

**THE CATHOLIC FAMILY IN ASIA:
DOMESTIC CHURCH OF THE POOR
ON A MISSION OF MERCY**

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I. FINAL DOCUMENT: THE CATHOLIC FAMILY IN ASIA - DOMESTIC CHURCH OF THE POOR ON A MISSION OF MERCY

INTRODUCTION

To the Church in Asia

1. Gathered at the XI Plenary Assembly of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences in Colombo (Sri Lanka), we Asian Bishops proclaim the Joy of the Gospel of Mercy to the Asian Family.¹

The Extraordinary Jubilee Year of Mercy has officially ended, but the merciful and compassionate God continues to shower his blessings upon us.

2. We share with you our reflection on the Asian family. We begin with the prayer with which Pope Francis concludes his post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* on love in the family (2016):

*Jesus, Mary and Joseph, in you we contemplate
the splendor of your love; to you we turn with trust.*

*Holy Family of Nazareth, grant that our families too
may be places of communion and prayer,
authentic schools of the Gospel and small domestic churches.*

*Holy Family of Nazareth, may families never again
experience violence, rejection and division;
may all who have been hurt or scandalized
find ready comfort and healing.
Holy Family of Nazareth, make us once more mindful
of the sacredness and inviolability of the family,
and its beauty in God's plan.
Jesus, Mary and Joseph, Graciously hear our prayer.
Amen. (AL 324)*

¹ We note with sadness the absence of representatives from the Church in China. We express our solidarity with all the suffering Church.

A truly beautiful prayer. A prayer of the family for all seasons. It reminds us of God's plan for the family to be a shrine of prayer and a sanctuary of life in communion. It recalls to us the inviolability of marriage, its sacredness and beauty. These are gifts of God's mercy and impel us to move forward in the renewal of the Catholic family in Asia.

FABC Vision of the Family - Major Lines

3. Renewal is not rudderless or direction-less. For the Spirit of Jesus has inspired the Church in Asia to fashion a vision for the Catholic family. The family is nothing less than the "focal point of evangelization towards a culture of integral life" (VIII FABC Plenary Assembly, Daejeon, 2004). The family is "to live the Eucharist" in Asia and be "Eucharistic" by loving, sharing and serving especially the poor and the needy (IX FABC Plenary Assembly, Manila, 2009). The Holy Spirit is calling the Asian Family to a mission of "New Integral Evangelization" (X FABC Plenary Assembly, Xuân Lộc, 2012).

Recent Ordinary Synods of Bishops on the Eucharist (2005) and on the Word of God (2008), the Extraordinary (2014) and the Ordinary (2015) Synods of Bishops on the Family, the International Eucharistic Congress (Cebu, Philippines, 2016), and recent pronouncements by Pope Francis (e.g., *Evangelii Gaudium*, 2013; *Misericordiae Vultus*, 2015; *Laudato Si'*, 2015) have abundantly enriched the Asian vision of family.

Renewal of the Catholic family in Asia is oriented towards this vision. We wish to journey on the road to renewal by reflecting on the theme: The Catholic Family in Asia, Domestic Church of the Poor on a Mission of Mercy.

FABC Vision of a Church of the Poor

4. Church of the Poor is a vision where all members of the Church, be they materially poor or enormously rich in the goods of this world, live in a spirit of evangelical poverty, characterized by detachment from material possessions. They acknowledge that everything is a gift of God.

The Church of the Poor is one where before the Lord we confess our poverty of spirit, the poverty of our sinfulness, as well as our total dependence on God. It is a Church that pledges option for the poor, is in solidarity with them and strives to defend their rights and dignity. It is a sharing and serving Church that promotes social justice for the poor with their many faces. Its Lord is Jesus of Nazareth, who made himself poor that we might become rich with his grace.

On our journey towards that vision, we recall the Letters of John to the Seven Churches in Asia in the Book of Revelation. The Letters speak of daunting challenges to the churches as well as the promise of hope. Discernment and conversion are necessary for hope to be realized. We hear the plaintive refrain in the Letters: "Whoever has ears ought to hear what the Spirit says to the churches" (*Rev* 2:7,11,17,29; 3:8,13,22). We, too, listen and discern.

Questions for the Journey to the Vision

5. The Asian Family is at the crossroads. We are faced with a barrage of questions. Besieged by a thoroughly secularist, individualistic and materialist culture which is at the heart of the postmodern spirit, will the Asian family succumb to the spirit of "global indifference"? Or will it preserve that human and Kingdom value so characteristic of the Asian spirit - a deep dynamic sense of community as well as of mercy and compassion?

We raise these questions as we face a world full of contradictions. Battered by images of human suffering through natural disasters, the world's compassion flows out in steady streams of relief aid. But the silent scream of millions in teeming poverty is literally ignored, like collateral damage in the uneven war of economic globalization. When millions of refugees flee from political and ideological wars, the world takes notice. But when hundreds of Christians are massacred and thousands of families flee for their lives, their homes and churches burned, hardly any protest is heard.

PART I – PASTORAL CONTEXT OF THE FAMILY

A. Family – Asianness

6. A significant Asian character of Catholic families is the fact that they are a very small minority in this massive continent of great ancient religions. Also an Asian character is the great number of interfaith marriages in most countries.

But Catholic families share values and characteristics that cut across the rich variety of Asian cultures, ethnicities, and religions.

We observe the close intergenerational family kinship in Asian families. This is palpably true for the nuclear Asian family of parents and children but also includes the extended family of cousins, nephews, nieces, grandparents and grandchildren. We see the great respect and honor, nay, affection that families give the elderly. Asian families typically love children and have the great desire to have children, for children are God's gifts and blessings.

We ourselves testify to a culture of caring for family members who are physically or mentally disadvantaged, the welcoming hospitality of Asian families despite their poverty, their support of one another in times of need, of grief, of disaster. For Catholic families, parents and children are participating together more frequently in the celebration of Holy Mass and praying more together.

7. These rich family characteristics are fundamentally due to a deep Asian sense of the sacredness of marriage and of family life, a deep sense that is culturally passed on from generation to generation. A general sense of the sacred is in fact a pervasive value in Asian cultures. It helps Asians to value and protect life from conception to natural death as well as preserve the stability of marriages.

Still, the minority status of Catholic families in Asia impacts their pastoral responses to the challenges that they face.

Collaboration with families of other faiths would be absolutely necessary.

B. Major Pastoral Challenges to the Family

The Asian family faces challenges of far-reaching proportions. Among them are the following:

Persecution - Religious Freedom under Siege

8. The variety of races, ethnicities and cultures in Asia from Central Asia through South and East Asia and down to Southeast Asia, from the plains to the mountains, should be a great source of pride and joy. They are a rich mosaic of the human tapestry that God our Creator has gifted Asia.

But harmony and peace do not always reign. Violent clashes of culture and ethnicity, often with religious and political overtones, dot the Asian landscape.

In some parts of South Asia and Southeast Asia, Christian families have fled their homes for safety, literally driven away by religious bigots and radicals. Families have been massacred. Churches have been razed to the ground. Christians live in fear, in anxiety and insecurity, under the sword of anti-Christian laws that do not welcome religious pluralism. Numerous are the cases of abducted Christian girls, forcibly converted and forced into marriage.

And sadly, we see an increasing level of aggressive and militant religious intolerance in many Asian countries.

Poverty, Migration and Dislocation

9. While there are certainly regional economic differences – note for instance the level of economic development in the East Asian region, as well as in Singapore and Malaysia – pervasive and massive poverty is the condition of millions of families in South Asia and Southeast Asia. The evils of human trafficking, the lure of the sex industry for children, youth and adults, the willingness of many to be involved in child pornography are mainly due to poverty and deprivation.

The negative effects of economic globalization on poor families that cannot compete fairly against the rich and more powerful in a regime of free liberalized markets cannot be overestimated. Unable to access the sources and benefits of economic development that flow directly to the upper levels of Asian societies, poor families are of necessity drawn to seek a better future in urbanized centers in their own countries or serve as migrant workers in more developed countries as in Singapore and Malaysia and in the East Asian region, and especially in the Middle East and in Europe.

Such internal and external migration of family members is often to the social detriment of the families left behind. Conjugal bonds and family relationships are broken by prolonged absences. Children grow up without the guidance of both parents. Love cannot be expressed merely by remittances sent to support families.

Moreover, many migrant workers suffer inhumane treatment and the phenomenon has been called a “new slavery”. Their dislocation often results in the breakdown of families and the dysfunctional growth and development of children.

10. Sometimes the drive for a better quality of life begets a craving for higher lifestyles and for luxury goods and results in a narrow utilitarian one-child view of family.

Further, the materialistic self-fulfillment view of husband and wife in pursuit of their respective careers weakens conjugal bonding and, aside from the economic motive, convinces the spouses that only one child is the ideal. Their procreative gift from God is lost in careerism and economic ambition.

Political, Ideological, Cultural Conflicts and Divisions

11. Of enormous implications is the situation of families affected by internal armed conflicts, such as wars, political rebellions, terrorism and violent cultural, ethnic, and religious clashes. Such violence and conflicts result in temporary or permanent dislocation, internal and external migration of thousands of families to safer areas, regions or countries.

We now have the growing phenomenon of political, economic, cultural, climatic and religious refugees in various Asian countries – a phenomenon that has stirred international concern. The phenomenon of Asian refugees exacerbates biases and prejudices that are constant sources of division and conflict.

The most affected victims of conflict and war are children, traumatized by evacuations, and the roar of weapons. They grow up as “children of war”, their growth and development and their formal education seriously interrupted. Many are even recruited forcibly as “child soldiers”.

Ideological Colonialism and Cultural Values

12. In the wake of economic globalization, a secular, materialist and relativist postmodern spirit is insidiously creeping into the Asian psyche. It runs counter to treasured Asian traditional values of the family. Its emerging dominance is in reality a form of ideological colonialism, whereby the values of secular ideology impose themselves subtly and, almost inexorably, replace Asian treasured values in a new form of colonial mentality.

Ideological colonialism has introduced “a culture of the ephemeral” (see AL 39). New forms of love relationships and new forms of families alien to the Asian ethos, such as same sex unions, are developing. The new cultural ideology devalues marriage and life-long commitments. It promotes instead the practice of co-habitation, transitory love and passing commitments. Political international bodies, in giving grants to developing countries, support this ideology by demanding

conditionalities to promote contraceptives and abortion in the guise of reproductive health. The sexual revolution and the fear of overpopulation are causative factors (see AL 42).

Further, in the internet lurk many dangers to impressionable minds with regard to human sexuality, such as pornography and the commercialization of the body (see AL 410).

On the other hand is the challenge from within cultures, such as the discrimination against and exploitation of women in some extremely patriarchal Asian societies. The thousands of female fetuses aborted yearly and the practice of girl-brides indicate the extent of women's subservient situation as well as a low attitude towards marriage.

We likewise note that there are many instances of ideological colonialism of local sources when we label products as excellent (or poor) because of their Asian country of origin.

Bishops from East Asian countries, as in Japan, also perceive a significantly declining birth rate, an aging population and the loneliness of the old in the light of weakened family linkage.

We also discern the rising number of separated couples marrying other partners to the detriment of the children. Single parent families are also on the rise. They struggle hard to maintain and educate the children, but the desire and longing for the presence of the absent father or mother is always a source of anxiety for growing children.

Global Warming and Climate Change

13. The effects of natural disasters and extreme weather changes resulting from global warming and climate change on Asian families are enormous.

Asia is experiencing as never before stronger and more frequent typhoons, floods, land erosion, more severe droughts, prolonged El Niño and La Niña effects. These bring about the

destruction of farm crops and the loss of livelihood. They dislocate thousands of families who are driven to look for a better environment for themselves and their children. They drive thousands of Asian families into deeper poverty and deprivation. They are the new “climate change refugees”.

Tensions within the Family

14. Asian families experience serious tensions from within that threaten the relationships between spouses themselves as well as among the members of the family. The environment of love is commonly broken by domestic violence that sometimes ends up in the hands of police. Children cower in fear and anxiety as their parents do violence on each other not only by words but also by action.

The inadequacy of decent housing among poor families, especially among urban poor, is a health and sanitation hazard. The lack of privacy is also a strong temptation to sexual crimes within the family. Undoubtedly, even though subtly, the gay or lesbian orientation of a member of the family leads sometimes to a silent discomfort and alienation. In some countries, the dowry system becomes a source of great tension at the very beginning of marriage. The harsh treatment of domestic workers is not uncommon.

Deterioration of Religious Faith and Spiritual Values in the Family

15. The creeping emergent global culture of secularism negatively impacts cherished Asian family values. It weakens religious faith, as it has already done in many developed countries in the northern hemisphere.

In some countries, the drive for higher standards of living results in less respect for the elderly and the disabled as they are considered burdens to the family. Consumerism replaces Gospel values of simplicity and responsible stewardship of created goods. In the language of Pope Francis, we are seeing the emergence of a “throw away” culture.

We recognize the positive contributions of the digital revolution to family and social life. But the digital revolution is ambivalent. Together with lights there are shadows. For we perceive the weakening of family bonds in this digital age. It is not unusual to see members of the same family gather together, but each one busy with the mobile phone, texting messages to friends. In the past, the family would gather and watch TV together. Now, mobile phones and iPads have replaced the TV. The sense of family togetherness is gradually being eroded.

Moreover, individualism, a fundamental attribute of the postmodern spirit, is luring the youth away from the family. With this is a gradual reduction of a sense of the family as sacred space of intimacy and love. As family bonds and family support weaken, young people today with even greater frequency than before find love and intimacy among peers and thus result in more teenage pregnancies.

16. We also observe that families do not have an adequate faith formation. Nor do they have the training to transmit their faith to others or exercise their faith in social engagement. Adult faith formation is lacking, making Catholic families vulnerable to the attraction of mushrooming religious sects.

Given the religious and cultural pluralism of Asia, there is a great percentage of interfaith marriages, often to the detriment of the Catholic party.

Yet the weakness of faith and the lack of faith formation of families are not entirely due to outside factors. We must humbly confess that we as leaders and shepherds of the faith have not evangelized our flock adequately that as a result there is a dichotomy between faith and life. Moral teachings are not followed. We need to examine our methods, approaches and language of evangelization in the light of this failure.

The Example and Challenge of Good Families

17. We cannot simply dwell on challenges as problems confronted by Catholic families in Asia. All over Asia are families from different cultural, social and economic backgrounds, families belonging to different religious traditions, interfaith families and families in difficult situations.

In varying milieus, many such families are examples of families that live according to the plan of God. They are parents striving to serve not only their own members but also others especially the poor and the needy, with the assistance of God's ubiquitous grace, on the journey to God's Kingdom. They edify other families and from them other families find support. How to support and maintain such families is a challenge.

Summarizing Questions

18. With these formidable pastoral challenges, we raise vital questions: How can the Asian family respond effectively to the challenges that it confronts? How can the Asian family reflect the communion of participatory communities that the Church envisions itself to be? And still a deeper question: how can the Asian family be a domestic church of the poor that can credibly proclaim from within itself the mercy and compassion of God?

Part II - REFLECTION IN THE LIGHT OF FAITH

Hence we need to reflect from the perspective of our faith about what the Catholic family in Asia should *be* in order to respond effectively and credibly to Asian pastoral challenges.

Fundamental Postulate: Communion of Love, the Ground of Conjugal and Family Love

19. In the fourth chapter of *Amoris Laetitia*, Pope Francis reminds us that "marriage is the icon of God's love for us" (AL 121, citing John Paul II, *Catechesis*, 2 April 2014, in *L'Osservatore Romano*, 3 April 2014, p. 8). This implies that love in marriage is a reflection of God's own love. Divine love is at the heart of conjugal and family life. This is our basic faith-insight.

God's love is fundamentally a communion, the communion of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in perfect charity and unity. So must conjugal and family love be communion.

In conjugal communion man and woman become one, "in a single existence". Similarly, Tertullian noted with deep insight: "How wonderful the bond between two believers with a single hope, a single desire, a single observance, a single service! They are both brethren and both fellow servants; there is no separation between them in spirit or flesh; in fact, they are truly two in one flesh and where the flesh is one, one is the spirit" (*Ad uxorem*, II, VIII, 6-8: CCL I, 393; cited in *Familiaris Consortio* 13).

Such communion of husband and wife in marriage deepens the equality between them. St. Ambrose declares to the husband: "You are not her master, but her husband; she was not given to you to be your slave, but your wife.... Reciprocate her attentiveness to you and be grateful to her for her love" (*Exameron*, V, 7, 19: CSEL 32, I, 154; cited in *Familiaris Consortio* 25).

In family communion, the members of the family are united together, indeed through natural physical generation, but more profoundly through interactive reciprocal love and service of one another - an indescribable gift of God to the family.

A. The Catholic Family in Itself, *ad Intra*.

Eucharistic Family

20. The faith-reality of Communion with the Triune God and especially with Jesus in the Eucharist was a central emphasis of the Ordinary Synod of Bishops on the Eucharist (2005), the Manila FABC Plenary Assembly on Living the Eucharist in Asia (2009), and the recent International Eucharistic Congress in Cebu (2016). The Eucharistic Congress reawakened our fading consciousness of the abiding and loving presence of the Eucharistic Jesus in our lives, in joy or in suffering, or in the ordinary seasons of life.

The Paschal Mystery of Jesus – His Passion, Death and Resurrection – draws everything and everyone to himself as the event of Salvation and Reconciliation (see *Jn* 12:32; also *Col* 1:20). Sacramentally memorialized in the Eucharist, the Paschal Mystery draws together the members of the family to the Lord Jesus and to one another. It is at the beginning of conjugal and family communion.

Undoubtedly, Eucharistic communion is first of all our communion of love with the Triune God. The Johannine biblical texts (see *Jn* 15:10; *1 Jn* 2:24; 3:24) on love and abiding in the Lord Jesus, in the Father and in the Holy Spirit (see *Jn* 14:16-17), speak of divine indwelling in the one who loves God and obeys God's commands.

Indeed, there is no doubt that the triune God is present in every baptized member of the family. Baptized in water and in the power of the Spirit, members of the family are children of the Father, brothers and sisters of Jesus. They are infused with new life and transformed into a new creation by the Spirit, and co-heirs of the Kingdom of God.

Into the Catholic family God has sacramentally poured forth his love and life, making it a “sanctuary of love and life”, an icon of God's mercy and compassion.

The divine presence impels the family to be Eucharistic in the manner of the Eucharistic Jesus who sacrificed his very life “for the many” and then bequeathed his own Body and Blood to us in the Sacrament of the Eucharist. By this total sacrifice, he demonstrated for us how to love, share and serve others, especially the poor and the needy. The family has likewise to have a spirit of sacrifice as it mightily struggles daily for a better life and strives to respond to the needs of others.

The lesson of sharing and serving is what Paul wanted to teach the Corinthians (see *AL* 118-27). He observed a division among them (*1 Cor* 11:18). He noted abuses in the Eucharistic

liturgy. It was tainted by greed and neglect of the hungry and needy (1 Cor 11:21). The Corinthians had forgotten the meaning of the breaking of the bread and drinking of the cup. These were meant to be signs of communion with the Lord, signs too of the unity of the various households or families. The Eucharist was meant to be a liturgy of worship, prayer, and mission.

For this reason, the family that is nourished continually in the prayerful celebration of the Eucharistic worship and enlivened by the Word of God in the Eucharistic liturgy has to be a school of prayer and worship. It is from a Eucharistic life of prayer and worship that the Holy Spirit sends the family to a mission of mercy and compassion in the world.

A Family of Faith, Domestic Church of the Poor

21. We recall the challenge of Jesus to families. When he was told that his mother and brothers were looking for him, he asked: "Who is my mother? Who are my brothers?" He pointed to his disciples and said: "Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my heavenly Father is my brother, and sister and mother" (Mt 12:46-48).

He referred to his new family, a family not of blood but of faith. The example of the first disciples dramatically illustrates how they left their families to enter the disciple-family of Jesus. At the end, it is when "biological families" open themselves to Christ and to others that they become "domestic churches".

In his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis, reminds us of the beginning of the Church. At the root of the Church's identity is "the Church of the Poor". It is a Church where rich and poor alike live a spirit of evangelical poverty and are in solidarity with the poor. Pope Francis himself has this vision: "I want a Church which is poor and for the poor" (EG 198).

The Lord Jesus wanted his community of disciples to follow his way of life, a way of poverty and simplicity, a way of humility.

“Blessed are the poor, for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven” (*Lk* 6:20, see also *Mt* 5:3). The first of the Beatitudes required the disciples to live evangelical poverty and recognize the utter gratuity of God’s gift of life and possessions. This required for the whole community of the faithful, for every household and family, a life of simplicity and sharing (see the life of the early Jerusalem community, in *Acts* 2:42-46 and 4:32-35).

Jesus identified himself with the poor and the needy, the least of his brothers and sisters (see *Lk* 6:20; *Mt* 5:3). In many ways, in words, attitudes and action, he expressed his preferential love of the poor. He was in solidarity with them, walked with them, ennobled them, called them to his side. He recognized the rich who were “poor in spirit”. He denounced greed and indifference to the plight of the poor and the needy (see the Parables of the Rich Man and Lazarus, *Lk* 16:19-31; also the Rich Fool and his barns, *Lk* 12:13-21).

The poverty of his life and death, the values of poverty and simplicity and dependence on God that he taught, his prophetic relationships with the rich and with the poor – these are the values that the Lord wants the Church and each household of faith to have and to live – simply to be a “Church of the Poor”. The Catholic family has, therefore, to be a domestic church of the poor.

Poor in fact was the Holy Family of Nazareth – Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. Mary and Joseph could only give the offering of the poor, a pair of turtle doves (*Lk* 2:24), when they presented Jesus in the Temple. They became refugees in Egypt (*Mt* 2:13-15). Joseph was only a carpenter (*Mt* 13:54-55). The Holy Family of Nazareth is the prototype of a domestic church of the poor.

The Family - "Missionary Disciple"

22. Vatican II (*Lumen Gentium* 1964, *Ad Gentes* 1965) and the papal magisterium (*Evangelii Nuntiandi* 1975, *Christifideles Laici* 1988, *Redemptoris Missio* 1990) have consistently taught that the whole Church is missionary. More recently and more forcefully in *Evangelii Gaudium* (see nos. 20-21, 24), Pope Francis has insisted on the identity of the Church as one "sent forth" to be a herald of Jesus and his Gospel, especially to the "margins" and "peripheries" of humanity, to the poor and the needy with their many faces.

How dramatic and vivid his vision of the Church as a "missionary disciple"! "I prefer a Church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security" (EG 49).

If the whole Church, so also the domestic church, the family. The Catholic family is by identity a "missionary disciple". Mission is the birthright of the Catholic family.

The Daejeon FABC Plenary Assembly succinctly enunciated an emerging Asian ecclesial maxim: "The family is the focal point of evangelization". It is to be evangelized and at the same time it is sent forth to evangelize, to tell "the story of Jesus".

Telling the story of Jesus is not in religious triumphalism but in humility, not with gloom but with joy, not with noisy words but with deeds. Such is authentic missionary discipleship.

The Family as Seedbed of Vocation

23. Although vocation to the priestly and religious life sometimes emerges from broken or irregular families, we cannot forget the fact that it is often in the family that the vocation to the priestly and religious life is sown and nurtured by the Lord usually in a family environment of religious faith.

B. The Catholic Family for Others, *ad Extra*.

Jesus-in-Mission: Mercy and Compassion

24. The Catholic family as a missionary disciple follows in the footsteps of Jesus. His was a mission of mercy and compassion, as he journeyed to the villages of Palestine, “doing good”. Jesus simply described himself as the “One who serves” (*Lk 22:27*).

With compassion, he taught the multitudes (*Mt 9:36*), hungry for the word of God. With compassion, he forgave sinners (e.g., *Lk 7:48; Mt 9:6; Mk 2:9; Lk 5:24*), healed the sick (e.g., *Jn 4:43-54; Mk 1:21-28; Mt 8:14-17; Lk 5:17-26*) and gave bread to the hungry, even promising them the food that does not perish, the Bread and Drink of Eternal Life, His own Body and Blood (see *Jn 6:54*). He insisted on the primacy of compassion in the practice of the Sabbath Law (see *Mk 2:27*), compassion for the untouchables, the unclean of Jewish society, for those who had no rights of their own, foreigners, widows, and orphans. He accepted those rejected by society such as lepers (see *Mt 8:1-4; Lk 7:11-17*), the blind and the lame (*Mt 15:30; 21:14*), even tax collectors such as Zacchaeus (*Lk 9:1-10*). His compassion and mercy transcended borders of race, gender, ethnicity, social and economic class. Whoever was poor and needy was the least of his brothers and sisters. They were all welcomed by Jesus and his table fellowship was with them (see *Mk 2:13-17; Mt 9:11*).

The Family-in-Mission: Doing the Mission of Jesus

25. In the footsteps of Jesus and as his faithful disciple, the Catholic family is likewise sent forth by his Spirit on mission. It is a mission of mercy and compassion to tell and share with others the values that Jesus lived, the values of the Gospel and of the Kingdom that he proclaimed.

Even as the Extraordinary Year of Mercy ended this November on the Feast of Christ the King, the boundless gifts of God’s mercy continue to pour like rain on a parched earth. The Catholic family is a receptacle of God’s love, “*misera et misericordia*”, misery with Mercy, so to speak (see St. Augustine’s

commentary on the encounter of Jesus and the adulterous woman, *Jn* 8:1-11, when “*misera* – the wretched woman” stood alone with “*misericordia* – God’s Mercy”). At the same time the Catholic family has to become an icon of God’s love for the suffering and the needy, *misera et Misericordia*.

Recalling and paraphrasing the words of St. John Paul II in *Ecclesia in Asia* (see no. 23), it is by the silent witness of genuine and faithful Christian life, of authentic discipleship of Jesus, that the Catholic family most eloquently tells the story of Jesus, the compassion and mercy of God, to other families.

Discipleship and mission – these would surely make a difference wherever the Catholic family is located.

PART III - PASTORAL IMPERATIVES FOR THE CATHOLIC FAMILY

26. Our general pastoral imperative is one of discerning, accompanying, and doing.

When we discern the challenges that the Asian family faces and reflect in faith on the Catholic family in itself and *ad extra*, the consequence is ineluctable. The Catholic family has to respond with mercy and compassion, with the joy of the Gospel, to the pastoral challenges.

Yet we have to present a caveat: the minority status of Catholic families in Asia impacts the kind of response they can give to the pastoral challenges they face. Their influence in a society that is predominantly Muslim or Hindu or Buddhist would not be as powerfully felt as in the predominantly Catholic societies of the Philippines and Timor Leste. To face the challenges effectively, collaboration with families of other faiths would be necessary.

A. Responding to the Challenge of Religious Extremism and Violence

27. In view of violent extremism in various parts of Asia, the situation of Catholic families is undoubtedly fraught with the gravest danger. Massacres and burning of homes and churches are perpetrated by a minority group.

The Ever-Present God, Constancy of Hope, Fidelity to Dialogue of Life

But the Gospel is always one of bright hope. God is present in every nook and corner of our world, in every culture and race, tribe and nation. But God is especially present where the cry for freedom and peace, for mutual understanding and respect is raised, where the suffering feel alone and helpless.

The virtue and spiritual gift of prudence urges families to seek safety and refuge from mortal danger. The Spirit-given virtue of courage calls families not to fear but always trust in the Lord. Vulnerability is part and parcel of missionary discipleship – to be lambs in the midst of predators. In such situations, the Spirit of the Lord strengthens Catholic families against paralyzing fear, insecurity and hopelessness. It is in darkness that hope must thrive. Our God is not one who abandons his people; He is with us even when we think he is distant and does not hear the cry of the suffering.

Hence, even as it becomes increasingly difficult to pursue the task of interreligious dialogue, the Catholic family in the midst of a hostile environment needs to persevere in a dialogue of life. Fellowship, solidarity for the common good, friendship, a welcoming of the “other”, respect and understanding are required Gospel attitudes even when they do not seem to be reciprocated.

Christians and members of other religions have biases and prejudices against one another. But, except for a very small minority, they are not agents of radicalism and violence. They are fundamentally oriented towards peace and harmony in a social

context of religious pluralism, where there are minorities and majorities. Hence we have to recognize the profound importance of a dialogue of life.

Solidarity with Victims

28. At the same time, Catholic families need to be in active solidarity with all victims of violent religious radicalism. Solidarity calls for advocacy, material and prayer support. Centers of refuge can be established in collaboration with other religious groups.

B. Responding to the Challenge of Poverty, Migration, and Dislocation.

29. The massive poverty of a great number of Asian families is a call by the Holy Spirit for the family to be truly a domestic Church of the Poor. It has to reach out to families in need. Love is not love when it keeps within itself.

Sharing, Defending the Rights of the Poor

From their own poverty and driven not only by the Asian trait of sharing with the needy but also by the Christian option for the poor, Catholic families share the little they might have, in generosity and joy, with others who are equally poor. And, *noblesse oblige*, the rich most especially have to share from the abundance of God's gifts to them and not only from their surplus.

Everyone in the Church of the Poor is called to defend the rights of the poor. Social teachings call for the creation of jobs, humane conditions of work and family living wage.

Promoting Social Justice, Removing Economic Imbalances and Corruption

30. Most urgent in the Asian poverty situation is for the whole Church, especially rich and powerful members, to promote social justice, remove economic imbalances and corruption that aggravate the poverty situation. Yet each family can contribute towards removing corruption by instilling in the children an abhorrence of bribery and refusing to sow seeds corruption in the family.

Economic imbalances are often entrenched in social structures. Concerted efforts by all citizens of various social, political, or religious groups would be necessary. Networks of collaboration among families in the grassroots, civil society, reform-minded business and political groups, and religious institutions would be effective in uprooting corruption from Asian social structures.

C. Responding to the Challenge of Asian Migrant Workers and Refugees

Conscientization

31. Asian families need to become more aware of the daunting problems that thousands of economic, political, religious, cultural and climatic refugees face. They also have to be more aware of the millions of migrant workers and the families they leave behind. There is a need to conscientize families and the general public in order to remove indifference that is temporarily shed off when media reports on heinous crimes committed by or against refugees and migrant workers.

Collaboration - Departure and Arrival

32. Families from countries of departure and of arrival need to collaborate. In countries of departure, through mediation of various organizations, clusters of families of refugees and migrant workers can be organized at local levels for mutual encouragement and support in the light of dislocation, separation and loneliness, of children growing up in the prolonged absence of parents or older siblings. Civil society, church groups, and government agencies can mediate and facilitate the organization of such clusters of support-families.

Similar local clusters in countries of arrival need likewise to be organized. The welcome that they can express to refugees and migrant workers, the active concern that they have for their legal, economic humanitarian needs and the moral support that they can provide will counteract exploitation and abuse, unfulfilled contracts, and inhumane working conditions.

Yet it is quite true that Catholic refugees and migrant workers and their families provide dynamism to the countries of arrival. Bishops from Japan assert that the future of the Church in Japan is in the hands of Catholic migrant workers.

D. Responding to the Challenge of Political and Cultural Conflicts and Divisions

33. The variety of cultures and ethnic groups within countries often carries mutual prejudices and biases. They find their way into the political sphere, where divisions occur along ethnic and cultural lines, as in minority-majority relationships. Indigenous peoples are often at the losing end. When armed conflicts occur, dislocation of hundreds or thousands of families take place.

Families from different religions and cultures need to come together and work for peace and harmony. There are interfaith groups in the conflict areas of Southern Mindanao (Philippines) called "Mothers for Peace" or "Kids for Peace".

They are peacemakers, “children of God” as the Beatitudes of Jesus would call them (see *Mt* 5:8).

Reducing Biases and Prejudices

34. It is in the family that biases and prejudices are reduced if not eradicated. Parents do the first catechizing of the children. They should set before their children the example of the Lord Jesus in the Gospels.

They need to tell their children the stories of Jesus welcoming and embracing with love all those discriminated upon or set aside by society, such as the daughter of the Syrophenician woman (see *Mk* 7:25-30; *Mt* 15:21-28), the daughter of Jairus (see *Mk* 5:21-43; *Mt* 9:18-26; *Lk* 8:40-56), the sick old man at the pool of Bethsaida (see *Jn* 5:1-15).

The faith formation agencies of the local church have to provide systematic support to the efforts of Catholic families.

But formation in anti-discriminatory living should not only be among Catholic families. Families of interreligious marriages should similarly embark on the same formation journey. The support of their own religious groups, of civil society and the government is necessary.

Promoting and Sustaining a Dialogue of Life among Families

35. Ghettoism, isolationism or flight from a multicultural and multireligious social context are not the solution. At the beginning of peaceful and harmonious relationships among families in such social context is the ordinary dialogue of daily life, in the neighborhood, in markets and places of work, in offices and schools, in streets. Where such a dialogue of life is taking place, there is considerably less likelihood that violent cultural and political conflicts could arise or be abetted.

E. Responding to the Challenge of Ideological Colonialism

36. Ideological colonialism is the gradual domination of alien ideological values, without moral and religious roots, regarding the origins and final destiny of human life, regarding birth and death, gender and alternative forms of human relationships and of family. These are ideological secular values that are alien to the Asian spirit as well as to the doctrinal and moral teachings that should guide Catholic families. Such moral teachings instruct us to respect persons with alternative gender orientations and to provide pastoral care for them through apostolates like COURAGE.

In particular, we need systematically to promote responsible parenthood and natural family planning. This is not merely to counteract the support of international bodies and governments for reproductive health that promotes artificial contraception and abortion. More importantly, we believe that Responsible Parenthood and Natural Family Planning demonstrate our fidelity to the will and plan of God for the family. They are a countersign to purely secular values.

The main agents of ideological colonialism are the tools of social communication that report on or display the trivialities and ephemeral nature of new family values and relationships.

Necessity for Families to be Evangelized about Media

37. There is first the necessity of making families, especially parents, aware of the negative power of the tools of social communication in the communication and formation of secular materialist values. Modern communication gadgets can put aside family conversation and bonding as well as develop a throw away culture as gadgets are quickly overtaken by new versions. Tools of social communication are often the instruments of pornography and sexual allurements.

Families can learn together the good and the bad of the tools of social communication.

Necessity of Evangelizing Media

38. In a similar way, families can also discern together on how through media they can expand their knowledge of God, of their faith, the world of the poor; how they can use media in accord with the Gospel values of simplicity, sharing, solidarity with the poor, in defense of their rights and dignity.

Together, families can put pressure on the powers that control media, on the government and on media practitioners so that media could be truly channels of Kingdom values, of truth, integrity, peace and harmony, and development.

In a very practical way, the tools of social communication can be instruments in keeping the bonds of family and kinship firm and solid by keeping migrant workers and refugees in touch with their relatives and friends.

These are some of the ways by which families can evangelize media.

F. Responding to the Challenge of Climate Change and Global Warming

39. The over-all response of families to the ecological challenge does not stem from any scientific reason but from *missio Dei*. God's mission for families is to take care of and be stewards of the integrity of creation. This is the message of the papal encyclical *Laudato Si'* on the care and stewardship of creation, our common home.

We observe that States and international organizations are striving to agree on protocols to reduce the emission of greenhouse gases (GHGs) that cause global warming and climate change. Scientists point to human responsibility as the main cause of GHG emission.

Hence individuals and families have a significant role to play on climate change mitigation.

Becoming Aware of the Reality of Climate Change

40. With the assistance of government and church institutions, of civil society, especially NGOs, processes of educating families about the reality, the causes, and the effects of global warming and climate change have to be initiated and supported.

It is in this way that families will become more concerned about the impact of day to day activities on the environment as well as about the care of the earth.

Simple ways of Mitigating Climate Change

41. Families are not entirely helpless before the universal scientific complexity of global warming and climate change. In truth, the cleansing of creation from the pollution that has endangered its life-support system should start from the family. The old adage “Cleanliness is next to godliness” is admittedly trite but never trivial.

Families can do ordinary things to mitigate global warming by reducing in their own homes the emission of GHGs. Some of these ways are saving water, changing electric bulbs to those that are brighter with less consumption of energy, switching off electric gadgets when not in use, using cold water for laundry, using motor vehicles with better gas mileage, having less beef for meals, not burning dry leaves and waste materials, reusing and recycling used materials, investing finances in ethically, socially and environmentally responsible investments.

In sum, living a simple but decent lifestyle is a call of the Holy Spirit that the family can easily respond to. And surely, our own pastoral programs can help mobilize families to act locally and think globally.

Acting together, families from different religions can make known their various concerns about the environment, pressure policy makers to enact environment-friendly public directives and laws. It is by acting on behalf of the care of the

earth that families can give intergenerational justice to future generations.

G. Role of Government, Church, Civil Society and Non-Government Organizations

42. For families in Asia to respond effectively to the pastoral challenges, they need strong support from the public.

Raising Awareness

Government and church institutions, civil society and NGOs need to collaborate with parents in educating their families and making them aware of the challenges that confront them. They have to help families know the nature of the challenges and realize their impact. Strong collaboration is needed particularly to dismantle the mindsets of patriarchy that discriminates and exploits women as subservient to men.

Organizing and Empowering Families

They have to assist in organizing them into networks of families and providing them with necessary resources for their tasks. With such organizing and resource support, families can be properly empowered to meet the challenges.

Distinctive Role of the Church - Doctrinal and Moral Formation and Guidance

43. A fundamental task for church institutions is to provide families with the doctrinal and moral formation and guidance that would assist them in responding effectively to the challenges.

Such formation can be done most effectively in Basic Ecclesial Communities, where families themselves can initiate concrete action to address the pastoral challenges they confront.

PART IV - RECOMMENDATIONS TO EPISCOPAL CONFERENCES AND LOCAL CHURCHES

44. At the Daejeon Assembly on the Family, recommendations were made on establishing a family ministry towards a culture of integral life (see VIII FABC Plenary Assembly, *Final Statement*, 118-127). Such family ministry was meant to include but also go beyond the traditional family ministry that was mainly concerned with “pro-life” issues.

The question can rightly be raised: a decade or so after Daejeon, how far have family ministries moved towards the promotion of “integral life”?

In view of the Asian pastoral challenges that we have discerned and of the necessity of assisting families to respond to them effectively, we need to expand the Daejeon recommendations.

A. The Family as the Focal Point of Pastoral Programs

45. If we believe that the Family is the Focal Point of Evangelization, it is recommended that the pastoral programs of the local church be oriented to the development of God-fearing families, steeped in the values of the Gospel and of the Kingdom so necessary for society.

B. Establishing a Family Ministry towards a Culture of Integral Life

46. Episcopal Conferences and local churches should set up:

1. “A Family Ministry that Forms and Empowers” the Family for Mission;
2. “A Family Ministry that Cares and Serves”
 - a. single parents, intercultural and interreligious families
 - b. families in difficult situations – broken, remarried, families with drug or alcohol dependent members;

- c. families with physically or psychologically disadvantaged members
 - d. families of migrant workers and refugees
 - e. families of indigenous peoples, tribals, etc.
 - f. parental and youth counseling
 - g. child care programs
3. "A Family Ministry that Promotes Social Transformation"
- a. Fostering Integral faith formation
 - b. Promoting social awareness in the family
 - c. Collaborating with families of other faiths in addressing social justice and peace issues
 - d. Pressuring governments to respect religious freedom when conditionalities for economic grants are imposed that run counter to doctrinal and moral teachings
 - e. Stopping the threat of religious violence
 - f. Rejecting the use of children and minors in war
 - g. Forming families into families of dialogue and peace
 - h. Stopping child and women trafficking, sex tourism.
 - i. Implementing the recommendations of the FABC seminars on climate change.

C. Formation of Conscience

47. Formation of Conscience has to be a special concern for the family ministry. Husband and wife make critical decisions together with regard to their marriage, their children, and their future together. It is most necessary to form an enlightened and right conscience when today individual freedom of conscience, totally independent of the will of God, is becoming a global norm. Doctrinal and moral guidance for parents is an imperative. They themselves have to provide such guidance to their growing children.

D. Youth Ministry

48. In the formation of God-fearing families, the pastoral care of the youth is of critical importance. They are “millennials” with values, ways of thinking, interests and skills that are quite different from the youth of 30 years ago. They are young men and women of a very secular digital age. Youth Ministry has to address their search for meaning, their restlessness, their psychological alienation and drifting away from their parents, their inner hunger for their ideals to be realized.

E. On the Formation of Pastoral Agents of the Family

49. Episcopal Conferences and Local Churches are to design modules of formation by which priests, deacons, religious sisters and brothers and their lay collaborators take on attitudes and skills so necessary for the family ministry, such as pastoral discernment and accompaniment.

Even going back to seminary formation, the Plenary Assembly recommends that candidates to the priesthood be introduced into the pastoral care and accompaniment of different forms of families through pastoral exposure and theological reflection on the sacrament of marriage.

Likewise noted by the Assembly is the need for foreign missionaries to be inculturated so as to provide more effective pastoral accompaniment for Asian families with their rich variety of cultures and ways of life.

Of great significance in Asia would be the encouragement and support of episcopal conferences for lay movements dedicated to the sacrament and the life of marriage, and related to issues, such as Marriage Encounter Movement, Catholic Family Movement, Retrouvaille, Couples for Christ, Focolare Movement, movements dedicated to single parents and the like. They promote spirituality in marriage and family and are outstanding collaborators in Family Ministry.

F. Collaborative Efforts

50. Moreover, we recommend that episcopal conferences and dioceses work in partnership towards the formation and development of holistic family ministries. They should exchange information, share resources, even come together for family formation, the formation of lay leaders for participation in the renewal of families.

A notable example of this collaborative effort was the Asian Seminar on “Shepherding Families in Asia”, organized jointly by the FABC Office of the Clergy and Office of the Laity and Family in Hua Hin (Thailand) on 16-20 May 2016.

CONCLUSION - SPIRITUALITY OF COMMUNION FOR THE FAMILY

A. In the Depths of Being - Communion of Love

Communion with the Triune God

51. The fundamental response of the family to Asian challenges springs from the heart of the family. For it is in the heart of the family that we find the very center of its giftedness – the immeasurable joyful love of our God of mercy and compassion.

The Triune God loving the family, the family loving the Triune God – this has to be the lifegiving spring from which gushes forth every response, attitudinal or active, that the family provides.

Communion in the Family, Mutual Shepherding

52. Let husband and wife be ever aware that the fundamental ground of their communion with one another is the sacred bond of their marriage covenant by which they commit each other before God and the community to be united forever in a single conjugal existence. Ultimately grounded in their communion with God, this is at the heart of a spirituality of communion.

Wife and husband demonstrate in the concrete the depth of this spirituality by a daily decision to be faithful in love for each other. They shepherd each other, minister to each other, in the way of virtue and righteousness in the midst of daily challenges. And many and varied these challenges are in the Asian situation of religious and cultural pluralism, especially in interfaith marriages so common in Asia. Thus do they grow in grace before God in a communion of love and service, growing old together in God through trials and testing in the love and care of each other (see AL 19). At bottom, the vocation of marriage is a vocation to holiness, to communion with God.

Communion between parents and children is daily demonstrated in the love, care and service they have for one another. It grows through mutual shepherding. Parents shepherd their children to deeper communion with other members of the family and with God. Parental counseling helps in educating the children towards faithful love, but the most important factor is not precept but the living example of faithful love.

Conjugal and family love is a generous, patient, and forgiving love. Spouses and their children need to forgive one another for theirs is a love that is never perfect, never free from human fragility and weakness. It is through daily mutual, patient, kind and forgiving love, through loving care and service that an "interior freedom" for God and for one another is built. That interior freedom becomes connatural with communion (see AL 320).

B. Prayer – Building Communion with God and in the Family

53. Prayer is the absolute *sine qua non* for the family to build communion with God. Popular devotion, such as the Rosary, prayer before and after meals, novenas, especially devotion to the Holy Family and Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament.

More importantly family devotion has to be directed to the Word of God. One of the most commendable practices of Basic Ecclesial Communities is for families to read the Bible and

pray with the Bible. We pray that Episcopal Conferences conduct a campaign to provide a Bible for every family.

Prayer helps build up family togetherness. It strengthens the marriage covenant. It gradually transforms the family into a school of prayer and worship.

Special effort must be made by family ministries to encourage husbands to be prayer leaders. In many countries, readily observable is the minimal participation of men in prayer.

Prayer is more than external devotions. The young have to be taught in simple “contemplative” prayer as in Taizé forms of prayer and in Eucharistic Holy Hour devotions.

54. The family can choose a Saint to be the patron of the family and invoke the name of the Saint in devotional prayers and have a family novena of prayers to prepare for the annual fiesta of the Family Patron.

Parents need to build up the faith of their children by telling stories of holy men and women who have become saints through the ordinary ways of being family, such as Saints Louis Martin and Marie-Azélie Guérin (the parents of St. Thérèse of Lisieux), canonized recently by Pope Francis, as well as the husband and wife team of Luigi Beltrame Quattrocchi and Maria Corsini, beatified by St. John Paul II.

They should especially tell and retell the ultimate Christian witnessing of many lay martyrs in Japan, Korea, China, India, Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, Myanmar, and recently in Laos, family men and women, lay catechists and teenagers. They constitute a treasury of heroes of the faith that made their families a domestic church. They should not forget the thousands of unrecognized martyrs in various parts of Asia who were killed because they believed in Christ.

55. Although many people from other religions join popular devotions, such participation cannot be presumed in interfaith marriage. Here loving dialogue before and after marriage on the necessity of religiously following the practices of one's faith for the common good of the family is necessary. It is about the exercise of religious freedom and the optimum religious tolerance necessary for a happy marriage.

Such observation is also true for participation of the family or of the Catholic partner at the Eucharist in interfaith marriages.

C. Eucharistic Spirituality of Communion

56. At the summit of family prayer and worship is the Holy Eucharist. It is the sacrament *par excellence* of communion with God. It is the sacramental memorial of the Passion, Death, and Resurrection of the Lord – the ultimate saving event of reconciliation and communion with God, with our neighbor, with the whole of creation.

Participation of the family, led by the father and mother, at the celebration of the Eucharist, bonds the family in a supreme act of prayer and worship, in the sublime total self-giving of Jesus on the Cross. The family in piety and devotion has to feel with the heart the Eucharistic act of Jesus, his body broken for the family, his blood poured out for the family.

In the Eucharist, communion of the Family with the Triune God, with neighbor, with society and with the environment is complete, especially when the family makes it a regular practice to receive the Lord in Holy Communion.

The joy of love, *amoris laetitia*, is the indispensable ground of a family spirituality of communion that is Eucharistic.

D. From Communion to Mission

57. A Eucharistic spirituality explicates the reaching out in love and service that the spirituality of communion requires.

Love of God impels the family to imitate the Eucharistic Jesus, to live and share the meaning of the Eucharist, to “shepherd in mercy” each member of the family and to look beyond itself and reach out in communion with others to meet Asian challenges.

Together with other families they help evangelize the Asian world and transform it to an ever-closer reflection of God’s reign.

E. Family-in-Mission of Mercy, Sent by the Holy Spirit

58. From the heart of the family, the inner energy, the impelling inspiration, the driving force of the Holy Spirit impels the family to mission.

A family that is “spiritual” is alive in the Spirit and is energized into mission of mercy. It is thus that the Catholic family tells the story of the compassionate Jesus to other families and to Asian society.

A family that is united to the Triune God, united within itself among its members, united with others and with creation is stirred into life by the spirituality of communion.

F. Gratitude to Families

59. We, in this XI FABC Plenary Assembly, rejoice that there are many Catholic families in Asia who live the faith in the midst of a multireligious environment. We thank the Lord for them and commend them for their perseverance and witness in love, hope, and joy.

We offer our support to the families facing different problems within and outside their homes. We pray with them and for them that they continue to feel the blessings of our God of Mercy, be filled with hope, ever inspired by the example of the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph.

G. Consecration to the Holy Family of Nazareth

60. May we always realize that Mary, Mother of Mercy, Queen of the Family and the Morning Star of New Evangelization, constantly accompanies Catholic families in Asia in this journey of transformative evangelization.

At the Manila FABC Plenary Assembly we consecrated Asia to Mary our Mother. Today in Colombo we consecrate the Catholic Families of Asia to the Holy Family of Nazareth. Under the guidance of his parents, Mary and Joseph, the Child Jesus learned obedience, the virtues of moral living, the ways of Jewish prayer and devotion, and grew in wisdom and knowledge. The Holy Family of Nazareth is the iconic Asian family for all times.

May Jesus, Mary, and Joseph be the companion of the Catholic Family in Asia to become in word and in deed a domestic church of the poor on a mission of mercy.

Approved this third day of December in the year of our Lord 2016, the feast of St. Francis Xavier, Patron Saint of Missions, Apostle to Asia.

II. FINAL MESSAGE

To All the Peoples of Asia,

'The Catholic Family in Asia: Domestic Church of the Poor on a Mission of Mercy.'

Introduction

We, the delegates to the XI Plenary Assembly of the Federation of the Asian Bishops' Conferences gathered in Colombo, Sri Lanka from 28 November - 4 December, give praise to God for having given us this opportunity to come together as Church in Asia. This is indeed an expression of our communion and solidarity not only with the universal Church but also with the particular Churches in Asia. We missed the presence of our brethren from the Church in China but it is our hope that this will change soon and that a

gathering such as this in the future may truly represent a greater diversity and uniqueness of Asia.

We are deeply thankful to the government and the Church in Sri Lanka for having extended a cordial welcome and hospitality during our stay. Being present in a country that has in recent times been working persistently and constructively towards reconciliation, it is our prayer that God's peace may truly reign in this land and in the hearts of everyone.

Ongoing Dialogue on the Family

In the last couple of years, Pope Francis, recognizing the importance of the family to the Church and society, has initiated a "series of conversations" on the family in the Church namely, the Third Extraordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops on the Pastoral Challenges of the Family in the Context of Evangelization (5 - 19 October 2014), the Fourteenth Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops on the Vocation and the Mission of the Family in the Church and in the Contemporary World (4 - 25 October 2015), the Extraordinary Jubilee Year of Mercy (8 December 2015 - 20 November 2016) and the publication of the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* (19 March 2016). Recognizing that the impact of these conversations is varied from place to place since our "cultures are in fact quite diverse and every general principle... needs to be inculturated, if it is to be respected and applied" (AL, 3), the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences has chosen to continue this conversation at its XI Plenary Assembly with the theme *The Catholic Family in Asia: Domestic Church of the Poor on a Mission of Mercy*

The Joys in Family Life

During the days that we have spent together, we once again recognised how important the family is to the Asian ethos. For centuries, the family has been the foundation on which societies and nations have been and will continue to be built. The beauty of our families is that we are not only made up of the nuclear family but we live in and care for the extended family which is

the bedrock of our existence. Children, young people, and the elderly further enliven and strengthen family relations. It is from this inter-connectedness that many of us have learnt the value of faith and community living in a spirit of unity and respect for one another. The interfaith and intercultural families, though not without challenges, have also enriched the life of the Church and promoted the values of understanding and harmony in society.

We celebrate the fact that the sense of the Divine exists in many of our families. This certainly provides direction, support, and inspiration to remain faithful despite challenging times. We are glad that many Asian families give life and sustain the faith in many communities and countries where they have chosen to begin a new life for they are indeed our missionary disciples. We listened not only to one another but also the testimonies of some families expressing the varied experiences of family life and views from other religious leaders. We are grateful to God for the gift of families to the Church in Asia for we know that the Church is indeed a communion of families modelled after the communion of the Holy Trinity.

The Challenges to Family Life

Even though we recognise the joys of family life, we are not oblivious to the challenges faced by many of our families. Every country in Asia is not spared of the rapid changes that are affecting the family. At this crucial time of our history, we in Asia are confronted with realities that affect the heart of family life in the areas of poverty, migration, corruption, human trafficking and prostitution, new forms of colonialism, gender inequality, violence against minorities, ecological degradation, religious extremism, broken and dysfunctional families, and the numerous other situations that are equally complex and multifaceted. These pose great strain on our families as they strive to remain faithful and many families have also been left hurt and wounded. Some of these challenges are aggravated given the greater accessibility to the numerous forms of media that seem to be changing gospel values that Asian families have given great importance to through the centuries.

Recognising the countless challenges that confront us in Asia, we acknowledge that family life has been impoverished in various ways. Though in many parts of our continent, economic poverty is a widespread reality, we are also concerned with the other forms of “poverty” - emotional, spiritual, relational, cultural, intellectual, physical and social. These new forms of poverty have been brought about due to the fast-changing landscape of Asia. Though these forms of poverty can often cripple one’s outlook of life, families must not be afraid to embrace the gift of life.

Moving Forward

In these days of being together, we realised again that given the complexity of the situation before us, we do not have answers to all these challenges. However, what became clear is that we in Asia need to put our minds together, consolidate our efforts and resources, and strategize constructively together for the sake of our families. In the words of Pope Francis, “we are not living in an era of change but a change of era” (*Decennial National Conference of the Italian Church, 2016*). This ‘change of era’ is profoundly affecting our families - the domestic Church. We not only need to work together but also support one another in this mission. We must together seek a ‘spirituality of the family’ that is founded on a personal encounter with Jesus Christ so that we can assist and sustain each other during these changing and challenging times. Many families are already rooted in our rich tradition of family prayer and bible sharing. The Holy Eucharist is central to the family for living a prophetic way of life. We strongly encourage and support this journey.

We also call on families to nurture the gift of children in the family for “the family is the setting in which a new life is not only born but also welcomed as a gift of God” (AL, 166). Let us be mindful that ultimately “each new life allows us to appreciate the utterly gratuitous dimension of love, which never ceases to amaze us.” (AL, 166).

Though the contexts from which we come are different, the changing face of the family is a phenomenon that affects us all. A

concrete fruit of the *XI FABC Plenary Assembly* is the document *The Catholic Family in Asia: Domestic Church of the Poor on a Mission of Mercy* which we humbly offer to all Asian families. We invite local churches and families to study and reflect on this document. It is our hope that those engaged in ministering to the family will lead the way in celebrating the joys of family life, promoting the sacredness of life, marriage and the family, accompanying, supporting and sustaining families.

May the Holy Family of Nazareth inspire the Church in Asia and our families to be missionary disciples of mercy.

✠ Oswald Cardinal Gracias
President – FABC

Fr. Raymond L. O'Toole, SFM
Secretary General – FABC

Given in Colombo, Sri Lanka on 4 December 2016

The delegates comprised of Bishops representing member Episcopal Conferences and Associate Members of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences; the Holy Father's Special Envoy, His Eminence Telesphore Placidus Cardinal Toppo; the Apostolic Nuncio, His Excellency Archbishop Pierre Nguyen Van Tot; fraternal delegates from Federations of Episcopal Conferences of Oceania (FCBCO), Africa (SECAM), Europe (CCEE), the United States (USCCB), and the Council of Catholic Patriarchs of the Orient (CCPO); Bishops and Secretaries of the FABC Offices; representatives of several funding and donor partners; and invited guests. We were a total of 137 participants (11 Cardinals, 22 Archbishops, 53 Bishops, 31 Priests, 2 Religious and 18 Laity).

III. DEDICATION OF CATHOLIC FAMILIES IN ASIA

TO THE HOLY FAMILY OF NAZARETH

Jesus, Mary and Joseph, you lived in Asia.

We praise, glorify and thank you
as the sublime family,

the example of a sanctuary of love and life,
a living Gospel, the icon of God's mercy and compassion.

O Holy Family of Nazareth,
today as we celebrate the Holy Eucharist
we dedicate to you our Catholic families in Asia
amidst the difficulties that they daily face.
May they be families of love and prayer,
in constant communion with our loving God.

May God our Father protect and give them strength
in their daily striving to do His will.
May the Holy Spirit inspire and guide them
to reach out to other families,
especially to those in need.
May they experience the loving presence of Jesus
in the joys and sorrows of their lives.

As their shepherds, we commit ourselves
in pastoral charity to care for their total well-being,
especially for the well-being of families in the peripheries.
We commit ourselves to the conviction
that the family is the focal point
of a new evangelization.

Jesus, Mary and Joseph, be the companion
of our Catholic families in Asia
in their journey to become, in word and deed,
domestic churches of the poor
on a mission of mercy and compassion.
Amen

XI FABC Plenary Assembly
Colombo, Sri Lanka
December 4, 2016

APPENDIX

A. Letter of the Holy Father to the Papal Envoy



To Our Venerable Brother
His Eminence **TELESPHORE PLACIDUS** Cardinal **TOPPO**
Metropolitan Archbishop of Ranchi

It would be useful indeed to recall that, in antiquity, when the zealous missionaries of the Gospel arrived on the shores of Asia, they ministered to the people of those lands with the saving gifts of the most merciful Saviour himself. With the abundant showering of divine grace, the seed of the Word of God was then diligently planted in those regions, expanding and growing into a strong stalk of grain yielding a fruitful harvest.

Thus having before our eyes the past and looking towards the future, the Church in Asia gathers for the eleventh time, so that, with renewed fervor, she may more abundantly obtain the graces from the heart of our Divine Redeemer. For this reason, the XI Plenary Assembly of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) shall duly convene, wherein it shall give plenty of attention to the enlivening of a stronger sense of religious fervour with a more solid faith and to promoting steadfast resolutions.

Therefore, when Our Venerable Brother Oswald Gracias, Metropolitan Archbishop of Bombay and President of FABC, requested that We send a delegate from Holy See, We deemed it appropriate to grant such wish, so that this forthcoming Assembly may proceed in a more dignified and distinguished manner. That is why We beseech you, yourself an honourable son of the Asian Continent, to act on Our behalf on this special occasion. Accordingly, with great esteem and affection, We

appoint and delegate you, Our Venerable Brother, to be **Our Special Envoy** to the XI Plenary Assembly of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conference to be celebrated from 28 November to 4 December in the City of Colombo, Sri Lanka.

Please extend Our kind wishes to all the Bishops and to all the participants gathered there. Even though separated by long distances, We shall be present together in spirit. And as the Jubilee Year of Mercy is drawing to a close, We wish in Our name and by Our authority to bestow Our Apostolic Blessing, filled with the wonderful spiritual fruits of this event. May this Blessing be a sign of spiritual renewal and evidence of supernatural graces. At the same time, We ask you all to pray that We may fruitfully carry out Our Petrine ministry.

Given from the Vatican City, on the 10th day of October, in the year 2016, The Jubilee Year of Mercy, the fourth in Our Pontificate.

Francisus

(Translation from Latin by Fr. Cyril J. Law, Jr., Diocese of Macau)

B. Homily at Solemn Opening Mass by His Eminence Telesphore Placidus Cardinal Toppo, Holy Father's Special Envoy, Archbishop of Ranchi

Your Eminence, Malcolm Cardinal Ranjith, Your Eminence, Oswald Cardinal Gracias, FABC President, Your Eminences, Archbishops, Bishops, and Friends in the Lord Jesus,

We have gathered here in this beautiful country to participate in the XI FABC Plenary Assembly. On this gracious occasion, I greet each of you and hold you as brothers in the Lord with a holy embrace. I understand that it is a God given moment for all of us to dwell on the theme, "The Asian Catholic Family: Domestic Church of the poor on a mission of mercy". Though the Holy Year of Mercy was concluded on the feast of the universal

Kingship of Jesus, the mission of mercy continues. Therefore the theme is within the context and very relevant for the Church in Asia. 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. I am confident that the wisdom of God will guide us to see everything holistically and guide the Catholic families in Asia to live and remain committed in the great and vibrant mission of mercy.

The first reading of the day sets the context for our reflection resonating hope and innumerable possibilities. The vision of Isaiah about a shoot that will come up from the stump of Jesse is placed at the background of God's anger against the Assyrian king for the wilful pride of his heart and the remnant of Israel beautifully described with a powerful imagery of the felling of lofty and tall trees.

The situation is one of despair, brokenness, hopelessness and destruction. 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. 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. All these and more have left their spell on the Catholic families who are in a strange dichotomy to live faithfully a life of faith and at the same time put up with the social, cultural issues affecting families and the society at large. Therefore a reflection on families with the clarified vision of transforming them into instruments of mercy is very vital today. Our Hope is the shoot from the stump of Jesse.

The vision of Isaiah has the remarkable dynamism of hope and certitude pointing towards stability and peace. The branch will flower and bear fruit: it will flourish in order to provide protection and nourishment for the people of Judah. Isaiah explains how this shoot will grow into a fruit bearing tree. He says that it will be conferred with wisdom and discernment; counsel and might; knowledge and fear of the Lord and the animating Spirit. Thus it will grow into a mighty fruit bearing tree. Our challenge then is to confer on the families the required faith dynamism to be actively engaged in the mission of mercy.

Isaiah now shifts the scene from a tree to a pasture and he presents an incredible scene of possibilities -- the wolf living with the lamb; the leopard lying down with the goat; the calf, the lion and the yearling being led by children; the cow feeding with the bear; lion eating straw with the ox; the infant playing near the

cobra's den and young child freely putting its hand into the viper's nest. They will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. Therefore they will not harm each other, or destroy one another on the holy mountain of God. This is the promise, the glorious, abundant resting place where the root of Jesse stands as a banner for the peoples. How shall we cover our families and fill them with the knowledge of God, the experience of God will remain one of our greatest challenges today.

The Church in Asia has to have a bold vision like Isaiah to transform our families, the Domestic Churches of the poor into channels of mercy. Each family will have to grow into a fruit bearing tree and all of them together create the new pasture of fruitfulness. Of course, the vision of Isaiah is of the Messiah who is the shoot from the stump of Jesse and the hope of Israel and the entire human race. We know Him now. St. John says in his first letter, 'We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us'. (1Jn 1:3)

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.

C. Messages delivered at Opening Ceremony

- His Eminence Malcolm Cardinal Ranjith, Archbishop of Colombo, President of CBCSL

Your Eminence, Telesphore Placidus Cardinal Toppo, the Papal Envoy, Your Eminence Oswald Cardinal Gracias, President of the FABC, Your Eminences, Your Excellencies, Dear Fr. Ray O'Toole, Dear Rev. Fathers, Brothers and Sisters, distinguished invitees and ladies and Gentlemen,

A warm word of welcome to all of you who have accepted the FABC invitation to attend its 11th Plenary meeting and have reached Colombo and more specifically this little town of Negombo today. On behalf of the Catholic Bishops Conference of Sri Lanka I welcome you all, most cordially.

Negombo was the natural choice of our Episcopal Conference when our offer to host this meeting here in Colombo was accepted. We are honoured by this and are grateful to His Eminence Oswald Cardinal Gracias, the FABC President and all the members of the Central Committee for consenting to organize this all important meeting here. Though Sri Lanka itself is largely a coming together of believers of the four world religions, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and Christianity, Negombo by and large has a stronger presence of Catholics as you would have already noted. It is called "Little Rome" by the Sri Lankans not just because we Catholics are a consistent number here, but also because Negombo itself is a sign of our "Catholicness" in the fact that Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims and Christians exist, interact and live in harmony here, open to each other and respecting and learning from each other. This has been a long tradition. Infact even during repeated race riots which marred Sri Lanka in the past, Negombo was a safe heaven for all. No one was hurt here and no property destroyed. Everyone felt safe here. The majority Catholic community here has always been protecting all the others who shared this town with them. It is like Jerusalem and we know what that means, etymologically: the "City of Peace" -

yir - Shalom. In the same way Negombo is a perfect example of peaceful co-existence, something we in Sri Lanka need to strongly re-discover after the 30 year conflict we have been through and which had cost us so much in terms of life and property. Still the old wounds have to be completely healed and we need courage to do that, courage that would make us stretch our hands out to the others in a spirit of readiness to forego what can be even legitimately ours. Of late, Sri Lanka has started a journey towards achieving that and I call upon all of you to pray for us so that the Lord may help us to experience a true national transformation, moving away from our entrenched positions of self preservation to one of true peace, unity and a healing spirit of diversity.

We thank the Central Committee of the FABC, its President and Secretary General for according to us this opportunity to host the Plenary here. The CBCSL and the Organizing Committee is happy to welcome each and every one of you to Sri Lanka and to Colombo with open arms. We hope you will enjoy your stay here with us. We are at your service to make this a happy occasion and before terminating these words, I consider it my duty to thank His Excellency the President and the Hon. Prime Minister of Sri Lanka, the Hon. Minister of the Tourism, Lands and Christian Religious Affairs, John Amaratunga and the Hon. Minister of Finance, Ravi Karunanayake and all the Government officials for the technical and monetary support they offered us all the way to make this event a happy one and even wished to meet all of us here in this venue and at the President's House during our Plenary. We wish you all a fruitful and pleasant stay.

May God bless our Plenary.

Ayubowan and welcome!

Message delivered at Opening Ceremony

- His Eminence, Telesphore Placidus Cardinal Toppo, Papal Envoy, Archbishop of Ranchi

Honourable Ranil Wickremesinghe, Prime Minister of Sri Lanka

Honourable Ravi Karunanayake, Minister of Finance

Honourable John Amaratunga, Minister of Christian Religious Affairs

It is my privilege to convey to you warm greetings from His Holiness Pope Francis who has sent me to this beautiful country as his special envoy, to bring his blessings.

Pope Francis had the joy of visiting this great country in January 2015 on the occasion of the canonization of St. Joseph Vaz. On this visit he was able to personally witness the deep religiosity of the people here which deeply impressed him. In his several discussions he learnt of the strong family ties that bind people here.

During these days the bishop representatives from all over Asia will be discussing the theme: "The Asian Catholic Family: Domestic Church of the poor on a Mission of Mercy."

Although we will be discussing about the Asian Catholic Family we are aware that the result of these deliberations will impact all of society in Asia and not just Catholic Families.

As you are aware the Holy Father had called a Jubilee Year of Mercy and had invited all the Churches to take initiatives of mercy. It is in this context that we also seek to inspire families to undertake a mission of mercy.

While I thank Your Excellencies for your special visit to this Plenary Assembly of the FABC, I also bring you best wishes from His Holiness Pope Francis and his special apostolic blessings and assurance of prayers.

Thank you

Message delivered at Opening Ceremony

- His Eminence Oswald Cardinal Gracias, Archbishop of Mumbai, President of FABC

Your Eminence, Cardinal Telesphore Placidus Toppo, the Papal Envoy

Your Eminence, Cardinal Malcolm Ranjith, the Archbishop of Colombo

Archbishop Pierre Nguyen Van Tot, Apostolic Nuncio to Sri Lanka

The Honorable Ranil Wickremesinghe, Prime Minister of Sri Lanka

The Honorable Ministers of Finance and Christian Religious Affairs

My dear brother Cardinals, Archbishops, Bishops, Friends of the FABC and Guests

It's a great joy to be over here in Sri Lanka for the XI Plenary Assembly of the FABC where we will discuss the family, the Asian Catholic Family, the Domestic Church of the Poor on A Mission of Mercy. The Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences is a Federation of nineteen Episcopal Conferences and has eight Associate Members in twenty nine countries in Asia. The initiative to establish a Federation was taken on the occasion of the first visit of Pope Paul VI, now Blessed Paul VI, to Manila, back in 1970. And it is a privilege for us to know that one of those who were present at that time, was a young Sri Lankan Bishop, Bishop Oswald Gomis, presently Archbishop Emeritus of Colombo, who was associated with FABC in those early days. It is our joy to have him present here today.

With respect to the FABC, the stated objective is solidarity and co-responsibility. But our efforts go beyond solidarity and co-responsibility. Our objectives are co-operation, collaboration, working together to spread God's kingdom, to see how the bigger churches can help the ones that are not so big, how the churches that are well-formed are able to help those who are not yet fully vibrant because of many reasons, internal and external.

We are privileged, in joy, that the Holy Father has shown special affection for Asia and for FABC, by sending his own Special Envoy, Cardinal Telesphore Toppo to represent him and to convey his greetings to us personally. His warm letter of the appointment

shows how much concern he has for Asia. The Holy Father has already come to Asia three times, to Sri Lanka, Korea and the Philippines. He has also shown his special love for Asia by recently appointing two of our own Asian Bishops as Cardinals, in fact just nine days ago, Cardinal Soter Fernandez and Cardinal Patrick D'Rozario.

The FABC meets every four years and we take as our theme, some topics which are relevant and which can help us in our work. We respond this time to the twin calls of Pope Francis; one is to be missionaries of mercy, agents of mercy and the second, is the call in *Amoris Laetitia*, of special pastoral concern towards the family. We have taken as our theme for discussion, the Asian Catholic Family, Domestic Church of the Poor on the Mission of Mercy. We hope that we will have very fruitful discussions.

We are proud in Asia of strong family ties. We are proud in Asia about our concern for the elderly. We are proud in Asia for the fact that our people have a deep religiosity, as His Eminence Cardinal Toppo said that the Pope had noticed on his visit here. We are proud in Asia of our many spiritual values. However, as a result of globalization, the tremendous advance in communications technology, winds of change are blowing and some of our traditional Asian values could sometimes get diluted. And therefore the urgency and necessity for us leaders of the church, to face the challenge of protecting these Asian values which are so dear to us and are so important for society. We need to make sure that these values are not eroded - that individualism, hedonism, materialism, secularism, which have infected society in many parts of the world, do not also infect us, our people, our families, and the religious life of our people. We are looking forward to very fruitful discussion these next few days. Cardinal Ranjith, in his welcome address, said that we hope we have a fruitful and pleasant stay. A fruitful stay, we know, depends on us participants. A pleasant stay: I want to say to Cardinal Ranjith, we already have experienced the warm hospitality from the moment we landed at the airport until we reached at the Plenary venue.

Thank you very much for the kindness and affection and efficiency that we have experienced. Just this morning at breakfast, one bishop told me, Eminence, why do we have this meeting only once in four

years. Can we have it once, twice a year? That shows what an impact that you have already made on us.

In conclusion, I want to thank you, I want to thank all the members of FABC who have come over here for this meeting on the family, to once again see how we can work together in our apostolate, to further the kingdom of Christ. I want to thank all our friends and guests who are present, you belong to our FABC family. Thank you. Be united. God bless and thank you once again.

Message delivered at Opening Ceremony

- Archbishop Pierre Nguyen Van Tot, Holy See Representative Apostolic Nuncio to Sri Lanka

Your Grace Papal Envoy,

Your Eminences, My Lord Archbishops and Bishops, Reverend Fathers and dear Brothers and Sisters,

I am very happy and grateful to be able to address you a few words during this important Plenary Assembly.

As our Holy Father states in his post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* the Joy of Love experienced by families is also the joy of the Church, as the Church is a family of families, constantly enriched by the lives of all domestic churches.¹

His Holiness looks at the nature of love and the different roles played by members of a family, as well as giving a reflection on the importance of the family in building a strong and healthy society.

His description of love is based on the Hymn to Love authored by St Paul in his First Letter to the Corinthians (13, 4-7):

« Love is always patient and kind.
Love takes no pleasure in other people's sins,
but delights in the truth;
it is always ready to excuse, to trust, to hope,
and to endure whatever comes ».

Holy Father Francis speaks of compassion in the sense of acceptance and appreciation of the differences in others, as well as taking up St Paul's theme of patience, which is not a passive waiting, but a dynamic interaction with others. He also speaks of endurance by refraining from acting on impulse. He exhorts us to be slow to anger, as well as inoffensive, reminding us at the same time of the patience that God has in regards to his People, as it is clearly shown in the Old Testament.

Most of all, His Holiness speaks of rejoicing in the beauty and successes of others, by taking delight in putting them before us without jealousy, while encouraging us to see beyond our own limitations.

The Holy Father also gives some homespun advice, repeating in various ways the old wisdom of never letting the sun go down on your anger and the importance of small, and often non-verbal, gestures that contribute to peace-making among the people.

I joyfully bring you the Holy Father's assurances of prayer as you engage in your important task during this Assembly, for we are all called to love and cherish family life, since families are first and foremost a blessing for the society.²

Catholic families in Asia constitute a 'domestic Church of the Poor'. This Church of the Poor is particularly blessed as its numbers are ever growing and its vivacity and vibrancy remain strong. It is, however, also a Church tyrannized by poverty, unemployment, corruption, substance abuse, violence and lack of affordable and dignified housing. It is a Church languishing for Divine Mercy and at the same time a Church called to minister in Mercy.

I implore the Lord to bless Your work to further strengthen Catholic families, by mediating Divine Mercy to them, and also find ways and means to embrace the 'wounded families' who participate in the ecclesial life in an imperfect manner - that is those living together, or are only married civilly, or are divorced

and remarried – for they too remain members of the Ecclesial Community.³

Our Holy Father strongly reiterates: « To show understanding in the face of exceptional situations never implies dimming the light of the fuller ideal, or proposing less than what Jesus offers to the human being. In the context of today it is vital that sufficient pastoral care is given to strengthen marriages and work positively to prevent their breakdown».⁴ The two Synods of Bishops held recently on the theme of the family amply demonstrate the urgent call the Holy Father makes to accompany the families pastorally.

While invoking the intercession of Our Lady, Seat of wisdom and Queen of Families, that God may guide You with the light of the Holy Spirit in Your deliberations for the good of all Asian families, I also pray to God, Lord of the harvest, to send more workers to the vineyard, by blessing our families with abundance of vocations to the priesthood and religious consecrated life. I thank you very much for this invitation.

¹ FRANCISCUS PP, *Amoris Laetitia*, 19th March 2016, no. 87.

² Cfr. FRANCISCUS PP, *Address at the Meeting of Families in Santiago de Cuba (22nd September 2015): L'Osservatore Romano*, 24th September 2015, p. 7.

³ FRANCISCUS PP, *Amoris Laetitia*, 19th March 2016, no. 242-243.

⁴ *Ibid*, no. 307.

Message at Opening Ceremony

- *The Honorable Ranil Wickremesinghe, Prime Minister of Sri Lanka*

Your Eminences, Your Lordships, Bishops, Honorable Ministers, Members of the Clergy, distinguished guests and friends.

It is our privilege to have the XI Plenary Assembly of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences being held here in Sri Lanka. You witnessed a cultural performance and the backdrop that I noted was the cultural heritage of Sri Lanka.

In the background, you have scenes that go back a few centuries such as the Anuradhapura and the Sigiriya era, and ancient statues of the Lord Buddha. But in this, there was one item that was left out. Carved in the stones of Anuradhapura, the ancient capital, is the Syrian cross. The adherents of Lord Jesus Christ found refuge and started a colony and spread the faith in Kerala, long before any missionaries set foot on the British Isles. So we are proud that we also have a historic connection to Christianity.

Your theme today is that of the Asian Catholic Family. This is also a matter for which our government is focused, because nearly two and a half decades of war had its own impact on the lives of the people. A number of families have lost their loved ones due to the war, the number of women-headed families, the number of families where people who are mentally or physically affected by the war and the breakdown on our economy forced a large number of people to seek employment especially in the Middle East. The breakup of the families and the impact is far reaching. That also led to the increased use of drugs, increased use of firearms, and the culture of violence. So we have also been contemplating and have been discussing with my colleagues, the establishment of Family Affairs Council. A council that can look at the family values and we have been discussing this issue with some of the members of my parliament, one member moved the general motion last week, welcoming it and I think, Your Eminence, we would welcome whatever advice you could give us on forming this Family Affairs Council. We want to have wide ranging consultations on how it can succeed both with the religious and the lay leaders in this area.

It is fitting that this Plenary Assembly is held here in Sri Lanka, at the time when we are engaging in a process of reconciliation. We had twenty five years of war and five years that we neither had war nor peace nor reconciliation. Without reconciliation, we cannot have peace; we will just have an absence of war. It is for this purpose that a lot of us who are in politics, different political parties or in Sri Lanka we say political families, put aside their differences and got together, to elect President Maithripala Sirisena to bring reconciliation to this country, amongst the different ethnic communities and among the religions. And I must say, in this endeavor to bring reconciliation, Your Eminence, Cardinal Malcolm

Ranjith and the former Archbishop Oswald Gomis, have all played a leading role in the Congress of Religions, where you met with the Venerable Mahanayake Theros or the chief priests or the members of the Buddhist Sangha, members of the Muslim and of the Hindu Clergy. And in our effort at reconciliation which was declared as our policy on January 8, the day the president took his oaths. We were also blessed by the visit of the Holy Father. He was the first foreign visitor to come to Sri Lanka and he blessed this endeavor. His advice and counsel has been available to us at all times. We are a nation which was deeply divided by the war, united only by cricket because we are Sri Lankans when we play cricket. But in all of the others instances, we thought of our ethnicity and our religion.

So we had to work on this. And in that effort, after the parliamentary elections of August 2015, we formed a National Government and the two main parties that fought for power, got together and said: Let us work together, let us look at how we can bring reconciliation. And the leader of the Tamil National Alliance therefore became the leader of the opposition, the third largest party. And the fourth party, of course, was the People Liberation Front or Janatha Vimukti Peramuna and their leader became the chief opposition whip. So now you have the two main parties in the government ranks, holding office in parliament, leader of the opposition, the chief government whip, and also a group within the UPFA (United People's Freedom Alliance), the second largest party, who prefers to sit with the opposition, but we pray that they will also welcome all our efforts at reconciliation.

So finally, internal discussions will narrow the gaps and people today are calling for, that reconciliation. But that reconciliation is not merely getting us together. But that process, we can only start it now. It is going to take years. When we think of ourselves, as Sri Lankans and while being both proud of our religions and our ethnicity we become even prouder to be Sri Lankan. And we have not told anyone, in any way, to disown his or her religion or to hide the religion or to disown their culture or their language. You must be proud about it and you must always talk about it, but not in the way of attacking other people or discouraging other people.

As the great Emperor Ashoka said in one of his famous edicts which is carved out in stone: you must listen to, treat with respect and honor, the doctrine and faith of the others. Then when you regard others with the same respect, treat all religions, as we do today, with respect, honor and dignity and without discrimination, you have the basis for everyone getting together. No religion has ever said: go and kill those who oppose your views. No religion has said in any way to show disrespect that is being done by those who want to spread it for their own purposes, those who feel that religion is an instrument for their own advancement, in spite of the fact that they themselves do not adhere to whatever is preached. We in Sri Lanka have seen the adverse effects of the ethnic crisis and as this crisis is now over and as we are struggling towards a true reconciliation, we are seeing in the world outside, the issue of extremes of religion, and where in can lead to, how it can be misused and how it is leading to disaster in certain parts of the world.

So we have to look at reconciliation as a need and since sometimes, the difference between two persons, personal differences between two people or two groups of people are reflected publicly, not in that difference itself but in their ethnicity or their religion, it has to be overcome and under President Sirisena we are engaged in that task now in Sri Lanka. For us, we will celebrate Christmas soon, the coming of the Lord, in the same way as we celebrate and observe the birth, the enlightenment and the Parinirvana of the Gautama Buddha, and it is the same way in which we celebrate Diwali Hindu festival, which is an event where the light, the enlightenment is celebrated And finally Ramadan. It, after all, sends us on the straight and narrow path, whichever religion we belong to. Thai Pongal is a special occasion for the Hindus in the Southern parts of India, which is even observed in the North. These are the specific functions we Sri Lankans celebrate. Then we have our own observance of every full moon day, in some parts of the country, in some Buddhist temples, there will be people who will hold their processions and religious functions. There are the processions of the churches which are being held in different parts of the country. These we want to continue to celebrate.

And I also recognize that the basis of this is education. It's not only that we have to teach everyone information technology, computer

education, but religious education is even more important. It's the values systems, after all these values are the same. We have neglected religious education, especially of the other religions in this country. The Minister of Education is taking all measures to ensure that religious education receives its due place and that all students will have the opportunity of studying the religion of their parents.

Similarly our school system, the education system was built up under a major contribution made by the Church itself, by various lay Buddhist organizations, though the system now has become state controlled. We are still finding space and we'll expand that for religious organizations to get more involved. The handful of schools that are run by religious organizations still have some of the best forms of discipline in Sri Lanka and value creation. This is all necessary. It's all these small building blocks which build up unity and reconciliation. So we are committed to it.

Your Eminences and Your Lordships, we want to forge a way forward and we want your advice and your blessings as we proceed. And I have no doubt, when this Plenary Assembly is over, you will be in your own way able to advise us. And always, Your Eminences, please pray for us, for the success of Sri Lanka. Thank You.

The Prime Minister was accompanied by the Minister of Finance, the Honourable Ravi Karunanayake and the Minister of Christian Religious Affairs, the Honourable John Amaratunga.

D. President hosts Banquet for FABC at the Presidential Palace and addressed the FABC Bishops and guests

Excerpts of an article written for FABC OSC during the Plenary.

Sri Lankan President Applauds Church's Work for the Poor

The President of Sri Lanka, His Excellency Maithripala Sirisena, applauded the Catholic Church for its work among the poor in his island nation.

At a banquet that the President hosted at his residence on November 30, he told members of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) who were attending their plenary assembly in the country, "I very much appreciate the work accomplished by the Catholic Church on behalf of the poor in Sri Lanka."

He noted that "the Church has also helped promote the social and religious life of people," and said he "very much" values the Catholic Church's efforts to promote social and religious life of the people.

According to the President, the Sri Lankan government has also been working to improve the lot of the poor. "In fact," he said, "a few weeks back I had the opportunity to declare 2017 as poverty eradication year for Sri Lanka."

"Sri Lanka is a nation of different religions and diverse cultures and traditions going back several centuries," the President remarked. "We have a closer understanding and respect for others' cultures, customs, traditions and values."

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

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. "

E. Message

- His Eminence Fernando Cardinal Filoni, Prefect of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples.

Your Eminences,

Your Excellencies,

It is with great pleasure that I send my fraternal greetings and best wishes to you my Brother Bishops who are gathered in Colombo for the Plenary Assembly of the *Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences*. I pray that this meeting may serve as another opportunity for you to continue to strengthen the communion amongst you as Bishops and Pastors of the Catholic communities in Asia,

As I look into the theme you chose to ponder on during these days which bring you to be together in Colombo: *The Asian Catholic Family: Domestic Church of the Poor on a Mission of Mercy*, come to my mind the challenges of being a Catholic in Asia today which are encountered by Asians and not who live or work in Asia. The Asian continent, although rich in culture, traditions and religions, is challenged by a widespread poverty which affects its people. This situation gives rise to problems which by one way or another have to cohabit with the cultural and religious subconscious of love for harmony and peace which is the hall-mart of the Asian peoples.

The Asian Continent being the home to an ever-growing number of Catholics, in the recent past has witnessed a great number of missionaries, priests and religious, men and women, left their country, village and comfort reality to announce the Gospel and bring the solidarity of the Catholic Church to the ends of the earth. Now, a particular emphasis is being made on the Church in Asia to be a missionary itself. My Brother Bishops, you have a specific mission of proclaiming Jesus as the Lord and Saviour of the world in a fast-tracking society which is in Asia.

Some parts of the Continent still need to be nurtured but others need to be reined in. The proclamation of Jesus as the Lord and Saviour of the world touches every aspect of life and level of society.

The theme chosen for the present Plenary Assembly concerns the family. The teaching of the Church teaches that the Christian family manifests the project of God's love being shared "with mankind: *"The well-being of the individual person and of human and Christian society is intimately linked with the healthy condition of that community produced by marriage and family. Hence Christians and all men who hold this community in high esteem sincerely rejoice in the various ways by which men today find help in fostering this community of love and perfecting its life, and by which parents are assisted in their lofty calling"* (cfr. *Gaudium et Spes* n. 47). The Magisterium of the Catholic Church about the family considers the family too as the privileged place, the cradle, the natural "garden"; the ideal atmosphere and "first seminary" where vocations are sown in abundance by God. It is there, in the family that they bloom, grow and reach maturation for the good of the Church and society at large (cfr. *Optatam Totius* n. 2).

As His Holiness Pope Francis reiterated once again in his recent Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, *"the mystery of the Christian family can be fully understood only in the light of the Father's infinite love revealed in Christ, who gave himself up for our sake and who continues to dwell in our midst"* (cfr. *Amoris Laetitia* n.59). In fact, Jesus Christ in speaking of God's original plan for man and woman reaffirmed the indissoluble union between them and *"through his Church, Christ bestows on marriage and the family the grace necessary to bear witness to the love of God and to live the life of communion"* (cfr. *Relatio Synodi* 2014 n.16).

Notwithstanding, the fast changes in the Asian society, the family remains the most complete and rich school of humanity, in which gratuitous love is significantly experienced, together with fidelity, and rich school of humanity, respect and

defence of life. The Catholic family's arduous work is peculiar, that of guarding and transmitting through education of the young ones values and virtues, in order to build and promote the good of the individual persons and the community at large.

The Catholic family today, to a certain extent must take upon its shoulders more than ever, its one and only vocation of becoming a sanctifying community in which humility, justice, mercy, respect for man and woman, peace and purity of heart are lived (cfr. *Ef.* 4, 1-4; *Familiaris Consortio* n. 21). It becomes, in other words, as St John Chrysostom calls it "a domestic church", in which Jesus Christ lives and works for the salvation of men and the growth of the Kingdom of God. Its members who are called to faith and eternal life, are "*participating in the divine nature*" (cfr. *2 Pt.* 1, 4), they nourish themselves by the Word of God and the Sacraments and express the values of the Gospel in their thoughts and actions so much so that they are open to a holy life on earth and eternal happiness in heaven (cfr. *Ef.* 1, 4-5).

The Asian Catholic family may be in a better position to influence and shape a more merciful Church in Asia and elsewhere. Its widespread poverty will always be the source to always give preferential option for the poor in proclaiming the joy of the gospel. Surely, the Asian Catholic family has an advantage to evangelize people from the perspective of the poor and hence create an inculturated Asian Catholic community from the same context.

My Brother Bishops, in union with Jesus Christ we must seek what He seeks and love what He loves. Beyond ourselves, our personalities and our egoism let us evangelize for the greater glory of God the Father. I encourage you to be close to the Asian Catholic families in order to accompany them in their mission as evangelizers, missionaries and teachers of faith. Empower them by creating appropriate faith programmes which put them the Catholic families on the fore-front of evangelization in today's Asian society. Instill in them a passion for Jesus, a passion for His people and a passion for His mission. As St. John Paul II said in his Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia*. "*A fire can only be lit by something that is itself on fire...to be on fire with the love of Christ and burning with zeal to make him known more widely,*

loved more deeply, and followed more closely" (cfr. *Ecclesia in Asia* n.23).

As Pastors of this large portion of die People of God you are first and foremost called to hand on the faith to adults and children, young and elderly, healthy and sick. Please, remember that: *"the Church is commissioned to announce the mercy of God, the beating heart of the Gospel, which in its own way must penetrate the heart and mind of every person. The Spouse of Christ must pattern her behaviour after the Son of God who went out to everyone without exception. In the present day, as the Church is charged with the task of the new evangelization, the theme of mercy needs to be proposed again and again with new enthusiasm and renewed pastoral action. It is absolutely essential for the Church and for the credibility of her message that she herself live and testify to mercy. Her language and her gestures must transmit mercy, so as to touch the hearts of all people and inspire them once more to find the road that leads to the Father"* (cfr. *Misericordiae Vultus* n. 12). It is Jesus himself who says, *"Be merciful just as your Father is merciful"* (Lk 6,36). *"It is programme of life as demanding as it is rich with joy and peace. Jesus's command is directed to anyone willing to listen to his voice (cf. Lk 6,27). In order to be capable of mercy, therefore, we must first of all dispose ourselves to listen to the Word of God"* (cfr. *Misericordiae Vultus* n. 13). All the Catholic families in Asia must seek the opportunity to proclaim the Word of God in order to become ever more similar to the little mustard seed which grows to be a large tree, a home for many birds of the sky (cfr. *Mt 13,32*).

As I renew to each and every member of the *Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences* my best wishes I wish you every blessing for your Plenary Assembly and assure you of my support and prayers.

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