

Sri Lankan President Applauds Church's Work Among Poor

By Jose Kavi

Colombo: Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena has applauded the Catholic Church for its work among the poor in the island nation.

"I very much appreciate the work accomplished by the Catholic Church on behalf of the poor in Sri Lanka. The Church has also helped promote social and religious life of people," the president said at a banquet he hosted on November 30 for the members of Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) at his residence.

More than 140 delegates from bishops' conferences in Asia are currently meeting in Colombo to address various issues facing families in the region.

Sirisena, who took over as the seventh president of Sri Lanka in 2015, said he "very much" appreciated the Catholic Church's efforts to promote social and religious life of the people.

He said his government is also working at improving the lot of the poor. "In fact, a few weeks back I had the opportunity to declare 2017 theme as poverty eradication year for Sri Lanka," he added.

Sirisena hails from the Sinhalese-dominated Sri Lanka's North Central Province which was seen as "border country" when the Tamil Tigers controlled the North. He was general secretary of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party and health minister.

The president said it was his privilege and honor to welcome the FABC delegates to Sri Lanka. "I am reminded of the privilege that I had to welcome Pope Francis to Sri Lanka in 2015," he recalled.

The president thanked the head of the Catholic Church in Sri Lanka, Cardinal Albert Malcolm Ranjith Patabendige Don, Archbishop of Colombo, for recommending Colombo as the venue of the FABC meet.

"Sri Lanka is a nation of different religions and diverse cultures and traditions going back to several centuries. We have a closer understanding and respect for others' cultures, customs, traditions and values," said the 65-year-old president.

He said places of worship belonging to Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim and Christian communities dot villages and towns from north to south and east to west of Sri Lanka.

"There is peace and harmony among Sri Lankan people. It is very significant that FABC selected Sri Lanka to hold this conference on the theme "The Asian Catholic Family: Domestic Church of the Poor on a Mission of Mercy," he added.

The president also acknowledged Cardinal Ranjith as a personal friend he approaches for advices when he faces difficult situations.

"I wish to thank the Cardinal Ranjith individually. He is a personal friend of mine. I very much appreciate his advice given to me whenever I approached him in difficult situations. He is like the Good

Shepherd that is mentioned in the Bible. It is indeed a blessing for Sri Lanka that such top leader of high learning to lead not just Catholics but all people in Sri Lanka,” the president said.

Cardinal Oswald Gracias, president of FABC, India thanked the president for inviting FABC participants and hosting a banquet after a brief cultural program with music and dances.

Cardinal Gracias, archbishop of Bombay, India, gave a brief note about FABC to the president. FABC has official members from 29 countries. For the current event, there are attendants and invited guests from every continent on the globe. At least 40 countries were represented at the banquet, the Indian cardinal said.

The FABC president also noted that Pope Francis was impressed with the religiosity of Sri Lankan people when he visited Colombo in January 2015 to canonize Joseph Vaz (1651-1711), apostle of Sri Lanka.

“We are holding the conference on family here this year, after Pope Francis held a synod on family for the renewal of the world and to make families stronger,” FABC president said.

Cardinal Gracias said although the focus of the bishops’ deliberations is Catholic family, its impact will go beyond Catholic families. Our deliberations will be beneficial to the whole world,” he added.

The cardinal also applauded the warmth and hospitality the delegates received from the time of their arrival at the airport.

“We are enjoying the beauty of the culture here. We experience excellent organization last two days of FABC event. We end our meet on Sunday. When we go back to our countries, we will be ambassadors of Sri Lanka in our respective places.”

He said the delegates would tell their countrymen that Sri Lanka “is a beautiful country, a land of peace and tranquillity” with “an enlightened leadership that makes plans for the good of the people.”

Describing Sri Lanka as the “Pearl of the Orient,” the Asian Church leader promised to pray for the country as it strives for reconciliation and development.

Cardinal Ranjith thanked the president for hosting the FABC delegates at his residence in the presence of the country’s speaker, minister, members of parliament and ambassadors.

The Sri Lankan cardinal thanked his president for taking time from his busy schedule to spend time with the bishops and other delegates. The president spent nearly two hours with the guests.

It was the first time in the FABC history that the head of a nation hosting its plenary members. A day earlier, Sri Lankan Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe created history as the first premier to address the Asian bishops’ top body.

Cardinal Ranjith assured the president that the Catholic Church supports his efforts to bring peace and reconciliation in the country that was ravaged by more than 25 years of civil war.

“It is a difficult task given the positions that we all hold in our own way of thinking. But we need to give this up and stretch out hand across to each other in order to find understanding and true reconciliation on the basis of justice and truth,” the cardinal asserted.

The banquet ended with Cardinal Ranjith presenting a memento to the president as a token of appreciation.

The president also presented souvenirs to all the guests as Christmas gifts.

The delegates said the evening program left a lasting impression on them. "I was deeply impressed and inspired by the President's message and presence at the evening," said Divine Word Father Victor Roche, secretary general of the Federation of Catholic Bishops' Conferences of Oceania.

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[This report is prepared by Jose Kavi and Santosh Digal of Matters India (www.mattersindia.com) for FABC-Office of Social Communication.]