



International Confederation of Christian Family Movements



CHRISTIANITY IN FRANCE

By Fr. A. Christophe, Chaplain of the Christian Family & Social Movement of Singapore Singapore

I have the unusual privilege of visiting and seeing France once, every three years or so, over the last couple of decades. Each time I was able to spend a few leisurely months there at, what we call in Singapore as “ — at the grassroots, and in the heartlands.” I spend time with relatives, families, friends from the villages, the towns, and monasteries. Each time I leave with what amounts to a “time –lapse snap-shot” of the place. Strung together I am able to make some general observations and commentaries.

This time round, I observed in particular that over the last 30 years or so there had been a serious erosion in the institution of the family in France. The decline was particularly acute these last 2 decades. Thirty years ago parents in France would be appalled and would despair if their children were to live together before getting married. In 1970 only 20% or so young adults would take this path. Today, thirty five years later, only 10% of young people do not live together until after they are formally married. The older generation has now begrudgingly accepted this as the norm.

Last year in France 47% of babies were born out of wedlock. Ten years ago this figure was 37%. This means that some couples living together do get married, officially, when they have children, and it also means that a large proportion of them could not be bothered to register a marriage even after they have a number of children. One of my relatives said to me, “Oh, I recently attended the wedding of a couple who had been living together for more than 17 years, and soon after their wedding, they also had their 12 year old child baptized. I guess it is never too late.” This, however, is not the trend all over Europe. In Greece, for example, only 3% of children are born out of wedlock. I tried to understand what had gone wrong. One of the young people I spoke to on this matter told me. “I am unemployed. No real life prospects. How to get married?” This despite that the girl he is living with is employed.

Could it be that young people got married, and then together they build their family and home. Whatever they build and made together are theirs, jointly, and this bonds them even closer. That was the basis on which the current laws relating to the separation of material assets when a marriage breaks up. In all cases, rather regardless of the actual cash contribution of the respective spouses, the matrimonial properties are generally speaking, equally distributed between the spouses. As this basis had undergone a sea change, will the laws and our social conventions have to be changed to reflect this? Could this deterioration of family values be a result of the rejection of their Catholic faith, their religion? All over France, churches are empty.

As an indication of the dire state of affairs, consider this – in the 1970s, out of three Major Seminaries in our area, two were closed and amalgamated into the remaining one. Last year I heard that out of eight Major Seminaries in another part of France, seven was closed and (so)



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all remaining seminarians could be educated, trained and housed in one institution. In the early 1950s, the French Government took on the financial responsibility of maintaining the exterior of all churches. It was the cultural heritage of the Nation. Recently they took on the responsibility for the maintenance of the interior of these churches. Had they not done so, would all the churches in France have gone to ruins by now? It is now not the congregation, not the community, nor the Church of the people of God who pays to build and to maintain their place to worship God. It is the taxpayers.

Today when you visit any French town or village, the church building is decently maintained by the government mainly for its cultural, architectural, historic, and artistic value. They are tourist attractions. Nobody goes to church for services or Mass anymore. Most church bells still ring for the Angelus, to tell the time, or for tourist? There are few baptisms, fewer marriages, and even fewer ordinations. 30 years ago we used to joke that the French enters the church 3 times in their life, -- first time – horizontally – as a baby for baptism, vertically for marriage, and then horizontally again before burial. Today most come in only one in their life, or rather after – dead.

So while we are still able to see a lot of churches in France, there is practically no Church. Funeral services still fill churches. I am not too sure if this is an act of social solidarity, a cultural throwback, or, some residual belief that there is something beyond the grave.

Non-church buildings, and those churches built after the 1950s, are not covered by this financial umbrella the Government provided. These are poorly maintained, closed or locked. Many are sold. In my first parish in Fourmies, the parish house, and ancillary buildings, and even the meadow, were all sold and now put to commercial use. The same thing goes for many seminaries.

In many rural parishes 6, 7, or more parishes are amalgamated under a new name as one parish. Many do not get a priest to visit to say mass more often than once every 6 weeks. There used to be 400 parishes which is now reduced to 51, and amalgamated into one Diocese. There is one saving grace, one small plus to be found amidst all these gloom – the village mentality of many people is now opened up. They have to come into contact, to interact, to worship and attend services with people from other villages, other faiths. I have heard that some emerging new Christian (Catholic) communities are now congregating on their own. They (regrettably still older people) group, meet informally in their own houses, and other community premises. They pray as a community, learn more about their faith and share their own problems. I heard that they get retired priests to come occasionally to say Mass for them and share their Christian lives. I do not have the privilege to meet any of them this time. Perhaps French Christianity is returning to the roots of early Christianity, of small Christian communities.