

South Zone Colloquium of Jesuits

- Jerome D'Souza SJ

74 Jesuits of the South Zone met at Dhyana Ashram, Chennai on 14-16 August to follow up the Province Assemblies with regard to implementing GC 35 and to prepare for the National Assembly. The program began with the Mass at which representative penitents lit the lamp. A coconut sapling offered at mass was later planted by Fr Edward Mudavassery, the POSA and the South Zone Provincials. Preaching the homily, which also served as the keynote address, the POSA drew attention to our universal mission that demands that we cross boundaries and be at the frontiers. This is also the expectation of the Holy Father, he said, who specifically referred to frontier men of the Society in his allocution to GC 35 delegates. The POSA pointed out that the Southern Provinces were well equipped with trained men, resources and powerful institutions. Pointing out that China had only 40 Jesuits in contrast to the 4000 in India, he asked whether we, particularly the South Zone Jesuits, have become too parochial, generous in proportion to our resources and needs elsewhere, and challenged us to transcend our boundaries both linguistic/cultural and personal/geographical.

The first day was devoted after the inaugural formalities to 'progress report' of the Provinces with regard to GC follow up. This was finalized in the Province groups before presenting in the aula. Frs Rex Angelo, Vijay Prabhu, Kunduru Joji, Henry Pattarumadathil, Britto Bonaventure and Sumeth Perera presented the reports for their respective Provinces. An added feature was the briefing on the Sri Lankan situation and a passionate appeal on their behalf by PS Amal, the JRS south zone coordinator.

The following were some of the common means that the Provinces had taken to communicate the spirit of GC35:

1. Sharing by the provincials and delegates with members of respective provinces.
2. GC 35 Retreats.
3. Making available GC 35 decrees to all the Jesuits and salient features of GC35 to the collaborators.
4. Holding Province Assemblies leading to a new/revised vision statement.
5. Using GC35 documents for study/recollections in the communities.
6. Use of Community Prayer Book on GC35 themes prepared by the South Asian GC35 delegates.
7. Time Bound Action plans at the Province/ Commissions/ Works/ Personal level.

Each Province in addition had its own ways of disseminating GC35 spirit such as Retreats on Ecology; Orientation on Fundamentalism to our Collaborators; Publications; Scholastics Meet on Religious Fundamentalism; Eco-Clubs, Environmental studies and motivating students to plant trees etc.

The second day began with the Independence Day celebrations (flag hoisting) together with the small Christian community, followed by the Eucharist to celebrate the feast of Assumption. Both sounded the note of liberation, the hope and the promise (symbolized in our Lady) and the dreadful reality (India). The morning session provided 'insightful inputs' on Globalisation (AJX Bosco), Inter religious dialogue (Terence Farias), Ecology (Joe Arun), Fundamentalism (Maria Anthony) and Community as mission (Jose Jacob). This was to take us beyond the Province reports to critical issues involved in these important areas. What came across is: our resources are limited to deal with these complex problems and issues adequately. Hence networking with other forces is a *sine qua non*. There are often dichotomies and contradictions in our approaches. Some hard questions were raised: While we are doing a lot, are we doing what we should? Are we really fighting the evils of globalization or preparing people for the market? Are we too simplistic and naive in our approach to fundamentalism and inter religious dialogue, the interest for which is waning among the younger Jesuits? Are we protecting the environment at the cost of survival of tribals and others who depend on forests for their livelihood? In our communities are we addressing the real issues of caste, language and culture, individualism & consumerism? Aren't there class differences among us (rich and poor Jesuits), aren't

there Jesuits who wield considerable power and influence, manipulate subtly or otherwise, Jesuits who are 'untouchable' and 'immovable', building their own kingdoms rather than God's kingdom?

The inter provincial group discussion that followed took up these issues and possible responses and each group came up with priorities for the Assistancy level and for the South Zone level. They also expressed their opinion regarding the need/advisability or otherwise of the Assistancy level assembly. In the meanwhile the South Zone Provincials met by themselves to interact with each other.

At the General session the following issues and concerns emerged as priorities at the POSA/South Asian level: Fundamentalism, Networking, Sri Lankan issue, Ecology, Right to food, Migrant labourers, Research and training, Protection of human rights. As for the South Zone, the following were the priorities indicated:

1. South zone Jesuits must promote the democratic rights of Sri Lankan minorities by influencing the policy makers of India.
2. Revamping as well as strengthening of ISI Bangalore to take up issues pertaining to farmers, Dalits, tribals and migrant workers.
3. Critical study of and a concrete action plan to combat Fundamentalism.
4. Jesuit educational institutions should be revamped, revised and redefined according to the signs of the times and there should be qualitative research centres for all ministries.
5. Right to food: Jesuits should play a mediating role between people and the government at the lobbying and at documentation levels as well as at grassroots level in implementing it.
6. We should cater to the needs of the unorganized youth.
7. Protection of collective human rights.

Together with this a number of other issues were also highlighted as needing attention: Globalization and communalization, Inter provincial collaboration for formation, Declining interest in inter religious dialogue, SC/ST status for Christians of scheduled caste/tribe origin, Agricultural food crisis, and Effective functioning of Youth ministry.

While 5 groups were in favour of a national assembly, 2 groups were not. In terms of absolute figures 24% were not in favour of a national assembly immediately.

The third day was devoted to fruit gathering. From the 2 days of sharing and discussions and prioritizing we could identify some common concerns among the Provinces & some unique to each Province (they were listed). This was done on the basis of Province wise reports as well as group and common sessions. Again some hard questions were raised in terms of our approach to these: whether we are addressing the symptoms or also causes, whether we see the nexus between globalisation, fundamentalism and ecological issues and the State approaches that under gird these, whether in our approaches there are common perspectives from which follow clear policies & practices/action plans. Otherwise our efforts may be counter productive.

In the light of this the provincials of South Zone met and presented to the group their stand. Each Provincial promised to carry forward the process begun here and committed himself. From the priorities that emerged they proposed 3 issues to the SA Assistancy for consideration:

1. Globalization, Fundamentalism and Ecology (as a complex and inter related issue):

- Make a thorough study of /research into Globalization, Hindutva ideology and Ecology; investigate the anti-poor and anti-earth exploitative alliances that exist.
- Educate all SA Jesuits, the church leaders and youth.
- Encourage inter-religious dialogue; network with minorities, specially, Muslims and progressive, secular forces.

- Challenge the Anti Conversion Legislation as being opposed to fundamental human rights.
- Make a contribution to anti communal violence legislative measures.

2. Sri Lankan issue

The JCSA is requested immediately to:

- Mobilize resources for humanitarian relief work by JRS and its partners, particularly, men and women religious.
- Constitute an Assistancy-level taskforce (Names from South Zone proposed and endorsed by the concerned Major superiors are: Fr. Ambrose Pinto (KAR) as Chairperson, Frs. Peter Daniel (AND), Raj Irudaya, Jabamalai Irudayaraj (MDU) and M.K George (KER). Other members, such as the JESA Secretary, could be nominated by the POSA to serve on the Taskforce. The Assistancy Taskforce will focus on advocacy, lobbying and bringing pressure at the national and international levels to bear on the Government of Sri Lanka to (1) address the humanitarian disaster, (2) arrest the grave violation of fundamental human rights and (3) promote national reconciliation and harmony.
- As the Taskforce will be engaged in assertive advocacy measures, keep the JRS Regional Director and a Sri Lankan Jesuit not as members but as contact persons (associates/advisors).

3. Other Issues Related to Human Rights (Right To Food, Migrant Labourers etc.)

At the South Zone level too, calling for thinking globally and acting locally, they confirmed the 7 recommended priorities and constituted another Taskforce for resisting Fundamentalism. This consisted of Frs. Xavier Arockia Samy (MDU), Sebastian Painadath (Ker), Packia Raj (And), Terence Farias (Kar) and a link person from Sri Lanka.

Fr Jerry (whom we affectionately call 'barefoot' Jerry) deserves all the credit and kudos for meticulously planning and executing every detail of the colloquium with regular communications (mostly through postcards even in this cyber age). Words of praise and appreciation were not wanting at the evaluation session. The preparation that went in, the arrangements proper at Dhyana Ashram, the participative process from beginning to end and involving as many as possible at every stage of the colloquium – that is typical of and unique to Jerry. Jerry also found a well deserved niche at the colloquium for his pet project 'Dhanam' (campaign for donation of organs) which was given a formal Jesuit Inauguration. Jerry repaid his collaborators with free and profuse claps from the assembly and to ensure fruitfulness of the colloquium, he made sure there were additional fruits at table! The South Zone Colloquium is grateful to Jerry, to Madurai province for hosting it and to the Dhyana Ashram community for the wonderful hospitality.