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Spiritan Formation Today

This document on initial Formation is the fruit of joint research and dialogue, undertaken to try to deepen our understanding of this essential aspect of our work of animation.

The General Council asked the two Councillors concerned with Formation to prepare it, and discussed the general lines it should take. The first draft was then sent out to a dozen formators, who were asked for their comments and suggestions.

The Council hopes that numerous reactions to it from all parts of the Congregation will help to give greater precision, in subsequent documents, to the "dynamism and unity" of Spiritan formation (cf. SRL 106).

I. They will begin their mission in the year 2000

a) In a little over ten years we shall be in the third millennium. The young men entering our formation programs at present will be then beginning their ministry. What is the Spiritan religious and missionary ideal that they are preparing themselves to live at that time with us?

From what we can gather from the formators' projects and the students' aspirations, and in the light of our Rule of Life, we can already say this much:

In the year 2000, the Spiritan will continue to commit his life to sharing the sufferings and the hopes of the poor. He will have learnt to be particularly close to the abandoned persons and groups that our world is producing in increasing numbers: immigrants and refugees, the young, the casualties of urbanization . . . those who have not yet heard, or have hardly heard, or who no longer hear, the Good News. He will work with them and will be able to analyse the moral and social causes of their suffering. He will have been trained in educational techniques, in the social sciences, in defending the integrity of Creation. He will commit himself, with courage and discernment, to changing unjust structures.

What are the frontiers that he will have to cross? They will no longer be merely geographical frontiers. In multiracial, pluralist societies the Spiritan will know how to defuse racial tensions caused in part by fear. He will have become accustomed to risking himself in dialogue and ecumenism which, in order to be credible, will require ever greater competence, ability to listen humbly to the other side, and a firm faith.

He will have assumed and relativized his own culture, and will have acquired the ability to enter sympathetically into that of others. A disciple of the "fraternity" of the Kingdom, he will be everywhere a builder of community. He will realize that the task of evangelization cannot neglect a good knowledge of the laws of group dynamics. He will be less inclined to live on

his own, knowing how to build both regional and local communities, and maintaining close contact with his confreres. He will be a happy person, having learnt to discern the signs of the future Kingdom in the world of today.

This global image of the Spiritan is inscribed in our Rule of Life. Students, formators, missionaries in the field are at one in pursuing an ideal in which they recognize themselves. There remains the task of putting into effect the "creative fidelity" that our Rule speaks of. This is a challenge for us as persons, for our missionary commitments, and for our religious and community activity. It is a challenge too for our programs and methods of formation. The time has come to draw the conclusions from the choices that we have made together. Fortunately, though much remains to be done, there are many signs of the dynamism of our formation.

b) Formation communities being built up

The image of the ideal Spiritan that has just been evoked is actually being built up in various formation communities throughout the world: their very diversity is a sign of their adaptability and vitality. Spiritans have a reputation as builders. This is no doubt a proof of realism: can a community live without a place to live in? With young men knocking at our door, houses of formation have grown up in the southern hemisphere and even in the north. But what is being built is not merely material.

In the **older provinces**, regional cooperation is increasing: international novitiates, supervised overseas training programs, a joint month of preparation for the "final consecration to the apostolate" are the fruit of this cooperation. There is an increasing willingness to work together, across frontiers. The same dynamism is found in experiments with inter-congregational and inter-confessional formation.

The main problems faced by these provinces is that of vocations. Why does the West, formerly so rich in missionary vocations, find itself with so few nowadays? Is it because of the weight of the past, in which colonization and missionary endeavour are now seen as having been too closely linked? And yet, in the older Christian countries, "new communities", many with a missionary orientation, are embarking on new paths, stirring up interest among young people and speaking to them. There are, at present, 166 young men in Europe and North America preparing to follow a Spiritan vocation with us. They encourage us to trust in the future. With the boldness and solidarity of the poor, the older provinces must show imagination. With a duty to utter a call to the young, should we not show ourselves as clever as those who "belong to this world"?

In the **young provinces and foundations**, the numbers continue to increase: students from the south now account for three-quarters of the newly professed in the Congregation. Many of them live in an intercultural setting from the time they join us. Research is continuing on how to improve the inculturation of our religious life, and on how to renew the vocation of the Spiritan Brother.

The first Spiritan university centre in Africa, the Spiritan International School of Theology (SIST), was officially inaugurated on 10 December last, while the

new Province of East Africa collaborates in an inter-congregational consortium in Nairobi. The first missionaries from the foundations are already at work in the field, and their pioneering experience can serve as a pattern for those who will follow them. Taking their place in the overall Mission, they will find their own way of preaching the good news and of showing solidarity with the poor.

c) Is intercultural formation possible?

In welcoming all these young men who ask to join us, the Congregation is becoming increasingly multicultural. Should we not enrich ourselves still more from our diversity, by multiplying, at certain moments of formation, houses that bring together formators and students from different cultures? At present our formation structures are so diverse that the practice of internationality is still difficult. This springs not only from cultural diversity but also from different "philosophies" of formation, some being more directive from above, others associating the students more closely with the elaboration of the training process, some being more deductive, others more inductive, with more stress on practical experience in the field etc. There is no question of trying to take short cuts in achieving unity, but we could maybe open a dialogue by asking ourselves what kind of unity we would like to give to Spiritan formation.

II. Towards what kind of unity in Spiritan formation?

1. Attentive to the present characteristics of our vocation

In fidelity to our Founders, the Spiritan Rule of Life bases the unity of our life on a concept of "Apostolic Life" in which we identify with Christ in his own mission. For us, the values of religious and community life, as well as those of the apostolate, are integrated in the dynamics of this consecration. These values are developed from the beginning of formation according to certain characteristics that remain always for us an object of research and conversion.

Let us consider three characteristics of Mission that are particularly important. How does our formation prepare us to live them?

a) Solidarity with the poor and oppressed is our first means of entering into the mission that Jesus received from his Father (Lk 4:18-19, SRL 1). Is it possible, asked one of our novice masters, that Spiritans, many of whom come from underprivileged backgrounds, should find themselves obliged, through their formation, to say goodbye to the world of poverty?

Isn't a real contact with the poor, during the whole period of formation, the best way of hearing their cry as Christ hears it? Are not the poor the ones who can best teach us the true meaning of asceticism and detachment in a world that alienates people? Should we, then, set up our houses of formation in the middle of deprived areas and shanty towns? Some have in fact risked this option, which has its advantages and disadvantages. Whatever the reply may be, we should seek a real and concrete proximity and solidarity with the poor. One way is for us to learn to live within the limits of a tight budget, to submit to the law of manual labour, to analyse the reality of the milieu in which we live (Justice and Peace programs) etc.

b) Mission in union with all the members of the People of God

Many questions remain open under this heading: How can our formation teach us to recognize and activate the charisms of the faithful? How does it prepare us to promote a new type of Church in which all are the People of God, men and women, priests and laity? And how can we structure our formation so that lay persons can have a part to play in it, either to be trained along with Spiritans or as part of the team of formators? The present openness of the Congregation to different forms of association with lay persons is a grace that can help us in this research.

c) One of the fundamental aspects of our mission is to promote the incarnation of Christ in the different cultures. It is here that our formation finds justification for its inevitable diversity. It will help us to relativize systems that appear universal and unchangeable, and to become open and tolerant, while having solid instruments for analysis and comparison. The formators insist on the need to be first of all at ease in one's own culture. How are we to reconcile this need with that of progressive openness to intercultural encounter? Learning how to distance oneself critically from one's own culture (and from any dominant culture) is difficult in itself. We should have in common a certain number of instruments of analysis and discernment so as to be able, with their help, to adapt to differences of culture. In the world of today, cultures are increasingly varied, evolving and complex.

Are we willing to work with the local Churches, including in what concerns the methods of formation for Mission? This should be an important characteristic of our desire for inculturation.

2. What is the role of the "apostolic experience" in formation?

The integration of the "apostolic experience" needs to be better understood and achieved; it presupposes a minimum of common options.

We are discovering more and more the need to build our spirituality, theology and missionary practice on the concrete local conditions of mission. There is a close link, therefore, between apostolic commitments and formation (the success of ongoing formation will depend afterwards on the aptitude that one has acquired for drawing lessons from experience). It is a question of gradually building a synthesis in our life of the things that make up the essence of our vocation. In any case, formation cannot be reduced to the acquisition of academic knowledge.

a) The "overseas training program"

Most circumscriptions feel that the integration of the different aspects of Spiritan life require a two- or three-year period of practical apostolic experience during the time of formation. Some place this period before the novitiate and stress its role in the discernment of a vocation. Most put it after the novitiate, just before or even during theology.

In any case, we can distinguish the periods before, during and after the practical experience. The period leading up to it should provide adequate preparation: anthropological, theological and spiritual. The experience itself should be a time of both apostolic work and formation, and should provide a method of personal, social and theological analysis of the experience. It should have its specific "accompanying guides": a welcoming community and persons named to be in contact with both the student being trained and his team of formators. The period after the experience should permit reflection and growth as a result of it, and psychological and spiritual integration of the "cultural shock".

The experience, at all events, should not be simply a parenthesis in the period of formation, left to haphazard initiatives. We think that every Spiritan should have the opportunity, during his period of formation, of an apostolic experience in another culture (which does not necessarily mean in another country), with the need to learn other modes of expression, if not another language.

b) Apostolic activity during the time of study

During the years reserved to study, even though the opportunities for apostolate are reduced, the importance of being rooted in reality and experience should be a common characteristic of Spiritan formation. This can be realized through various pastoral activities in a concrete ecclesial or human community. The students should be able to play an active role in this group, sharing its apostolic reflection, ministry and prayer. The formation community as a whole should be engaged in this, and not merely isolated individuals.

3. So that our life and activity may be "of Christ" (cf. SRL 101)

Secular culture would have us judge every commitment on the basis of tangible results and efficacy. Our formation, on the other hand, does not limit itself to turning out efficient apostolic technicians. Our meetings with students, our presence on occasions like professions and ordinations, our visits to houses of formation have confirmed our perception that the priority is one's receptivity to the free gift of God, one's desire to share in the Paschal Mystery, which is essential for the coming of the Kingdom. Perhaps there is still some way to go before these dispositions become rooted in a personal and community life that bears still greater witness to our "apostolic consecration". Let us consider two conditions for this:

a) Progress in the understanding of our vows

We can touch only briefly on the vows here, but we can at least say this: the manner in which our formation communities bring out the Spiritan way of living Chastity, Poverty and Obedience is decisive in developing a common approach to Mission.

One can grow in **Chastity** during the years of formation thanks in particular to community and apostolic relations: chastity that is lived in a positive way helps one to avoid shutting oneself up in a purely intellectual and voluntaristic perspective and enables one to relate to others in a caring, kind and compassionate way. There could be a danger, during formation, of developing cerebral personalities, invulnerable even to friendship, incapable of interpersonal relationships and collaboration. But formation that gives proper weight to the "affective" dimension is a difficult challenge: it entails the deliberate and conscious choice of celibacy for the Kingdom.

Poverty is not a sentimental dream: it is one of the great problems of our time. For us it means, first of all, a practical solidarity with the poor, in union with Christ, to the point of giving our life for them. We have already mentioned its importance, which was also very strongly stressed by our Founders. For Libermann, only genuine poverty on our part could deserve the trust of the poor. A lot still needs to be done to discover a Spiritan way of living poverty which would correspond to the needs of our time.

Spiritans **Obedience** implies availability for different kinds of Mission. Each one's personal vocation develops through identification with the life of the Congregation and of the whole Church, with which one becomes more and more closely bound. Our Spiritan program of life, including, as it does, close links with our religious community and with various other groups, accustoms us to going outside of ourselves to make contact with others and discern our way along with them. How can we best learn to accept the resulting tensions and so develop a truly apostolic spirit of obedience?

b) Concern for persons

The unity of one's "Spiritans existence" is built up slowly in stages that must be respected and in the mystery of a personal journey in the course of which

some guidance may be necessary for the discernment of one's path.

i. Stages to be respected

The stages of our formation follow those proposed by the Church, with all the riches of the reflection that has taken place since the Council. We can profit by cooperating with other institutes and local seminaries in giving greater precision and harmony to these stages. Various directories and guidelines have been drawn up, to which we may refer while adapting them to our specific vocation and to local conditions.

- In the pre-novitiate period the stress should be on trying to lay the foundations of personal integration of life and on developing the **human qualities** of the apostle. The candidate should examine his vocation and see whether it corresponds to the Spiritan charism. In many circumscriptions this pre-novitiate period is something new: we should try to arrive together at a better understanding of how to make the most of this period.
- In the novitiate, stress is laid rather on the supernatural aspect, on the fact that it is God who consecrates us and sends us on his mission. The novitiate ends with a real **"consecration to the apostolate"** which gives it its particular character. It is especially urgent that we should share and deepen our understanding of this essential stage of formation.
- The years of theology (or the immediate post-novitiate years for Brothers) are those of more professional training as apostles, whether as priests or as consecrated laymen. In this period stress is laid on the **mission** of the consecrated person. Regional meetings of formators would be particularly useful for im-

proving the quality of formation during this period. It is also the best period for experiments in international formation.

ii. An "accompaniment" permitting unification of life

The different stages of formation all have the same aim of progressively developing the unity of the person, so that he may respond fully to his vocation in the Congregation. In each of the stages there should be close links between apostolate, theological reflection, spiritual life and community life.

In fact, it will not be easy for the candidate to achieve such a unity. On his own he would find it difficult to integrate the various experiences that he has in his prayer, his classes, his apostolic work and his community. Sometimes the teachers and other people that he encounters in the course of his formation do not have enough opportunity to meet. It is important, therefore, for the student to have certain "accompanying guides" to help him attain the desired integration.

Among these accompanying guides, the spiritual director has an indispensable role to play. It is he that will best be able to help him see the close links that exist between the various elements in an at times complex formation. For conversion is at once spiritual, moral and intellectual. The spiritual director will help him discern the mystery of his individual vocation – a road proper to him which the Holy Spirit invites him to follow and which he embarks on with full liberty and in a spirit of service.

The formators of several regions have placed this question of "accompaniment" among their top priorities. It will be interesting to hear their reflections on it.

III. The training of formators – an urgent missionary need

So as to be equipped for their "mission" in formation, formators rightly request a time of preparation during which they will receive specific training for the task. They should also have had missionary experience long enough to have enabled them to integrate in their own lives the essential dimensions of the Spiritan vocation.

Preparation will also entail long-term planning so that suitable university training will be given to likely candidates in a variety of subjects. At the moment, with the large number of houses of formation, we can barely respond to the needs. A first stage would be to draw up a list of confreres who have been trained for posts in formation but who are otherwise employed, and a list of confreres employed in formation but who would need time out in order to acquire a particular qualification.

Academic qualifications are not in themselves sufficient. A formator's task is a specialized one requiring specific training. In several local Churches there are training programs for formators which we are not sufficiently aware of, and it would be a good thing if Spiritans at a regional level could set up similar training programs. These would deal with such questions as how to acquire a deeper knowledge of Spiritan spirituality, how to place this knowledge in the

context of present theological research on Mission, religious life and community life, and how to prepare formators for service in transcultural and international situations.

The General Council, for its part, would like to play a role in this ongoing formation and in promoting the "dynamism and unity" of Spiritan formation by organizing suitable meetings. These meetings should help us to a better understanding and application of the main lines of our Rule of Life by confronting them with concrete situations. The novice masters will be meeting in Dublin in July 1989, and in July 1991 there will be a meeting of representatives of formators from all Spiritan regions. The agenda for it will be drawn up in 1990 on the basis of suggestions expressed by the regions.

Through these meetings and the initiatives that will spring from them, and with the help also of your reactions to the questions raised in this I/D, we will proceed along the way that our Rule of Life has clearly indicated. The future of our service to the Mission, and no doubt also the readiness of young men to join us, will depend on our success in this