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A Look at the Future

"We are just a group of poor people, brought together by the will of the Master, who alone is our hope. If we had powerful means at our disposal, we would not achieve much; but, as we are nothing, have nothing and are worth nothing, we can make great plans, because our hopes are founded not on ourselves but on Him who is all-powerful" (Liebermann, ND IV, 303).

Our Approach

This is the last I/D of our administration. Should we give you a report on the past six years? The Superior General will be doing this at the Chapter in July. We prefer instead to take a look ahead, remembering how often you have asked us the question: "How do you see the future?"

To be able to guess at the future means looking at the present facts, situations, developments and orientations, and prolonging them into the future. In this way a certain vision becomes possible, at least for today; tomorrow, admittedly, the course of events may not be as we foresee them.

This discernment does not remain at the level of mere analysis; it has to be interpreted in the light of faith. The Lord is present through his Spirit, and it is He who is the true shaper of Mission. To try to discover his action and his intentions in their various manifestations is a fascinating but risky task, for there is often enough light to be able to recognize his hand but also enough darkness to have to accept it in faith.

Global Vision

Let us present a summary of the main lines of our vision, which is an interpretation of our time from the point of view of religious-missionaries, though other readings are possible.

- As we look at this world to be evangelized, and the aspiration towards "a new world or-

der", we see that Mission, far from being over, is becoming more extensive and more urgent; it is called to cross over borders and become a "mission without frontiers", a somewhat different mission from that of the past.

- The renewal of the Church, begun by Vatican II, is taking place with a view to this "world to be evangelized". In the new Church being born there is promise for the future, with a new missionary drive, indeed "a new era of Mission".

- The renewal of the Congregation is to be placed in this context, with a view to Mission. Our conversions in the light of developments are an effort to reply to the needs of today's Mission. But there is a good deal more: we are also ourselves the bearers and shapers of the future. We think we can see enough of its promise to live in hope even to find our era as interesting as, if not more than, the past. It is possible to be enthusiastic about Mission.

- This point of view is based ultimately on faith and finds its light in God's word. We know from the history of the People of God and from the witnesses of the Gospel that times of trial and change are privileged moments in which the Lord works to accomplish a new project; we have only to think of the Exodus or the Exile, and still more the Cross, which was a passage to the resurrection. The more one looks at the period since Vatican II, the more one feels that the Lord is at work. What project is He working on? Various signs seem to indicate that He is renewing the Church by his Spirit, and within the Church the missionary institutes in particular, with a view to a new missionary movement. For a new world, a new mission.

Promising Signs for the Future

“Continuing Commitment to the Local Churches” (SL, 57)

In preparation for the 1986 General Chapter, we asked all circumscriptions to list in order of priority the four orientations of the 1980 Chapter, namely: 1) “a greater openness to the call of universal Mission”; 2) “a continuing commitment to our missionary involvement in the local Churches”; 3) “a deepening commitment to the poor”; 4) “a deepening commitment to the witness of our religious-missionary way of life” (SL, 56-61).

The second orientation is listed as the first priority by the majority of circumscriptions, the Districts in particular; the third and fourth are listed as second and third; while the first orientation comes in the fourth place and is mentioned as a top priority mainly by Provinces. This classification corresponds well to the situation today, and stresses the importance of our ministry in the local Churches. In many and varied ways you are contributing by your daily ministry to the coming of this “other Church” with its promise of a new missionary zeal.

A Church that is wholly Missionary

In presenting the Church as the People of God which “by its very nature is missionary” (AG, 2), the Second Vatican Council extended the missionary task of the Church to the whole Body of Christ, to all his members. You experience the importance of this “shared mission” in particular through the laity, both as a Christian and as a human community.

If the movement of this shared mission continues to develop, the Church will become a more ministerial one; it will become more mission-minded and will spread into all areas of society.

Local Churches

In order to follow more perfectly its essential vocation to be missionary, the one universal Church organizes itself and transforms itself into local Churches. Thanks in large part to the immense efforts of missionaries in the past and down to our own day, local Churches have been born and are developing in all peoples and nations, especially in the southern hemisphere. The older Churches too are evolving more in the sense of local Churches, though at a slower pace because of their traditions.

We can see great promise for the future in this aspect of the Church that is still in full evolution: responsibility for evangelization shared by each Church; engagement in local situations; Churches that grow more from below and that are enriched by a diversity of cultures.

Growth of the Churches

How can we not rejoice at seeing you share in that other promising fact that is the growth of the Churches, especially in the southern hemisphere? Africa is the most outstanding example of this. Ac-

ording to Barrett's *World Christian Encyclopedia*, 1983, Africa counted 9,000,000 Christians in 1900, in 1985 the number had risen to 236,000,000, and the forecast for the year 2000 is 393,000,000, or 48% of the population of Africa and 19% of the total number of Christians in the world.

More important than the numerical growth is the progress of the local Churches, at different rates, towards self-sufficiency in personnel. Priestly and religious vocations are increasing steadily, and responsible lay community leaders are playing their part. The organization of basic Christian communities also favours the development of services and ministries and the growth of a sense of responsibility.

The coming to maturity of the local Churches means a new impetus for local evangelization and, later on, their participation in the universal Mission.

Incarnated Churches

The movement of Churches that are trying to incarnate themselves in local cultures and conditions will also influence Mission and is another sign of hope. The example of Latin America is illuminating: placing itself squarely in the context of this continent, the Church has rediscovered the Christian message as a liberating force for the poor and oppressed. The theology of the Latin American Church has influenced the Church as a whole.

One can guess all that is at stake: a new strength to the Christian message as it expresses itself in the variety of local cultures and mentalities; the preaching of salvation to people in their full human and spiritual dimensions; evangelization in depth; Churches with widely differing cultural expressions, mutually enriching each other; the development of Mission as exchange and communion.

Missionary Awakening New Provinces and Foundations

All the points already mentioned lead us to a still greater promise, namely the missionary awakening of the Churches of the southern hemisphere. The new missionary era has already begun and is taking shape. It will mean: the evangelization of the southern hemisphere by itself; the universal mission shared collegially by young and old Churches; the mission to all continents, “from everywhere to everywhere”; mission as exchange, witness, communion between Churches, renewing itself through contributions from all the Churches.

We are all playing our part in different ways in this building of the future, but it is being done in a special way in our young Provinces and Foundations of the southern hemisphere. Their growth is a good example of the missionary awakening of the Churches. They already number 133 Fathers and 12 Brothers, with 288 students in higher education in 1985 and a forecast of possibly 550 students in 1990. Most of these new Spiritans are African; the Province of Nigeria alone had 80 Fathers, 4 Brothers and 99 students doing higher studies in 1985.

The young Provinces and Foundations are also playing an important role in the evolution of the Congregation as it adapts itself to the new era of Mission. We may mention some possible developments:

a) Inculturation and new expressions of the Spiritan vocation

The Congregation will be enriched by the cultures, currents and aspirations of the different continents; it will move towards greater diversity in living the Spiritan vocation; it will have to define more clearly the essential links that bind us all together.

b) The face of the Congregation is changing

Its main characteristic will be greater universality. In the distant future, with fewer vocations in the northern hemisphere, African Spiritans will be in the majority. This development will help us to open up more to universal Mission, to enter the era of mission as cooperation and communion between Churches, to be witnesses of the brotherhood of peoples. African dominance will ensure in a new way what was "the preferential option for Africa" of our origins.

c) The evolution of structures

The Districts are diminishing and, with few exceptions, are being overlaid by the growing young Provinces and Foundations. Spiritans from these have gone to countries where there were already Spiritans at work, such as Zambia and Gabon, or to break new ground such as the Nigerians are doing in Zimbabwe.

The Foundations are destined to become Provinces some day, and the East African Foundation will soon be one. The new Provinces and the Districts will coexist for a time that will be longer or shorter according to the regions. Spiritans from the different continents are called to live and work together; internationality will develop, though groups from a single Province will continue to exist. For our commitments in mission areas, the trend will certainly be towards international groups, which will replace the District structure – as in recent commitments in Pakistan, Mexico and Guinea-Bissau.

Cooperation and Solidarity

The stress we have laid on developments in the southern hemisphere does not diminish in any way the importance of the older Churches and of our Provinces in the northern hemisphere. These have a key role among the promising signs for the future, in their missionary activity today, their rich ecclesial traditions, and their support in personnel and finances. We may also note a certain renewal in our Provinces and their local Churches. The new missionary era concerns all the Churches and the whole Congregation.

Sharing, dialogue and solidarity have become more important in the past 20 years at all levels – national, regional, continental and global. New structures have been set up, such as: episcopal conferences, synods, theological symposia; organizations to promote development, Justice and Peace, Christian unity, dialogue between religions; meetings of religious and missionary institutes with each other and with the hierarchy. Within Congregations, including our own, we notice the same movement.

We believe that, with all of this, the mission of the future will be marked by a greater coresponsibility all round. Compartments and boundaries will be blurred, and there will be greater togetherness. A greater sense of universality will be seen in missionary institutes.

Renewal of Spiritan Vocation

We are ourselves deeply involved in the issues and signs for the future that have been mentioned, and it is our conviction that our Spiritan vocation is being renewed (cf. the recent I/Ds). The reports from the circumscriptions in preparation for the 1986 General Chapter bear witness to this, as can be seen from one or two examples:

"Commitment to the poor is a value of the USA West as well as a reality... We will not accept a parish if it is not among the poor. Within the last four years we have disengaged from four parishes... One of these was our most financially successful... During the same period we accepted two parishes... one among Blacks and the other among Mexican Americans... We have had community meetings where we have renewed our commitments to both Black and Hispanic minorities" (USA West).

"We have insisted especially on community witness. We have asked each community to define its project. The questions put to each community in asking them to draw up their project show which points we consider particularly important:

- a) What is *the mission* entrusted to our community today?
- b) What is the *quality of the fraternal life* that we are living and wish to live today?
- c) What are the *high points* of our community life?
- d) What occasions are there for *taking stock* periodically of our community project?
- e) How do the issues of *Justice and Peace* challenge our personal and community life?" (France).

In his personal study of the Draft of the Constitutions, one of our confreres picked out some keywords that keep appearing: the Holy Spirit; apostolic life according to Libermann; total donation; life in fraternal community; mission with its various aspects – the poor, Justice and Peace, dialogue, inculturation, signs of the times. In these words we can see something of our present orientation.

We could continue to evoke many signs of the renewal of our Spiritan vocation, a renewal that is taking place all the time in many forms (cf. our recent I/Ds). While attaching great importance to all the signs of promise and renewal mentioned above, we consider, with Libermann, that "holiness of life" is the most important of all. A well-known text from Libermann is often quoted among us: "The apostolic life is that life of love and holiness that the Son of God led on earth to save and sanctify souls, and by which he continually sacrificed himself to the glory of the Father for the salvation of the world" (ND, II, 290). Our meetings with you, especially our personal meetings, allow us to say: there is a deepening of spiritual and religious life in the Congregation, accompanied by community renewal; unity of life is found in the "apostolic life" according to Libermann. The whole renewal of Spiritan vocation is in view of Mission.

Why all this renewal? This world to be evangelized

As we look at all this effort at renewal in the Church throughout the world, a renewal in which the Congregation is playing its part, one may ask: "Why all this? What is at stake?" A brief glance at the world today and tomorrow will suggest the reply: it is in view of a wider, more urgent and different Mission that it is taking place. The Lord is at work through his Spirit. He is stirring up a new missionary movement in reply to the needs of today and tomorrow.

a) A wider Mission

Will evangelization keep pace with the demographic explosion? Towards the year 2000, the population of the world will be about 6,000 million. Between 1985 and 2000 it is expected that the population of Africa will pass from 520 million to 813 million (Barrett, op. cit.). Are countries and continents that were formerly Christian still to be considered so? The whole world has become a mission field. If Christians today are 32% of the world population, what of the other 68%? And can one not speak of a necessary re-evangelization for large numbers of Christians?

A new spirit of universality is growing through the renewal of the Church and of religious and missionary institutes. The 1980 Chapter oriented the Congregation in this direction: "A greater openness to the call to universal mission" (SL, 56). One sign of this, among others, is our engagement in Asia and Oceania and the option of the Indian Ocean Foundation for Asia.

b) A more urgent Mission

The demographic explosion, growing urbanization and other factors are making ever more insistent "the cry of the poor". The poor, the oppressed, the unemployed, the hungry are ever more numerous. And there is violence, war, inequality, racism, opposing blocs, totalitarian regimes etc.

"I have seen, I have seen the misery of my people" (Exodus 3:7). The Church and religious and missionary institutes are called to become more fully involved in the struggles and aspirations of humankind, to renew their sense of mission to the poor, to intensify their efforts for Justice and Peace, integral development, brotherhood and solidarity. We must renew the ideal of our apostolic life by "a deepening commitment to the poor" (SL, 59).

c) A different Mission Different Approaches

Mission-as-conversion has failed with the great religions, which form a large part of humankind. Sev-

enteen percent of the world population are Muslims, 13% Hindus, 6% Buddhists. By the year 2000 Asia will account for 65% of the world's population, and will have the smallest proportion of Christians (only 3%). And yet Christ's command remains: "Preach the gospel to every creature" (Mk 16: 15).

Vatican II took a different look from that of the past at religions, cultures and other human realities, inviting us to a different approach to evangelization. The Council recognized that "all people of good will, in whose hearts grace works in an unseen way," can be associated with the paschal mystery: "We ought to believe that the Holy Spirit in a manner known only to God offers to everyone the possibility of being associated with this paschal mystery" (*Gaudium et Spes*, 22). It spoke of the Holy Spirit, who "visibly anticipated the apostles' action" (*Ad Gentes*, 4). It invited us to discover "the seeds of the Word" contained in "national and religious traditions" (AG, 11). As for the great religions, the Council recognized their religious and salvific values and exhorted Catholics "prudently and lovingly, through dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions, and in witness of Christian faith and life, to acknowledge, preserve and promote the spiritual and moral goods found among these people, as well as the values in their society and culture" (*Nostra Aetate*, 2).

From this we can see something of the Mission that will certainly develop in the future and will concern the greater part of humanity, namely: the discovery of God's presence and action in human persons and realities before the preaching of the gospel; dialogue and cooperation with all those of good will and with the great religions, which are trying like ourselves to meet the challenges of the world. Our confreres in Mauritania, whom we have visited this year and who have found ways of dialogue with Islam, all say that they are beginning to see the fruits of their presence there. It is not rash to think that dialogue and cooperation are a possible and providential stage, while waiting for "God's hour" (Cardinal Duval).

Bearers of the Promise

You are members of Christ's Body, and, together with the Church and the Congregation as a whole, you all share in these promising signs for the future and contribute to them. Each one's personal share may not seem to amount to much; often it is hard to make it out at all, and one may sometimes question the utility of part of one's work. Let us remember the words of Mother Teresa about her work for the poor: "It is only a drop in the ocean, but something would be missing if it weren't there." With Libermann, let us put our hope in the Lord, "whose power, working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine" (Eph. 3:20).

"All works undertaken and carried out in the Church have met these same difficulties, and often even greater ones, and yet these difficulties did not dismay the apostolic people who undertook them, and did not prevent them from carrying them out with as much steadfastness as success. It has always been the order of providence to manifest its maternal care in the midst of obstacles, and the best results have normally been produced after the greatest difficulties. So it would be wanting to deviate from the ordinary ways of providence, it would be wanting to perform a human work, to want to undertake nothing except with an absolute guarantee of success, and the assurance that all difficulties will be smoothed out." (Libermann ND VIII, 92).