

**CATHOLIC SCHOOLS IN ASIA:
A SHARED MISSION AMONG BISHOPS, CLERGY,
CONSECRATED PERSONS AND LAY FAITHFUL
IN THE LIGHT OF RECENT PAPAL DOCUMENTS**

**FABC Office of Consecrated Life (OCL) and
Office of Education and Faith Formation (OEFF)**

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**Edited by
Pablito A. Baybado Jr., Executive Secretary, OEFF**

CONTENTS

- I. FABC Office of Consecrated Life and Office of Education and Faith Formation Conference Statement**
- II. The Challenges and the Directives of *Amoris Laetitia* and the FABC Paper on *The Catholic Family in Asia: Domestic Church of the Poor on a Mission of Mercy*
- Archbishop Filipe Neri Ferrão**
- III. Catholic Schools and Religious Communities in Asia -
Towards the New Evangelization
- Archbishop Antonio J. Ledesma, SJ, DD**

I. CONFERENCE STATEMENT

- *FABC Office of Consecrated Life and Office of Education and Faith Formation*

Joy is a fruit of the Holy Spirit, a mark of the presence of God. It was the tune the angels sang when proclaiming to shepherds the birth of our Savior. It was what Jesus said we needed to have even in the midst of persecution and pain. Joy was the emotion the women felt mixed with their fear when, on Easter Sunday, they were told that Jesus had risen from the dead. The **completion of joy**, says the writer of the First Letter of John, is the result and the reason for proclaiming *'what they had seen and heard'* (cf. 1 Jn 1: 3).

Joy is the spirit of many Vatican documents, from *Gaudium et Spes* of the Second Vatican Council, to recent papal exhortations like *Evangelii Gaudium*, *Amoris Laetitia*, *Gaudete et Exsultate*. It is the same **Joy** that has brought us together, the two Offices of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC): - the *Office of Consecrated Life* (OCL) and the *Office of Education and Faith Formation* (OEFF), for a Conference at the Redemptorist Centre in Pattaya, Thailand, on September 24-28, 2018. There are more than eighty (80) of us - lay faithful, religious brothers and sisters, bishops and priests - from 13 different countries in Asia: Bangladesh, Cambodia, Hong Kong, India, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam. Finally, **Joy** is what we hope to take home and continue to experience in our shared mission in Catholic schools in Asia.

As Bishops, administrators and educators, we have come together to examine who we are and what we do as Catholic Schools in Asia. We came to share concrete experiences and challenges in our ministry and work on Catholic education. We have discerned, with prayer and worship, how we might respond to the pastoral directives of recent papal documents and of the FABC XI Plenary Assembly Statement on the Catholic Family. We came to realize that each one is a gift in our respective state of life, and to appreciate the beauty of working together in overcoming hurdles and crosses. In coming together, we have strengthened our personal and individual commitments to the mission of evangelization and to promote deeper communion among the lay faithful, consecrated persons, bishops and priests involved in Catholic Education in Asia.

Regarding the process, the Chairs of the two FABC Offices set the direction of our discussions. Workshops facilitated the sharing of experiences and reflections in the light of the recent documents towards a common understanding and action. Eucharistic celebrations and community prayers kept us focused on our spiritual center. Friendly informal interaction among us brought out the spontaneity of the Spirit who, like the wind, blows where He pleases and inspires as He wills.

Archbishop Filipe Neri Ferrão, the Chair of the FABC Office of Education and Faith Formation, talked on **The Challenges and the Directives of *Amoris Laetitia*** and the FABC paper on *The Catholic Family in Asia: Domestic Church of the Poor on a Mission of Mercy*. Archbishop Filipe Neri has related **The JOY of LOVE** of Pope Francis to insights and exhortations on the family, the home and the school in the context of Asian values and cultures. Paying attention to the diversity of the participants, he brought to the fore the importance of **COMMUNION**, pointing to three fundamental aspects of collaboration between the laity, the clergy and consecrated persons involved in schools: 1. *Communion in the educational mission*; 2. *A needed course on formation for communion for a shared educational mission*; and, 3. *Openness towards others as the fruit of that communion*. He reminded us that it is in living out the mystery of communion in our Catholic schools that we carry out our *mission*, and that *mission* itself strengthens our *communion*.

For his part, Archbishop Antonio Ledesma, SJ, the Chair of the FABC Office of Consecrated Life, presented his views on the **Directives and Challenges of *Evangelii Gaudium*, *Laudato Si'* and *Gaudete et Exsultate***. He pointed out that Pope Francis reminds us all *of* who we are as [a] 1. *A Church of Joy and Mercy*; 2. *A Church which is poor and for the poor*; 3. *A Church which is Open*; 4. *A Church of Missionary Disciples*; and 5. *A Church for Peace-building*. He added that Pope Francis also highlights that all of us need to respond to the universal call to holiness. It is a challenge to be holy and to live in the presence of God – not in a museum of sweet-scented holy memories but in our daily life: in our journey in community, in our living side by side with others, in the family, the parish, the religious community, in the dust and the noise and the humdrum flow of small everyday things. That we are part of

and responsible for creation was a healthy reminder for all of us as well.

The workshops brought out the individual experiences of joy and pain, of inspiration and hope of the participants living in our respective cultures: Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim, Christian (Christian/Catholic) or simply secular. Appreciation was shared of the way we came together in the Conference, belonging as each of us do to a particular state of life. The hope was expressed that in our actual educational day-to-day lives such cooperation would not be lost. In the face of almost never-ending challenges in school works, a paradigm shift was offered and taken: from a “problem-solving” model to a “mercy-manifestation” way of doing things. In the midst of tiredness and seeming meaninglessness that we sometimes feel in our work, some reminders, it was hoped, we can give to one another: *You are not alone. God is with you. We are in this together. We collaborate. We accompany one another.*

We realized that there are still many gaps that need to be filled: between what we say we believe, and how we actually live; between our academic qualifications and our administrative deficiencies; between the holiness we are meant to exhibit and our personal faults and sins that we cannot hide. We came to understand that there should really be no problem for consecrated persons and priests and lay faithful to work together in schools if only everyone respected each other, each aware of the other’s uniqueness and value and living in joy because of it. We learned with sadness and alarm that, in some of our countries, it is forbidden even to just say the name of our Savior **JESUS**. We pray that somehow if that precious name cannot be said, may it be seen in each of us. We are to be **JESUS** to one and all.

The Gospel of Mark (3:13-19) that relates how Jesus *appointed the twelve disciples, called them Apostles, and sent them forth to preach*, which is often unread and thus un-reflected-on, is the reason for the mission and its circumstances. In it, the dynamics of mission is shown as: He **summoned those whom He wanted ... and they came to Him ... that they might be with Him**. Thereby, the *disciples* who were called *apostles* became *missionaries* because *First, Jesus wanted them, Second, they came to Him* and *Third, that they might be with Him*.

Choice and Call. Response. Being-with-Him. This is our Mission as Catholic Schools in Asia today. As laity, consecrated persons, bishops and priests, we are called to be **ONE** – different roles though we may play – but everywhere, **TOGETHER** in transforming our Catholic schools as fountains of mercy and paths to holiness. For it is our **Being-with-Him** that brings us **JOY** in ourselves and in all our Catholic Schools in Asia.

II. THE CHALLENGES AND THE DIRECTIVES OF AMORIS LAETITIA AND THE FABC PAPER ON THE CATHOLIC FAMILY IN ASIA: DOMESTIC CHURCH OF THE POOR ON A MISSION OF MERCY

- Archbishop Filipe Neri Ferrão (Goa and Daman, India)

Chairperson, FABC Office of Education and Faith Formation

INTRODUCTION

We are in the midst of a privileged event: the joint meeting of the **FABC Office of Consecrated Life** and of the **FABC Office of Education and Faith Formation**. Together, we will examine some important insights from recent papal documents and then use these as signposts to guide us on our journey with our sisters and brothers as they share, at this Conference, their concrete experiences and challenges of Catholic schools in the various multicultural contexts in Asia.¹

1. CATHOLIC EDUCATION: THE VISION

1.1 Educating to Fraternal Humanism

Education and school and university education have always been at the centre of the contribution of the Catholic Church to civic life.² The Church exists to evangelize³ and one of the significant ways in which the Church has spread her Good News is through Catholic educational institutions. Her educational vision is at the service of the achievement of the highest goals of humanity.⁴ These goals were anticipated in the Vatican Council's Declaration *Gravissimum Educationis*: the harmonious development of physical, moral and intellectual abilities, aimed at the gradual maturation of a sense of responsibility; the conquest of true freedom and positive and prudent sex education.⁵ The requirements set out in *Gravissimum Educationis* are still relevant today and have been summed up, in later

documents, as educating to fraternal humanism. Some of the key notions of the latter are given below.

1.2 Common Good

Within this perspective, it became clear that education should be at the service of a new humanism, in which the social person was willing to talk and work for the realization of the common good.⁶

1.3 Person at the Centre

One needs, therefore, to humanize education, that is, to make it a process in which each person can develop his or her own deep-rooted attitudes and vocation and thus contribute to his or her vocation within the community. ‘Humanizing education’ means putting the person at the centre of education in a framework of relationships that make up a living community which is interdependent and bound to a common destiny.⁷ This is fraternal humanism.

1.4 Civilization of Love

To give a soul to our ever-changing global world, the Congregation for Catholic Education gives new impetus to the priority of building a “civilization of love”⁸ and urges all those who, by profession and vocation, are engaged in educational processes at all levels to live their experience with dedication and wisdom.⁹ Catholic education has the primary objective of building a better world.¹⁰ It is, first and foremost, an educational process where the search for a peaceful and enriching coexistence is rooted in the broader concept of the human being – in his or her psychological, cultural and spiritual aspects – free from any form of egocentrism and ethnocentrism, but rather in accordance with a notion of integral and transcendent development both of the person and of society.¹¹

1.5 Hope

Education to fraternal humanism must start from the certainty of the message of hope contained in the truth of Jesus Christ. It is up to education, then, to offer this hope to the peoples of the world, as a message conveyed by reason and active life.¹² As Pope Francis said, “we must not allow ourselves to be robbed of hope!”¹³ With this appeal, he meant to encourage the men and women of our time to face social change optimistically, so that they can immerse themselves in reality with the light that radiates from the promise of Christian

salvation. He said: "We are called not to lose hope, because we must offer hope to the global world of today. 'Globalizing hope' and 'supporting the hopes of globalization' are basic commitments in the mission of Catholic education. A globalization bereft of hope or vision can easily be conditioned by economic interests, which are often far removed from a correct understanding of the common good, and which easily give rise to social tensions, economic conflicts and abuses of power. We need to give a soul to the global world through an intellectual and moral formation that can support the good things that globalization brings and correct the harmful ones."¹⁴

It is precisely Christian education that can perform this most important task, because it "gives birth, it makes grow, it is part of the dynamics of giving life. And the origin of life is the most gushing spring of hope."¹⁵ One of the expectations of Catholic education emphasized by Pope Francis is that it will sow hope. He said that human beings cannot live without hope and that education is a great generator of hope. "Education has in common with hope the same substance of risk. Hope is not superficial optimism, nor is it the capacity to look at things benevolently, but rather it is a way of knowing how to run risks in the right way, like education," he said.¹⁶

1.6 Much work has been done

Following the World Congress *Educating Today and Tomorrow: A Renewing Passion*,¹⁷ the Congregation for Catholic Education presented guidelines to "all those whose daily challenge is to renew, with passion, the educational mission of the Church in the various continents."¹⁸ Starting from the *culture of dialogue* and *globalizing hope* and going on to *inclusion* and *cooperation networks*, significant themes were explored, offering stimulus both for the educational experience and teaching as well as for studies and research.¹⁹

Moreover, to assist education develop "ways of building a world based on the values of Christian solidarity,"²⁰ Pope Francis has established the Foundation "*Gravissimum Educationis*" with the aim of pursuing "scientific and cultural ends, intended to promote Catholic education in the world."²¹

Starting with the impetus provided by *Gravissimum Educationis*, much attention has been given to Catholic education, the first three major post-conciliar documents that came out being the *General Catechetical Directory* (11 April, 1971), *Catholic Schools* (24 June, 1977) and *Lay Catholics in Schools: Witnesses to Faith* (15 October, 1982).

Several other documents have been produced, since then, and the above are some of the central themes that have emerged, over the years.

2. INSIGHTS FROM *AMORIS LAETITIA*

2.1 Pope Francis' Apostolic Exhortation, *Amoris Laetitia* (The Joy of Love) brings together the results of two Synods on the family convoked by Pope Francis in 2014 and 2015. The document is a significant landmark in the history of the Catholic Church. After a brief summary of this monumental work, we will look into some important insights that have relevance to our topic of education in Catholic schools.

2.2 Pope Francis' Summary of *Amoris Laetitia*

Probably the shortest and the best summary of this document is Pope Francis' own summary in his introduction, where he gives the following chapter plan:²²

1. "I will begin with an opening chapter inspired by the Scriptures, to set a proper tone."
2. "I will then examine the actual situation of families, in order to keep firmly grounded in reality."
3. "I will go on to recall some essential aspects of the Church's teaching on marriage and the family,"
4. "thus paving the way for the two central chapters dedicated to love" (in marriage)
5. (and "Love made Fruitful")
6. "I will then highlight some pastoral approaches that can guide us in building sound and fruitful homes in accordance with God's plan,"
7. "with a full chapter devoted to the raising of children."
8. "Finally, I will offer an invitation to mercy and the pastoral discernment of those situations that fall short of what the Lord demands of us,"
9. "and conclude with a brief discussion of family spirituality."

2.3 Overview of *Amoris Laetitia*

The Apostolic Exhortation is striking for its breadth and detail. Its 325 paragraphs are distributed over nine chapters. While the document is indeed rich, written in Pope Francis' unique style, where he weaves together deep theological insights with common

practicality, we cannot do justice to the entire document in this short time and space. Hence, we will focus largely on those chapters that have direct relevance for our topic on hand. The purpose of this overview is to help us identify these chapters and to situate the important insights that we will deal with in this paper.

“The Bible is full of families, births, love stories and family crises” (AL 8). In the first chapter, *In the Light of the Word*, Pope Francis uses scripture passages and biblical insights creatively and artistically, so as to paint a comprehensive picture of marriage – like a literary painting upon canvas. This sets the foundation of what God wants marriage and family to be. This picture is then enhanced with the teaching of the Church, in the third chapter, *Looking to Jesus: the Vocation of the Family*.

Interspersed between these two foundational chapters is a very down-to-earth second chapter on *The Experiences and Challenges of Families*. These are challenges that concern our Catholic schools as well, as they arise from a social ethos that affects both the school and the family. We will take a closer look at these later in this paper.

The fourth chapter, *Love in Marriage*, will probably always remain through future generations as a sort of charter for couples to live by. It is a unique and lasting contribution to Church teaching, unprecedented in previous papal documents. Whereas the fifth chapter, *Love Made Fruitful*, specifically caters to the norms of married life, the fourth chapter can enlighten us on the nature of Christian love to be practised in schools as well.

The sixth chapter, *Some Pastoral Perspectives*, and the eighth chapter, *Accompanying, Discerning and Integrating Weakness*, are aimed more directly to pastors of the flock, e.g. priests in parishes, but the seventh chapter, *Towards a Better Education of Children*, has greater relevance to ‘pastors’ in schools.

And then we have the great finale: *The Spirituality of Marriage and the Family*. Can this be taught to our school children so that they grow up with the correct vision of marriage and family?

2.4 The Challenges

Having established a secure biblical foundation in the first chapter of *Amoris Laetitia*, Pope Francis goes on to examine the challenges confronting us today, in the second chapter, showing how these affect marriage and the family. We could group these challenges together into the following main themes:

2.4.1 *Extreme Individualism:* “consideration needs to be given to the growing danger represented by an extreme individualism which weakens family bonds and ends up considering each member of the family as an isolated unit, leading in some cases to the idea that one’s personality is shaped by his or her desires, which are considered absolute.... Here I would also include today’s fast pace of life, stress and the organization of society and labour, since all these are cultural factors which militate against permanent decisions ... if misdirected, (personalism) can foster attitudes of constant suspicion, fear of commitment, self-centredness and arrogance” (AL 33).

2.4.2 *No Self-giving and Narcissism:* This is closely linked with the concept of excessive individualism. “Freedom of choice makes it possible to plan our lives and to make the most of ourselves. Yet if this freedom lacks noble goals or personal discipline, it degenerates into an inability to give oneself generously to others” (AL 33). “The fear of loneliness and the desire for stability and fidelity exist side by side with a growing fear of entrapment in a relationship that could hamper the achievement of one’s personal goals” (AL 34). The Pope warns “against a cultural decline that fails to promote love or self-giving.... Narcissism makes people incapable of looking beyond themselves, beyond their own desires and needs. Yet sooner or later, those who use others end up being used themselves, manipulated and discarded by that same mindset” (AL 39).

2.4.3 *Throwaway Culture:* We see around us “various symptoms of a “culture of the ephemeral.” Here I think, for example, of the speed with which people move from one affective relationship to another. They believe, along the lines of social networks, that love can be connected or disconnected at the whim of the consumer, and the relationship quickly “blocked” We treat affective relationships the way we treat material objects and the environment: everything is disposable; everyone uses and throws away, takes and breaks, exploits and squeezes to the last drop. Then, goodbye” (AL 39). “The ideal of marriage, marked by a commitment to exclusivity and stability, is swept aside whenever it proves inconvenient or tiresome” (AL 34).

2.4.4 *Loss of Hope in the Future:* “At the risk of oversimplifying, we might say that we live in a culture which

pressures young people not to start a family, because they lack possibilities for the future” (AL 40). There is danger that the decline in population “will lead to economic impoverishment and a loss of hope in the future” (AL 42).

2.4.5 *Weakening of Faith and Religious Practice:* Having commented on the often seen immaturity in affective relationships among couples and their consequent inadequacy in handling marital problems and crises (AL 41), Pope Francis writes, “The weakening of faith and religious practice in some societies has an effect on families, leaving them more isolated amid their difficulties. The Synod Fathers noted that one symptom of the great poverty of contemporary culture is loneliness, arising from the absence of God in a person’s life and the fragility of relationships” (AL 43).

2.4.6 *Addictions and Problems of the Social Media:* The Synod Fathers “also expressed concern about the current spread of pornography and the commercialization of the body, fostered also by a misuse of the internet” (AL 41). Families face problems in raising children. “In many cases, parents come home exhausted, not wanting to talk, and many families no longer even share a common meal. Distractions abound, including an addiction to television. This makes it all the more difficult for parents to hand on the faith to their children” (AL 50). “Drug use was also mentioned as one of the scourges of our time, causing immense suffering and even breakup for many families. The same is true of alcoholism, gambling and other addictions” (AL 51).

2.4.7 *Caring for the Disabled:* “The Fathers also called particular attention to families of persons with special needs, where the unexpected challenge of dealing with a disability can upset a family’s equilibrium, desires and expectations” (AL 47).

2.4.8 *Injustice to Children and the Elderly:* Children in families are vulnerable and helpless. They often suffer for no fault of their own. “A great number of children are born outside of wedlock, many of whom subsequently grow up with just one of their parents or in a blended or reconstituted family.... The sexual exploitation of children is yet another scandalous and perverse reality in present-day society” (AL 45). Children also suffer when men do not do justice to their role of fatherhood. Fathers play a “decisive role in family life,

particularly with regard to the protection and support of their wives and children.... The absence of a father gravely affects family life and the upbringing of children and their integration into society. This absence, which may be physical, emotional, psychological and spiritual, deprives children of a suitable father figure" (AL 55).

"Most families have great respect for the elderly, surrounding them with affection and considering them a blessing.... In highly industrialized societies, where the number of elderly persons is growing even as the birth rate declines, they can be regarded as a burden.... The elderly who are vulnerable and dependent are at times unfairly exploited simply for economic advantage" (AL 48).

2.4.9 Poverty: "Here I would also like to mention the situation of families living in dire poverty and great limitations. The problems faced by poor households are often all the more trying. For example, if a single mother has to raise a child by herself and needs to leave the child alone at home while she goes to work, the child can grow up exposed to all kind of risks and obstacles to personal growth" (AL 49).

2.4.10 Women Unfairly Treated: "I think particularly of the shameful ill-treatment to which women are sometimes subjected, domestic violence and various forms of enslavement which, rather than a show of masculine power, are craven acts of cowardice. The verbal, physical, and sexual violence that women endure in some marriages contradicts the very nature of the conjugal union. I think of the reprehensible genital mutilation of women practised in some cultures, but also of their lack of equal access to dignified work and roles of decision-making. History is burdened by the excesses of patriarchal cultures that considered women inferior ... we must nonetheless see in the women's movement the working of the Spirit for a clearer recognition of the dignity and rights of women" (AL 54). Having taken a brief look at the global challenges that confront us, let us now see how these affect the Asian scene. We will also look at some challenges that are particularly Asian.

3. INSIGHTS FROM THE FABC PLENARY

The Catholic Family in Asia:

Domestic Church of the Poor on a Mission of Mercy

3.1 The Bishops gathered at the XI Plenary Assembly of the FABC in Colombo, Sri Lanka, reflected on this theme and approved a document with this title on 3 December 2016.

The insights of this document are grounded in the Asian reality, which has some unique characteristics of its own. “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.”²³

“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. ... We see the great respect and honour, 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.... 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.... 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” (CFA 6-7).

3.2 The Major Pastoral Challenges in Asia

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

3.2.1. *Persecution - Religious Freedom under Siege.*

Although the variety of races, ethnicities and cultures can be looked at as “a rich mosaic of the human tapestry that God our Creator has gifted Asia,” unfortunately, “harmony and peace do not always reign. Violent clashes of culture and ethnicity, often with religious and political overtones, dot the Asian landscape.... 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.... And sadly, we see an increasing level of aggressive and militant religious intolerance in many Asian countries" (CFA 8).

3.2.2. Poverty, Migration and Dislocation. With some exceptions, "pervasive and massive poverty is the condition of millions of families in South Asia and Southeast Asia.... 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 centres in their own countries or serve as migrant workers in more developed countries.... 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" (CFA 9).

3.2.3. Political, Ideological, Cultural Conflicts and Divisions. "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 ... (and) refugees in various Asian countries.... 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" (CFA 11).

3.2.4. Ideological Colonialism and Cultural Values. "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" (CFA 12). Ideological colonialism has

introduced “a culture of the ephemeral” (AL 39), declining birth rate and several other ills mentioned in *Amoris Laetitia* (cf. AL 41-42), which are contrary to Asian culture.

“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” (CFA 12).

3.2.5. *Global Warming and Climate Change.* “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” (CFA 13).

3.2.6. *Tensions within the Family.* “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.... 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” (CFA 14).

3.2.7. *Deterioration of Religious Faith and Spiritual Values in the Family.* “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 ... 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” (CFA 15). “Given the religious and cultural pluralism of Asia, there is a great percentage of interfaith marriages, often to the detriment of the Catholic party” (CFA 16).

3.2.8. *Lack of Faith Formation.* A crucial consideration in this context is the inadequacy of faith formation. “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. 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 and 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” (CFA 16).

3.2.9. *The Example and Challenge of Good Families.* “We cannot simply dwell on challenges as problems confronted by Catholic families in Asia.... In varying milieux, many families are examples of families that live according to the plan of God.... They edify other families and from them other families find support. How to support and maintain such families is a challenge” (CFA 17).

3.3 Questions that Arise

“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?" (CFA 18).

3.4 The Solution

Reflecting from the perspective of our faith about what the Catholic family in Asia should be in order to respond to the Asian pastoral challenges, here are some answers to the above searching questions.

3.4.1. Family: Communion of Love. The basic faith-insight that answers these questions is the *Communion of Love*. This is the ground of conjugal and family love. "In the fourth chapter of *Amoris Laetitia*, Pope Francis reminds us that 'marriage is the icon of God's love for us' (AL 121). This implies that love in marriage is a reflection of God's own love.... 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" (CFA 19).

3.4.2. A Eucharistic Family. "Undoubtedly, Eucharistic communion is first of all our communion of love with the Triune God.... Into the Catholic family God has sacramentally poured forth his love and life.... The divine presence impels the family to be Eucharistic in the manner of the Eucharistic Jesus who sacrificed his very life.... By this total sacrifice, he demonstrated to 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.... 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" (CFA 20).

3.4.3. Domestic Church of the Poor. "The Lord Jesus wanted his community of disciples to follow his way of life, a way of poverty and simplicity, a way of humility.... 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 (cf. Lk 2: 24), when they presented Jesus in the Temple. They became refugees in Egypt (cf. Mt 2: 13-15). Joseph was only a carpenter (cf. Mt

13: 54-55). The Holy Family of Nazareth is the prototype of a domestic church of the poor” (CFA 21).

3.4.4. *Doing the Mission of Jesus.* “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.... If the whole Church, so also the domestic church, the family” (CFA 22).

“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)” (CFA 24).

“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” (CFA 25).

3.5 Pastoral Imperatives for the Catholic Family in Asia

The “general pastoral imperative is one of discerning, accompanying, and doing.... The Catholic family has to respond with mercy and compassion, with the joy of the Gospel, to the pastoral challenges.” However, “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” (CFA 26).

3.5.1. *Responding to the Challenges of Extremism, Violence, Conflicts and Divisions.* The Catholic family in Asia is invited to respond to religious extremism and violence (e.g. massacres and burning of homes and churches), with trust in the Lord, fidelity to a dialogue of life and solidarity. “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" (CFA 27). "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" (CFA 35). "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"... It is in the family that biases and prejudices are reduced, if not eradicated. Parents should set before their children the example of the Lord Jesus in the Gospels" (CFA 33-34).

"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" (CFA 28).

3.5.2. Responding to the Challenges of Poverty, Migration and Dislocation. "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" (CFA 29). Catholic families in Asia are invited to share what they have, defend the rights of the poor, conscientize and promote social justice, remove corruption and collaborate with others to help migrant and dislocated people. "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" (CFA 30).

3.5.3. Responding to the Challenge of Intrusive Social Media. "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 throwaway 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" (CFA 37).

3.5.4. Responding to the Challenge of Climate Change and Global Warming. Families have a significant role to play on climate change mitigation. This is an area where they can collaborate with families of other faiths, NGOs and government organizations, in

order to raise awareness and take action. Besides this, families can cultivate the right mindset in their own homes. “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” (CFA 41).

3.6 A Spirituality of Communion for the Family

“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 centre of its giftedness – the immeasurable joyful love of our God of mercy and compassion.... At bottom, the vocation of marriage is a vocation to holiness, to communion with God” (CFA 52). This communion needs to be nurtured daily through prayer, a Eucharistic spirituality and daily acts of love and communion within the family. From this communion will flow forth the mission of the family.

4. DIRECTIVES FOR CATHOLIC SCHOOLS IN ASIA

4.1 The Church is One Body

Gaudium et Spes begins with, “The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ.” Echoing this famous insight, *Amoris Laetitia* also begins with “The Joy of Love experienced by families is also the joy of the Church.”

Having looked at two recent Church documents on the Catholic Family, we cannot merely shrug our shoulders and move on, thinking that the challenges and directives contained in these documents apply only to families. In fact, the Catholic school has a crucial role to play in supporting Catholic families in their mission. “Christian communities are called to offer support to the educational mission of families.... The Synod wanted to emphasize the importance of

Catholic schools which play a vital role in assisting parents in their duty to raise their children.... Catholic schools should be encouraged in their mission to help pupils grow into mature adults who can view the world with the love of Jesus and who can understand life as a call to serve God."²⁴ This is even more necessary in Asian countries where Catholics form a small minority and the environment is hostile to Christianity.

4.1.1. Cultural Challenges. It is important to realize that families are not alone in facing the challenges listed above. In fact, these challenges are woven into the very fabric of society and can be considered cultural challenges with far-reaching effects that envelop the children and staff of Catholic schools as well. This is another reason why Catholic schools need to respond creatively and adequately to these challenges.

Amoris Laetitia constantly emphasizes the fact that the challenges faced by families are, indeed, broader cultural challenges. When talking about the challenge of individualism, for instance, Pope Francis writes (in number 33): "The tensions created by an overly individualistic culture, caught up with possessions and pleasures, lead to intolerance and hostility in families." Then again (in number 50): "Other responses pointed to the effect of severe stress on families, who often seem more caught up with securing their future than with enjoying the present. This is a broader cultural problem, aggravated by fears about steady employment, finances and the future of children."

4.1.2. Helplessness of Families. As Pope Francis exclaims, "nowadays who is making an effort to strengthen marriages, to help married couples overcome their problems, to assist them in the work of raising children and, in general, to encourage the stability of the marriage bond? Given all the challenges facing Catholic families, even good and well-meaning families are ill-prepared to deal with them."²⁵ Furthermore, the number of families that are dysfunctional is on the increase and "society and politics fail to see that families at risk lose the ability to act to help their members.... We see the serious effects of this breakdown in families torn apart, the young uprooted and the elderly abandoned, children who are orphans of living parents, adolescents and young adults confused."²⁶ There is much that the Catholic school can do to bridge this gap.

4.2 Directives in *Amoris Laetitia*

Chapter seven of *Amoris Laetitia*, 'Towards a Better Education of Children,' gives clear directives to educators. Here are some of them (with relevant paragraph numbers of the document):

4.2.1. Responsible Use of Freedom. "Education includes encouraging the responsible use of freedom to face issues with good sense and intelligence. It involves forming persons who readily understand that their own lives, and the life of the community, are in their hands and that freedom is itself a great gift" (262).

"Obsession, however, is not education. We cannot control every situation that a child may experience ... controlling all their movements is no way to educate, strengthen and prepare their children to face challenges. What is most important is the ability lovingly to help them grow in freedom, maturity, overall discipline and real autonomy. Only in this way will children come to possess the wherewithal needed to fend for themselves and to act intelligently and prudently whenever they meet with difficulties" (261). Children can thus grow up to be people who are "capable of carrying out their own discernment in complex situations. We have been called to form consciences, not to replace them" (37).

When speaking of real autonomy, it must be noted that a "distinction is not always adequately drawn between 'voluntary' and 'free' acts. A person may clearly and willingly desire something evil, but do so as the result of an irresistible passion or a poor upbringing. In such cases, while the decision is voluntary, inasmuch as it does not run counter to the inclination of their desire, it is not free, since it is practically impossible for them not to choose that evil" (273).

4.2.2. Moral Education. Like families, Catholic schools can also be "places of support, guidance and direction" (260) and help children in their moral education.

What is moral or ethical formation? "A good ethical education includes showing a person that it is in his own interest to do what is right. Today, it is less and less effective to demand something that calls for effort and sacrifice, without clearly pointing to the benefits which it can bring" (265).

Moral education includes "shaping the will of children, fostering good habits and a natural inclination to goodness.... Moral formation should always take place with active methods and a dialogue that

teaches through sensitivity and by using a language children can understand. It should also take place inductively, so that children can learn for themselves the importance of certain values, principles and norms, rather than by imposing these as absolute and unquestionable truths" (264).

"Moral education has to do with cultivating freedom through ideas, incentives, practical applications, stimuli, rewards, examples, models, symbols, reflections, encouragement, dialogue and a constant rethinking of our way of doing things; all these can help develop those stable interior principles that lead us spontaneously to do good" (267).

4.2.3. *Loving Correction.* "It is also essential to help children and adolescents to realize that misbehaviour has consequences. They need to be encouraged to put themselves in other people's shoes and to acknowledge the hurt they have caused.... It is important to train children firmly to ask forgiveness and to repair the harm done to others (268).

"Correction is also an incentive whenever children's efforts are appreciated and acknowledged.... Children who are lovingly corrected feel cared for; they perceive that they are individuals whose potential is recognized.... A child who does something wrong must be corrected, but never treated as an enemy or an object on which to take out one's own frustrations.... An attitude constantly prone to punishment would be harmful and not help children to realize that some actions are more serious than others.... It is important that discipline not lead to discouragement" (269-270).

To overcome bad experiences of the past which come in the way of children following the right path, children also "need help in the process of inner healing and in this way to grow in the ability to understand and live in peace with others and the larger community" (272).

4.2.4. *Patient Realism.* "Moral education entails asking of a child or a young person only those things that do not involve a disproportionate sacrifice, and demanding only a degree of effort that will not lead to resentment or coercion. Ordinarily this is done by proposing small steps that can be understood, accepted and appreciated, while including a proportionate sacrifice. Otherwise, by

demanding too much, we gain nothing. Once the child is free of our authority, he or she may possibly cease to do good" (271).

"In proposing values, we have to proceed slowly, taking into consideration the child's age and abilities, without presuming to apply rigid and inflexible methods" (273).

On the other hand, children also need to be taught patient waiting and not to "become obsessed with satisfying their immediate needs and develop the vice of 'wanting it all now.' This is a grand illusion which does not favour freedom but weakens it. On the other hand, when we are taught to postpone some things until the right moment, we learn self-mastery and detachment from our impulses. When children realize that they have to be responsible for themselves, their self-esteem is enriched. This in turn teaches them to respect the freedom of others" (275).

4.2.5. *The Need for Sex Education.* "The Second Vatican Council spoke of the need for 'a positive and prudent sex education' to be imparted to children and adolescents.... We may well ask ourselves if our educational institutions have taken up this challenge. It is not easy to approach the issue of sex education in an age when sexuality tends to be trivialized and impoverished. It can only be seen within the broader framework of an education for love, for mutual self-giving. In such a way, the language of sexuality would not be sadly impoverished but illuminated and enriched" (280). "[T]hinking that we enjoy absolute power over our own bodies turns, often subtly, into thinking that we enjoy absolute power over creation" (285).

"The important thing is to teach them sensitivity to different expressions of love, mutual concern and care, loving respect and deeply meaningful communication. All of these prepare them for an integral and generous gift of self that will be expressed, following a public commitment, in the gift of their bodies. Sexual union in marriage will thus appear as a sign of an all-inclusive commitment, enriched by everything that has preceded it" (283).

Valuable principles on sex education are given in the paragraphs 280 onwards, dealing with the harmful effects of data given to those not yet ready to digest it (including information via the social media), the need for appropriate language, modesty, sexual attraction, and so on. "But who speaks of these things today? Who is capable of taking young people seriously? Who helps them to prepare seriously for a

great and generous love? Where sex education is concerned, much is at stake” (284).

4.2.6. Responsible Use of Social Media. Special mention has to be made of the intrusion of the social media into the lives of children. Educators need to pay keen attention to what children are being exposed to, “and this necessarily means being concerned about who is providing their entertainment, who is entering their rooms through television and electronic devices, and with whom they are spending their free time” (260).

In the context of sex education, the document speaks of the importance of helping children to “develop a critical sense in dealing with the onslaught of new ideas and suggestions, the flood of pornography and the overload of stimuli that can deform sexuality. Young people need to realize that they are bombarded by messages that are not beneficial for their growth towards maturity. They should be helped to recognize and to seek out positive influences, while shunning the things that cripple their capacity for love” (281).

“The educational process can be helped or hindered by the increasing sophistication of the communications and entertainment media. When well used, these media can be helpful” (278). While educators need to “prepare children and adolescents to confront the risk, for example, of aggression, abuse or drug addiction” (260), they also need to teach children to discern how to use the social media constructively, “without imposing unrealistic prohibitions. In any event, we cannot ignore the risks that these new forms of communication pose for children and adolescents; at times they can foster apathy and disconnect from the real world. This “technological disconnect” exposes them more easily to manipulation by those who would invade their private space with selfish interests” (278). Two cases in point are the rather recent *Blue Whale Challenge* and now, the *Momo Challenge*, which run through various social media platforms, targeting chiefly young people in several countries and requiring them to harm themselves or family members and even to commit suicide. This is indeed cyberbullying to the extreme!

4.2.7. Developing Social Concern. A very important facet of Catholic education is to help a child develop a good social conscience. First and foremost, teaching staff are called to witness by their own example. Secondly, there should be programmes or a

regular syllabus to help children imbibe these values. Example is the best teacher, and this includes “varied forms of witness, namely solidarity with the poor, openness to a diversity of people, the protection of creation, moral and material solidarity with other families, including those most in need, commitment to the promotion of the common good and the transformation of unjust social structures ... through the practice of the corporal and spiritual works of mercy” (290).

Caring for the Environment. “The task of education is to make us sense that the world and society are also our home; it trains us how to live together in this greater home” (276) “[W]e can rethink our habits of consumption and join in caring for the environment as our common home” (277).

Sensitivity to those who are ill. “An education that fails to encourage sensitivity to human illness makes the heart grow cold; it makes young people ‘anaesthetized’ to the suffering of others, incapable of facing suffering and of living the experience of limitation” (277).

Gender issues. Part of developing a social conscience is to inculcate fair treatment to women and to treat girls and boys with equal dignity. Here we must note that “biological sex and the socio-cultural role of sex (gender) can be distinguished,” even if they cannot be entirely separated (56). While male and female are different, biologically, “it is also true that masculinity and femininity are not rigid categories. It is possible, for example, that a husband’s way of being masculine can be flexibly adapted to the wife’s work schedule. Taking on domestic chores or some aspects of raising children does not make him any less masculine or imply failure, irresponsibility or cause for shame. Children have to be helped to accept as normal such healthy ‘exchanges’ which do not diminish the dignity of the father figure. A rigid approach can hinder the development of an individual’s abilities, to the point of leading him or her to think, for example, that it is not really masculine to cultivate art or dance, or not very feminine to exercise leadership” (286).

4.2.8. Faith Education. The hallmark of Catholic education is imparting good faith education to children. While some of the aspects of an integral faith education have been mentioned above, there is need for a regular curriculum, “an orderly process of handing on the faith” (287). It is also important to inculcate in children an ability to pray and a love for genuine prayer. Handing on the faith

presumes that educators “themselves genuinely trust God, seek him and sense their need for him” (287).

Families often are not equipped to give systematic faith formation to children, and this is further “made difficult by current lifestyles, work schedules and the complexity of today’s world, where many people keep up a frenetic pace just to survive.” Hence, the Catholic school has a pivotal role to play in the faith formation of a child. In fact, in this context, “families often feel abandoned due to a lack of interest and attention on the part of institutions” (43).

“Education in the faith has to adapt to each child, since older resources and recipes do not always work. Children need symbols, actions and stories. Since adolescents usually have issues with authority and rules, it is best to encourage their own experience of faith and to provide them with attractive testimonies that win them over by their sheer beauty” (288).

5. CATHOLIC SCHOOLS IN ASIA: A MISSION TO BE SHARED BY ALL CATHOLICS

5.1 Our Response to these Challenges

As *Amoris Laetitia* (57) points out, the “Synod’s reflections show us that there is no stereotype of the ideal family, but rather a challenging mosaic made up of many different realities, with all their joys, hopes and problems. The situations that concern us are challenges. We should not be trapped into wasting our energy in doleful laments, but rather seek new forms of missionary creativity. In every situation that presents itself, “the Church is conscious of the need to offer a word of truth and hope.... If we see any number of problems, these should be, as the Bishops of Colombia have said, a summons to ‘revive our hope and to make it the source of prophetic visions, transformative actions and creative forms of charity.’”

5.1.1. *Schools Invited to Help.* In paragraph 229, it further goes on to say that “schools and other Church institutions can help in a variety of ways to support families and help them grow. These might include ... social services dealing with family problems like addiction, infidelity and domestic violence, programmes of spiritual growth, workshops for parents with troubled children and family meetings.” We will search, here, for ways in which we can respond to the challenges and directives presented above.

5.2 A Shared Mission

All Catholics, by virtue of their Baptism, are called to share equally “in the threefold mission of Christ as Priest, Prophet and King.”²⁷ The call to transform the whole world “according to the plan of God in view of the final coming of the Kingdom of God”²⁸ is urgent. “The call is a concern not only of Pastors, clergy, and men and women religious. The call is addressed to everyone: lay people as well are personally called by the Lord, from whom they receive a mission on behalf of the Church and the world.”²⁹

*“It is not permissible for anyone to remain idle.”*³⁰ It is in this context that we can look upon the mission of the Catholic school as a shared mission of Bishops, Clergy, Consecrated Persons and Lay Faithful. This idea was discussed at a Conference organized by the Vatican Congregation for Catholic Education³¹ and from these deliberations we can borrow some basic insights:

- The Catholic school is “a place of integral education of the human person through a clear educational project of which Christ is the foundation.”³²
- “The project of the Catholic school is convincing only if carried out by people who are deeply motivated, because they witness to a living encounter with Christ.”³³
- “The implementation of a real educational community, built on the foundation of shared projected values, represents a serious task that must be carried out by the Catholic school.”³⁴
- Regarding cooperation between lay and consecrated persons³⁵ within the same educational mission, we find this important insight that the choice of the lay faithful to live their educational commitment as “a personal vocation in the Church, and not simply *as ... the exercise of a profession*”³⁶ meets with the choice of consecrated persons, inasmuch as they are called “to live the evangelical counsels and bring the humanism of the beatitudes to the field of education and schools.”³⁷

5.2.1. *The Crux of the Matter.* The final outcome of the whole process of discussion and reflection on this topic can be summed up in one word: COMMUNION. Three fundamental aspects of cooperation between lay faithful and consecrated persons in the Catholic school were highlighted:

- i) *communion* in the educational mission,

- ii) the necessary course of *formation for communion* for a shared educational mission,
- iii) openness towards others as the *fruit of that communion*.³⁸

5.3 What is Communion?

“The ecclesiology of communion is a central and fundamental concept in the conciliar documents.... What, then, does this complex word ‘*communion*’ mean? Its fundamental meaning speaks of the union with God brought about by Jesus Christ, in the Holy Spirit.... Baptism is the door and the foundation of communion in the Church.”³⁹ Through the sacrament of Baptism we have the privilege to be invited into “the communion of love that is the very life of God-Trinity.... Communion is, therefore, the ‘essence’ of the Church, the foundation and source of its mission.”⁴⁰ It is important to remember that “Church communion is a gift, a great gift of the Holy Spirit, to be gratefully accepted.”⁴¹ Bearing in mind the biblical image of the vine and branches (cf. Jn 15), we can begin to understand the profound mystery of communion. Communion “leads to mission, and mission itself to communion.”⁴²

5.4 Working Together in a Spirit of Communion

“In recent years, one of the fruits of the teaching on the Church as communion has been the growing awareness that her members can and must unite their efforts, with a view to cooperation and exchange of gifts, in order to participate more effectively in the Church’s mission. This helps to give a clearer and more complete picture of the Church herself, while rendering more effective the response to the great challenges of our time, thanks to the combined contributions of the various gifts.”⁴³

Just as a consecrated person is called to testify his or her specific vocation to a life of communion in love⁴⁴ so as to be in the scholastic community a sign, a memorial and a prophecy of the values of the Gospel,⁴⁵ so too a lay educator is required to exercise “a specific mission within the Church by living, in faith, a secular vocation in the communitarian structure of the school.”⁴⁶

“What makes this testimony really effective is the promotion, especially within the educational community of the Catholic school, of that spirituality of communion ... and the Christian community’s ability to make room for all the gifts of the Spirit in a relationship of reciprocity between the various ecclesial vocations.... Even in that

special expression of the Church that is the Catholic school, spirituality of communion must become the living breath of the educational community, the criterion for the full ecclesial development of its members and the fundamental point of reference for the implementation of a truly shared mission."⁴⁷

5.5 Formation for Communion

It is clear that a spirituality of communion is the basis of a shared mission. This necessarily implies a serious pursuit of theological and spiritual formation for the whole Christian educational community in the Catholic school. It means praying together as a community and living a Eucharistic spirituality too.

5.5.1. *Lack of Christian Formation.* The weakening of faith and religious practice mentioned earlier in this paper (2.4.5, 3.2.7 and 3.2.8) has its impact on the educators in a Catholic school. We cannot take for granted that all the baptized have a zealous and well-informed faith. Among the baptized educators in a school, there might be several who have a lukewarm faith or are even agnostics and atheists. A large majority of the lay faithful may be faithful to rituals, but may know hardly anything about the faith. How then can we find a common platform for Christian communion which is the springboard for a truly shared mission?

5.5.2. *Enemies of Communion.* Physical or sexual abuses in a school are enemies of a spirit of communion. "The sexual abuse of children is all the more scandalous when it occurs in places where they ought to be most safe, particularly in families, schools, communities and Christian institutions."⁴⁸ So, too, is the abuse of power and conscience, such as clericalism. Pope Francis categorically says, "Clericalism corrupts communion" and, he advises: "flee from clericalism."⁴⁹

Another danger to communion is the discrepancy in faith formation between priests and religious on the one hand, and the lay faithful on the other. There is likely to be a sense of superiority among priests and religious who have studied something about the faith, and may therefore look down on their lay colleagues as being 'unlettered' or uninitiated and hence inferior. This could seriously jeopardize the emergence of a spirituality of communion.

5.5.3. An Urgent Consideration. “Educating the young generations in communion and for communion in the Catholic school is a serious commitment that must not be taken lightly. It must be duly prepared and sustained through an initial and permanent project of formation that is able to grasp the educational challenges of the present time and to provide the most effective tools for dealing with them within the sphere of a shared mission.”⁵⁰

This statement underlines a requirement that has been mentioned in numerous documents of the Church and has been stressed time and time again since the Second Vatican Council. Both the documents that we have studied here speak of the need for faith formation (cf. 3.2.8 and 4.2.8). To quote just a couple of more of these documents:

“To live a vocation as rich and profound as that of the lay Catholic in a school requires an appropriate formation, both on the professional plane and on the religious plane.... The need for an adequate formation is often felt most acutely in religious and spiritual areas; all too frequently, lay Catholics have not had a religious formation that is equal to their general, cultural, and, most especially, professional formation.”⁵¹

“For the purpose of a truly incisive and effective pastoral activity, the formation of those who will form others is to be developed through appropriate courses.”⁵²

Professional competence, uprightness and example of life are ways to be true witnesses of the Gospel,⁵³ and are therefore very important. However, we must note that in Catholic schools attention is sometimes given to professional formation and updating, but almost never to Christian formation.

In this context, we would do well to recollect the humble admission in both the documents studied in this paper: “We also need to be humble and realistic, acknowledging that at times the way we present our Christian beliefs and treat other people has helped contribute to today’s problematic situation. We need a healthy dose of self-criticism” (AL 36). “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, with the result that 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” (CFA 16).

A truly meaningful contribution of this gathering here, therefore, would be a clear commitment to promote a systematic faith formation of the lay faithful. Several ecclesial movements and associations have their own formation programmes for their members, but which are specifically concerned with the charism of that particular group. A lot has been done for the formation of lay persons within the Church too, but most of this formation is geared towards service *within* the Church (e.g. catechists or liturgical animators, choir groups or leaders of Small Christian Communities) and hardly anything for the specific and wonderful vocation⁵⁴ *ad extra* of the lay faithful in the world – the vocation to “seek the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and directing them according to God’s will.”⁵⁵

5.5.4. Learning from History. Formation for the lay faithful has been sporadic and piecemeal, not regular and systematic as it is for candidates to the priesthood who study in a seminary. We must, however, remember that regular seminary training, as we know it today, came about only after the Council of Trent (1545-63) recommended it. That was not even five hundred years ago! How were priests formed in the faith before that? A quick review of this history will help us reflect on the formation for the lay faithful.⁵⁶ The simple but comprehensive profile of the first seminary is sketched in the words of the Gospel: “He appointed twelve to be with him, and to be sent out to preach and have authority to cast out demons” (Mk 3: 14-15). From then onwards, priestly formation took on various forms. Initially, the Christian community merely chose someone who seemed to be an authentic disciple of the Lord, and emphasis was laid on prophetic witness. Later, there were zealous priests or bishops who set up their own training schools. For instance, soon after St. Augustine became bishop of Hippo in 396, his episcopal residence at Hippo was the school for the superiors of a good many monastic houses as well as for a considerable number of diocesan bishops, and, in this way, the clergy became a model for imitation elsewhere. During the Middle Ages, the majority of clerics received brief informal and practical education at the hands of a priest in either a monastic or episcopal cathedral school.

Emerging universities were also places of study. However, university settings were not always conducive to clerical

formation. Besides, few clerics could afford the time and expense involved in getting a university degree. As the Middle Ages drew to a close, laxity in clerical life grew. Pope Paul III appointed a commission to undertake the cause of clerical reform in the Church in 1536, and these recommendations paved the way for the Tridentine decision to have regular seminary formation.

If we draw a parallel between the development of priestly formation and the formation of the lay faithful in the Church, we can see that, like the former, laity formation has also been through a series of stages, including small 'schools' of formation gathered around a zealous teacher (reminiscent of St. Augustine's training of priests), and more organized church projects too. As all the efforts at priestly formation finally fed into a programme for systematized priestly formation, so also the time has now come for all our attempts at formation of the laity to feed into a more systematic and comprehensive project of faith formation - one that specifically nurtures and enhances the special vocation of the lay faithful.

Such a systematic faith formation of the laity should be oriented by some important considerations, such as:

- The special vocation of the lay faithful and particularly its secular character have to be recognized and respected;
- A systematic and comprehensive syllabus is to be drawn up and adapted to suit the requirements of the various categories of the lay faithful;
- The dynamics of this formation have to suit the circumstances in which the lay faithful live, and must be different from the live-in seminary approach;
- The material should preferably be prepared by competent lay persons so as to better connect with the mindset of other lay persons.

Thus, through a programme of regular and systematic faith education for the laity, a common platform for a truly shared mission will be established and a spirituality of communion will be made possible.

5.6 Fruit of Communion

Openness to others is a fruit of communion. "The communion lived by the educators of the Catholic school contributes to making

the entire educational sphere a place of communion open to the external reality and not just closed in on itself. Educating in communion and for communion means directing students to grow authentically as persons who 'gradually learn to open themselves up to life as it is, and to create in themselves a definite attitude to life'⁵⁷ that will help them to open their views and their hearts to the world that surrounds them."⁵⁸

The witness of the evangelical life of consecrated persons must reveal that "holiness is the highest humanizing proposal of man and of history; it is a project that everyone on earth can make his or her own."⁵⁹

Openness to others could take various forms - openness to people of other faiths, to parents and families of children in the school, to the disabled, the poor, the marginalized and so on.

5.6.1. *Schools in Asia.* One pillar of open communion is to develop communion with people of other faiths, and this could be the strength of schools in Asia. Interreligious prayer services could be thought of for schools in Asia, since there are people of other faiths too. A common ethical formation which includes areas of social concern could be integrated into the curriculum. This would help to respond to several challenges that we have dealt with above: excessive individualism; a throwaway culture; problems of the social media; poverty; denying the dignity of the human person (especially women, the old, the disabled, the marginalized and so on). It would also inculcate an attitude of care for the environment (including plants and animals) and build a proper context for understanding love, sex and marriage. Through such a moral formation, basic human values and principles could be highlighted and social issues dealt with which would supply ample common ground for working with people of all faiths. Thus would our feet be set squarely on a common journey towards a civilization of love.

5.6.2. *Parents and Parishes.* "Another pillar of open communion is formed by the relationship between the Catholic school and the families that choose it for the education of their children. This relationship appears as full participation of the parents in the life of the educational community.... In willingly welcoming parents' cooperation, Catholic schools consider essential to their mission the service of permanent formation offered to families, to

support them in their educating task and to develop an increasingly closer bond between the values proposed by the school and those proposed by the family.”⁶⁰

“At an ecclesial level also, the communion experienced within the Catholic school can and must be open to an enriching exchange in a more extensive communion with the parish, the diocese, the ecclesial movements and the universal Church.... The members of the diocesan clergy and the lay persons of the local Christian community, who do not always have an adequate knowledge of the Catholic school, must discover it as a school of the Christian community, a living expression of the same Church of Christ to which they belong.”⁶¹

The special course for systematic and comprehensive formation, mentioned earlier, could be made available to both these categories, i.e. parents (or families) and parishes.

5.6.3. *The Marginalized.* A very important aspect of open communion is to build communion with the marginalized of the society. Authentic Christianity shows special care towards the disabled, the poor and those sidelined by society. Simple ways of doing this in a school include getting the more intelligent and gifted children to help the weaker students in the class.

Here I would like to give a concrete example of a school in India: the Jyoti Sroat School. *Jyoti Sroat* means ‘source of light’ in the Sanskrit language. The Jyoti Sroat School is an inclusive school based in Shillong, Meghalaya (North-East India). The school was started in 1993 as the first school for the visually impaired in Shillong. It was started when there were barely any attempts at setting up organized and professional formal education and rehabilitation services for children and young people with disabilities, especially for the blind in the Khasi and Jaintia areas of Meghalaya. It offers services from pre-school to pre-university (Class XII), a variety of coordinated therapeutic and support services to infants and children (0-8 years) and counselling of their parents and families. There are programmes to suit the individual needs of each child.

However, from 2006 onwards, it evolved into an inclusive school offering educational opportunities to all children. The school provides educational and mainstreaming opportunities to diverse learners and with diverse learning needs: children with disabilities, children without disabilities and children from disadvantaged socio-

economic backgrounds. Out of 230 children, 110 have some disability or the other.

The wonderful thing is that these children study together in the same classroom, facilitated by teachers who are specially trained, thus enabling them to lead a *'Life with Dignity'* - the motto of the school. This is what they say: "Our rich diversity is our biggest strength. This allows us to appreciate, embrace and celebrate our unique differences."

This school provides a good example of how the challenge of disability can be met. Normally, persons with disability are segregated and, if at all they go to school, it is to a 'special school.' By studying together, children without disability learn to accept the differently-abled as a normal part of their lives, and to care for them. For example, they learn to push wheelchairs and to help the disabled in various ways. All the children in the school learn sign-language so that they can communicate with the deaf and dumb. In this way, the differently-abled are integrated into normal human life and the onus is on the more gifted and normal children to adjust to the less gifted, rather than the other way about.

5.6.4. A Sign of the Spirit. Those "who lovingly accept a child with special needs are greatly to be admired. They render the Church and society an invaluable witness of faithfulness to the gift of life ... welcoming and caring for the mystery of the frailty of human life. People with disabilities are a gift ... an opportunity to grow in love, mutual aid and unity."⁶² Accepting the presence of persons with special needs helps one to recognize and ensure the quality and value of every human life, with its proper needs, rights and opportunities. Pope Francis stresses that dedication and concern shown to persons with special needs is "a sign of the Spirit." It is a paradigmatic situation that serves "as a test of our commitment to show mercy in welcoming others and to help the vulnerable to be fully a part of our communities."⁶³ True inclusion is one of the main elements of an education to fraternal humanism.⁶⁴ As Pope Francis points out, the Church "knows that Jesus himself is the shepherd of the hundred, not just of the ninety-nine."⁶⁵

CONCLUSION

The Logic of Pastoral Mercy⁶⁶

The whole of *Amoris Laetitia* is characterized by a deep concern for mercy. “The Church is commissioned to proclaim the mercy of God, the beating heart of the Gospel, which in its own way must penetrate the mind and heart of every person.”⁶⁷ “This is not sheer romanticism ... for ‘mercy is the very foundation of the Church’s life. All of her pastoral activity should be caught up in the tenderness which she shows to believers; nothing in her preaching and her witness to the world can be lacking in mercy.’”⁶⁸

“This offers us a framework and a setting which help us avoid a cold bureaucratic morality in dealing with more sensitive issues. Instead, it sets us in the context of a pastoral discernment filled with merciful love, which is ever ready to understand, forgive, accompany, hope and, above all, integrate. That is the mindset which should prevail in the Church.”⁶⁹

This *logic of pastoral mercy* should influence all of our responses to the challenges that face us as well as to the directives given in this paper.

A Spirituality of Supernatural Communion

“We have always spoken of how God dwells in the hearts of those living in his grace. Today we can add that the Trinity is present in the temple of marital communion.”⁷⁰ “A positive experience of family communion is a true path to daily sanctification and mystical growth, a means for deeper union with God.”⁷¹

From family communion and communion within the educational community to open communion, the answers to the challenges of our times spring from a spirituality of communion. “If we think and live by virtue of communion with Christ, then our eyes will be opened”⁷² and we will understand that “real revolution, the decisive change in the world, comes from God.”⁷³

A Systematic Faith Formation

“The communion experienced in the educational community, animated and sustained by lay and consecrated persons joined

together in the same mission makes the Catholic school a community environment filled with the spirit of the Gospel. Now, this community environment appears as a privileged place for the formation of young people.”⁷⁴

Along with a mindset of mercy and a spirit of communion, a regular and systematic faith formation is indispensable if we are to truly tackle the challenges and directives before us. In this manner, we can educate towards fraternal humanism, putting the human person at the centre of our concerns, working for the common good and building a civilization of love, thus giving hope to the world.

A Prayer

Let me end with a prayer, adapted from *Amoris Laetitia*:⁷⁵

Prayer to the Holy Family

Jesus, Mary and Joseph,
in you we contemplate
the splendour of true love;
to you we turn with trust.
Holy Family of Nazareth,
grant that our Catholic schools, too,
may be places of communion and prayer,
authentic schools of the Gospel,
furthering the mission of the Church.
Holy Family of Nazareth,
may those in schools 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 every human life
and of its beauty in God’s plan.
Jesus, Mary and Joseph,
graciously hear our prayer.
Amen.

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25. *Ibid.* 52.
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27. John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles Laici*, 30 December 1988, 14.
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III. CATHOLIC SCHOOLS AND RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES IN ASIA - TOWARDS THE NEW EVANGELIZATION

- Archbishop Antonio J. Ledesma, SJ, DD Chairperson, FABC
Office of Education and Faith Formation

Throughout Asia, much of the first missionary efforts of the Catholic Church were carried out by religious congregations along with the establishment of schools that sustained the initial efforts of evangelization. Even up to our present time, schools run by religious congregations continue the educational apostolate together with a wider network of diocesan schools run by the local clergy and lay faithful. Indeed, the Church's various schools in the Asian region depict a shared mission among bishops, clergy, consecrated persons and lay faithful.

It is in this light that Catholic schools as well as religious congregations in Asia are called to engage in the New Evangelization outlined in recent papal documents. In particular, Pope Francis' Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*, in 2013 summarizes and builds on the proceedings of the XIII Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops in October 2012 with the theme: *The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith*.

Subsequent papal documents, notably *Laudato Si'* on the environment in 2015, and *Gaudete at Exultate* on the call to holiness in 2018, have further elaborated on the characteristics and dimensions of the New Evangelization. This paper explores seven key dimensions of the New Evangelization that we can apply to the role of Catholic schools and religious communities in Asia.

I. A CHURCH OF JOY AND MERCY

The most often mentioned words by Pope Francis, according to journalists, are Joy and Mercy. "The joy of the Gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus" are the opening words of *Evangelii Gaudium*. The Holy Father goes on to remark that "there are Christians whose lives seem like Lent without Easter" (EG 6). Focusing on God's mercy, he stresses, "God never tires of forgiving us; we are the ones who tire of seeking his mercy" (EG 3). "Mercy," for Pope Francis, "is the greatest of the virtues" (EG 37). The Church herself "must be a place of mercy freely given, where everyone can

feel welcomed, loved, forgiven, and encouraged to live the good life of the Gospel” (EG 114).

In the archdiocese of Cagayan de Oro, we have a Divine Mercy Shrine where thousands of devotees flock, particularly during its feast on the second Sunday of Easter. On the eve of the feast day, many devotees line up to go to confession. Not even a dozen priests can cope with the long lines of penitents which last past midnight. For many penitents, the culmination of their pilgrimage is to climb up the stairs behind the rays of the 50-foot statue to the heart of Jesus where they can pray briefly before the Blessed Sacrament.

A Church of joy and mercy, for Pope Francis, does not need to coerce any one to join the Christian community: “It is not by proselytizing that the Church grows, but by attraction” (EG 14). Joy and mercy are the natural – and supernatural – magnets of the New Evangelization.

II. A CHURCH WHICH IS POOR AND FOR THE POOR (EG 198)

Practically all the local churches in Asia started among the lowly and downcast of society. In most countries, the Christian community remains a small minority that is sometimes discriminated against or even persecuted and suppressed. In the Philippines, the Church’s Second Plenary Council in 1991 expressed its self-identity as a Church of the Poor. Pope Francis extends this definition, calling for a simple lifestyle and option for the poor, to the universal Church. He is emphatic in saying No! to “a globalization of indifference” and to “an economy of exclusion and inequality” (EG 53-54). Instead he opts for “generous solidarity and a return of economics and finance to an ethical approach which favours human beings” (EG 58).

In Asia, there are numerous examples of the Church involved in social services for and with the poor – from the work of St. Teresa of Calcutta to mission schools for indigenous communities, to relief services among refugees, to orphanages and homes for the elderly and the sick, and to many other lowly sectors of society. Advocacies for the rights of marginalized groups – like agrarian reform, environmental conservation, and ancestral domain claims – are part and parcel of being a Church of the poor.

However, for Pope Francis, “the worst discrimination which the poor suffer is the lack of spiritual care” (EG 200). This was highlighted for

me in our experience of Typhoon Sendong that struck Cagayan de Oro City at midnight on December 16-17, 2011. Nearly a thousand persons died in their sleep from the sudden flood waters that submerged their homes along the river banks. When international agencies came to help, they followed their protocol of forming clusters among all the local and national organizations that extended aid - e.g., clusters for food, sanitation, trauma healing, etc. But there was no cluster for spiritual care! It was left to the local church to extend this spiritual care, particularly in celebrating the Christmas novena of early morning *Misa de Gallo* in the evacuation centers. The spiritual care of the poor is a greater challenge posed to us by Pope Francis: "Our preferential option for the poor must mainly translate into a privileged and preferential religious care" (EG 200).

III. AN OPEN CHURCH

Pope Francis envisions an open Church: "Our church doors should always be open" (EG 47). This can be understood in two directions: that any one, especially the lowly and deprived, are welcome to enter the church; but also, that those inside should go out to the peripheries to seek the lost and the hopeless. In the same section of *Evangelii Gaudium*, the Holy Father emphasizes that "the Church is not a tollhouse; it is the house of the Father, where there is a place for everyone, with all their problems".

For the pope, the Church can also be likened to "a mother with an open heart" (EG 46). A mother never condemns, but always offers hope and solace to her wayward children. In the same way, the Church looks for her lost sheep with loving eyes and ears, and even imbibes the smell of the sheep. "I prefer a church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets," comments Pope Francis, "rather than a church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security" (EG 49).

The Church in Asia must also be open to cultures and religious traditions, many of which antedate the birth of Christianity. Indeed, the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) in one of its earliest documents has striven to engage the Church in Asia in a fourfold dialogue with the poor, with cultures, with religions, and with the youth. The challenge for inculturation of the Faith in various

socio-historical contexts is at the heart of the New Evangelization in Asia.

I recall an incident when I was sent on a month's exposure as a novice to a pioneer area in the center of Mindanao island. During the mid-sixties, Kadingilan was still a newly-logged area where settlers were coming in. About ten chapels of various Christian denominations were being set up to attract followers. As I was walking around these wooden structures, an old man came to me and proudly said, "You know, Brother, I am a *Catolico cerrado*." Thinking back on that encounter, I think we could have said, "I am a *Catolico abierto*" - firm in our own identity but ready to respect others' beliefs and traditions.

IV. MISSIONARY DISCIPLES

In several of his allocutions, Pope Francis has stressed that every Christian is not only a disciple, but is also a person on mission - i.e., a missionary disciple. Starting with the first disciples, the pope points out: "Jesus did not tell the apostles to form an exclusive and elite group. He said: 'Go and make disciples of all nations' (Mt. 28:19)" (EG 113). Hence, every Christian regardless of one's status and cultural background is called to share in the mission of the Church. "In the diversity of peoples who experience the gift of God, each in accordance with its own culture," the pope remarks, "the Church expresses her genuine catholicity and shows forth the 'beauty of her varied face'" (EG 116).

Among ordinary people, the blend of mission and discipleship is notably felt in popular piety which "enables us to see how the faith, once received, becomes embodied in a culture and is constantly passed on" (EG 123). Pope Francis cites Pope Paul VI who said that popular piety "manifests a thirst for God which only the poor and the simple can know."

As institutions that provide continuity across generations, Catholic schools play a crucial role in forging discipleship with mission: "Catholic schools, which always strive to join their work of education with the explicit proclamation of the Gospel, are a most valuable resource for the evangelization of culture" (EG 134).

V. ENGAGED IN PEACE-BUILDING

Pax Christi, the Peace of Christ, is at the heart of the Gospel message and is integral to the New Evangelization. Pope Francis points out its foundations: “The dignity of the human person and the common good rank higher than the comfort of those who refuse to renounce their privileges” (EG 218). The Social Teachings of the Church have further developed our understanding of human dignity in terms of rights and duties and the duty of governments to promote the common good. In this regard, the pope cites a passage from a pastoral letter of the U.S. bishops that “responsible citizenship is a virtue, and participation in political life is a moral obligation” (EG 220). Along with this, I would add that responsible parenthood is a prior virtue and a task for every couple.

Peace-building means engaging in dialogue rather than resorting to armed conflict. For Pope Francis, “interreligious dialogue is a necessary condition for peace in the world, and so it is a duty for Christians as well as other religious communities” (EG 250). In an international conference three years ago in Cotabato City, Christian and Muslim religious leaders came together to reiterate that both Islam and Christianity are religions of peace. “Peace is Living Together” was the theme of the conference which sought to support the passage of the Bangsamoro Basic Law that would create an autonomous region for Muslim Mindanao.

For the Holy Father, “diversity is a beautiful thing when it can constantly enter into a process of reconciliation and seal a sort of cultural covenant resulting in a ‘reconciled diversity’” (EG 230). The challenge for peace-building in a world torn by divisions continues for a church that strives to share the Easter message of the Peace of Christ.

VI. STEWARDS OF GOD’S CREATION

“Climate change is a global problem with grave implications: environmental, social, economic, political and for the distribution of goods” (LS 25). In his landmark social encyclical, *Laudato Si’*, Pope Francis addresses the overarching threat to the universal common good: climate change and the threat of irreversible destruction of the

environment. Five major themes for the spiritual-moral context of our discussion on climate change can be outlined.

1) The environment is God's gift to everyone. Nature's design of love and truth mirrors God's presence in the world. "Nature is usually seen as a system which can be studied, understood and controlled," points out Pope Francis, "whereas creation can only be understood as a gift from the outstretched hand of the Father of all, and as a reality illuminated by the love which calls us together into universal communion" (LS 76). He adds, "Creation is of the order of love. God's love is the fundamental moving force in all created things" (LS 77). Citing the Psalms and the hymn of St. Francis of Assisi, the Holy Father exults: "When we can see God reflected in all that exists, our hearts are moved to praise the Lord of all his creatures and to worship him in union with them" (LS 87).

2) The environment is a collective good, destined for all. All beings are interconnected in the cosmos. We need to value the biodiversity in our forests and coral reefs. "The climate is a common good, belonging to all and meant for all" (LS 23), the pope stresses. He adds: "The natural environment is a collective good, the patrimony of all humanity and the responsibility of everyone" (LS 95).

As Christians, we are all against suicide, the killing of self. We are against homicide, the killing of another human being. We are against genocide, the killing of an ethnic group. But if we are not mindful, are we not now contributing to eco-cide, the killing of the environment – and eventually of all life on planet earth?

3) Human beings should exercise a responsible stewardship over nature. The covenant between Yahweh and Noah in the ninth chapter of Genesis includes the environment; the rainbow becomes a constant reminder of this covenant between God and his people for the mutual protection and conservation of the natural environment. Pope Francis comments: "Our 'dominion' over the universe should be understood more properly in the sense of responsible stewardship" (LS 116).

4) Projects for integral human development need to be marked by solidarity and inter-generational justice. The encyclical enumerates the gradual, cumulative adverse effects of environmental degradation such as the loss of bio-diversity, extinction of wild-life species, social erosion and irreversible damages affecting future generations. For

Pope Francis, “intergenerational solidarity is not optional, but rather a basic question of justice, since the world we have received also belongs to those who will follow us” (LS 159).

Communities have become more conscious of “the right to a safe and healthy natural environment.” In the Philippines, the Supreme Court has issued a landmark decision favoring the right of children to enjoy the fruits of an unspoiled environment. Thus, the search for alternative sources of energy to counter the greenhouse effect in climate change goes on – e.g., by harnessing solar or wind power, as well as the power of sea waves. Pope Francis notes that a true ecological approach always becomes a social approach, integrating questions of social justice “so as to hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor” (LS 49).

5) The Church has a responsibility towards creation and integral human development. The book of nature and humankind is one and indivisible. We are part of the web of life. “Care for nature is part of a lifestyle which includes the capacity for living together and communion” (LS 228), states Pope Francis. Moreover, “a sense of deep communion with the rest of nature cannot be real if our hearts lack tenderness, compassion and concern for our fellow human beings” (LS 91). As a case in point, the pope continues: “It is clearly inconsistent to combat trafficking in endangered species while remaining completely indifferent to human trafficking.”

VII. CALLED TO HOLINESS

Gaudete et Exultate, the most recent Apostolic Exhortation of the Holy Father in March 2018, recalls the theme of Joy and Mercy, and can be seen as a sequel to *Evangelii Gaudium*. Its sub-title on the “Call to Holiness in Today’s World” provides another dimension of the New Evangelization. Pope Francis invites all Christians to be holy in a practical way for our time and to join “the middle class of holiness.” He points out five signs of holiness in today’s world.

1) Perseverance, patience and meekness. This is perhaps exemplified in the long history of apostolic presence of religious communities and Catholic schools in many parts of Asia. The patient struggle of generations of Catholic educators in establishing and maintaining

schools is a major part of the mission history of many religious congregations.

2) Joy coupled with mercy. Joy in the Holy Spirit, joy in serving the poor, joy in building “the beautiful, unseen temple of a child’s immortal soul” – these are the spiritual attributes of God’s cheerful giver.

3) Boldness and passion. Zeal for souls and the drive to share the Good News are hallmarks of missionary disciples. For Pope Francis, “the Church needs passionate missionaries, enthusiastic about sharing true life” (GE 138). He cautions us from making “our Christian life a museum of memories” (GE 139).

4) In community. “Growth in holiness is a journey in community, side by side with others” (GE 141), notes the Holy Father. He adds that the common life, whether in the family, the parish, the school, or the religious community, “is made up of small everyday things” (GE 143).

5) In constant prayer. “Holiness,” for Pope Francis, “consists in a habitual openness to the transcendent, expressed in prayer and adoration” (GE 147). He continues to mention several kinds of reaching out to God: prayer with grateful memory, prayer of supplication, prayerful reading of God’s word.

These then are seven dimensions towards the New Evangelization in recent papal documents that can be actualized in one way or another in our religious communities and Catholic schools in Asia. Different cultural contexts and socio-economic-political situations may determine which dimensions can be brought to the fore. Nonetheless these dimensions express Pope Francis’ world-view and guide posts for the renewal of the Church herself in our present age. May these dimensions also be the bases for our shared mission – as lay faithful, religious, clergy, and bishops – in the running of Catholic schools in Asia.

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