5-1978


The Generalate Team

Follow this and additional works at: https://dsc.duq.edu/id
Life: our best witness

The time was early November last. The place was Assisi. The occasion, the Annual Retreat of the Generalate Team. Before setting out on our various visits to the Provinces and Districts we had considered it important to go aside and rest awhile with the Lord, not only for our own spiritual refreshment but that we might share together our common concern for our confreres and for the Renewal of the Congregation. Very quickly we became aware of our agreement on what we should put before our brethren for their consideration in the months and years ahead. Our reflections seemed to turn on four points which we are convinced are vitally important: a. SPIRITUAL RENEWAL, with particular reference to Prayer-Life; b. THE RELATIONSHIP of the individual member and the Congregation; c. VOCATIONS. We feel the urge to share our thoughts with you. For it seems to us now as it did then that we were being invited to answer a triple call:

A call from God:

Renewal is the key-word in all Religious Institutions to-day. It occupies the attention of all Religious Institutes as well as our own. It is concerned less with work in the mission-field and more with the quality of life of the missionary and the value of the witness given by those who live that life at its deepest level. Before, it was customary for Chapters to be principally concerned with the theme of Mission in their deliberations: this is changing. In Sierra Leone recently, the District Chapter directed its attention first to Spiritual Renewal: in this they were not alone. It is simply one of many signs of an evolution in thought and in approach which is both hopeful and encouraging.

May we not see in this a delicate invitation of the Lord and His eternally-active Spirit, over-riding our human thinking and planning? Is not this His way of dealing with His People in every age? We may not ignore such "divine visitations", such indications. However humbly, however tentatively, we must strive to interpret them in the light of Faith.

A Call of the Church:

This is confirmed by the important Apostolic Letter, “Evangelii Nuntiandi”, which reflects the thinking of the Bishops in the 1974 Synod: in our world it is not what we say or preach but the way we live and witness that impresses men. “Above all, the Gospel must be proclaimed by witness”, – No. 21, and “For the Church the first means of Evangelisation is the witness of an authentically Christian life” – No. 41. It means giving ourselves to God in a communion nothing can destroy and at the same time giving ourselves to our neighbour with unlimited zeal.

A Call from our Brethren:

Significantly, the Principal Superiors of French-speaking Africa have adopted as their guiding theme for the coming year “The Witness of our Religious and Community Life”. In doing so they are responding to a need, to the growing awareness amongst their confreres that we are, or at least have been, too activist. It was a truism to say, “Work is Prayer” and our apostolic successes tended to make us forget Him Who was the Author of them.

At a time when the idea of Mission is changing, or more correctly is evolving, interior renewal is of primary importance. Should not the missionary life reflect, as circumstances require, the mobility of Abraham, the humility of the Baptist, a “diaspora” scattering us more widely than at present, a greater fraternity and sensitivity to the unspoken needs of our confreres at times?

We pause here for a moment to share with you the heavy burden we carry, for it is an aspect of the last point of fraternity: we refer to the requests we receive for laicisation. Certainly we are no worse off in this respect than other Institutes but the number is still too high. If only each took seriously the call to interior renewal, these departures would grow less, decisions sometimes regretted later would be avoided and judgements that are far from fraternal would disappear or at least be reduced.

This attention to what we must live and witness to first of all is at the very heart of our four preoccupations: that we renew ourselves spiritually, that we live in community, that we strengthen the bonds that unite us to the rest of the Congregation, and that we are ready to listen to and help the young people who come to us for an answer.
Community Prayer

"All these, with one mind, gave themselves up to prayer" – Acts I, 14.

The early Christian communities considered this to be of primary importance. Indeed, when the Apostles themselves realised that too much of their time was taken bestowing "our care upon tables", with the approval of all they appointed others for these tasks: their principal duty was, they said, to "devote ourselves to prayer, and to the ministry of preaching" – Acts VI, 4. Did not the Lord tell us "to pray always." – Luke 18, 1.

"Where two or three are gathered . . ."

I/D No. 16 spoke sufficiently it seems to us about prayer in general. But without wishing to overlook the personal aspect of prayer, we think it useful to recall briefly its community side.

We remember a Provincial who had occasion one day to visit a Spiritan House whose members were of a different language-group to his own. He was deeply impressed: "Here is a Community that prays", he said, "After visiting other Communities who did not appear to pray that much, this was to me like a breath of fresh air."

To pray in common in this way is a support we all need. It is also an apologetic of the Faith to the Christian Community about us and an invitation and appeal to those not of the Faith.

The Demands of Prayer In Common.

We are very happy to observe that, especially in the Districts, Community prayer is being thrown open to include all who share with us the task of evangelisation: religious of both sexes, catechists and other leaders of the laity, and the faithful at large. This greater participation gives an impressive witness to Community of Prayer. It can enrich our prayer-life in other ways also: often it makes us more attentive to the preparation and quality of our prayer and the setting in which it takes place. One is especially conscious of this in Mahommedan countries where we have to be particularly careful.

Personal Prayer Essential.

Personal prayer is, we may say, the other side of the coin: the renewal of our personal prayer is an essential to any renewal of Common Prayer. However lovely it appears, Community prayer that is not nourished on personal prayer, that is not a genuine expression of a personal prayer-life, alone as well as with others, is superficial – a worship of the lips but not of the heart.

Community Life

"There was one heart and soul in all the company of believers; none of them called any of his possessions his own, everything was shared in common". – Acts IV, 32.

Even though it appear slightly idealistic, this witness of the early Christian community invites us to examine seriously our own apostolic life to-day. In Africa or South America, where the sense of community is so strong and where pastoral policy is so community-orientated, what witness do we ourselves give?

Too many Spiritans In Isolation.

Let us face the facts: too many of our confreres are living alone. For a variety of reasons we have too often been too isolated in many cases. Pastoral needs, penury of personnel, our readiness to serve in whatever capacity asked of us, measure the generosity or obedience of those who accepted to live alone for these reasons but do not make the situation less regrettable. Who can fail to have sympathy; for a confrere alone in a mission who can say: "I have lived alone for 15 years. It started when I was asked to take over a mission for a year. I am here ever since. I have always asked and wanted to live in Community: now it is too late. I could not face it."

We may not upset such confreres or put pressure on them evidently. We can and must encourage them however to see it as a duty to belong or to seek to belong to a Community either at local or regional level. The frequency of their return to community may vary according to circumstance but we should say that if their visits are only occasional they will lose any real meaning or value. The odd meal with the community in a fraternal atmosphere is both pleasant and necessary but the main purpose of such encounters is missed if they do not provoke serious opportunity for exchange of ideas on our life and work.

A Critical Threshold.

The Principal Superiors of French-speaking Africa, in their Assembly last February, expressed concern at this. If we continue in this way we shall come to a crisis-point sooner rather than later. Everyone is losing out on this: the
Congregation and our confreres; the dioceses and communities where they work. One man alone, without the support of an apostolic Community of which he is a member, can do little to create Christian Communities about him.

In earlier times, people were often sacrificed to the needs of the Apostolate. Given the concept of Evangelisation then prevailing, this might seem justifiable. Even still we can appreciate the anxiety of Bishops that “we must not abandon this or that mission” and their desire that there be a “permanent priest” there. Nevertheless, it is our duty when we dialogue with them to point out the importance of Spiritan religious and missionary life and the contribution it makes to the apostolate we exercise on their behalf.

The ideal Spiritan Community should be small, preferably three rather than two, to ensure a more balanced relationship, a richer interpersonal exchange and to lessen possible tensions that might arise. Congregations making foundations in the new countries at the present time are very definite on this point. Finally, a renewal of pastoral policy along these lines will make it possible for us to spread ourselves more widely and fulfill our mission with greater efficiency.

Different kinds of Community.

The General Chapter of 1974 accepted that there could be many different kinds of Community: we could, for example, live in Community with the local clergy and with members of other Institutes. Every true Community has a real witness-value. Such Communities, which may even include lay-people and especially lay-leaders if the Superior of the District or Province approves, put the particular charisms of the individual at the disposition of all and carry our witness into the heart of the territory where we work.

The Superior-General of the Jesuits, Father Arrupe, spoke in similar terms recently: “Community life will continue to be a distinctive characteristic of religious life in the future, even though the form it takes will vary with the Institutes. It will be realised in a deeper, more apostolic way through greater interpersonal relationships in prayer and in apostolic reflection together. This will be accompanied by the conviction that this way of living must not lead to introversion but must favour a life that in spirituality and action accords with the spirit of the Institute.

Community life will be more open and lose at least in part something of the reserve which made it an unknown quantity to many. Apostolic contact will, in consequence, require greater openness and this in turn will require a style of life that gives true witness. This same contact with souls will call for changes in the way of life of a big community which if it remains closed will become an isolated institution. It should be reduced in size so that it may be a yeast at work amongst the people of God by its community of life and its participation in the real life of the world about it.

New forms of authentic community life should be envisaged which have as criterion a greater flexibility of adaptation. This will allow for a fruitful pluralism, even inside the Institute itself.”

Relationship With the Congregation

A Challenge.

In recent years, the common bond uniting all our confreres has been put to the test: “Our Missions” have now become Local Churches. It is they who are responsible for Evangelisation; it is they who determine pastoral policy; it is they who have the task of “incarnating” the Gospel in their own cultures. Our place and role has changed: we are at the service of these Churches, called to do specific work in the way they have determined. So much stress has been put upon these points that at times even our very presence in these territories was called in question. On the other hand some confreres had eyes only for the Local Church. The insistence on “incarnation” meant that we were increasingly becoming more identified with the local Church. Some even went so far as to conclude that the time for Missionary Institutes was over.

“A Spirit of Universality.”

In this situation there was danger that local Churches, even the missionaries themselves, might become too inward-looking, and that links with the Congregation might be loosened. Fortunately, this did not happen. In the light of Vatican II and the Synods of the Bishops, the local Churches grew to realise that they had co-responsibility with others for the Mission and a corresponding openness to the Universal dimension of the Church. The “Spirit of Universality” necessary for every missionary has been testified to by “Evangeli Nuntiandi”: more recently in October 1977, in his Message for Mission Sunday, Pope Paul insisted upon the same point.

New Relationships.

This openness to the spirit of universality is characteristic of the renewal in the Congrega
tion and helps to draw its members closer together. Our General Chapter of 1974 was dominated by concern for internationality. In the Enlarged General Council of 1976, the principal subjects discussed were solidarity and co-responsibility. August 1977 saw the Meeting of Young Spiritans from our Provinces and Districts and December 1977 the Meeting of Spiritan Formation Directors. About the same time the first International Teams were setting out for Angola and Pakistan. No doubt when the Enlarged General Council of 1978 meets in May we shall see further progress on the way of solidarity and the distribution of personnel, leading us still further afield. The number of conferees interested in Libermann and his original inspiration is growing. Even as our Spiritan identity is being more clearly defined, our common project is being formulated in fresh terms and our vocation in the Church becomes more universal.

While this openness of the whole Congregation is a contribution to the prevailing emphasis on the Church, the individual member of the Congregation can have a real share in it principally by his personal attachment to the Spiritan family. It is in and through this attachment that he contributes to the Universal Mission of the Church.

The Congregation and Local Churches.

At this level that the Congregation, can be most particularly helpful to Local Churches. It is true we may not identify ourselves too closely with any one: that would isolate us from the wider vocation conferred on us by the Universal Church. She asks us to give special witness to her universality and if we did not bring that witness to the local Churches, we would be failing both them and Her. It is our good fortune to be present in many different local Churches and we may not fail them. They for their part must accept that inter-Church exchange which characterises Mission today is an expression of what they themselves are expected to live and witness to. Missionary activity and sending is not all one way.

This does not make our work any easier. If faithful to our commitments we live in a state of tension between the whole-hearted dedication of ourselves to the particular Church we serve and a necessary sensitiveness to even more urgent calls and needs elsewhere, which require the whole-hearted solidarity of all our members. Only the strength of the bonds that unite us in the Spiritan family can help us to preserve the right balance between these two.

Spiritan Vocations

The Importance of A LOCAL Clergy .

At one time on the missions great importance was given to the establishment of a local clergy, essential to of a local Church. This is still a prior consideration. It also explains the reluctance of Missionary Institutes in the past to look for vocations for their own society in mission-lands. The few who did become Spiritans in those days had to accept a way of life little adapted to their own background. Their very fewness itself put them as it were on the periphery of the Congregation.

Even after the establishment of local Churches some Bishops, often for good reasons, were reluctant to see young Africans join Congregations which were not of local origin.

. . . And of RELIGIOUS-MISSIONARY Vocations.

Almost everywhere this has changed. There has been an increase in vocations to the local Churches in the Third World. More importantly, these Churches have become increasingly aware of their duty to participate in the Universal Mission of the Church. In consequence, their Bishops are happy to welcome in missionary and religious vocations.

We have a duty of cultivating such vocations in collaboration with the local Bishop and People. At home or abroad their lives will be an enrichment of their own Church and a witness to its concern for the Church and world beyond their own boundaries.

Should some of these wish to become Spiritans, then we must give them the opportunity of living the particular charism of our Congregation in accordance with their own culture. It is likewise important that they become sufficiently numerous to make their own way in a Spiritan context.

The Congregation for its part must show a great openness and flexibility where Spiritans of other cultures are concerned. She must also accept the changes their presence amongst us will bring.

It is Christ Who Calls, but . . .

At the dawn of every vocation, there is Christ: But, we too have our part to play. We must be such that young people seeking may find our houses places of prayer and fraternal sharing that answer their aspirations.

If our Communities are havens of prayer and life, giving authentic witness; if we are universal in our outlook and spirit, welcoming and open, then our hope for the future is immense. They will come and see and spend the rest of life's day with us.