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“To seize the hope set before us” (Hebr. 6:18)

The last I/D drew our attention to a number of signs that show us that the Congregation is moving towards the renewal of life asked for by Vatican II. In this issue we will push our enquiry a bit further and reflect with you on the scope and urgency of this renewal. As the word ‘renewal’ is ambiguous (we often hear of ‘charismatic renewal’ today), we want to make it clear from the beginning that we are using it in the sense of adaptation and renewal of religious life, as described in *Perfectae Caritatis*.

Renewal takes many forms

When we read, in *Spiritans Today*, No. 1, the replies of confreres to a request for reflections on their experiences of renewal, we soon realize that Spiritan renewal takes many forms and is lived out in the heart of the concrete situation in which each one finds himself.

As a starting point for our reflection we will take some of the more significant of these replies and try to pick out from them some essential aspect of Spiritan renewal.

1) The changing missionary situation

One reply concerns the experience of listening to a young Church:

«To serve a young Church seeking its own way of growing and maturing means to divest oneself of Western categories in order to receive and appreciate the African way of living. A divesting which asks for much humility and disinterestedness! A sharing of joys and pains, hopes and doubts. Add to that the experience of violence, of the struggle for survival, of insecurity. The circumstances oblige one to turn to the essential and to see Christ in every human face. . .

I feel the need to invoke the Holy Spirit. May He bring about what He alone can — the miracle of faith and grace — in the heart of this people! I suffer from the slowness of the people to become open to grace! I suffer from being such a poor sign of the love of God! This brings me to give my life so that they may have Life! It is curious that more than ever I want to plunge into the freshness of the great mystics; I badly need prayer, silence, a deeper community life. This is all new for me!»

2) Frontier situations

For other confreres it is the experience of frontier situations that leads them to the heart of renewal:

“As the situation offered little hope for the future (with the constant insecurity of wartime conditions), it was natural to think of moving elsewhere. Should I stay or go? But there was another question: are not these situations the ones most in conformity with our specific end? To work without seeing the results, to die like the seed in the earth — is that not one of the characteristics of our charism? I could not see clearly. For me this was all a slow apprenticeship to patience, perseverance, long-suffering, humble abandonment, knowing how to wait for God’s moment, to recognize and accept that it is God’s work infinitely more than ours, that is to say, to be seized by the miracle of the Redemption. Easy to say but very difficult to accept and live! . . . Then I remembered Libermann’s word: ‘what is important is not knowledge but holiness’. All that made me admit my poverty and my littleness. To stay, that would mean counting on the miracle of grace, in myself and in others! . . . I stayed.”

3) Getting back to the essential

Another testimony comes from a Spiritan who during the last few years has shared the life of many of our confreres and has reflected with them:

"What strikes me about Spiritans in general is their courage and, in spite of new situations created by the presence of local clergy and the decrease in the number of missionaries, an ardent zeal for the apostolate. But there are also cases of fatigue due to the complexity of certain situations and to the process of aging.

I have just reread the reports of our regional meetings. Everywhere one sees a desire for genuine spiritual renewal, at both personal and community level, based on our Spiritan consecration and on Libermann's thought. Our confreres have a deep awareness that the Spirit of God is at work among them, though they may not know how to express this or even how to translate it into action. They feel also that He is at work in the mission He has entrusted to them, but it is difficult at times to discern his mode of presence.

For many of them their community life is not as deep as they would like it to be, and especially they have not got a deep enough personal prayer life on which to base it."

4) The trial of a crisis

The experience of a grave crisis and a crucifying trial can lead a whole Province to renew itself:

"Confreres from other Provinces seem to surround our Province with a sort of mysterious halo, much as Lazarus emerging from the tomb must have

awakened the curiosity of the people of his time. Our Province has been credited with a resurrection which to my mind is far from being complete.

Much more modestly, I can say that we are trying to live a 'refoundation' after a period of grave trials. What is certain is that this period of trial has enabled us to go through a joint conversion, to turn towards the Lord and open ourselves to the influence of his grace. This is certainly the most important aspect of our so-called 'miracle'."

5) Difficult ministries

A difficult and unfruitful ministry can also open the way to renewal of life. Here a confrere tells us of his paschal experience through contact with Muslims:

"I felt myself called from the beginning to work in a Muslim country. Many people were saying: Why go where there are no conversions, when priests are lacking in other places? I could give no reasonable justification but I felt called to those people. In the course of time a doubt entered my head: Does the Lord still love you? I understood that for me the desert of prayer was necessary because I was loving the Lord for myself and not for him. Then I discovered the tenderness of God for all men and found once more the joy and peace of my first gift. . . I saw very strongly the tenderness of the Father revealed by Jesus Christ in Mary. I feel myself much more fragile, less sure of myself, but with total confidence in God."

We could quote many other cases, for similar experiences of renewal are to be found throughout the Congregation. But these few examples, taken from among many, are enough to help us pick out some of the essential features of the conversion that the Church and the world require of us today.

At the heart of renewal: "experience of the Spirit" (cf. *Mutuae Relationes*, Part 2)

We can sum up in four main points the essential elements in these testimonies, and others like them, that express what the Congregation is living today:

- Renewal comes from lived experience.
- Renewal is an experience of the Spirit.
- It is a question of apostolic renewal.
- Renewal is the work of saints and prophets.

1) Renewal comes from lived experience

When we speak of renewal, we think of lived experiences. Behind each renewal there is an experience of a creative type. In the ideological phase there is a good deal of theorizing; one feels the need for renewal and seeks the solution at the level of ideas, study and discussion. Someone is asked to study the Founder's charism, another the first Rule, another the Congregation's tradition. These are all important but they do not go to the heart of the matter. Everyone is busy studying, but no one is con-

verted. The charism of the Congregation is rediscovered, rethought and reformulated, but as an ideology rather than as a paschal event.

In the creative phase, the phase of foundation or refoundation, lived experience becomes essential. There is a surge of life in the Holy Spirit, springing up as from a source and going ahead of norms and laws. A simple biography cannot convey it.

It is not by chance that the time of foundation is a time of experience. The same phenomenon occurs when one takes the road of renewal, which has something of the 'state of foundation'. No renewal

of any kind can be effected by working at it theoretically at one's desk, nor even during a Chapter. These procedures certainly have their importance but they are not enough to renew the Congregation.

Renewal arises from the heart of a personal or community experience, in which the Holy Spirit himself is the chief agent. And that is why it is the life of the confreres that is the most important thing at the time of renewal as at the time of foundation. Renewal begins always with a biography: the story of a person or a group in a particular place. We know how the basic intuitions of our Founders sprang from their lived experiences. When Libermann, for example, says: "God is all", we know that this affirmation springs from his own experience of God at the moment of his conversion.

During these years since the Council we have produced lots of beautiful, deep, even demanding, texts; but we have hardly had time to live them. We need to go through a sort of 'universal novitiate' to experience what these documents propose, to submit them to the test of life.

2) "Experience of the Spirit"

The expression "experience of the Spirit" is taken from *Mutuae Relationes* and concerns the Founders' charism. It is the phrase that best sums up the essence of renewal.

At times of great change and new directions, when a new world is being born, there is a fresh outpouring of the Holy Spirit. A time of renewal is always a time of the Holy Spirit. It is a time of exile and of the desert, a time when God prepares a new covenant with his people.

The key to renewal can be none other than that of deepening spirituality: the experience of the Spirit must be lived in depth. The discovery of new expressions of our missionary life and our religious consecration can only be the fruit of a deep experience of faith and an intense communion with God.

All the examples that we quoted at the beginning stress that the experience of renewal included a rediscovery of the Holy Spirit and of the contemplative dimension of apostolic life. They speak of this discovery in terms of wonder and amazement.

In all these examples we are in contact with what has been called a 'second conversion' — that decisive and definitive turning towards what is essential in our Spiritan life and towards the basic values that underlie it. It is not a question of spiritual withdrawal, but of a conversion to the very source of apostolic life, "that life of love and holiness which the Son of God lived on earth", according to Libermann (ND 508). We must find in the heart of our apostolic life the inspiration for the renewal of our communities.

We are living in a period of transition and of new situations. To adapt to a new situation one needs a new interior attitude. We cannot adapt to the new situation of the missionary Church or of the changing world without renewing our spirituality and our faith. Events have forced us to change our missionary methods, but not necessarily our interior attitude. We are not lacking in renewed structures, updated documents and even a modern missionary outlook,

but all of that may have come before conversion. New wine in old wineskins! That is good neither for the wine nor for the wineskins!

The difficulty of adapting to this period of transition can be seen in confreres who no longer feel at ease in the Congregation and who seek their spiritual nourishment elsewhere. It is difficult to find volunteers for situations of typically Spiritan urgency, while there are so many confreres in good health engaged in less urgent ministry.

3) Apostolic renewal

The last I/D spoke of different movements that can be seen today in the life of the Congregation: a movement towards the periphery, towards universality, towards renewal of life, and towards the future. Renewal of life is one of these movements, which are not parallel movements from which each one can choose his own path. They form part of a fundamental, global attitude that situates us in God's 'today' for the Congregation. We should not be satisfied with merely correcting a few errors and touching up our regulations and our way of acting. A 'second conversion' requires us to go to the essential, to the roots, and get back to a 'state of foundation'. Either we become members of a Congregation in a 'state of foundation' or we shall be the last members of a Congregation in decline. Renewal is not optional. For example, the General Chapter asked us to go to the periphery, to frontier situations. These commitments are important for the Congregation and for its conversion. Wherever the Church dedicates itself to the poor, it renews itself and regains vitality. But we are not prepared to live in frontier situations. To live in such situations means to live in insecurity, and our spiritual horizons are limited. We have a lot of trouble in sharing a spirituality that is suited to the world of the oppressed. Their conditions of life leave little space for silence, recollection and prayer, and the reality of their situation must be expressed in a different sort of prayer life. Maybe there will be victims, and even martyrs, before we arrive at the goal, but these frontier situations will more and more become the decisive areas in tomorrow's mission.

This spirituality will certainly have to contain the essential features of any life of union with God: times of silence and of community celebration and sharing. But it should be a simple spirituality, based on the realities of everyday life, harsh though they may be. It will be lived out in an environment that is indifferent or hostile to the gospel, in the struggle and improvisation that marks the life of the poor, who are not masters of their time. But it must also find time for such seemingly gratuitous things as adoration and contemplation.

These frontier situations will have a decisive role to play in the conversion of the Congregation. It is the poor who will evangelize us and teach us to express the fundamental values of our consecrated life: availability, simplicity, spontaneity in prayer — making a prayer of one's whole life. We need these 'sign' situations to rediscover the freshness and "inspiration of our origins" (*Perfectae Caritatis*, 2). We must go to the house of Cornelius to discover the new ways of the Spirit.

Another example is the movement towards universality, which brings us to the heart of the local

Churches: "the Church which is at Rome... at Corinth... at Brazzaville... ", with the features of Rome, of Corinth, of Brazzaville. They do not spring up readymade. They have to be helped to grow and to find their identity, with the culture and flavour of each place. The word of God becomes a seed of new life not in the hands of the sower but in the earth. In adapting to different ways of expressing the faith, there is a whole conversion to be undergone, and we must learn to read the signs of different times and places. It is in this context that we see the importance of the new Foundations. We have been marked by our whole history and formation with their view of missionary 'exportation', and it is hard for us to make this change of optic without a deep conversion.

4) A time for saints and prophets

These last 15 or 20 years since the Council have been a time of renewal for religious institutes. As we look back over these years, we can distinguish three phases or moments in this renewal: the renewal of structures, personal renewal, and community renewal.

The first phase has been the renewal of structures, which is not what had been foreseen. *Perfectae Caritatis* speaks of the renewal of structures only in the third place, after renewal of life and of the spirit. In fact, concern for adaptation to modern times has almost completely dominated these postconciliar years. The great preoccupation of religious has been how to witness to Christ in the working life and the frontier situations of the world today. Instead of maintaining their distance from the world, they have passed to a policy of presence and dialogue. This change of optic has brought about a good many structural changes, with flexibility and openness becoming more important (including openness to the action of the Holy Spirit), as well as coresponsibility, dialogue and personal initiative.

This phase has been an important one, for renewal is not possible unless structures are adapted to support and foster the new outlook. In the course of it, there was need especially for theologians, with their study and research. But it is time now to go on to the phases of personal and community renewal. We have nearly all we need now for renewal, and the revision of our Constitutions is well under way. It is time to move from research to conversion and renewal of heart. Either we seriously undertake this conversion or the whole process of renewal remains blocked. It is a delicate moment, and one that in fact may take a good deal of time, but we have to go through with it.

Up to now we have needed experts and theologians, but now is the time for prophets and saints. In a letter to St. Teresa of Avila, St. Peter of Alcantara reproached her for consulting theologians and canonists on a point which was not within their competence, namely the reform of the Carmelites. "If it were a legal matter or a theological discussion," he wrote, "you could turn to them, but in matters of sanctity it is to saints that you must turn, for no one can give advice except on what he has himself experienced."

True renewal cannot spring from merely human maturity nor even from ordinary spiritual maturity, but only from the spiritual depth that is in the hearts of the saints. And this is what is lacking at times in our efforts at renewal: we need real saints and prophets.

Fr. Libermann puts it even more forcefully: "I have come to cast fire on the earth," said Jesus. Wishing to produce this blaze, He will certainly put burning torches in the hands of those He charges to light it. Why are there so few incendiary saints? Because there are so few real saints. The torches go out or produce no more than the flicker of a match" (*Instructions to Missionaries*, 1851).

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"It is impossible for you to sanctify yourself without working might and main for the salvation of the souls entrusted to you, and it is scarcely possible for you to sanctify those souls while neglecting yourself.

How important this reflection is! For priests often think of their own salvation alone, and souls are somewhat neglected. They have more zeal for recollection and the other virtues which tend to their own sanctification than they have for the salvation of souls. This is a great fault. Once we are priests we belong to ourselves no more, we belong to souls according to the divine will which makes use of us in their service for his good pleasure.

Others, on the contrary, under the pretext of zeal for souls, are entirely given to their ministry without taking care of their own sanctification, which suffers thereby. They do still more harm than the first group. They must first procure the glory of God in their own soul. Furthermore, if they are holy they will save many more souls with a lot less activity. So one must be done and the other not omitted."

Libermann, N.D., II, 472.