

**Questionnaire on the Document from the Synod of Bishops of 1971.
Response from the Little Sisters of the Assumption, JPIC Secretariat. Rome.
October 2011.**

1. The Synod and the document “Justice in the World” had an impact on my religious congregation. Name visible changes that your Congregation has undergone as a result of this Synod.

It is difficult to isolate the influence of the Synod from other events which had already raised our awareness to the question of justice:

The texts of the Council, especially *Gaudium et Spes*.

Populorum Progressio.

In France:

Evangelisation of the workers world has been a constant preoccupation of the Church and during the 1950's this preoccupation gave birth to the worker priests, the Mission to the workers world, and to Catholic Action for Workers (ACO) Because of our work among working class families we as Little Sisters of the Assumption were aware of the conditions of their lives. We also got to know their working conditions even in factories, and learned how to analyse the causes of these problems in conjunction with the activists of the ACO and of the Mission to Workers. After 1968, with the evolution of society and the organisation of medico/social services, the sisters began to find salaried work in various organisations and to find out about trade union activity. Some sisters asked to work in factories, shoulder to shoulder with those who were at the bottom of the social ladder.

Marxism was an influence during those years, and the idea of “class struggle” was often referred to in social analysis and caused fear. Social activists along with the Bishops drew up an important reflection on Liberation and Salvation in Jesus Christ.

In Latin America:

The Medellin Assembly and the preferential option for the poor

The Theology of Liberation

The development of Basic Christian Communities whose members learned to analyse and reflect on their lives in the light of the Gospel, and in particular of the book of Exodus.

In other words, we found ourselves fully resonating with the Synod text, and especially with its introduction.

2. DOCUMENTS: Name two community documents and/or references that demonstrate this influence, e.g. sections in chapter documents, constitutions, etc. Please be specific.

The 1975 General Chapter included a section entitled: *Engagement for Justice and a Draft Reflection on Trade Union Activity and Political Action.*

The new edition of the Rule of Life in 1981 refers explicitly to the 1971 Synod.

RL. No.21 *“The harshness of the situations that confront us, or which we witness in our own local surroundings as well as at the international level, impels us to act according to our option for the poor.*

Countless people are subjected to violence, marked by hunger and wounded in their dignity. Consequently, “action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel ... (2nd Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, 1971).

The texts of the 1987 Chapter are all marked by this commitment to justice and peace, which touches every aspect of our existence, including our community life: the theme of non-violence appears again and again and during the following years gave rise to much reflection and was the subject of several sessions. The General Chapter:

- *took as its orientation “choose life”, and as a priority “Peace, the fruit of Justice”.*
- *decided to create the Justice and Peace Secretariat.*

3. BEHAVIOURAL/LIFESTYLE/COMMUNITY LIFE: Name two behavioural effects/practices in your community (local or curia) that show evidence of this influence.

- **Starting from the 1975 Chapter** gradually every community grew in their awareness of questions of justice and peace, and the Synod text helped in dissolving resistance.
- **Starting from 1987** The International Justice and Peace Secretariat awakened the communities to some of the major global questions and their repercussions on the daily lives of the impoverished, such as” the weighty question of external debt”. Every Province / Region was invited to set up a Justice and Peace Commission according to local possibilities.
- **In 1993 the General Chapter** entrusted to Provincials and Regional Delegates the responsibility of integrating the dimension of Justice and Peace into the animation of the mission of the province / region.

- **From 1992 to 1998** the International Justice and Peace Secretariat organised two international meetings of Provincial J&P Commission delegates.

4. MINISTRY: What changes resulted in your ministry directions as a result of the JW document?

In 1999 the General Chapter declared that working for Justice and Peace was an integral part of our mission, since it results from our following of Jesus Christ. The Chapter outlined the mission and structure of the International Secretariat. It entrusted to the International Secretariat the responsibility of linking up the Congregation to an NGO already recognised by the UN to ensure that those who are excluded might be represented in the place where important questions impacting on the future of the world and of the impoverished are analysed.

In 2001 we joined with the NGO of the Augustinian Order in taking part in the campaign for the eradication of hunger and poverty within the framework of the Millennium Development Goals.

In 2005 the General Chapter declared that the Integrity of Creation and the Culture of Peace and Non-Violence were to be one of the orientations of the Congregation for the following years. It decided to include in the name of the International Secretariat for Justice and Peace the phrase “Integrity of Creation” (JPIC).

The Chapter proposed that the Congregation:

- Deepen our understanding of the theological, biblical and spiritual bases of Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation.
- Agree that Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation are inherent in an option for evangelical faith
- Generate a culture of Peace and Non-Violence so as to contribute to the well-being of humanity and of creation.
- Develop the feminine dimensions of tenderness, of attention to life and of reconciliation in our relationships among ourselves, with others and with our “Mother Earth”.

In June 2007 the Council of the Congregation re-affirmed that a Culture of Vocation and a Culture of Peace would be a dynamic means of revitalisation for all the communities.

The International Secretariat for Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation developed a formation programme to help in integrating the dimensions of a “culture of Peace and a culture of Vocation “. There is for us an indissoluble link between the culture of vocation, which makes us ceaselessly choose life as God’s gift in everyday life, and a culture of peace, which is one of the ways in which we express our choice of life for ourselves and for those among whom we live and work. Various individuals and groups with whom we seek to create ways of justice and peace took part also in drawing up this programme.

The Apostolic Community is the main place where we express our commitment to Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation. Since 1987 we have recognised the strong emphasis on this theme of the Apostolic Community, and that it is our way of expressing the charism today. In other words, Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation are an integral part of how we proclaim the Gospel such as we understand it today.

Our Fields of Activity

In our neighbourhoods: every day we take part in the life, hopes and sufferings of individuals and families who live in poor and marginalised areas. We share the difficulties of the unemployed, immigrants, displaced persons, asylum seekers and refugees. We join with them as they search for better living conditions, a more human environment, and relationships of solidarity and of faith sharing.

With Networks, NGOs, groups, and organisations we look for alternative ways to take action on the causes of hunger, the movement of peoples, and human trafficking. We support policies of long-term development. We are part of local, national and international networks such as the World Social Forum, the Africa/Europe Faith and Justice Network, the NGO VIVAT and other similar groups.

Our Rule of Life – No. 146 and 147 *“...Living among the poor of different countries we discover the extent of the domination exercised by some nations and the dependence endure by others, and the burden of social and economic inequality.*

We weigh the consequences of hunger, unemployment, violence and emigration...

We denounce these situations. Together and with the people themselves we strive to develop or recreate bonds between individuals, families and groups....

With them we seek out paths of justice and peace.”

5. NEW ISSUES: Name two issues needing urgent attention from your congregation as a result of the Synod document “Justice in the World”.

In June 2011 the General Chapter approved the proposals put forward by the International Justice and Peace Secretariat:

- **Spirituality is the driving force of our mission : Develop the prophetic power of Compassion.**

- Following Jesus the Servant “We are called to be converted to the spirit of the Beatitudes”. (Rule of Life, No. 21). This gives us the certainty that Justice and Peace are possible in our world. Evangelic compassion leads us to take action on the root causes of injustice and to promote Peace: a world according to the “dream of God” is possible.

- Become ourselves new persons capable of dwelling with others on the earth in a different way: to live with a compassionate heart and a cooperative spirit.

Since the beginning of our congregation our mission has urged us to seek to take action on the causes of whatever endangers life.

- action on what is bringing about of the degradation of the planet; the relationship between this degradation and our life style; the unjust model of development; the suffering of the poor.
- action on what is causing the enforced migrations of people: injustices within the economic, political and religious models governing societies as well as natural catastrophes
- living out our commitment with the impoverished at local level helps us to realise the urgency of exerting influence on the global. Therefore: develop methods of analysis; plan systematically the actions which we, along with others, undertake in our communities; make use of our membership of networks which serve to make the suffering of the poorest more visible, conveying facts to the places where decisions are taken (UN, European Parliament).
- Do what is necessary to ensure that our projects are supported by reliable, long term resources.

6. NEW DIRECTIONS: What other directions can you see emerging in the future as a result of the impetus of the JW Synod document? Explain.

- Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation cannot be merely optional: they are essential elements of the Gospel. JPIC is more than one ministry among others. It is a way of living and of proclaiming the Gospel and belongs to all ministries.

7. SPIRITUALITY : How would you describe the spirituality that emerged from your congregation as a result if the changes that you experienced?

In 1895 Etienne Pernet and Antoinette Fage established the Congregation of the Little Sisters of the Assumption, at Paris then undergoing the full impact of the new phenomenon of industrialisation. Being individuals of faith their response to God's call was to *give witness to the Father's love among the poor, the workers and their families*. At this time people did not speak about justice and peace as we do today. Instead the phrase *the salvation of the poor and the little ones* was used. However in remembering the life of our Founders, their original intuition and their experience in the light of today's questions, we are convinced that Justice and Peace are at the heart of the Mission of the Little Sisters of the Assumption from the very beginnings of the Congregation.

Etienne Pernet and Antoinette Fage were convinced that what pleased God was to work for the happiness and the salvation of the weakest in society. They were aware of the suffering of the poorest of their time – the working-class families. They perceived the evils that were the cause of such poverty.

The causes: Workers were considered as extras of the machinery to which they were enslaved.

The consequences: bad housing; inadequate nourishment, people ravaged by tuberculosis and the cholera epidemics. A type of poverty which was called by many names: economic, social, cultural, psychological misery, loss of identity. A poverty which was harmful to relationships and brought about family disintegration.

Etienne and Antoinette were familiar with the current influences of the day: *A time during which the encyclical Rerum Novarum was being prepared.* (1891 – Pope Leo XIII). This encyclical went on to denounce inhuman conditions of work. *A time marking the birth of a liberal and social Catholicism*, the beginnings of trade unionism and of the worker movements, socialism, Marxism, the explosion of popular anticlericalism. Various institutions and good works were initiated to respond to the mission to protect the faith of workers and to bring about the rebirth of society.

What could be done in face of such misery?

The originality of Etienne and Antoinette is discovered in finding an evangelical response within the everyday life of the working class families. They were aware of:

- *the special place* of the family in society and in the plan of God
- *the value of bringing together* individuals, families, fraternities.

At the heart of the Little Sisters of the Assumption vocation there is **a call to witness to God's love among the poor, the workers and their families**, by means of an attentive presence, through simple acts of service.

to bring about a rebirth

of the fabric of human relationships in the family, to bring about the rebirth of God's people: fraternity groups are a link in the chain that binds people together to be able to have a greater experience of friendship, trust, solidarity, justice and peace; to overcome inequalities and oppression of every kind.

In other words, it is to follow Jesus...*who came among us, lived a poor life, worked with his hands, announced the Good News through the simplest realities – bread, water, light, healing, life and death.* (Rule of Life, no.18)

This spirituality is “*developed and enriched by inculturation in different lands, in the midst of different peoples, journeying always within the Church, and challenged and questioned by events.*” (Council of the Congregation 2001)

Today we continue to proclaim Jesus Christ, Servant and Saviour among working class families and among those who are impoverished, and excluded so that they can recognise that they are children of God and rekindle their hope of happiness as members of the human community. We hear the call to be converted to the spirit of the Beatitudes and to the prophetic power of compassion so as to make of our world our common home where each one can be called by their own name.

We are convinced that life is born out of what is broken and that this requires humble and courageous searching. “*We affirm that every time someone stands upright, every time justice, love, fraternity triumphs over the forces of hatred or domination, every*

time life triumphs over death, the Paschal Mystery of Jesus Christ is alive in our world. General Chapter 1975.

Our charism commits us to working for the coming of a world starting with the poor, and in collaboration with others. From the very beginning right up to our own day, the seeds of the charism have been transmitted through many individuals who shared the same passion. We can say that this dynamic reciprocity opens up rich possibilities.

“The struggle for justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel.”

*Little Sisters of the Assumption
Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation Secretariat*