

HEADLINES 2011/04 ... News from the Jesuit Social Apostolate ...

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- * Narrative: Peter Daniel SJ, Andhra Jesuit Province, India
 - * Flashnews: Cambodia/Japan, Argentina, Sri Lanka, Europe, USA, Chad
 - * SJES: Preliminary workshop on Global Ignatian Advocacy Networking

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This is the story of the village of 'Agnipuri' (A village of Fire). When I was appointed parish priest in Darsi, in the state of Andhra Pradesh, I soon heard of a neighbouring village called Erraobanapalli, which is more than 100 years old. In this village, there was a group of 65 high caste farmers, divided into two political groups, who used to win the elections for local government (Panchayat) every time. On the other side of the village lived 250 Dalit families who served them, and who were also split into two groups, and never allowed to come together. Most of the Dalits were either Christians or Catholics, but some Dalit Muslim and Hindu families had joined them over time. All the Dalits were landless labourers. The Government Primary School was situated in the high caste part of the village and hence the Dalit children had no access to education. The Dalit part of the village was 100% illiterate.

When I started visiting the village and found out about this situation, I met with the Dalits, first with the two groups separately and then eventually with everybody together. It took four years, but when the next elections for local government were called, the Dalits were ready to vote for their 'independence'. They chose a single candidate and regardless of their great fear of taking a stand against the high caste farmers, they won the elections. As soon as the high caste farmers found out about the election results, they burned down the Dalits' houses.

The homeless Dalits, men, women and children, fled with only the clothes they were wearing into a nearby forest. When I found out about this, I immediately organised food for them. The next morning, we marched together to Darsi, to the office of the governor of our county. We sat in front of his office for seven days until the sub-collector came to meet us. He agreed to build a new village, where the government would take care of building the road, a drinking water facility, electricity and a new school. Since the government was only going to rebuild the same number of houses that had been destroyed by the fire, and which had been shared by three families each, I found a private sponsor from Austria who agreed to finance the remaining new houses, so each family would have their own space. With the help of the Jesuit province, the community built temporary huts on the ground that had been identified five kilometres from the original village. Together, we then built the 250 houses.

We named the village 'Agnipuri' (A village of Fire) and blessed the new colony in July 1996. That day was also the day of reconciliation with the high caste farmers who came for the inauguration of the new village and made peace with the Dalits. I felt about this whole experience like Moses leading the people of Israel from Egypt to the Promised Land. Each of us had a role to play in this modern exodus and we all experienced God walking along with us.

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Cambodia/Japan: Fr Vicente Bonet SJ from Sophia University in Tokyo visited Cambodia with ten members of a group called Camboren (Friends of Cambodia) from February 5 to 13. Impressions from the visit can be found in the newsbulletin of the Japanese social apostolate: <http://tinyurl.com/3bp8ox3>. Also in February, Fr Enrique Figaredo SJ, Bishop of the Apostolic Prefecture of Battambang, Cambodia, visited the Japanese province and talked about the work of the Jesuits in Cambodia. At the beginning of March, he was received by the Queen of Spain, Sofia, who had been following his work since they first met in 2008.

Argentina: The Institute of Administrative and Social Sciences (ISAS) of the Jesuits in Palermo, Italy, has organised a 14-month course on organic farming for Argentinean youth of Italian descent. The course ended in March with a graduation ceremony in Cordoba. This successful collaboration between the Jesuit provinces of Italy and Argentina-Uruguay was funded by the Argentinean Labour Ministry and included an internship in Italy for all participants.

Sri Lanka: Anglicans, Methodists and Catholics gathered recently to discuss what their role and responsibilities would be in implementing social reforms in Sri Lanka following the country's civil war. "Recognition of minorities means recognizing the other as my brother or sister. This is easy to talk about but difficult to practice," Father Lasantha de Abrew SJ told the participants. In the meantime, the Shanti Community Animation Movement, started by Fr Michael Catalano SJ in 1977, is running classes where victims of war from all ethnicities can learn together. On 24 March, the ambassador of Italy inaugurated the Catalano Computer Centre.

Europe: "Building Bridges" was the motto of a two-day conference in March, organized in Brussels by the Migration Desk of the Conference of European Provincials. The main objective of the conference was to gather as many Jesuit institutions as possible that are working with or for migrants in Europe. The 53 participants from all over Europe discussed advocacy on integration policies, integration of second generation migrants and interaction with the host society, awareness raising on diversity and intercultural citizenship and common positions on migration and integration. <http://tinyurl.com/3n9xork>

USA: A web-based training session (webinar) on "Jesuit Ministries Responding to the Unemployment Crisis" was organised by the Secretariat for Social and International Ministries of the US Jesuit Conference on 14 April. It focussed on ways to develop or enhance job training programs and worker support committees in parishes and ministries. Participants also discussed challenges and shared effective strategies, programs and ideas. If you are on Facebook, click "Like" at the top of the page of the Secretariat for Social and International Ministries to get updates on their education and advocacy activities: <http://tinyurl.com/simfb>

Chad: Foi et Joie (Fe y Alegría Chad) has just celebrated its third anniversary. Working hand in hand with the local education leaders, several community school networks have been established Southern region of Guéra. The main challenge is the school-attendance by girls who often drop out in order to help in the household. Read the full report and see pictures here: <http://tinyurl.com/3lxw2lr>

* SJES: Preliminary workshop on Global Ignatian Advocacy Networking

The Social Justice and Ecology Secretariat organized a workshop to discuss the Global Ignatian Advocacy Network (GIAN) from 4-9 April at the Curia in Rome. One aim of the workshop was to bring together the leaders of the five advocacy networks: Governance of Natural and Mineral Resources (GNMR), Right to Education, Migration, Ecology and Peace & Human Rights. The second aim is to understand the GIAN project really well, which is a two-year training programme in international advocacy and networking that we have set up in order to create a firm basis for all networks.

The five leaders shared with each other what had happened in their networks during the last year and took stock of their activities, focus areas, responses received and the strengths and weaknesses of the networks.

Three resource persons joined the workshop: Julian Filochowski, from the United Kingdom, with a long experience as director of CAFOD, who is at present a close collaborator of Jesuit Missions in London; Christina Kheng, from Singapore, who has collaborated with the Asia-Pacific Conference in the mapping of the social sector, and Martina Liebsch, Policy Officer of Caritas Internationalis. They helped the leaders to understand the importance and potential of international advocacy networks.

The group also prepared a tentative agenda for the General Workshop that will be held in Loyola, Spain, from 18-23 June. This workshop will bring together the five leaders and 19 members of the core groups of each network.

<http://www.ignatianadvocacy.org/>

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