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## Towards a Missionary Spirituality for Today

### Introduction:

#### What kind of spirituality is ours?

Spiritual life is the life in us that is animated by the Spirit of God. It is at the source of Spiritan life: what we are and what we do spring from this Spirit that dwells in us (Rom. 8:9). The offering of ourselves to the Father, our apostolate, our way of living community life, our way of interpreting the signs of the times - everything springs from the same source, which unifies and makes it all fruitful. Our spiritual life comes from "the source of love" (*Ad Gentes*, 2).

And yet, there are two questions that we should ask ourselves:

- 1) Is our Spiritan spirituality present in the heart of our apostolate, and creative enough to be able to respond to the needs of the world today?
- 2) Are our apostolic activities animated by a deep

spirituality which is at the heart of our Spiritan vocation?

In fact, Spiritans are engaged in a certain number of apostolic activities in which it is difficult to find the spirit that is typically ours. And there are also many activities that fit in with our Spiritan tradition but that are not well suited to mission as understood today. In other words, the renewal of our apostolic dynamism does not always go hand in hand with our personal and community renewal. And also the renewal of methods and structures of the apostolate is not always accompanied by a conversion of heart and a renewed faith that will open us up to the world of today and involve us in new forms of mission.

The main lines of a renewed Spiritan spirituality that will promote a new apostolic dynamism are to be found, therefore, on the one hand in the sources of our Spiritan life and, on the other, in the new situations of today's mission in which we are called to bear witness to Christ.

## The Sources of Spiritan Spirituality

It is from our Spiritan sources that a true Spiritan spirituality will spring. These sources are, above all, the lives and faith experiences of our Founders, which are the great parables that reveal the grace and meaning of our own vocation. In the lives of Poullart des Places and of Libermann there are a certain number of fundamental spiritual experiences that have become sources of life for the Congregation - more implicit in Poullart, more explicit in Libermann. It is these experiences that are at the origin of our Spiritan vocation, that constitute the essence of our call. Let us look at some of the more important of them.

- 1) The fundamental interior experience that emerges from the lives of our Founders is above all the **experience of God as the Absolute**. For both of them this was the key insight. The more they stripped themselves of everything, the more absolute God became to them.

In Poullart des Places it was a stripping off of vanity, ambition, passion for glory, worldly pomp, money, family inheritance. This awakened all the more his thirst for God and led him to a total donation of himself, to the point of a desire for martyrdom, to which he aspired with his whole soul.

In Libermann the abnegation was still more radical: his austere education in the Jewish ghetto of Saverne, the separation from his family circle and his affective roots at the time of his conversion, his marginalization at Metz, the epilepsy that blocked his access to the priesthood, the painful night of the soul at Rennes and the departure towards the unknown, the long wait in Rome, the shipwreck of his dreams at the death of his first missionaries... "God is all" was indeed the keynote of his life.

Our Congregation owes a great deal to this double interior experience, which continues to be reflected in it.

- 2) Another characteristic experience of our Founders was their faith in Providence acting through events - what would be called today an "openness to the signs of the times".

Their great apostolic options were not planned in advance - they were the fruit of their listening to the Spirit in the calls of the Church and the world of their time. Neither the Seminary of the Holy Spirit nor the Work for the Blacks was born from a premeditated plan. It was step by step, in the concrete circum-

stances of their time, that God led them along his path.

One could say that the whole of Libermann's life was a continual reading of the signs of the times. Even the selection of fields of apostolate for his Congregation was made "*according as Divine Providence will dispose events*" (ND II, 185). His foundations were made in accordance with the urgent demands of new needs. His projects were always dependent on God's hour and God's choice.

3) This faith in God's presence at the heart of events expressed itself in their lives by a **great docility to the Holy Spirit**. To consecrate oneself to the Holy Spirit meant, for them, to dispose oneself to receive from him the inner life that makes us vibrate, as it were, on God's wavelength. Rather than a form of devotion, it is a form of inspiration. From the outset, to be a Spiritan meant to be at the disposal of the Holy Spirit, without knowing where he would lead us. To give oneself over to the Spirit is a key idea in Libermann's spirituality, and we know how he multiplied images in order to express this availability: to be like a child who expects everything from its mother, clay in the hands of the potter, a statue in the hands of its sculptor, an anvil before the blacksmith, a light feather at the whim of the wind.

4) The **mission to the poorest** was also, for our Founders, the object of an existential experience.

Poullart learnt with his poor scholars how to be poor and to live poorly. He made himself one with them, washing the dishes, running errands, taking his turn at cleaning their shoes. And, when he founded his little community, he chose as its aim not merely the upkeep and training of poor seminarians but an evangelical radicality in the service of the poor.

Libermann, for his part, had lived the full drama of the *anawim*. An object of humiliation and scorn, cursed by his father, without any security for the future, he was able to empathize with the Blacks of Bourbon and Haiti that Le Vavas seur and Tisserant spoke of.

5) Libermann's setbacks in his first missionary foundation strengthened him in his conviction that **the work of God is inseparable from the paschal mystery**. Mauritius, Bourbon and Guinea were sources of great suffering for him; Guinea especially, where eight of his first ten missionaries died soon after arriving - a harrowing disaster.

This experience of the mystery of the Cross made Libermann fully aware of the ways of God: it is God who saves, it is God who builds, it is he who is the craftsman in whose hands we are but poor instruments. This realization is at the source of his calmness, his great peace, his imperturbable confidence. His spirituality springs from this abandonment into the hands of God. One must know how to wait for God's hour, to walk at his pace, to be patient: "*If you knew the value of patience among the apostolic virtues, you would use all the resources of your soul to obtain it*" (LS IV, 458). He is a man of peace in success as in failure. Abandonment and peace are two key elements in his spirituality.

6) **Community life** was almost an obsession with Libermann, especially in the last years of his life. Religious and community life were for him a support for apostolic life and the guarantee of its efficacy. But they had to be protected, for the great distances and the dispersion that these entailed were constant threats to them. Neither in Guinea nor in Mauritius nor in Bourbon was community life free from difficulties: excessive preoccupation with the work to be done; the missionaries' spirit of independence; the Bishops' tendency to speed up apostolic activity; lack of regularity. For Libermann, infidelity to the Rule was a sort of original sin which could influence the orientation of future missionaries. For his Bishops in Africa, community life was an instrument of apostolate and its support; for Libermann it was more than that: it was the Mission's only chance, and he spent the last years of his life struggling to safeguard the community life and religious spirit of his confreres.

7) A final experience of Libermann's was at the source of his *Instructions to Missionaries*, which sum up his apostolic aims and are a sort of spiritual testament. He stresses that an apostolic project would be useless and worthless if there were not constant reference to the source that gives life: **apostolic holiness**. For him the missionary must be deeply rooted in Christ if his apostolic activity is to be fruitful, and he places the Spiritan's apostolic life at the heart of this union: "*the life of love and holiness that the Son of God led on earth to save and sanctify souls, and through which he continually sacrificed himself to the glory of his Father for the salvation of the world*" (ND X, 55). Libermann is convinced that the "apostolic life" contains in itself the life of Our Lord, on which our own is modelled. The Congregation is defined by it: religious life and community life are integrated in the apostolate. Its spirituality is an *apostolic* spirituality. This comes through quite clearly from the very first chapter of his Rule.

## Spiritans Spirituality for Today

How can this current of life that flows from our origins inspire our apostolic dynamism in the new missionary situations in the Church and world of today? In other words, what are the lines of missionary spirituality that emerge both from our Spiritan sources and from the actual experience of Spiritans today?

We are, in fact, faced with many new situations which demand from us not only a change of missionary strategy but also a renewed interior attitude if we are to be able to cope with them. We do not really know yet how to come to terms with the new age of mission. We have not had enough experience of it,

and the prophets of the new age are not numerous. We are at the threshold of an era in which the issues are not yet quite clear. But certain lines are beginning to emerge, which bear on the new situations in which we find ourselves.

### 1. A spirituality of exodus

In the majority of our older Districts we are at a decisive juncture: the change from a missionary situation to a missionary Church. It is a time of exodus, of the giving up of certain frames of reference and of a

sort of security to which we had become accustomed; a time that favours lighter structures that are not linked to the power and glories of the past; a time that calls for an exodus mentality and an availability of the Libermannian type. Today more than ever, our Spiritan vocation requires us to have no fixed abode, to be always on our pilgrim way. *"A Congregation that is growing old is always looking for security, trying to make its tent into a house and its house into a fortress."* If in the past we have been pioneers and builders, in the future we shall be called on to be pilgrims and prophets.

## 2. A spirituality of foundation

*"Faithful to the first intuition of our Founders, we go preferably to those who 'have not yet heard the gospel message or who have scarcely heard it', and we assist at the birth and promote the growth of new Christian communities"* (1985 Draft of Constitutions, 15). According to Libermann, our role is one of foundation: once a Christian community has been founded, we leave its development to others, as far as possible. It was for this reason that he insisted so strongly on the training of local clergy and leaders.

The spirituality of a founder is the spirituality of a sower: a spirituality that places its trust in grace, in the seed, in the soil, in the rain, and that leaves room for a host of unforeseen elements that may even delay the harvest. It is a spirituality that can do without immediate results, a spirituality of hope that does not need to actually see the harvest. Libermann gave to his missionaries the model of the *"eminently apostolic heart of Mary"*. She, who was at the origin of Christ's mission and that of the Church, remained always discreetly hidden beside her Son, sharing his paschal mystery whose depths she could not fathom.

## 3. A spirituality of apostolic availability

*"Each congregation in the Church has its own particular spirit, in accordance with its aims: the Trappists, for instance, have a spirit of penance, while the Carthusians have a spirit of prayer. We, like other missionary congregations, must have an apostolic spirit. The great means for this is to have our eyes fixed on Our Lord during his ministry, and on the apostles. These are our models"* (Gloss on the Provisional Rule, p. 145).

For Libermann, the Spiritan is above all an apostle, walking in the footsteps of Jesus and the Twelve; and the apostolic virtue *par excellence* is availability - an availability which means first of all an openness to the events of the country in which he is and to the changing situations of a Church in the process of growth. It also means a reaching out to others and an acceptance of them as different, an openness to other cultures that will lead us to the ends of the earth.

*"Our availability is at the same time a permanent readiness to leave the work to others, in places where we have finished our work of 'foundation' and to answer new and urgent calls which arise, whether they come from the local Church we happen to be in or from other parts of the Church universal. All his life Libermann had an ear for new needs and situations"* (Spiritan Papers, no. 18, p.43).

## 4. A spirituality of welcome

In most of our missions the first century was the Spiritan century: that of the foundation and consolidation of the Church, in which we played a leading role. The second century will certainly be that of the local Church. Instead of 'proprietors', we have become partners.

Fr. Congar has said that the most revolutionary thesis in the ecclesiology of Vatican II was the rediscovery of the local Church: *"the Church that is in Rome, in Corinth, with the characteristics of Rome and of Corinth"*. This does not come about all by itself. The local character of each Church has to be developed, with its liturgy, its charisms and its spirituality influenced by local conditions and culture. The word of God which becomes the seed and source of life does not remain in the hand of the sower, but takes root in the soil of the country. We have to learn the importance of places and times.

But we have been marked by a missionary training that was one of exportation rather than of welcome, and it is difficult to make this conversion unless we renew our spirituality. Our personal and community renewal, therefore, must include this conversion to the country, the culture and the treasures of the Churches that welcome us. Our prayer, our community life and our manner of living the vows should reflect this participation in the local Church. How can we imagine the Congregation in Asia without an appreciation of the values of Asian contemplation, or in Latin America without an openness to the values of Justice and Peace? *"The Congregation itself receives life and vitality from these 'currents of life' in the local Churches. It is moulded by the Spirit that breathes in these Churches."*

## 5. A spirituality with a new stress on contemplation

All of this means a new capacity to discover God in various cultures, in history, in the signs of the times - a capacity to bring to light what is still hidden. One has to be on God's wavelength in order to see him beside us in values other than our own. Perhaps the model for tomorrow's mission will be the contemplative model of St. John rather than the strategic model of St. Matthew. St. John centres mission on the Father. As the Father sent the Son, so the Son sends the apostles to bear witness to the Father's love. Mission is considered at its source - a love that manifests itself as ministry, washing of the feet, sharing, service - rather than as a program or a strategy. The missionary must be at the service of others. Contemplation will be more and more seen as a decisive element in this kind of mission.

## 6. A spirituality of insecurity

In most parts of the world today, but especially in Africa and Latin America, there is a feeling of insecurity. We cannot foresee what the future will bring, and nobody can guarantee that the means that we have today will be there tomorrow. This feeling of insecurity is an essential part of the missionary vocation today, especially that of the expatriate missionary. Before sending anyone out to the missions, his superiors should ask him if he accepts insecurity as part of his vocation. If he does not, he will never succeed in adapting himself.

There is also a psychological insecurity. Formerly, one went out to the missions for life. The mission Church became that of the missionary. Today we do not know for how long we will remain, for how long they will need us. And we have to let go of structures that have sheltered us in the past, structures that we may find it difficult to work outside of.

There are many questions too about our past, our image, our methods, our form of presence today, even our identity. Here too Libermann teaches us how to live for God alone, abandoning ourselves into his hands and trusting the Spirit who has called us and who guides the mission. *"The uncertainty of our presence in all parts of the country is perhaps our main missionary resource; we are like the first missionaries, who never knew what the next day would bring."*

## 7. A community spirituality

Chapter 2 of *Lumen Gentium* calls attention to the community aspect of our call to holiness. Our spirituality must be marked by involvement with others. It must not be an individualistic spirituality, but one of communion, sharing, complementarity. It is the Spirit who guides, and who distributes different graces and gifts to each one for the proclamation of the Kingdom. This means that we must recognize with humility and joy the elements of salvation that the Spirit has conferred on every person and on all groups of people, and that we should allow ourselves to be enriched by them and place our own gifts at their service.

Spiritan apostolic life is essentially based on community, so much so that our Founder laid down a categorical law: *"All the members will live in community"* (1849 Rule). His plan was for teams of missionaries, setting out from a stable community in which they lived. They could separate temporarily for tours further afield, but they would return to share what they had experienced and to live with their confreres (1840 Rule).

## 8. A spirituality of the universal

It has been said that we live today in a global village. We cannot live closed in on ourselves, but must be open to the universal, even in spirituality. When we look at the Spiritan scene today in all its variety of communities, experiences, commitments, charisms and gifts of the Spirit, geographical and cultural diversity, we realize how much all of this influences our spirituality. Our spirituality is not a question merely of a relationship between God and each of us; it is also a communion with all these situations and with all our confreres; its horizon is the whole of today's mission, in which the Spiritan family plays its role. We must open up a space in our prayer, in our poverty, chastity and obedience, for this fraternity and solidarity. The space of our spirituality is indeed the space of the Spirit.

## 9. A spirituality for frontier situations

We have a certain number of confreres today who live with the poor and are deeply committed with them in their struggle against oppression. Our place is certainly among the poorest, and these frontier sit-

uations play an important role in the awakening of the Congregation and its credibility. When the Church commits itself with the poor, it is renewed and gains in vitality. The increase in the number of situations of injustice in the world points out a path for us.

These situations require a type of spirituality of which we have not had much experience. There will certainly have to be elements in it that are indispensable to all spirituality: times of silence and recollection in the presence of God, of community celebrations, of adoration and the search for God for his own sake, as Christ showed us. But this meeting with the Father will be influenced by the experience of a life shared with the poor. The value of our prayer and its authenticity will be judged according to the seriousness of our commitment to the total liberation of humankind, otherwise we shall be forgetting half of the gospel.

A spirituality that grows out of situations of distress, often in the midst of situations of conflict, will of necessity be a simple spirituality, based on the daily experiences of a life of privation and hardship, in dechristianized areas, amid the struggle and improvisation that is the lot of the poor. The variety of these situations and experiences will be reflected in our prayer and our faith. It is a spirituality, therefore, that is built up along with the people, and as much among them as in one's own religious community. Whence the difficulty of finding inspiration and support for it entirely from the spirituality of the Congregation. And yet, is it not true that both the Congregation of the Holy Ghost and that of the Immaculate Heart of Mary were born from the call to frontier situations?

## Conclusion:

### Bearing witness to our Spiritan vocation

There are other situations, e.g. situations of dialogue, which would require a new reading of our spirituality, but space does not permit us to go further.

During the first hundred years of our presence in most of the mission countries, we have been the protagonists in the Churches that we helped to build. We have substituted for the diocesan clergy, while waiting for it to come. This task has not been completely finished, but, during the second century that is beginning, what will be asked of us is that we should be more and more Spiritan: it is as Spiritans that we shall have something to say to these Churches. We must bear witness, therefore, to our own particular charism.

The witness of our religious-missionary life will become more and more important. Certain essential values of our Spiritan heritage should be more clearly seen in the Spiritan of tomorrow: the apostolic life - and the holiness of the apostle - that Libermann saw as the heart of Spiritan vocation, the contemplative dimension of the apostolate, fraternal community life, the orientation of our ministry towards the service of the poor and towards frontier situations as a privileged area in which the Spiritan is called to live and bear witness to his specific vocation.

It is up to each Church and each circumscription to discern the ways that it will take, but our common denominator will be more and more our SPIRITAN IDENTITY.