9-1978

1978 Vol. 18: Spiritan Life and Spiritan Mission

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Spiritan Life and Spiritan Mission
The Enlarged Council at Knechtsden, 1978

More and more it becomes clear that the emphasis given to Mission is changing: today stress is put less on work, even apostolic work, and more on the living witness we give: the first means of evangelization is the witness of our lives. Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers it is because they are witnesses (Evan. Nunt. 41). Our Spiritan life should give this witness; but as Spiritan our Mission is also our Life: how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? ... So faith comes from what is heard and what is heard comes by the preaching of Christ (Rom. 10, 14, 17). The main themes of the Enlarged Council of 1978 were Spiritan Life and Spiritan Mission.

SPIRITAN LIFE

Prayer and Community

During the Enlarged Council at Knechtsden, the major superiors exchanged experiences of prayer and community. However general the desire for community and prayer is among Spiritans, some communities experience tension about the manner of prayer and the way of living community: a situation which one provincial described as ‘disparity of cult’.

In some communities the majority preferred traditional forms of community prayer, while others preferred shared prayer or charismatic prayer. Some would like to hold prayer meetings in the community to which people from outside would be invited; others regard such meetings as an intrusion on their privacy. Because of this opposition some confreres go outside the community to pray. There are communities where prayer meetings are held, but some feel unable to join them. Some communities recite together the Litanies, the Veni Sancte and the rosary, but not everybody attends.

In the mission districts there was sometimes, a ‘conflict of generations’ about the manner of prayer: older men often preferred the traditional forms, which younger men found repetitive and monotonous.

There was agreement about the need to pray more but different ideas about how to do it. If a community is to become a praying community, reconciliation and mutual acceptance are necessary. Existentialists must learn to understand Thomists, and the community as an institution must also become a community of Communion.

New kinds of praying communities

There is however a growing number of Spiritan communities where community is celebrated in a common Eucharist, in shared prayer and liturgical prayer. Such communities are centres of attraction for many young people who share in their prayer and community life in varying degrees. Such a community is seen as a place of evangelization for its various kinds of members. It seeks to give testimony to the gospel by a life of poverty and by work for the poor and for justice.

‘A transparent community’

A community which opens itself to others is very demanding on its members. It seeks to welcome everyone who comes, and often breaks bread with them. ‘Where do you live?’ asked the disciples of John. ‘Come and see’ was Jesus’ reply. The Spiritans are frequently put into question by visitors and friends. Young people who have shared the day’s gospel with the permanent members do not hesitate to comment adversely if they think the Spiritans’ lifestyle is not in accordance with it and if they do not seem to be men of prayer and workers for justice. Such criticism helps the Spiritan members constantly to review and improve their gospel witness: they have no cloister to take refuge in; they live in a ‘transparent community’ where they must practice what they preach.
'Come and see'

The form of prayer may vary from day to day to suit the guests who are present. It is important that such communities have good 'animators' who know how to favour the spiritual growth of all and who do not allow the community to fall into selfish routine. The community often provides instruction and spiritual direction for young people who are drawn to a life of prayer or to a religious and missionary vocation.

'The contemplative dimension of prayer'

The 'Young Spiritans' at the Enlarged Council saw Spiritan community in a similar way. Since the Spiritan charism is a special love for the poor, a Spiritan community should be characterised by the same love of its members for each other.

The Aranda meeting had asked the Spiritans to rediscover and live the contemplative dimension of prayer through the 'practical union' of which Libermann speaks. Our meetings with the Lord should become more sincere and frequent so as to make us more readily to give ourselves to his service and to the service of men.

'Eaten up by work'

The testimony of the District Superiors suggested that Spiritans find themselves challenged to a more intense prayer by the exigencies of apostolic work: their work leads them to prayer and community rather than the other way around: from work to prayer in community rather than from community and prayer to work.

Many missionaries were finding that work without prayer was spiritually impoverishing: they felt 'eaten up by work'. It was not fully true to say that prayer was prayer. The busier a man was, the more he needed time for silence and prayer - 'to go apart and rest awhile'.

Living in community

The members of the Enlarged Council also discussed the need of many confreres to live in a Spiritan community of life and work, which they saw as a necessary condition of their apostolic work.

In the name of pastoral necessity, many confreres live alone, both in the districts and in pastoral work in the provinces. It was recognised that after many years of living alone a Spiritan might find it impossible to return to community life.

The District superiors asked for a statement from the Enlarged Council which would call on all in posts of responsibility to promote and maintain common life and work in apostolic teams, whether with Spiritans or with other missionaries. The purpose of the statement was to prevent the dispersal of those living in community and to bring back to community those who wished to do so.

'Ve are religious missionaries'

In his talk on the consecrated layman in the Congregation, Brother Jean-Pierre Delsarte described a community experiment in Chevilly, inspired by the capitular texts, which was intended to discover how consecrated laymen could live together as missionaries in a larger community: they were not a kind of lesser clerics but men who had received a specific call to be missionaries in a specific missionary institute. In the course of the experiment the Brothers realized that the difference between vocations was not between priest and non-priest but was to be understood in term of ministries to be done and of the charisms necessary for the growth of the community.

What came out of the discussion which followed was the importance of us seeing ourselves as missionary religious. There may be an unconscious assumption amongst us that the priesthood is more 'important' than the religious life: that the Fathers are mainly priests and that the brothers are religious. Until the members of the Congregation accept, existentially as well as theoretically, that we are all brothers, sharing the same religious commitment, there will always be a certain alienation in the Congregation. The Chapter of 1974 has said it already:

All the members of the Congregation share in one common project. All are gathered into one fraternal community, all share in the same rights and duties in a diversity of service, the service of the priest and the service of the consecrated layman, while the equality of Fathers and Brothers is accepted, a greater effort is still needed on both sides to change attitudes and ways of acting (Guidelines, 56.57).

Are we becoming too pietistic?

During the last few years, the texts of local chapters point to the growing interest of the confreres in prayer, liturgical and charismatic, shared prayer and mental prayer; in directed retreats, days of recollection, even in houses of prayer.

At Knechtsteden, some fears were expressed of a too narrow concept of spiritual renewal. Emphasis on spiritual renewal should not lead to a dichotomy: renewal in prayer and community life should lead to a concern for and an involvement in the fight for justice and for the poor. We should beware of a 'disin-carnate' or a 'prehistoric' spirituality. Spiritual renewal should not mean a restoration of the ancien régime. Spiritans are not Carthusians: our contemplation should lead to action; we should be in actio contemplativus.

The warning was apposite: some prayer movements today seem to shun involvement in the struggle for justice in the world, and where this is so, doubt can be placed on the quality of their prayer. True prayer is standing before God: it is not self-contemplation or navel-gazing. God's first words to Moses forced him to involve himself in the struggle for justice:

I have heard the cry of the sons of Israel and I have witnessed how the Egyptians oppress them, so come! I send you to Pharaoh to bring the sons of Israel, my people, out of Egypt (Ex. 3. 9-10).

True prayer does not take us out of the world but sends us into it, as Moses, Isaiah and Jeremiah were sent. Like Paul, the missionary is:

A chosen instrument to bring the name of God before pagans and pagan kings and before the people of Israel, I myself will show him how much he must suffer in my name (Acts, 9, 15-16).
The Unity of the Spiritan Apostolic Life

Missionary activity and the religious life – which may exist separately in the Church – are united for the Spiritan in the concrete unity of one and the same response to ‘God who calls him to give himself entirely to the work of the gospel’. It follows that, for us, ‘the religious spirit belongs to the nature of the apostolic life which it animates and this in turn belongs to the nature of the religious life (CDD 20).

The other big theme of the Enlarged Council at Knechtsden was

CO-RESPONSIBILITY IN SPIRITAN MISSION

In the context of furthering the autonomy of local churches, the Chapter of 1974 asked for lists of apostolic priorities to be drawn up, for present commitments to be examined in the light of these priorities, and that these priorities be taken into account in the making of first appointments and in the exchange of personnel (Guidelines 13; 138).

A long list of Pastoral Priorities

The list was ready for the Enlarged Council in Knechtsden. It was a very long list, even though the General Council had short-listed a group of several items, from which the Enlarged Council were asked to pick three priority missionary commitments for 1978.

How to choose?

In many cases the needs expressed seemed to take for granted a permanent presence in an area and to leave unanswered the question of possible disengagement for the good of the local church. Could some of the needs be fulfilled by calling on other missionary societies or on Fidei Donum priests? One of the ‘signs of the times’ was the increasing rôle of lay-missionaries: could they not help also? The needs presented were all within our present circumscriptions: were there not greater needs outside our present commitments? We are diminishing in numbers at present: can we answer every need? How could we talk of co-responsibility in a common mission when we know there were other needs, as for example, work for immigrants, which might have priority at provincial level but which were not included in the list? Were we moving in the direction of a bi-annual lottery in which three deserving cases would be chosen to which personnel would be contributed if something were left over when the needs of the circumscriptions were fulfilled?

We sought for criteria to guide us in our choice: the needs of the Congregation as a whole, vocations, new foundations, formation, provinces in danger through serious loss of personnel; works with a sign value for the future.

Mission Priorities of 1978

In the final choice, all the priorities short-listed by the General Council were included, with the addition of the work for immigrants.

A major priority was the supply of formation personnel for the new Spiritan foundation in Angola, East Africa, Francophone Africa Brazil and Puerto Rico.

Another priority was an international team for Bethlehem in South Africa. This is a mission for which it is difficult to find volunteers. There are as yet no indigenous priests there. Of the 19 Spiritans working in the diocese, 5 are over 70 years of age. A third priority was personnel for the Missionary Animation Centre in Gentinnes, Belgium. Since the Kongolo massacres, the Province has been going through a difficult period: vocations are nil and unless help comes from outside the province, Gentinnes will have to close.

The Enlarged Council approved five other priorities. As a sign of the need to reanimate old works in the provinces, it approved of the formation of a qualified team for Auteuil. It declared work for immigrants to be a missionary priority. It approved of a team to evangelize the Manjaque tribe in Guinea-Bissau. As a sign of the need some districts have for personnel, the diocese of Bafia in the Cameroun, of Kindu in Zaire and the international team in Mexico received special mention. The urgent need the Congregation has for theological and other specialists was also noted.

The International Teams

The strengthening of the international teams in Pakistan, Paraguay and Angola remain as priorities. In Angola teams are required for the formation of basic communities and for the training of community leaders. It is hoped that young Angolan Spiritans will be incorporated into these teams during the period of team-formation. We are still at an experimental stage in the Pakistan foundation: visa problems make it likely that future members will come from Commonwealth countries, such as Britain, Nigeria, East Africa, Canada, and also from Ireland. There are still great missionary needs in Paraguay.
International formation for the Mission

The Enlarged Council approved of the Summer Experience of International Formation, which will take place in 1979. This will give a fairly large number of young Spiritans an experience of several weeks in international living together. International formation is necessary in view of future international teams. Internationality meets the requirement of mission today, which takes place in the context of a universal church, without boundaries or frontiers (Evan. Nunt. 61). International teams may be 'the shape of things to come': not bizarre alternatives to the present Districts but new structures which gradually, over the years, will replace the present Districts.

Questions for the future

When the revised list of eight priorities was presented to the Enlarged Council, the list was voted without discussion and without perceptible enthusiasm. In 1976 there was a certain euphoria: it was easy to visualise a few small teams. With the cooperation of the Provinces the General Council could have its international teams just as the Provinces have their Districts. Did we try to please as many as possible by putting eight items on the list instead of three? Will we be as equally committed to the eight priorities as we were to the three of 1976? We can hardly say to the Province of Belgium or to the District of Bethlehem, "I wish you well; keep yourself warm and eat plenty", without giving them the bare necessities of life" (cf. James 2,16). If the concept of co-responsibility for the common missionary Project of the Congregation is to grow in meaning, we must think in future of the mission of the Congregation as a whole, and see the needs of our particular Spiritan circumscription in this context; and we must not see the missionary priorities of the Congregation as a sort of alms-box to which we contribute when other personnel needs have been fulfilled. Just as personal projects should be fitted into the Project of the Congregation (Guidelines 60) so also the projects of circumscriptions. As the Congregation grows rapidly smaller, its survival will depend on this co-responsibility, on this internationality.

THE GENERAL CHAPTER OF 1980

The Enlarged Council also decided that the General Chapter of 1980 should have for subject THE SPIRITAN LIFE. The Chapter will therefore be concerned with Spiritual Renewal for Mission, and will also be a sharing together of the new directions the Congregation is taking. We need objectives that are clear and accepted and our life-style must be in conformity with them. Spiritan life means involvement in the struggle for justice.

A Celebration

The Chapter of 1978 is to be a celebration. The delegates will live together the Spiritan life in Chevilly and will go back as 'animators' to their circumscriptions. It will not be a study-session. Celebration is not the attitude of one who goes to the Chapter to secure victory for his own thesis. The poles of reference will be from the actual living of the Spiritan life to its celebration in faith. It will be a celebration as the Eucharist is a celebration.

The day the Enlarged Council closed, the Office of readings provided an apt quotation:

Celebrate then, as members of the one body of Christ. Your celebration will not be in vain if you are what you celebrate, if you hold fast to the Church which the Lord filled with his Holy Spirit; he acknowledges it as his own as it grows all over the world and is himself acknowledged as his Church.

The unknown African author was speaking of the celebration of Pentecost: let us pray that the Chapter of 1980 be also a celebration of Pentecost.

"... A Chapter is always a 'paschal celebration'... with everything Easter contains in relation to the cross and hope, to death and resurrection. A Chapter is not a mere study meeting, a superficial gathering or a short-lived revision of life... It is above all a 'penitential' celebration which aims at living two things deeply: a sincere attitude of conversion and a deep and painful search for the Lord's ways. God's ways must be discovered every day in pain and in hope. Because it is a 'penitential' celebration, a Chapter is always carried on in the joy and sincerity of brotherly charity.

How important it is to stress the penitential aspect of a Chapter! It means a serene and profound examination of conscience, with the consequent change of mentality and life; and it means a painful search for God's will in the present necessities of consecrated life... What can we do so that consecrated life may really be to-day a sign of the holiness of God and of the presence of his Kingdom?

But, being a real paschal celebration, it is not just the penitential aspects that interest us in a Chapter. It is its whole dimension of paschal newness -- of creation in the Spirit -- and of firm committed hope. Every Chapter must leave a sensation of freshness in the Church, a good dose of paschal optimism, if the Chapter has been celebrated well in an attitude of poverty, prayer and brotherly charity..."  (Cardinal Edoardo Pironio, Prefect of the S.C. of Religious. The full text is to be found in the English Edition of the Osservatore Romano, 16/6/76).

Published by Frs. J. Godard & G.W. Fitzgerald, C.S.Sp., Information Office, 195 Clivo di Chima, ROME (Italy)