

## Diversity and the merits of hope

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Newly elected French president Francois Hollande provoked what media are terming “soul searching” throughout all Asia these recent days when he appointed Fleur Pellerin as minister of small and medium enterprises and the digital economy. The appointment had to have spoken to the people of France as well.

Ms. Pellerin’s birthname is Kim Jong-sook. She was adopted in Seoul by her French parents at the age of six months.

The South China Post headlined an article about Pellerin with the words “Tolerance Korea can learn from” (5-23-12). South Korea’s own Hankook Ilbo daily wielded a scalpel in words even more slashing. Minister Pellerin of France, said the newspaper, with a nod to her name “Fleur,” had “bloomed as a flower” in Paris after “being abandoned” in Korea (TT 5-20-12 p. 5).

Journalist Akira Nakano of the Japanese think tank Asahi Shimbun (As Shi below) remarked that in the aftermath of the Korean War, from 1950-53, some 160,000 Korean babies were adopted overseas. Today, “due to financial and other problems, some 1,000 South Korean children end up overseas after being adopted.” (As Shi 5-19-12).

Several issues here deserve comment. First, that word “abandoned” bothers me.

Since when is bringing a new life into the world and allowing someone else to adopt the child an act of abandonment? Perhaps it is time for wordsmiths to re-fashion not only the meaning of this term, but of “pro-life” also.

Over the years, I have irritated or infuriated some readers, and perhaps pleased a few, by taking a pro-life stand on a variety of questions. I have written in

opposition of absurdly liberal gun laws in the United States, for example. Gun control is a pro-life issue. From the start of it, I opposed the war in Iraq. I’ve remained pro-life in sensitivities to euthanasia. I strongly oppose blanket condemnation of gays and lesbians and the stereotyping of persons because of race or nationality. In taking these stands, I believe I have been pro-life.

To say that parents (for we must include fathers here) “abandon” babies when they put them up for adoption seems too simplistic and somehow wrong. If we want to talk about “abandonment,” let’s talk about abortion. Abortion is abandonment in the most extreme sense because it is an abandonment of all hope.

Let us give credit, then, to the natural parents of new French minister Pellerin, who made it possible for their child to come into the world, and to find and a make a life they could not offer her.

The second issue that calls for comment in the Pellerin story is “home” and “country,” and perhaps other terms tied to questions of identity.

In Korea and, let’s be honest, in Taiwan, Japan and throughout all Asia, we continue to find instances in which foreign workers, “foreign brides,” and so called “new families” are undergoing real times of suffering because these marginalized groups do not easily fit into the tightly knit cultures in which they find themselves.

Ethnic tensions in contemporary France, with a Muslim population of some 6 million among the general French population of 65 million, are beyond the scope of this column. Obviously, however, the Pellerin appointment speaks powerfully to the people of France.

A local paper reported this week that 49,558 marriages occurred in the first four months of 2012 here in Taiwan.

Tellingly, 14.3 percent are classified as “international marriages” because one of the partners is from China (63 percent), a South East Asian country (22.4 percent) or other country (14.5 percent) (TT 5-24-12 p. 3.) The International Herald Tribune said a week ago that for the first time in history, “minorities – including Hispanics, blacks, Asians, and those of mixed race – reached 50.4 percent” of all births from July 2010 – 2011 in the United States (IHT 5-18-12, p. 1).

Migration for many reasons continues to dramatically re-define and re-shape the meaning of national identities. The story of Fleur Pellerin in France is a reminder to all of us that diversity in a society is a strength and treasure, and need not be a source of suspicion and fear. (Father Daniel J. Bauer SVD is a priest and associate professor in the English Department at Fu Jen Catholic University.)

## **Talking Point**

- 1) This column focuses on an important new cabinet minister in France, Fleur Pellerin, who is actually Korean by nationality. Her French parents adopted her when she was 6 months old. Would the president of Taiwan or of China appoint a "foreign born non-Taiwanese" or "non-Chinese" to a high government position? How open are Asian societies to foreigners?
  
- 2) A large Korean newspaper says Ms. Pellerin has "bloomed in Paris" after being "abandoned" for adoption as a baby in Korea. Is it fair to say that offering a baby for adoption is "abandoning" the child?
  
- 3) About 15% of current marriages in Taiwan involve a partner who is not from Taiwan originally. Our local society is rapidly becoming more diverse. Are "differences" in race or nationality harmful to the "identity" of a country?