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BUILDING ON ROCK

I. IMPLEMENTATION OF THE CHAPTER OF TORRE D'AGUILHA 2004

1.1 A GENERAL SYNTHESIS OF RESPONSES

Introduction

This brief reflection represents a “synthesis” of a “synthesis” - that is, a summary of the (summarised) responses submitted to the General Council on the implementation of the last General Council (2004) in Spiritan circumscriptions throughout the world. It also represents the reactions of the participants of the Enlarged General Council (2008) to these various responses. Necessarily, this present reflection will include significant concerns, trends, and challenges of the Congregation today in a “broad view” only.

Mission and Spirituality

Whereas commitment to the poorest of the world remains an anchor for Spiritans, expressed in numerous forms such as ministry with refugees and displaced peoples, education, healthcare ministry, parochial apostolate, etc, the locations and forms that this ministry assumes continue to change and adapt with the “signs of the times.” Mission as expressed in inter-religious dialogue, service to victims of AIDS, focus on Justice, Peace, and Integrity of Creation projects, consume the attention of Spiritans in many quarters of the world. New ventures in Asia and countries in Africa previously unknown to Spiritans occupy our interest and

commitment. And the particular spirituality underlying these commitments remains solid and sure; namely, a desire for “practical union” with God, expressed through prayer, personal and communal, in a fraternal life in the spirit of our Founders.

International/Inter-cultural Community

These mission commitments, and their alignment with lives of prayer and fraternity, are not without challenges for us. We note that our Congregation has become deeply “international” and “intercultural,” a source of joy for us and a witness to evangelical mission. At the same time, these trends bring with them difficulties in living together, coming to agreement on style and approach to mission, formation, and theological vision. We see this difficulty often played out in the lives of confreres on “first appointment” in the Congregation. The participants at the Enlarged General Council in Ariccia noted the need for a renewed “passion for mission” in tandem with a clear understanding of the meaning and practical life of the evangelical counsels today that we all share. A commitment to continue dialogue and interpersonal respect within our Congregation was named as an important factor in our common life together.

Finance and Authority

Financial matters worry us in the Congregation. Communicating in new and effective ways is a consistent challenge for our members. Understanding the implications of justice and peace in countries torn by civil strife or where such ministries are unwelcome is a serious difficulty. The roles of superiors are sometimes unclear – and are certainly demanding and often unrewarding. We strive to continually understand the dynamic of the common life and the life of

the vows in an international Congregation – and to resolve conflicts effectively and honestly.

Individualism as a Special Challenge

A special challenge, noted with some frequency by circumscriptions and discussed at the Enlarged General Council, was a growing tendency towards “individualism” in the Congregation. This trait manifests itself in decision-making, regarding choice of ministry, use of money, or other factors important to religious life, apart from the Congregation and its legitimate authorities. A renewed effort towards re-commitment to the common life – as well as pastoral outreach to those confreres living and working apart – was recommended as a remedy to this troubling tendency.

Conclusion

In particular, our attention will be given in the next years to reflection upon the vows of poverty and obedience, to new and expert ways to manage finances effectively, and to an organisational revision that will focus on collaboration in “Unions of Circumscriptions,” emphasising cooperation and communion in all aspects of our lives, including the important area of formation. We will continue to emphasise the particularity of our “Spiritane” legacy – the study of our Founders and our Charism – and the unique formation of “Spiritane” formators for our younger members. And, as always, the cultivation of our “passion for mission” and search for new areas of mission for the poorest will be our goal and inspiration.

Practical Orientations – an agenda for 2008-2012

In its discussion of the general responses of circumscriptions to the implementation of the General Chapter decisions (2004), the participants at the Enlarged General Council

noted the following specific tasks to be accomplished during the next four years:

1. The promotion of dialogue (by the General Council) between younger and older members of the Congregation, between circumscriptions of the North and the South, and particularly regarding matters of conflict.
2. The communication (by the General Council) of a common vision of the vows; specifically, on the use of money, the sense of entitlement, and the meaning today of the vows of chastity, poverty, and obedience.
3. The composition of a document on the vow of obedience.
4. The promotion of new ways of communicating Spiritan documents to the membership
5. The composition of a “more clear” definition of the meaning of a “sabbatical” and post-sabbatical appointments.
6. The composition of a “Customary for Superiors.”

1.2 JUSTICE, PEACE AND THE INTEGRITY OF CREATION

*T*he Torre d’Aguilha General Chapter documents (3.1 to 3.6) lists six directives for Spiritans in the Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation (JPIC) area. We are reminded there that JPIC is a central element in mission in today’s ‘Areopagus’ (Acts 17: 22-31). Well in advance of the Enlarged General Council (EGC) of Ariccia all participants received a document reporting on progress made and difficulties encountered in each of these areas since the last General Chapter. A set of questions following the report of each of the areas was included to help participants undertake personal reflection and consult the Spiritans they represented in

Ariccia. During the EGC a very generous amount of time – two entire sessions, was devoted to reflection on Spiritan-linked JPIC questions.

In much of the reflection the term “Aeropagus” could easily summarise the direction that the discussion on JPIC took. In a world speedily becoming more and more complex, we are being called to new frontiers and situations of mission. Our JPIC commitment both helps us to read such challenging situations and to make a meaningful missionary response. Examples of such new areas of mission and ministry include peacebuilding, reconciliation, lobbying and advocacy, just to mention a few. There was general agreement in Ariccia that this is indeed a call of the Spirit and to answer it we need both courage and preparation. It was felt that as a Congregation we have indeed made progress in many such areas. In others – the care of creation is an example; we still need to make greater progress.

An example of Spiritan advance into today’s Aeropagus was seen to be our recent increased involvement in advocacy and lobbying. A consensus was obvious in the assembly that this is a direction we need to follow. Support for our involvement in VIVAT, which lobbies in our name at the United Nations, was very apparent. Many of the serious issues we encounter in situations of mission are larger than our resources or capacities; for this reason our collaboration with others – church or non church groups, was seen to be central to our methodology – our active participation in the Africa Europe Faith and Justice Network (AEFJN) was seen as a clear example.

Health ministry, responding frequently as it does to poverty-provoked illnesses, was also an area where we were encouraged to advance. The General Council was encour-

aged to advance in their reflection regarding the possibility of appointing a part-time coordinator of Spiritan Health Ministry.

If mission in today's Aeropagus was seen to be complex, the Spiritans assembled in Ariccia recalled the importance of being well prepared and organised for JPIC engagement in mission. Even though Torre d'Aguilha called on each circumscription to prepare a JPIC plan by 2008 (3.2), relatively few have done so. In evaluating this, the consensus at the EGC was that it is important that all circumscriptions draw up a plan as soon as possible. Such a plan helps to animate circumscriptions, to choose priorities and directions, to set aside the resources necessary, and to courageously undertake challenges in mission. To facilitate JPIC animation in general in each circumscription the importance of appointing a coordinator was stressed.

Preparation was seen to be necessary also in formation – both initial and ongoing. It was recalled that in all our General Chapters since Itaicí (1992) we have been called upon to engage in an apprentice style of formation geared to preparing young Spiritans for the complex situations of mission today. Frequently our initial formation is overly theoretical and academic, while frequently it lacks appropriate courses in areas defined as essential by recent General Chapters. More emphasis needs to be placed on acquiring pastoral methodologies throughout the entire formation period appropriate for mission today; here the social sciences are very important. That the Congregation should invest in “distance learning” via the internet to supplement this deficit was seen as a good initiative in Ariccia.

Another area calling for our attention was seen to be that of Spiritans working in difficult situations. Torre d'Aguilha 3.6

had pointed out our need to be aware that we can be wounded as we minister in demanding situations and that our congregational leadership needs to ensure that if this happens, confreres receive the necessary care and support without delay. During the discussion in plenary session in Ariccia, it was felt that as a Congregation we still need to make significant advances here. While an essential part of our mission is to struggle for justice and human rights especially for the poor and marginalised, we need constantly to ensure that within our Congregation we fraternally resolve any cases of injustice or violation of human rights as soon as they occur.

II. CONSOLIDATION OF THE CONGREGATION

2.1 MISSION APPOINTMENTS

The question of First Appointment elicited animated discussion on the part of the confreres at the EGC and many felt more time could have been given to it to enable them thrash out more this very important matter that concerns all. There was a felt need that with the number that we get annually for first appointment we could organise their appointment better and in a more equitable way to assist the circumscriptions most in need of personnel especially the small groups, the fragile circumscriptions and the aging provinces.

- There seems to have been a general agreement that the question of First Appointment needs to be taken very seriously by all the parties concerned to make sure that First Appointments work.