



Introduction

In the Archives there are many documents that help us to discover the foundation of the Assumption in India. In particular, the story written by Sr. Alphonse which is available on our site and which will allow you to continue your discovery after reading this article. Mother Josefa Ignacia wrote after her first trip to India : *"Why then go to this so Christian country? It is precisely in response to the Church's call to make this region a home of Christian and missionary formation from which apostles will leave for other parts of India where the needs are pressing (...) In Pala, we are asked to have a university home and a retreat house..."*¹.

Article

The story of Assumption in India began a few years earlier. The Congregation had finalized the project to establish a community in this country but this could not be done because the Indian government refused entry to foreigners. Father Jacob Kattackal, who lived in Rome and regularly celebrated the Eucharist in Viale Romania, proposed to his two sisters, Aleykuuty and Marykutty (who would become Sr. Elsy Thomas and Sr. Mary James), to join the Sisters of the Assumption whose spirituality and internationality touched him. Coming from faraway India, they first stopped in Rome, the heart of the Church, and stayed two weeks in Viale Romania before taking the train to Paris.

Through the same Father Jacob Kattackal, Mother Marie Denyse met the Bishop of Pala who invited the Assumption to open a house of prayer in his diocese. He first promised to send Indian candidates. And he did it! The first "elected group"(Agnes Jacob Kottoor, Rose Joseph Njavalliputhenpurayil, Therese Koottiyani, Lizzie Thalanani and Rosa Tresa Ayathmattom) has been prepared for 4 months in India, assisted by the Congregation of the Mother of Carmel (CMC) before leaving for Paris on 21 October 1961. The bishop of Pala continued to send sisters until 1967. Even if many of the young people then left the convent, *"the first stones for the foundation in India were being chipped and polished in Paris"*. Some of them also went to England or USA where they were trained in theology but also in Montessori pedagogy, which was then in full expansion.

It was at that time that Mother Josefa Ignacia and Mother Laurentia stopped in India and discovered with their own eyes the vast mission field that awaited the Assumption in that country. After this contact, the first young sisters made their perpetual profession in Auteuil on July 25th, 1968. And the first community was chosen: Sr Mary James, Sr Elsy Thomas, Sr Rose Joseph, Sr Therese Immaculate, Sr Ani Jose and Sr Stella. Sr Cristina Augusta, a Filipino sister who was a general counsellor, was appointed Superior but had to wait a few months before obtaining her visa. She joined the sisters a little later. The first group arrived at Cochin Airport on October 17th, 1968: *"What a touching sight it was when the plane landed in Cochin on October 17th. The large crowd of our families and friends filled the small airport. A warm, moving welcome! We cry with joy!"*² Among the crowd that welcomed them stood the chancellor of the Bishop of Pala. After the usual visits, the

¹ Mother Josefa Ignacia, Letter of January 9th, 1967 about the foundation in India

² Letter from Pala Community (India), February 11th, 1969

sisters stayed for a while with the Sisters of Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament. They finally settled in their first home on November 23rd, 1968. *"Right from the beginning they established a pattern of simple and austere life, reminiscent of the life of the first community of the Assumption in 1839! They were happy with the minimum of facilities availing in the house. They themselves did the cooking, washing, cleaning and shopping, something unheard of in mts convents in Kerala at that time."*³

Mother Cristina Augusta finally arrived on January 23rd, 1969 ; together the sisters tried to live in contact with the local population, faithful to the contemplative life. In one of their first letters, they share what some priests, friends of the community, used to say: *"Keep your contemplative spirit as it is, it is your strength. This is what is missing in religious life today.."*⁴

In their first letters, we can find the stories of two meetings that certainly inspired the founders. A hermit, who was living in a Benedictine monastery, came to visit the community. He was an authentic "poverello" and he left this call to the community: *"He begged us to start our work poorly, according to the Gospel. He says that Pala needs apostles who know how to form young girls to give themselves with a missionary spirit"*⁵. Later another seeker of God, Saddhu Ittyavirah, visited them. He lives on the move, without a permanent abode, summing up his life in presence and love offered to the poor, a life that culminates in prayer... *"When Saddhu Ittyavirah left us, he especially recommended that we continue our most effective apostolate: the radiance of joy"*, write the community of the Priory of Joy⁶. The name of their convent is well chosen!

Thus contemplation, poverty and joy seem to be three important foundation stones during these first months in India, marked, it is true, by change, movement and displacement. The first difficulty, related to obtaining visas, is to find stability. The composition of the community and the people called upon to provide leadership changed often: Mother Cristina Augusta is replaced after one year by Mother Natividad Maria, another sister from the Philippines, who obtains a 3-year visa. Sr Myriam Selz, from France, who arrived in 1972, will come after her. These changes are an opportunity to live the spirit of itinerancy required for spiritual life.

Another mark of the homelessness to which the sisters are called is the search to define the mission that God has in store for them. This research is a constant state of mind in the history of the Province. They had been called to found a spiritual retreat house but it is not quite the right place and they would not have enough audience. They changed their mind and opened therefore a hostel for college girls in June 1971. Immediately, there is an "Assumption color": they try to develop the sense of responsibility of young people, by forming character and spirit of service. The students wash the dishes, clean the house, which is not to the taste of all priests and parents. But the personal relationship, the interest for each student and the quality of guidance are very successful. The hostel is soon full!

After Vatican II, the need for a centre for spiritual renewal then emerged. Under the impulse of the Bishop and in collaboration with 4 other Congregations, the sisters opened Jyothis Theological College on August 17th, 1972. During the first year, 40 sisters will be resident. The word "Jyothis" comes from Sanskrit and means "star", wisdom, "heaven". We can find a link with Mary in her Assumption. Sr. Myriam Selz, upon her arrival, took over the direction of Jyothis College and Sr Lizzie

³ Sister Alphonse, Remembrance and gratitude, Story of the Indian Province, written around 1995

⁴ Letter from Pala Community (India), February 11th, 1969

⁵ Letter from Pala Community (India), February 11th, 1969

⁶ Letter from Pala Community (India), August 6th, 1969

became the first novice mistress. After the foundation years, life can spread and be shared with new young vocations.

A time of long apostolic exploration is beginning. The sisters will learn from the experience by tirelessly travelling in this "*vast land of infinite variety*"⁷.

Many invitations came for a foundation outside Kerala; thanks to the meeting with an enthusiastic priest, the foundation was decided in Punjab, in the diocese of Jullundar; the Bishop was Capuchin. Catholics were few in number and lived in remote villages throughout the diocese. "*Families, most of them large, living in one room: 4 clay walls with a flat roof, no windows, only a door.*"⁸ Priests were also few in number and therefore carried the burden of a heavy mission. The new Bishop was looking for "*a Congregation that would be willing to send 3 or 4 sisters to share the life of the villagers by settling among them. Through their example as well as through their teaching, the Sisters would gradually raise the standard of living of these poor people.*"⁹ It is therefore for a religious presence in the villages, where no other women's congregation had dare to live before, that Assumption is called. On September 1st, 1972, when the sisters (Sister Alphonse, Sister Elsy Kattackal, Sister Rosily Kottaram, Sister Jaya as a postulant and another one postulant) embarked on this adventure, "*faith was the only sustain force and they trusted in the Providence of God and He did not abandon them.*"
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Upon their arrival in Mukstar, they settled in a small two-room apartment on the first floor of a building whose ground floor was used for multiple celebrations. The place was blessed on September 8th and placed under the patronage of Our Lady of the Way. And the journey really began! Priests and catechists accompanied them to the surrounding villages. "*Through these visits, they entered a new world, the world of the poor and illiterate.*"¹⁰ To the most remote villages, they would go by bullock carts, tractors or on foot.

This experience has not been very long but the sisters were beginning to discern the deep need of Indian society and the desire for a more social perspective for the Assumption, in harmony with the preferential option for the poor that had been reaffirmed during recent international meetings.

In Pala, the scope of the mission was also wider: an English and Malayalam Montessori school had been opened, where rich and poor could be welcome, thanks to a system of fees adapted to the situations of families. The focus was on values education. The college girls hostel, Jyothis College for on-going formation and the Montessori school traced the imprint of the Assumption on this small part of the Indian land. Everything was ready for a new stage that took shape at the General Chapter, in 1976: India became a Province; Sister Chantal Emmanuel Greindl, Belgian, was appointed Provincial and a first Provincial Chapter was held from 13 to 20 May 1977 in Poona. The same year, the Province decided to choose the Sari as its religious habit: a new sign of proximity with the people.

In the years to come, with the villagers, fishermen, women and children, Assumption in India will never stop seeking to take its part in Christ's Gospel, closed to the poor. In 1970, as the community of Pala waited to begin its apostolate and lived "*the life of the Virgin in the Temple*", the sisters had this anecdote: "*Devotion to the Blessed Sacrament begins to shine. The wife of a professor who lives near us offered to give the oil for the lamp of the sanctuary; a gesture which, being quite*

⁷ Sister Alphonse, Remembrance and gratitude, Story of the Indian Province, written around 1995

⁸ Letter from Pala Community (India), April 1972

⁹ Idem

¹⁰ Idem

spontaneous, touched us very much."¹¹ Many are those poor people who, throughout subsequent history, have fed, until today, the lamp of the sanctuary, filling with their faces and stories the prayer and the life of Assumption in India. Do not hesitate to read the continuation of the story by looking for the text written by Sr Alphonse!

*Soeur Véronique Thiébaud, RA
Archivist of the Congregation*

¹¹ Letter from Pala Community (India), July 2nd, 1970