

## Advocacy and our educational commitment aiming to change attitudes and bring about social transformation<sup>1</sup>

*"The invitation of Marie Eugenie to "love our times" impels us to turn our attention to those two phenomenon, ecology and migration, ... and to network more effectively with those who share the same concerns ... " (doc "Ecology and Migration" General Chapter 2012)*

This month of July 2016, we participated in the workshop of **Vivat - International** "Leuven, Belgium edition" it was a workshop for members of this organization from France, Belgium and Holland.

*Vivat - International* is an NGO based at the United Nations. It was founded in 2000 by the Religious of the Divine Word, other congregations are associated with them and we, the Sisters of the Assumption came to join them in 2008.



*Vivat - International* holds workshops every year in different countries where their congregations, members or associates, are present. There have already been workshops in Spain, the Philippines, Indonesia, Ecuador, etc. These meetings help us to better understand the vision of *Vivat* and at the same time deepen our understanding of the big global issues contra to human dignity.

*Vivat* works mainly through advocacy that is to say by actually raising issues at the UN where there are violations of human rights which we witness in our work among peoples who are undergoing different types of injustice. We want to contribute to justice, peace and sustainable development at the level both of the officials concerned and the United Nations.

In order to do this, *Vivat* engages in several different ways:

- Advocacy, either at the UN level or with national and regional authorities.
- Networking with other NGOs.
- Dissemination of information about human rights in different countries by providing elements that allow the thinking to advance, and with it, commitment.

Currently national branches of *Vivat - International* exist in Indonesia, Bolivia, Argentina, India and Kenya.

For congregations involved as we are, participation in *Vivat* can be a visible expression of our commitment JPIC -S<sup>2</sup>, or at least, a tool to achieve it.

During the workshop, we deepened our understanding of the significance of advocacy, making "*every effort to influence the decisions of public and private decision-makers as a way to ensure respect for the human dignity of all, especially the poorest.*"

Advocacy is an action that aims to put pressure, to mobilize and sensitize public opinion. It seeks to influence the press, parliamentarians and governments.

As an educational Congregation for us this action has an important place in education for citizenship, because it is urgent to form those attitudes out of which injustice, violence, disrespect and all that is at the origin of situations of abuse and poverty may arise<sup>3</sup>... This invites us to let ourselves be questioned: what is the logic between the thought – and the action ... "*...first learn to sweep outside our own door*" as Dom Helder Camara says.

It should also help to create an environment where people and projects devoted to the common good, can really happen.

<sup>1</sup><http://www.assumpta.org/Education-Septembre2016>

<sup>2</sup> Justice, Peace, Integrity of Creation and Solidarity became a priority since 2000 General Chapter

<sup>3</sup> The Preamble to the Constitution of UNESCO declares that "*since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed*".

Advocacy is an attitude that requires constant discernment, a thoughtful and constructive criticism, openness to dialogue, an expanded outlook, a transformation of our attitudes so that we can make commitments for justice, peace and respect of the environment, even if they are small...

Throughout the workshop we had very good interventions and evidence around issues such as:

- Migrants and asylum seekers. The different reception and integration networks.
- Human trafficking in its various forms (forced labor, slavery begging, prostitution, etc.) and the support structures that there are battling against these.
- Climate change and the actions that can reverse ecological disaster.
- The mode of operation of *Vivat* of the UN offices in Geneva and New York.

We also had the chance to share what each "member Congregation" is doing in France, Belgium and Holland: our JPIC -S priority is in our educational projects, whether in the network of schools<sup>4</sup> or in social projects where we are collaborating.

### ***We will share with you some Assumption social testimonials from France:***

*"As part of ATD Fourth World, I go to a Roma camp to take care of children, on Wednesday afternoons with others, there are four of us who are fairly regular, and students to join us occasionally.*



*Their living conditions are very difficult. The camp ground is a squat, where they can be turned out at any time. There is no drinking water, they take water from the firefighter terminal. For electricity: they plug into a nearby pylon. There are no toilets, you just go to the nearby wasteland.*

*In wet weather, the camp is a quagmire difficult to cross. Sometimes children miss school because their clothes cannot dry after being washed. Most are enrolled in schools, but few are regular.*

*Through educational activities that we organize we try to encourage them to change their situation: we begin with school work, or writing for children. Then we do educational games. During the holidays, we try to organize trips: the Zoo, the nearby park for games". Sister Marie Noel Gazel*

*"By teaching FLE (French foreign language) to the CPU (academic boost), I was in contact with young asylum seekers who had to flee their country to save their lives, they and their children. A couple from Bangladesh living in a CADA (center for asylum seekers) shortly before the birth of their baby could meet a family in the parish, they had nothing, Catholic Relief provided baby clothes etc. for them; and through weekly lunches organized for single people, they met the parish priest and parishioners who have then fully adopted them. The baptism of Nathanael was a beautiful celebration hosted by the youth choir followed by a lunch of forty people seated, all become friends of the couple in a few months, and as Sidney told me: "Now we have a family". They are not alone to face the future whatsoever.*



*Another family from Georgia have two small children 7 and 6 years old, they speak perfect French, they have been schooled in France for two years and even correct their parents who have more trouble learning the language!!! In community, we support them, they call us "Grandma" they have been repeatedly rejected, they do not even have the title of refugees, all their aid has been more or less denied. They still live in a hotel room but for how long? Dad is sick, mom fights like she can. Lately they were summoned to Paris to present their papers, they wanted to go by train without paying, they have no money. We explained that it was not a good idea to get in the wrong when you want to get permission to reside in France! Mom found a very cheap bus, but you had to pay with a credit card, a computer and a "printing press" !!! We were able to supply them with the help of one of our friends !!! But as Katuna said "I do not want to help", translate, "I will not be helped!" We often admire their feelings and delicacy. They are devout Orthodox. We entrust the future to the Lord! ". Sister Miriam Selz*

Yes, advocacy can be effective at the level of "decision makers", but it also happens particularly by everyday gestures of solidarity. These actions "make a difference" and transform the reality of many people by opening up a possible future.

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