

## **“WHO SAID DIALOGUE IS DEAD?”**

### **My first Visit to the Indian Jesuit Provinces as JCSA Secretary for Interreligious Dialogue (Sept 23-30, 2013)**

In the first year of my assignment as JCSA Secretary for Interreligious Dialogue, I visited the Coordinators of Dialogue of Calcutta, Patna, Dumka, Hazaribagh, Ranchi, Jamshedpur, Delhi, Gujarat, Bombay, Pune, Goa, Karnataka, Kerala, and Madurai. I have a few more to go.

Before meeting with the coordinators, I sent the following Questions to all the Coordinators, based on which we reflected together:

1. How do you conceive your role as the Coordinator of dialogue in your province/region? And how could this be conceptualized and seen working – in terms of a vision focus, strategy and means, activities and engagement, etc.?
2. In what ways you would still consider Dialogue an important aspect of our Jesuit ministry?
3. What has been the regular and special activities concerning dialogue in your province/region?
4. How would you envisage a new focus/direction to this ministry of dialogue given the contemporary situation in India/in your region?
5. How do you want the JCSA Secretary to plan out the Asst. meeting – date, venue, and the areas you want the members to discuss.

Given each one's specific region, culture and set up, also individual skills, the coordinators reflect upon their specific way of engaging in dialogue. Apart from the regular interreligious prayer, sacred-text reading, getting religious leaders to speak to students, joint celebrations on festive occasions, gift-food-sharing, small peace-initiatives particularly in educational institutes and in the neighbourhoods, there are efforts in getting smaller multi-faith groups formed and activities undertaken. This was visible in Calcutta, Patna, Pune, Karnataka, Kerala, and Madurai. In other places, the individual coordinators' keen interest in associating themselves with their neighbours and other groups is worth mentioning.

I was glad to see that in both Calcutta and Jamshedpur, their Provincials (Fr. Jeyaraj and Fr. Dhanaraj) were active members during the meetings with the Calcutta Dialogue Commission, arranged by Fr. Patrick Walsh, and the zonal meeting in Jamshedpur, arranged by Fr. Antony Raj. The latter was sponsored by the Jamshedpur Provincial House.

In Calcutta's meeting, the members were sharing about political communalism and their fears about the communal picture getting revoked. But despite threats, the dialogue of life and experience do take priority in life in such associations with the Ramakrishna Math, Brahma Kumaris, Sadbhavana Manch (for all religions), All Churches Committee (ACC), and the like. Celebrations during Buddha

Poornima, active help during the Uttarakhand disaster, Albert College's inter-faculty ecumenical staff association, Jesuit juniors' experience during the Pooja time and the Christmas occasion... are events to recall the great interfaith spirit and legacy left by Brahmabandhab Upadhyay in the region. Dialogue between the Catholics and the Sarna people is yet to be initiated for building harmony and solidarity among these people. Reaching out to Sarna students and their parents for the first time in the school bore much fruit. The Political Science and Commerce Depts. of St. Xavier's College, Kolkata, celebrated the 150<sup>th</sup> birth anniversary of Swami Vivekananda; and the Environmental Science Dept. held seminars on Faith, Reasoning, and Science. Organizing and systematizing such efforts need to be done, the Commission felt.

In Jamshedpur zonal meeting which more or less covered the tribal belt, Fr. PJ James of Hazaribagh Province mentioned that he was trying to create a sense of understanding among the students in his school through interreligious prayer and harmony programmes. He indicated that the former Bishop Rt. Rev. Charles Soren was keen on nurturing such ministry of building relationships.



Fr. Zacharias Lakra of Madhya Pradesh said that dialogue between cultures take the priority in his region as they are facing problems between the Tribal Catholics and the Sarna people. Even inculturated dancing during liturgy, red-border saree adorning Mother Mary, partaking in Rice-bear, etc. have come into question and the Catholic leaders and people have begun facing problems in their Tribal churches and communities. Motivated by RSS and groups like Sarna Samiti created by VHP, people are springing up causing division and hatred between Christians and non-Christian tribals. Peace and Harmony are to be promoted by all, not necessarily by dialogue commission alone.

Pointing out that dialogue is an intrinsic dimension and attitude in all the Jesuit works and relationship, Fr. Antony Raj of Jamshedpur Province said that dialogue of action takes the form of safeguarding the rights of people, joining in the seasonal festivities, inculturate with the Ho people of the region like in formulating the seasonal Ho prayer, etc. Members of school management are interested in building contact with city-youth by forming Sarva Milan for skill-development among

them through Spoken English. Collaboration with the Social Action Commission has created a forum called Samagam, of people Coming Together. Peace-building among Dalits and Adivasis is a strong area of concern. Could our schools and Gram Panchayats do something about interfacing between communities? Dialogue today should mean and act in this way.



In Patna, under the leadership of Fr. Thomas Chillikulam, interfaith celebration of Christmas and New Year take place regularly and the RTC has periodic Satsang along with the villagers. Children take part actively in these events. The time of bomb blast in Bodh Gaya was an occasion to form Shantisena to counter communalism and terrorism. A few important political leaders along with scholars, social activists, and Jesuits participated in an interfaith meeting. Occasionally there are arranged interfaith gatherings wherein thousands of college and university students take part. The Commission has links with Human Rights groups and PUCL. A perspective 10-year plan for the Dialogue Commission is under way.

I went to the environment-friendly 'shrine' called Tarumitra (Friends of Trees), to visit with its Founder-Director and my senior, Fr. Robert Athickal. Needless to talk about the centre's contribution to the dialogue with the Environment, which GC 35 talks about, and we need to see its website promoting a spiritual sensitivity to Mother Earth.

Fr. Victor Edwin and Fr. Tom Kunnangal were busy organizing an International Conference titled 'Building Communities of Peace: Muslim-Christian Relations in Asia' and I had the opportunity to attend it. Apart from the success story of this conference, that was obvious, Fr. Edwin says that he has a number of works in his hands: his own doctoral study, regular JAMI meetings, periodic Salaam publication, links with Jamia Milia Islamia Central University, Islamic Intercultural Centre, and so on. He has been suggesting to the Delhi Provincial that someone should be set apart for dialogue with the Sikhs in and around Delhi. Everyone will vouch to this idea, knowing the strength of Sikh

presence especially in Delhi. 'But the ministry as such lies low and peripheral due to lack of persons, interest,' Fr. Edwin acknowledged.

As I travelled in the West, I met the new-Provincial of Gujarat Fr. Francis Parmar to know about his mind about dialogue and what plans he has for Gujarat Province, a hotspot of Hindutva forces and Mr. Modi's pro-Hindutva government. Giving due importance to purely 'religious' dialogue, Fr. Francis stressed the need for addressing the issues politically and culturally. In this regard, Fr. Cedric Prakash and his team have been doing the best in the past several years. He said that lot more enlightened people should come up to speak to the media and to write in magazines and newspapers, standing for justice and human rights, promoting community and cultural cohesion even after knowing the difficulties and challenges involved in building communities.

I met another Gujarat Jesuit Fr. .... (can't recall his name, I have attached a photo) who has done much on cultural and ethnic study on some of the tribals in Gujarat. He said that 'we need to uncover' Jesus who is already present in the tribals. Common sense calls for mutual learning and insertion first before we could give (dump on) from our side. It was interesting to see his collected works of Music and Lyrics of these tribals, himself being a musician and lyric writer, setting music to several of their songs. It was a good instance of inter-cultural dialogue.

Fr. Ishanand, the dialogue Coordinator of Gujarat for over two decades, is now too old to continue this job and Fr. Parmar needs to find another person soon. In Bombay, Fr. Lancelot Prabhu has now saddled the race. His predecessor Fr. Francis Swamy was a school man and headmaster and he concentrated on dialogue in the educational context. Fr. Aubrey Mascarenhas, my own teacher of Sanskrit in De Nobili, Pune in 1979, was involved in dialogue meetings in Mumbai. Fr. Prabhu has a good link with the J. Krishnamurti Foundation in Mumbai and goes for talks on themes related to mind-body-spirit, in the Krishnamurtian Way. Coordination of dialogue activities at ground level and/or at academic level is a long way process.

Snehasadan of Pune was one of the pioneering centres of dialogue in the Western region with a strong legacy of persons like Fr. Matthew Lederle. The young Fr. Anil Chakranarayanan, the Coordinator of Pune and heading now the Centre, has many plans to open up the door of Snehasadan to the religious neighbours, particularly the Hindus. When I met him, he had already announced a list of events for 2014, all concentrating on Fraternity through Dialogue, through art and music, ecology, and so on. His community sat for a chat on Snehasadan's dialogue aspirations. Fr. Anil took me to Pune University's 'Vaidic Samshodan Mandal' (a Vedic manuscript library and reservation of ancient sacrificial materials), a place of Hindu academicians and scholars, who have links with Snehasadan.



In Goa, I stayed in the Provincial's house but could not meet him, unfortunately. Fr. Reginald Britto, present Coordinator for dialogue almost disowns his capacity to involve in this ministry, and we need to look for a change. It was a Sunday and Fr. Regi being a parish priest in Ratnagiri, was ready to come over to Panjim but I safely discouraged him not to board the train because of time constraint. But, the Minister of the Provincial House Fr. Abraham Painumkal, an energy-person with openness and certain liberal thinking, spoke to me about 'real' religion other than the 'ritualistic' dimension, which could bring people together for interaction and cooperation. He was kind to take time on a tour of Goa, showing me St. Paul's, the first college of the Jesuits in India, its remnants. We drank water from the 'same' well, where St. Francis Xavier believed to have quenched his thirst. We went to the Thomas Stephen Konkani Kendra and Xavier Centre of Historical Research and met Fr. Savio Abreu to learn about the centre's activities. He showed his recently edited book Goa 2011: Reviewing and Recovering 50 years (Feb. 2014). I do not need to say the impact of Bom Jesus.

Down in Bengaluru, Fr. Prashanth Madtha, present Director of Ashirvad and Coordinator of Dialogue for Karnataka Province and a writer in Kannada, spoke to me about the series of activities in Ashirvad, the official dialogue centre of the Province. It has all along sustained its Harmony meetings and annual retreats and pilgrimages, talks and discourses of the Interreligious Harmony Movement (IRHM) in the shadow of its predecessors Fr. Terence Farias, Fr. Ronnie Prabhu, and Fr. Pradeep Sequeira. Book discussions (books of Aurobindo), forming interreligious dialogue groups in St. Joseph's College and other colleges, Harmony training for rural students, JESCOL (Jesuit Collaborators) meetings, etc. are a few new ventures by Fr. Prashanth. One among the laudable initiatives of Fr. Prashanth is the SWOT analysis 2014 undertaken by the members of the Commission for Dialogue in the Province. He gave me a booklet of its final report, sure to be a good guide to all other provinces.

Fr. Roy Thottathil, a young priest of Kerala Province, has taken over the new coordinating assignment from Fr. Sebastian Painadath. He took the trouble to come all the way from Trissur to

Kottayam Jeevadhara Office to meet with me and Fr. Painadath. Sameeksha at Kaladi has been the hub of many activities of dialogue in Kerala Province. The centre has been running successfully a 2-year course on Gnana Sameekha for people nearing retirement, and a Degree awarded by JDV. Acknowledging the value of this ministry, Fr. Roy said that dialogue needs to become part of life-orientation and should penetrate all that we do, and a spiritual counselling to be shared with youngsters. The ‘Golden Rule’ text has a huge impact on persons as a spirituality beyond all religions. As the country is nearing the elections (already over with the obvious results), dialogue ministry should look into the socio-political situation, and the Jesuits should come out of their cocoons to write in secular journals and respond to articles, network with the social media with similar interest.

It will be a long story if I talk about IDCR, the Institute of Dialogue with Cultures and Religions where I come from and the various centres and their activities in Madurai Province. The Commission for Dialogue is coupled with Spirituality. But it has not had any overlapping with the dialogue ministry as such though a ‘spirit’ of dialogue is acknowledged in all our value-governance. What may be new is giving retreats for non-Christians, a practice that is slowly picking up in the colleges. Reflections are centred on God, in general, and the ways of fostering virtues and cleansing from all sins and vices, be open to inner transformation, etc. It is a good news that colleges have begun realizing that these institutes are not just meant for Catholics and Christians but for all and the management has a role to play in enhancing the spirituality of the students/faculty given to them.



All the colleges in Madurai Province are Autonomous in nature and hence have the flexibility to offer courses on world religions and dialogue, ethics, etc. We are trying as much as possible to network with Higher and Secondary Education, Counsellors, and Religion teachers. There is a mandate to IDCR from the Provincial Fr. Sebastia L. Raj to prepare a textbook that could be used in all our colleges. The Text is supposed to be practice-oriented with exercises and group reflection. 10-

years ago, we had a similar project but we did not get apt persons to sustain and to complete it. We need to go back. We have initiated a project on Interreligious Marriages and it is half way through with interesting results. Bodhi Zendo, an Institute for Buddhist meditation, goes on with a single person, Fr. Ama Samy. It has a beautiful and natural environment and the foreigners love it.

I should say that before I came here to the U.S., both Fr. Michael Amaladoss and I had fixed appointments with Cardinal Ravasi, President of the Pontifical Council for Culture and Cardinal Tauran, President of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue. Our conversations were cordial and they appreciated our efforts in fostering congenial relationship among communities.



So far the story, as of now! Our next activity is to work toward Zonal meetings of Coordinators, religious, and lay partners in Dialogue and eventually plan for an Assistancy level meeting. The coordinators have already suggested three venues (Delhi, Varanasi, and Pune) and we are slowly evolving the agenda for the meeting.

A personal note: I have already handled this assignment as Secretary from 2000-2007. Things have not changed much. I need to mention here what I said in 2000 when Fr. Kolvenbach was present for the JCI meeting in Raiganj: Every Provincial feels and says that Dialogue is an important ministry. But how important it is... is yet to be seen in the training of personnel, appointment of persons, personal accountability of the Commission, networking with other Commissions within the Province, allocation of funds, and so on. But I always end with a HOPE.

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