



ASIA/SINGAPORE - Jesuits in Asia and in the Pacific: an enormous region, young and growing, with many challenges

Singapore (Agenzia Fides) – Jesuit major superiors met at the Asia-Pacific Conference from 23 to 27 January in Singapore. Participating were, Superior General of the Society of Jesus Father, Adolfo Nicolás, accompanied by Father Daniel Patrick Huang. The following is a brief overview of this vast area of the world where the Jesuits find themselves living out their mission in very different contexts and as a result facing different challenges, according to the description given by Fr Huang, sent to Fides by the General Curia of the Jesuits.

The Jesuit Conference for the Asia-Pacific (JCAP) is composed of thirteen units: 7 Provinces (Australia, China, Indonesia, Japan, Korea, Philippines and Vietnam) and 6 Regions and Missions (Cambodia, East Timor, Malaysia-Singapore, Micronesia, Myanmar and Thailand). In January 2011 there were 1,640 Jesuits in this service, or about 9% of all 17,772 Jesuits in the world. JCAP is serving a huge part of the world, in terms of both geographical coverage and population. In addition to the vast continent of Australia, JCAP also includes China, the world's most populous nation and second largest by territory, as well as Indonesia, which is not only a huge archipelago that extends over three time zones, but also the country with the largest number of Muslims worldwide.

Except for two predominantly Catholic Countries (the Philippines and East Timor), the Catholic Church in this part of the world is truly a “small flock”, a tiny percentage of the total population. For example, the Catholics in Japan, about half a million, represent less than 0.5% of the Country's population. Similarly, the less than 300,000 Catholics in Thailand are little more than 0.4% of Thailand's population. The vast majority of the peoples of the Asia-Pacific region have for centuries been part of one or other of the great religious traditions such as Buddhism, Islam or Confucianism. Currently, however, these ancient religions and cultural traditions in Asia are faced with a growing secularisation of cultures. The new “global” cultures emerging are especially influential on young people, so many of whom are from the Asia-Pacific region.

Besides being so different in terms of religion and culture (not only are there different languages, but also many different alphabets and writing systems!) JCAP countries are also faced with different challenges. In the Asia-Pacific, on the one hand, we are faced with economic giants like China, Japan, Korea, Australia and Singapore, but on the other hand, we have even some of the poorest countries in the world, such as East Timor, Myanmar and Cambodia. In Myanmar, Vietnam and China there are problems of political repression and restrictions on religious freedom. In reference to the various forms of Islam, today we have challenges in Indonesia, Malaysia and southern Thailand and the Philippines. Migration, for various reasons, is a major challenge for the entire region and involves millions of people (if you include internal migration in China, hundreds of millions!). Finally, on the whole, Asia-Pacific, with regard to the Society of Jesus, is a young and growing region. Approximately one third of the Jesuits of JCAP are under 40 and some even younger. The new Province of Vietnam, established only five years ago, has about 150 Jesuits, of whom 90 are in formation. Of the 45 Jesuits in East Timor, 30 are in formation. Of the 45 Jesuits who work in the Mission in Myanmar, 34 are in formation. (SL) (Agenzia Fides 5/02/2011)