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1981 Vol. 27: "Blessed Are Those Who Hunger and Thirst After Justice"

The Generalate Team

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March 1981

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Spiritan Witness

This issue of I/D will be somewhat different from usual, in that it will consist mainly of concrete examples of efforts to promote justice. The world today is more sensitive to cases of injustice than in the past. Newspapers and reviews give considerable space to them, and the subject is treated in the Chapter documents of many Congregations.

We could have drawn up a catalogue of injustices round the world, picking out the more striking ones and recalling the Church's stand on many of these issues. But this would be repetitious, as we take it that confreres are already informed of them, and challenged by them, through the press, radio and television.

We have decided instead to give a few examples of what Spiritans are actually doing in this area. We realize that there are many others that we could have quoted (some of which have already appeared in 'Spiritan News' or elsewhere), but space is limited and we have tried to pick examples from different continents and different types of engagement. In some cases we have not been able to give too much detail, out of respect for the delicate situation of the confreres concerned.

Extracts from Letters from Missionaries in Angola

"My confrere has come back from home leave. It was difficult for him to come back, as his aging father and his sister did all they could to prevent him. They refused even to say goodbye. It was hard on him...."

"Say a special prayer for our men who are on the road each day, in constant danger. It is hard on the nerves... but 'caritas Christi urget nos'. Please, no publicity, but remember us in your prayers...."

"As one confrere put it: 'If we continue to risk our lives each day, it is not because we are braver or better than others, but because God keeps us in his hand'...."

"On all sides there was guerrilla warfare, political tensions, hardships. One may be tough, but one isn't made of steel... During my last home leave I wanted to stay at home. After all, we are made to live in peace and to seek peace, beauty and goodness. I was terribly afraid of coming back to Angola. Guerrilla activity was approaching relentlessly. But the Sisters were there; mission life continued; the people were in need; the Church had been only recently planted... I had no right to abandon it. This struggle spoilt my whole holiday. With feet of lead I went to the airport to return here. It was as I had foreseen - even worse... Systematically, all the villages round about were attacked and burnt. Seventy per cent of the area near the mission was depopulated, leaving the mission village like an island, full of refugees. An attack could come any day... Two years ago the Sisters left, and I was on my own... There was often an interior conflict, one voice saying to me, 'You are crazy to stay', and the other, 'You are brave'. The fact was that I simply could not abandon the mission and these people, as they were in such distress. Day and night they were with me. I tried to find food and drink and medicines for them. Could I leave, when they depended on me? And then there was the Church work. On Sundays the chapel was full. There were baptisms to be done, confessions to be heard... In the villages that were still left, activists intimidated the catechists, and only a few of these had the courage to continue. This made it even harder for me to leave... I was the only white man left in the area... Then the mission schools and institutions were nationalized, and two weeks later the mission house itself... Everything was taken except what I had in my bedroom... It seemed it was time to leave, but to go where: back to my homeland or to some other village here where there was still a chapel and a mission house?... I am now in a hut without water, toilet or kitchen. I have a bed and a cup-
board, and I'm continuing... People are coming again... There are more than a hundred children attending catechism... If I had some good catechists, I could take a few months off, but I am not sure that if I went home I would have the courage to come back... I could have spoken to you about religion, politics, Marxism, what it means to be human, about Christ becoming man for us, for you and me and broken people like us, about so many other things. I have mediated a lot in the past few years, not so much in church but late at night... Hope is a great virtue..."

"We must continue to row against the tide and try to hold on. I am convinced that sooner or later we shall have to speak out clearly and take a clear stand on behalf of the poor and oppressed. Perhaps by the time we make up our minds to do it it will be too late. We keep putting it off. Each time we find another fear, another reason for not speaking out clearly. And things become more and more difficult and complicated... What will the Congregation do after the Chapter, with its statement on Justice and Peace? What sort of statement will our own Chapter here make? There will certainly be discussion, there will be agreement that something should be done, and then the possible consequences of an energetic protest will inspire the usual fear... Will the Congregation have the courage to risk its personnel?... The Congregation should speak out clearly if it is to be truly missionary."

**Chaplaincy for African Students in Paris**

*(From the French Province's bulletin 'Province et Mission', June 1977)*

"... We are in regular contact, here in the community and in their homes and meeting places, with about a thousand African students (of the 15,000 in the Paris area and 30,000 in France). They have been plunged into a world completely different from their own and often hostile to them in their daily life. They are up against all sorts of problems and difficulties, simply from the fact that they are 'coloured' — difficulties in finding accommodation and work, difficulties with registration forms and bureaucracy... Many of them have to study by day and work by night, or vice versa.

In such a world of insecurity and injustice, one can easily understand how small a part faith plays in the life of the average African student.

This cannot but concern us. We try to respond by being present among them, welcoming them, showing solidarity with them, and taking concrete action... It is important to help them stand up for their rights, and to denounce racism wherever we find it — in administrative services, landlords or employers... We affirm our solidarity with their aspirations for justice, equality and true respect for others and for their culture... Their complaints and criticisms on these points are only too justified, unfortunately, even at times in so far as our own communities are concerned. How many of our clerics on home leave in France, or African Bishops visiting here, have enquired about students that they know and about what we are doing, or not doing, for them. And many of these students will soon be leaders in their own African societies, and will determine, for better or worse, the future of the Church there and the direction that their societies will take...

More than 85% of the students with whom we are in touch have drifted away from the Church as they knew it in Africa and as they see it in France. They have not forgiven the collusion of the Church with Western colonialism in Africa, and they are quite indifferent to present Church structures in their countries. As for the Church structures and communities in France, they find nothing there but indifference to them, segregation, and conscious or unconscious paternalism... Naturally they reject this, and surely we can understand them. Some of the missionary propaganda in France is also offensive to them. A Senegalese student said to me: 'I went three times to church here, and nobody treated me like a person.'

The Church is ourselves, our communities, our missions. What are we doing to give it a better image? Those who challenge us and reject the counter-witness of the Church are often past leaders of Catholic Action or former seminarians. We cannot remain indifferent to their challenge... None of this is imagination, but the facts of everyday experience.

At the suggestion of a group of students, twice a term we hold a meeting comprising a discussion, bible readings and a Eucharistic service... By way of conclusion, we would like to raise three serious questions:

1. To what extent do the missionary Congregations, including our own, measure up to their responsibilities towards immigrants in France?

2. Has the Congregation a clear program for the assistance of African students and workers in France?

3. It is an undeniable fact that the Church in Africa, our missionaries and our Bishops — like those in France for that matter — show a certain fear and mistrust of students, because they tend to call into question past and present structures and methods. Why should this be so? Why not go a bit deeper into the causes? Are we afraid that it would show up our failings?..."

Jean GUILLOUX, C.S.Sp.

**The 'Jornal de Itamaratí'**

Itamaratí is a small village on the Jurua River, in Amazonia (Brazil). In the immense area that it serves, extending along 1,000 kms of the river, there is a population of about 10,000, mostly mestizos who live near the river and make their living from the rubber plantations.

Fr. Guilielmus BURMANJE, a Dutch Spiritan who was drowned in the Jurua River on 20 January, had begun publication in June 1977 of a local monthly newspaper, the 'Jornal de Itamaratí', aimed at pastoral care, the building up of a sense of community, and the conscientization of these isolated people, threatened by various kinds of disease and oppressed by the rubber industrialists.

To promote unity, the paper (10-12 polycopied pages, closely typed in two columns with illustrations
drawn by hand) gives local news such as births, deaths, illnesses and school items. It also discusses politics, replies to questions on health and hygiene, and explains local proverbs. In short, it treats of anything that is of interest to the daily life of its readers. It puts a lot of stress on popular religious practices, which are the subject of pastoral research in Latin America at present. To arrive at true evangelization and a solid grounding in the faith, it is necessary to bring out the valuable elements in popular religion, while eliminating the abuses that have crept in.

Another aim of the paper is to give a greater awareness of their possibilities to these people who have become passive as a result of centuries of oppression. A feeling of complete powerlessness has killed all initiative in them. The Gospel is presented to them as a liberating message, and also as a call for them to help themselves. In its first issue, the paper quoted the Bishops of Amazonia, who were concerned about the situation of the Indians and injustices in the confiscation of land. In the face of such injustice the paper does not hesitate to go into specifics, giving simple and clear questions and replies:

- "If someone buys land, has he a right to expel the peasants who are living on it?" Reply: "Never".
- "Has the Brazilian peasant a right to a plot of land of his own in this immense country?" Reply: "The Constitution guarantees him such a right."
- "If the Mayor, the Chief of Police or the Judge supports an unjust proprietor, should one obey him?" Reply: "No. One should appeal to the INCRA (National Institute for Colonization and Agrarian Reform)."
- "What should one do to guarantee one's right to a piece of land?" Reply: "The best guarantee is to remain in occupation of the land, even if compensation is offered for vacating it."

The 'Jornal de Itamarati' leaves no doubt, therefore, about the Church's position. It tries to make the people realize that they have rights and that they must defend them. It also tries to make the authorities realize that exploitation and oppression are incompatible with Christian conscience.

The paper is modest in circulation but courageous and effective. The 41st issue, of January 1981 (signed by Fr. BURMANJE shortly before his tragic death), mentions its circulation: 71 copies.

Demonstration for the Rights of Immigrants

During the meeting of the Enlarged Provincial Council of France in 1979, the French Senate was due to debate, on 26 June, a Government bill which would seriously undermine the rights of immigrant workers. The Provincial Council decided to suspend its session on the afternoon of 25 June to allow its participants to join in a silent protest march through Paris, organized by the Interdiocesan Service for Immigrant Workers and the Movement against Racism and for Friendship between Peoples, and supported by about 30 other organizations, mainly of Christian inspiration.

Many of the 36 participants in the Council meeting did in fact take part in the march, and on the following day the Senate voted against the bill.

Haitian Refugees

The Brooklyn community (New York) comprises three Spiritans (a Haitian and two French confreres who had worked in Haiti) and a Haitian secular priest. Since 1971 they have been working for the Haitian refugees in New York, who number about 40,000 at present.

A house, like the others in the neighbourhood, was acquired and is used as a place of welcome and an administrative centre. It is open day and night for all to come to with their troubles (finding accommodation on arrival, registration papers, legal problems, the learning of English, financial difficulties etc.). The lower floor of the house has been furnished as a 'foyer', with help from the four Spiritan Provinces of the United States and Canada, and these, apart from financial help, lend the weight of their influence in dealing with authorities.

Swamped as it is by such a tide of human misery, the small group is constantly under pressure and can do with any support they get.

As part of their pastoral work they translate liturgical texts and hymns into Creole, to help the people maintain their culture and express themselves through it (in spite of complaints by other Church workers who would prefer to see them fully integrated into American ways). Texts and music produced in New York are even at times asked for back in Haiti.

There is obviously a political side to some of the activities. It could hardly be otherwise when trying to help people who are rejected both at home and in their new place of refuge. Conflict with civil authorities is inevitable, and even with priests who see things from a different angle and would prefer a 'purer' ministry, with no ambiguities. The same is true of relations with the Government of Haiti, for the defence of refugees who seek political asylum is in itself a political statement.

Open Letter to the Prime Minister of the Bahamas

January 14, 1981

"Dear Prime Minister Pindling,

We are the major superiors of the Holy Ghost Congregation in North America and the Caribbean assembled in Puerto Rico for our annual meeting in the course of our deliberations we have been considering the situation of Haitian refugees in various areas where we work. They are of concern to us since the Holy Ghost Congregation has ministered to the Haitian people since the mid-nineteenth century.
and we have several Haitian confreres who give dedicated service to their people.

We have learned during these days that your government has set January 18, 1981, as the date after which all Haitians in the Bahamas are subject to immediate expulsion.

Your government has already acquired an international reputation for justice and respect for all sectors of your society, as well as for maintaining good relations with other countries. Certainly, too, as a young nation, you have incurred many problems from the influx of the Haitians; you face in particular a problem with unemployment and this has been aggravated by such a large and unplanned increase in the number of inhabitants.

We know, therefore, that you have not taken this decision lightly and yet we think that a more humane solution could be found. We, like many others, were shocked by the events of Cayo Lobos, and recent acts of the Haitian government indicate that any refugees forced to return to Haiti face a very uncertain future.

Several of us know from personal experience that the Bahamians are a deeply religious people and that many, including yourself, are committed Christians. It is, therefore, in the name of God, of our common Christian traditions of compassion for those in need and of respect for the dignity of all human beings that we now appeal to you to rescind or at least to postpone this order. Such a postponement would give international agencies time to arrange for other nations to help in receiving these unfortunate people.

We make this appeal to you with no ulterior motive, but entirely out of concern for fellow-human beings in distress, with whom we have a special affinity.

Yours sincerely,

Maurice BARBOTIN, C.S.Sp. (Sup., Guadeloupe)
Charles CONNORS, C.S.Sp. (Sup., Puerto Rico)
Silvio D’OSTILIO, C.S.Sp. (Prov., USA West)
Jean-Guy GAGNON, C.S.Sp. (Prov., Canada)
William HEADLEY, C.S.Sp. (Prov., USA East)
Georges BOUVIER, C.S.Sp. (French Guiana)
Michel DE VERTEUIL, C.S.Sp. (Prov., Trinidad)
Michael DOYLE, C.S.Sp. (Prov., Trans-Canada)
Gaston GAUTHIER, C.S.Sp. (Sup., Martinique)
Antoine ADRIEN, C.S.Sp. (New York)
Antoine MARGIER, C.S.Sp. (Montreal)
Michael SCOTT, C.S.Sp. (Toronto)
Enda WATTERS, C.S.Sp. (Prov., Ireland)
Norman BEVAN, C.S.Sp. (Gen. Assistant, Rome)
Christopher PROMIS, C.S.Sp. (Sup., Tanzania)
Bruno TRACHTLER, C.S.Sp. (Gen. Assistant, Rome)."

And what of ourselves?

The above examples (chosen, as we said, from among many) have not been given in a spirit of self-satisfaction.

There are indeed instances of heroic commitment on the part of confreres, as well as the taking of a stand by one or other group or assembly. But real commitment is a duty for each Spiritan, and not merely for a privileged elite. It would be too easy for us to soothe our consciences with the thought that some Spiritans are living in dangerous situations.

We cannot, of course, all undertake the same work, nor does Spiritan unity require this. But we can allow ourselves to be challenged by those in the front line. Otherwise we may become lethargic and stifle the anguish that gripped the heart of a Pouillard des Places or a Libermann. Perhaps we have too often heeded warnings about what we should not do rather than encouragement to do the things we should.

- **We cannot remain indifferent** to situations of crying injustice. Our confreres who are engaged in trying to put them right should be recognized and encouraged. They are not marginalized Spiritans with a special vocation. We must support them — and this may bring us further than we think.

- **We must combat human misery in all its forms:** sociological, political, economic, cultural — and also spiritual. Is atheism not a very real form of poverty? Sin — both individual and social — is at the heart of the structures that refuse 20 million people the right to a fatherland, that condemn 200 million people to hunger and war. If we remain silent and do nothing, do we not become accomplices? We should not only open our eyes, but raise our voice and make ourselves heard.

- **We are not alone in this enterprise.** The Chapter texts of other institutes also stress Justice and Peace, in a language not heard till recently. One Congregation has said that its animation for a whole year will bear only on this subject; another that absolute priority will be given to the poor in every situation. We must join forces with others working for the same goals.

We must accept the challenge to go beyond ourselves: beyond our fixed habits, our human prudence, our settled individualism.

- **Is our lifestyle** — at the Generalate as in the furthest mission station — an expression of the Gospel in the eyes of the oppressed? We are not poor merely by saying that we are. We are not poor once and for all.

- **Is our spiritual life** in line with that of our Founders? Is Libermann’s love for the liberated slaves reflected in a like love on our part for the oppressed of today: exploited workers, stateless persons, immigrants, the unemployed, the hungry?

The Generalate Team has no intention of trying to lay down norms on Justice and Peace for each Spiritan. Situations differ. But let us challenge each other. It is up to each circumcision to formulate its policy in the light of local conditions. It is up to each Spiritan to stir up his Province, his District, his community, in this area. He will do so to the extent that he personally “hunger and thirsts after justice”.

**THE GENERALATE TEAM.**