

## **STATEMENT OF THE FIRST INTERNATIONAL CONGRESS FOR THE FAMILY**

Theme : The Family at The Service of Human life

Dates : January 26<sup>th</sup> - February 1<sup>st</sup> 1983

Venue : Madras – India

### **Preamble**

0.1 Three hundred participants, hailing from more than thirty countries of the world, assembled together at the First International Congress for the Family of Asia and Australia, held at Madras, from January 26<sup>th</sup> to February 1<sup>st</sup> 1983, under the auspices of the Tamil Nadu Family Development Centre. This Congress, in the line of those previously organized for the countries of the Americas, Europe and Africa, was intended to throw light on some of the crucial and sensitive problems that face contemporary family life in both the largest and the smallest of the earth's continents, with special reference to the problem of fertility regulation.

0.2 The coming together of so many people, directly or indirectly involved in the family apostolate in various countries, offered an unique opportunity for a fruitful exchange of information and ideas as well as for mutual encouragement, constituting thereby a very enriching experience for all. It helped to better identify our problems and needs in the different areas of family life, to take stock of the work already achieved or being done in our countries and to draw concrete plans for the future. From a brief world round-up throughout the countries represented emerged a clear vision of common achievements and common problems.

I. In the perspective of a just society and common pilgrimage with all people of good will

1.1. Though our Congress was a gathering mostly of Christians and its main theme was Family, our vision throughout the deliberations was that of a just society to emerge or God's final and universal rule to come. Our concern was to embody in our lives and in the

activities and structures of society and Church the human values of freedom, fellowship and justice proclaimed in the Gospel. It is our belief that the new society hoped for will be a universal family of God's people. It will be a state in which all human persons will be brothers and sisters in all-round caring and sharing, enjoying equality and freedom and truly able to call God Father.

1.2 We realize that the major problem that confronts the world at large and the countries of the Third World, is dependence and injustice in human relationships, personal and structural. This is an interconnected and interacting reality in socio-economic, political and cultural spheres, at international, national and local levels. Due to sustained exploitation, oppression and domination by a small minority, the vast majority of the people have been dehumanized, marginalized in society, and rendered powerless and voiceless. The gap between the rich and the poor is ever widening making the rich richer and the poor poorer. It is within this situation of injustice that we view the whole problem of population and poverty which are its consequences.

1.3 In keeping with the ultimate goal of Asian religions and the Gospel of Jesus Christ we aim at integral human development and all-round liberation of all people. As such the struggle for a new society is a common task of all people and a constitutive element of the Church's mission in the common historical movement towards total freedom. Our approach to population control and our efforts for promoting family planning and responsible parenthood are situated and integrated within this major thrust.

1.4 We want to move in common pilgrimage towards this beckoning vision to realize this ideal in a spirit of dialogue of life and concrete cooperation with all people of good will. We are convinced that our efforts at serving the family should be a collaborative venture with all Governments, international organizations, non-governmental and voluntary agencies, institutions and groups, cutting across all religions and ideologies. In a world where the majority of families live under or on the poverty line, whatever services we render them

need to be done as part of our struggle for justice on the basis of our preferential option for the poor, in genuine solidarity with them and adopting a simple life style.

1.5 It is against this background and within this perspective and conviction that we focused our attention on the family and reflected on its role at the service of life in contemporary society.

## **II. Problem identification.**

2.1 It was generally felt that family life in our countries, although it begins to be strongly exposed to the unhealthy winds blowing from within and from without, still maintains the basic values of its Cultural past, Nevertheless, it was agreed that it would be unwise to rely too much on our past experience of the traditional stability and sanity of our families and that adequate steps should be taken from now to counterbalance the devastating effects of the evils that are corroding the integrity of so many families.

2.2 In the light of a theological reflection on the family as a community of love and as a domestic Church we have considered the situation of the family and this reflection has convinced us that severe fissures and fractures have appeared on the family horizon in the countries of our region. The family which was meant to be the community of love, of total self-giving, has thus been affected by the world situation.

## **III. Natural family planning, a pastoral concern.**

3.1 We have drawn abundant inspiration from the consistent teaching of the Church on family problems in the past few years, particularly from the recent Apostolic Exhortation "Familiaris Consortio" in which Pope John Paul II gathered together the fruits of reflection and deliberations of the Synod of Bishops on the same theme.

3.2 We noted with special care that the Church does recognize the serious problem of population growth in the form it has taken in many parts of the world and its moral implications (FC 31). We also recalled that the Church accepts and recommends, as the sole legitimate method of birth regulation, the recourse to periods of infertility whereby

the couple respect the inseparable connection between mutual love and procreation, the two dimensions of human sexuality and thus act as ministers of God's plan, using their sexuality according to the original dynamism of total self-giving, without manipulation or alteration (FC 32).

3.3 It has been a matter of immense joy to know that in accord with the wish expressed by the Holy Father, an ever increasing number of people in our two continents are devoted to the urgent task of rendering the knowledge of the body's rhythms of fertility accessible to all married people and also to young adults in order to prepare for the marriage (FC 33).

3.4 Natural family planning cannot be considered as just one more method of contraception, when it is meant, not only to avoid, limit or space, but also to achieve pregnancy. More than a mere method, easily accessible to all, it is also a way of life. In fact, it enhances and intensifies the relationship between the spouses, it promotes marital harmony and equality, it educates for continence and it demands "a continual Effort through which husband and wife develop their personalities and are enriched with spiritual value "(Paul VI, *Humanae Vitae*, 21)

3.5 We acknowledge the results obtained in the propagation of natural family planning. However, the need was strongly felt for disseminating the established scientific credibility of the ovulation method and making people aware of its reliability and effectiveness. It has also urged that many more instructors be trained who can impart such knowledge to married couples or to youth of marriageable age with the help of adequate teaching aids.

3.6 The active presence of Cardinal J. R. Knox, President of the Pontifical Council for Family, of Drs. John and Evelyn Billings, the initiators of the ovulation method, and of other researchers was a source of much enlightenment and support. This Congress wishes to place on record its appreciation of the scientific input of high caliber of these scholars.

#### **IV. Family Pastoral Ministry**

4.1 It was wished that the Church through all her members - bishops, priests, religious and laity - should make the family the centre of all her pastoral ministry.

4.2 An integrated approach to the problems of the family is called for. This will serve as a strong foundation for the acceptance of natural family planning. Each Diocese which has not yet a family life centre ought to set up one. It will be run by a trained director and the centre will offer a package of services in areas such as family life education, vocational guidance, marriage preparation courses, parent and marriage enrichment programmes, responsible parenthood training, family catechesis and spirituality and marriage counselling.

4.3 While placing on record the great support of so many Bishops and priests to the family apostolate in our countries, we feel that some do not seem to be yet sufficiently committed to, and convinced of the urgency of the family apostolate in face of the impending or already surrounding dangers. Credit should be given to those who dedicate their best effort to this ministry.

4.4 Family life education is the first necessity and should be imparted to parents and youth alike not only at home but also in schools and colleges as part of the curriculum of studies.

4.5 An important part of the family life formation is education in human sexuality, understood obviously not as a mere information but basically as a communication of the proper values and attitudes.

4.6 Besides this remote education for family life, an immediate preparation for marriage should be made obligatory for all engaged couples. This will not only enlighten and strengthen their faith in the sacrament of matrimony, but also provide them with the modern psychological insights and medical information helping them to grow to maturity.

4.7 In addition to these pre-matrimonial services, follow-up programmes for the newly-weds and other married people, have to be set up.

4.8 It is only through such a holistic approach to the family that Christians will be enabled

to resist the contraceptive mentality, permissiveness and anti-life attitude that pervade the modern world. While abortion should be condemned, a positive attitude to respect all human life should be fostered by all means and all efforts should be made to educate youngsters on the dangers of drugs and alcoholism through an understanding and sympathetic approach to their problems. Young people should also be helped to perceive the particular difficulties inherent in mixed marriages or to make such marriages when they are contracted, a success through a genuine witness of the Catholic partner to his/her faith, supported by graded catechesis. A deeper and more comprehensive study of mixed marriages would be most welcome.

4.9 Such a vast programme of family formation requires obviously sufficient and well-trained personnel particularly the formation of a coordinating team at the level of parishes.

4.10 Lay people, who have a specific contribution to make in this field, should be called and persistently encouraged to assume their responsibility in a sphere which is eminently theirs for more than one reason.

4.11 Parents and, in general, married couples should consider the apostolate of the family as an important task of their specific vocation. They are the best to transmit to others, specially to young people preparing for marriage, the values of their sacrament.

4.12 Various specialists, particularly medical professionals, psychologists and social workers, either as individuals or as members of health organization are duty bound to offer their contribution by way of service and research to the betterment of the quality of family life. Catholic hospitals and dispensaries should get more involved in this education and propagation of NFP as a way of life. Teachers in schools and colleges should also consider part of their noble mission to co-operate enthusiastically in the urgent campaign of safeguarding true family values.

4.13 Religious Sisters who are already rendering yeoman service in the field of natural

family planning should be encouraged to prepare themselves and get involved also in other areas of family apostolate.

4.14 Seminar and novitiate training should equip the future priests and religions not only with theoretical knowledge but with the appropriate skills and guided pastoral experience for such a demanding apostolate. Priests already in active ministry, who never had the benefit of such training, should be given an opportunity to follow refresher courses to get acquainted with the main pastoral problems concerning modern family life.

## **V. Conclusion**

5.1 It is hoped that from this fraternal sharing of concerns, successes and failures, that took place at the Madras Congress strong bonds of a fruitful solidarity and ever closer collaboration may arise and flourish leading to a steady overall growth of families.

5.2 To facilitate this, it is desirable to have an informal Asian Family Service. It will collect and share information among persons, groups and institutions involved in Family Ministry in Asia. It will help them update on the latest scientific research and make available all literature and aids in this field. We recommend that the organizers of this Congress ensure such a follow-up to this event which we cherish.

5.3 It is hoped that the above services will contribute, though in a modest way to enable the families play an indispensable role in the ushering in of God's Kingdom. By a deep realisation of the values of the kingdom such as justice and freedom, love and concern, equality and brotherhood the families will build up authentic Christian communities and contribute in no small measure to the emergence of a just society.

5.4 Since God himself is the source of life and love, the family too by giving life to children and manifesting love within itself, becomes in a way instrument in God's hands for the building up of his family.

5.5 The love between husband and wife finds its expression in the children and tends to

flow into the wider community. The loving relationships arising between families and persons within the family strength further the links between broader groups, We discern the spread of God's rule in these growing relationships and bonds of love.

5.6 Thus any service rendered to the families by way of supporting them to face manifold problems and encouraging them in times of difficulties will be a service rendered to promote justice in the world, the advancement of God's kingdom.