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COMMUNITY LIFE

I. THE REALITY OF SPIRITAN COMMUNITY LIFE

1.1 INTERCULTURALITY/INTERNATIONALITY

Spiritans communities are more and more international, cross cultural and inter-generational”.⁴ This is a result of the geographical and cultural spread of membership which led to a significant demographic shift over the recent years.⁵

Spiritans are grateful to God for this diversity. *The Spiritan Rule of Life* states that the diversity of our membership is the work of the Spirit of Pentecost who brings us together into one large family, “from different cultures, continents and nations” (SRL 37). It bears witness to the relevance of our Spiritan charism in the contemporary world that is in dire need of peace and reconciliation.

The positive witness of international communities is one of the qualities of Spiritan life that bishops, priests and laity of the local churches underline as special to Spiritans. They see it as a contribution to the structuring of local churches and human

⁴ Torre d’Aguilha 2.1.

⁵ The demographic shift comes out clearly in the last statistics of 31 December 2016. Spiritans are 2598 from 46 circumscriptions of origin. The breakdown according to continents is as follows: Africa (1469); North America (103); South America (30), Asia (18); Caribbean (64), Europe (848), Oceania (1) and Indian Ocean (65).

society. In many places, bishops state this as the reason they want Spiritans to work or remain in their dioceses.

The majority of Spiritan formation communities, especially in the second cycle, are international and intercultural. They bring together students of circumscriptions belonging to a particular Union as well as students from outside the Union. Formators dedicate time to train the confreres in the Spiritan culture of hospitality and openness to the other. The Congregation is grateful to those formators and spiritual directors who accompany the younger brothers in this difficult task.

Diversity naturally creates the possibility of tension, fear and sometimes mutual suspicion. Symptoms of ethnocentrism and nationalism, which are present in the world are also found sometimes in Spiritan communities. In certain circumscriptions, ethnic and cultural divides play a role in determining who will be Provincial or on the council and whether or not his authority will be accepted. These also determine the credibility given to the word of a formator in a formation community. Decisions made by the authority (postings, recommendations, sanctions, etc.) are interpreted from this point of view.

Another area where the experience of diversity creates tension is the transition from formation to apostolic communities. It can be traumatic for some. Multiple adaptations are called for. One often has to negotiate a new language and culture in a new environment, with confreres from different cultures who have gone through a different formation and have a different mentality. The trauma is compounded if no one seems to care about what the young confrere is going through.

For reflection

- a) *From your experiences, what are the joys and difficulties of living in an international/multicultural community?*

b) *How well do our formation programs prepare people for cross-cultural mission?*

1.2 INTERGENERATION

Our Congregation is blessed with many elderly confreres who sacrificed their youth and energy for the service of Spiritan mission in many continents. Today they continue their Spiritan mission through a life of prayer and humble acceptance of their physical limitations and sufferings. Many of them are examples of “graceful ageing” as they welcome the reality of transition with gratitude to God for the marvels he realises through human fragilities. By so doing, they transmit memories and traditions to the younger ones. Young confreres are touched by this act of witnessing when they see their ageing brothers welcome suffering with dignity and accept to be taken care of by others.

However, perceptions and visions differ according to age. Some older confreres do not trust the capacity of the younger ones to carry on the missionary projects of the Congregation and maintain the structures they put in place. They are reluctant to give their positions of responsibility to young confreres. On the other hand, some younger confreres are not sensitive to the attachment of their older brothers to a certain style of mission, to their memory as well as to their diminishing capacities. Sometimes, young confreres are tempted to think that they have nothing to learn from the old, while some elderly confreres feel they have to teach the young ones and have nothing to learn from them; they often question the young confreres’ commitment to the Congregation and to the mission to which they were appointed. In some instances, some older confreres

appear to be more progressive as regards openness to new challenges, pastoral approaches, understanding of mission, finance, priestly ministry, than some younger confreres, who tend to be more conservative.

For reflection

- a) *What is your experience of intergenerational living in your circumscription?*
- b) *What are the difficulties?*

1.3 PRIESTS AND BROTHERS

Spiritans religious life is blessed with two principal forms: some confreres are priests and some are brothers. However the relationship between these two realities in Spiritan communities has often been a source of tension. The fact that priests belong to the hierarchical and institutional order of the Church leads sometimes to the tendency to clericalism in communities, which tends to reduce Brothers to second class Spiritans. Cultural factors play a significant role in the perception of the place of the Brother in the Church. In many places the vocation of brothers is misunderstood and they encounter numerous humiliations generally because they are compared with priests, rather than understood as a separate and distinct vocation. This issue has been largely dealt with in the *Anima Una* on Spiritan Priests.⁶

Another major challenge comes from the fact that the Spiritan Congregation by its canonical status is a clerical institute. This means canonically that only members who are priests can be elected to the position of major superior (SRL 168). Bagamoyo

⁶ General Council, *Spiritans Priests, Anima Una* 64, June 2012.

2.12 asked that this matter be revisited. The recent document of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life⁷ has also opened the door for this reflection.

For reflection

- a) *How is the vocation of brothers considered in your circumscription?*
- b) *How do we ensure equality in our structures and communities ?*

1.4 SHARING COMMUNITY WITH LAITY

Many communities live in solidarity with laity who share their joys and sorrows. They pray together, discern and work together in particular apostolates within the local Church. In some circumscriptions, the Spiritan community includes Lay Spiritans, whom “we welcome...with joy, inviting them to share our spirituality and our apostolic life” (SRL 24.3). Our covenantal journey with them, “expressed in commitments of various forms and nurtured by formation”⁸ is mutually enriching. Living and celebrating the complementarity of charisms and vocations greatly enlivens the community, its witness, and its mission..

For reflection

- a) *How are lay people integrated in the life and mission of your circumscription?*

⁷ Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, *Identity and Mission of the Religious Brother in the Church*, Vatican, 4th October 2015, n° 39.

⁸ Bagamoyo 2.13.

b) *In what ways can the professed Spiritans and the Lay Spiritans benefit from one another?*

1.5 SPIRITAN HOSPITALITY

Spiritans communities are known for the quality of their hospitality to confreres, families and visitors. We celebrate together both joyful and sorrowful moments in confreres' lives and those of the local community, thus deepening the care we owe each other and reflecting our motto "cor unum et anima una." We welcome members of the larger Christian community to our community prayer, something that enriches all. Significant testimony is given by Spiritan communities which are hospitable and open to the poor and marginalized. They sometimes struggle to make space for those who have been wounded by life or who cannot walk at the same pace as healthy people.

This hospitality also leads to tension in some places. It can be difficult to define where the boundaries are, to what extent the community can welcome visitors and friends and, at the same time, ensure private space for its members.

The question becomes more delicate when it is a question of welcoming members of the natural families of confreres. Sensibilities differ according to cultures and traditions. Some cultures focus on the individual, while others are more communally-minded. Actual experiences of family are also very diverse: nuclear or extended families, harmonious and supportive or conflicted and broken families, families with an only child or with many siblings, and so on. The challenge is to reflect on a reasonable balance between the time and space dedicated to hospitality to family members and friends and the

safeguarding of the serenity and intimacy of life in the community.

For reflection

- a) *How is hospitality expressed in your community?*
- b) *How do you handle the relationship with members of your families?*

1.6 POLARITY OF COMMUNITY LIFE AND MISSION

Spiritans wrestle with the polarity of community and mission, the demands of community life and the demands of missionary life.

On one hand, there is a risk of regarding the community as a refuge and comfort zone. The community is used to avoid the risk and discomfort that come from exposure to missionary challenges. The values of living together could serve to camouflage self-centeredness and a lack of emotional maturity or the difficulties of social contact and insertion into a different culture.

On the other hand, some may tend to neglect community living on the basis of zeal for mission, regarding their confreres as simply neighbours with whom they maintain cordial relations, what is sometimes called “living together separately”. The discomfort of relations in community, internal tensions and individualism, are given as reasons to flee from the community and the demands of living and working in common. Mission becomes a multiplication of activities or a large network of social relationships often lacking community discernment.

These two extremes, which are in fact the result of a misguided understanding of both mission and community, can be harmful and consequently compromise Spiritan mission itself. The tension between the collective and the individual can create a lot of difficulties: difficulty in planning and evaluating community missionary work together; difficulty in writing a community project. Some confreres are suspicious of community projects and effectively regard community living as an obstacle to mission. They claim that the real project is the Spiritan Rule of Life and that there is no need for an extra one.

For reflection

- a) *What tension do you experience between community and mission?*
- b) *How do you resolve any issues involved in this tension?*

1.7 REGIONAL COMMUNITIES

The Spiritan Rule of Life (32.1) foresees that, in the case of Spiritans living and working alone or with non-Spiritans, they are “grouped together as a regional community.” Some circumscriptions have a long tradition of such regional communities. Others question whether it is authentic community living. Often these regional communities fail to function in accordance with SRL and confreres merely assemble for occasional gatherings around Spiritan feast days. Some confreres have been on their own for such a long time that they no longer have the skills for community living.

For reflection

- a) *How is the reality of regional communities understood in your context?*

b) *What efforts are being made to reduce the number of confreres living alone?*

1.8 FINANCES

Sharing finances in common is an essential aspect of Spiritan community life. The Spiritan Rule of Life states that “Whatever we receive as a gift or in payment for our work-gifts, salaries, pensions, grants, insurance benefits, mass stipends and every other income we may derive from our work- belong to the Congregation” (Canon 668.3) (SRL 65).

Sharing all in common in religious community calls for ongoing self-transcendence, accountability and transparency in the service of our common vision. A culture of increased individualism and materialism makes the challenge of community life ever more acute. This is evident in the habit of financial autonomy and unwillingness to share on the part of some confreres. In many circumscriptions, some confreres retain gifts, stipends and salaries for personal use and occasionally own and/or build properties in their own name or that of family members. The impression therefore given is that some confreres are financially better off than others and able to do what they want while their circumscriptions remain financially in need; inequality among confreres often goes unchecked. Expenses are seen as the responsibility of the community while income is kept for oneself. Such a practice, even though unacceptable, is widespread in our Congregation. It destroys trust and thus prevents collaboration.

Some communities seem always on the edge, especially financially; they are barely able to care for members or sustain them in the apostolate. Members may not be able to take due

holidays or periods of renewal to refresh themselves after a considerable period of time on mission.

A delicate situation is created where one member of a community is the principal source of funds both for the community and the mission, especially if the person concerned behaves as the “breadwinner” and “donor”!

The issue of “pocket money” is often a source of conflict. Some communities have a tradition of a fixed monthly amount for personal use. Others prefer to talk of running expenses, “fonds de roulement”, i.e. money put at the disposal of the confreres for a given period of time. Some others prefer a common community box from which each takes according to need.

Another question can be how to support families of confreres in difficult financial situations. This can be a source of tension or even conflict in communities. A deeper discernment needs to be done in order to respond fairly to these situations.

For reflection

- a) *How do you share the resources in community?*
- b) *How do you respond to the demands of families of confreres in financial difficulties?*

1.9 SERVICE OF AUTHORITY

*A*mong the services necessary to life in community, authority as a force for unity holds a special place” (SRL 46).

The Congregation has many superiors at different levels who reflect and live this vision. Many superiors provide dynamic animation of their communities. Confreres have memories of superiors who accompanied them in different communities and helped them to feel loved and cared for.

However, some superiors lack an understanding of their role and function in a community or circumscription or feel unprepared for it. This is shown in the inability to provide sufficient accompaniment for confreres or to follow procedures and decision-making processes in accordance with SRL. Some adopt an authoritarian leadership style; others adopt a more laissez-faire attitude and avoid taking decisions. Sometimes inflexibility, personal issues and hidden agendas get in the way, to the detriment of the overall good and interests of the community.

Some confreres seem averse to all authority and react negatively to any effort to dialogue about themselves and their mission. It may, however, be time to reflect also on how far the term “superior” corresponds to the Spiritan ministry of the service of authority.

For reflection

- a) *How do you understand the service of authority?*
- b) *What areas of improvement are needed?*

II. COMMUNITY LIFE IN THE CHRISTIAN TRADITION

Christian tradition, especially the experience of the apostles with Jesus, as well as that of the first Christian communities, underlines the primacy of community life.

2.1 THE COMMUNITY OF JESUS

One thing that is evident in the Gospels and Acts of the Apostles is that the *raison d'être* of the community is that