

Asian bishops urged to aid families face modern threats

COLOMBO, Sri Lanka: Catholic bishops of Asia began their eleventh plenary assembly listening to Pope Francis' special envoy urging them to have a bold vision to transform families facing innumerable problems of modern society.

"The biggest challenge to this Plenary Assembly would be to have an all-inclusive picture of the families across Asia, the largest continent in the world with 48 countries and the largest population of people professing various religious faiths within varied cultural and social milieus," Cardinal Telesphore Placidus Toppo, archbishop of Ranchi, said in his homily at opening Mass on November 29.

Nearly 150 bishops and their officials representing 28 episcopal conferences in Asia are attending the nine-day plenary at Negombo near the Sri Lankan capital of Colombo.

The quadrennial assembly has chosen the theme, "The Asian Catholic Family: Domestic Church of the Poor on a Mission of Mercy."

Cardinal Toppo reminded the bishops that deliberating on the Catholic families is "a God given moment" for them to carry forward the mission of mercy that the Universal Church had stressed for year until November 20.

Although "the Holy Year of Mercy was concluded on the feast of the universal Kingship of Jesus, the mission of mercy continues," asserted the first tribal from Asia to become a cardinal.

The 77-year-old cardinal, who became a bishop 38 years ago, told fellow prelates that although families in Asia are "domestic churches of the poor" they can become instruments" for their mission of mercy in a region beset with varied problems.

He recalled that in the past traditional ties, cultural values and social norms enhanced by faith had guide Catholic families in the region. However, they now face problems such as unfaithfulness, brokenness, loneliness, lukewarmness, poverty, unemployment and several other problems.

Referring to the day's Mass reading from Isaiah's vision of a shoot that will come up from the stump of Jesse is placed at the background of God's anger, Cardinal Toppo compared the Asian family situation with the despair, brokenness, hopelessness and destruction that the Israelites experienced under the arrogant Assyrian king.

"Family ties are slowly breaking up affecting family peace and the faith generated unity. The modern media and technocratic lifestyles have left their adverse effects on our youth. The present day market economy with its lure and lustre is making people more greedy and individualistic affecting family ties and family prayer," the cardinal bemoaned.

All this, he added, has brought "a strange dichotomy" for the Catholic families where they have to live their faith while tacking social and cultures issues affecting society.

He wants the bishops to have a clear vision to transform the families so that they can engage m in the mission of mercy. "Our challenge then is to confer on the families the required faith dynamism" for this task, he added.

“Each family will have to grow into a fruit bearing tree and all of them together create the new pasture of fruitfulness,” the cardinal elaborated.

In today’s Gospel taken from St. Luke, Jesus filled with the joy of the Holy Spirit exclaims, “I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this is what you were pleased to do”. Then he turned to his disciples and said privately, “Blessed are the eyes that see what you see. For I tell you that many prophets and kings wanted to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it.” We, His little children are given the privilege to know Him, experience Him, live Him and proclaim Him. He is undoubtedly the face of the Father. His heart unfolded to the world the mercy and the compassionate love of the Father. He touched and cleansed the leper; he gave sight to the blind; he commanded the paralytic to get up and walk; he helped the lame to be on his feet; he freed the demoniac; he raised the dead; he healed all kinds of sick and manifested to the world the reign of God’s mercy. The poor, the neglected, the least, the lost, the sinners and all found their home in his heart of mercy and forgiveness. Jesus gave flesh and blood to mercy and compassionate love of the Father. Our context for a bold vision for the families of Asia to be on the mission of mercy has to have its roots in the heart of Jesus. The task is not easy. We need to have the hope and certitude of Isaiah. On the ground, the pastoral leadership and pastoral commitment at every level of Catholic life needs to give centrality to family which holds the future of the Church in Asia.

Therefore, the pastoral workers have to be men and women of compassion, having the willingness to listen and possess “angelic” patience to accompany the families in their struggles and challenges becoming a Eucharistic presence in every way. The families need to experience the presence of the Eucharistic Lord through the visits undertaken with utmost love and concern. Ideally, such a preparation should concur with life itself — ‘from womb to tomb’. The following years of human growth essentially foster and build upon the premium.

The pastoral care of families presupposes the need of men and women with a missionary heart that can kindle other hearts with the fire of love. Families fanned to flame, in turn, will be the torchbearers to the Gospel of love, compassion and peace in the church and in their neighbourhood. This also demands that the pastoral workers emerge out of their comfort zones available in an institutionalised life and walk the lanes of the villages, towns and cities to be with the families and their daily concerns. They are our hope and the best medium of evangelization and transformation.

The challenge is immense but the time is here and now. Yes, within the spirit of the vision of Isaiah and the revelation & mission of Jesus, the Catholic family of Asia, the Domestic Church of the poor has to be prepared to be in the all important mission of mercy. May Almighty God grant us the wisdom to live our day-to-day lives and may Mary, the Mother of Mercy, accompany us on our journey. Amen.

The situation is one of. The trees that are felled are only left with the stumps and the possibilities of life from the rotting stumps appear remote and almost impossible. But Isaiah’s vision boldly speaks of the shoot that will come up from the stump of Jesse. A small, green shoot will spring forth from one of the dead stumps, from the family tree of Jesse, the humble father of Israel’s greatest king,

David. Though this royal lineage holds incredible importance to the people of Judah, Isaiah does not mention David's name here.

Instead, he refers to humble Jesse from whose roots a branch will bear fruit. We are reminded here of the words of St. Paul, “But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things — and the things that are not — to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him” (1 Cor. 1:27-29).

The Asian families are indeed the Domestic Churches of the poor but can be great instruments in the mission of mercy. God will ensure the shoot from the stump of Jesse that it bears fruits and fruits that are lasting. Nevertheless, speaking in realistic terms, **our Catholic families across Asia once bound within traditional ties; cultural values; social norms and enhanced by Catholic Faith, today are faced with numerous problems of unfaithfulness, brokenness, loneliness, lukewarmness, poverty, unemployment etc.**



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