

believed in the project and helped convince the Archbishop, always reticent when faced with any kind of change and, above all, anxious to avoid rough weather. Some of his advisors reckoned that we were going to create trouble for the diocese; I must admit, today, that they were right but I regret nothing. The priests on the East Coast gave me their support, all the more important since it involved financial support. Finally, my French colleagues of the Paris Foreign Mission let me go ahead though I could read in their eyes much puzzlement and a huge question mark.

I started to look for suitable premises for our venture.

The Geylang Catholic Centre From Lorong 19 to Lorong 24A

In the following weeks, we began to look for a place with one main room which would be large enough to accommodate assemblies of about twenty people and, at the same time, would provide at least enough space for me to live in. We looked for a place as close as possible to the centre of Geylang or at least not too far away.

If I remember right, it was Aileen Lau who found a place which could do. It belonged to a shopkeeper, who himself lived in Geylang. The flat was located in Lorong 19. The whole area was made of parallel side-streets or *lorongs*, identical and numbered in sequence, with two main avenues running on both sides which connected the centre of Geylang to the East Coast of the island on one side and to the city on the other. This peculiar feature made it a very compact district with buildings no higher than three storeys. Most of the shops were on the main avenues. There was a big mosque at the end of the district, but no Chinese temple and no church.

This was the time I met Teo Soh Lung, a young lawyer, who showed great interest in the project. All the more so because she herself was dreaming of leaving the downtown area to set up an office in a working-class area such as

Geylang, close to the “little” people whom she wanted to help as a priority. She would turn her project into reality a few months later. She became our neighbour, together with two other lawyers. They became a great asset for our own activities. Gradually, Soh Lung attracted around her a dozen young lawyers whom we could call upon at any time. In the following years, their influence at the Bar of Singapore grew steadily until they held some of the key positions in the Law Society of Singapore. It was at that point that problems started, both for them and for us. More on this later.

On 1st June 1980, I moved into the premises. The first days were busy with getting the logistics in place. My room was two by two metres and could not really accommodate a bed, but I managed to fix a shelf all along the wall and put in a chair. During the day the shelf served as my desk, and at night, I would unfold a mat under it to sleep. It was not very comfortable, but I was happy.

I did not have many visitors during the first weeks. If I am not mistaken, my first visitors were three men who introduced themselves as members of the Vice Squad. Maybe they belonged to a branch of the ISD (Internal Security Department); in other words, the Singapore political police. In the following years, I would get to know their colleagues better. They asked me why I had decided to set up there and what I intended to do. I gave them all the necessary explanation. I do not know if they were convinced but there and then, I realised that my moves would be closely scrutinised. A European, on top of it, a priest, who came to live in such an unsavoury area, which he was not supposed to

even visit in the first place, and where there was no church, could only be a politically incorrect crank. From supposed eccentricity to plain subversion there was only one step to go. In a strictly planned society such as that dreamed of by the PAP—the party in power since independence in 1965 and earlier when Singapore gained partial independence in 1959—thinking or acting out of the box was always suspect. We would quickly come to understand that, anything that might look like civil society, even on the smallest scale, would also necessarily be suspect.

Soon, I met 20 young Chinese female workers from Malaysia, who lived on the floor just above, where the firm which employed them had set up a dormitory. I quickly discovered that there were many similar dormitories in Geylang, used as lodging for migrant workers, mainly from Malaysia. My first encounter with my neighbours from the upper floor was rather funny. One evening, coming home, I met some of them at the common staircase of the building. As a joke directed to her co-workers, one of them shouted loudly in Mandarin: “*Xiao xin, King Kong lai le!*” (Be careful, here comes King Kong!) Her friends burst out laughing, and so did I. I asked them in my best Mandarin, why they did not seem frightened at all. I must say that I created a little surprise. They did not expect me to understand Chinese. I took the opportunity to invite them to drop by and have a cup of tea at my place, whenever they were free.

They were going to become the first “clients” of the Geylang Catholic Centre. Teo Soh Lung organised English classes, and was assisted in this by a few young people,

understand but as a good Chinese businessman, he could not go back on his word so we concluded the deal. But every coin has two sides. When the time came to renew the lease, the owner increased the rent above market rates. I told him so, but he reminded me, half-smiling, that two years before I had secured a price that was below market rates, so we were now even and his new proposal was only fair. It was his turn to congratulate himself. He invited me for a cup of tea to conclude the deal. Our relationship had been excellent until then and remained so afterwards. We had operated without a written contract and this was to go on until the end with full tranquility of mind on both sides. In Singapore, in that part of society, the word given had more value than 10 contracts signed before lawyers.

Prison Services

Since the beginning of our venture, I had been thinking that perhaps there was something to be done in the prisons. At that time, a Catholic priest conducted mass there one Sunday every three months. The Methodists had a full-time pastor at this task. The three main prisons in Singapore are on the East Coast and were therefore part of the parish to which I belonged. I asked my colleagues to give me responsibility for serving the prisons. They were only too happy to accept, none of them being really eager to be on that job.

I started by getting together the lay people who used to accompany the priest to the prison. There was Richard Ortega, a music teacher of Filipino origin, Larry Chelliah, a Eurasian civil servant, Anthony Koh, John Lim, Martin Hendroff, and Francis Ang. They were all simple people, easily approachable and not prone to be offended by the rough vocabulary or behaviour of some prisoners. I also invited two young lawyers, Lawrence Khoo and Patrick Seong, as well as a young engineer, John Suresh Fernandez, who had the advantage of speaking the two Indian languages spoken in Singapore—Tamil, (language of the Indian state of Tamil Nadu) and Malayalam (language of the state of

Kerala). This team proved very efficient during the following years in the service, both of detainees and of those who were released after varying periods of detention. These lay people were shining examples of the fraternity to which we have been called by the Gospel and we were able to fully rely on them throughout these years.

It was not easy. The men and women whom we had to deal with were not all easy to manage. Soon, we organised a mass every Sunday in the “medium security” prison, another in the “high security” prison and once a month in the prison for women where there were fewer people, or at the “drug rehabilitation” centre where consumers caught with small quantities of drugs were detained.

Initially, there were few voluntary participants at our Eucharistic celebrations which were attended mostly by those who were Catholics by birth. Relatively quickly, however, the number increased up to approximately 50 people in the medium security prison where detainees were serving short sentences, and about 100 in the high security prison. The celebrations were held in a rather relaxed atmosphere and it was not rare, for example, that the prisoners would interrupt my homilies, sometimes to agree with what I was saying but more often to object, which led to discussions that I had some difficulty keeping under control. I must say that the detainees had such varied backgrounds, especially in the high security prison, that it made it difficult to find a common language. The population there was quite diverse, some having been sentenced to several years while others had been arrested on a preventive basis for supposedly

belonging to Chinese secret societies. A law inherited from the former British masters made these arrests possible. Some could spend up to 10 years in prison without having committed any crime and without being brought before a court for trial. Their cases would be reviewed about every two years by a special committee which would decide whether to release them or not.

This law has its political equivalent—the Internal Security Act (ISA)—which makes it possible to arrest political opponents and detain them indefinitely without trial. These provisions were perhaps useful in the early days, to eradicate Chinese secret societies on the one hand and to eliminate clandestine Maoist movements on the other, but today they have become obsolete since these organisations have practically disappeared. On top of it, they give unlimited arbitrary power to the government. Many today in Singapore are calling for the abrogation, once and for all, of these laws that pertain to periods of emergency.

To get back to the discussions that would take place during our Sunday celebrations, concrete difficulties would start when trying to find common ground for a dialogue between, for example, a former high-level civil servant heavily condemned for swindling and who relished strong intellectual debate, and a detainee condemned for armed robbery, with very little schooling and for whom such niceties were totally irrelevant. The same would go for the presumed member of a secret society whose back completely covered with tattoos signalled his membership and rank in the organisation.

religion was banned in Singapore because they refused the obligatory national military service. I was supposed to check that the detention conditions of both were correct. Obviously I could verify only what was shown to me. Those visits stopped too at the same time as those to the Changi prisons.

Before all those events, we had to open a second Centre in the working class district of Chai Chee, in Bedok new town, on the east side of the island. We just had too many people now to accommodate every evening, including youths released from prison who needed immediate aid, the Filipino domestic workers who kept flowing in and often stayed a few days with us, not to mention the Crisis Centre and its clients or the English classes which were organised almost every evening by Tee Seng and his friends. I asked Larry Chelliah to take responsibility for the management of this new Centre dedicated to the young coming out of jail. Since he was retired and unmarried, he had more time to devote to this. Besides, he knew the area very well as he had many friends there. He was also the best equipped to take daily care of these youth who were often confused. The whole team of prison visitors who accompanied me every Sunday was involved in this venture. I myself tried to go there as often as possible. When Larry could no longer manage a situation, he would call me for help, but it rarely happened.

With the opening of the Chai Chee Centre, the Geylang Centre would devote itself fully to other tasks.

The Filipino Domestic Workers

Very soon after the Geylang Catholic Centre was established, I felt the need to have someone help me coordinate and above all develop the various projects. With this in mind, I called upon Vincent Cheng in 1981. He already had some experience in that kind of work. As a seminarian, he had almost finished his theological studies, but had decided not to be ordained as a priest. Instead he had chosen to go for further training in a Protestant centre set up in Jurong, Singapore's industrial district, by a Japanese pastor. This "Christian industrial mission" was devoted to the service of workers, mostly Malaysians, living there. The mission was soon closed by the government under suspicion of subversive activities, in particular because of its links with the Student Christian Movement (SCM). Back in the 1970s, several members of the SCM had been arrested for alleged—yet never proven—links with the Malayan Communist Party which was then losing ground. Vincent had acquired organising competencies which he agreed to share with the Geylang Catholic Centre. The Society of Foreign Missions (MEP) approved a budget allocation which enabled me to offer Vincent a roughly decent salary.

It all started with Tina, a young Filipina, who came from Iloilo, a town south of Manila. She had arrived in Singapore a few weeks earlier with an employment contract as a domestic worker. She had run away from her employer and I do not remember very well how she landed at the Geylang Centre. Anyway, we eventually took her to a police station to lodge a complaint. She claimed that her employer forced her to massage him, and imposed on her other abusive requests of a sexual nature. This was the first time we were confronted with a problem of this type. Once the complaint was registered, we had a good deal of trouble stopping the policemen from sending her back to her employer who, in their eyes, was responsible for her as long as she was staying in Singapore. For them too it was the first time they had to face this kind of problem: who was answerable for a penniless foreigner if not her employer, against whom she had just lodged a complaint and in whose house she was in danger? The police finally admitted that it was better for her to stay at the Geylang Catholic Centre where she would have board and lodging, until her case was settled. The Immigration Department agreed with the proposed arrangement even though it was in contradiction with existing rules. The Ministry of Labour, equally embarrassed, was informed but found nothing to criticise.

The trial took place a few months later. The employer was severely condemned and Tina found a new employer who took her over with her two-year contract. The matter was commented at length in the Singapore newspapers,

always on the lookout for this kind of stories. In this regard, nothing has changed in the Singapore press for the past 30 years. It remains quite fond of lustful anecdotes. In any case, on this occasion, the Geylang Catholic Centre became widely known among the public. We did our best to manage such sudden publicity. The first consequence was that the Filipino domestic workers, who had started to arrive in numbers in Singapore in the early 1980s (there were already 80,000 in 1982), now knew there was a Catholic Centre which could help them sort out the various problems they might encounter with their employers or with the recruitment agents through whom they had come to Singapore. The news spread quickly by word of mouth among the Filipino community who usually gathered on Sunday mornings around the Catholic Cathedral or near some shopping centres downtown. Our interventions therefore multiplied in the next few years. The second immediate consequence was that both the Ministry of Labour and the Immigration Department paid closer attention to what we were doing and genuinely tried to resolve the issues which we presented to them. I can say that very good relations developed between the civil servants in these administration and the Geylang Catholic Centre. Perhaps some department heads were also worried that they might get bad publicity in the local media if one of the cases we presented them blew up. They knew we had good connections in those circles. The recruitment agents too, at least those who were based in Singapore, were now obliged to take us into account and to keep away from practices that might come too close to slavery.

Forewarnings and Warnings

From 1986 a few signs of forewarning appeared, heralding what was to become a national psychodrama. The annoyance of certain government sectors was growing against the various groups formed by the Geylang Catholic Centre, the Centre of Young Christian Workers in Jurong directed by my friend Fr. Patrick Goh, the Catholic Students' Association, the Students' Union close to our centre, the weekly *Catholic News* directed by my friend Fr. Edgar D'Souza, and the diocesan Justice and Peace Commission led by the Chairman, Fr. Joseph Ho; its full-time Secretary was Vincent Cheng.

The young lawyers

The young lawyers, some of whom regularly worked for the Geylang Centre, were very active in other respects. They formed an informal group which gradually gained influence in the Law Society of Singapore. They eventually won the elections in the professional body and supported the appointment of Francis Seow, a highly experienced lawyer, as president of the Law Society, whose counterpart in France would be "Le Conseil de l'Ordre des Avocats".

I remember very well the day they won the elections.

That evening, when I came back to the Geylang Centre, I found them all gathered around the big table in the main room. They all displayed gloomy faces, which made me think they had not succeeded in their project. But they only wanted to play a joke on me and as I was ready to share in their disappointment, they burst into triumphant joy. They were young and schoolboys' jokes still belonged to their repertoire. Together we went to the neighbouring market, to enjoy *laksa*, which comes from Malay cuisine: a soup noodle with fish and vegetables, characterised by its extreme spiciness

Besides his recognised professional excellence, Francis Seow was a well-known opponent to the government, although he did not belong to any political party. As soon as he was elected, his new team set up a committee to scrutinise legislation. They questioned the necessity of new laws and subsequently became engaged in open confrontation with the government.

The conflict reached a climax in the summer of 1986 when the Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew, exasperated, violently attacked the Law Society publicly, claiming that it was infiltrated by a few troublemakers bent on jeopardising the State's ability to function properly. Rounding it off, he challenged the lawyers to a debate with him on television. It was our friend, Teo Soh Lung, who took up the challenge. Many Singapore citizens would have been terrified at the thought of facing the old lion, the founding father of the City-State, as feared by the population as he was respected and who, moreover, was a remarkable debater. This type of