Loyola College Negombo Advanced Level Students' visit to Jaffna and Vavuniya

The North-South Dialogue Desk of Lanka Centre for Social Concern initiated another exposure program for the Advanced Level students of Loyola College, Negombo. They spent three days in Jaffna, Vavuniya and the Madhu Shrine. Before they left for Jaffna, there was an input session to orient their exposure program.

"Where are we going?" "Who are the people we are expected to meet?" "What happened to Jaffna during the past thirty years? What will be there along the A9 road? Who are these people in Cheddikulam, Kodikamam camps and why are they in camps for the Internally Displaced? What is the difference between a pleasure trip to Jaffna and our exposure visit to Jaffna?' were some questions reflected upon before their exposure visit. Fr. Chandana Lal, the Vice Principal and a few members of the tutorial staff joined the program and organized it well. On their way to Jaffna, Fr. Joel, the JRS Country Director extended them a warm welcome and hosted a grand breakfast in the JRS Vavuniya Office.

The NSDD group with a few University students joined the Loyola College students in Vavuniya. Before the arrival of the Loyola students, the NSDD group had an interesting session with Fr. Joel on "What happened then in Sri Lanka" a brief but thought- provoking session on the current situation of our country.

Then the NSDD group was busy with exposing the realities of VAROD (Vanni Rehabilitation Organization of Differently Abled) in Pampemadhu to the Loyola Students. VAROD cares for the war victims who were made physically and mentally disabled and the mentally malfunctioning orphans who have lost their parents during the war. VAROD is a ministry of the Claretian Fathers.

In VAROD we met so many youngsters who were bed ridden, amputees, blind, and crippled. The NSDD members took the Loyola Students into the small huts where the VAROD inmates live. There were a few Loyola students who could converse in Tamil and others had translators. We could see the students becoming silent and pensive in front of these youngsters who had lost……. Some were in tears and they felt the pain of their Tamil contemporaries from the other side of the same nation.

Later we journeyed to the Madhu shrine to celebrate the Eucharist and thank God for all the graces granted to these young ones during these three days of exposure. There too Fr. Lasantha took time to explain the role of the Madhu shrine in the lives of the Internally Displaced people

for the past thirty years, the maternal care of Our Lady of Madhu towards her suffering children at various moments of despair and the role of reconciliation the church needs to play in Sri Lanka in the coming days.

Some comments after the exposure

- We were ignorant of what is happening in the North. The state media do not report touch the realities honestly and objectively.
- It was very sad to see victims of war, of our own age, their unbearable suffering and pain.... I too was overjoyed with the war victories in May 2009 but now I feel ashamed
- The Tamil people are still suffering as we saw them along the A9 road
- Why so many military personnel along A9, in Jaffna, and even the road up to the Madhu shrine?
- Still we have not attended to the causes of injustice which led the Tamils to take a violent path
- Will ever the Majority Sinhalese- Sinhalese Buddhists agree to equal dignity and power-sharing with all the minorities in Sri Lanka?
- The Church in Sri Lanka is also a minority – will it happen to the Church?
- Building roads and new bridges will not solve the problem but our Tamil brothers and sisters must feel that they are part and parcel of Sri Lanka. We need to trust them and they need to trust us
- It is painful to see the plight of the war victims
- The Church has a major responsibility in this reconciling process, to bring Justice and to establish peace even when we are suspected.
- I am very happy and proud to be a Christian because of the wonderful work the church has done and doing to these suffering ones.