unit. In many Asian cultures, the family is considered more important than the individual. The Asian family is like a beautiful tapestry woven from strong bonds of relationship intertwined with revered duties towards a wider family. From this deeply Asian understanding of the family, it is not difficult to proclaim that the family is a domestic church.

And as a Filipino, may I boast that the Philippines and the Holy See are the only sovereign states in the world that outlaw divorce. We used to share the honor with Malta until the parliament of Malta authorized it last July. Filipinas *semper fidelis*! In the bigger Asian continent, divorce is essentially considered as a failure of the couples; it is met with mixed feelings of guilt and grief and even among friends and colleagues who feel they have failed to save the marriage. Asians widely recognize that the innocent victims in every divorce are the children. The protection of the family is in the Asian blood.

It also makes us proud to say that in Asia, same sex unions and adoptions are considered abominable by almost all the nations of the continent. I see no possibility of the American European tide of same sex unions ever destroying our Asian value system. Asia must be shielded from these erroneous trends.

Asia is a continent of truly spiritual and genuinely prayerful people no matter what religion they belong to. The Asian family is naturally a community of loving and caring people whose respect for the pre-born and reverence for the elderly are so close to the teachings of the Catholic Church. The Asian appreciation of the family is innate to our peoples even before the proclamation of the gospel of life.

The Shadows

Where is the problem in the Asian family? What are the challenges for the Christian families in Asia?

The Christian family in Asia must proclaim to fellow families the beauty of the Gospel. The Christian family must retell the story of Jesus to her children and to the rest of the children of our continent. It is necessary for the Christian parents in Asia to make the times of family bonding as occasion for family praying. Blessed John Paul said once that the family in Asia is not simply the object of the Church's pastoral care; it is also one of the Church's most effective agents of evangelization. Christian families are today called to witness to the Gospel in difficult times and circumstances, when the family itself is threatened by an array of forces. To be an agent of evangelization in such a time, the Christian family needs to be genuinely "the domestic Church", humbly and lovingly living out the Christian vocation.(EA, 46).

The Christian family in Asia must be socially engaged but it is not so enough. Sadly, we are losing by default to the glitter of materialism, misplaced technological progress and the phenomenon of migration. Authentic Asian values, which are radically Christian values too, are being replaced with borrowed colonial values and corrupted beliefs from the so called "first world". The Asian family will not really need much evangelizing

because it already has the spirit of Christ in it. It only needs a little nurturing and it will easily recognize itself in the values of Christ. If only Asia will be left alone with its ancient values and beliefs, we can really see it as the fulfillment of the prophecy of Blessed John Paul II.

The Hope

The Church is growing in Asia. The Vatican statistics and independent survey institutions all acknowledge that Christianity has a steady growth of almost sixteen percent each year and an increase of around twenty three percent each year in the number of Asian priests. This is not only due to the natural births in Christian families but more on account of the increasing number of conversions to the Catholic Church. What adds awe to this grace filled phenomenon in Asia is that it is mainly the lay people, not the religious missionaries, who actively proclaim the faith and invite their friends to the Christian faith. Catholic Filipinos migrating within Asia become catalysts for evangelization in the countries where they seek employment. Filipino Catholics in the diaspora fill up churches, organize rosary groups, organize Couples for Christ chapters in their cities and inspire unbelievers to exclaim: "See those Christians, how happy they are! How they love one another!"

To close this reflection on the Christian family in Asia, I borrow the tender words of Blessed John Paul II to Mary, Mother of Asia:

O Holy Mary, Daughter of the Most High God, Virgin Mother of the Savior and Mother of us all, look tenderly upon the Church of your Son planted on Asian soil. Be her guide and model as she continues your Son's mission of love and service in Asia.

Pray that through the Church's love and service, all the peoples of Asia may come to know your Son Jesus Christ, the only Savior of the world, and so taste the joy of life in all its fullness. O Mary, Mother of the New Creation and Mother of Asia, pray for us, your children, now and always!

Amen.

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