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The Generalate Team

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Young People: As in Libermann’s Day

International Meeting of Young Spiritans in Spain (*)
(August 1977)

“‘It is only through young people that a community can thrive: the hope of the harvest is in the seed. It is there that a Society’s spirit is formed . . .’”
(Fr. Libermann to Mother Javouhey, March 9, 1845, N.D., VIII, p. 86)

“‘It is to you, the young confreres, that we look for a FRESH START in the Congregation’s Mission. We also expect great AVAILABILITY in the finest tradition of the Spiritan family . . . You will have your chance to live according to the Spiritan charism. Your aspirations will be respected to the extent that today’s changing Mission permits . . .’” With these words Father GENERAL brought to a close the international meeting of young Spiritans in Spain. He had been joined there by the General Assistants Fathers SOUCY and GROSS, as well as the Provincial of Spain and the Principal Superiors of Sierra Leone, Senegal and Central Brazil. All of them were struck by how closely the aspirations of the young confreres paralleled GUIDELINES FOR ANIMATION from 1974 and the spirit of the 1976 ENLARGED COUNCIL.

Much has been said about the “death and resurrection” test for religious institutes. At the meeting in Spain the young confreres presented their contribution and showed that the Congregation has clearly set out upon the path of resurrection today and for the future. We shall try to present here the essence of that contribution for the benefit of the whole Spiritan family.

Get Back to the Original Inspiration
“‘Poor among the poor’

The young confreres had the idea of celebrating their history together: both their personal history and that of the Institute with all its lumbering progress as well as its wealth of experience, all its convictions and its hopes. They put all this together, prayed and meditated over it, came to feel “at home” with it in what they called a PARABLE OF SHARING.

After the presentations by Provinces and Districts had provided a kind of refresher course in the whole reality which is the Congregation, the next step was a sharing of thoughts about four topics: MISSION, FORMATION, SPIRITAN LIFE, VOCATIONS AND MISSIONARY ANIMATION.

From so many different approaches, it was striking to see how the ideas converged. More and more, the direction was towards what is essential, towards the inspiration which gave us our beginning, towards Libermann himself: TO GO TO THE POOREST AND MOST ABANDONED.

There is really nothing surprising in this: it was a getting back to our beginning, to our youth. Libermann made his appeal to young men. What they heard, ringing down across the centuries, was Christ’s invitation to evangelical poverty. Christ was poor himself and

(*) From the 1st to the 15th of August 1977, 134 young Spiritans met at CASTRILLO DE LA VEGA (ARANDA) in Spain. They came from 30 different countries. (Cf. "Spiritan News", No. 8, August-September 1977).
came "to bring the good news to the poor". WE WANT TO BE POOR AMONG THE POOR: this was the essential message, the deepest aspiration, of the 134 young conferes in Aranda. This is not an isolated cry coming from Aranda only. We hear it from other places in the Spiritan family. Just recently, the Province of United States East dedicated its Chapter to renewal and came up with similar expressions and seemed at the same time to "get its second wind".

The various appeals are so similar that they seem to us to represent a call of the Spirit. It is the Spirit who is urging us to take up resolutely the basic options of Libermann: FOR THE POOR in the footsteps of Christ. It is the Spirit who is turning us towards a re-appraisal which may be difficult, towards what was asked of us by the 1974 Chapter: "... that ... we take a critical look at our present commitments ..." (G.A., 13).

Community

Another current soon made itself felt in the meeting: TO LIVE IN COMMUNITY. The young conferes place much more emphasis upon life than upon works, upon WHAT WE ARE than upon WHAT WE DO. For them, as for Libermann who recommended it so strongly to his sons, living in community is a fundamental need in religious and missionary life. It is one of the characteristic values of Spiritans. "Nothing new in that", one might say. Perhaps! but the young conferes certainly do not imply exactly the same things as we used to when they use the expression TO LIVE IN COMMUNITY, — witness the following quotations:

A basic need:

"... our Spiritan charism is bound up with our work for the poorest; but no less essential is the fact that we work and live in community, which is a sharing at every level: material, spiritual and personal. The community is the source of our strength and our support. In missionary situations our community life can be looked upon as our first witness and our first proclamation of the Gospel ..." (from the "Mission" group)

A major requirement for Mission:

"... in the Mission, we take as a priority the formation of our own Spiritan community, as a base of operation for our own growth, for our openness to other Christian communities and for the formation of new ones. Our purpose is evangelization and community is a means of achieving it . . . ."

(Preparatory meeting of young North American Spiritans in Montreal)

The center of our life:

"... since our charism is a special love for the most abandoned, our community must be marked by our genuine love for one another. This is ... the meaning of "Cor unum et anima una". Apostolic work begins in the community. Community life is the center of our Spiritan life: a true family life which fosters the development of every member, even the weak, the sick and the very old. The future will be realized in small communities, both in the Province and in the Mission ..." ("Spiritan Life" group)

Do away with discrimination:

"... we must put an end to all discrimination between priests and non-priests. We should be able to find other labels, as they have in Spain. Are we not all brothers? Why do some Provinces still say: Congregation of Holy Ghost FATHERS?" ("Spiritan Life" group)

During formation:

"... the Gospel must be genuinely lived in the community (students and directors) so that we can all be sincere witnesses to the Mission we want to accomplish ... Essential elements of community life are: prayer, work, openness to others and lack of affectation. ("Formation" group)

When young people knock at our door:

There were long discussions about what young people look for in a missionary congregation.

"... young people who aspire to missionary life strongly desire that community life be based upon prayer, openness, mutual help and good organization. This aspiration goes beyond the years of formation; it is an essential element of missionary life ... All our communities should little by little become centers of missionary animation. In this way they will show how the Congregation can be a help and support for a lifetime commitment in a fraternal setting ..." ("Vocations and Missionary Animation" group)

Our communities have no right to disappoint these hopes of the young conferes.
Mission Today

All the young Spiritans, whether in the Provinces or in the Districts, are talking about Mission. This represents a great hope for the Congregation, which, like all missionary institutes, finds it hard to renew itself, to arrive at the kind of missionary presence and activity which is suitable for our times, and to open up its horizons to the future. It can readily be seen that our recent Chapters, the 1976 Enlarged Council and the animation the Generalate is trying to provide are all reflected in the aspirations of the young Spiritans. If we curb those aspirations, we will cut off all chance of renewal.

In solidarity with the past:

A whole week given over to reports from the Provinces and Districts — listening to OUR history in three languages and coming from three continents — provided a look at our origins, our growth and our present situation. It forged stronger links with all those who went before us, links which motivate us to get beyond the limited vision of OUR Province with ITS commitments and ITS Districts.

The young American Spiritan who wrote the "Letter from Spain"(*) was right when he said: "...it was a gathering of Spiritans who happened to be young but who also had a real sense of belonging to the Congregation as a whole...fell themselves rooted in a history and tradition...discovered a solidarity among ourselves with the rest of the Congregation."

One event symbolized the bond between the young and their predecessors. During the meeting, we received news of the death of an English confere, Father CULLEN, who had been a missionary in Nigeria and in Mauritius. That evening, at the Mass for Father, requests came in the various languages for our prayers for all the deceased of the Congregation. It was a moving experience; it put the spotlight upon the labors of all the older conferees over the years on many continents.

Attentive to the present:

Solidarity with our predecessors is a strength. Another strength is the inspiration we find in Claude POULLART DES PLACES, in Francis LIBERMANN, and also in other great Spiritan personalities, like Joseph SHANAHAN. Still, to live in the spirit of our tradition does not mean to reproduce yesterday's Mission today, but rather to be fully involved in today's Mission. The young conferees are strongly convinced of this, and they said so.

They said so in stressing another form of poverty, a more difficult one — that of accepting the TEMPORARY. They see in this a characteristic trait of the Spiritan type of evangelization:

"...From the very beginning of any work, our explicit intention is to make ourselves unnecessary...Our purpose is to achieve a truly self-sufficient Church which can live without depending upon our continuing presence...We seek...to get ourselves free to move on to other places which have not yet heard the Good News." ("Mission" group)

In order to achieve that freedom, the type of commitment which joins Spiritan charism with loyalty to the Churches, "...we have to devote ourselves resolutely to recruiting and training lay people and to fostering vocations: that is, to the formation of the leaders who will make our presence unnecessary..."

A newer dimension: "...Mission seems to us to be essentially a call to live the universal dimension of the Church, to establish exchange between the churches, to foster dialogue with the non-Christian churches, particularly Islamism, to work towards inter-cultural understanding. In the case of Spiritans, this call has to be responded to in community and in the midst of the most neglected peoples. The Provinces have a role to play in this, by their missionary animation, by their challenge to the sister churches — our churches of origin, by their work among migrant workers and foreign students, by their study of the problems raised in the "North-South" confrontation..." ("Vocations and Missionary Animation" group)

If the purpose of our Mission is to be POOR AMONG THE POOR, our whole formation ought to be a preparation for it.

"...Mission is the most important current of force in our formation. By reason of our Spiritan charism, formation ought to include contact with the poor. This should have an influence upon the choice of location for houses of formation. This is a point which ought to be fully discussed by all concerned..." ("Formation" group)

The place and the role of Brothers (or Consecrated Laymen) in the Congregation received particular attention also. A special discussion group was set up for the purpose. Some experiments are going on in the Congregation, and the recent General Chapters insisted upon the need for progress in our thinking about Brothers. In a few months, an issue of I/D will attempt to shed some light upon this question.

Towards the Future

There are important moments in the life of the Spiritan family. The meeting in Spain was one of them. Getting beyond all sorts of frontiers, they broke down barriers, forged links, shared their hopes. They began as strangers, but managed to live together and achieve a deep understanding of one another.

Discovery of what we have in common

With a view to helping the Congregation become more international, the last issue of I/D insisted upon availability among Spiritans. The young confreres also see the need to be a part of the new and more universal direction the Congregation is taking. They have now had an experience of life in an international community, with all its joys, but also all its difficulties. That experience opens up more than ever the new path which Spiritans must follow.

"... Where Mission is concerned, internationality seems to us to be the sign that the Church is truly universal. Let us open ourselves up to other cultures and get out of the isolation within each Province. Let us acquire the feeling that the Congregation is one family, that it too is universal." ("Formation" group)

"... International teams seem to us to be a valuable means for us to get beyond our own culture and enter into genuine dialogue with others. Our Spanish meeting showed clearly that, by the very nature of our Congregation, we have extraordinary riches in the area of internationality which we have not yet really taken advantage of..." ("Mission" group)

"... If we want to work in international teams in the Mission, we have to start during our formation to become acquainted with other cultures..." ("Spiritans Life" group)

Presence of Africans and Brazilians

Unfortunately, the new Province of Angola could not send anybody to Spain. We did, however, have confreres from Brazil and confreres from Africa (Nigeria, East Africa, French-speaking Africa) who made a real contribution to the meeting. Their presence was a sign that the churches in Africa and Brazil take their missionary responsibility to heart. It was also a sign that the Congregation is diversifying and universalizing itself, getting beyond the limits of Europe and North America as the usual origins of its members so as to be better able to meet the new needs of today's and tomorrow's Mission.

"One heart and one soul"

None of the experiences of Aranda were as fine as the Eucharistic celebrations, both all together and in smaller groups. This sharing the same Word and the same Bread as brothers really brought us together "into one body". The diversity of languages and of backgrounds gave our prayer a universal character. Calling upon "the same Father, through the same Spirit" united us into "one heart and one soul".

"We knew it was so, but now we have experience of the fact that it is Prayer and the Eucharist above all that can bring about the unity in our diversity."

Convinced that spiritual renewal is the source of all renewal, the young confreres exhort one another "to live in and to strengthen the more contemplative aspects of prayer by means of the PRACTICAL UNION which Libermann teaches us..." ("Spiritans Life" group)

Happy to be Spiritans

"... We are glad we came to Aranda. We are happy and proud to be Spiritans. We are also as aware of limits and difficulties as we are of our hopes. We have one raison d'etre: there are still many POOR, there are still many people who do not know Jesus Christ. Like Libermann, we must allow ourselves to be led by the Holy Spirit. He will know how to show us the way..." (That is how the "Spiritans Life" group concluded its comments on the meeting.)

We of the General Administration rejoice in this spirit and these ideals manifested by our young Spiritans. We thank all those who, from a distance or on the spot, contributed to the meeting. Most especially we thank the young Spanish Province for "going all out" to provide such extraordinary hospitality.

In response to a wish expressed at Aranda "that the young confreres might be able to make their contribution to the Enlarged Council in the role of observers", the General Council has decided to invite one or two to participate in the 1978 Enlarged Council.