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Committed to the Poor: Action for Justice and Peace

"We count the following as constitutive parts of our mission of evangelization: the 'integral liberation' of people, action for justice and peace and participation in development. It follows that we must make ourselves 'the advocates, the supporters and the defenders of the weak and the little ones against all who oppress them'" (*Spiritan Rule of Life, 14; Rule of 1849*).

1. Justice and Peace: Already in Our Midst

- A Spiritan parish in Sierra Leone formed an Ecumenical Action for Justice Group. With some support from local civil authorities, the group meets weekly to determine appropriate responses to local incidents of injustice. Reports of excessive charges by a doctor and bribes by a border guard were recently acted upon.

- Spiritans in Amsterdam assist African students and itinerant foreign workers living in Holland. In addition to providing spiritual and material support, Spiritans work with these groups to assure their humane treatment under Dutch law.

- The culture and lands of indigenous Indian peoples are critically endangered in parts of Brazil. Through their village groups, Indians make their personal responses to these concerns. Aided by Spiritans who work with them, the Indians also call upon the local Church to assist.

- Sudan's severe development needs are tragically complicated by a large influx of refugees. The Spiritan presence there labours administratively on behalf of the local Church, assuring that relief and development funds are acquired and carefully distributed.

Many examples of Justice and Peace can be found among Spiritans. Some few are offered as illustrations. These suggest that as people of the Mission, Spiritans are not just now hearing that the Gospel is a force for liberation. When we took on Christ's mission within the Spiritan tradition, we entered the work to reform whatever oppresses people.

In ministries such as first evangelization, basic Christian communities, education, pastoral service and formation, we have been helping to free people from sin and its consequences. To the extent that

we have been true to this mission, we have, often quietly and unobtrusively, gone about these toilsome and often thankless tasks. Yet, we constantly seek guidance and courage to express more fully this Gospel imperative towards liberation. Some confreres are showing us the way.

In developing countries: We know only too well the extreme oppression and pain of some peoples and nations among whom Spiritans labour. In such countries the Church herself is often the only pillar standing for justice. Spiritan missionaries serving in these settings are at times the only effective voices of the people; their mere presence can deter oppression.

Policies which impoverish nations are a scandal of our times. Some confreres work in the developing world, trying to effect a change in these policies. Many of us ministering in these countries do what we can in local settings, helping to diversify one-crop economies, teaching self-help skills, effecting a transfer of appropriate technology, etc. It is a credit to our missionaries that some basic cash and food crops have been introduced, effectively reducing dependency.

In developed countries, many Spiritans labour in direct service to the poor. Others turn the minds and hearts of their people to injustices at every level of society through preaching, teaching and quiet personal example. A great deal has been achieved through membership in human rights associations, national and international. Spiritan provincials of the European Spiritan Provinces, for example, are considering participation in the Africa Faith and Justice Network/Europe. This joint effort of missionary institutes, already being carried out in North America, will promote more just and equitable relationships between the peoples of Africa and Europe.

2. A Difficult Step

Still, the truth is that this call for Spiritans to serve justice is troubling to many of us. Feelings of discomfort, unfamiliarity and disinterest sometimes arise when we are asked to promote justice in concrete ways. The reasons for these feelings are numerous.

For many, our initial formation did not prepare us to make action for justice integral to ministry. Thus, the complexity of society's structures leaves us unsure where to begin. We can be both intimidated and blinded by the policies of governments. The seeming excesses of some justice activists are often seen as hurting rather than helping the poor. Even the special "justice jargon" makes understanding and action difficult. These and other factors conspire to distance many of us from action for justice.

3. A Most Urgent Call

Francis Libermann's urging that his followers become advocates of the weak against oppression has been echoed with increased intensity in recent years. This echo comes to us from the life situations in which we work. It resounds also within the Congregation as a whole.

The Rule of Life referred to Justice and Peace as "constitutive" of our Spiritan mission (SRL 14). In calling us to this effort, the Rule voiced in a personal way the post-Council Synod: "Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the

world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel, or, in other words, of the Church's mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation" (*Justice in the World*, 6). When the 1986 Chapter delegates identified guidelines for the present Generalate Team, Justice and Peace emerged as one major concern. As early as the 1980 General Chapter, the Spiritan Life (SL) document called for the integration of Justice and Peace into every major area of Spiritan life.

4. A New Dimension

Spiritans have always felt a special call to help impoverished or oppressed peoples. What special insight into the gospel message does the new stress on Justice and Peace give us?

Essentially, it is the "discovery" that poverty among other things is a "structural problem". Poverty in today's world cannot be explained simply by a people's misfortune, lack of knowledge, lack of initiative or access to development. It is also the result of political and economic decisions of governments and institutions of all forms. The "discovery" is that today's poverty is not accidental. It is woven into the fabric of society and is often the result of particular policies and systems. This happens despite the good intentions and unawareness of those who administer the structures. In this context, poverty becomes a political problem, a question of injustice and a matter of changing structures.

A great debt is owed to those Spiritans whose compassion for the poor is a powerful witness to us all. This effort to feed the hungry, clothe the naked and forgive the sinner is an essential step in the service to the poor. Today, the Congregation asks still more: that we "promote justice in the social, economic, political and religious lives of our people" (SRL 30.1). This demands that we work alongside people to improve their circumstances in the world... and to change unjust structures which victimize them.

Thus, action for justice demands, at once, a new courage and a profound sense of communion with the

poor. This courage calls us to examine more deeply, from a Christian perspective, the structures that surround and often victimize the poor. The discovery of "structural sin" and its remedies requires an analysis which reaches the roots of social problems, raises our consciousness and leads to courageous action. We offer a few illustrations:

- Illiteracy has been found to be the basic cause of oppression in some countries. In these places, adult literacy programmes are major tools for transformation.
- Migrants, refugees and racial minorities are often subjected to unjust discrimination. In some areas, the discrimination is along religious lines.
- A whole population may be in danger of extinction because of a loss of identity; in the case of the Maasai, for example, this is because of a culture clash, the restriction of grazing rights, and land alienation.

Analysis of social situations involves a special kind of action: one taken in communion with the poor. This implies an ever deepening awareness that they themselves have wisdom and ability to work at their own structural problems. As the sensitivity to this strength of the poor grows, our service changes from one of labouring for them to a partnership with them. Giving expression to this change of attitude, a Spiritan recently commented, "Are we worthy enough to work with the poor?"

5. Our Faith Response

“This is what Yahweh asks of you, only this: that you act justly, that you love tenderly, that you walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8).

As a religious missionary community pledged by our Rule of Life to service of the poor, against whom much of the world’s injustices are committed, we are called upon to be just and to act justly.

This divine imperative has, however, a broader faith context. It is but one of the demands made by the Lord. Three such demands are suggested by the Micah text cited above. Taken together these aspects of life – walking humbly with God, loving tenderly and acting justly – provide a basis for an integrated spirituality (Dorr, pp. 8-18).

5.1 Religious Conversion: “Walk Humbly with Your God”

Micah’s demand that we “walk humbly with our God” can be taken to refer to our personal relationship with God. This relationship preserves both our uniqueness and acknowledges that each of us has a part in the Creator’s loving plan for salvation. Human freedom and God’s reign are delicately balanced in this relationship.

The Spirit who works in us lives in the world, making it holy. From the midst of this world, the Spirit calls us to a religious conversion, to an ever deeper relationship with God. We are constantly reformed by the events of daily life in the world.

5.2 Moral Conversion: “Love Tenderly”

Spiritans are meant to be people for others. The “others” are family, relatives, friends and acquaintances. The “others” are those with whom we have been drawn by the Spirit to live out our Spiritan calling in community. It is, most particularly for Spiritans, the “others” of our apostolic commitments (SRL 12).

The divine command to “love tenderly” draws attention to this second area of an integral Christian spirituality, i.e. interpersonal relationships. Stress in moral conversion is placed on deepening the quality of our person-to-person relationships. It compels us to develop an ever stronger interest in the personal lives of the people we serve, their traditions and their need for continual growth. This is the solidarity asked of Spiritans.

Moral conversion goads us to acknowledge that Spiritan communities need the mutual support of their members. Thus, living together in community calls us to a mutual “forbearance, pardoning and sharing” (SRL 24). This conversion has, too, its expressions of attentiveness toward our families, relatives and those personally close to us. A spirituality-for-others lived out each day ever “more tenderly” in the human cycles of pain and joy virtually consume the missionary.

5.3 Political Conversion: “Act Justly”

The final element of this integrated spirituality is to “act justly”. It is a political conversion in the sense that it calls us to a genuine care about public life. Here, the person of faith moves beyond personal relationship with God and face-to-face relationships with people. The believer acknowledges in political conversion that the same Spirit who inspires these relationships intends that we work to build societies that are just.

To “act justly” in this context moves us beyond commutative justice with its special attention to personal forms of honesty. It calls us to a fuller understanding of how a society and all its benefits are organized or structured. “In order to contribute effectively to promoting justice, we make every effort to analyse situations, to lay bare the relationship of individual cases to structural causes” (SRL 14.1).

Understanding and analysis are important beginnings to action for justice. Such action reaches a fullness when we seek in concrete ways the promotion of justice and peace in the social, economic, political and religious life of people.

This political conversion is the newest of these three demands for conversion to enter explicitly into the consciousness of the Church. While expressions, timing and the appropriateness of actions for justice can be argued, there seems to be little doubt that the promotion of liberation from oppression and transformation of the world is “a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel” (*Justice in the World*, 15). This has special relevance for Spiritans, on whom the oppressed and those whose needs are the greatest have a special claim.

5.4 An Integrated Faith Response

As believers, each of us has formed a sense of the God who lives among us. This sense of the Holy, our spirituality, is shaped by who we are, where we have come from and what we have experienced. Spirituality is that part of us that images God and the work of the Spirit in our lives. It is from this imaging that we articulate for ourselves and, as Spiritan missionaries, for others our experience of God. In its deepest sense, this is our faith, a faith that is at once very personal and shared with others.

An authentic call to conversion – whether it be religious, moral or political – is a challenge to the personal spirituality of each Spiritan. As a result of our own histories, we often find ourselves concentrating almost exclusively on one or another aspect of spirituality.

“Many ‘good’ people wake up to a deep sense of God’s providence and this leads them to a prayerful and enthusiastic spirituality; but they may remain quite insensitive in their human relations and may lack all sense of the ‘political’ dimensions of the Christian faith. Other people build their spirituality around openness to others; but they may be lacking in depth

because they give little time to prayer and reflection; and they may imagine that the world can be changed without major structural changes in society. Finally, there are some deeply committed Christians who are so intent on changing the social, economic and political order that they sacrifice their own peace of spirit and their human relationships in a frenzy of quasi-political activity" (Dorr, p. 18).

6. Orientations for Animation in Justice and Peace

It is in this faith context that we have asked ourselves, "What animation for Justice and Peace among Spiritans is needed today?" In response, we have chosen three major orientations: action, formation and structures for justice.

Practical actions for justice asked by our Rule and the world of today are responsibilities shared by the individual Spiritan, local circumscriptions and the Generalate Team. Always, this action must be informed and motivated by faith.

Thus, the demand made upon us is not only to act justly but to *be* just. We must form ourselves as a *just* Community. This formation of an authentic Spiritan is too vital a task to be reserved solely to those living through initial formation (SRL 102). It is the life-

Spiritans spirituality does not serve us well, if it overemphasizes one or another form of conversion. Rather, it must call us to the fullness of conversion: "religious", "moral" and "political". It serves neither the Christian faith nor the Spiritan vocation to neglect any aspect of the conversion demanded of us today by the Spirit. Together, we must strive for an integrated spirituality.

time task of continual deepening of our apostolic life (SRL 100).

To accomplish these vital tasks, we must use the human and material resources at our disposal. New structures will be required, which are adequate for the work and in keeping with Spiritan simplicity.

In summary, we want:

- to act for justice, making it an integral part of Spiritan apostolic life;
- to assure the formation of Spiritans as just and peace-filled persons;
- to develop appropriate community structures which enable action and formation for justice.

7. Some Questions

We have offered here our thoughts on action for justice in Spiritan life. Now, we invite you to join us and to help deepen this reflection:

- We have written about the good which we have seen Spiritans doing in the cause of Justice and Peace. How are you and fellow Spiritans able to express Justice and Peace in your lives and ministries?
- The difficulties in implementing action for Justice and Peace have been discussed honestly. So, too, was the sense of urgency found in the Spiritan Rule of Life and our life situations that we make Justice and Peace integral to our lives. Has this sense of urgency touched you and your Spiritan Community? If you are having difficulty with the integration

of this dimension of our apostolate, can you discuss this openly with fellow Spiritans?

- We presented an approach to spirituality which includes action for Justice. How does your personal and community experience with justice influence your faith and spirituality?
- What have we not said about Justice and Peace in our lives together that needs to be added?

Please, take these reflections and questions to your people and fellow Spiritans. Talk to us in visitations and various meetings about your experiences. Let us know if there is something more that the Generalate Team can do to respond to the Spiritan challenge of making ourselves the "advocates, the supporters and the defenders of the weak".

THE GENERAL COUNCIL

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