



EMBRACING TODAY'S EXCLUDED!

II INTERNATIONAL CONGRESS OF JPIC
from 30th January to 8th February 2006
Uberlandia, Brazil

Foundational Document

The year 2009 will mark the 800th anniversary of the founding of the Order of Friars Minor. The OFM general government has set aside the three years leading up to the celebration as a time for reflection upon our charism and the question of who we are as friars in the twenty-first century. The Order will hold an Extraordinary General Chapter in September of 2006 to prepare for this process. But even before the General Chapter, the second OFM international congress for Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation, to be held in the beginning of 2006 in Brazil, will offer a chance to reflect on these issues. In his letter of convocation for the congress, our General Minister, Br. Jose Rodriguez Carballo, refers to the 8th Centenary as a *kairos*, a chance “not only to remember our history, lived in very diverse cultural situations, but, above all, to respond, on the basis of our prophetic vocation, to the real challenges which come to us from the Church and present-day society.”

As JPIC animators, then, we must first understand the Franciscan, ecclesial and secular context in which the JPIC project is undertaken. The commission chosen to prepare the Extraordinary General Chapter has proposed that all friars read and study the Declaration of the General Chapter of Madrid (1973), *The Vocation of the Order Today*. The document was meant to present a vision of Franciscan identity in the midst of the contemporary world, and it continues to invite all of us to a serious examination of conscience. It notes first of all that at the center of Franciscan life is the experience of faith in God and in the personal encounter with Jesus Christ. Our Gospel life of faith is lived out as brothers-in-mission, in communion with the Church. As a consequence of this deep faith lived in communion, like Francis, we are led to look at the present-day world and to listen to the challenges that come to us from contemporary trends. The document points out that we want to create a fraternal community in the midst of people, one which renounces power in order to serve, and which chooses a life-style that brings us close to the poor and makes us sensitive to the situation of all who are oppressed (Madrid, 33). The Declaration of Madrid offers a good starting point to begin the reflection on our identity and on the context in which we operate.

The Plenary Council of Bahia, held in 1983, continued the process begun in Madrid. The friars gathered in Brazil noted that: “In our world, full of hopes and aspirations, we see a desire for community, peace, justice and the promotion of human dignity together with a desire for the satisfaction of basic human needs. At the same time society is plagued with atheism and religious indifference, conflicting ideologies, wars, racism, oppression, and an ever widening gap between rich and poor” (Bahia, 13). In response, our brothers proclaimed that we are called to be an evangelizing vanguard, and to focus our efforts on establishment of God’s family among all people, thus offering an example to a world hungering for community and longing for a new and more humane society (20 and 23). The Plenary Council asked the friars to live with the poor, so that we might see history and reality from their point of view (31), and to make a preferential option for the poor so that our evangelizing will come from the poor and be done

with them (39).

The General Chapter of 2003 again takes up the same themes. Chapter delegates admonished us not to domesticate the prophetic words of the Gospel in order to adapt them to a comfortable style of life, and called us to a renewed vision of life and relationships based on justice and love, and the paths of peace (*May the Lord Give You Peace*, 2). We are reminded that reading and interpreting the signs of the times in light of the Gospel is an evangelical requirement, and that failure to read these signs puts our work in the world at risk (6). We are challenged to build an economy of solidarity, and a world ethic based on respect for the inviolable dignity of the human person, capable of guaranteeing a minimum of justice for all (10 and 11). We are called to encourage dialogue in a world characterized by division and strife (15), to be present in the areas of social fracture where so many of our brothers and sisters find themselves trapped. Those attending the JPIC congress must pay special attention to the JPIC proposals that were accepted at the General Chapter and which now must be implemented at the appropriate levels of the Order.

Against the background of these documents that create the general context in which we do our specific work, we are invited to come to Brazil as brothers charged with the task of animating the work of JPIC throughout the world. The theme chosen for our congress, “Francis’ embrace of the leper: embracing the excluded of today,” comes as a logical consequence of the reflection that the Order has done over the last forty years. In his letter convoking the congress, the General clearly presents the task at hand: “The II Congress proposes to study deeply the processes of exclusion and to identify the faces of the excluded people in the different social contexts and then, in the light of the Priorities of our Order and of the experience of each Entity, to indicate the main lines of action to be taken so that, on the basis of our form of life as Friars Minor, we can continue to accompany them along the path to the recovery of their fundamental rights in collaboration with other organisms of the Franciscan Family, of the local Church and of civil society.” Together, we must analyze the information that comes to us from the different regions of the world, evaluate the situation of JPIC throughout the Order, and present proposals for concrete action to address the global problems that we face.

To facilitate the work at the congress, all animators are requested to study the documents from Madrid and Bahia, and the JPIC proposals from the General Chapter of 2003. As far as possible, study of these documents should be done in groups. Each animator is requested to “read the signs of the times” at his local level; he should be able to name those who are “the excluded” of the region, seek to discover the processes of exclusion that are at work, and be prepared to discuss the level of cooperation that exists between JPIC and the social movements, especially those movements that represent the excluded of the region. Animators will share this information with one another at the congress, and it will serve as part of the basis for elaboration of proposals for our future work.

Another area of interest at the congress will be an examination of our JPIC structures. The majority of entities and conferences have created programs that concretize our commitment to JPIC values (establishment of JPIC offices and centers of documentation; formation of networks and international organizations for defense of the rights of the poor; presentation of JPIC courses and workshops). It appears that we have passed from the phase of establishment of JPIC to one of consolidation. While it is important to guarantee the existence of these structures and to work to strengthen them, we cannot be content with mere institutionalization of JPIC services. Rather, we must be a prophetic voice to our brothers and to the Church, challenging them to prophetic gestures that further the cause of peace, or defense of the environment. This demands of us

constant discernment and constant dialogue with the social movements that deal with these issues. We must recommit ourselves to cooperate with Franciscans International, with peace and environmental movements, with the World Social Forum, and to support our brother and sister activists who are part of the international network of the Franciscan Family.

Finally, those attending the JPIC congress must make a conscious effort to provide a challenge to the Order as it begins commemoration of the 8th Centenary of its foundation. To this end, the methodology of the congress will be different from that of the first congress at Vossenack. It will be based on the experience of the animators and other friars with the excluded of their regions, and will focus on finding ways to accompany the excluded and their organizations. Those at the Congress will seek new ways to evangelize, and they will share these methods with all the friars; they will learn how to see reality from the point of view of the excluded. The Centenary should not be triumphalistic, nor should it be simply celebratory. Our JPIC congress needs to impress this message on the delegates of the Extraordinary General Chapter, so that the 8th Centenary will truly be an opportunity for renewal and refoundation.

In order to initiate the process that will culminate in the work of the Congress, we once again invite all animators to answer the questionnaire that was sent out earlier in Communication number 03. The information generated should be based on the rich experience of your entity and, as much as possible, on the experience of your conference. Your response should be sent as soon as possible to the JPIC office in Rome. For your convenience, we present again the questions from Communication number 03:

a) Remembering

- Historically, to which social sectors has your Entity been committed?
- What main activities has your Entity developed to respond to the needs of the poor? Indicate some of them, at least from more recent decades.

b) At present

- How is the process of exclusion carried out in your region or country?
- Who are the excluded, and what causes them to be excluded in this process?
- Reactions to exclusion:
 - How do the excluded respond through their own organizations?
 - How are the friars involved in this process?

c) Looking to the future

- What proposals to accompany the poor do the friars in your Entity have? In your conference?
- Indicate some of the activities being pursued.

Finally, we ask all who will participate in the Congress to read attentively the texts which will serve as a basis for the activities of our meeting in Brazil. They are:

- *The Vocation of the Order Today* (Madrid, 1973)
- *The Gospel Challenges Us* (Plenary Council of the Order, Bahia, 1983)
- *May the Lord Give You Peace* (General Chapter, 2003)
- *The Grace of our Origins* (Rome, 2005)

Fraternally,
JPIC Office Rome
OFM General Curia