

MARY AND FAMILIES IN EXILE

When we read about Mary in the Gospel we find that Mary did in fact experience living in exile. What made it harder for her was that she suffered her exile when she needed most to be settled quietly in a home, for the preparation of the birth of her Divine Son Jesus our Saviour. But I will be talking more about this later on.

What do we mean by Families in Exile?

The first thing that comes to our mind is, those families who are forced to leave their own native country. The reasons for leaving one's country, among others, are to avoid persecution or other sorts of injustices, to improve job possibilities or because the cost of living is very high. As a teacher in Victoria, Australia for 20 years, teaching in a school of students whose parents come from over 50 nationalities I found that most of their parents came here for the reasons mentioned above. All such families needed help to settle down in a totally new environment and to help them overcome the cultural shock, which affected most of them.

As for my family, and myself it took us quite a long time to overcome the cultural shock, which we had when we came here. This was not because we came in a different land with different customs – which everyone expects that to be the case – but because of the confusions that existed and still exists in the Catholic Church and Catholic Schools, with the way they interpreted the teachings of the Church especially after Vatican II.

We can never forget how great our cultural shock was when we found out that the religious practice in Malta, was much different to the one practiced in Australia which was more liberal. It seems that in most Catholic schools and churches, sin didn't and still doesn't exist, students had no idea of what a venial or mortal sin is, no idea what confession is, they were told that they didn't need to go to confession because God is very forgiving, that it's no sin if you don't go to Mass on Sundays and so many other things. That is why even those who migrated out of their own free will needed help and encouragement to keep their Faith alive and their spiritual customs and moral values.

Most Of The Immigrants Kept The Faith Strong.

Pope Benedict XVI in his first speech said that Australia is the most secular country in the World. And He is right. From our 23 years living in Australia we can now easily say that, were it not for the strong Faith, devotions, family unity, and Christian values that these immigrants brought with them and kept them alive; Australia would be in a much worse state with regards to religious practice and moral values.

In this case many of us felt like living in exile because of following the true teachings of the Catholic Church. We had to search for and travel to the traditional parishes to enjoy praying in a church that follows the teachings of Jesus Christ. Most of these immigrants joined prayerful groups or movements, kept most of the tradition they had in their own native land, like the rosary, attending regular Mass, devotions, feasts of Saints and so many others. So it is good that the ICCFM is working very hard to be present as CFM groups, in as many countries as possible, especially amongst the immigrants who in this case feel being in exile.

As Members of the ICCFM We Need To Look Beyond.

As members of the Christian Family Movement we need to look beyond our immediate world. The reason is that there are millions of families living in exile not only in their own native country but also in their own homes. In this so called progressive, scientific, open minded world with all its modern and sophisticated technology, we still find millions of people surviving on just a dollar or two a day. Even in rich and progressive countries like America, Australia and other developed countries; one still finds millions of people, families and children homeless, jobless and suffering hunger. Some of these families have worked hard throughout their lives only to find out that their savings is wiped out by unavoidable medical bills and indirect taxes.

Globally, 852 million people, mainly in developed countries, are still chronically or acutely undernourished. In China 114 million are malnourished and in India 221 million, whilst the worst is in the African region with 204 million. (UN Millenium Project Hunger Task Force 2005). Also the lack of suitable water for people and nature is a growing crisis and is causing severe hardships to families especially children. According to Brian Richter, director of "The Nature Conservancy's Sustainable Waters program" (see Web) more than one billion humans lack access to clean drinking water, and two billion – almost one in every three people on the planet – do not have adequate sanitation facilities or electricity. Every eight seconds, a young child dies from lack of water or a waterborne disease. How can these people not feel as being in exile when they know that there are so many others living in luxury and surplus of food and drink?

Biggest Problems That Need Immediate Action.

The biggest problem in the world today is that in today's so called progressive world – where most of us enjoy living comfortably in our air-conditioned home, fully nourished and can talk to and even see our relatives overseas through our computers

– we find millions of other people living in conditions of almost unimaginable suffering and want. I have witnessed this myself in the Philippines where I have seen families living in unbelievable and abhorrent conditions, without access to sanitation and abandoned or not properly nurtured children. Where this type of poverty exists one finds that many people including children are dying of various diseases such as malaria, pneumonia, diarrhoea and other diseases, which in developed countries, and even in those same countries can be prevented if they had access to medical treatment. This is contrary to Jesus teaching when in Mt. 18-10, He tells us not to despise these little ones. **“See, that you do not despise one of these little ones, for I tell you that in heaven their angels always behold the face of my Father who is in Heaven”!**

In 2007 we still have millions of illiterate parents, as well as millions of school age children that cannot attend schools. Notwithstanding the fact that every government in every country around the whole world promises to make laws to protect rights of families and the rights of every child for guidance, education, protection and a safe and nurturing environment, we still have millions of children and young people undernourished, abused and exploited in the worst form of child labour or child abuse. Not to mention the thousands of young women who emigrate for work and find themselves forced to work or sold for the multi-billion dollar commercial sex-trade and are also sexually abused.

With the problem of divorce and children being born out of wedlock increasing at an alarming rate, millions of children are being starved in their own homes because they are not receiving the benefits of being raised by the same two legitimate parents from childhood to adults. I need to mention here, also those families who, most of the times through their lack of marriage preparation or egoism and selfishness - although living together under the same roof, they live exiled from each other through their arguments and disagreements to the detriment of themselves and their own children.

Where Does The ICCFM Come In?

As we all know that the ICCFM is made up of families who work for both the spiritual and temporal needs of families. So it is very much concerned about all these families, youth and children who are living in some type of exile mentioned in this speech. The Christian family Movement has done and is still doing a lot of work in not only evangelising and educating parents by providing spiritual formation to individual married couples but also to couples before marriage, so that through a genuinely Christian, healthy and spiritual Family Life bear living witness to the Gospel. It also offers other services for the deepest needs of people with problems in

their married life, or divorced and dysfunctional families through spiritual, temporal and emotional support. The CFM also trains couples for marriage, gives counselling before and after marriage.

Methods of Solving These Problems Globally.

It is almost impossible to write about all the problems, difficulties and obstacles that the family meets today. The institution of Marriage, as God created it and as we know it, is facing a lot of opposition from various levels of society, most of the media, magazines and even governments who want to eradicate it. The breakdown of the family is so spread and so common that most of the young have lost the ability to trust the older generation for reliable support. Young people are desperate for meaningful and deep relationship but are not prone to trust others. So this makes it much more difficult for the “modern Christian family to be called back to the original position” – as Pope John Paul II urges us to do – because of the discouragement and stress at the continuous growth of its difficulties.

1. Children And Youth Must Be The Primary Target Of Our Future Spiritual Family.

So, one of our first priority is to tackle the young couples preparing for marriage as well as young married couples in their first years of marriage. Now this is something impossible to be done by ourselves only. We need the help and cooperation of State and Church authorities. One of the reasons that most of these young couples don't bother to show any interest in learning about their own way of life and living, is because their upbringing was dysfunctional as already mentioned before in this speech. They never or hardly ever experienced their basic human rights of a nurturing love and a relational connection in their innocent young age.

2. Catholic Schools Must Give An Authentic, Effective, Catholic Religious Education.

This is another worldwide problem that is affecting the Catholic Church's faithful in almost every country where Catholic schools exist, - unfortunately even in some missionary countries - **that needs immediate attention**. One can find that most of the children with problems mentioned above, attended Catholic Schools and still find it hard to practice their faith and believe in God's laws – the Commandments. They don't even know that as Christians they have duties and obligations towards God and themselves. So it is of utmost importance that we approach our Bishops and encourage them to take immediate action with regards to this problem, as many bishops are doing in America.

Bishops have to start with the fact, that in general the Catholic Schools, in most places, are Catholic in name only. Such results as we get in Australia; that only 4% of the students keep practicing their Catholic Faith after completion of 12 years in a Catholic Primary and Secondary Schools, and some even more by attending so called Catholic Universities; **are a very clear proof of this.** This clearly shows that the blame cannot be put on the students or parents only. Unfortunately one can find such results in most countries in Europe that few years ago were very proud of their Catholicism such as in the once 100% Catholic Italy and Catholic Malta – the country where I was born. So this should be our very urgent priority.

We should continually remind Bishops that, as Pope John Paul II said in the conclusion (86) of **“Familiaris Consortio (The Family) Conclusion”** **“young men and women, are the future and the hope of the church and the world, destined to be the dynamic central nucleus of the family in the approaching third millennium....It is therefore indispensable and urgent that every person of good will should endeavor to save and foster values and requirements of the family.”**

Of course, the formation and education starts from home when we are still very young, and there is no better place to continue this than in our own good Catholic Schools.

As Michael Gilchrist rightly quotes - in his book “Lost” - Catholic Educator Br. John Moylan CFC:- “Indeed, if the culture of the school does not say to its Catholic students that the most valuable thing in life is a living Catholic Faith with all that this implies, by that very fact it is giving these students a false education which could be teaching them that religion and the Church are irrelevant; sacramental, liturgical and private prayer is unnecessary; and that one is at liberty to choose one’s own moral code.” (p.76)

3. We Have To Be A “Citizen” And A “Catholic.”

As Archbishop Nicholas Chia told us at the Singapore Asian Family Conference last year we have to be **not only good citizens of our country but also good Catholics.** As good Catholic citizens **we must not be afraid to speak up for the truth** in this case about family values - especially when they are attacked.

Another priority will be that **wherever we Catholics are,** we must make our voice heard. It is not the first time that our CFM group in Australia – although very small - was engaged in writing letters and collecting signatures to be sent to parliamentarians or senators and even the premiers of the states and the prime Minister of Australia – to encourage them to vote against such laws that affect the sanctity of marriage, such as

homosexual marriage and other laws affect the family. Such signatures helped to convince the Labour Party to vote with the Howard Government in passing a New Bill in Parliament in favour of the traditional marriage.

Unfortunately other laws like RU486 and the cloning were passed notwithstanding the letters and signatures sent to all governments. Now this is the initiative of the Australian Family Association, which has done and is still doing all it can to see not only that the family as God created it, will not be eroded, but also that the temporal needs of the family are met. For our CFM group in Australia, the AFA is an inspiration that gives us courage and strength. The AFA as a denominational Movement in Australia has been and still is one of the greatest – if not the greatest Movement that defends the rights of the family in all its dimensions.

We have to be real missionaries, not succumbing to the worst threat summarised in the modern expression of “political correctness.”

4. The Need For CFM Members To Know More The Teachings Of The Church As They Are.

The last thing I suggest in this talk is that since the aim of these groups is first and foremost to spread the teachings of the Church **as they are**, and not as the crowd wants them to be, and to promote the welfare of the Catholic Families according to the vision expressed in all the Popes letters and Encyclicals, the Documents of Vatican II and the Catechism of the Church – always bearing in mind that the Family is the “Domestic Church”, **we should make it a point that in every meeting we should dedicate few minutes to read and discuss parts of these.**

Mary In Exile.

As a conclusion to this talk, I would like to come back to Mary’s exile as a model for families in general but especially to those suffering through exile or other hardships. In all the Gospels we find very little about Mary. However, once we become familiar with the birth, life and death of Jesus, we find enough history of the exile that Mary had to suffer to save Jesus when he was born and thus help Him complete His Mission to save us all. The first exile that Mary and her family had to suffer was when an Angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and told him to take the child Jesus and His mother by night, and depart for Egypt and to stay there till the death of Herod, because **“Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.”** (Mt.2:13-18.) We can all understand how Mary felt at this time when she saw that she had to put her newborn child Jesus on an arduous and dangerous journey through the desert, that is, her son being exiled by the very people he came to save. Mary and Joseph

stayed in Egypt for about two years before returning to and settling in Nazareth. However Mary accepted His will with the deepest of faith, for her entire being was centred on God.

Mary as the Model of Prayer, Hope and Trust to All Families.

Although Mary was privileged to be the Mother of Jesus, she wasn't excluded from suffering. As Pope John II said in the Conclusion of Familiaris Consortio (The Family), Mary underwent trials of poverty, persecution and exile, thus glorifying God in an incomparably exalted and pure way. And she will not fail to help Christian Families – indeed all the families in the world – to be faithful to their day-to-day duties, to bear the cares and tribulations of life, to be open and generous to the needs of others and to fulfil with joy the plan of God in their regard.”

As Christian families, we join in this prayer of John Paul II: “May the Virgin Mary, who is the Mother of the Church, also “be the Mother of the church at home.” Thanks to her Motherly aid, may each Christian family really become a **“little church”** in which the mystery of the Church of Christ is mirrored and given a new life. May she, the handmaid of the Lord, be an example of humble and generous acceptance of the will of God. May she, the sorrowful Mother at the foot of the Cross, comfort the sufferings and the dry tears of those in distress because of their difficulties at home.

Finally, Mary trusted God when the angel appeared to her to announce the birth of his Son Jesus, and further, trusted Jesus at the Cana wedding when Jesus seemed to refuse her intercession for the wedding couple (Jn.2:4.), and even when Jesus' mission looked like a complete failure. As a human being Mary surely suffered from misunderstanding Jesus' mission, or from the stress she endured because of his conflicts with religious authorities, including His death on the Cross. Mary who grew in wisdom and grace, kept her hope in God. In her own prayer in response to Elisabeth's greeting, Mary gives hope to those in suffering:-

“He has cast down the mighty from their thrones, and has lifted up the lowly.

He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty.

He has come to the help of his servant Israel, for he has remembered his promise of mercy, the promise he made to our fathers, to Abraham and his children for ever.”

(Lk 1:46-55)

The End.