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The Generalate Team

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One Heart
and one Soul

"Do the Spiritans still want Brothers? If so, for what Mission do they want them?"

This question was asked by one of the Brothers at the Aranda meeting. This Brother was 45 years old and was the spokesman for about ten young Brothers who were at the meeting with him.

The question is asked of us, but it is also a question for all the clerical institutes which have Brothers as members. They are all in danger of seeing the presence of these religious men in their midst diminish at first, and then disappear altogether. It will happen, unless the "clerical" members undergo the necessary conversion. A Brother must receive full re-recognition in his religious family and find a genuine place there.

As Spiritans, we are at a critical threshold in the Congregation as a whole. Only three or four Provinces still have vocations to the Brothers and are preparing them according to contemporary methods. The other Provinces have, at best, one or other isolated candidate, or none at all. The longer this goes on, and the Brothers already with us grow older, the less hope there is of attracting young men to join an aging group.

That is why we are sounding the alarm! If we make only vague resolutions, the Spiritan consecrated layman will disappear. We will become a congregation of clerics and be very much the poorer both in our life and in our mission. And that at the precise moment when we are living in an age of renewal of the laity. In such an age, it is a great good fortune for an institute to have consecrated laymen among its members. It is a great advantage for the Mission at a time when priests and laymen are being called to work together more and therefore have more need of one another than ever before. If the Mission "has a new image", should not the Brothers also have a new image?

If the Brothers were to disappear, it would be a serious loss to the very life of the Congregation. We now have about 500 Brothers. Ever since the Congregation began, everybody has borne witness to the depth of their religious life. They have made an irreplaceable contribution to Spiritan life.

Once more we are called to conversion so that we may renew the Congregation and its Mission and live our Spiritan Life better.

Let's be clear about it: the presence of the Brothers is something which goes right to the heart of our Spiritan existence: WHO ARE WE? It is a question which tests our motto: "ONE HEART AND ONE SOUL" (Acts 4:32). If that motto is an evangelical ideal for any Christian community, how much more is it so for a religious community!
"Happy to be a Brother"

"I cannot really see how the Brothers of the future will evolve. I am quite happy with our present status. There is complete harmony between priests and brothers. A brother’s life in the present climate of the world is difficult as indeed is that of the priest and it is not easy to attract people to our way of life. I am only too well aware of the good work we can do and are doing." (An Irish Brother, 50 years old).

"My own reason for becoming a Brother and for continuing to be one is that it gives me a chance to fulfill my desire to help those who need us. I can help them very effectively through my apostolate as a Brother with technical training. I can help the most abandoned in their professional development as Christians. I can help the poorest to develop as human beings and to become better able to surmount the hardships of their life. However, in the documents about the Brothers, you should give enough importance to the value of their apostolate through their technical and professional training." (A Brazilian Brother, 28 years old).

"I remained because I was able to feel fulfilled in my work in Africa . . . I am organizing a small productions workshop for young men from very deprived and disturbed backgrounds. I am just another member of the group. I organize, manage, design and instruct. We manufacture joinery and furniture products at present and may extend into other fields later. I would like to get other Christians to help and extend the scheme to other areas of the city." (An Irish Brother in Gambia, 38 years old).

"What sustained me in my vocation was the witness to the primacy of spiritual values in religious life . . . We accepted many aspects in our Religious life in our early years without much questioning . . . in this more enlightened modern age, many wonderful things have evolved in recent years, and I am so grateful for them and to be living in this age of challenge. We must now question in an open and sincere manner, and thus equip ourselves better to face the new demands made on us today." (An Irish Brother, 57 years old).

Where formation is concerned

Spain, France and Portugal have drawn the conclusions inherent in this real brotherliness, and applied them to formation:

"The Province of Spain, in its DIRECTORY, has tried from the start to open the way for there to be only one category of Spiritans. The results have been good.

Recruitment is the same for all. Candidates who have not had a basic formation receive it in one of our houses. Then they are given the specifically Spiritan formation, including the novitiate. Finally comes their specialized formation according to personal aptitudes and the needs of the Mission. In line with this, three of our scholastics are doing technical studies in Health Care, while the others are studying theology. This does not mean that we consider the first three "Brothers"; neither do they look at it that way.

There are three of us ‘Brothers’ of the Province who received the old-style formation. One of us works in the missions and two of us in the Province. Personally, I am fully integrated into the work of the Province and I don’t feel the need to wonder whether I am a Brother or not." (A Spanish Brother, 44 years old).

Different kinds of service

"The fulfillment (of our Brotherhood) is possible if we look upon all of us as missionaries. No one is the servant of anybody else. We are recognized,
TO THE BROTHERS

they have something to say to us.

What of to-morow?

"I think the whole question of Brothers in the Congregation (I can only speak for Ireland) should be examined, as to whether we should continue to recruit or let them, like old soldiers, fade away! In other words, are Brothers really needed today in the Congregation, have they a part to play, – food for thought, there is no doubt." (An Irish Brother, age not given).

"I think if we are serious about Brothers in looking for vocations, there should be a Brother on vocations, at least as an experiment." (An Irish Brother, 39 years old).

The "other things Jesus did"

"Seven years before I entered the novitiate, when I was in the third year of medical school, I took private vows. Up until the end of my studies I was tempted to commit myself to the service of the Church as a priest and several times I almost entered the seminary. My family was always against it and told me I should first make sure I had qualified in a profession. I followed their advice. The outcome is that I am finding in my work in Africa as a doctor more than I ever dared to hope for. Meantime, I saw all around me any number of priests going through crises..."

"When I entered the novitiate, I was ready for anything, but I had a feeling that my profession as a doctor ought to have a place in my commitment as a religious. During the novitiate, nobody imposed the idea of the priesthood upon me. In fact, it was in dialogue with my Superiors that I came to understand that the Lord was calling me to serve Him as a religious-missionary bringing the Good News of salvation in Jesus Christ through relieving the sufferings of the poor. At the time I did not know what a "Spiritual Brother" was; I only knew that, at least for the moment, I did not want to be a priest, and that in spite of some unconscious pressure from some of my confreres and from many nuns. It was only at the meeting in Spain that I "found out" that I was a Brother. It made me very happy. I want to remain a Brother and I feel completely at ease with my confreres who are priests.

"It is true that the range of a Brother's work can go all the way from a so-called "material trade" to a completely pastoral activity, but I see my place as a Brother as a complement to that of the Father. The Father is more exclusively given over to the service of the Word of God and he has received the charism to interpret it with authority. He is also in the service of the Breaking of Bread in the community. The Brother is rather the incarnation of those "other things that Jesus did". This is perhaps only one man's way of looking at things and some priests may be miffed at seeing themselves "relegated" to the purely spiritual; but what I am saying is not absolute, – it lends itself to all sorts of nuances around its central meaning.

"What I like about our status as Brothers is the simplicity of our commitment. It allows us to be very close to lay people and to remind them that they are called to holiness just as much as we are. What distinguishes us from them is our official commitment to the Church and our way of understanding and living poverty." (A Belgian Brother who is also a medical doctor, 31 years old).

Chevilly: the concrete experience of one group

For a few years now in Chevilly (France) a group of Brothers – both young ones and some not so young – have been conducting a study and an experiment. Jean-Pierre DELSARTE, a French Brother, 38 years old, told the 1978 Enlarged Council about what his community is doing.

"... We had had enough of the old "anticlericalism", enough of criticizing Chapter texts... We wanted to see WHAT LIFE HAD TO SAY. We tried to realize and to demonstrate that we were men, Christians following a definite call within a particular Institute. We wanted to be wholly Religious-Missionaries.

"So for three years we placed ourselves at the service of a large community, that of Chevilly. We formed a small group within that big community, but that was not without its problems. The older men took a dim view of the fact that the "younger Brothers" were living separately. One Father was astonished that a Brother could have the moral responsibility for the group! There were problems too with some of our group who wanted to live as consecrated laymen, – but outside Chevilly. Our difficulties were solved when we took on a common project: the renovation of Chevilly to provide suitable quarters for our retired confreres and also for housing the groups which were coming in ever greater numbers. This gave us a chance to work professionally along with other workmen on the job, and also to be hosts to various groups, to give witness of our religious and missionary life to people who spent a few days with us. Thanks to our professional life, our apostolic life and our prayer life, we stayed together. Three of our Brothers have chosen to do their novitiate within our group...

At the end of their report to the 1978 Enlarged Council, this Chevilly group of Brothers asked the whole Congregation this question:

"Does the Spiritual Congregation today want Spiritans who are not priests and who exercise a ministry different from the priestly ministry?"

"If it does, what steps is it going to take to arrive at a recognition of the several different ways of "being a Spiritan"?"
"YES" TO THE BROTHERS

To the question: "Does the Congregation still want Brothers?" the Generalate Team answers without hesitation: Yes!

Yes, because we want to be loyal to all the Brothers who, today as in the past, have committed their lives to the Congregation.

Yes, even more so because of the Spiritan community. Every Brother is one of God's gifts to the Congregation. By reason of his person, because of what he is, because of his life as a religious, he is a gift to the community, helping us to live together our common vocation within the Mission of the Church.

Yes, still more because of the Mission. Today, and even more tomorrow, laymen are an integral part of evangelization. Vatican II said this very clearly. Their function, which is important in the human community, will be equally important in the Christian community. It is through them that the Gospel will get deep down into the lives, the cultures, the structures of society; through them also "Justice and Peace" will gain its full stature. Thanks to this renewal of the role of lay people, evangelization will have a new upsurge, and even more so, by renewal of consecrated laymen. By making religious profession the consecrated layman gives himself totally to God and His service within the project of the Institute. He consecrates himself totally to the proper and irreplaceable vocation of the layman in the Mission.

The Mission is the work of everybody, priests and lay people. It is a fortunate religious-missionary Institute that counts both priests and lay people among its members. This renews its missionary vision and is a sign of the fact that the Mission is accomplished by priests and laymen in the diversity and complementarity of their ministries. If they are not conscious of the necessity for them to collaborate in the service of the same Gospel, neither group will renew the Church and the Mission. That is what is at stake for our Congregation today.

We are challenged

Our affirmative answer entails for all Spiritans a new way of looking at the consecrated layman. By that very fact, it entails many changes. So many Institutes refuse to make them and disappear because they do not move with the new currents and accept the required conversion! From this very point of view, the consecrated layman is a challenge to us.

First, we must be converted

The most important conversion we need — and it is much more far-reaching than just our choice in favour of consecrated laymen — is to become genuinely conscious of our "being Spiritan". When will we get over our habit of looking at ourselves and defining ourselves as "Father" or "Brother"? By religious profession and according to our common vocation we are all RELIGIOUS MISSIONARIES! We are all consecrated to God and His service. Called in the Church and for her Mission, we ALL follow a common vocation. That is the very foundation of our fraternal community in which we are all "brothers"; it is the very foundation of our unity, of our rights and obligations — the same for all.

Conversion would mean this: Father or Brother, our particular service can no longer be the point of reference which divides us into classes and thereby determines our powers and our duties. As Spiritans we are religious missionaries and we live out that common call in DIVERSITY according to our mission in the Church. "There are different services and ministries, but all are for the common good." (cf. 1 Cor. 12). The priest has a service to render which is irreplaceable. So has the Brother. They are complementary to one another. Our conversion is the sincere recognition of THE PROPER AND IRREPLACEABLE VOCATION OF THE BROTHER.

But, a Brother for what Mission?

No one will be surprised if we do not have a ready and irrefutable answer. We are only at the dawn of a new missionary epoch, as Paul VI said. The same is true of the new mission of the laity and of the consecrated layman.

It is possible, however, to point out a few paths. When the Brother gives himself totally to God and His service according to our common vocation, he is a witness to the Gospel. He lives that witness in various services and ministries within the human and Christian community. When he exercises his profession, he gives it an apostolic dimension. By means of his profession he can gain access to places where the Gospel cannot enter, in countries where the political regime excludes a direct apostolate. There are countries where, by means of international work-teams, only Brothers could gain admission, provided they are highly qualified professionally.

In addition, the Brothers' profession, human though it be, has in itself an apostolic value. This is true in the domain of education, of development, of health... admittedly, some professions have this apostolic orientation more than others. But there is a more important element: the living these diverse ministries as a team, a fraternal community, Fathers and Brothers, in order to witness to Christ and His Mission.

What needs to be changed?

This kind of a perspective presupposes an evolution away from our present "clerical" status. However, the current situation — of the reform of Canon Law — makes it imprudent, to say the least, to ask for a change of status. If there are situations in which Canon Law in its present state hinders us from practising equality between Fathers and Brothers as we ought to and as our two most recent General Chapters explicitly wished, we know that we can get whatever exceptional permissions are needed (such permissions have already been obtained).

There are many changes which only depend upon ourselves; e.g. a more demanding formation on both the professional and the theological level according to each one's capabilities. In some Provinces there is already a part of formation which is common to all candidates to the Spiritan life. Only afterwards should there be diversification in view either of further professional education or of the priestly ministry.

And then, above and beyond the exigencies of formation, we can change many a local habit in our communities, and, first of all, in our way of thinking, so that all of us, religious missionaries, will be truly "BROTHERS".