

REFLECTIONS OF MADURAI PROVINCE ON PRIESTHOOD IN THE SOCIETY OF JESUS

This year, 2009 - 2010, is indeed a God-given opportunity as a special “Year of Priests” to reflect on the profound meanings and the prophetic challenges of the priestly call in the Church and in the Society of Jesus. We, the Jesuits of Madurai Province, have taken time in our communities for prayer and reflection on priesthood. The fruits of this process are collated under the three issues that were highlighted by Fr. General in his letter dated June 19, 2009.

HOW ORDAINED JESUITS ARE CALLED TO LIVE THE PRIESTHOOD?

We are proud to be Jesuit priests. As priests, we could touch the hearts of different categories of people and offer solidarity and support in some substantial and spiritual ways specially to those in the margins. Being available and accessible to the concerns of people is itself the reflection of the inner joy and greater consolation of our Jesuit priesthood. As a result, the fraternal trust and personal confidence that people have in us give us an ever-abiding encouragement to live out our Jesuit priestly life.

We also derive inspiration from our Jesuit heritage. After his conversion, St. Ignatius did not at first think of becoming a priest, but he felt an urge to share the spiritual insights that he received at Manresa in the form of a 30-day retreat. In fact, he gave the Exercises even as a layman to others. Due to the force of circumstances he decided later to study for the priesthood and establish the Society as a Sacerdotal Order. So, we Jesuits are called to make known to the people around, first and foremost, the spiritual wisdom of Jesus through the method of the Exercises of St. Ignatius. This continues to be a principal apostolic priority for us as Jesuit priests even today.

IN OUR DAILY LIVES:

The ministerial priesthood of each Jesuit in daily life gets manifested through pluriform apostolic activities. Our contextualized formation programmes and our concretized prophetic challenges of the contemporary Tamil Nadu facilitate a life of priestly commitment in and through:

Our siding with the poorest, especially the Dalits.

Offering spiritual and pastoral services to the suburban and rural people.

Guiding, instructing, teaching and counseling the needy.

Manifesting a profound sense of availability and a prophetic sense of creativity.

As presbyters, accepting our role as leaders of Christian communities and as alter Christus permeating the life and values of Jesus in our life and ministries.

Integrating faith and justice in our priestly ministry.

Challenging the current regional and national realities that are marked by religious communalism and cultural fundamentalism.

Extending a “service-based” presence and proactive participation (“suffering servant”) amidst people, especially in our parishes and social action locations.

Offering support to liberation movements and solidarity with the sidelined and struggling masses.

Standing with people of good will for ecological protection and promotion.

Probing the depth of Christian spirituality through the use of Ignatian principles of indifference, *tantum quantum, agere contra* and the *magis*—which leads to discerning love (*discreta caritas*) that could form us and the people whom we serve into persons for and with others.

CERTAIN CONCERNS:

In the process, we do face certain concerns that have to be addressed in order to bear a better witness to our priestly way of life:

By and large, as individual Jesuit priests, we stand out but as a team / community, we don't. At times, a group identity (for example, based on caste/interests etc.) seems more visible than Jesuit identity and priestly identity.

Prevailing hierarchical levels of the Church and elements of cultic priesthood are at times evident in our way of life. Directly or indirectly, we contribute to the maintenance of the status quo in terms of caste, class, gender etc and thereby promote authoritarianism.

Accordingly, common priesthood is not sufficiently emphasized and practically followed.

CONCRETE SUGGESTIONS:

We need to refashion all our ministries so as to acquire an intrinsically socio - pastoral involvement.

In the meantime, ours should be asked to go for teaching catechism / to be in touch with and involved in the life of people (parish / village) at least for a week every year.

We need to deepen our understanding of priesthood, interpreting it in the multi-religious context of Tamil Nadu / India.

WHAT IS OUR UNDERSTANDING OF THE SOCIETY OF JESUS AS A “SACERDOTAL SOCIETY”?

Ignatius and his companions probably had no choice other than becoming priests in the then socio-cultural context of Europe. Priests had political power and social status. Priesthood had become a powerful and accepted medium for providing pastoral services. Though Ignatius gave retreats to people as a layman, he seemed to have grasped the significance of a priest giving the same retreat. Priestly ordination and the training and the theological studies it involved certainly equipped a Jesuit better in his apostolic ministries. Moreover, a clerical order was the best way to reform the decadent Catholic clergy at that time. It was a socio-cultural compulsion.

Today, as a Sacerdotal Society, we are called upon to live the priestly demands of our Christian commitment as Jesus lived. He sacrificed himself for others so that they may have “life and life in abundance” (Jn. 10:10). Accordingly, He is recognized as the High Priest in the Letter to the Hebrews though He himself was not a Levite.

As such, it is a special call to live out the values of the Gospel of Jesus in a challenging and self-sacrificing manner. This has received a further emphasis in the light of our recent General Congregations 34 and 35. We are thus beckoned to be the Companions of Jesus to serve under the banner of the cross for the mission of the faith that does justice (GC 32 Dec 2), engaged in the dialogue with people belonging to different cultures and religious traditions (GC 34 Decrees 3 – 5). This is now expanded to include “our covenant with creation as central to right relationships with God and one another” (GC 35 Dec. 3, No.36).

St. Ignatius wished Jesuits to be “learned” (which was not the case in his time when priests were not that well-informed and well-formed) so that we could movingly and meaningfully teach / instruct / guide / counsel / animate / accompany others. As such, our Jesuit sacerdotal character has to be progressively

manifested through (a) Eucharistic Life (b) Spiritual Exercises (c) Discernment (d) Magis (e) Intellectual leadership in whatever ministry we are involved in so that every Jesuit ministry is done with efficiency as well as effectiveness.

CERTAIN CONCERNS:

Psychologically, we as Jesuit priests, tend to attach more importance to “being Jesuits” than “being priests”.

A sense of balance has to be sought between “going to villages” and “going to cities and towns” for our priestly services. Of late, the latter gets rather an undue preference.

There seems to be a certain hesitation, if not reluctance, on our part to be sensitive to the cries of the marginalized, for example, women in distress, unemployed/ unemployable youths, unjustly handled parishioners, divided couples/families etc.

CONCRETE SUGGESTIONS:

We need to evaluate all our ministries in reference to priesthood. The Mission-values of the Gospel, as expounded by our recent General Congregations, should be the focal point in our evaluation.

We need to take a lead in interpreting priesthood in the multi-cultural, multi-lingual, multi-religious and multi-ethnic Tamil Nadu / India.

We should discourage “private Eucharist being celebrated by individual Jesuits” and promote more and more “Eucharist celebrated with people and with fellow - Jesuits” so that we come around the altar as a “Sacerdotal Society”.

Ours who are serving in the various institutions should move to “parishes in the neighbourhood” on weekends for a continuous pastoral exposure and experience.

During vacation, ours serving in institutions should take up direct pastoral and spiritual activities, including extending retreats, spiritual counseling services in far away - parishes and villages.

We should promote constructive and proactive discussion on the participation of women in priesthood.

Various accusations and allegations of people and media on priests should be sincerely addressed with a deep sense of humility and transparency.

WHAT IS THE RELATIONSHIP OF THE LIFE AND VOCATION OF A JESUIT BROTHER TO THE SACERDOTAL CHARACTER OF THE SOCIETY?

Certain historico - ecclesial and religio - structural reasons that were present during the Reformation period made St. Ignatius to go for “temporal coadjutors” in the Society. Now we are living in a different context. The Society of Jesus down the centuries has produced very many Saints, Blesseds and Venerables among Brothers. This confirms the richness of life and vocation of the Jesuit Brother.

As the GC 34 (Dec 07.no. 05) indicates, “ we must now exert ourselves to discover the ways in which our communities and our apostolic activities, the places we live and work as priests and brothers, can express simply and transparently the oneness of vocation and ministries in the Society.”

CERTAIN CONCERNS:

The epicenter of discrimination between priests and brothers in the Society lies in the power of cultic priesthood that is wielded by Jesuit priests and by priests in general. Brothers being excluded from exercising the ministry of leadership s Superiors is another crucial issue to be considered.

The religious congregations that are meant only for Brothers still receive a good number of vocations as far as Tamil Nadu/India is concerned. That would mean that they still appeal to people and to youngsters in particular whereas clerical orders such as the Society of Jesus that have Brothers do not attract vocations to the Brotherhood. Divisions, tensions, apprehensions, discriminations and hierarchical gradations ... could be the major reasons for it.

CONCRETE SUGGESTIONS:

Given the current world and Church context, certain definitive NEW THINKING regarding the Jesuit Brotherhood is a big need, going even beyond what GC 34 had conveyed in its Decree no. 07.

Highlighting the COMMON PRIESTHOOD and linking it substantially with the vocation and life of Jesuits would enhance the image and ministries of our Brothers in the Society of Jesus.

A well planned ONGOING FORMATION for Jesuit Brothers is a must. That master plan should include a good exposure to Scriptures, Sacred Theology , Social Sciences, Psychology etc. All these studies would equip our Brothers to render their services meaningfully. More than that, these broad-based studies and substance-filled services would give them a certain profound sense of consolation of participation in Christ's Mission.

The brothers' ongoing formation should include "study – programmes" meant for EACH AND EVERY YEAR and extended to EACH AND EVERY JESUIT BROTHER . This progressive process would facilitate the growth and grace of life and vocation of our Brothers.

Extending DIACONATE ORDINATION to our Brothers so they get involved directly in some spiritual and pastoral ministries.

Collated and summarized by Jerry Rosario

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FEAST OF ST. JOHN DE BRITTO, PATRON OF MADURAI PROVINCE