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1980 Vol. 26: Called to a New Life; A Six-Year Program

The Generalate Team

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THE GENERALATE TEAM

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Called to a New Life
A Six-Year Program

During its plenary sessions in November, the Generalate Team reflected on the main points of the General Chapter. In this first of a new series of I/Ds, we offer a few aspects of our reflection. The field is too large to be covered all at once. We wish here to call attention to a few general points, a few calls from the Chapter and conversions that it asks of us as a program for the next six years. We will take up the main points more in detail in subsequent issues.
We hope in this way to be of some help to you in your reflection on the 1980 Chapter, but we are sure that you yourselves will find many other aspects worth studying and meditating upon.

We are now at the final stage of the General Chapter: the follow-up. It is always a decisive stage, the time when the grain becomes wheat, when the word takes flesh. It is up to each of us now to renew the covenant that the Lord on his side once more renews with the Congregation. It is a moment of grace that demands prayer and reflection. To make it bear fruit will require as much time and effort as went into the preparation of the Chapter. The Chapter documents that you have just received are not merely a record of the Chapter, or even a collection of conclusions that the capitulants agreed upon. They are the result of an experience of faith through which the Holy Spirit wishes to speak to the Congregation and renew with each of you the covenant that will allow Him to open up for our Congregation new paths for the "progress of the Word". They are our program of life for the next six years. We must put it into all our resources of mind and heart. We must 'pray' these documents and listen to them.

Renewing our vision

"... having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which He has called you" (Eph. 1:18).

"I am grateful for the exceptional grace of the Chapter, which has made me realize that I belong to a group that is alive and capable of renewing itself, a group in which mutual relations are truly fraternal."

These remarks of a capitulant, in his final evaluation of the Chapter, bring us to the heart of its message. What had the greatest effect on the capitulants was not what was written but what was lived. The Chapter was above all a lived experience. We shared, of course, our worries, hopes, projects and dreams. But what we lived was above all our 'Spiritanness' — that dimension of our lives (difficult to put into words) in which each one finds his identity, in faith. Beyond differences in points of view, types of work and actual situations, each one finds his deeper self in a community born not of flesh or of blood, but of God. It is not surprising that the celebrations that the capitulants found most moving were those of our unity, at the moment of the Superior General's re-election, and of fidelity to our original inspiration, in the pilgrimages to Saverne and to the tomb of the Venerable Father. The sharing of "the hope that is within us", of our family life, of the wonders that God works through our brothers, were at the heart of the Chapter. The texts give some indication of this. When Paul visited his communities and shared their experiences in the faith, he always looked back at them with a fresh vision and feelings of wonder, which he expressed in his letters, along with gratitude for the graces that God had given them.
This fresh vision, springing from our vocation and the grace that is within us, is the first call that the Chapter makes. It asks us to have trust in our Spiritan vocation and in the fundamental values of our apostolic consecration, to have the courage to look with the eyes of our Founders on our Mission, our lifestyle, our community life, our commitments and projects. Every Chapter should be a renewal — a return to a state of newness.

But our gaze should not be turned in on ourselves. We are witnesses and bearers of new life and of a new meaning to life. Our fresh look at our vocation should bring us to love the world in which we live and to make new contact with it — a world that is both distressing and fascinating, in which the Congregation must seek its agenda for the future. The life, the aspirations, the sufferings and needs of the world are decisive elements in our vocation today.

Realism and hope

"I will pour out my Spirit on all mankind... Your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men see visions" (Joel 3:1).

A Chapter is a time of synthesis, and of deciding on the relative merits of various demands and values. The Chapter had to bring about some sort of synthesis between realism and hope, and its program for the next six years is based on this.

It looked first of all at the FACTS. There would be no point in making plans for a Congregation that existed only in one’s mind. In the section on Mission, the Chapter document (Spiritan Life) lists signs of suffering, of questioning on Mission today (SL, 29-31), the decline of Spiritan vocations in the Northern Hemisphere (SL, 32), and the aging of the Congregation (SL, 33). It also admits to injustices and the infringement of human rights in our Spiritan community (SL, 80).

But at the same time it points out signs of hope and of new life, such as rejuvenation through the Foundations (SL, 35), the acceptance of new situations by confreres (SL, 36), the desire for unity (SL, 44), initiatives in the field of Justice and Peace (SL, 78), efforts to renew community life (SL, 90), and solidarity with confreres who are ill, retired or in difficulty.

The important thing is to look clearly at both our actual situation and “the hope that is within us”. Only then can the Chapter talk about planning and projects for the future (SL, 234-235), especially as regards missionary priorities to retain and a formation program to reactivate. While respecting differences of culture and situation, it stresses the new unity (SL, 227), and looks towards the future (SL, 4), in order to give new impetus to Mission, formation, government, and the Spiritan policy on Justice and Peace. It listens to the voice of the young Churches and to the calls of tomorrow’s Mission. The 1980 Chapter was the Chapter of the new Foundations, of the first Assistant from Africa, of “Justice and Peace”.

Working together

Towards a new coresponsibility

The 1968-69 Chapter opened up the ways of subsidiarity. The 1974 Chapter stressed what was common in the midst of our diversity; it was the Chapter of solidarity. Here too, between subsidiarity and solidarity, the 1980 Chapter sought a synthesis, which may be called CORESPONSIBILITY: all responsible together for moving the Congregation forward towards the life that we wish to lead, the conversions to be undertaken, the program to be put into action, the new hope to be awakened.

Coresponsibility in formation. In formation too there must be coresponsibility between all those in charge of it, working together (SL, 183-184), planning together (SL, 195) and sharing their expertise (SL, 194).

Coresponsibility in dialogue. The Chapter encourages all regions to follow the example already given by some, in bringing together Major Superiors to share their experiences and give mutual help in community animation, vocation work, education, ongoing formation and commitments for justice (SL, 217).

Coresponsibility in decision-making. The recognition of the Enlarged General Council as a privileged place for coresponsibility marked an important stage in the unifying and revitalization of the Congregation. It is here that the main decisions should be taken, with the participation of all in both coming to them and implementing them.
At the same time, the Chapter reminds us that co-responsibility needs coordination, and it points out the role of the General Council in coordinating and being ultimately responsible for the Congregation's program on formation (SL, 183), Justice and Peace (SL, 83), community (SL, 95), Brothers (SL, 97), Foundations (SL, 135), planning, distribution of personnel and new commitments (SL, 228).

From ‘aggiornamento’ to conversion: the main lines of a program.

"Seek the Lord while he is still to be found, call to him while he is still near" (Is. 55:6).

The 1980 Chapter was the last before the promulgation of new Constitutions. We have been trying since the Council to bring about our ‘aggiornamento’ – an updating that was necessary and that must continue. We cannot turn back, but the promulgation of new Constitutions implies that a certain stability has been found. During the coming years we must make the ‘aggiornamento’ produce real conversion. This call is to be found throughout the Chapter documents, and the main lines of its program all entail conversion.

1 - Getting back to the essentials of the Gospel.

Getting back to essentials is certainly the first main point in the program. We have already mentioned the synthesis between realism and hope, and that between subsidiarity and solidarity. But the most obvious synthesis is that which brings everything together in Christ. All the documents are centred on Him, everything radiates from Him. He is the focal point and inspiration of Mission, Justice and Peace, community, life, formation, etc. We are continually reminded that our vocation is a mystery rather than a profession, that we belong to Christ rather than to ourselves.

MISSION is seen first of all as an adventure of faith (SL, 48). It is:

- a sharing in the Paschal Mystery of death and resurrection (SL, 49);
- a new incarnation of the Word of God (SL, 50);
- a discovery of the riches given to different peoples by God's Spirit (SL, 51);
- a work of reconciliation, in Christ (SL, 52);
- a work for true liberation, in Christ (SL, 53).

Our work for JUSTICE and PEACE is likewise inspired "by that charity of Christ which is poured into our hearts by his Spirit, who is given to us. That same Spirit it is who enables us to recognize God as our Father" (SL, 76). "We become more fully aware that true liberation requires the proclamation and presence of Jesus Christ, who radically changes hearts, reconciling men to God and to one another" (SL, 54).

The essentials bring us back also to COMMUNITY LIFE (SL, 93-95). The Chapter texts return to Liberation's insistence on community life (SL, 85) as a means of apostolic life, which he saw as "that life of love and holiness which the Son of God lived on earth to save and sanctify souls" (SL, 2).

FORMATION too is centred on Christ, who is both the one who forms and the goal of formation. Formation is seen as a following of Christ, in faith (SL, 153, 156, 159, 181 etc.). The vocation and program of each Spiritan finds its source and its ideal in Christ.

2 - Universality.

"Reflection on recent mission experiences prompts us to go beyond a territorial concept of Mission to one which recognizes the call of all mission situations where the Gospel needs to be proclaimed" (SL, 56).

We are called to be missionaries in a new era – an era of universality and contact between cultures, of change and ‘future shock’. Phrases such as "a new age of Mission" keep coming back in the Chapter texts.

The Chapter reminds us that "changes affecting our missionary life are not passing, superficial phenomena; they reflect the changes in the world and the deepening renewal in the Church. We cannot turn back" (SL, 19). Our future depends on our ability to adapt to new situations. It is not only the fields of evangelization that change but also the methods and partners. The appearance of new centres of vitality in the Church, especially in the Southern Hemisphere, the contribution of the young Churches with their "riches and treasures", the new mission-sending areas, the intercultural exchange – all of this will call for a change in mentality, new ways of looking at Mission, and a new lifestyle (cf. I/D No. 25). In this context one can see the importance of the Foundations. The growth of the Congregation in different nations and cultures opens the way to new expressions of the Spiritan charisma and a rejuvenation in membership, outlook and culture (SL, 123).

Taking account of the demands of Mission today, of new challenges and of changes to be made, will we have the courage to make the necessary "migrations'' and take up new commitments, where we are or elsewhere? To grow old in out-of-date commitments is worse than growing old in personnel. One of the most important tasks in the next six years will be to lay the foundations for the future that the Chapter desired for the Congregation.
3 - Justice and Peace.

"The Chapter gives a clear mandate to the incoming Generalate Team to make animation in the area of Justice and Peace a primary focus of its ministry" (SL, 83).

"Man is the first road that the Church must take in its Mission" (Pope John Paul II). The Chapter documents invite us, in a more pressing way than usual, to a new solidarity with human situations, and new forms of presence and of dialogue with the world. We shall move securely towards the future if, in the present phase of evaluation, reorientation and new choices, we have the courage to turn frankly towards the poor. In a world in which the "cry of the poor" becomes louder, from the depths of injustice, oppression and exploitation, the Chapter invites us to a new start. In Franciscan terms one would speak of a "return to Assisi".

The commitment to Justice and Peace was one of the great intuitions of the Chapter. Never in previous Chapters had the call been made so clearly. It is one of the key orientations of the 1980 Chapter and should be one of the great sources of inspiration for renewal. It should put us in a state of "ongoing conversion" (SL, 79) and lead us to review our attitudes, choices, availability and lifestyle. The Chapter goes so far as to ask us to be ready to risk our life at the side of the poor.

4 - Our religious-missionary life.

"... that one of the primary objectives of animation over the next six years be the nature of membership, i.e. that we are, before all else, a religious-missionary Congregation in which all members live as brothers" (SL, 97).

The religious life is the clearest sign of our dedication to the service of Mission and of the poor. Christ’s mission was first of all to share his vocation with the Apostles, to motivate them to live with him the adventure of being Son and witness of the Father. In him the Father’s love appeared. All his teaching tended towards the deepening of this vocation, to place it at the heart of their being, their concern and their program of life.

The equality and fraternity of all Spiritans is rooted in this spiritual experience. The Lord has called us first of all to live together the total donation of ourselves to the Father. The diversity of commitments within our single family and single vocation becomes secondary. The Chapter asks us to stress the deeper aspect of our lives which unites us, before any distinctions are made. It asks us to take practical steps to promote equality and to enhance the role of Brothers. The role of the lastly will be more and more decisive in tomorrow’s Mission. Areas such as Justice and Peace, labour relations, the mass media, Marxism etc. require an active, militant evangelical presence that can only be supplied by lay persons. Why then are lay vocations to the Congregation dying out? Why are potential Spiritan Brothers seeking other forms of consecrated life? The Chapter did not give enough reflection to this problem, but the basic principle was laid down. Will we have the courage to draw all the consequences from it? Are we ready to open ourselves to the demands of today’s Mission and overcome the situation in our Congregation, where young Brothers have difficulty in finding their identity?

5 - Community Life.

"Community renewal is a priority for the Congregation during the next six years, and we ask the Generalate Team, Major Superiors and local Superiors to direct their animation to this purpose" (SL, 96).

Community life should be a source of inspiration and revitalization for apostolic life. The Chapter calls attention to the need for a living and praying community, and asks for further research in this area. By renewing our community life we increase our credibility as a force for the future. To give new heart to our communities, we should use all the means at our disposal: ongoing formation, refresher courses, training of animators, rotation of personnel. Our solidarity with others should be rooted in solidarity with our own community: the Holy Spirit calls us back always to this.

6 - Forward-looking courage.

Formation is presented as a focus and inspiration for the whole Congregation. Rather than mere instructions on Spiritan formation, the document is a call for a renaissance, the dynamism of new beginnings. The whole Congregation should put itself in a state of formation. It is not just a question of shaking off the weight of years and being reconverted once and for all; in a quickly evolving world, readjustment is continually necessary if the witness of our lives is to have an impact on people in their actual circumstances. Our tired eyes no longer accommodate to the changing world, and young people quickly sense this. There are families that do not want children, said Fr. De Couesnongle, Superior General of the Dominicans, and there are communities that do not want young candidates for fear that they may have to change something in their lives. The young will not respond to our prophetic calls and commit themselves to us to Mission, unless they see that these calls come not from abstract ideas but from living communities. The donation of their life must spring from a deep spiritual experience. The Chapter recalled some fundamental demands of tomorrow’s Mission. In discussing formation, it also sketched a portrait of the Spiritan for the 80’s. All the main lines of the Chapter documents meet here, even in their hesitations. The young already have a foothold in the new era. The Congregation must count on them, on their dreams, their forward-looking courage and their ability to adapt to tomorrow’s needs.

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