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Pastoral care, healing and preaching of the Gospel

Report from a Korean parish

topics

- *contextualisation of pastoral care in Korea*
- *issue of women's rights*
- *the needs of children and of old people in Korea*

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Contextualization of pastoral care

The post-modern society of the 20th century hasn't only caused positive but also negative changes in the social, cultural and religious sphere of human life. In the Korean society it hasn't become different either. Because of the rapid development from a rural area almost being like in medieval times to an industrial state which it has become in the last 50 years, life of the Koreans has become incredibly wealthy. The bad side of this material prosperity is the weakening of the own spiritual judgement, the weakening of humanity within social contact and thereby the distortion of the true human being.

Many people suffer from the confusion, respectively the distortion of the human image being created according to the image of God (Imago Dei). The important task of the church in this context is the pastoral care and healing of the people in the own quarter of town with concrete help. Nowadays the gospel can be mainly perceived and preached by a parish by healing the sores and illness of the people who suffer from the personal and structural problems of society.

Jesus Christ has not only healed the ill people and given is love to the people who came to him, but he has visited himself the ill, the suppressed and the suffering people, he has visited, healed and freed them. Nowadays the church shall also follow the example of Jesus Christ. That means: Pastoral Care must be contextualized beyond the narrowness of the personal sphere into the living world of post-modern society.

Our parish has worked over three problems for a long time:

- 1) Question of women's rights – dealing with the problems of women of the social lower class including the problem of taking care of the children before they go to school.
- 2) Question of problems of the youth – dealing with the destruction of dreams and humanity among the young people who are only drilled and supplied with pure facts at school;
- 3) Question of problems of senior people – dealing with old and retired people who are isolated and estranged from their families and society.

Before outlining the projects our parish works at, I'd first like to explain the traditional idea of the supreme happiness in Korean society, and the field of problems in our parish. According to the traditional idea a human being is only supremely happy when he has enjoyed five forms of happiness in life: a long life, wealth, health and a deep feeling of peace inside him, a good reputation by living virtuously, and a natural death. All these forms of happiness rely to life on earth. Even if in the Christian tradition the idea of supreme happiness is characterized by the longing for heaven because of the beatitudes in the gospel according to Matthew 5, 3-12, we must not leave out the earthen dimension of supreme happiness. For the life on this earth that God has given to us cannot simply be a painful one, but it should rather become a happy one by tasting in advance heavenly joy.

Case-studies and practical work in the parish

The district of my community, my parish, is in the country, near the border to the capital of Seoul. The total population amounts to 19.569. Half of the population (mostly indigenous and farmers) live in detached houses, and the rest (mostly commuters who go to work to Seoul every day) live in newly built skyscrapers.

Question of women's rights

The question of women's rights automatically maintains the problem of taking care of the children. Whereas the women of the social upper class do their jobs in order to emancipate in society, the women of the social lower class are automatically forced to work, to be able to nourish their families. As those women aren't educated highly either in respect of jobs, they apparently can't get proper and well-paid jobs. Mostly they are unhappily married with men from the same social class. A lot of these men have got odd jobs, take other women. In addition to that they are alcoholics or gamblers. If these women have got any job, the actual problem arises who will be able to take care of the children. As the private kindergartens are too expensive for those mothers, they either do without work and so remain at the low limit of existence, or they lock their children in a room with food and drinks until they return home in the evening. Some years ago newspapers reported about some accidents of those children who had put on fire the room while playing with matches and had died in the flames because the room they were in had been locked. Certainly it is an extreme example, but today there are many similar cases. In this context I think that half of the women's problems will be solved when our parish takes charge of the children.

Case 1: Mrs. Pae Myung-Hee, 28 years old, gets social help. Two years ago, her husband died in a car accident. Since then she has lived alone with her 3-year-old son. As she wants to save money for the future of the child and also for her own financial situation, she has accepted a job at a hairdresser's.

Work starts at 8.30, and she can be home only after 6 p.m. The child is too young to be alone at home the whole day. Most places that take care of children only work in the mornings. There are places that work the whole day, but she can't pay for them.

Kindergarten

In order to solve such problems, our parish has established a kindergarten on March 3, 1995. 58 children between three and seven years old have been accepted. Seven women with a full-time employment take care of these children. As we get great subsidies, we have hardly any financial difficulties. Viewing the number of children being not of school age in our district (1.516 children of which the number of children of the well-off families and the children in other kindergartens must be left off) the local contribution of our parish is relatively high.

Senior school

The rapid process of industrialisation in the last 20 years has automatically caused a new structure of the traditional system of large families in the Korean society. It has caused lots of new problems that are related to the estrangement of people. Especially stricken by that are the old people who have come out of this process. Most of them suffer both from the financial and from the mental and spiritual impoverishment. Especially the too early retired people fight for their new identity that is seen as "useless for the society".

Many of them are still healthy, have lots of time and can work hard. But the society doesn't need them any longer. Even their own family doesn't need them. Because of the generation gap that is formed in a great measure by social changes, most of the grandchildren don't have any closer inner relationship to them. Therefore, they feel more and more lonely and useless even in their own family.

There are hardly taken any state measures on the local field. To sum up all that: the four characteristics of senior problems in the post-modern Korean society are impoverishment, illness, loneliness and loss of identity. All that leads to the loss of joy and courage of living. On task of the church in this situation is also counselling, company, and healing of these seniors with energy.

Case 2: Mrs. Im Yung-Hi, 72 years old, has been an housewife during her whole life. As her husband died very early, she had to educate alone three sons. For some time she had lived with the family of the eldest son until the youngest son became an alcoholic. Since then she's lived together with him in poverty. She is alone at home the whole day.

In order to give a small contribution to the reduction of the mental and physical decay of those people by isolation and for the integration of those people into a changed situation of life, our parish founded the senior school on March 9, 1995. At the end of a 4 month's probation we've made written inquiries. Out of the 100 members of the senior school, 78 people have answered. The main reason for their coming to this school is said to be the making of new friends and the joy by learning. Because of these statistics we've learnt how important this new community is for the old people expelled by the post-modern society into isolation and estrangement.

Challenge for the Korean church

By the above-mentioned activities in our parish I have learnt that in a post-modern society of isolation and the individualisation of the communities of life by high-tech-industrialisation, the traditional pastoral care for the parish must be done in a new shape. That means: not only human beings, but also the whole own district is to be pastorally cared for, counselled, accompanied and really helped (= healed) individually by every parish. The fulfilling of this task within the own parish is – in my opinion – much more important than any missionary work in remote countries.

The question of the rights of women, children and senior people in our society is the question of the poor and the suppressed. Church must engage itself a lot for these people, because that is a form of divine service, too. We must not forget that Jesus fought at the side of such people.

Finally, I want to give biblical reasons for this new challenge for the modern church. As you can read in Deuteronomy, there will always be poor people in the country. “Therefore I command you, you shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor in the land.” (Deut. 15:11) And: “As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.” (Matth. 25:40) That means: “Do not neglect to do good and to share what you had, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.” (Hebr. 13:16)