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“This is the favourable time” (2 Cor. 6:2)

An ongoing reflection

Can we say now to the whole Congregation: “This is the favourable time”? A time of special striving for renewal? A point at which the call to conversion becomes particularly urgent?

For the past two years these questions have engaged our attention. They emerged in our meetings with you, and came up in our discussions on the life of the Congregation in these rapidly changing times. We were hesitant to reply, as we realized that finally it is simply God’s call that we must interpret.

The theme we chose for our annual retreat at Assisi in October 1983 was ‘Second Conversion in Libermann’. The question is: “Have we arrived at the decisive stage that could be called a second conversion?” Evaluating the positive and negative signs at the level of the Congregation as a whole, we concluded that the process of discernment should continue, in contact with the confreres.

We shared some of our reflections on this point with you in the last two I/Ds. ‘Towards the land that I will show you’ (I/D 34, Dec. 1983) gave some of the signs of making a new start in the Congregation, as seen in four movements: towards the periphery; towards greater universality; towards renewal of life; and towards the future. ‘To seize the hope set before us’ (I/D 35, Feb. 1984) went a step further, reflecting with you on the scope and urgency of renewal in religious institutes.

We continued this discernment in our visits, and the meeting of the Constitutions Commission at Carcavelos, Dec. 1983-Jan. 1984, helped to clarify the issues.

Our conclusions

In May 1984 we went for a two-day recollection to share what we had seen and heard among you, especially on the question: “Are we at a point that could be called a second conversion of the Congregation?” In our evaluation we came to the following conclusions:

- We can confirm the ‘new start’ of the Congregation and the four movements or orientations that can be seen (I/D 34 and 35).

- There are signs of renewal that we have already

pointed out. We note a certain readiness to go still further.

- Reflection on our Spiritan vocation is taking place, with both a return to our sources and a desire to adapt our vocation to the needs of our age. This reflection was very much in evidence at Carcavelos.

- More and more confreres seem to be touched by grace, renewing themselves in their apostolic vocation, deepening their interior life, sometimes undergoing a real conversion. This comes out especially in private conversations, in which the best of a confrere is often revealed.

- Circumscriptions are taking up personal and community renewal as the principal element in their animation.

- There are also some negative signs, but these are less obvious than the positive ones.

Vision for the two years to come

This long and sometimes difficult process of discernment has led us to the following vision, which will guide our animation during the remaining two years of our mandate:

- The response to the changes of our times and the present ‘new start’, far from being completed, is to be continued. It is becoming all the time clearer that we are at a stage of *re-foundation* in view of the new missionary era.

- In this process of re-foundation, looking at the signs and especially at the readiness to go still further, we think we can see God’s call to the *second conversion* of the Congregation – a vitally important stage for institutes that are faced with the possibility of life or death.

- The call to a second conversion of the Congregation is a call to *individual conversions*, both of each member of the Congregation and of the different circumscriptions.

- Personal and community renewal should take the form of a return to *essentials*.

Our certitude in this vision remains open to verification. It does not go beyond the ‘chiaroscuro’ of the ways of the Lord. There is enough light to point out the way to us, but also enough darkness for us not to forget that we have to walk in faith.

The paths of re-foundation

Called to re-foundation

The world that we have to evangelize is in the throes of rebirth and aspires towards a "new world order". To reply to this world in transition, the Church has been trying since Vatican II to renew itself, striving to bring about that "other Church" envisaged by the Council and bearing the promise of a "new missionary era". It is in this world and this Church which are being born that the call to re-foundation and conversion makes itself heard.

For the past few years we have been trying together to read the 'words' that the discreet hand of God is writing in the new situations and in our replies to them. We have set off in new directions, we are in a period of transformation which is far from complete and which is tending towards that "other Congregation". The Draft of the new Rules and Constitutions reflects the essentials of this transformation and sets out the more important paths that we must follow in the process of re-foundation.

Drawing inspiration from our sources Our particular vocation

There can be no true re-foundation without drawing inspiration from our sources — the Founders and our living tradition — and interpreting them for our times. It is a question of our particular vocation within the Church's mission. In the growing interest which we see being shown in our sources, we recognize a call to move in this direction. And, as if to draw our attention to its importance, two beatifications — those of Fr. Laval and Fr. Brottier — mark this stage in our renewal.

And so we encourage especially: publications and translations of our sources; seminars and days of recollection based on our Founders; the development of Spiritan 'holy places' — that of Fr. Laval in Mauritius, of Fr. Brottier at Auteuil, of Fr. Libermann at Rue Lhomond and Saverne; and research on Spiritan spirituality. We may pick out two traits that were common to Fr. Laval and Fr. Brottier and that should mark us all: they were both witnesses of God's love for the poor; and they were both very active while being men of prayer.

Seeking unity of life For the Mission

You are well aware of what is by now a sort of traditional family dispute among us on the tension between being a missionary and living a religious community life. The way of conceiving and unifying these essential elements in the Spiritan vocation has a bearing on our options and lifestyle. The return to our sources, and such meetings as that of experts at Gentinnes in August 1983 and of the Constitutions Commission at Carcavelos, have contributed to a sort of accord reflected in the Draft of the new Constitutions: "*The Holy Spirit has consecrated us in a decisive way to the apostolate. Though from different cultures, we render this service while living together as brothers and practising the evangelical counsels*" (No. 3).

Fr. Libermann's inspiration is manifest here. For him, the Spiritan is first and foremost *an apostle*. This apostolic life is "*that life of love and holiness which the Son of God led on earth to save and sanctify men, and by which he continually sacrificed himself to the glory of the Father for the salvation of the world*" (ND II, 290). Expressing in this way the essence of apostolic life, Libermann places religious life in the same line: it is a way of living the fullness of apostolic life. And so community life also takes on an apostolic aim; it is necessary for the good of the apostolate and the sanctification of the members of the Congregation — without which their apostolate would not bear fruit.

In this time of preparation of the new Constitutions and of re-foundation, we recommend: an effort to resolve the ambiguities concerning our Spiritan vocation in its essential aspects, and to achieve unity in our life, with Mission as its aim; acceptance of the challenge to be missionary in all the stages of our life, whether we are young or old, in good health or bad, assigned to our Province or to a mission abroad; an examination of our apostolic life to see if we are aiming at the essential, as did Libermann — not taking refuge in being 'religious' to avoid being 'missionary', or on the other hand sacrificing religious and community life to apostolic activity, which would thus be deprived of the source of its fecundity.

Renewing our ideal Criteria

Every institute shows in the course of time a tendency to grow old in its ideal and fall away from it. And today there are so many developments and new situations to be faced that it is not always easy to go back to the meaning of one's original particular vocation. Yet this is an indispensable task if we are to play our part in today's mission and that of tomorrow.

Noting, on the one hand, a certain aging in the Congregation's ideal and, on the other, signs of renewal in our particular vocation, we recommend:

- Recalling and clarifying the special characteristics of our vocation within the Church's mission, characteristics which are also our criteria for engagement. The Draft of the Constitutions defines them as follows: "*We dedicate ourselves to the evangelization of the poor. We offer ourselves for tasks for which the Church has difficulty in finding workers. We go to peoples and individuals whose needs are greatest, or who are oppressed. We preach the Gospel message among those who have not heard it, or who have scarcely heard it. God calls us to share the lives of the poor among whom we work*" (No. 4). Check these criteria.

- Renewing oneself according to this ideal and intensifying the movements already perceived in the Congregation "towards the periphery" and "towards greater universality". These movements should be strengthened as we try to interpret the above criteria in the context of the world today. You will find the paths of this renewal in I/D No. 34, pp. 2-3, "*... on the road to the future*".

Evangelizing the poor Justice and Peace

Renewal of our particular vocation, and re-foundation in accordance with the needs of our time, will take place especially through evangelization of the poor. The "cry of the poor" is making itself more strongly heard among us, for the needs of the poor are growing. The last General Chapter made a strong appeal for us to give greater attention to those who are oppressed, exploited, powerless, and wounded in their basic human rights, for "*social analysis reveals the extent and even the universality of oppression*" (Sedos Seminar, 1981). As we listen to the world about us, this "cry of the poor" calls us to certain conversions:

- Welcoming the General Chapter's stress on work for those who are oppressed and exploited.
- Considering Justice and Peace as one of our essential criteria and among the special aims of the Congregation.
- Seeing evangelization as "integral liberation".

The Draft of the new Constitutions puts it as follows: "*We are witnesses to a new age. The Spirit of God inspires us to prophetic action for justice, and to be wholeheartedly involved in freeing all human beings. This demands ongoing conversion on our part – listening to the cry of the poor*" (No. 5).

The reinterpretation of the word 'poor' with the accent on Justice and Peace calls us to conversions not only in our commitments but also in our attitudes:

- Justice and Peace is basically the dream of the coming of the Kingdom of God.
- We must not hide our eyes from the misery about us, but look at the world from the point of view of the oppressed, of those who suffer injustice. We should change our viewpoint.
- Commitment to Justice and Peace means bringing the themes of social and collective misery also into our prayer. These issues must find a place at the heart of our spiritual life.
- Justice and peace is "a new way of seeing, which leads us necessarily to a new way of life and of action".

The "other Church" being born Promise of a new missionary era

In response to a world in transformation, the Vatican Council launched a renewal in the Church which is far from being complete. As we look at the prospects that have been opened up and what has already been achieved in many local Churches, we can see the beginnings of a new missionary drive. What are the points that should be stressed today if we are to play our part in this "other Church" that is being born and in this "new missionary era"?

The Draft of the Constitutions (in Chapter One, which gives the main lines of our Spiritan vocation) says: "*We work at the birth of Christian communities and Churches which, deeply rooted in the local culture, are fully responsible for their own development and growth*" (No. 6). These words reflect what one might think of as a 'new canticle' of the missionary,

inspired by the Council. Some stanzas of this canticle might include the following:

- We are working for a Church, the People of God, which will be *entirely missionary*. At the service of the local Churches, we try: to create small Christian communities, to develop ministries and services, to train leaders, and to promote priestly, religious and missionary vocations. We work for the development of "shared mission", which will hasten the growth of the Churches and free us for other calls.
- We are working for the *coresponsibility* of all the Churches in the universal mission. We foresee a day when young Churches and old will jointly share the task of bringing the gospel to the whole world. We are entering the age of mission in all continents, "from everywhere to everywhere", with dialogue, sharing and mutual help between Churches. Having our part to play in this "care of all the Churches", we make our contribution to the future by opening up to the universal mission, paying attention to the Churches that are most in need, promoting contact between Churches, and through our Foundations and young Provinces.
- We are working for a Church that will undertake a *new exodus* to speak to "the whole person and to all persons". We will take part in this exodus by intensifying our movement "towards the periphery". We dream of a new "progress of the Word", making itself heard among the chosen ones of the Kingdom: the poor, the abandoned and the oppressed.
- We will take the roads recognized by the important Sedos Seminar of 1981 as the *main directions* in mission today, namely proclamation, inculturation, dialogue and liberation. We realize that these roads are still largely to be built, and we must take into account the presence of the Spirit even before proclamation, the salvific values in the various cultures and non-Christian religions, and religious liberty.

At the heart of apostolic life An essential step

So far we have indicated several roads to be followed and conversions to be undertaken in the renewal of our apostolic life, taking into account the circumstances of the world today and our own experience. We come now to the heart of this renewal, to its essence, namely personal and community conversion. In the present process of re-foundation, we think we can discern the privileged moments of this call (cf. p. 1 and I/Ds 34 and 35).

We hope that our discernment is correct. We have learnt from various sources that it is necessary to pass through this stage. Studies on the renewal of institutes consider it decisive. In the light of faith, times of trial and change become times of personal and community conversion – important periods during which new projects are formed. The saints and prophets bear witness to this. It was in the crucible of suffering at Rennes that Libermann underwent his 'second conversion' and formed his missionary project. It was at the time of the Babylonian exile that the People of God turned towards the Lord and attained the universal outlook that is expressed in Deutero-Isaiah.

Encouraged by this faith and by the growing signs among us of personal and community renewal, we believe that we are all invited to turn more resolutely to the Lord and allow ourselves to be possessed by him.

Possessed by the Lord Personal conversion

We believe that all the developments and conversions mentioned above, and the trials and stresses of the past twenty years, reveal in the end God's intention for us: to lead us to him so that we allow ourselves to be possessed by him. To renew our apostolic life, in the new world and Church that are being born, the Lord wants us to take the shortest way, the way of intimacy with him. This was how he dealt with the saints, the prophets and the great missionaries. If we are God's intimates, we shall see things as he sees them and hear calls as he hears them, especially the cry of the poor. And we shall be able to answer them "in the strength of the Spirit".

"If today you hear the voice of the Lord, harden not your heart" (Ps. 94). No one is alone. God's grace is at work in many of our confreres to lead them to the decisive step of a 'second conversion'. Each one will contribute, for his part, to the renewal and conversion of the Congregation as a whole. On this will depend its worthiness to be chosen again by God for tomorrow's mission.

Personal conversion concerns especially those of the 'second age', between 45 and 60. At some point in this period of their life, many find themselves at a crossroads: their initial choices, values and dreams have been subjected to experience; they have realized their limitations and weakness and have suffered setbacks; they may have found it difficult to adapt to change. They are now faced with either a sort of resignation or with a decisive step forward, a 'second conversion'. This consists in giving oneself totally to the Lord, in finding a new wholeness of life, in renewing one's fundamental choices and discovering anew one's vocation. As the majority of our confreres are in this period of their life, the renewal of the Congregation will depend largely on them.

A priority Community renewal

While noting the efforts that have been made towards renewing community life, we must recognize a certain sluggishness in this area. We have allowed ourselves to become too dispersed and perhaps we do not really see why we ought to live in community. We have produced fine texts in our Chapters but without much effect on our lives.

It would be necessary to reinterpret Libermann's inspiration in today's context. For him, let us repeat, community life takes on an *apostolic aim*; it is necessary for the good of the apostolate, and for the sanctification of the confreres, without which their apostolate would not be fruitful. The Draft of the new Constitutions, in Chapter 3, follows this line.

In order to promote community life, the 1980 Chapter asked that community renewal should be one of the most important priorities and that a study of it should be made at the level of the Congregation as a whole. This study is being made, with the aim of finding concrete ways to promote renewal.

We recommend in particular: that the motivation for community life be reflected on; that the aim should be apostolic communities; that each community should draw up its community 'project' or unde-

taking, as is already being done in some circumscriptions (cf. Draft, No. 61.1).

Finally, let us stress that personal and community renewal are interdependent. Without personal conversion there can be no community conversion.

"New spirituality" Integrated religious life

We have suggested, in these pages, various changes and steps to be taken if we are to play our part in the changing world and Church, which herald a new missionary era. It will be difficult for us to make the necessary conversions unless we renew our spiritual and religious life. We will limit ourselves here to a few important aspects of this vast subject:

- There is talk today of a "new spirituality". Usually this means a spirituality shaped by, and integrating, concrete experience and new situations – especially 'frontier situations' or situations of conflict, tension and oppression. The intuition seems a just one; we are called to play our part in the search for a new type of spirituality and religious life that is influenced by the realities of our apostolic life and especially by the frontier situations in which we are engaged.

- On this point too, we should take Libermann's inspiration and reinterpret it for today. Apostolic life is essentially "*that life of love and holiness which the Son of God led on earth*". Religious life is the way that leads us to live our apostolic life fully, and is shaped by our apostolic life. If we have already been invited to be converted to the 'essential', there remains the task of integrating our religious and apostolic life.

- We would like to encourage the ongoing research on Spiritan spirituality. We have the good fortune to have in one of our Founders, Fr. Libermann, someone who, in the opinion of experts, developed an original spirituality. The Draft of the Constitutions reflects some aspects of this, especially in what concerns the Holy Spirit.

Re-foundation Second conversion

Considering all the calls to conversion that we have mentioned in this I/D, it would not be wrong to speak in terms of a re-foundation – especially as in many of the areas we are only at the beginning of the transformation. We think, for example, of the impact that the young Provinces and Foundations will have on the Congregation, through their inculturation of the Spiritan charism, the participation of the Southern Hemisphere in mission, and the diversification of the Spiritan family in its membership and commitments. Like the world and the Church, the Congregation too is, and should be, engaged in a movement towards that "other Congregation".

We live in hope, as we watch the signs of a new start and the movement towards renewal. As it develops, in the various ways that we have mentioned, it can become a true 'second conversion' of the Congregation, similar to that of a person. What is at stake is important, for the 'second conversion' of the Spiritan family as a whole bears much promise for the future.