

Asian Bishops gather for meet on family, mercy

COLOMBO, Sri Lanka: Catholic bishops from across Asia have arrived in the Sri Lankan capital to seek ways to make family the basis of domestic church and center of their mission of mercy in the region.

More than 140 delegates Asia, mostly bishops and priests representing various ministries, including Oriental Churches, are attending the eleventh Plenary Assembly of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) November 28-December 4 at Negombo, a coastal city of Catholic stronghold, near Colombo.

The Asian bishops are coming to a South Asian country 38 years after they met in Kolkata (then Calcutta) for the second plenary in 1978.

This first assembly was in 1974 at Taipei, Taiwan and last one was in December 2012 at Xuan Loc Pastoral Centre, Dong Nai Province, northeast of Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam.

The plenary in Colombo has chosen as the theme, "The Asian Catholic Family: Domestic Church of the Poor on a Mission of Mercy." The assembly is expected to draw clear roadmaps for the family apostolate in the Asian Church with appropriate recommendations, says Father Raymond Ambroise, executive secretary of FABC Office of Social Communication.

The plenary takes place ten days after the Universal Church ended the Year of Mercy.

The Colombo meet will start with a solemn Mass led by papal envoy Cardinal Telesphore Placidus Toppo, on November 29. A message from Pope Francis will follow.

The host of the assembly, Cardinal Malcom Ranjith, Archbishop of Colombo, will welcome the delegates.

Cardinal Oswald Gracias, FABC president, Archbishop Pierre Nguyen Van Tot, Apostolic Nuncio for Sri Lanka, and Sri Lankan Minister of Christian Affairs John Amaratunga will address the opening session.

The highlights of the assembly include a welcome dinner hosted by Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena on November 30 and an inter religious dialogue on "Family" by religious leaders from Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, and Christianity on December 1.

Regional conferences will present their reports and hold regional workshops to develop recommendations and action plans to strengthen the family and lay apostolate as a priority task of the Church in Asia in the next four years, Father Ambroise said.

The Asian Church focussed on the family apostolate at the FABC Plenary at Daejeon in South Korea in 2004. It had addressed the theme "The Asian Family: Towards a Culture of Integral Life," he added.

The Bishops' Institute for Lay Apostolate (BILA), the FABC has also held two colloquiums and a survey on Family life in the past one decade.

"Avenues/Approaches to Respond to the Challenges in Pastoral Care to Families in the 21st Century" was the theme of the first colloquium, held in June 2007 in Thailand, while the second one in Malaysia in 2013 took the up theme, "Families in Asia, Serving and Being Served."

Some challenges identified by the BILA have been on the changing concept of marriage starting with 'live-in' relationships, postponing marriage, no children and no responsibility.

The growing divorce rates due to poor spousal relationships, the new work culture with unlimited working hours, rise of pornography as an entertainment industry, legislation in favour of same-sex marriages, migration, scourge of abortion, euthanasia are some of the challenges identified by the BILA in its two meetings.

The bishops had recommended promotion of Small Christian Communities (SCC) as a pastoral priority to build families and domestic church. "Pastoral care to families has to be rooted in compassion and sensitivity, instead of being judgmental," bishops stated then.

FABC had also conducted a survey on family life in Asian Church where 69 percent of respondents indicated that they collaborate very closely with the family movements, if they are available in parishes.

However, the BILA II held in Malaysia had observed that family ministry at parish and diocesan levels remains under-developed and often isolated or fragmented into programs, events and activities.

Report by T S Thomas and Santosh Digal of Matters India for FABC Media Team