

‘Rowing into the Deep’ – The Ministry of Interreligious Relationships in India

ASSISTANCY MEETING OF COORDINATORS OF DIALOGUE (December 15-17, 2016 - NITIKA-Don Bosco, Kolkata)

“The City of Joy”, Kolkata, welcomed us on 15th Dec. 2016 into its embrace, inspiring us to ‘row into the deep’ to seek the new horizon and newer forms of religious relationships. The Kolkata Dharsan, guided by Fr. Timir Singha, SJ, Coordinator of Dialogue for Calcutta Province, unfolded the immense possibilities of ‘rowing deep’ into other cultures and religious traditions in the Indian contexts. NITIKA, the Don Bosco Centre run by Fr. Jose Thanicakal SDB and his team, extended a hearty welcome and their presence and support furthered our reflections on dialogue ministry.

In his presidential address Most. Rev. Dr. Thomas D’Souza, Archbishop of Calcutta, reminded us of the great dialogue of life that St. Mother Teresa of Kolkata entered into through serving the poor of this city. He applauded the Jesuit initiatives and contributions related to interreligious dialogue, both in theory and praxis. Fr. Jeyaraj Velusamy SJ, Provincial of Calcutta, indicated that the dialogue was not just to tolerate differences but to celebrate life through respecting and accepting other religious traditions. *Let us Stand Up for Prayer: Sacred Texts that Shape Perspectives*, a practical anthology of sacred texts on 50 themes authored by Vincent Sekhar SJ, Assistancy Secretary for Dialogue, and useful to school assemblies and interreligious gatherings, was released by Emeritus Bishop Linus Gomes SJ of Baruipur.





It was the keynote address from the eminent theologian Fr. Michael Amaladoss, SJ, Director of the Institute of Dialogue with Cultures and Religions (IDCR), Chennai, which set the importance of the conference proceedings. He quoted major documents of the Church to show that ‘rowing into the deep’ into other religions and communities and the ministry of interreligious relationships is still relevant. Concurrently, Fr. Amaladoss indicated by quoting Pope Francis that the Church’s approach towards the other religious traditions and the creative openness shown by the Pontiff’s have positively transformed the attitudes of the Church and of the globe. Fr. Amal concluded his presentation by stating that in “...Asia we could worry less about the *Truth*, for which we will still be searching, but focus more on *The Way*.” At the end of the day, the participants were hosted by the St. Xavier’s Jesuit community and could join in their joy of St. Xavier’s College being elevated to University status.



On the following day, Fr. Sudhir Kumar, Coordinator for Ranchi, presided over the Eucharist with a crisp message of giving testimony to the truth. In the morning session, we continued our discussion with the resource person Fr. Amaladoss. It was a good occasion for participants to clarify theological issues related to salvation, caste and Hinduism, and the best approach to dialogue in the present Indian contexts.

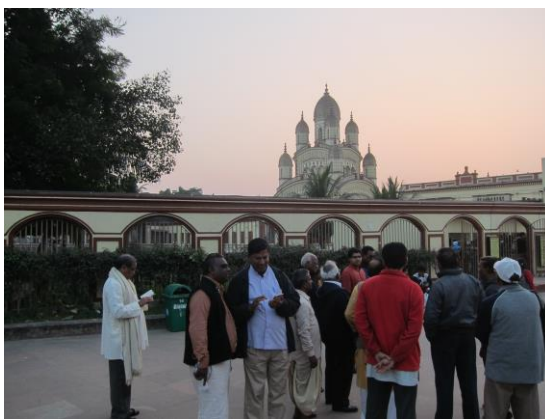
After this, a thought-provoking paper entitled *The Ministry of Interfaith Dialogue in India: Shades and Shores* was presented by Vincent Sekhar, SJ, sketching out the journey of interreligious dialogue in the past years by the Jesuits in the Indian contexts. He also indicated the present religio-political situation of India in order to discern newer paths and directions the ministry of dialogue and the qualities and the competence a Jesuit needs to have. One needs to be proactive in order to stand against all that thwarts pluralism and secular values of India and to voice forth in all possible manners to nurture and enhance love and fellowship, trust and cooperation. The need of the hour is to build bridges among and to reconcile communities, and to enhance good relationships.



Fr. Sekhar put forward two crucial areas for our reflection, namely the communalizing politics/religions and the challenges of religious fundamentalism and provocation, seriously affecting the twin-pillar of India's democracy and secularism, which called for newer directions to the mission of interreligious dialogue. The presentation helped the group come out with practical suggestions on countering fundamentalism and religious conflicts, given their distinct contexts and interreligious relationships. Both religious fundamentalism and extremism emerged as a major concern in the discussions. There was also the sharing of dialogue activities in their respective provinces and regions.



In the afternoon, we had a learning-cum-spiritual visit to Dhakshineswar, where Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa had his multi-experience of God in other religious traditions. We were fortunate to have Mr. Dipankar Basu, one of the faculties of St. Xavier's High School and an active member of the Kolkata Jesuits' dialogue initiative and the Archdiocesan dialogue committee, to tell us about the place and importance of Dakshineswar. He narrated Sri Ramakrishna's vision of Mother Mary and Infant Jesus so vividly and passionately, reading the relevant pages from the volume on the Paramahansa. We were once again fortunate to be invited by St. Lawrence Jesuit community for dinner on the eve of their School Day.





On the following day, it was so moving to offer the Holy Mass at the tomb of St. Mother Teresa of Calcutta. It was presided over by Fr. Bosco SJ of Andhra Province. We encountered “the dialogue of life” in the Mother House.



The final day started with sharing of the Coordinators, moderated by participants. Most of them shared on the different ways relationships between religious communities are enhanced. They also shared about the images others have about Christians, particularly about conversion, and how unhealthy elements inject divisions through prejudice and hate speech. Communal and identity politics play a vital role in causing negative impacts on harmony.

Participants generally felt that neither the Institutional Church nor the Society of Jesus has taken adequate steps to counter the impacts of disharmony in the country. Despite our strong presence in the field of Education and Social Action, inter-ministerial understanding, coordination and network are lacking. And yet, the participants felt that as Christians, motivated by the Church documents and the positive attitude and actions of Popes, we need to be engaged in building harmony in our neighbourhood. The Coordinators mentioned a list of up-coming activities in their centres and regions to be happy about.



At the end of the sharing of the Coordinators, Fr. Jose Kalapura, Coordinator of Patna Province, collated key issues and presented the same to the audience. The group spent some time on the following: 1. Conversion, still a challenge 2. The Chotanagpur Tenancy (CNT) Act 3. Dialoguing with Sarna parents & students in Christian schools 4. Divisive forces on the increase 5. Dialoguing with the Charismatic groups 6. Saffronization of tribals 7. Increasing Interfaith marriages 8. Role of the institutional Church in the wake of human rights violations.

At the end, Fr. Michael Amaladoss gathered the fruits of all that we discussed and urged the need and promotion of *the dialogue of life*: "From what we have been hearing in the various presentations during the last two days, it seems clear that the first two dialogue is rather rare. May be they should be left to experts or specialist groups. What seems more common is the dialogue of life like common celebration of festivals. There are also efforts to promote interreligious relationships. Coming together for a common defence and promotion of human rights and justice seems to be happening also sometimes. GC 34 spoke about the threefold dialogue of the gospel with the poor, the cultures and the religions. But the dialogue with cultures and religions are not taken seriously still, it seems. Thinking about what we need to focus on at present I would say that we should focus on dialogue of life and also, much more, on dialogue of action in the joint promotion of human and spiritual values. We could pay special attentions to four areas. 1. We should build relationships and

help people, not only tolerate, but celebrate difference as God's creative gift; 2. We should build a multi-religious coalition to counter every kind of fundamentalism and communalism in all religions; 3. We should be specially concerned in the formation of youth to overcome ignorance and prejudice and to promote social harmony and peace; 4. We should increasingly use the social and digital media to reach out to a growing number of people and to form networks. We could diffuse information, offer training programmes and even facilitate encounters through the internet. Our centre is the one God who is the origin and goal of all peoples."

The participants too felt that frequent interreligious gatherings for discussion and prayer are the best forms of keeping abreast the Ministry of Dialogue. They also suggested that every year there could be planned Zonal-level meetings (more or less at the same time) and the Assistancy-level meeting in the alternate years. Fr. Vincent Sekhar, JCSA Secretary for Dialogue, appreciated the good works carried on by the Coordinators and partners in dialogue and sought advice from the group indicating the low attention this ministry has in the Assistancy. "The low attendance of participants for the Asst meeting is a mark of that," he mentioned. The participants suggested that Fr. Sekhar should write to the POSA and ask for a session to speak to the Provincials in their next gathering.

At a culmination of the three-day meeting, Frs. Devadhas Muthiah, SJ (Madurai), Sudhir Kumar Kujur, SJ (Ranchi), and Jose Kalapura, SJ (Patna), formulated a Final Statement, which was discussed and approved by the group. It says:

"We the participants of the South Asian Jesuit Assistancy meeting of the Coordinators of Dialogue recognize that the essence of all religions is love and service, peace and harmony. We believe that recognition of the indwelling Supreme Being in each human person and in all forms of life will lead us to mutual respect and harmony of life. We also believe that respect for and appreciation of the teachings of scriptures of all religions will lead us to mutual appreciation and acceptance, and help us to live together amicably. We assure to promote and organize interreligious prayer meetings and celebration of festivals in collaboration with members of different religions to foster greater understanding and togetherness. We would also strive to bring about reconciliation and harmony in the context of violence. To this end, we commit ourselves anew, networking with individuals, institutions, and organizations active in diverse ministries in South Asia, towards creating a just and humane society."

The group is very thankful to Fr. Timir Singha, SJ, Calcutta Province Coordinator for dialogue, who planned so well with the JCSA Secretary and made all local arrangements with the help of NITIKA administration and Srs. Mala and Angela DSA and the helpers at the Dining Hall.



(Reported by: Fr. Francis Xavier Tharamel, SJ - Coordinator of Kerala Province)

Vincent Sekhar SJ

Secretary for Interreligious Dialogue - Jesuit Conference of South Asia

Email: sekharSJ2010@gmail.com