1979 Vol. 22: Our Spiritan Commitment to Justice and Peace

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Our Spiritan Commitment to...

**Justice and Peace**

1845  
"(The Missionaries) will be the advocates, the supporters and defenders of the weak and small against all who would oppress them."  
(Libermann: Provisional Rule – N.D. II, 256).

1971  
"The fight for justice is a constitutive element of Gospel-preaching, which is the mission of the Church for the liberation of all forms of oppression."  
(Synod of Bishops, 1971.)

1978  
"In union with the Sacred Congregation of Religious ... we are convinced of the bonds that unite evangelisation to human development and we are determined to convey this message more efficaciously to our religious brethren throughout the world"  

1979  
"The human conscience, the conscience of the nations, the cry of the poor and above all, the voice of God, the voice of the Church, with me, say to you: 'it is not just, it is not human, it is not Christian, to maintain certain situations which are manifestly unjust'".  

It is not our intention to use the above quotations as a pad from which to launch religious life on a "new" and ill-conceived path. On the contrary reference to God, to whom our lives are consecrated in Obedience, Poverty and Chastity, is of the very essence of our religious state. We believe we have made this sufficiently clear in recent publications, when we spoke of SPIRITUAL RENEWAL and its consequences in the practical order: of all that concerns indeed our relationship to God.

What follows therefore is intended to complement what we have already said. Its purpose is to remind us that our common sharing in the Gospel message embraces also another relationship and calls for another renewal: the RENEWAL OF COMMUNITY and of COMMITMENT, in the fullest sense, to THE SERVICE OF MEN.

Religious Life and Apostolic Action are inseparable from each other. Each calls for the support of the other. Thus, the spiritual renewal of Spiritans and of Spiritan Communities inspires renewed dedication and generosity in the service of the Mission, of the poor and the oppressed; which presented to the Lord is a source of deeper interior life.

Not without reason, human language distinguishes between those elements in our lives which are most closely united when it describes us as "RELIgious-MISSIONARIES". That is indeed the very core of our vocation but it also indicates why we must always expect difficulty in preserving the delicate balance between the two. Torn between thirst for God and desire to feed the hungry multitude of men, Father LAVAL and many others like him, remind us that this dilemma is by no means new.

**Why get actively involved?**

The "sins of society" are as old as the world. There have always existed countries or social classes where human rights were ignored or injustice elevated into a system, in which the full development of the human person was unknown, misunderstood or simply reserved to an elite. The same is unfortunately true also in our day.

In latter years nonetheless, and more especially since Vatican Council II, and the publication of certain pontifical documents on world-problems, the world has become more sensitive to questions of justice, peace and poverty. Organisations have grown up in defence of human rights, and the means of mass-communication have been widely used to propagate this new sense of human solidarity. Religious are themselves more clear on where their duty lies and the part they have to play in this movement to make ours a better world.

Apart from the challenge this presents to us religious, Pope Paul VI clearly presented in "Evangelii Nuntiandi" the nature of the problem:

"Between evangelisation and human advancement – development and liberation – there are in fact profound links. These include links of an anthropological order, because the man to be evangelised is not an abstract being but is subject to social and economic questions. There are also links in the theological order, since one cannot dissociate the plan of Creation from the plan of Redemption. The latter plan touches the very concrete situations of injustice..."
to be combatted and of justice to be restored. They include links of the eminently evangelical order, which is that of charity: how in fact can we proclaim the new commandment without promoting in justice and peace the true authentic advancement of man?" (Ev. Nun. Ch 3, No. 31: C.T.S. London.)

More recently, the Union of Superiors-General, in June 1978, having spent four days reflecting on "THE COMMITMENT OF RELIGIOUS TO HUMAN DEVELOPMENT", felt compelled to pass a resolution, which we consider sufficiently important to quote:

"As Superiors-General we see the full development of people as a very important task of our religious mission to the world. It is moreover our conviction that spiritual development is inseparable from human development, in its socio-economic and politico-cultural aspects. We strongly support the legitimate aspirations of people to be self-sufficient and to decide their own destiny, while acknowledging their desire to grow in union with the most developed countries of the world.

"The poor of the world enjoy evangelical priority. With renewed determination, we wish to express our commitment to the realisation of their aspirations. That means for us new apostolic undertakings, in conformity with the needs and circumstances of time and place, as well as an effort on our part to make our rich brethren more aware of their responsibilities to those for whom life is a continual struggle. That demands that our religious communities be more flexible in facing up to the new needs. It requires also a greater readiness to re-evaluate our traditional apostolic works so that they may measure up more efficaciously to the requirements of the day.

"Finally, it is our conviction that the evangelical life calls us as members of Religious Institutes to play a prophetic and critical role. It is not however our intention to consider our-
selves an elite nor to assume a triumphalist attitude. The Gospel spirit truly lived has inevitably a prophetic aspect. Faced with forces destructive of man, it is our wish to proclaim the inherent dignity and value of the human person. Faced with a consumer society which enslaves, we wish to stress, by the simplicity of our lives, the true liberty of the children of God which should be found in spiritual and human values. Where so many of our brothers suffer injustice and evident oppression, we cannot be silent. We seek a response to their problems which is faithful to the principles of the Gospel and inspired by Christian charity. Above all, we recognise that the personal and collective witness of our way of life is essential to any prophetic role we may adopt.

No longer therefore may a religious hide behind some so-called statement of the Church in order to lead a quiet life and avoid being involved in the efforts made by his contemporaries. No longer may he blandly proclaim: "Of course, for my part, I never meddle in politics". We see only too clearly how such abstentions, such silences, contribute to the continuance of unjust policies and regimes.

With "Populorum Progressio" the Church spoke out 10 years ago and has repeatedly intervened since in the same sense. And yet some to-day, with tongue in cheek and not without reason, say... that it is "Populorum Regressio" we should be writing about. It is easy to find excuses for this that let us off the hook. Thus: it is not our fault that the United Nations is powerless and that the gap grows between the rich nations and the poor: it is not our fault that some rulers of poor countries get rich so quickly: it is not our fault, as we know too well: the root of the evil is in the hearts of those who will not be converted!

"MY" Responsibility

WE KNOW... and yet, is it so sure that I can do nothing, that these matters are beyond me? Is it so sure that I am not looking for the easy way out?

"Good luck to the Prophets".

In face of such unacceptable situations, whether I see it or not, voices have been raised as witness to the Gospel or the dignity of man, such as those of Dr Martin-Luther KING and Mahatma GANDHI. Both rejected violent solutions, both died violently in defence of peaceful answers. Both were sustained by a faith, or at least a hope, that should be our own:

"Still I dream, thanks to this faith, that we shall be able to banish temptations to despair and to throw new light on the darkness of pessimism. Yes, thanks to this faith, we shall be able to hasten the day when peace will reign on earth and good will to men. That will be a wondrous day, the morning stars will sing together and the sons of God cry out with joy". (M-L. KING. The Real Revolution.)

Comfortably installed in an arm-chair, it is easy to admire such prophets, while reflecting: "excellent! Yes, I see his point of view but isn't he a little idealist"?

To which the answer is: "Certainly not"! Listen again to Martin-Luther KING, who wrote:

"I feel it impossible to have any affection for someone who attacks my home. I find it impossible to have sympathy for someone who exploits me. It is not possible for me to have sympathy for someone who crushes me under a burden of injustice. Nor is it impossible to sympathetise with one who, day and night, seeks to kill me. And yet, Jesus reminds me that love is good-will, all-embracing, creative, redemptive, of all men. I believe it is there we take our stand as a people in our struggle for social justice. In this struggle we will never draw back but, in our action, we will never abandon the privilege that is ours: the privilege of loving.". (The Power of Love).

"The risk for me is too great!"

"Fine words butter no parsnips"; how especially applicable that is to religious called to be witnesses of love. We must translate our belief in action: faith without good works is dead, says the Apostle. At the same time, we may legitimately ask if active involvement may not be a danger to our faith or our religious consecration. Only a factual appraisal of
what has happened can answer that. And the facts appear to be as follows.

Concern for the social aspects of human affairs has given a new look to many traditional forms of apostolate. To-day, Spiritans are to be found in the great capital cities of Europe or America, engaged in the apostolate of immigrants, to take one example; and also in the depths of the forests of the Amazon, trying to protect the local Indians from exploitation by the powerful capitalist multi-nationals. They labour too in the basic communities of Paraguay, encouraging their people to develop in a manner worthy not only of their human dignity but also of their dignity as children of God: while in New York and the Bahamas others dedicate themselves to the service of groups of Haitians living in isolation an existence of inexpressible poverty and insecurity. Some of these confreres of ours have known what it is to be rejected by old friends in consequence of their election and have found new ones. But, whatever the cost to them, we can assert that the Mission has gained greater credibility because of their choice.

It would be a pariah, however faithful to the Gospel, could be carried out without problems and difficulties. Such commitments, undertaken in loyalty even to Christ’s teaching, are often linked unfortunately (perhaps, it is a measure of our past failure) to political views and positions which are open to criticism. Sometimes too the sense of attachment to the Congregation falls into second place, and in recent years many defections may be traced to this. But, even well before this, how many problems arise: tensions and misunderstanding with confreres; criticism of institutions, even religious ones; questions of financial independence arising out of the earning of personal income and so on. The urgent needs of the poor has, at times, led to many over-simplifications, such as a certain distaste for serious or prolonged study. More seriously, conflicts with Governments, even with the local Hierarchy in some places, has put to the test not merely the human but the spiritual equilibrium of those in question.

Yes, there is no purpose in hiding the fact that the dangers do exist. But, our purpose in drawing attention to them, even with some degree of bluntness, is not to discourage those who have so bravely put themselves in the front line but rather to help them see more clearly what the difficulties are, so that they may take all the means possible of reducing them to a minimum.

"Such questions are beyond me"!

That is readily understandable. Nevertheless, between blissful ignorance (or the easy answer!) and specialised knowledge there is room for a deeper examination of problems not considered in Seminaries 50, 25, even 15 years ago.

Reading an article on the increasing cost of primary materials and the consequences of that, am I willing to study and discuss the question or do I prefer to go along blindly as before?

Faced with the reality of inflation, unemployment, strikes and terrorism, am I willing to look for the underlying causes?

Equally, while recognising that it is the fashion — and rightly so — to criticise the Consumer Society, am I aware that at least in a certain type of society reduced consumption gives rise to problems of industrial paralysis and under-employment?

"All I can"!

There is evidently no wish to send all Spiritans to man the barricades in the struggle for justice, wherever it exists. The question we put is much more practical: "What can you do? What should you do: to establish Christ’s reign of Justice and of Peace on earth?"

"How should I act?"

In loyalty to the Church and our Religious Consecration.

Responsibility for the restoration of the temporal order in accordance with God’s Plan falls upon the laity and not upon us. Neither will our place as religious in the modern world be more clearly determined by "a priori" definitions of what religious may or may not do by contrast with activities recognised as the proper concern of the layman.

We shall rediscover our specific role and proper identity, rather by trying to read "the signs of the times" in the light of Faith. This will enable us to decide more easily at what levels and on what precise points we should intervene in temporal affairs in order to present more effectively the message confided to us. It is the global vision of the Church which should inspire us in our mission. It is that we are called to project in our consecrated lives and our social commitments at all times and without counting the cost to ourselves. To safeguard this Christian vision and the religious character of our vocation, while being involved in matters of their nature partial and contingent is probably our greatest challenge to-day.

To preserve this religious character of her mission and protect her apostolic freedom in promoting human development, the Church in consequence asks those (priests and religious) most closely associated with her mission to keep a prudent distance, sometimes even to abstain from involvement in certain activities. Amongst such activities might be classed those expressive of too personal or too prejudiced interests, those whose means to achieve their end are questionable, those suspect because of the particular historical context in which they take place. In summary, we are invited to refrain from engagement in activities less likely to give witness to the more spiritual, more absolute and transcendent values in human development. This would apply more particularly to direct political action and especially leadership of or militant involvement in certain political parties or movements.

Though we should always live close to men and have their problems at heart, we must also live close to and have at heart what the Gospel requires of us. So, we should act independently of and above all social or political ideologies of left or right, which are often partial and prejudiced in their views, ambiguous and demanding of their adherents and can lead us away from our primary commitment.

Certainly, the radicalism of our religious witness, as testimony to Christ and because of these reservations, will be a sign of contradiction in the modern world. And yet, it is only in this way that it can be a sign of hope and liberation.
Looking Ahead: The General Chapter.

The General Chapter of 1980 proposes to focus attention on SPIRITAN LIFE. Our preparation for it should provide an opportunity to express our views on the charism and commitments of the Congregation, on the unity and plurality of these commitments and their authenticity as well as their community aspects. As a Congregation, we have no reason to be ashamed of our record. We have seen in our visits to Provinces and Districts the continuation of a long and noble tradition of work for human development, for more just and humane conditions of life.

Nonetheless, we should work ever more closely with local organisations of Justice and Peace. We should be sensitive to the fact that in missions abroad we are usually foreigners. Decisions therefore should be made on a Community basis. However heroic inopportuné personal pronouncements may seem, however sincere, they are least likely to lead to the good solutions we desire.

In our Communities.

Given how widespread injustice is in the world today, it would be surprising indeed to find that all our communities were models of perfection in this respect. Let us question ourselves. Let us see if our criteria for evaluating our confreres and their work for or determining the working hours, conditions and salaries of those we employ, are in accordance with the Gospel? Is it not at this lowly level, first of all, that we give living authentic witness to Justice? Our life-style too is something we should examine. Imported overseas, the way of life of rich countries risks becoming the ideal on which the developing countries model themselves.

And, what of our Vow of Poverty? Should it not also take into account the “signs of the times”? Our style of live will be truly prophetic only insofar as we understand the influences that condition the lives of our contemporaries.

Many communities in Europe, America, even Africa at times, make provision in their regulations for seeing Television News. This half-hour has become part of the “daily ritual” of “traditional community recreation”. Without wishing to pass judgment, it is surely in order to ask what effect the things we see and hear on T.V. have on our lives of prayer and fraternal exchange and on our commitments. Are we sufficiently critical in our approach to these powerful media of communication, which can at times influence our judgements and our ways of acting?

Is there not also a danger that, faced with possible commitments which concern the whole community, we say or do nothing lest we create tension between confreres: or conversely, the danger of imposing ideas in an atmosphere charged with emotion and passion? How often are judgements vilified or stances taken too hastily because of prejudices of one kind or another.

On the Personal Level.

Each of us is a person in his own right and so, there can be no imposing a uniform way of thinking on all. Still, given our own personality, should we not be ready to question ourselves loyally before God and our confreres? How many are the opportunities missed, how many false certitudes retained, because we do not avail of the possibility of reflection, of questioning and of discussion provided us through meetings, lectures, slide-projections, film-shows, etc. Admittedly, many problems are very complex and it is all too easy to bury our heads in the sand rather than consider them objectively, with a readiness to learn and an effort to understand.

Again, I am painfully aware that some of my confreres have made choices, or undertaken commitments that I find difficult to understand and with which I disagree. Does that excuse me from maintaining charitable relations with them? And what if one day they decide to withdraw from the Congregation because of lack of fraternal contact or interest? Rather than say: “I told you so”, should we not be at least a little disturbed that perhaps it is we who failed them.

It is true, not all our commitments are on the same level. In some dioceses missionaries have compromised themselves by their actions, and bishops by their statements. But, at least, each in his own area collaborates wholeheartedly in the interest of the poor and oppressed. Can we not have something of the same unity in our communities, centred around projects that are truly common? Rightly, “personal projects” have come in for criticism at times. Yet, to be fair, were some of them not an answer to an apostolic call, undertaken where those in authority had not the courage to take up a position: and have not some of them since been accepted and adopted by Provinces and Districts?

There are a thousand and one other practical problems which we cannot discuss now. What is important, what is essential always, is our readiness to accept with poverty and humility of spirit other people, other view-points, other ways of realising Christ’s Mission; our readiness to be always open of mind and heart: “spiritually” to be converted and live!

“Do not be obstinate in your ideas, do not be unyielding” (N.D. 6, 322). “All inflexibility of will, all reliance on yourself and your own ideas must disappear, must be destroyed” (N.D. 13, 144). “Should it happen that you are not of the same opinion as your confreres, sink you own personal judgement in the judgement of the generality. Te-naciuousness of one’s own ideas is one of the greatest evils of men who live together” (N.D. 4, 458).

That’s what Father Libermann asked of his followers. More recently, another prophet of his day challenges us in almost identical terms. Mgr Helder CAMARA (in the review, APORTAS, Bogota, Jan 1978) writes:

“History is inexorable; God, also, will demand an account of the graces we have received...

Let us learn the only true prudence, that of the Spirit. Let us learn to despise the prudence of the flesh, of egoism, of opportunism, of fear and the spirit of careerism and of compromise...

Let us at least have the courage to free ourselves from ourselves, from our egoism, our certitudes, our halos of prestige and power, so that our option in favour of the poor and the oppressed be clearly defined.”