

Tribal Communities are Asian Church's Future: Cardinal Toppo

By Santosh Digal and Jose Kavi

Negombo: Asia's first tribal cardinal has urged his fellow bishops to pay more attention to indigenous people who he says are the future of the Church in the region.

"Christianity is not something strange to tribal communities. They live the Gospel values in their daily lives," said Cardinal Telesphore Placidus Toppo on December 1 in his final message to the plenary assembly of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC).

The cardinal, who is a member of Oraon tribal community of eastern India, attended the November 28-December 4 assembly as the special envoy of Pope Francis.

More than 140 prelates, FABC officials and visitors from nearly 40 countries sought ways to channelize Catholic families as agents of mercy in Asia during the meet at Negombo, a coastal city close to the Sri Lankan capital of Colombo.

"Family bond is the soul of tribal life. An internal mechanism of spontaneous affection and transparent simplicity binds tribal people together,"

Cardinal Toppo asserted that the hope of the Church in Asia is in tribal communities.

"We find tribal village communities across Asia emerging as a force in the Church. Living within their own social, cultural and traditional milieu they could easily radiate the new life received in faith. Sharing is the way of tribal community life," the 77-year-old prelate later told the FABC Media team.

Generally, tribal families, present in most parts of Asia, are well-knit units with traditional outlook on life, he explained.

Hardly, any discrimination is found among them in dealing with or relating to male and female children which is not the case with many other dominant communities in the region.

Tribal children are named after their great grandparents to keep alive the family lineage.

Equality is ensured and opportunities are provided for the growth of all children within the economical scope of each family, he added.

The papal envoy hailed the family as the "most beautiful community of mercy" on earth.

Families are authentic schools where people learn to communicate Gospel joy and practice the art of forgiving, says a top Catholic prelate.

The family helps its members become "true followers of Jesus despite the difficulties, problems and challenges of life," the cardinal added.

The Church in Asia believes in the ability of Catholic families to become agents of mercy and God's love because they have nurtured their faith for centuries braving persecutions and divisions, Cardinal Toppo noted.

Since Catholic families live among people of other religions in Asia, they are in a better position to transmit God's mercy and compassion in a region beset with varied problems.

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