

**"The Bishop: Harbinger of Hope - Bishops, Women, Gospel and Communion"
(Pastores Gregis)**

**FABC Office of the Laity and Family
In collaboration with the FABC Office of Theological Concerns**

12 – 16 May 2008, Redemptorist Center, Pattaya, Thailand

My heart was glad, my tongue rejoiced, my flesh will live in hope. (Acts 2:26)

Called to proclaim the hope that springs from the cross (PG 5), 10 bishops along with theologians, 13 women and 2 priests from different parts of Asia, came together to reflect on the challenges posed by the situation of Asian women. The meeting was held at the Redemptorist Center, Pattaya City, Thailand on 12th - 16th May 2008, and was organized by the Women's Desk of the FABC Office of the Laity and Family in collaboration with the FABC Office of Theological Concerns. The theme, *The Bishop: Harbinger of Hope - Bishops, Women, Gospel and Communion*, was inspired by *Pastores Gregis*, the post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation of Pope John Paul II (2003).

In this Apostolic Exhortation, the bishop is called to be "a defender of human rights.... promoter of justice and peace, model and promoter of the spirituality of communion, model of attentive listening, and person of dialogue" (PG 19). To help the bishop in fulfilling this call in his pastoral ministry to women, the meeting focused on three objectives:

- 1) to review the status of the women's movement in the Church in Asia;
- 2) to recognize and affirm the contribution of women in the life and mission of the Church; and
- 3) to help the Church in Asia to uphold the dignity of women and open greater opportunities for their presence and action in the Church.

Through story-telling, theological inputs, workshops and prayer, the participants experienced a moment of renewal, especially the bishops who saw the pains, struggles and strength of women and reflected on how their pastoral ministry could effectively respond.

Since we have such hope we act very boldly. (2 Cor 3:12)

As we listened to the stories of women we became once more keenly aware of the complexity and magnitude of their oppression and the continuing violence against them in Asia. We recognized various women's groups and their efforts to transform their situation. Through the use of feminist critique and inclusive language they expose attitudes and structures that perpetuate the oppression of women and work towards a world of equality and justice. Through prayer and discernment, they are led to decisive

action in collaboration with advocacy groups bringing about economic, legal and social changes that benefit women.

An increasing number of women are pursuing theological education and are trying to use women's insights into God, Scriptures, sacraments, mission, and ministry to contribute to a renewed theology. They are also actively involved in evangelization, the promotion of the faith, peace movements, and solidarity actions for the dignity and equality of all persons irrespective of sex, caste, class, and creed. All these and the responses of the local Churches to the recommendations of BILA I (1995), II (1998), III (2001) are signs of hope.

For through the Spirit by faith, we await the hope of righteousness. (Gal 5:5)

Sadly the anguish of women remains. The roots of women's oppression, embedded in our cultures and influence religions, grow unchecked as they are not brought to the fore and challenged. Further the internalization of patriarchal values blinds women and oppressors to their roles within structures of exploitation and discrimination, making change difficult to achieve. Thus despite the presence of affirmative legislation, we see the persistence of injustice towards women particularly domestic violence, poverty, inequality, trafficking, and female foeticide and infanticide. We are concerned too about new threats to women and family life brought by consumerism and the global mass media through their impact on women's perception of themselves, their bodies and marriage. We regretfully confess that the gap between the Church documents and theology that uphold the equality of men and women on the one hand and pastoral practice on the other remains to be bridged. In all humility we admit that women feel discriminated against even in the Church. The failure to recognize their "equal privilege of faith through the justice of God" (cf 2 Pet 1:1) has been a block to acknowledging their "true equality with regard to the dignity and to the activity common to all the faithful for the building up of the Body of Christ" (PG, 10).

In God's great mercy God gave us a new birth to a living hope. (1 Pet 1:3)

As an Easter People driven by the Spirit of the Risen Christ, we recognize that "We cannot effectively promote our Christian vision of full life unless the Church as a communion of communities will credibly expend its moral and spiritual energies to the conversion of mentalities, the transformation of structures, and the eradication of practices that deny women and the girl child in Asia their God-given dignity" (Christian Discipleship in Asia Today: Service to Life, Final Statement of the 6th FABC Plenary Assembly, 1995, #15.2). Thus, we commit ourselves to be *harbingers of hope* by becoming:

A welcoming community that

- encourages women to share their charisms and gifts for the benefit of the community

- listens with empathy to the pain of women, documents their stories and makes the Church a place where they feel at home, experience healing and wholeness;
- supports women through self-help groups, legal assistance, and counseling;

A prophetic community that

- confronts cultural practices that discriminate against women with the values of the gospel, promotes and sustains counter-cultural Christian communities;
- denounces female foeticide and infanticide, discrimination in the upbringing and education of girls, forced marriages and the practice of dowry;
- promotes mutuality and co-responsibility in the family;
- educates itself on issues that threaten the life and dignity of women;
- revisits the curricula in our schools to ensure that all subjects are taught according to the gospel values of equality and justice;
- advocates the dignity and rights of women in the wider society in collaboration with government agencies and advocacy groups (NGOs) from different faith communities;

A theologizing community that

- creates spaces for the faith perspective of the powerless and the voiceless;
- reinterprets the traditional image of Mary in the light of the Magnificat and understands Mary's song as an invitation for women's prophetic speech;
- rethinks our theologies of marriage, sexuality, purity and the body in order that dehumanizing cultural prejudices be transformed by the liberating word of the gospel;
- encourages and facilitates the study of theology among women, provides financial assistance, and opens avenues for them to use their knowledge as teachers, pastoral workers and researchers.
- ensures the presence of women theologians in theological faculties and seminaries so that women's scholarship could enrich and renew theology;
- develops theology courses that integrate women issues following the method proposed by the FABC which commences with exposure to life experience, followed by reflection in the light of Scripture and Tradition, and leading to clear choices for action;
- consults with women theologians in the diocese so as to discover possible ways of becoming a Church more faithful to the vision of the Gospel.

A participatory community that

- acknowledges the need for education in women issues to become a part of the on-going formation of bishops, priests, religious and seminarians;
- nurtures collaborative ministry at all levels of the life of the Church life: base communities, parishes and dioceses;
- sees the ministry of church leadership, as bishop and pastor, in terms of gospel animation, pastoral encouragement and prophetic engagement in humble service, in addition to management and administration;

- exercises power as “power with” and “power for” rather than “power over” or domination of the community;
- affirms and recognizes the pastoral work of women as catechists, lectors, animators of base communities, counselors, liturgists and promoters of works of charity;
- ensures that diocesan bodies that are open to lay members include women;
- appoints women in leadership roles which are open to them such as chancellors, judges and chairpersons of different commissions, etc.

May we who have heard the voices of suffering women be reflections of God who “observed the misery of God’s people, heard their cry... knew their sufferings and has come down to deliver them” (Exodus 3:7-8). May we continue fruitful dialogue and be filled with hope, for as *Pastores Gregis* says, “Hope encourages a Bishop to discern, wherever he exercises his ministry, the signs of life which are able to uproot the seeds of destruction and death. Hope sustains him as he transforms conflicts into an opportunity for growth and for reconciliation. Hope in Jesus the Good Shepherd will fill his heart with compassion, prompting him to draw near to the pain of every suffering man and woman and to soothe their wounds, ever confident that every lost sheep will be found.” (PG, 4). May Mary, the Mother of Hope, who believed in the fulfillment of the Lord’s words (Lk 1:45), “obtain for us the grace never to fail in the task of love which Christ has entrusted to us” (PG 74) as we restore woman to her rightful dignity as the image of God (Gen 1:27).