

Asian Bishops Fete Papua New Guinea's Cardinal

By Santosh Digal

Negombo, Sri Lanka: Papua New Guinea's first cardinal has thanked bishops of Asia for sending missionaries to the Oceania continent.

"I take this opportunity to thank you for sending missionaries to our region. Most of our missionaries at the present are from Asia. They come from countries like India, Philippines, Indonesia and Vietnam," Cardinal John Ribat, told the members of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences.

The new cardinal attended the eleventh FABC plenary at Negombo in Sri Lanka as the president of the Federation of Catholic Bishops' Conferences of Oceania (FCBCO).

The Archbishop of Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea was among the 17 new cardinals Pope Francis appointed on October 9.

The Asian bishops feted Cardinal Ribat on December 2, the fourth day of their plenary.

Cardinal Ribat brought greetings of the other three cardinals, bishops, priests, religious and Catholics of his continent comprising Australia, New Zealand, PNG, Solomon Islands, Fiji and 17 other small island countries of the Pacific.

The region has 84 dioceses in 21 countries that vary in cultural, economic and religious backgrounds but are mostly Christian.

"Most of your communities and dioceses have rich Catholic history and traditions. But we on the whole are a young Church with mostly vibrant communities. But we have our share of problems in shepherding and on-going formation for our Catholic faithful," Cardinal Ribat told his Asian counterparts.

The 59-year-old smiling prelate said his region had just finished the celebrations of the 50 years of the establishments of the dioceses of Papua New Guinea and Solomon islands. They became dioceses from Apostolic Vicariates on November 15, 1966, he added.

He said a major issue confronting his people is climate change. "We are not creators of this problem but we are greatly the affected from this problem," he lamented.

The bad effects include rising sea levels, ocean acidification, and unusual rainfall patterns. They harm many communities in the region.

"In some cases, entire regions and nations are under threat from the indisputable fact of rising sea levels. Examples from this part of the world include the Carteret Islands, Fead Islands, Kiribati, the Marshall Islands, the Mortlock Islands, Nukumanu Islands, the Tokelau Islands, and Tuvalu.

“Efforts to build seawalls are largely ineffective against the rise of tides and consequently scarce fertile soil and cultivation areas are being destroyed rapidly,” the cardinal noted.

It is nothing more and nothing less than the well-being of humanity and of the future generations that we have at heart and so we too cry out for action, he added.

He expressed happiness that a statement issued by the bishops of the region was well accepted by other conferences and governments, especially those attending the

“We are happy to say that our FCBCO statement on Climate change was well accepted by other conferences and the governments of COP 21 which met in Paris in December last year,” the cardinal said.

He commended the Asian bishops for choosing the theme, Asian Catholic Family: Domestic Church of the poor on a mission of mercy. “It is a great opportunity for me and Fr. Victor Roche to represent FCBCO in this plenary Assembly,” the cardinal said.

Fr Roche, a Divine Word missionary from India’s Tamil Nadu state is the FCBCO secretary general

Cardinal Ribat is a member of the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart founded in 1854 by Father Jules Chevalier at Issoudun, in Bourges diocese of France.

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[Santosh Digal of Matters India (www.mattersindia.com) prepared this report for FABC Office of Social Communication.]