



FORUM



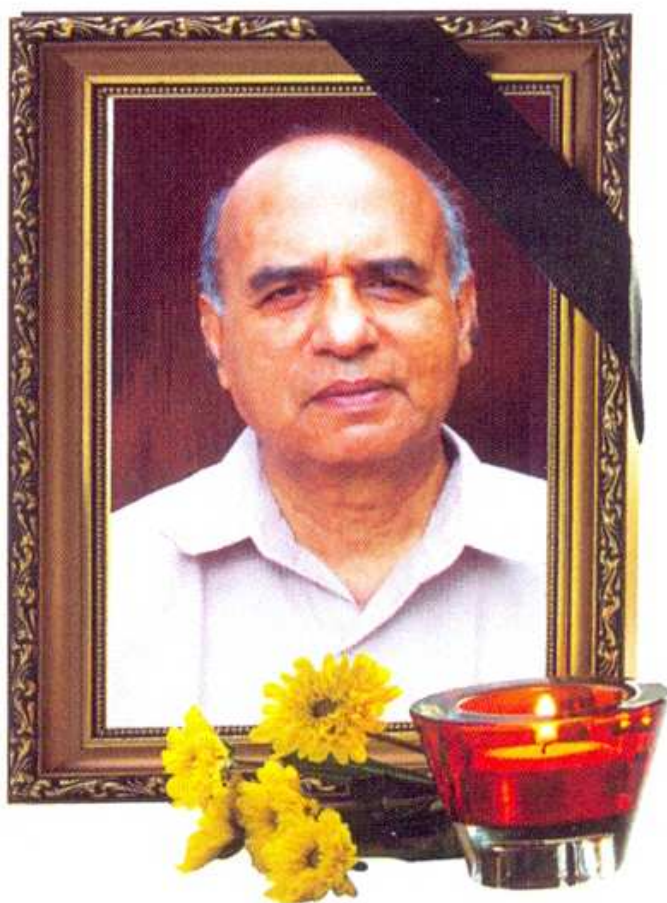
of Religious for Justice and Peace

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Newsletter

No. 23

In Loving Memory of Fr. Thomas Kocherry



Born on: 10.05.1940

Ordained on: 20.04.1971

Died on: 03.05.2014

*“The story of my religious life is a Constant struggle for justice
and Values of the kingdom of God”*

Fr. Thomas Kocherry

We dedicate this issue of FORUM Newsletter to the memory of
Fr. Thomas Kocherry CSsR

Editorial:

I had an interesting experience when I visited Mariyanadu, a fisher folks' village at Trivandrum. I was taken there by Mr. George my friend, because it was a special place and a special community lived there. This place which was called 'ALILLATHORA' because it was deserted, with hard work and sustained efforts of Social Activists, became MARIANADU. Mr. Xavier Mariyanadu, the leader of the cooperative Society welcomed us and we had a hearty conversation and a dinner.

I asked Xavier Mariyanadu whether he knew Fr. Tom Kocherry. With glittering eyes, he said that he was the best priest friend of his, and the great leader whom he admired. I asked him whether he could say something special and specific about Tom. "Although he was a Catholic Priest, he understood the poor and worked among the poor". And so I asked him, "Why do you say 'although'?" He said "No priest whom I know of, ever worked among the poor fishermen. Whereas from the first year of ministry, Fr. Tom preferred to be with the poor – he started the first year of his priesthood in Poothura, a poor village, close to Marianadu and he worked with all his heart and soul. Fr. Tom Kocherry in a simple way explained to us that the preaching takes flesh and blood when we start acting and that is what Jesus did. We need to be with the poor and suffer and work with them, to witness to poor Jesus."

When a small group of us went to Nandigram, in West Bengal, it was only because of Tom, we were able to go into the nook and corner of Nandigram. And we could perceive what high respect the activists and leaders had for Tom.

When I went for a Dalit Rally in Trivandrum, though he came after the heart operation from Australia, he was there to show his solidarity and interest.

In this issue of the FORUM Newsletter, many of Tom's friends have verbalized their experiences, their insights and their appreciations of Tom Kocherry, an ardent leader, National and International, of the poorest of the fisher folks. It is a rich source book of the Life and Work of Tom to inspire and challenge those who are serious about their Christian and Religious vocation..

AXJ. Bosco SJ, Telangana



End of a Legend

May 3, 2014 brought the end of India's legend in Social Justice and Social Movement in the person of Fr. Thomas Kocherry fondly known as Tom Kocherry. I had the good fortune to know and work with this great Indian, an exemplary Religious Priest of the Redemptorist Order, Social activist, Social Reformer, lawyer and many more, ever since he became the active member of the FORUM, a movement of the Religious involved in Social activism and in fighting against injustice wherever it is found.

Tom boldly raised his voice against injustice, be it in the community, within the Church, in politics, in the governments – local, national or international. As an active member of the FORUM for more than a quarter of a century, Tom's contribution was many and varied. He made his presence felt whenever he came for any meetings of the FORUM, which he rarely missed. His contribution in the upliftment of the fisher people extended National and International coasts. His voice was loud and clear be it in the World Social Forum, World Economic Forum, World Forum of Fisher People which he took initiative to establish in 1998 as its first president or in protest rallies in Singur, West Bengal, or the meetings of National Alliance of People's Movement (NAPM) etc. As a lawyer he fought several cases against injustices through PUCL and other networks.

In the meetings of the FORUM he not only exhibited his talent as a political thinker and an excellent Mass organiser and orator, occasionally he also entertained us by exhibiting his culinary expertise in preparing highly tasty fish curry prepared with love and personal attention. The seventy four years of Tom's life was eventful.

Ravindranath Tagore's prayer "Give me the strength never to disown the poor and bend my knees before the insolent might" was fulfilled in Tom, as fearless as he was when it was the question of fighting against injustice. Who knows Tom may be organising the 'gods' against injustice by the humans as I feel that Tom cannot keep quiet.

With the demise of Tom Kocherry, the Church in general and the Indian Church in particular has lost a faithful follower of Jesus Christ and for me personally a very dear friend.

May he rest in Peace and continue to inspire us!

John Vattamattom SVD, Telangana



The Last Moments of Tom

Fr. Tom Kocherry passed away on 3rd May 2014. I would like to give brief information of how all this came to pass.

About five years ago Tom had a very serious heart attack while in Australia. The doctors had to do an emergency heart surgery on him in Australia, and implanted a defibrillator close to his heart, which incidentally was given to him free of cost. After that surgery Tom gradually began to regain his health, and in due course of time returned back to India. Yet, from that time onwards little by little, his health condition began to deteriorate. Of and on he used to get a severe pain in the heart and he had to be rushed to the hospital. He was now put under heavy medication, until it came to a point where he needed frequent hospitalisation. As a result I had temporarily asked Fr. Tom to stay at our house in Muttada at Trivandrum, so that he could be under the close supervision of his doctor friend, Dr. Scaria. There were also some other doctors at Trivandrum who took special care of him. Fr. Tom then spent about eleven months at our community in Muttada.

I was told by our confreres at Muttada that his usual programme for the day was that after his breakfast he used to take a little rest every day in his room. And on Saturday 3rd May, he took his breakfast, spoke to Fr. M.A. Joseph and then went to take his usual rest in his room. I was told that about 10: 30 a.m. Fr. M. A. Joseph called out for him, but there was no response from Tom. Presuming that Tom was resting, he did not want to disturb him any further. Then an advocate Miss Elsa came to meet him. As she did not want to disturb him in his sleep, she just sat in his room for about half an hour waiting for Tom to get up from his sleep. But she found it strange that he did not get up at all. So she went close and touched his leg to wake him, but found that his leg was cold. So she immediately called for Fr. M.A. Joseph. He came rushing down and both of them found that his entire body had become cold. The sisters were called to help out. They came, saw the condition of Fr. Tom, and then called Dr. Helen to come immediately. The doctor on arrival examined Fr. Tom, and said that he might have passed away around 11:00 a. m. It was Saturday, 3rd May 2014.

I was deeply impressed with the number of people who came to pay their tributes to Tom on Monday 5th May. Some of the dignitaries who came to pay their respects to Fr. Tom were the following: Shri. Oommen Chandy, the chief minister of Kerala; the president of the Kerala Pradesh Congress committee; the general secretary of Communist Party of India in Kerala, and the general secretary of the CPI (Marxist), and the convener of the Left Democratic Front, and the leaders of Aam Admi Party. There were about five ministers of state who came to pay their respects to him, plus an equal number of MLAs had come. All these dignitaries took the mike and said a few words of appreciation about Tom.



I was totally humbled at this long procession of high profile visitors for Tom. Of course the poor, for whom he worked zealously all through his life, were there in their large numbers.

I was deeply impressed to see how many people in the outside world, had such an extraordinary appreciation for Fr. Tom and his work. May the Lord bless this very dedicated confrere and give him eternal peace and happiness in his kingdom.

Fr. S Arulanandam CSSR, Provincial Superior, Bangalore

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“Faith in Jesus is a passionate call for Liberation through non-violent means, and of being a Suffering Servant. We are at the end of the final battle, caught in the tussle between Life and Death. Remain, then, under God’s command. The old world is overthrown and Jesus’ Kingdom, it alone will arise from the ruins.” Tom

Eulogy to Fr. Thomas Kocherry CSsR

He was a tall, stocky, bald and clean shaven priest. He was a bitter critic of globalization in India. He had a booming voice. Friends would often joke that a megaphone was placed in his throat for his voice rose like a rolling thunder. He was a relentless fighter. It was said of him in an issue of India Today, "He was often seen wearing a khadi dhoti and standing tall in front of politicians, police, unions, shipping companies or anyone who dared bother his beloved fisher folk or ruined the oceans". That was Fr. Tom Kocherry; and we his confreres who knew him well in the Redemptorist congregation would just affectionately call him as Tom.

1. Fr. Tom Kocherry was born on 10th May 1940 at Changanassery in Kerala to Mr. Vavachan and Aleyamma. He was the fifth in a family of eleven children, seven boys and four girls. Tom completed his graduation studies in Science and then joined the congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer to become a priest in this congregation.
2. But why did he join this congregation in the first place? Tom himself explains this in his brief autobiography. He says that while he was still a student at St. Berchman's College in Changanassery he met a Redemptorist, the late Fr. John Anthony, who incidentally had come to Kerala to study Malayalam. Tom was fascinated by this young priest because unlike other priests he played football. Soon both Tom and Fr. John Anthony became good friends. As days went by, Tom expressed to Fr. John that he would like to join the Redemptorist congregation. Fr. John seems to have asked him "But why do you want to join the Redemptorists?" And Tom's immediate answer was, **"I want to work among the poor"**. Fr. John Anthony then explained to Tom about the Redemptorist congregation. It was started by a very famous lawyer named Alphonsus Liguori in the city of Naples in Italy. And it so happened that Alphonsus, who was considered a brilliant lawyer at that time, suddenly lost a very important case in court due to the corruption of the officials at the court. Alphonsus was both disheartened and ashamed at this defeat in court. He soon said good bye to the law courts, and gave himself to the search for true justice. This search led him to a small village in Naples called Scala, where he found groups of shepherds who were totally abandoned by the official Church of that time. This situation

of the plight of the poor affected him very much. So he decided to begin a congregation that would work for the most abandoned poor in society. After giving Tom this brief history of the congregation, Fr. John said, "Tom, I must tell you, the actual practice of working among the poor does not receive **a high priority** in the Congregation." And he added, **"But if you want to take it as a challenge to work for the poor, then you are welcome to our congregation"**. Fr. Tom used to say to us always that he accepted this challenge from Fr. John Anthony, and did his work for the poor. And to prove his determination, the next step that Tom took was to join the Redemptorist congregation in Bangalore in the year 1962. He was professed as a Redemptorist on August 2, 1963, and was ordained a priest on April 20, 1971.

3. Keeping to this motto of working among the poor in his life, Tom was always a voice of **dissent** in our congregation. The dissent was not just to oppose something that was said or asked by our superiors, but it was primarily to draw the attention of the majority to the struggles of the poor. Let me give you just one example. In the year 1971, millions of refugees from Bangladesh crossed over to India in the wake of the Indo-Pakistan war. These refugees were located in different refugee camps. Tom was doing his final year of theological studies at the Redemptorist Seminary in Bangalore. And what did Tom do? He got the support of one more companion from among the students named James Chakkalakal, and they both went to their superior and asked for permission that their final exams in theology be anticipated by one month, so that they would be free to go and serve at the refugee camps during the holidays. These two confreres were allowed to write their exams early and they then rushed to the refugee camps in West Bengal, to render their service to those refugees. It was an action that helped others to see what was demanded of us. In our book of constitutions and statutes it is written, "Redemptorists are never deaf to the cry of the poor". This action of Tom was reminding many of us, that this constitution should not just remain in our books, but must become real in our present day situation. However, it must also be said, that at times in his dissent, Tom also took a very rigid position, and would not tolerate any compromise on an issue he felt very strongly.

4. Tom was one person who by his life and work gave **visibility** to us Redemptorists as a congregation, both within the country and abroad. Tom in one of his many interviews with the media was once asked this question: “what led you towards fishing communities in particular?” Tom said, “My decision to spend my life defending the oppressed was further consolidated when I began to work in a small fishing village called Poothura near Thiruvananthapuram. Middle men led by one politically well –connected family were using muscle- power to keep fisher folk permanently on the edge of starvation even though they worked harder than any community that I knew. I decided to arm them with knowledge by teaching them to read and write. And thus began my work among the community of fisher folk.” His work among the poor fisher folk led him to become the coordinator of the World Forum of Fish –harvester and Fish workers (WFF) and India’s National Alliance of Peoples Movements (NAPM). He was one of the organisers of the famous Kanyakumari march of 1989 that struggled to protect India’s coastal ecology. He together with his companions mobilised the fishing community to fight the foreign industrial fishing fleets who were invited to India by our politicians. He was a crusader against coastal pollution and spearheaded protests against the Koodankulam Nuclear Plant in Tamil Nadu. Once in the United States at Seattle, they addressed him as “Tom Kocherry, the Catholic priest, trade union leader, lawyer, environmentalist and battler against the World Trade Organisation, and Tom’s simple reply was, “I might be all that and more. But my one concern is, *‘I want people who live close to the earth to be protected from those who have detached themselves from the earth’*, and then he added, ‘I still do God’s work by defending his creation’.

5. Once the newly elected superior General of our congregation visited Canada, and since he was newly elected, the Media approached him and asked him a number of questions. They said to him, what is the work you do as a congregation in the world? And the superior General explained to them what the mission of the congregation was and the many types of work the Redemptorists are engaged in. But those answers did not satisfy the people who questioned him. Then they asked the superior General once again, “Tell us what you concretely do as a congregation for the growth

and development of people in many parts of the world?” and in his answer the General casually mentioned that some of our men also work among the poor very much, and a person like Fr. Tom Kocherry is engaged with working for the traditional fish workers in India. The moment our Superior General mentioned the name of Tom Kocherry the media personnel immediately said, Oh!, if it is Tom Kocherry we know him very well, and we are happy to know that he is a member of your congregation, and that you as a congregation encourage him in his work.” Well, that is how Tom was. He was a person who by his life and action gave much visibility for the Redemptorists both in the country and outside the country as well.

6. Tom was a **highly committed** person. What he did, he did with **passion**. There were no half hearted measures with him. If he took up some task, he put his entire heart and soul into the work, and tried to complete that work as best as he could. Yet, he met with a lot of opposition, both from within the congregation or the Church, and also from the powers in authority in the outside world. At times the opposition also came from his own companions or colleagues who turned hostile and went on a rampage to defame him. But Tom weathered all these storms and came out through, at times a little bit shaken, but often with renewed courage and energy. He used to say to his friends, **“every fight, every movement, every reform is a moment of optimism”**. Kocherry fought on.



When he couldn’t argue in the courts, he used the old Indian weapon — the fast. In 1995, his fast led to the inclusion of fish workers in the Murari Committee which was formed to review the 1991 policy on joint venture fishing; in 1996, when the government again ignored a parliamentary committee’s recommendation on cancellation of

all licenses to foreign trawlers, he fasted until the United Front rescinded it. Speaking of Tom, his friend the late Mr. Harekrishna Debnath once said, “Tom personified the struggle of Indian fish workers”.

7. Tom was a recipient of many international awards. He was awarded the Pew Research Centre foundation award for marine conservation. He declined the award because it was funded by a company that was in itself responsible for marine pollution. The international organisation for Socio-Economic Human Rights Protection, Germany, awarded Thomas Kocherry with a gold medal for his work on human rights issues. The earth day celebrations at the United Nations, the Earth Society Foundation, New York awarded him with the earth Trustee Award for his contribution in preserving and promoting marine ecology. He was also one of the winners of the Sophie Prize from Norway, which recognises contributions in the field of alternative politics and development.
8. And finally Tom, we your brothers in the Redemptorist congregation look up to you, for all the greatness you have achieved. Your life of commitment and dedication to the Lord Jesus in the oppressed poor will always be powerful witness to all of us. Your life was symbolised by struggle and you struggled till the end. In the last few months your health condition deteriorated after a series of heart attacks. Yet, you kept working with your laptop and continued to send messages of hope and encouragement to many of us, and also to many other people. As we bid goodbye to you, we say that we are very proud of you Tom, and very proud of all your achievements. You have become a legend in your time. We thank you for your goodness, your sincerity, your hard work and above all for your faithfulness to struggle till the end. Thank you Tom, although your booming voice is silent, yet the memory of what you stood and worked for, will linger long in our minds. Good bye Tom, may the Lord protect you and take you into his kingdom of eternal peace and happiness. Goodbye Tom, till we meet again in God’s holy Kingdom.

Xavier Sanjivi CSsR



Tom Kocherry: The Man I Knew

St Alphonsus, the founder of the Redemptorists, focused our whole life through the lens of the “most abandoned.” They were to be the catalyst for our way of life, our spiritual sustenance and the criteria for every work that we chose. They are the thread that holds together the necklace of our lives as Redemptorists as it was in the life of Jesus the Redeemer, who Redemptorists are called to follow. Tom and St Alphonsus will meet as soul-mates now and pray for all of us who struggle to better hold together the contradictions in our lives, as they seemed to do it more easily in theirs.

Tom was five years junior to me, which means he entered the Redemptorists during the actual unfolding of the Second Vatican Council (Vatican II, 1962-65). It was providential that he did, because he would not have survived during the pre-Vatican II days. In those days, the Rule was the Will of God. “You keep the Rule and the Rule will keep you,” was the fundamental refrain for us as novices and seminarians. That the Rule was only a more practical interpretation of the Gospel, was unheard of. A person with Tom’s stubborn and innovative personality would have probably been packed off home within days. But his were post Vatican II days; so he survived

Even in his seminary days in the mid-1960s, Tom led the seminarians to leap over the wall to serve the poor in the slum just outside our wall. Within a short time he had the poor boys from the slum leap back over the wall to play on our ground and use our ample facilities. Naturally, this created enormous tension between the students and the Priests. But Tom not only survived the tension; he thrived on it. That was the story of his life: **stubborn, contentious, unyielding, when it came to serving the poor.** He was ready to take on all-comers.

Tom had an extraordinary ability to challenge authority without appearing arrogant. In 1993 the World Parliament of Religions was convened after 100 years. Without sorting out the conflicts between religions, it held, there was no way to global peace. Tom was one of the two resource persons invited to address the Parliament. His provincial superior at the time refused him permission to go to Chicago. He appealed to the Superior General in Rome. He was not willing to overrule the provincial superior according to the fundamental principle of subsidiarity. Tom went anyway to Chicago. On his return, for gross disobedience, Tom was put on retreat with iconic Jesuit Fr Joseph Neuner. I met Tom after the retreat. He laughed heartily about the retreat and the “good” report that Fr Neuner sent to the superior of how faithfully Tom made the retreat. It is rumoured that in the report to the provincial, Fr Neuner wrote that if he had any more such “recalcitrant” subjects he (Neuner) would be delighted to give them a retreat!!

His spirituality, based on the Gospels especially the Magnificat of Our Lady and the Sermon on the Mount, always sustained and encouraged his ebullient personality. He was a few months younger than I, so it was sad to see his health deteriorating before our eyes since his serious heart attack in Australia about five years ago. But **his passionate love for the poor, the marginalized and the oppressed never waned.**

Desmond de Sousa CSsR, Goa



A True Friend, Guide and Inspiration

I met Tom in 1972 in Ithithanam, Chaganacherry when I was in the Novitiate. That relationship lasted for 42 years till May 3rd 2014, when my sister Elsamma Prayikalam who was the first one who announced his death called and exploded her shock to me. Actually Tom and myself had a conversation through the phone on May 2nd night around 8 pm. The message was like this “I am sending some books to you through a boy, since I want to give my last gifts to you before my death” Then he laughed as usual. I replied “No, God will not call you now, it will take some more time”. And the conversation went on for some more time and he sounded quite good and joyful. So when Elsa said, “Tom is no more” I couldn’t believe my ears. And the boy brought the books to me a week after his death. One of his books was “**Be not Afraid: Overcoming the fear of death**” by Johann Christopher Arnold. He finished reading that book up to chapter 17 “**Dying**” page 160 and put a mark there. For each and every chapter he had written a comment in the book itself. It seems that he was fully prepared for his death. His letters to his provincial as well as the local superior are also a proof of that. He had mentioned the names and phone numbers of the people whom they had to inform of his death as well as his desire to have a 2 hour prayer service with reflections and *Nadan Pattukal* (folk songs on struggles) and the name of the people who could prepare that for him. So I rushed to Thiruvananthapuram to prepare that prayer service as my last gift to him.

In 1972 a year after his priestly ordination Tom came to Ithithanam, Medical Mission Sisters’ convent to give a retreat to our sisters. That time I was in the Novitiate and he met me there while I was teaching Malayalam alphabet to some of our poor neighborhood children. He got interested in that and told me “if you can come to the sea shore in Poothura (one of the coastal village in Trivandrum) you can teach many poor children”.

Soon after my Religious profession as a Medical Mission Sister in 1975, I joined a group of four Sisters who opted to live and work among the fisher people in Anjuthengu, Poothura, where Tom and three other Redemptorist priests had already started to work among the fisherpeople taking care of Poothura parish. My life with those fisher people became not a mere ‘immersion experience’ but a continuous process of commitment for almost three decades of my active ministry from 1975-2004. Their life and struggle became part and parcel of my life, leaving unforgettable experiences and

impressions, which, to a great extent were shaped by Tom, his reflections and inspirations. An experience of being challenged by Tom as well as by the fisherwomen was the first stepping stone in **The Process of the power I developed within me** as a woman. After 8 months of involvement with fisherpeople, one night around one o’clock, we found that our house was on fire. It was a small thatched house with only one entrance. Somebody who found us as a threat to their existence had set fire to our house. To our surprise, the next day the people around our house gathered together, and collected some money, thatched the house, and made it more beautiful. There we were asked by Tom and the women whether we would like to continue or not in the midst of such oppositions.

The process of development of the power within me challenged me to make conscious and deliberate choices in my life. In the seventies it was very difficult for others to comprehend Religious sisters getting involved politically. We had to face many objections, rejections, and criticisms from different sources: Religious, priests, our own families and relatives, and the Church, and even from our own Sisters. We were kicked out from all the activities in the Church and banned as “Communist –Marxist Sisters”. But all that time Tom was with us encouraging us and supporting us reflecting and sharing with us the word of God especially Lk 4:18 and *Magnificat*.

The process of development of the power within me was a Process of Conversion and Change within me. Tom enabled me to look into myself, my own petty cherished values and to make a strong decision of being with the fisherpeople and it went on for 30 years impelling me to take a stand with the poor. My experience in the police station with the Adivasi men, in Muthenga, where I was abused by the police was a real experience of my own strength and power within. Where I was really strengthened by the words of Tom quoting the Scripture that God provides the words and the strength to bear witness (Lk 21: 9-19)

In short Tom was my friend, he was like a member of our family, my companion, my teacher, my brother, my guide, my strength and my inspiration. And I believe that he will continue to be like that giving strength and inspirations to me.

Theramma MMS, Kerala

The Roar, the Echoes and the Awakening

Shakespeare has Mark Antony, standing beside the body of Marcus Brutus, “the noblest Roman of them all”, pay Brutus the following compliment: ‘his life was gentle; and the elements, So mixed in him, that Nature might stand up and say to all the world, ***This was a man***”(Julius Caesar, V, v).

The word ‘man’ in the quote could be replaced by ‘prophet’ and ‘Thomas Kocherry was indeed a veritable prophet’ for our times.

Who is a prophet? What does he/she do? A prophet is one in deep communion with God in order to be suffused with His vision for the human family, is inserted in and is in solidarity with the victims of systemic injustices and exploitation, and is ever in relentless campaign for securing for them justice/ rights/freedom. From Moses to John the Baptist, truly their number is impressive. They roared when faced with social evils. In discharge of their God-given tasks their roar caused tremor in the recalcitrant monarchs and deviant society. Hardened mindsets of royalties and unjust social systems stood exposed to their thundering denunciations. Tom’s roar went beyond the coastlines of peninsular India and led to the formation of global network of fish workers to stand for just transactions.

Tom left us too early. But he has left behind much:

1. As a result of decades long struggle for the defense of the rights of fish workers Tom has internationalized their concerns.

2. By advocating the rights and justice of a variety of oppressed and exploited communities across India, Tom has taught us that we should stand by every affected community anywhere in the world.
3. Tom as a believer and as a priest has shown that it is proper of authentic religiosity to attend to the fundamental rights and needs of the human person irrespective of religion, race, caste or nationality.
4. Integral development of the human person has to be the duty of planners in the State which should desist from pursuing lopsided development.
5. Tom’s approach shows that irrespective of religious persuasion presence in the civil society creating and shaping public opinion is important for the success of the cause you advocate.
6. The Church in India could profitably draw this implication from the mystery of the Incarnation: religious rituals and celebrations may be regarded as proper of the private domain. But the hard core of the Church as Christ’s body would be in the public, in the civil society, being active like Jesus in His time openly standing for the all round welfare of the Indian citizen.

T.K John SJ, Delhi

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A Tribute to Tom

He who believes in me though he dies, yet shall he live (Jn: 11:25)

The above saying of St. John is perfectly true regarding Fr. Tom Kocherry. His death has left a vacuum in the hearts of thousands of people. But he is present in their hearts as a hero who walked ahead as a model for living a committed, dedicated, simple life. He offered his life for others especially for the downtrodden-fisher folk.

I knew him closely from 2004 when both of us became National Conveners for National Alliance of Peoples’ Movements (NAPM). Though he used to be very busy in many things, he never missed the meetings and never went away before the meeting was over. He shared his ideas without looking at the face. He spoke the truth in black and white. We find very few people who stand for truth without minding his/her name and fame. He is one among them. Though he was very strong in his speaking, he had a very large compassionate heart towards the

needy. One of his compassionate actions put him in a very difficult situation and his name was assassinated. Since his faith in Jesus Christ was very deep he could face all the struggles with moral courage. His funeral was a witness for the life which he lived for others.

I conclude by quoting from his Provincial’s letter “I was totally humbled at this long procession of high profile visitors for Fr. Tom. I was deeply impressed to see how many people in the outside world, had such an extraordinary appreciation for Fr. Tom and his work.”

Celia UMI, Karnataka

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Forthcoming Event of the FORUM FORUM National Workshop

Venue:

Montfort Spirituality Centre, Bangalore

Dates: 20 – 22 February 2015

Thomas Kocherry: A Prophet of our time

In his book, *Religious Life and New Challenges* Thomas Kocherry wrote, “**The story of my Religious life is a search and constant struggle for Justice and values of the Kingdom of God**”. In my thirty seven years of experience with him in the participation of the struggle for the rights of the people, protection of environment and equal status for women in society proved his total commitment to the cause even to the point of great physical hardships and mental suffering. He was convinced that truth and justice will prevail at the end.

In order to enter into the struggle of the people, he insisted that all of us should be aware of the socio- economic, political and religious realities around us. Action-Reflection-Action (ARA) was the method he used. Through the reflection process he brought to light the consequences of taking the side of the poor and marginalized – being criticized, excluded, unjustly treated and humiliated. In spite of all these he was convinced that the Priests and Religious should commit themselves to fight for the values of the Kingdom. This is our call.

I see him as a fully grown human person. Closely associating with him in his life and mission, I experienced him as a human person with great strength and weakness. At the same time through his commitment for the poor and the struggle for the establishment of God’s Kingdom he was able to witness the mystic prophetic character of his life. His understanding of contemplation was to live truthfully, honestly and lovingly. It is deeply a revolutionary matter. ‘This internal transformation is not more important than action for justice, but without it our search for justice and peace becomes another exercise of human will, undermined by human self deception.’ (from *Faith in Jesus*)

His clarity of vision and his commitment to live this vision with selfless and self giving commitment in spite of opposition from the Church authorities, political parties, from his own organization he founded, and people who were closely related to him, confirmed that his movement was in the right direction.

Though there were many great events in his life that proved his commitment and conviction I would like to mention two instances that affected my life in the beginning of our journey with the fisher people.

Once when we were reflecting during the Eucharistic celebration, a twelve year old girl was carrying water from the well for cooking for the family. Her sister had just given birth to her 4th baby and her husband had to go fishing to feed the family. Tom explained how this little girl was life giving to six people by offering her services. This struck me deeply. I realized that even a small action with love and concern is life giving. Jesus’ word, “*I have come that they may have life and have it in abundance*” (Jn. 10:10) is fulfilled here.

Another instance was when for the first time, Trivandrum District union decided to go on an indefinite fast as part of the struggle for trawl ban in 1981. It was suggested that the President Mr. Joychan Antony go on fast. But he insisted that Tom too join him. Since it was Tom’s exam days for LLB, first he hesitated, but suddenly realizing the need for support for Joychan, he agreed. Though it seemed to be a small matter I was struck by the total commitment of Tom for the cause.

He enjoyed coming together and celebrations. Before he got involved world wide, our team met regularly for reflection and celebration of the Eucharist. It was always with emphasis on our solidarity and breaking and giving ourselves for others. He always carried a Mass – kit with him.

The get together of the leaders of the union during Holy week every year was a symbolic expression of our solidarity with the crucified people, which was acted out depicting the realities around.

As a result of his commitment he had to go through physical and material suffering. During the last days of his active life he was betrayed by his close associates. It was even suggested that he should be dismissed from the Federation. What he had told us in our reflections came true. He said “when we take a stand, we must be ready to suffer and die. Then only we can become fully human. This is real experience of love. That is what Jesus did; when he challenged authorities and the powerful they crucified him. Today when we challenge and take a stand with the oppressed, marginalized and fight for truth and Justice we also will be crucified. Only through crucifixion

and death we will be able to celebrate Easter. The Cross is the test for the authenticity of a revolutionary.” His reflections on the last days of his life after the severe heart attack prove the genuineness of his life.

*“We all stand together as one family
Thank one another and their support
Their love and concern.
Now I was really to close my eyes
But God did not allow me to do that
I am here again, another life....*

For what?

*I am sure of my mission....
I still long for a world that is all inclusive,
no exclusion of any sort,
No religious fundamentalism,
No political fundamentalism,
No racism,
No gender Discrimination,
No Economic Fundamentalism,
No casteism,
No division of believers and unbelievers,
No greedy accumulation of private property,
Land is meant for all,
No pollution of Air, Waters,
And land for a greedy profiteering
We are all one family,
Children of one God,
Where everybody is equal,
Free brothers and sisters.
I continue fighting against
All anti-Kingdom values,
All temptations of power mongering,
Hidden and subtle
Money and position, fame and sex,
In the process I also become enslaved
By the temptation.*

*I am sorry
“Your mercy O Lord endure for ever
Do not forsake the work of your hands” Ps 138/8
(From Magnificat by Tom)*

Tom was a great person, human and divine!

Philomine Marie MMS, Kerala



A Great and Vulnerable Man

That loud gusty voice with deep conviction of one who had toiled amidst the fisher workers will never be heard again...

That's what I would say in a sentence about the vacuum Tom has left in his going away from among our midst. Only such voices and such experiences don't die, they remain with you when you are in your own struggle. It is in that quiet gentle way that Tom says, *I have walked that path, you will also move on, fear not.*

That tall hefty person, who stood tall in his values and in his engagement with the marginalized never minced his words, never had a doubt on whose side he should be. His actions, his sweat and his charisma brought throngs of people to his side. Such was the magnanimity of this person. Though his heart was with the fisher workers, they were not the isolated groups. Anywhere injustice was being done, anyone who needed help, he would be there to reach out. His visit to Patna and his keen interest in our work for housing, not knowing Hindi, yet communicating with the language of LOVE was very inspiring and encouraging. His generosity was such that you would also be compelled to do an act in turn.

Such was the simplicity of this great man that he would trust anyone and believed in working as a team as Religious together. But what happened to him was very sad, when a Religious woman took advantage of his kindness. That was the time when I found Tom very low; he was caught in a trap, sounded helpless and it was a matter of the integrity of his character. I happened to be the Convener of the FORUM at that time and together we were having a meeting in Delhi; we sat till late that night and listened to the grief and stress he was experiencing. We as FORUM tried to intervene. Varghese, Tom and I went to meet the Provincial of that Sister and try to find a way forward. It hurt me to see that this man should have to go through all this after having given his life for a cause, only to experience being let-down by one whom he gave shelter to.

Tom pulled through that rough phase and moved on; teaching us that nothing lasts, **“all things are passing, God alone suffices.”** He never stopped, he was there trying to motivate young people, sharing not only his story, but stories of those of us who had moved out of institutions to walk a different path, thus inspiring and inviting people to think out of the box. I am certain that the manner in which he communicated, many would have followed.

Tom, your Spirit will surely guide us, I wish to say thanks that our paths crossed; you have walked the unbeaten path; proving to me that, that is the best path. For all that you did to make life better for others specially the ones thrown on the margins, their lives were better because of you. You have fought the good fight and now you are crowned among the saints ...

Dorothy Fernandes pbvm, Bihar



Thomas Kocherry - An Indomitable Fighter

To remember Tom alias Thomas Kocherry is to remember a tall personality and a life with integrity that is lost forever, leaving behind the spirit and strength. Tom who worked with and for the fish workers, not only fishermen but also women, across the country and the world, was, no doubt a trade union leader first. He was a man of organisation building. With great diligence and confidence, he would work out his strategies and organization's capacity. With discipline which he didn't just follow but loved as a 'value', Tom would always carry out a meeting of mass movement without any dilemma or dilly dallying. That was like a good leader who built National and World forum of Fish workers and won many battles.

Tom's foundation and cultivation of the National Fish worker's Forum with indomitable commitment, successful battle against foreign fishing vessels, and resistance to all attacks as fisher people's livelihood is well known, he reached and contributed to World Fish worker's Forum through the same.

We remember Tom in National Alliance of People's Movements (NAPM) as one who always laughed at the crises and challenges. He would peacefully analyze the greatest of those and then plan. Always ready with a programme proposal he would participate in the debate with an open mind. His fast in Mumbai as his dialogues with the Ministers across the party, therefore were with confidence that always brought in some results. He had

his heart in the struggle by the fish workers and was a master of those issues. But what made him gain a national stature and status was also his ideological clarity and strategic inputs on the wider issues. Whether it was people's right to land, water, forest, empowerment of women- among masses to leadership collectives- also nuclear power, Tom was committed to support, participate and guide. His role in the struggle against Haripura nuclear plant in West Bengal and Koodankulam was well known. His support was not just to the leadership but also to common activists, common people and all those who would be in the action which he participated in, made him relate to all.

I remember Tom would never behave like a 'Father' but a brother, a colleague, and a comrade. His simplicity and his sincerity were his assets which he presented till the end of his life. A disciplined soul that he was, he cultivated NFF...unfortunate demise of Harekrishna Debnath being a great blow to Tom and NFF both...but Tom's spirit continued to support it till his last breath. He was no doubt a reformer within the community of missionaries and a revolutionary visionary for all those who challenged the system. Not always with very radical words, his songs in open, raised voice reflected both...'Saathiyo, Salaam hai...with Neela, Narmada, Chilika...' The sound is faded but not memories, that will be an everlasting tribute with a salute.

Medha Patkar, Mumbai



Walking with a Prophet

When I think of Tom (Fr Thomas Kocherry) what comes to my mind is the urgency with which he responded to calamities or any situation of exploitation, dominance, violence, discrimination etc. He had consistency in the way he went about doing things. He kept on till some result came or a movement was set in motion around an issue. He had a charismatic personality that he could get around issues and get the concerned people involved. As I mentioned above, when he saw that something was not right he responds immediately, not by himself alone but involving all the people around. He had a special knack to get the concerned people involved. A small example was how he handled a flood situation which destroyed many houses in a village near to his parish Poothura, though it was in the area of another parish and the people affected were mostly Hindus. He immediately contacted

the Parish priest of the concerned area, people around the area, both Hindu and Christian leaders, school and other offices etc. He organized a group to take care of the situation. Together they collected food materials, clothes and other needed things. Also gave shelter to those whose houses were under water in the Church, school, community hall etc. Up to this time the Church did not pay much attention to the people who lived on the other side of the road but only to the Catholics fish workers and those lived close to the sea. This involved a lot of time, energy and hard work. As a result close relationship was built with the nearby parish and the Hindu brethren. It was the first experience of its kind in that area. As he was interested in such issues he also found time to listen to individuals with compassion and interest and helped them out directing them to concerned persons /offices.

He entered into situations fearlessly and did not mind the comments or criticisms of the higher ups in Politics, the Church or the Congregation because he believed – this is the way a Religious should live her/his commitment to Christ who always took the side of the poor, downtrodden, marginalized, women, children etc. (Lk. 4: 18). For this stand Christ had to suffer unjust judgment, suffering, violence and finally crucifixion - our hope is in His resurrection. The following incident reveals his fearlessness to enter even into violent situations. There was a violent fight between the people of Poothura and Mampally area. At that time Tom was not the Parish priest of Poothura. Usually in such situation the Parish Priests would enter into the area and try to bring peace. But in that situation the parish priests from both sides were afraid or not able to enter into that situation. Tom was called in and he went up and down from both places to make the people understand that some people are trying to make political gain out of the situation. Both side people were planning to burn houses etc. one group through sea and the other through the back waters at night. In the evening Tom came to our (MMS) house, offered Mass and we prayed for peace between the two areas. After taking food he went to Anjengo and there people were meeting together to plan to execute violence. The same planning was going on in Poothura also. Somehow Tom was able to make them understand the consequence and deter them from such an attempt. While he was involved in this process due to Political pressure he was arrested and put in jail. The ruling Party thought that his interventions would affect them adversely because Assembly elections were close at hand. We came to know about it only in the morning when one of the fisherman brought Tom's bicycle to us. Then everyone including our parish priest, fisher people's union etc. moved for his bail and it took a few days to get it. We were all waiting at the Varkala Court for his bail and by the grace of God the bail was granted. Just a few minutes after that an order came from the higher ups, instructing the Police not to grant bail to him by any means. This is what he had to pay for such involvements!

His option for the poor was clear from his first choice to work in Poothura parish. When he came to Trivandrum diocese he was interested to work in the context of a parish. The bishop, Peter Bernard Pereira, took him to all the parishes in his diocese. When they came to Poothura a parish in Anjengo Forane Church the bishop told him this was the most 'difficult parish' and all the priests refused to be assigned there and for a long time there was no parish priest there. And the reason was that a few rich and powerful controlled the parish committee and the priest had to dance according to their tune and those who refused to do that were beaten up and chased from there. On top of it most of the time there were family feuds and other fights. Tom was most enthused to choose such a place. May be he took it as a

challenge – as I see his life now. Somehow, through different tactics and entering into the lives of the people through his simple life style, he was able to organize a functional parish committee with newer members. Of course there were lots of threats and violence. Being with them he realized that most of the fisher men were bonded laborers to the owners of the fishing equipments. So he also organized a cooperative which owned the equipments and the members went fishing and got their proper share. Besides this he also organized reflection groups based on the Bible related to their life situation. He also prepared people to teach catechism based on Bible.

While he worked in the parish itself he got in touch with other likeminded groups and collaborated and networked with them. That had been his way of functioning in his future involvements also. For example his involvement in organizing the Boat Workers Union, Trivandrum district Fishermen's union, State level Union, National Fisher Workers Forum, World Forum etc. In all this his inspiration was the Bible especially The New Testament—the life of Christ the Liberator - his faith.

He was also interested to bring together like minded theologians, Religious, priests and other people so that the voice of the marginalized, downtrodden, women, victims of violence and institutionalization, political and religious structures etc, could be heard and pressurize the decision making bodies at the local, national, and international level. His passion for such groups is revealed in this that he went for the Theologian's Meet in Calcutta from Trivandrum six months prior to his death, though very sick, and presented a paper on Faith two months before his death he went to Koodamkulam to inaugurate the election campaign of Mr. Udayakumar, the leader of anti atomic struggle. Just three days before his death he travelled to Manavalakurichi (TamilNadu) with the secretary of National Fish Workers' Forum Mr. Elango and handed over all the documents, photos and other papers of National Fish Workers' Forum. He was well prepared for his death. He was active through his computer in communicating events and its consequences in relation to peoples' life till his death.

Patricia Kuruvinakunnel MMS, Kerala

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“Our faith in Jesus should take us to an all inclusive education for all with service mentality not profiteering. This commitment should be in every religious as a characteristic quality of our faith in Jesus. We have to collaborate with the GOI in the free and compulsory education to all children up to the age of 14, which is a constitutional commitment in India.” Tom Kocherry

A Prophetic Theologian and a Mystic of the Market-Place

Thomas Kocherry literally slept in the Lord exactly a week before his 75th birthday! In the early morning of 3rd May, at 4.30 I received an e-mail from him. He was worried about the outcome of the general elections! He could not see his beloved country being divided on communal lines with the consequent destruction of the ideals enshrined in the Constitution of India. He was worried about the development mantra that was chanted during the electioneering in favour of the corporate sectors, multi-nationals at the cost of the lives of the poor all over the country especially the Tribals, the Dalits and the fish workers for whose well-being he dedicated his life.

Many know Tom as a trade union leader, environmentalist, lawyer, social activist, one of the leaders of the national and international Forum of Fish Workers and active member of Indian National Alliance of Peoples' Movements (NAPM). But I know Tom as a contextual theologian for more than 20 years! He did not hold any doctorate in theology from any university or ecclesiastical institute but his theological reflections emerged from the multiversity of the life of the poor and the marginalized sections of the society. His thunderous prophetic voice amplified the silent cry of the oppressed and exploited in the society and raised questions about our faith in a God who is deeply involved in human history! He was an active member of the Indian Theological Association (ITA) and participated in all its annual meetings and seminars without fail. His down-to-earth-approach to God-talk could challenge the tendency of some theologians to make God-talk or theology too abstract, mysterious and other-worldly! At my request, as the section editor of Jeevadhara May issues, he wrote articles

on Jesus' relations to society and the implications of our faith in him which he published later as a booklet, *Faith in Jesus: A Passionate Call for Liberation*. Tom emphasized the prophetic commitment of Jesus. According to him, our faith in Jesus demands that we move away from ritualism and dogmas towards liberation experience and prophetic proclamation.

Tom could experience God's presence intensely in the daily life of all who are struggling to secure the basic necessities of life including their recognition as humans with inalienable rights. He could sense the absence of God when the markets were manipulated by the powerful, forests were cut down by unscrupulous traders of timber, and trolling destroyed the lives of ordinary fish workers. By committing himself to change the situation he wanted to experience God's presence in the midst of it. Like Jesus he identified himself with the fisher workers and the poorest of the poor in the society. He was courageous to raise his voice against all forms of injustice without caring for its consequences. Like all prophets he had to suffer terribly when he saw the organization he built up not only abandoned him and his ideals but also hurled false accusations against him and spread calumnies about him. Tom suffered bitterly in those days and months but he consoled himself by accepting them as a sharing in the passion the Lord, whom he followed closely till the end of his life. Tom lived his theology not as an academic knowledge but an experience of the suffering God and he raised his prophetic voice without any fear or favour. He continues to live not only with his Lord but with us who are touched and inspired by his life.

Jacob Parappally MSFS, Karnataka



Remembering Tom

When we all gathered to bid the final farewell to Fr. Thomas Kocherry or Tom as we called him, we were all struck by the peaceful face with which he lay. We were friends for around 40 years. Before he started work in the fishing village of Poothura, he had visited us in Marianad where we had been working with the fishing community for a few years already. We were wary of having a priest close by as we had experienced the way the Church connived with the powers that be leaving the fishers, poor and exploited. Tom and his companions turned out to be different, desiring to live their Christian faith as taught by Jesus...close to the poor. They also attempted to earn

their bread working with the fishers...all very radical for the Church of the early 1970s. This was an inspiration to us and as the years went by we not only created a strong group of Christians for Socialism but also saw the fishers organizing to fight for their rights to survival.

Tom was a charismatic leader and gave unstintingly of himself. We all have numerous stories not only of his clever strategies as a leader but also the very humane way he reached out to us and others. For several of us who were disillusioned with the Church, Tom and a few other priest friends provided the space to read the Bible in a contextual manner and celebrated and broke the bread with us in true communion. It was this solidarity

that also sustained our commitment to the struggle of the fishers.

Tom looked beyond the struggle of the fishers and made efforts to build alliances with the larger working class movements and struggles. In the late 1980s he participated and expressed solidarity with the textile workers as they fought their losing battle in Mumbai. In the early 1990s, he joined the National Alliance of People's Movements (NAPM). Even when the government was unaware of what was happening at the international level, the people's movements were opposing the signing of the Dunkel Draft that proposed the creation of the WTO. The fishworkers participated in huge demonstrations against this. Tom was particularly aware of the links between the global and the local and tried to bring this awareness to the fishworkers' movement.

Nevertheless, he was also very human. His assertive loud voice and daring nature which were his strengths as a leader were also his limitations hindering his ability

to listen to others. As the fishworkers' movement made considerable gains and achieved national recognition, the old solidarity bonds weakened, the open debate and discussion and search for the truth got stunted, and the dynamism of the movement got paralyzed by organization structures and hierarchies. While the base of the national movement weakened, Tom was building an international movement of fishworkers which for similar reason again was divided at its birth.

All said and done, when we old friends gathered to bid him the final farewell, it was a very sad moment for us all. We had seen him gradually lose his physical energy but his mind and spirit remained undaunted. His desire to fight and transform the world and rid it of its wrongs was his prime concern to the very end. He fought a great fight always faithful to his commitment to priesthood. He now rests in peace remembered by thousands around the world.

Nalini Nayak, Kerala

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Tom: An Amazingly Ordinary Man

I know Fr. Thomas Kocherry from 1975 onwards. I met him for the first time the day I started my Novitiate during the Eucharistic celebration, in our Novitiate house at Ithithanam. His sharing on Religious life touched me to the core of my heart. He said, **"Option for the poor is a privilege and a duty of Religious."**

It was also a time, Medical Mission Sisters were searching for meaningful involvements among the poor and marginalized of the Society in the light of Vatican Council II. Tom had been a great support for us in Poothura and we were working as a complimenting team among the fisher folk.

As a novice of MMS for exposure in Poothura community, I have seen Tom identified so much with the poor and marginalized. *'His daily schedule began with Mass in the morning. Then he went to the kitchen lit fire and put rice for cooking. Then he rushed to the seashore to join the fishermen's group for fishing. When he returned after fishing, the rice would be ready to eat. He made curry from the catch, ate the food, cleaned the black cooking vessels, washed clothes, swept the courtyard.....'* Pasting posters for awareness programmes, composing and teaching songs, praying with groups of people in Poothura parish, preparing and acting out dramas etc, were some of his activities. When he visited MMS houses he used to carry jack fruit and tapioca from our houses on his head exactly like coolies at the railway stations. He was human to the core to see, understand and take daring steps to eradicate peoples' misery from exploitation.

He used to challenge the oppressive structures without any fear and was never ready to compromise any of the values. He was a man of great vision, quick to foresee the catastrophe and enthusiastic to take preventive measures to save people and environment. 'Protect water and Protect life' was a mass movement to protect environment. He was a charismatic leader in his own Redemptorist Society, in the Catholic Church, and in the society. Tom lives in the hearts of many. We will miss his interventions in the socio economic political and religious arena.

Valsa Paravarakathu MMS, Kerala

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"I want people who live close to the earth to be protected from those who have detached themselves from the earth. I still do God's work by defending his creation". Tom Kocherry

Appreciation and Acknowledgement:

Our Appreciation and sincere thanks to all our contributors of this issue. Because of your sharing of experiences, insights and appreciation of Tom Kocherry, this issue of the FORUM Newsletter becomes a rich resource for those who want to know the life and work of Fr. Thomas Kocherry CSsR

Tom isn't Away!

If I remember it right, it was in 1981 the year that I joined the seminary for my Religious priestly studies that Fr. Thomas Kocherry delved deep into the socio-economic struggles of the fisher people of Kerala. He went on a hunger-strike for the cause of the fisher folk. He had been into it much earlier onwards. To be frank, as a boy reared in a very conservative Syrian Christian family, I was not much in praise of these sort of struggles by Priests and Religious in those days. But, later on, as I was ordained a Priest, I became an admirer of Religious activism and especially so of Fr. Tom Kocherry.

As I have had somewhat close acquaintance with Tom, as he was fondly called, I was ever so enthused at the fire this man contained. On account of his straight forward attitudes and mindset, he has had several personal setbacks, all of which he was able to take with a certain lightness and mental detachment, showing forth an exceptional charisma. Through the course of several years, we became good friends; and all the time he was interested in whatever I did. I am not a fool to believe that I had anything in me to gain his friendship. The fact is that, he befriended anyone whom he met. Being the editor of the popular Catholic Magazine namely 'Assisi' for some years, I had the occasion to interview this great fire-brand organiser, several times.

Everyone who has had some acquaintance with Tom would certainly agree with me when I say, it was the

zeal that he had and the passion with which he spoke that made Tom so very different. Wherever there was injustice, propelled with Jesus' spirit, he fought against it with all his might.

He was always interested in others' works- even works that were in the least liberative. Once, I remember, very much disillusioned, I declared at a meeting that, setting aside everything else we were going to begin a Spoken English Tutorial at Kozhikkode. Having a nose for the liberative dimension it could have, Tom immediately declared that it was a wonderful thing to have a centre where quality coaching could be imparted to economically backward youth the art of Simple Spoken English, which would position them on great vantage point.

Three years back, a few of us were involved in forming a visual-media centre. In those times, on a fine day I received a Registered Parcel from Tom. To my great surprise, the packet contained some CDs of good Documentaries and documentations of Peoples' struggles. He must have come to hear from someone that we were into a visual-media project. I was so very touched at this gesture of concern that he showed towards me. May be, as they say Tom was a great visionary, an activist, a speaker, a motivator, an organiser, a fighter and so on and so forth. But, to my mind, he was simply a-gem-of-a-person, captivated by the true Christ-ian Spirit.

George Valiayapadath Ofm Cap, Kerala

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FORUM OF RELIGIOUS FOR JUSTICE AND PEACE (FORUM)



PREAMBLE

Religious life is a call to be a sign in the world and in the Church, the Spirit filled community of Jesus, of the liberative action of God in history. Religious are to fulfil a prophetic role within the Church and society at large. Like the prophets of old, like Jesus himself, denouncing injustice and enslavement in solidarity with the oppressed, the Religious are to be the harbingers of a just and free society.

In response to the cry of the poor and to the stirrings of the Spirit in their hearts to be more authentic in their vocation, Religious Social Activists opt to join the oppressed in solidarity with their struggle for freedom. Their perception of the social reality, their openness to the signs of the times, their initiatives to uphold human life and dignity make them an essential element of the march towards the Reign of God.

Forum of Religious for Justice and Peace (FORUM), which came into existence in 1987 is a movement of religious women and men who share in the above vision and mission. It brings together members to share common concerns, to strengthen solidarity, to extend mutual support and to renew their spiritual, moral and intellectual resources to function as a catalyst in Church and society.

Vision

Religious women and men living the Gospel radically by responding to increasing dehumanization and degradation of creation

Objectives

- a) To be a prophetic voice in the Church and the society
- b) To promote solidarity and common search among the religious committed to the struggles of the poor and the exploited.
- c) To provide inspiration and create avenues for the awakening and formation of Religious for Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation (JPIC) ministry.
- d) To promote an inclusive theology and spirituality of struggle and liberation
- e) To promote human rights and life with dignity with special focus on women, Dalits, Tribals and children
- f) To promote gender sensitivity and to work for a gender just Church and Society
- g) To promote Pluralism
- h) To extend support to members of the FORUM in face of problems.
- i) To promote among the religious reflection and action on the political dimension of the struggles of the poor for liberation
- j) To increasingly promote the adoption of rights based approach in all Church sponsored welfare and development activities.
- k) To Study and promote a radical understanding of the Gospel and of the social teachings of the Church.
- l) To monitor, denounce and seek redress in instances of injustice to Religious.

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A SOLEMN PROMISE BY THE MEMBERS OF FORUM OF RELIGIOUS FOR JUSTICE AND PEACE

Having understood and being affected by the painful and de-humanizing social exclusion experienced by large number of our sisters and brothers in our society and in the Indian Church, I solemnly promise to reject and remove all forms of caste feeling and caste discrimination, to uphold the dignity of all humans, especially the poorest of the poor and the marginalized and to work towards the building of an egalitarian society based on the values of Jesus.

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