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## 1991 Vol. 48: Towards "a committed and responsible laity" (SRL18)

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I/D 48

THE GENERALATE TEAM

May 1991

## Towards "a committed and responsible laity" (SRL 18)

This I/D is offered as an instrument to help our reflections on the role of Spiritans in the formation of, and cooperation with, laity. It is not seen as a definitive treatment of the subject but rather as an encouragement to continue discussion.

### "Fostering Christian Communities" (SRL 18)

The Diocese of Port Louis (Mauritius) took a decision in 1981 to radically transform parish ministry. Instead of simply being places where people gathered for liturgy and sacraments, parishes were to become centres for the union and coordination of basic ecclesial communities. These communities were to be living cells in which Christians were encouraged to share fraternal union, to participate in adult catechesis, to pray and read the "signs of the times" and to participate in concrete apostolic work.

It soon became apparent that to accomplish these objectives a programme of Christian formation was essential and thus was born "Le Thabor", a centre which, under the guidance of Fr. Maurice Piat (now Bishop), prepares leaders, and subsequently offers them support and encouragement.

Half a world away, in Trinidad, the flourishing SERVOL movement is the inspiration of Fr. Gerry Pantin, who left a teaching post to give himself totally to the poor and the marginalised. SERVOL is based on the conviction that the most fundamental need of today's world is the countering of the crisis in family life by the preparation of young people for parenthood. Assuming childhood and the late teens to be the crucial periods, SERVOL concentrates on preparing Early Childhood Teachers and Adolescent Instructors. Basic to the training programme is a three-month human development course which helps potential leaders to understand and accept themselves before going on to acquire the skills necessary to interact with parents and the community. The programme, a balance of theoretical and practical skills, is ecumenical in character embracing adherents of the Christian, Moslem and Hindu faiths.

### Directions

Capturing the spirit of the Second Vatican Council, certain trends are evident in today's Church: the development of close-knit communities at village and

district level; the formation of more and more laity to undertake ministry; greater collaboration with lay men and women to transform society according to Gospel principles; and the opportunity for greater initiatives on the part of the laity within the apostolic and missionary work of the Church.

Spiritans have not been slow to respond. In addition to those mentioned above, Fr. John B. Doyle is ministering to some of the half-million people who moved into Rondonia (Brazil) as part of a World Bank project. The 120,000 parishioners in Rolim de Moura are made up of over 100 local communities scattered over a wide area, each with its own animators, who are prepared by the parish team through regular visits and special "Training Days" held several times a year; participation averages about 80 per session. The methodology is a combination of lecture, small group reflection and practical action; the topics usually a mixture of religious and social concerns.

Fr. Albert Le Floc'h is now in his fourth year in the parish of Ruashi, Zaïre, in which more than twenty "Communautés Ecclesiales Vivantes" (CEV) have been established, all animated by lay leaders. In addition, he is assisted by a lay "collaborator" who assumes responsibility for much of the work of instruction and is especially adept in ministry to young married couples.

When Spiritan personnel in Angola were seriously depleted because of the civil war, the call went out from the Generalate for volunteers from other provinces. The result of this appeal was the formation of a team in Malange, composed of Spiritans Bernard Duchêne, Bernard Ducrot, John Kingston and James Flynn. Concerned that the progress of the war would leave the diocese bereft of pastoral workers, the team set about implementing an intense programme of training for catechists. Prospective candidates were given a six-month preparatory course, divided into three segments of two months each over a period of three years, and interspersed with supervised practical work. Within a short time most of the burden of evangelising, organising and sustaining the Christian communities rested on the shoulders of these catechists and the village councils. The bishop authorised the head catechists to baptise and to officiate at marriages.

Spiritans schools in Ireland, the U.S., Canada, Trinidad, France (Auteuil) and elsewhere are largely in

the hands of lay teachers. Duquesne University has its first lay president and the headmasters of several of our secondary schools are lay. Gradually laity have been prepared and encouraged to assume roles at one time almost exclusively in the hands of Spiritans.

Fr. François Le Bec is the pastor of Notre-Dame de Fatima in Loubomo, the Congo, a parish of some 50,000 Catholics. It is a parish full of life and vitality thanks in large measure to the establishment of numerous basic communities animated by lay leaders.

Thus in many parts of the world, in places as diverse as Brazil, Zaïre, the United States, Senegal, Papua New Guinea, Trinidad and Ireland, lay people are assuming more and more responsibility for the apostolic work of the Congregation as members of basic communities, catechists and parish leaders, teachers, promoters of justice and human rights, and development and relief workers. The specific examples cited are clearly not intended to be exhaustive. They may not even be the best available. They are simply a random selection offered in recognition of, and encouragement to, those involved in this important work.

## Awakenings

In the Christian communities of the New Testament a balance was maintained between the ministerial priesthood and the charisms of the faithful. However, the establishment of an entente between the Church and the Empire confirmed by the Edict of Milan (A.D. 313) gave rise to a change in the nature of the Christian community. A new model of Church began to emerge, stressing the sacramental aspect and placing an ever growing emphasis on the role of the clergy while diminishing the active participation of the laity.

By the time of the Reformation, the lay person had come to be regarded as little more than an eternal minor, a situation which persisted more or less up to the twentieth century. In 1906 Pope St. Pius X referred to the laity as "the multitude" and went on to say that "the one duty of the multitude is to allow themselves to be led, and like a docile flock to follow the pastors".

There were exceptions. The faith was carried to Korea by lay people and sustained by them for decades before clergy arrived. In many mission lands catechists and lay leaders provided the bulk of instruction and animated the prayer life of young Churches, often deprived for long periods of the services of priests and religious.

Nevertheless, it is generally fair to say that, at least in the Western Church, the laity were almost completely passive, having little input into the development of theology or spirituality and little active role in the missionary life of the Church.

But even before Vatican II the winds of change had begun to blow, however mildly. Rapid sociological and demographic developments made new approaches inevitable. Fresh concepts of lay action emerged, amongst them Catholic Action, Young Christian Workers and, in a more modest vein, the Legion of Mary (whose founder was Spiritan educated), giving rise to new relationships of cooperation and equality between clergy and laity.

It was Vatican II, however, which firmly attempted to

restore the lay person to her/his proper role within the Christian community. The biblical image of the People of God was emphasised, helping to renew the theological understanding of the Church. *Lumen Gentium* has this to say: "There is one chosen people of God, one Lord, one faith, one baptism; there is a common dignity of members deriving from their rebirth in Christ, a common grace as children of God, a common vocation to perfection, one salvation, one hope and undivided charity. In Christ and in the Church there is, then, no inequality arising from race or nationality, social condition or sex, for there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor freeman, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (LG 32).

Thus with Vatican II the image of the church as People of God gains a privileged place in theology. The Council's decision to place consideration of the People of God before a reflection on the hierarchical structuring of the Church was a fundamental choice. It emphasised what Christians have in common before that which differentiates them in terms of functions within the Church. Oneness in Christ Jesus is the profound and rich mark of members of the Church. It is the same reality, Baptism and Faith, which grants admission to the people and which is much earlier than any distinction based on charisms and ministries within the community.

The same concept is contained in the Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles Laici* of John Paul II, in which he says: "Through their belonging to Christ, Lord and King of the Universe, the laity share in his Kingly Office and are called by Him to serve God's Kingdom and its spread throughout the world... The laity are called in a special way to give back to the created Universe all its original value" (CL 15).

In his encyclical *Redemptoris Missio*, John Paul II comes back to the same ideas. "All the laity," he tells us, "are missionaries by baptism," and he recalls that "from the very origins of Christianity the laity - as individuals, families and entire communities - shared in spreading the faith" (RM 71). The Holy Father encourages laity to exercise a missionary role in the vast and complicated world of politics, economics and social life and to participate in the variety of activities, ministries and forms of animation available within the Church (RM 72).

Today's challenge is to help the laity to rethink their role in the Churches and to accompany them in the formation they need to fulfil their vocation. It would seem to follow, as a recent symposium of the East African Pastoral Institute puts it, that "our Churches should be devoting at least as much of their resources to lay formation as to the formation of priests and religious".

## Those who "wish to be associated with us" (SRL 24.3)

As the Church carries its salvific message through different eras and to varied sociological contexts, the Spirit calls forth prophetic communities to respond to the "signs of the times". Thus at different periods of history new styles of religious life have appeared: the Cenobitical Life, the Monastic Tradition, the Mendicants and the Apostolic/Missionary Congregations. Each development, while not eliminating its predecessor, responded to a particular trend in society and within the Church. Many would say that today we are entering a new era which will, in turn, call forth new forms of apostolic/community life. Perhaps it is in this context that we can best

understand the growing interest in "Associates".

It will probably come as a surprise to many to learn that the notion of associates has been around for a long time in the Congregation. The Des Places rule for the Holy Ghost Seminary recognises both clerical and lay associates. In the 1770s a lay associate taught in the college in Cayenne. Libermann accepted at least one associate for the missions, Dr. Brunet, who worked in Reunion. For many years agrégés were part of our communities. Most significant, perhaps, was the proposal, in 1885, of Fr. (later Archbishop) Le Roy, that married laymen be admitted as associates.

The post-Vatican II Chapter (1968/69) reintroduced the matter of "Associate Members", placing it in the context of the Vatican Council's invitation to missionary institutes to be "ready to train and help those who engage in missionary activity for a time" (AG 27). The Chapter decided that "major superiors can accept associate members, priests and lay men who wish to consecrate themselves to the work of the Congregation by adopting our way of life" (14B).

The Chapter of 1974 included a brief section on diversity of members (61): "It seems appropriate to give more attention to the question of new forms of members in the Congregation in view of: (a) the call of the laity to participate in missionary work; (b) the desire expressed by some to engage in it on a temporary basis; and (c) the desire of some to share the prayer life of our communities."

The 1980 Chapter recognised that some circumscriptions had begun experiments with new forms of membership (101). The Chapter asked the General Council to have a concrete description of those experiences ready for the meeting of the Enlarged General Council to be held in 1982 (102). It also encouraged "experiments with lay missionaries who may wish to associate themselves with our apostolic endeavours and our missionary spirituality without any intention of establishing juridical links with the Congregation" (103).

In the Spiritan Rule of Life the question of associate membership is left open for new experiments: "In some places those who are working with us wish to be associated with us. We welcome them with joy, inviting them to share our spirituality and our apostolic life. The conditions of their acceptance and their work are decided at the level of each circumscription" (24.3). SRL also suggests Formation for associates (125.1).

The legislation enshrined in various Chapter documents up to and including the Spiritan Rule of Life does little more than leave the door open to those circumscriptions who wish to experiment with the idea of Associates and Lay Missionaries. In practice several provinces and districts have seized the opportunity, and the lived reality is richer than the written word.

**GERMANY (1982) *Missionar auf Zeit*.** At the National Katholikentag in Berlin in 1980, some young people asked the missionary institutes to open themselves to associates who would share their life and missionary work for a time. Out of the response to this request was born the project *Missionar auf Zeit*. The first MaZ went overseas in 1983, some for one year and others for up to three years. To date more than 30 have returned from missionary work, while a dozen others continue their efforts in Latin America and Africa.

The young people who asked for this experience were

clear that they were not development workers. They were looking for a new way of living Church and considered that sharing in the community life and spirituality of a missionary institute overseas, while engaged in apostolic work, was integral to this aim. Also envisaged from the outset by the young people themselves was the long-term aim of missionary insertion into the Church at home.

**(1987) *Assoziierten*.** This development began when a number of young people formed a study group directed by a Spiritan in Stuttgart and became linked to the local Spiritan community in order to have some share in Spiritan community life. The initial group was soon joined by some of the returned MaZ.

**TRANSCANADA (1971) *VICS - Volunteer International Christian Service*** - is an ecumenical lay volunteer programme providing professional and technical personnel to aid with Third World development in a Christian context. At any one time some 40 VICS personnel are serving overseas, and to date 349 have participated in the project. VICS lay missionaries have worked in 36 countries covering Asia, Africa, Latin America and Oceania. On their return many continue their missionary commitment in the local Church. Although VICS is directed by the Spiritans, members are not considered Spiritan associates in the strict sense of the term.

**(1974) *Lay Spiritans*.** A conversation on Pentecost Sunday 1974, between the Provincial of TransCanada and a lay couple, gave concrete expression to the concept of Lay Spiritans which had been under study for some time. These are people who wish to associate themselves with the Spiritan charism and community and, where possible, to work closely with Spiritans, especially in those apostolates directed towards the marginalised and the oppressed. Lay Spiritans are accepted as members within the Province and participate in community functions including chapters.

**CANADA (1979) *Spiritains Associés*.** This group was launched in the Province of Canada in 1979 as a means of allowing lay persons to live the Church's evangelising mission in collaboration with Spiritans. They seek to share community life and prayer under the influence of Libermann's spirituality and have recently produced a constitution for the guidance of members.

**SPAIN (1972).** The Province has tried various ways of associating lay people with the Spiritan missionary task and way of life. Lay missionaries have gone to Angola, Cameroon, Tanzania, Paraguay and Brazil. The province provides formation, puts the lay missionary in touch with the missionary bishop and arranges contracts. Some 25 people have participated in this programme since its initiation.

**USA-EAST/TANZANIA (1982).** The Spiritan Associate Programme is a volunteer missionary apostolate undertaken initially by USA-East in conjunction with the District of Kilimanjaro. It offers to Christians the opportunity for temporary commitment to missions, lived in the Spiritan tradition. More than 25 people have participated in this programme and some of the returned missionaries are laying the foundations for continuing the programme in the U.S., where the Eastern Province has put the former novitiate of Dorseyville at their disposal.

**HOLLAND (1990).** Following several years of research and a number of short-term projects, the Provincial Council established the associate program known as "Medestanders".

Its objective is to prepare lay men and women, who wish to devote themselves to the poor in a Spiritan context, with the training and support necessary for a three-year (minimum) commitment. Some members have already been sent overseas.

The foregoing are the established programmes, however fragile; several circumscriptions are preparing to launch initiatives, amongst them USA-West, Ireland, France, Belgium and East Africa.

## Trends

Among the groups already well established, a number of trends can be identified. Some cater for short-term commitment to apostolic work, either within the context of Spiritan communities or with others. Following their apostolic experience, some individuals continue to be associated with the Spiritans and may progress to long-term, even lifetime, engagement. Others return to participation in their local Church, often maintaining contact with Spiritans for the purposes of reflection and mutual support. On the other hand some associates are geared, from the beginning, to long-term involvement. Among these latter, two sources of inspiration are evident: those motivated by a desire to work with Spiritans in apostolic/missionary work, and those who are initially attracted to the community life/spirituality of the Congregation. Both groups draw sustenance from the charism and the spirit of our founders.

## Other Congregations

Spiritans are by no means alone in their interest in, or their experimentation with, associate programmes. In November 1987 the Conference of General Curias in Rome met to discuss the topic "How can contemporary religious institutes share their charism with the laity through new or renovated structures?" A year previously the Italian Conference of Major Superiors (CISM) devoted its general meeting to the theme "Religious and laity united for the Gospel". In May 1989 more than a hundred directors of associate programmes met at Bon Secours Centre, Maryland, USA, to share histories and to explore the future. Also in May 1989, at a meeting sponsored by SEDOS (Rome), superiors general and councillors of 20 congregations gathered to discuss their experiences, which proved to be as varied as the charisms of the institutes they represented. In June 1991, the first meeting of Spiritan Associates is scheduled for Bethel Park, Pittsburgh, USA.

The Associate Movement, although it preceded *Christifideles Laici* by many years, received a boost from the document, in which John Paul II emphasises: "That the Christian laity is co-responsible with ordained ministers and religious in carrying out the mission of the Church" (CL 15). It is this sense of equality and joint responsibility that has helped laity and religious come together in what is now becoming a significant movement, at least within the Western Church. Stress is placed on forming bonds between laity and religious around a specific charism and mission and in joining together towards deeper spiritual growth. Impelling motives are a desire for a greater community, a wish to deepen prayer life and a longing for a broader service of ministry.

As is often the case, legislation lags behind reality. This new phenomenon is not treated expressly in Canon Law. However, by analogy, one can find some direction in those canons which deal with third orders and members of secular institutes, or which speak of laity sharing a charism of an institute (Canons 303, 312 and 725). Some inkling of the mind of the Church can also be derived from the fact that many institutes (including our own) have had constitutions which make provisions for associate programmes of some kind approved by CRIS. Nevertheless, real legal and canonical difficulties remain, such as the extent to which associates can become full members, share in the government of institutes (including chapters), hold active and passive voice and participate in formation programmes, to mention just a few.

Other emerging issues are: the need to develop a formation based on the reality of lay life, something more than a pale imitation of sacerdotal or religious spirituality; the need to develop the associate programmes as entities in their own right and not simply as a means to cope with the vocation "crisis" or the shortage of clergy. Financial arrangements, too, can be tricky and will demand careful consideration.

## Conclusion

The proliferation of lay groups seeking to express their Christian calling through a serious apostolic commitment is surely a sign of the times. Many young men and women are motivated, as strongly as were their predecessors, to serve Christ, but do not feel called to traditional religious life; rather they prefer other forms of commitment to the Gospel. In Rome, for example, a lay community started in 1968 has grown today to encompass 4,000 members. Rooted in the Gospel and the teachings of Vatican II, members of the Sant'Egidio Community direct their apostolic efforts, in particular, towards the promotion of justice and the service of the poorest.

Profound and rapid cultural changes taking place today call for us to rethink and restructure the Church's pastoral operation. In order to process this restructuring with theological seriousness, we must pause and look at the Church's tradition. "Return to the sources" was one of the keynotes of Vatican II. It is by reminding ourselves of how many different possibilities of pastoral structuring and action the early Churches adopted, each in its own area, and how many legitimate changes or orientations were adopted over the centuries in answer to new situations, that we can have sufficient openness to the actions of the Spirit to face up courageously to the challenges offered us at the present moment.

Our Spiritan Rule of Life has taken up the invitation of Vatican II and has called us to a closer collaboration with laity in ministry, as well as sharing with them our spirituality and our apostolic life (SRL 24.3, 135.1). Considerable latitude is left concerning the manner in which this invitation will be put into practice. It is recognised that different circumscriptions will search out the means best suited to the realities of their society and of the local church, taking into account the aspirations of the laity themselves. A significant role for Spiritans is the utilisation of their resources, human and material, in preparation and support of lay ministries.