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## New Energy for the Congregation: Lay Spiritan Associates

Marielle Beusmans

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Marielle Beusmans of the Netherlands received a Master's in mission theology from the University of Theology and Pastoral Work, Heerlen (1991). She did the Oversees Training Program in Tanzania (1987-1988) and worked on women pastoral development in Same diocese (1991-1995) and pastoral development among the Maasai communities, Tanzania (2003-2007). She became advisor in interreligious dialogue for religious leaders in Kenya (2008-2010). Back in the Netherlands, she functioned as part time member of the mission animation team and part time parish pastor (1995-2003); since 2010, she serves as chaplain on social affairs in the diocese of Roermond.

*Is the movement of Lay Spiritans in your province "guided" or "accompanied?"*

### **And that New Energy is Inspiring!**

In 2015, 26 Lay Spiritans and nine professed Spiritans gathered in Dublin to discuss the theme, "A New Energy for the Congregation." I was happily surprised by the energy generated by this group of Lay Spiritans. This was my first European meeting ever since I bid farewell as European coordinator for Lay Spiritan Associates and for many years worked with the Spiritans in East Africa.

In preparing this meeting, we, the Lay Spiritan coordinators of the different European provinces, made known our wish to take as topic what inspires us, issues for which we feel great enthusiasm. In other words, we wished to work from the bottom up. The organizing question was, "what moves us?" All were asked to demonstrate in a creative way, with visual aids if possible, what they do in their own provinces. This time there will be no stories or theological discourses, only sharing in the "spirituality of the street." Earlier European meetings often stressed the differences between the provinces and tried, from the top down, to come to uniformity – and this never succeeded. That was more of a frustration for professed Spiritans than for us Lay Spiritans! Differences there were. The contexts of the countries differ greatly, just as the number of Lay Spiritans in particular provinces. There are many "older" people, but also some young folk are joining us. The following binary options point to some differences between the various European contexts.

Do you stress missionary engagement or emphasize reflection?

Are you closely associated with the church or living in a strongly secularized society?

Is the movement of Lay Spiritans in your province "guided" or "accompanied?"

The first European Lay Spiritan meeting was held towards the end of the 1990s. That means that we are still "young" compared with the Congregation which is more than 300 years old. The quality of youth defines who we are and how we are. We are a movement with great dynamism. A movement in which many different things are happening. A movement in which we inspire one another. A movement that is not yet ready for structures, rather needs space to grow and develop. Indeed, there is not yet a theoretically constructed "doctrine";

what there is continues to evolve gradually – life ever more deeply lived, practice ever better reflected upon, inspired and inspiring, and more strongly animated by the Spiritan charism and thinking.

### **Spirituality**

All presentations during the Lay Spiritan meeting in Dublin spoke much about spirituality. Spirituality is about what moves you, that which is meaningful for your life, or for the group of Lay Spiritans, and it is about becoming conscious of that drive. All stressed in their presentations that something like this arises during meetings between lay and professed Spiritans. Call it the dynamics of spirituality. Stories and experiences of past generations are being heard and connected with the stories and experiences of the lay in the present. Lay Spiritans experience daily in their (volunteer) work that our society is under pressure. We are asking ourselves how we must and can encounter it. Those meetings with each other and with the professed Spiritans challenge us. At those moments, we learn how words from tradition, both the Spiritan and the Christian tradition at large, have meaning also in our present secularized society. In many presentations, I recognize values expressed in Catholic Social Teaching. Those fundamental values that have their origin in the first social encyclical, *Rerum novarum* of 1891, are also very topical for our present society and for our being and acting from Spiritan spirituality. Everybody talked about human dignity. The human person is at the core center, as individual and alike as member of a community. We start from a society in which it is good to live, in which people strengthen and affirm each other, in which solidarity is a core value, and care for each other the starting point. We want to promote the common well-being of every human being. And we do this from the point of view of subsidiarity. That is to say, we recognize that every human being is endowed with talents and can care for themselves under appropriate circumstances; any help given comes to supplement or extend innate abilities.

*We do that by contributing to political and social life.*

*Listening is a primary aspect of our mission – we listen to persons.*

### **The Gospel**

It is a special task of Lay Spiritans to commit themselves in the spirit of the gospel to society, politics, and the economy. Catholic social thinking gives guidelines in this. We do that by contributing to political and social life. As real witnesses of the gospel, we collaborate from an inspired connection to peace and justice. We start from the human being, the origin, center, and aim of our endeavors. Listening is a primary aspect of our mission – we listen to persons.

If I ask you to listen to me and  
you start to give me advice,  
then you are not doing what I ask.

If I ask you to listen to me and  
you start to tell me,  
why I shouldn't feel something as I feel,  
then you don't take my feelings seriously.

If I ask you to listen to me,  
and you think that you must do something  
to solve my problems,  
then you let me down,  
strange as it may seem.

So, please, listen just to me  
and try to understand me.

And if you want to talk,  
wait then for a moment and I promise you  
that I for my part will listen to you.<sup>1</sup>

### **Dialogue**

During our European meetings, it is not always easy to communicate in spite of the efficiency of the interpreters. They are indispensable for us! Europe knows many different mother tongues and not everyone is so confident as to speak in one of the official languages used during international meetings. In spite of that big obstacle of lack of a common language, we still dialogue with each other. In that dialogue, everyone's experiences and possibilities receive expression and we try to discover how they may contribute to solidarity. We are curious about each other's thinking. During those dialogue sessions, we enter into conversation with each other, everyone is given space to speak. Everyone tells what they want to say from the perspective of their own situation. Everyone is attentively listening. Nobody is thinking for another or giving advice. We try to investigate what it is all about. In that open dialogue, mutual respect is palpable, we reach new insights. Saint Pope John Paul II wrote:

Dialogue does not originate from tactical concerns or self-interest, but is an activity with its own guiding principles, requirements and dignity. It is demanded by deep respect for everything that has been brought about in human beings by the Spirit who blows where he wills. Through dialogue, the church seeks to uncover the 'seeds of the Word,' a 'ray of

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that truth which enlightens all men'; these are found in individuals and in religious traditions of humankind. Dialogue is based on hope and love, and will bear fruit in the Spirit.<sup>2</sup>

### Meeting is “Hanging Out Together”

European Lay Spiritans meet only once every four years. I always look forward to these meetings. And I do not speak for myself alone when I say that those three days of “hanging out together” are of great importance for my solidarity with the other European Lay Spiritans and the Congregation as a whole. In whatever country we meet, something happens to you. It is the Spirit that inspires. You exchange ideals and experiences that hold great importance for you in your life. It does not matter that you have not known some people long. We understand each other from the inside. Each recognizes something of themselves in the other and vice versa. For us, “meeting is daring to take the step, daring to show your true face, putting aside your fear and uncertainty, and putting your trust in somebody.”<sup>3</sup>

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### Relations with the Congregation

For a long time lay people were seen in the church as second-class Christians. Luckily that is not the case in our Congregation. During the European meeting in Dublin, Br. Marc Tyrant was present for the first time. His open way of speaking about the position and role of the lay in the Congregation appealed to all of us. He views his own role “as someone who hangs out with the Lay Spiritans.” He hopes to realize this especially by listening well, so that from inside and from the bottom up he can help to point the way for the lay movement of the Spiritans.

The general council, of which Marc is a member, has been given the task by the general chapter of Bagamoyo (2012) to formulate the guidelines of a lay movement in the Congregation. His approach is to do this from the bottom up and he hopes that in this way there will soon be a *Guide* in which the Lay Spiritans recognize themselves. This is not an easy task.

In this explanatory and exploratory phase, he will especially also hear lay Spiritans and tell them what his impressions of the first three years of his mandate have been. He starts from three questions. 1) How do professed and lay Spiritans complement each other? 2) What is the specific task of the professed and lay Spiritans? 3) How can professed Spiritans support the lay ones to engage themselves in society?

During the international meeting he used the image of a tree. A “Spiritans family tree” that shows this relation very well.

Marc identified his role with the Associates primarily as one of accompaniment. Emphasizing our different roles in church and society, our different life perspectives and our ability to “think outside the box,” he showed how Associates can add a new energy to the Congregation.



He also challenged us to move out of our comfort zone and to stretch the limits of our missionary commitment, entering into an enriching dialogue with others. His thought-provoking and inspiring input gave rise to the discussion of two questions:

- How do Associates integrate and respond to the “road map” from Bagamoyo, especially with regard to youth and migrants?
- Are there frontiers which we should now cross and go beyond?

Well did someone write, “as a leaf on a tree, inextricably bound up with all living creatures, I see the human being, who lives the life, bound up with each other in a breathing longing for somebody that gives life.”<sup>4</sup>

Every human being knows the longing for solidarity. We long to be known and loved by others. We long for real contact with them. For Lay Spiritans, the Spiritans family is also a place where solidarity is found. Precisely in these times that many people experience as confusing, is it necessary to have a sounding board somewhere. Lay Spiritans are doing soul searching. They tell stories to each other and the professed Spiritans who hang out with them. These are moments when we can test and accentuate our ideas, feelings, and experiences. In them, we learn to express how to interpret and go about the world around us. This hanging out together and listening to each other gives strength and inspiration to carry on life and work and make the right choices. A safe solidarity – which the Spiritans family gives us – plays an important role in this.

Another aspect of that solidarity is “a sense of belonging” to a group where ideals are shared. Lay and professed Spiritans in the different provinces feel close association with each other. They feel a bond with each other in many fields. They live and work in solidarity. Spiritans invest in many ways to support that solidarity. In every province, Lay Spiritans have an annual program with moments of encounter in order to strengthen the mutual solidarity with professed Spiritans and to grow in Spiritans missionary spirituality. We experience this support not only in our own provinces, but also in the Congregation

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at large. For example, the Congregation makes possible these moments of encounter and international meeting.

### **Active and Alert**

Solidarity inspires Lay Spiritans to be active and alert in the world. Two fundamental ideas that go with this are “being industrious,” and “being watchful.” Our fast-changing society has a huge impact on every one of us. At one time change is taking place in the social field, another time change touches you in the very depths of your soul. And there are changes in the financial field that greatly influence our well-being and behavior. Changes are often better supported when people share experiences and do not feel left alone to face them. Pope Francis exhorts all Christians to be active and alert. Pope Francis, as no one else, knows how to express, again and again, the social strength of the Christian faith. Every human being deserves to hear and experience it. Liberating words are constantly sounding from this Pope. He has eyes, ears, and heart for the most disadvantaged in our society. He exhorts us to be near to each other, but also to animals and the whole of God’s creation. The Encyclical, *Laudato si’*, testifies to this. In *Laudato si’* he uses the image of the common home – the earth is our common home. A great master plan alone cannot save us and the world. From the Christian point of view, it is all about a different relationship to things, namely a relationship in which everything and everyone is given the space to contribute to the good and to the common life in their own way and according to their own insight.

### **Missionary Commitment**

During the European meeting of Lay Spiritans, we told each other how we shape our charism, in which ways we are active, and how that gives new energy to the Congregation.

*Albertina America* from Portugal in her presentation cited the Spiritan Rule of Life:

In some places people who are working with us wish to be associated with us. We welcome them with joy, inviting them to share our spirituality and our apostolic life. The conditions of their acceptance and their work are decided at the level of each circumscription. In every case there is a written agreement” (SRL 24.3).

The laity bring new energy to the Spiritan community and this comes from their presence in, and understanding of, the world” (Torre D’Aguilha, 2004, 11.1). The laity live

their mission in the world, inspired by such documents as *Evangelii nuntiandi* (1975) and *Christi fideles laici* (1988). We recognize that lay men and women are involved in a great variety of ministries in the church. Of great importance is our commitment with Spiritan mission. Aspects of Spiritan mission are missionary animation, communication, and sharing with local churches. We do this in a spirit of availability, confident waiting, and docility to the Holy Spirit, always ready to leave for where and what the Spirit indicates to us. We are present in the structures of the local churches in the areas of formation, youth, vocations ministry, and missionary animation. A huge amount of mission projects in our circumscriptions count on our commitment. Some of us are committed to working in a Spiritan mission project. Taking advantage of the old Spiritan Formation House (Fraião-Braga), Lay Spiritans have built up an institution, ANIMA UNA. Harnessing the skills of each one, they are providing services to the poorest - older people (Spiritan confreres and the local community). They are also involved in the training of local communities in the light of the Spiritan charism.

*Irish Lay Spiritans* told their story which they illustrated with a power point presentation, “Many Gifts, One Spirit.” They

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envision a Congregation, united in heart and soul, of professed and lay Spiritans, with a spirit of openness and simplicity, all working together to build God’s reign of love, justice and peace. Lay Spiritans are working or volunteering in the mission works of the Congregation. Some do chaplaincy work, others parish work, prison work, or counselling. Some are involved with youth and seniors, the Spiritan mission, or with Spirasi.<sup>5</sup> We are convinced that Lay Spiritans are a new branch of the Spiritan tree, an old tree, but one regularly called upon to new growth.

*Sylvestre Wozniak* explains that in France they differentiate friends, members of fraternities, and lay associates.<sup>6</sup> There is a big group of friends, with as many as 1000 members, who with great interest follow the work of the Spiritans and occasionally participate in Spiritan missionary activity. The fraternities, which are connected to one of the communities, count some 100 members. There are 15 lay associates and they are involved in missionary projects. In those missionary projects, simplicity and respect take center stage. As examples, he mentions Accueil St Joseph, the association Tobie et Raphaël, and Friends of the Congo. Three times a year these 15 Lay Associates come together. At the outset, new associates are assigned a

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companion. The role of such a companion is that of a “buddy,” someone with whom you can regularly and easily work. Rennes has an important place in the formation. That is the place to pass on the story of the founders, Poullart des Places and Father Libermann. And, of course, prayer has an important place in our Spiritan consciousness. Contacts with professed Spiritans in the local communities to which we belong are frequent and good; besides we participate in important Spiritan meetings.

**Remedios Luna Pastor** reported on Lay Spiritans in Spain.

In Spain our relation with those professed is smooth, natural and fraternal, with much respect and mutual interest. We feel that we are valued and listened to, while at the same time we perceive good will and interest in our life and circumstances. It is clear what unites us: the same charism and the sentiment of being called for the mission by Christ. Our relation with those professed is to share our responsibilities: mission animation, vocation, Justice and Peace and the Integrity of Creation, but also communications and administration.

She stressed “the importance of sharing the mission and living the same charism together.” Professed Spiritans, in Spain and wherever else lay Spiritans work with them, see the collaboration as enrichment.

**Lyn Sutcliff** of the English province talked about their spirituality, formation, and commitment by showing a YouTube video. In their commitment, solidarity with the life and work of the Spiritans is very important. They bring to bear their skills and talents in many ways, for example, by participating in Spiritan works and special study groups. At the outset, this was strange for professed Spiritans. But with time they appreciated the professional knowledge of lay Spiritans; the lay Spiritans themselves feel greatly valued. In the English province, people seeking to join the lay Spiritans pass through a whole year of formation to grow in their faith from a missionary and Spiritan perspective. In that formation year, they meet Spiritans active in England or who work on mission somewhere else but are back on holidays in their home province. The latter share about their work and life overseas. In the formation, many aspects of Spiritan Christian life are treated. The ideas of the founders are handed on and linked with mission today. Lyn summarizes the story of lay Spiritans in England by stating: “Together we create a unity that is much more powerful than if we walk alone or work apart.”

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**Marielle Beusmans** spoke on behalf of the Dutch lay Spiritans. She explained that lay and professed Spiritans come together for reflection and a prayer service every month. Since most of us have been lay Spiritans Associates for long and no new members have joined, the thinking about formation does not play a part. Continuous formation, however, is important. It takes place during the annual weekends that we organize. In Spring, there is the pilgrimage weekend, in Autumn a cloister/reflection weekend. During these weekends, observations and experiences are exchanged about an annual theme chosen by the members. Spirituality is associated with one's experiences in daily life. We start the New Year with a special day of encounter. In the community of Gennep, where at the moment most of the Spiritans are living, there is, after the service, an exchange of experiences about the annual theme. This is a fascinating event for both lay and professed Spiritans.

In all presentations, we heard over and over again how small groups of lay Spiritans dedicate themselves to helping people. They do this as volunteers and as professionals. They contribute decisively to a society in which every human being counts and everyone is connected to everyone else. Lay Spiritans consciously do this from a Spiritan perspective. It is our experience that power for transforming society comes from Spiritan spirituality and commitment. The Spiritan perspective is also for us, lay Spiritans, a way of seeing and acting in the light of peace and justice.

### **In the Footsteps of the Founders**

The founders of our Congregation, Poullart des Places and Francis Libermann, followed a path of life that was revolutionary and which makes itself felt until our time. They forwent a secure and safe career of personal comfort and looked out for the poor, brought them together, and set up a community. Besides, they pointed out to others the great need of the poor. The movement they started led outwards, to where the poor lived. The Spiritan Walk in the footsteps of our founders, which lay Spiritans took during the European meeting, was an important moment of formation. History, spirituality, charism, and commitment came together in it.

Spiritans trips are for the Dutch province – and probably also for other European provinces – an important tool to show ourselves and let young people experience who Spiritans are, where in the world they commit themselves, and in which way they do that. There have been many youth trips to places where Dutch Spiritans are working. Every year there would be a trip with ten young people to Cameroon, Tanzania, Ethiopia,

or Brazil. Those youth trips were formative and helped young people to discover their own place in the world. A number of those participants of a youth journey have searched how they can continue to draw from the source of spirituality and where they can find a sounding board to look at their existential questions from the perspective of solidarity and justice.

Talking about continuing formation, I would like to mention a special trip “in the footsteps of ...” In 2013, there was a Spiritan trip to let Dutch lay Spiritans see the context from which some young Nigerian Spiritans now working in the Netherlands originate. Just the intensive preparation by these young Nigerian Spiritans, all of them working in the Missionary Team of Eindhoven, was already a moment of missionary formation. Our experiences during our journey and stay in Nigeria added to our ongoing formation. The two Nigerian Spiritans who accompanied us showed how Spiritans in Nigeria interpret the Spiritan missionary thinking in their own way. We visited many mission stations, and every time we were given a warm welcome and there was an opportunity to talk with each other. Oftentimes the conversation revolved around “who are we?” and “how do we interpret the missionary task?” These were questions we asked each other as professed or lay Spiritans. The many discussions about interculturality and Spiritan commitment and vision were fascinating, even if we did not always agree with each other. I experienced anew that diversity can also be an enrichment. I am now 26 years a Lay Spiritan. What appeals to me is the dynamics of Spiritan spirituality and missionary commitment. It is a moving target, continuously evolving, depending on place and time, hence a great challenge. It is never ready or finished, always requiring a search, especially a searching together.

*Marielle Beusmans  
Baexem, The Netherlands*

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### **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup>Leo Buscaglia, part of the poem “Listen” in ‘Loving each other’ (1993).

<sup>2</sup>Encyclical *Redemptoris missio* Vatican City, 1991, no. 56.

<sup>3</sup>Unable to identify the author of this often used quote.

<sup>4</sup>Poem written by Bert Hofstra for the contest “the poem in the parlor,” 2011 (2nd price).

<sup>5</sup>Spirasi (Spiritans Asylum Services Initiative) founded in 1999 in Dublin under the trusteeship of the Spiritan Congregation.

<sup>6</sup>This roughly corresponds to the distinctions made in the document on Lay Spiritans of the 2016 Enlarged Council. Editor.