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## **A call to discern and act in favour of the poor and those at the margins during the Pandemic Covid-19**

*SJES - 1/2020*

My dear sisters and brothers,

Greetings from SJES - Rome!

A few months ago, we celebrated the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of our Social Justice and Ecology Secretariat (SJES) with a Congress in Rome in which more than 200 delegates from all over the world participated. Holy Father Francis, in his audience, encouraged and invited us to **“open wide the future, create possibilities, and imagine alternatives”**. He reminded us that, **“above all, the social apostolate must promote processes and encourage hope.”** In the conclusions of the Congress, we identified four processes of conversion the social apostolate needed to foster, namely transformation, collaboration, synodality and the creation of new narratives. This year we planned to work on preparing a document based on these conversion processes in order to provide input for discernment and apostolic planning along the lines of the UAP.

We could not have anticipated then that, within the next few months, our lives, and the world as we used to see it, would change drastically. We did not know then that, in a few months, we would find ourselves in a global health crisis, unprecedented in our lifetime, because of the COVID-19 Pandemic. With numbers rising every day from their current level of nearly 1,300, 000 cases and more than 70,000 deaths in 183 countries as on April 6, 2020, the virus has disrupted life in almost every corner of the globe. In response to the rapid spread of the virus, many countries have decided to close their borders, cease all non-essential activities, and impose a lockdown on all residents.

Healthcare systems risk becoming even more overwhelmed as the pandemic spreads. Health and socio-economic and political consequences are expected to be devastating and will affect – in fact, are already affecting - the most vulnerable individuals and communities, including elderly people, children, migrants, refugees, and forcibly displaced persons, dalits, and indigenous people in particular. How will the poor and excluded cope with this crisis? How will they keep social distance in the cramped slums of many of the cities of our world? Where will the pavements dwellers find a safe home? How will they confine themselves for days and weeks if they have to earn their living daily? As many are already saying: if they have to choose between hunger and coronavirus, they would choose the latter. At the same time, this global crisis gives us a sense of interconnectedness and of being part of the same human family in a common home.

In the present situation, I sincerely believe that many of us in the social apostolate of the Society of Jesus have responded to this global crisis quite creatively yet cautiously. I feel deeply consoled and challenged by **Father General’s words** in his recent webinar on April 2, 2020, to the members and collaborators of the Society of Jesus, when he said, **“My first thought is with the poor and those who live at the margins of our society”**.

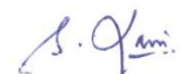
So, what is God calling us to do? I am happy to hear from many of you that, in spite of many difficulties due to complete lockdown, you are establishing networks and connections, 'creating possibilities and imagining alternatives' to reach out to the affected people, particularly the poor, the migrants, the daily labourers, the elderly, the abandoned and the neglected. Many of you are creatively finding ways to be in solidarity with the poor and to express your solidarity and affection. I believe that at every level we are collectively discerning and activating processes, strategies and actions to alleviate the plight of marginalised persons and communities and to help them raise their voice in the public sphere. The Universal Apostolic Preferences give us an excellent roadmap for this. At the international level, the Sustainable Development Goals and the Agenda 2030 should also be a good framework for our advocacy initiatives.

In SJES, despite the lock down we are experiencing, we feel obliged to take up this challenge and respond. Hence, we initiated the following:

- a) We had virtual meetings with the six Conference delegates, the four GIAN leaders, along with the Xavier Network (XN) emergency group to share and listen to one another about the situation in various countries, in the Conferences and networks.
- b) With the support of the XN, the Secretariat launched a survey on March 30, 2020, to obtain some basic information on difficulties encountered, actions taken and plans made by social centres / institutions and networks. This survey includes other Jesuit international works such as Fe y Alegría and JRS. We hope that this will provide us with some basic information for collective discernment to establish global coordination, joint strategic planning and action both now and later during the recovery phase. We invite you to share your suggestions and join in these efforts.
- c) The Secretariat has also created a new section, **Covid-19**, within our Website: <https://www.sjesjesuits.global/en/index.php/covid-19/>. We feel confident that this will strengthen our global communication strategies, in order to share news and reflections, global concerns and best practices within the Society of Jesus at this time of the Pandemic. Hence, kindly share your experiences, learnings and best practices, especially during this time of crisis.
- d) In and through this we are actualising the four conversion processes that we identified at the end of the Congress, namely transformation, collaboration, synodality and the creation of new narratives during this global health crisis.

We are experiencing the toughest and most unexpected test that we could imagine. Nevertheless, we could come out of it better, if we remind ourselves how Fr. Pedro Arrupe reached out to the victims of the Nagasaki atom bomb on August 6, 1945. Let us follow his example and recall his words, "The Lord had never been so close to us, for we had never been so insecure." We ask that, through his intercession, the light of the Spirit may guide us so that we can adequately respond in this global crisis, defending the dignity and rights of the poor and marginalised communities, and helping to build a more healthy, sustainable and fraternal world for everyone.

With deep gratitude and best wishes for a grace-filled Holy Week, and the conviction that we shall rise again with Christ!



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