

“The Asian Catholic Family: Domestic Church of the Poor on a Mission of Mercy”  
**Working Document of the XI FABC Plenary Assembly, Colombo, 2016,**  
**Response of the Syro-Malabar Church**

The Working Document of the FABC XI Assembly entitled “The Asian Catholic Family: Domestic Church of the Poor on a Mission of Mercy” is a theological as well as programmatic text that the Church in Asia will receive with great evangelical enthusiasm. Congratulations to all those were involved in the drafting of this text.

A couple of months back all Syro-Malabar bishops and the representatives of priests, religious and laity from across the world (490 participants), gathered for our global Church’s quinquennial assembly. One of the themes we discussed was family-witness. While working through the assembly sessions we got a powerful insight into the thick interconnection between family life *ad intra* and family’s mission *ad extra*. We found out that practicing Christian families are also missionary families that bear witness to the Gospel of mercy. Indeed, God, who is calling men and women to marriage in order to build up family, is in fact calling them to experience first in their own personal life, and then show to others, God’s love and mercy. Therefore, experience of love and mercy in the family is the wellspring of family’s mission of mercy. It is in this light that the Syro-Malabar Church understands and responds to the problems and possibilities presented in the document under discussion.

Family is a school of humanity<sup>1</sup> where persons learn human and humanitarian values including Christian values. But today we are witnessing a decline in values in all fronts in all parts of the world.<sup>2</sup> This entails that the Church in Asia takes immediate efforts to re-introduce and foster familial values ingrained in our Eastern psyche.<sup>3</sup> Church needs to

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<sup>1</sup> *Gaudium et Spes*, 52.

<sup>2</sup> One of the background assumptions of the draft under discussion, which also becomes evident in some places, seems to be an outdated worldview which revolves around a contrast between *poor but religious Asia* and *rich but secular Europe*. In the present post-globalized world, distinctions such as these are not as sharp and clear as in the past.

<sup>3</sup> The section on the Asianness of family (Part I, A) is very important section of the draft. Among the four paragraphs in this section, the fourth paragraph is well in continuity with the first one. So, they could be merged. The second and third paragraphs in the section enumerate the characteristics of Asian family. Only four characteristics are mentioned; the list could be augmented. In the third paragraph, it is stated that these characteristics are “fundamentally due to a deep Asian sense of sacredness” which is culturally transmitted. It

condemn and resist all governmental and popular efforts at legalizing same-sex marriages, euthanasia, abortion, etc. because legalization of unspiritual practices such as these will in effect banalize long cherished Christian practices. The global context of religious as well as secular ideological competitions, wherein our young men and women live and grow, has serious impacts on Christian family. In response, we can highlight Christian family customs, social values, and special cultural norms and expectations in each traditional community.

Traditional Syro-Malabar families have some unique characteristics, such as solid faith in the sacred and inviolable nature of marital bond, special social manners and family customs, especially family prayer, family spirituality (family liturgy) and ecclesial life, system of faith formation through catechetical activities, role of grandparents in family, openness to adopt good elements from other cultures, ability to mix easily with others, high regard for priests, consecrated people and the elderly, zeal for social action, etc.

Love is the corner stone of family as well as family's mission of mercy. But pastoral experience with families tells us that there is an increasing loss of affectivity in contemporary families. Therefore, the question of the loss of affectivity in family, and remedies thereto, could also be discussed. We need to teach families about the joy of being at home and cultivate the homing instinct in everyone. Having an exclusive family time everyday and occasional family outing not only for leisure but also for social service and pilgrimages have been found contributing to the making of mature Christian families in our Church. Family liturgy binds family members spiritually. So many Christian families are voluntarily doing a lot of acts of mercy in their neighborhood. Some families welcome orphans, the sick and the elderly to their home and take care of them. Some others render their free service in their neighbouring hospitals and homes for the poor, disabled and mentally challenged. And there are still others who provide food in the street and cloths in slums. Following such examples members of each family could put their hearts together and ask what more could they do in order to make their home a mercy home. Indeed, every Christian home should become a mercy home.

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is good to add a word about the specific characteristics of Asian Catholic families bringing out the distinctiveness of the Catholic culture in Asia in the context of religious plurality. The third paragraph of Part I. B. 1 ends with a phrase "under the sword of anti-Christian laws that do not welcome religious pluralism." The precise point of contention here is not religious pluralism; rather it is religious freedom. So one could put it as "... laws that deny religious freedom." The word *pluralism* carries a normative sense whereas the word that conveys a descriptive sense is *plurality*. There are at least three other occurrences of the word *pluralism*, which all could be replaced with *plurality*.

While focusing on the mission of Asian family today, we cannot ignore that the structure and sustainability of Christian family is under threat due to various factors. The idea of same-sex union and the practice of temporary cohabitation, divorce, separation due to practical breakdown of marriage, etc., undermine the original divine plan about the indissoluble union between man and woman in marriage. A culture of temporary and a host of secular and unspiritual values which are fast finding their ways to the young minds in Asia are often the causal factors behind many of the current family problems.<sup>4</sup> The family-size in Christian communities is shrinking because more and more couples seem to be unwilling to accept God's gift of children and to assume their parental responsibilities. There are many attitudinal and practical reasons for couples' lack of openness to the gift of life. In order to pass on our Tradition and Faith to the new generations, we have to follow a serious system of Catechism, other than having only a preparation for the First/Solemn Holy Communion and the Sacrament of Confirmation. An effective ongoing proclamation of the Gospel of family with reference to the biblical, patristic and magisterial sources is essential<sup>5</sup>.

A family that evolves from Christian marriage is a domestic Church; and as a domestic Church family embodies communion and concern for all. A Syro-Malabar family that evolves under the pastoral care of an ecclesial tradition initiated by Apostle Thomas retains its specific Syro-Malabar identity in its religious and cultural practices. Just as each church community lives in and evolves through families, each family finds its Christian origin, community-identity and specific role in the common ecclesial mission under the care

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<sup>4</sup> At least at three crucial moments of the overall analysis of the situation of contemporary family (in the introduction; in Part I B. 4; and, in Part I B. 6) the draft holds postmodernism as responsible for the problems in the Asian culture today. This is an incorrect and objectionable treatment of postmodernism. Postmodernism is not all negative. Many Christian philosophers and theologians in the east and the west are updating their thoughts with postmodern insights. Postmodernism cannot be taken as the common source of secularism, materialism, individualism, indifferentism, etc. One way of correcting this one-sided reading is to simply avoid using the term postmodernism, if it cannot be nuanced adequately.

<sup>5</sup> Three remarks on Part II - Faith Reflection: First, this part of the draft would be more powerful if it makes references to biblical and patristic sources. Second, in Part II B, the draft calls for "silent witness." Lest this might undermine the divine command and our apostolic task to preach the word of God, a word should be added about direct evangelization. Third, there is quite some ambiguity surrounding the category of the poor. In Christian discourses we use the term poor both as an economic category that refers to persons who are deprived of basic means for material sustenance and as a theological category that refers to the poor in spirit. Although they are mutually permeable, their distinctiveness should not be overlooked. Economic poverty has no inherent theological quality; it becomes virtuous when one voluntarily accepts it for the sake of the Gospel of Jesus who was poor. In Part III, 2 we read, "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." As said above, voluntary poverty is a fruit of grace. But, massive poverty is not a call by the Holy Spirit; it is, as rightly said in other sections of the draft, the result of social injustice, economic imbalance, and corruption. So, if we want to save the above cited sentence in the draft, then we need to put it like: "The massive poverty of a great number of Asian families gives an opportunity for the family to be truly a domestic Church of the Poor."

and guidance of its mother Church. Family is the first seminary. Our traditional family system and family prayer have greatly contributed to missionary vocations. The Syro-Malabar Church has made substantial contributions to missionary activities, especially by providing numerous zealous personnel (to a great extent, to the Latin Church in India). [There are at present 27 Syro Malabar Bishops serving for Latin Dioceses. At one time it was about 40 bishops. After my coming for the present FABC, I have come to know that Bishop Sebastian Francis Mechery of Penang in Malasia is of Syro Malabar origin; his parents are from and born in my Archdiocese, Trichur]. The missionary zeal originates from and is kept alive by the domestic Church.

The Syro-Malabar Catholics are migrating in good numbers to big cities in Asia and especially to the Gulf countries. Since there are no sufficient structures and possibilities for the pastoral care of the Syro-Malabar migrants in the Gulf countries, faith formation has become practically dysfunctional and some migrants are even leaving the Catholic Church. The horizontal inequality experienced among Churches *sui iuris* due the lack of proper freedom given to some Churches *sui iuris* to care for their migrants spread around the globe might slow down the momentum of the mission of mercy. Therefore the Syro-Malabar Church wants to gently urge everyone concerned to establish proper structures for pastoral care in the ritual tradition of migrant families.

*Amoris Laetitia* asks the Church to train families to be “effective agents of Family Apostolate” (cf. nos. 200-202), and exhorts families to become missionary families (cf. nos. 208; 289). In fact, in various dioceses in the Syro-Malabar Church new forms of missionary families, variously named as Couples for Christ, Legion of Apostolic Families (Consecrated Families), Evangelizing Families, Family Meetings (*Kudumbayogangal*) or Assemblies of Families by their family/blood relations and so on, have emerged and proved themselves to be helpful. In addition, domestic celebrations in connection with traditional ritual commemoration of the dead like *Sradham*, (the 7<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup>, 30<sup>th</sup>, 40<sup>th</sup> and annual day commemorative celebrations of the death of ancestors and other family members), the observance of five fasts (*Ambathu nombu*, (50 days Lent), *Irupathianchu nombu* (25 days Lent in the Advent), *Ettu nombu* (Sept. 1-8), *Pathinanchu nombu* (Aug 1-15), and *Moornu nombu* (3 days fast of *Ninivites*) in our tradition are not only domestic ritual activities but also occasions for performing acts of mercy. Family Units or Small Christian Communities in our parishes are effective means to foster better pastoral care. However, we need strong Family Apostolate Centers for pastoral accompaniment of young families and wounded families. House visits

by parish priests and home mission by sisters are very important in this regard. [The Holy Family Sisters (CHF) in my Archdiocese are running a very good training institute (FATRI) for Home Mission]. As aging groups are on the increase, Church needs to promote pro-life movements and palliative care structures for the aged and the terminally sick.

As mentioned in the working document, in most of the countries we are a small minority. But, we need to realize that Church is not a negligible minority; rather it is a very significant minority. Church is not merely a teacher of doctrines and moral principles <sup>6</sup>. Church is a movement and it can initiate as well as effectively lead social and spiritual movements. St. Teresa of Calcutta who lived for the abandoned poor and Bl. Kunjachan who devoted his life for poor Dalits tell us what even a single individual can accomplish in Church's mission of mercy. A diocesan weekly/monthly which reaches every Catholic family will be a very effective tool to support new movements. Lay leaders at various levels, especially in youth groups like "Jesus Youth" will be exemplary takers of God's mission of mercy. The mission of mercy that each and every family in the Asian Church involved in will soon become the cultural mission of this continent. As Pope Francis succinctly puts in *Amoris Laetitia*, "families are not a problem; they are first and foremost an opportunity" (no. 7). It is with this Christian optimism that the Church examines the factors and situations that have positive as well as negative impacts on the familial experience of the joy of love, the fullness of life, and the readiness for the mission of mercy.

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<sup>6</sup> Part III 6.c says that the distinctive role of the Church is "giving doctrinal and moral guidance." This brief section seems to betray a very minimalistic self-understanding of the Church.