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The Generalate Team

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The Spirit of God inspires us to prophetic action for justice

(Draft of new Rules and Constitutions, no. 5)

*"When they came to take the Communists, I remained silent, for I was not a Communist.
When they came to take the Jews, I remained silent, for I was not a Jew.
When they came to take the workers, I remained silent, for I was not a worker.
When they came to take the intellectuals, I remained silent, for I was not an intellectual.
But when they came to take me, there was no one left to speak up"*

Martin Niemöller

The cry of the silent: Spiritan testimonies

(We withhold the names in order to protect our confreres)

"I was returning home from a mission outstation, taking with me as usual in the car some people coming home or visiting friends. Among them was a mother of four, a good Christian woman who tried to be helpful in her neighbourhood as much as she could. When I left her off, I saw her make her way to a little path. Next day I was called to bury her. She had been shot dead because she took a short-cut that trespassed on a local estate. Everyone knew who murdered her, but no one dared to denounce him. She had been killed because she was black; everyone was afraid to accuse a white man. Myself included!"

"My parish is so large that we can visit the outstations only once a month. But they are well organized, and the people celebrate a Sunday service on their own: they come together, have a celebration of the Word and receive Holy Communion. The leaders are elected by the community, and after a suitable time of preparation they are installed by the bishop for a period of two years. José was one of these community leaders — young, dynamic, married with two children and his wife expecting their third. The community gathered around him, not only for the Sunday service, but also when there were problems, which for them always meant difficulties with the big landowner. The latter behaved as he liked and grazed his cattle anywhere, so that they often broke into the plots of the small farmers. These did their best to defend

themselves, with the community leader at their head. José was coldbloodedly assassinated by hired killers, 'pistoleiros', as they are called here. The excuse was that he had been drunk and had attacked them. It is always the same story. Everyone knew that José on principle never touched alcohol. The 'pistoleiros' are still on the landowner's estate. There were no arrests. The little group of peasants are intimidated and speak of moving away. Thus the big landowner's plan will have succeeded: to acquire their land.

"This is not an isolated case. We are always coming across such things — oppression, hunger, violent death. Can anything be done? The theology we learnt in Europe does not go far. You cannot go on consoling people, telling them that evil is a consequence of sin. That abstract formula will do until the evil strikes you directly yourself. But here it is you yourself who are the victim, and you know the causes of the evil but can do nothing to change them."

"I am back for the past two weeks. It is amazing how freshly one feels pained at the situation again, even after a short absence. There is crushing inflation. You wonder how the people survive on their minimal salary — jokingly we call it the 'economic miracle'. Naturally the all-powerful dollar plays a large part in it. Everyone knows the country is insolvent, but why then is it not declared bankrupt? It would spell an end to help from abroad, it is true, but

it would allow for clear precise planning and on-the-spot decisions for the future. While I was on leave I was hurt by the fact that people had doubts about our presence here. Even when I spoke of my own work and situation, people were slow to believe me, even my own family. It was the most painful experience of my vacation.

"The attitude of those who will not believe how much our people are suffering from a war that was imposed on us from outside and will not go away is almost criminal. Have we no right to real indepen-

dence, autonomy, freedom, self-determination? We do not need your money or your arms, we need peace. What we need is to be able to take our destiny into our own hands, to decide our own future. The great powers and their satellites have a duty to free our country from this shipwreck and self-destruction. Our country is rich in mineral and natural resources. We are capable of providing for our own needs. This war imposed on us by the great powers is a criminal enterprise that cries to heaven; they condemn us to slavery and annihilation. Help us to put an end to this war."

Pope Paul VI's program

"If you want peace, seek for justice"

The theme of 'Justice and Peace', the insistent call of the Church to all people of good will to commit themselves to working for justice, is still quite new. It is too recent to have penetrated the consciences of all conferees, or to have found its place in formation programs of theology or religious life. The principal events and documents on the subject are as follows:

7 December 1965, the last day of Vatican II: promulgation of the pastoral constitution *Gaudium et Spes*. This constitution indicated a radical change from pre-Council thinking. The very old notion of the Church as the People of God was reintegrated into theology, and the dichotomy of pastoral and social work was surmounted. Human beings came to be considered in the wholeness of their being.

January 1967: Pope Paul VI set up the Pontifical Commission 'Justice and Peace', which received its definitive mandate in 1976. In the encyclical *Populorum Progressio*, promulgated in March 1967, the Pope indicated why he had set up the Commission: "Wishing to respond to the Council's desire, we considered it our duty to create a pontifical commission that would make known to all the People of God the role the present moment is offering them, to do what they can for social justice among the nations" (no. 5). In this same encyclical the Pope clearly describes the link between Christian faith and responsibility for the development of peoples.

In his apostolic letter *Octogesima Adveniens*, addressed to Cardinal Roy, President of the Pontifical Commission 'Justice and Peace', Pope Paul removes all doubt: Christians are to collaborate actively "for social, political and economic changes" (no. 4).

In 1971, over 200 bishops, drawn from all countries, met in Synod in Rome to study, among other things, justice in the world. "The mission of preaching the gospel," they said, "demands in our day radical commitment for the integral liberation of all human beings" (Synod's final document).

1975: The apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiationis*, summing up the 1974 Synod on evangelization, gives a mandate to missionaries especially: the liberation of the whole person is an integral part of the good news.

It is no exaggeration to say that concern for justice in the world was a central preoccupation of Pope

Paul VI. He succeeded in integrating, firmly and coherently, the new mentality of Vatican II into the guiding principles of his pontificate, and he tried to get all the members of the Church interested.

1980: The General Chapter dealt with this theme and gave it long consideration. Its deliberations are set forth in the 'Justice and Peace' section of *Spiritan Life*, nos. 69-84. They call all conferees to a radical conversion and give a mandate to the General Council "to make animation in the area of Justice and Peace a primary focus of its ministry" (SL, 83).

Repercussions in the local Churches

In 1969 and 1979 the bishops of Latin America met at Medellín and Puebla, respectively, to consider the Church's role. The "preferential option for the poor" was the main decision at Medellín and constituted the first important step in implementing the decisions of Vatican II in the sub-continent. That option was renewed and strengthened at Puebla. Thus Medellín was a historic moment for Latin America, in which the Church as such made up its mind to be no longer a Church of the rich. In the midst of these huge masses of poor people bereft of rights, it became the advocate of political and economic justice, publicly acknowledging that it had itself been sinfully culpable and partially responsible for social and structural evils.

The bishops of Africa and Madagascar (SECAM), at the end of their general assembly in Yaounde in 1981, addressed the exhortation *Justice and Evangelization in Africa* to all apostolic workers. "Whatever the regime under which they live and work, apostolic workers must bear witness that Jesus Christ loves all people and has special care for the poorest and weakest" (30). We must "realize the need to know about the discussions on a new ordering of relationships between nations — political, economic, monetary, cultural — and on the free flow of information. Our Christian communities must not remain unaware of discussions so important that they will affect our life and pastoral activity" (32).

Likewise we may mention the statements on peace of several episcopal conferences, and statements on various concrete situations — for instance,

those of the episcopal conference of South Africa, whose president, the courageous Archbishop Hurley of Durban, takes a clear stand on the apartheid question; and that of the episcopal conference of the Uni-

ted States on nuclear arms. The latter conference has also been preparing a position paper on the capitalist system and the consequences of the economy of multinationals.

To give witness to the justice of the Kingdom

(Draft of new Rules and Constitutions, no. 36)

By the issue 'Justice and Peace' we do not mean what are usually called works of Christian charity. This is not to make a value judgement but only to define terms. Both are necessary obligations, but each is a fundamentally different reality from the other. Work for justice and peace is not something one may accomplish side by side with ordinary tasks as an extra on the timetable. What is it? It is an effort to procure rights for those without rights, a home for refugees, work and a fair wage for the jobless, food for the hungry and thirsty. It is a denunciation of the unjust and sinful structures of society, and an attempt to transform them in union with all people of goodwill. Is this a utopian dream or simply the good news of Jesus Christ?

Justice and peace are grounded in Jesus' message of the Kingdom of God. This is not just an other-worldly and spiritual reality but the Kingdom which is already being realized. "*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, for he has anointed me. He has sent me to bring the good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives and to the blind new sight, to set the downtrodden free, and to proclaim the Lord's year of favour*" (Lk 4:18-19). The enterprise relies on faith, on the conviction that the Gospel values, the moral teachings of Jesus, are feasible for all peoples and can have a meaning in every form of society and in every age.

The place for this to happen is the community of Jesus. Jesus neither wrote nor taught a course of social doctrine, but he gathered disciples around him into a community which is a model for every community. The members lived by new norms of sociability, in clear contradiction to those of the world, as we learn from the Acts of the Apostles; for example, poverty ("*they sold all their goods*"), eliminating social distinctions (Jesus told his disciples that the first among them should be the servants of all). What is at issue is a society without oppression or violence, as we see it portrayed in the Sermon on the Mount. Most especially, Jesus declined to have recourse to violence in the face of death. Justice, in the long run, aims at fulfilling this message.

"Grant to us, O Lord, a heart renewed"

The task presupposes conversion

1. We need a new outlook on the world.

Whoever wants to work for justice and peace must change the point of view from which he sees the world and its conditions: the oppressed and marginalized, prisoners and the persecuted, today's blind and sick. We need Jesus' outlook in the Capernaum synagogue, as given by St. Luke, where, filled

with the Holy Spirit, he announced the mandate he had from his Father. To change one's point of view means to see the world, to recognize its needs, with the eyes of the poor and oppressed and all those who suffer injustice; to try to analyse their condition from their point of view, with their eyes; for only thus will it be possible to recognize the relevance of the values of the Kingdom of God and put them into practice. Governments, industrial complexes, the mass media and institutions cannot adopt this point of view, for they must follow the laws and values of this world, which are not those of the Kingdom. Their values are power, self interest, gain, advantage.

Our task is to proclaim the Kingdom of God and to live under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Our task is a prophetic one, since it will lead us towards the oppressed and marginalized. This will place us in a special position with regard to the institutional system. We cannot allow ourselves to be caught up in it. On the contrary, we must be free to challenge it and call upon it to open itself to God's Kingdom.

2. The second presupposition follows from the first. We are bound to change our point of view in the light of Christ's message about the Kingdom of God. Whoever wants to work for justice and peace must discover new sources of spiritual energy, new ways of praying and meditating.

As our new point of view will give us a new interpretation of the world, so it will furnish us with a new way of meeting and knowing God. Side by side with the usual individual relationships with God, social and community relationships will come to the fore. The object of our prayer will become the social conflicts that the poor live with all the time, the concrete experience of oppression, powerlessness in the face of crushing social structures. Contemplation will not be simply an act of personal union with God but an experience of God through situations of poverty and misery, a meeting with the suffering Servant of God in our neighbour. The Bible will be a fresh experience speaking to us more concretely: the call God addresses to his people, to his community. Charity, at the heart of the Christian message, will be not only a fine concept for the individual but will widen to embrace the community, the whole people and even international relationships.

This must form part of the foundations of our spirituality. And perhaps some day an inspired confere may arise who will show us how Fr. Libermann's intuition of 'practical union' can help us to live up to our vocation in these situations of injustice and violence that are becoming ever more frequent. Many of us still find it hard to separate this from its context of French religious terminology of the 19th century. But it would indeed be a pearl of great price for which much else could be sold.

3. The third presupposition is a new understanding of our life.

A new outlook and a new spirituality will necessarily lead to a new way of living and acting. "The poor evangelize us." We will become more acutely sensitive about the goods we possess and how we use them. This has been called a simpler lifestyle and we have often been encouraged to adopt it. A change in our way of living may be a sign of a genuine renewal, but it will remain an external sign unless another change precedes it — that of our heart, drawing us to the poor.

Libermann's sons, advocates and defenders of the oppressed

We are called to conversion. This conversion will concern not only our mind and interior disposition but, in the biblical sense of the word, it will call for a turning-about, a 'metanoia', a visible, noticeable change of behaviour. The Church calls us to this conversion, which is in point of fact a part of the 'aggiornamento' willed by Vatican II.

Would it be an exaggeration to say that in this call to conversion we touch on a central point of our charism? From childhood Libermann lived the ghetto experience in depth. He was part of a minority in the bosom of society. Thanks to the thoroughness of his father's faith, he was also part of a minority in the bosom of his race and religion. From early on, he knew what it was to be without rights, rejected and marginalized. At Metz he experienced rootlessness, and to this was added the feeling of being abandoned by God. We can imagine what it meant to him then, in his little attic in Paris, when it dawned on him that he was not rejected by God, when he became convinced that God loved him and was his Father, as he was Father of all. This recognition gave Libermann a base, a community where he was accepted, in which he had rights, of which he was a full member. He learnt that God's love not only has effects in the soul of each person but that it transforms and concretely determines relationships between human beings. This love, according to Christ's message, gives rights, a fatherland, work, in a word, all that is required by human dignity. The message of the universality of God's love, and its accomplishment, determine the living community of human beings.

As a result of his fundamental experience he would later give his missionaries this mandate: "You are the advocates and defenders of the oppressed". If you bring them the Father's love you will also be bringing them a new fatherland, a new community, in which they will have rights and where they will be welcomed and accepted. For the Father's love brings tangible changes into the human community.

This call is still relevant, for "the present world situation is one of urgency; delay may be catastrophic" (SL, 74). God's Spirit impels us to prophetic commitment on behalf of justice. We live out this commitment according to Libermann's call and inheritance wherever, after community discernment, we notice oppression and exploitation.

Conversion is not the result of long, extended and reasoned reflections. Nor is it the result of discussions meant to convince an adversary. Conversion is a grace, a gift accorded to us when "we retire into the desert", "when we fast and pray", when we pray uninterruptedly to obtain it, when we leave ourselves open to the Spirit in humility, when we give him entry and allow ourselves to be led where he wills. Just now, in this time of our renewal, when we are preparing to re-write our Rule, we need this openness to the Spirit, we need to pray to have the Spirit, so that he may show the way, this way which he revealed to Libermann and which we wish to rediscover for ourselves and for the Spiritans of tomorrow.

For this we need saints and prophets:

– who are brave enough to stand out from the ranks, to go into the desert, to listen to the voice of God there and to call the Church and the Congregation to the ways of God;

– who are not afraid of being treated by the powerful ones of this world as enemies of the nation or as revolutionaries, and of being condemned to prison or even death;

– who are not discouraged if they are reprimanded, condemned or rejected by certain structures and even by their own confreres.

WHOEVER DECIDES TO FOLLOW CHRIST MUST BE PREPARED TO SHARE HIS FATE.

The option for the poor

"We are not a church of geniuses who suddenly decided to opt for the poor – the option came from pure necessity: 85% of our population is oppressed and its oppression clearly showed us that we live in a social and economic system of injustice. In Medellín we verbalized our conviction that this injustice is not occasional but that it is institutionalized in what we call social sin... The option for the poor touches the very heart of the social system and incites the anger of all those who have benefited from an unjust economy... Another consequence of this option for the poor is the transformation of the Church... If you ask me what has changed, I have to say: everything! Our pastoral planning is different, decisions are made in assemblies of all the members of the Church. Our religious education has changed, the way of preaching the Gospel has changed. Our liturgy is renewed – it is deeper, it comes from the heart of the people, it celebrates their victories and their defeats. Our theology has been renewed, our seminaries are different. And yes, our bishops tell wonderful stories of how they were before they made their options for the poor!"

Cardinal Evaristo Arns of São Paulo, Brazil,
speaking to the Centre of Concern, Washington, 1981.