

## Asia and the synod on the family



Sensational issues aside, global gathering

held deeper meaning

Most of the prominent reports on the 2015 Synod of Bishops on the family were prepared by Western journalists. Many of us in Asia had to rely on these writings to keep ourselves abreast of the discussions as they were happening.

The reports, however, have been generally preoccupied with the most controversial issues. In a way, this is not surprising. The debates among the bishops revolved around institutional approaches toward cohabitation, same-sex marriage, and divorced and civilly remarried Catholics. In various commentaries, tensions were usually presented in terms of the liberal-conservative divide. Indeed, based on the votes cast, it is clear that these split the bishops in significant ways.

The preoccupation with sensational issues is not without warrant and the Catholic Church in Asia has to confront them too, one way or another. This is an important point to make, especially because in some commentaries, the liberal-conservative divide was constructed along geographic lines. European bishops, for example, are the liberal ones working against the moral conservatism of aggressive counterparts from Africa.

Is Asia also conservative when it comes to moral issues? This is a tricky question to answer. To treat Asia as a homogenous entity is a mistake given its diversity of cultures and religious expressions. But some impressions linger, especially with regard to certain values. Filial piety, the relevance of the extended family, and patriarchal household arrangements all seem to point to the lasting influence of family life on individuals.

Some of these values are of course informed by Orientalist stereotypes, usually pitted against the individualism of Western societies. But sometimes, they are also reinforced by state discourses. The “Asian values” of regimes in East Asia invoke the necessity of discipline, hierarchy, and communitarian responsibility for the sake of economic development.

So while they continue to register in the public life of many Asian societies, it helps to underscore that conservative values in relation to family life are not unchanging. Divorce, same-sex relations, and cohabitation are also discernible patterns for many Catholics in the region. And they challenge

patriarchal and heteronormative family arrangements.

### **The lingering question**

But the preoccupation with these issues, no matter how important, has glossed over many other areas of concern the document includes. And they are not any less sensational. They have significant consequences for churches in Asian societies. Aging, migration, violence against women, and limited economic opportunities for young people raise important questions not just for society but also for the church and its pastoral work in the region. There is benevolence, therefore, in the repetitive declaration to "accompany" families and "listen to their reality" given the many challenges that they confront today.

The issue, therefore, is not whether bishops or Catholics are liberal or conservative with their theological positions. While I admit that theological clarity matters, the pastoral duty of the church trumps differences in opinion. If the family is the "subject of pastoral action," then its immediate contexts do matter if the church were to remain relevant.

In many Asian societies, the idea of the stable nuclear family has to be reconsidered. Today, a whole new generation of Indonesians, Thais, Bangladeshis and Filipinos are growing up in surrogate arrangements because their parents are working elsewhere. In the advanced economies of Japan, Singapore, and Hong Kong, the care of the elderly is left to migrant workers. And violence against women and the queer community continue unhampered. All these have consequences on the family the church so cherishes.

### **What good remains in the family? And what good can the church offer?**

To be sure, these matters are not unique to the experience of Catholics in the region. They are concerns of young people and the elderly, whether Catholic or not. But that is precisely the point. The Synod of Bishops on the family, and whatever future documents that come out of it, need to ask a bigger question: What does it mean to be the Catholic Church in Asia today?

The synod and the buzz around it will soon die down. But this one question will linger for a long time.

And yet wider still is the horizon demanding change. Ultimately, the contribution of this synod is not in rendering visible the liberal-conservative divide in the church. In his speech at the synod's closing, Pope Francis has rightly acknowledged that the synod laid bare "the closed hearts which frequently hide even behind the church's teachings or good intentions, in order to sit in the chair of Moses and judge, sometimes with superiority and superficiality, difficult cases and wounded families."

In this light, the synod was not so much about the family as it was about the church itself. Intriguingly, their own document demands nothing less than acts of great mercy.

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