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The Generalate Team

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“Unless the Grain of Wheat dies...”

Outside the novitiate in Aranda, Spain, where the meeting of Young Spiritans was held last summer there is a dead tree, battered by the elements and burnt by fire. It holds out its two remaining branches in an attitude of supplication. When you look at it, it becomes the figure of Christ on the cross, a sign of hope, rising out of death.

The Fathers of the Church often loved to dwell on the image of the old tree which was the cause of Adam’s fall. Its wood was fashioned to make the cross of Christ, which was erected on the old stump: a shoot springs from the stock of Jesse, a scion thrusts from his roots: on him the spirit of Yahweh rests (Isaiah 11, 1).

Sometimes during the long winters of Europe, the ice and snow freezes the whole countryside in a death from which there seems to be no awakening: the cold nights and the short dark days stretch on endlessly. Then one day the sun returns, the thaw begins and the first crocuses force their way through the snow:

For see, winter is past...
the flowers appear on the earth.
The season of glad songs has come,
the cooing of the turtledove is heard in our land
(Cant. 2, 13).

Today there are increasing signs that a new spring is beginning for the Congregation: in Aranda the young people of the old Congregation expressed their longing to return to the days when Israel was young, when the first Spiritans devoted themselves wholeheartedly to the service of the poor. And at the Enlarged Council of 1976, the elders turned their eyes towards new missionary paths: Your young men shall see visions, your old men shall dream dreams (Joel, 3, 1). But spring becomes possible only when winter has gone before, and dreams and visions are false and harmful if we are not prepared to pay the price to make them real. If the tree is to bear fruit it has to submit to a cruel pruning; the seed has to die before the harvest is possible; we must lose our life for the sake of Christ before we can save it. Before the Congregation can be renewed it must die first. As Bonhoeffer wrote, there is no such thing as cheap grace.

Now is ‘the Time’ of Salvation.

Every Christian man, every Christian community, – and so also the Congregation – is constantly being invited by Christ to sell what it has and give to the poor; to live in faith; to fill up what is wanting in itself of the sufferings of Christ Jesus. There comes a time in the life of a Christian when the hand of God intervenes and strips him of his interior or exterior possessions, and he responds in a spirit of poverty and humility, in faith and hope and joy. This is a moment of redemptive suffering, when Christ helps the Christian to die to himself. It is God’s moment, the kairos, the tempus acceptabile. God however, does not save men merely as individuals without any mutual bonds, but by making them into a single people (Lumen Gent., 9). He acts within a
Christian community as well as with individuals. It does seem that such a moment of grace and salvation has come for the Congregation.

"The time has come: you must wake up now: our salvation is even nearer than it was when we were first converted. The night is almost over, it will be daylight soon" (Rom. 13, 11).

Christ often warns us to be vigilant, to be watchful. Faith has eyes, but we often keep the eyes of our faith closed, and so we fail to recognise God when he is very near us. The apostles slept during Christ's agony. When things happened just as Christ said they would, when he was arrested and crucified, the disciples did not see his death with the eyes of faith. The Christian community fell into a state of panic and lost hope. When the two disciples met the stranger on the road to Emmaus they told him that they had hoped Jesus would be the one to set Israel free. Jesus reproved them for their blindness and he explained how the scriptures had ordained that the Christ was to suffer before he could enter into his glory (cf. Lk 24, 13-35).

The Congregation is suffering.

"If one part is hurt, all parts are hurt with it" (I Cor., 12, 26).

Empty Buildings.

The Congregation seems to be going through a period of crisis, and it is important for us to see this crisis as a period of salvific suffering, as a period when God calls us as a community to metanoia, and to renewal.

In our older provinces great buildings stand empty, which only a few short years ago were full of life and activity. We can explain the fall in vocations by talking of sociological change, of the effects of an affluent society, of the change in the image of the missionary, and the explanations are true enough as far as they go. Christ's appeal to his followers, however, is on a different plane: they are called upon to sell what they have and give to the poor and to follow him. One of the apostles was a tax-collector and others were boat-owners, but they were attracted by Jesus and they very gladly left everything behind them. When two of John's disciples asked Jesus where he lived, he replied, come and see: so they went and saw where he lived and stayed with him the rest of the day (Jn., 1, 39). One of the things that attracted John's disciples to Jesus was that he was preaching the gospel to the poor. People were attracted to the first Christian communities by the witness they gave to the gospel teaching, to sharing, to community prayer and to the celebration of the Eucharist: They went as a body to the temple every day but met in their houses for the breaking of bread; they shared their food gladly and generously; they praised God... Day by day the Lord added to their community those destined to be saved (Acts 2, 46, 47). Spiritans should not blame themselves for the empty buildings but they should see this time of suffering as a call to poverty and to a more evangelical community life.

The 'Works of the Congregation'.

In the provinces many of the traditional works in which the Congregation has been engaged for many years are being put more and more into question. In some cases the very success of such works means that they are no longer clearly seen as expressions of the Congregation's commitment to the poor. As the responsibility of governments for social services increases and as the laity assume their rightful place in building the world in Christ, pressure grows for control of our schools and orphanages by lay people or by the government itself. The group of young Spiritans who feel attracted to such works is diminishing. As a result the average age of Spiritans engaged in these works is so high as to force us to consider, if not complete disengagement, then at least a drastic change in the form of our commitment to them. And such a prospect is causing sadness and pain to many confreres who, in self-sacrifice and obedience, have devoted most of their lives to these works. And yet, since the inevitable is a clear sign of God's will, should we not show our acceptance of his will by making the necessary plans and by putting them into effect?

In the missions: "... I must grow smaller". (Jn., 3, 30)

Certain aspects of our present missionary involvement in Africa resemble the situation of many of our traditional works in the old provinces. If in the provinces the cycle of our involvement in many works seems to be reaching an end, the same is true of our involvement in some of our oldest missions. In some Districts we seem to be approaching the last stages of implanting the church. It is indeed a joy for Spiritans to realize that they and their
predecessors in the Congregation have preached the word of God and brought forth churches. While many of these churches still need the help of foreign missionaries they must be allowed to become autonomous. It is required of foreigners that they ‘diminish’ so that others may ‘increase’. Here again there is a clear evangelical call to humility and self-forgetfulness, where the painfulness of the adjustment required is commensurate with the need for it.

No longer a popular Hero.

The majority of Spiritans today are aged between 45 and 55 and have served or are still serving in Africa. On their first appointment they went out to a situation which was still colonial or had only just left the colonial period. In those not so far off days they were people of substance in the eyes of the world: people who had considerable influence and who were respected by everybody. The missionary was a big employer; those were the days when churches, schools and hospitals were being built everywhere. In his home country the missionary was a heroic figure: books were written and films were made about his exploits. Today he has little influence or patronage and if he is a foreigner his presence is more often tolerated than welcomed. The value of his contribution is often questioned in the press. Within the local church his presence is seen by some as more of a hindrance than a help. He is no longer a hero but has become in the eyes of some of his contemporaries a somewhat ridiculous figure: Here we are, fools for the sake of Christ . . . we have no power, but you are influential; you are celebrities, we are nobodies (1. Cor, 4, 10).

Expulsions from the Mission Fields.

In the last ten years hundreds of Spiritans have been expelled or forced to leave their missions in Haiti, Guinea, Nigeria and Angola. The shock of being up-rooted and the difficulties of starting a new life in unfamiliar surroundings can cause considerable strain on individuals. Their suffering affects not only the confreres concerned but also their province-of-origin and the whole Congregation. Nor can we put aside the possibility of another wave of such expulsions.

Questioning of missionary motivation.

The whole destructive process seems to reach a climax when the very theological motivation of Mission is questioned: “Thus one frequently hears it said in various terms that to impose a truth, be it that of the Gospel, or to impose a way, be it that of salvation, cannot but be a violation of religious liberty. Besides, it is added, why proclaim the Gospel when the whole world is saved by uprightness of heart? We know likewise that the world and history are filled with the ‘seeds of the Word’; is it not therefore an illusion to claim to bring the gospel where it already exists in the seeds that the Lord himself has sown? (Evan. Nunt, 80). Many Spiritans have been disturbed and saddened by such questioning and are tempted to lose faith in their missionary vocation.

“The Hand of the Lord has touched me”.

When we put these points together: — falling vocations, aging personnel, the questioning of our traditional works in the provinces, the expulsions, the attack on missionary motivation, the approaching end of a certain form of missionary commitment — they add up to a considerable amount of suffering for many confreres, so many that we can say the whole Congregation is suffering. But if we are suffering then God is purifying us: he is putting us to the test as he did his servant Job.

We active missionaries are tempted to see our work in terms of quantitative success, in the building of churches and schools and hospitals, in development schemes and adult education schemes, and we can go on for years without much increasing the interiority in our lives. But if God wants to make something of us he suddenly intervenes and strips us of everything we thought was ours. It is not a choice of whether to suffer or not: this he imposes on us and leaves us no choice. The choice we are given is that which was given to the two thieves on the cross: to turn to God in love or to refuse to do so.

For the Congregation . . . a new Exodus.

“If it dies, it yields a rich harvest” (Jn, 12, 24).

Should we not see it as a new exile? As the call to a new Exodus?

Before the Exile the people of God put too much trust in their institutions: the Land, the Temple, the Law, Israel itself. They offered sacrifices and holocausts in the Temple and they regarded it as a place of safety. But God destroyed the Temple, stripped them of their lands and drove them into exile as slaves in Babylon.

During the long years of the Exile God schooled the people of Israel in detachment
and spiritual poverty and brought them back to the fervour they had when Israel was young:

I will woo her,
I will go with her into the desert
and speak to her heart...

There she will respond to me as she did when she was young
as she did when she came out of the land of Egypt (Hosea, 2, 16-17).

They returned to Jerusalem with a more purified religion than before. They have lost much of their chauvinism and had a greater understanding of the universality of salvation. The missionary element was much stronger: Israel was to be a light to the Gentiles and the new covenant was to be an interior law written on men’s hearts.

God has stripped us of our possessions, he has expelled us from many of the countries we held most dear. Our present impasse is like a desert in which God is speaking to us and he wishes us to answer with the missionary fervour which the Congregation possessed in its youth.

“The Poor and most abandoned”.

One thing we can be sure of, God wants us for the future to devote ourselves more wholeheartedly to the service of the poor. Libermann’s inspiration is part of the central message of the Gospel (cf. Lk. 4, 18). If we undertake new works for the poor we will have to renew ourselves in faith, in poverty of spirit and in prayer. As a man may be called by Christ to leave his boat and his nets behind, so a Congregation may be called to give up its oldest and dearest institutions.

“That each one be faithful…” (1 Cor., 4, 2).

We were each of us called individually by God to serve him. But our response to this call did not end on the morning we first said, here I am, Lord (Cf. I Sam. 3, 1-21). The call continues to be made, and our lives should be a constant response, a constant readiness in God’s service. Obedience to God is our most fundamental motivation for being missionaries. If we preach the gospel we can claim no credit for it. We are only discharging a trust (cf. 1 Cor. 9, 17). Christ himself has commanded us to preach the gospel and we cannot hope to gain salvation if through our laziness or fear or despair we fail to do so (cf. Ev. Nunt. 60).

A text in Ad Gentes insists on the faithfulness required of every missionary:

“When God calls a man must reply without taking counsel with flesh and blood (cf. Gal. 1, 16), and give himself fully to the work of the gospel. However such an answer can only be given with the encouragement and help of the Holy Spirit. The one who is sent enters upon the life and mission of him who emptied himself, taking the nature of a slave (Phil. 2, 7). Therefore he must be prepared to remain faithful to his vocation for life, to renounce himself and everything that up to this he possesses as his own and to make himself all things to all men (1. Cor. 9, 25).

(Ad Gentes, 24).

Prayer: a means to faithfulness.

The missionary life as described in this passage in Ad Gentes is in itself a state of prayer, of which our personal and community prayer is only a more intense expression. Basically prayer is our obedience to God’s Word, and his Word is always being spoken to us, even when it appears to be silent. Prayer is standing before God in poverty of spirit full of desire and listening attentively: “When you seek me you shall find me; if you search for me with all your heart I will let you find me (Jer. 29, 13). Prayer means being like men waiting for their master to return from the wedding feast, ready to open the door when he comes and knocks (Cf. Lk., 12, 36).

We have to want God, to desire him; and our desire for God is something we have to work on, and we can’t do this too easily driving landrovers and attending meetings. Being the sort of people we are, our cares and occupations cool our desire for God. We need to leave them at fixed times to exercise our desire: this we do to prevent what had begun to grow lukewarm from going quite cold; the remedy is to rouse it often into flame (Breviary, 29th Week of the Year: St. Augustine’s letter to Proba).

If we do this, then even when we are on the landrover we will be able to live in ‘practical union’ with God.

Torn as we are, like all other apostles, between manifold tasks, problems and obligations, we cannot hope to escape in our apostolic life the tension between prayer and action which is inherent in the whole Christian life. But a Spiritian is called on to seek a solution on the lines of “practical union”, a phrase which summarises the central thesis of Libermann’s missionary spirituality, in its final form. This ideal may be expressed as a state of habitual openness to the promptings of the Holy Spirit, almost a natural movement of the heart in a man who has “achieved the sacrifice of himself to God so as to be free to devote himself to others” (N. & D. XIII, p. 706).


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