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"You Are All Brothers" (Matt 23:8): Spiritan Brothers

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“YOU ARE ALL BROTHERS”
(Matt 23:8): SPIRITAN BROTHERS

The Bagamoyo cemetery in Tanzania houses the tombs of 28 Spiritans who came from Europe to join the late 19th century missionary drive on the coasts of Africa. Among them are counted 17 religious brothers. The youngest, Brother Apollinaire, was 21 years old at the time of his death. This peaceful and moving site reminds us that for a long time our Congregation richly manifested the varied forms of vocation in Spiritan life. Our statistics show, however, that every year this variety is becoming increasingly impoverished and that the Brother’s vocation holds little appeal, including in regions of great vocational dynamism. Is that to say that this vocation now belongs to the past? In its service of the mission, can our Congregation today do without Brothers?

In December 2015, the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life released a document reflecting on the identity and mission of Brothers in the Church and the world today. We thought it would be of interest to read this document and examine it from the perspective of our experience and beliefs as Spiritan Brothers, in order to see to what extent it can inspire a new understanding of our vocation.

Can we say that there is an “identity” specific to the religious Brother, distinct from that of the religious priest?

The document from Rome, whose title presumes a positive response to this question, proposes from the outset to address “only what is most specific or particular to this vocation [of religious Brother]” (no. 3). Nonetheless, it immediately shifts the question to another level by stating that references to consecrated life in general are inevitable. Repeatedly emphasizing the variety of situations (Brothers in clerical Institutes, mixed Congregations, and Institutes of Brothers), nos. 2, 11, 39, the document does not distinguish among these in its analyses and seems to refer most frequently only to Institutes of Brothers. In fact, the greater part of the study draws on the foundations of religious life and an identity grounded in a baptismal vocation common to religious brothers and religious priests, even though priests are rarely mentioned. Yet
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Marc Tyrant is a Spiritan Brother of the French Province. He made final profession in the Congregation in 1998. Qualified as a medical doctor, he worked as a missionary in Pakistan for 14 years. During that time he served as Coordinator of the Spiritan International Group. In 2008 he returned to his home Province and was appointed director of formation. During that time, he also entered a master’s program on the theology of religions and interreligious dialogue. At the general chapter in Bagamoyo in 2012, he was elected a member of the General Council and third Assistant to the General.

there is no doubt that within the same Congregation priests are every bit as “religious” as Brothers. In choosing to distinguish the Brother’s vocation using criteria from religious life in general, do we not risk putting religious priests in another category, essentially sacerdotal, whose religious character would only be secondary?

In fact, shouldn’t the question of identity be asked first of our confrere priests, who must reconcile on a daily basis their double vocation, religious and presbyteral? Non-ordained Spiritan Brothers have no other vocation than that of the religious missionary life which they share with their confrere priests. One could of course also mention the “vocations” of teacher, doctor or musician, but it’s not exactly comparable. Besides, those specific professional capacities can also be carried out by confrere priests. We all have these kinds of multi-faceted identities, whether tied to a specific skill, belonging to an ethnic or national group, or a particular social commitment. Do we consider ourselves French first, or religious first? First and foremost a musician or first a priest? Such oppositions have no meaning. Thus the Spiritan priest is no less religious than the Spiritan brother. The two share the same religious and missionary identity.

In our Congregation, we run the risk of two main and contradictory pitfalls when, with the best intentions in the world, we try to distinguish an identity specific to the Spiritan brother.

1. *Exalting differences:* with the legitimate aim of avoiding a devaluing of the brother – a historical legacy – we end up overly differentiating a vocation that is upheld from the outset as “specific” and “particular.”5 We glorify, for example, the figure of St. Joseph as “patron of Brothers” because he is of “the workers”,6 we emphasize the amount of manual labor done by the Brothers. But today’s Brothers don’t have any special skills that priests could not also possess. Wanting too much to single out Brothers (even in a positive way), we segregate them amongst themselves and in specific categories of activity (manual jobs, frugalness, teaching in “profane sciences”) that nothing in theory can justify.

2. *Masking differences, at the risk of a certain “clericalizing” of Brothers:* they are lay religious,
...it is good that the religious Brothers be trained in theology...

not “quasi-priests” who constitute an exception in a Congregation of “Holy Spirit Fathers.” As is the case for all God’s people, it is good that the religious Brothers be trained in theology, teach catechism, be active in the parish, etc., but it is not a *sine qua non* condition of their religious commitment.

Quite rightly, the document insists at several points (nos. 23 and 36) that the religious Brother is a Brother for all his life, including in sickness or weakness: his identity is not confused with his eventual occupation or ministry.7

No, the religious Brother’s real identity is religious life, which he shares with his confrere priests.

Can we then say that the Spiritan mission is lived differently by a lay confrere and a confrere priest?

The *Rule of Life* is the same for all. Its first chapters, which treat fundamental elements of the vocation, the mission, and our religious life, make no distinction between Spiritan priests and Brothers, as the document *Anima Una, Spiritan Priests*8 rightly reminds us. Our common identity is thus truly religious and our common mission is “*the evangelization of the poor.*”9 If our way of living religious life is the same, the diversity of apostolates, according to each person’s skills and the specific character of the priesthood for confrere priests, leads to a fruitful complementarity for the requirements of the mission.

The same document, *Spiritan Priests*, lays out eleven principles10 corresponding to different aspects of a specifically Spiritan vocation. These are to be an inspiration for the way the priesthood is practiced: evangelizing the poor, defending the oppressed, moving beyond borders, pursuing interreligious dialogue, bringing service to places where the Church has difficulty finding workers, working with communities, collaborating with local Churches, leading a simple life, protecting the integrity of Creation, etc. It is notable that all these points are followed with the phrase “*as do all Spiritans,*” reaffirming the common dimension of our mission.

A number of these points are also found in the Rome document, in sections 2.II and 2.III (nos. 21-31) in particular (“*communion*” and “*mission*”). These describe religious life in general, and therefore do not apply exclusively to the religious brother. Thus are included aspects such as sharing, fraternal love as lived...
“Common life” is especially singled out as being “an essential characteristic of the religious life of Brothers” (no. 24): Is this true? Isn’t it rather an essential characteristic of religious life itself? In our Congregation as in other clerical institutes, priests are no less subject to this requirement of communal life, seen as the core of our religious vocation!

The Bagamoyo Chapter neatly summarizes this question of Spiritan identity as being above all religious and thus communitarian, and which is expressed in a variety of functions and tasks, whatever the type of vocation.

We are a community of brothers endowed with varied charisms in different functions and tasks. We aspire to live simply and openly, in a prophetic way. Community life forms our identity; it is the most powerful symbol of what we are. It constitutes our way of living the mission. We live, pray, work and grow together and share everything with each other.

The Mystery of Communion

The Rome document develops the idea of the “mystery of communion” that the Brother incarnates. Rather than examining the religious Brother’s identity, isn’t it instead questions about his role that we should be asking ourselves? As we’ve already outlined, the theology of the religious Brother is simply the theology of religious life (as evidenced by the document’s many borrowings from Vatican II and *Vita Consecrata* and its use of the theology of the “sign”). Nothing is said about the Brother that could not be extended to religious life in general, whether for men or women. That said, and the Rome document clearly reflects this, some elements can be noted that the presence of Brothers alone bring to the fore, which suggests a unique fecundity within a clerical Congregation. These features—universal calling of the baptized, universal brotherhood, prophecy—bear directly on the question of communion in the Church, which the Brother especially manifests.

“There is nothing greater than baptismal consecration” (no. 14). The religious Brother thus becomes the witness to the universal calling of the baptized, reminding every
Christian through his religious consecration that all life is given to God (nos. 16 and 22). Near to the “little ones,” the marginalized and the poor, he invites them to the “table of the Kingdom” in “the Eucharist of life” that he celebrates in the Spirit “from his baptismal priesthood reaffirmed by his religious consecration” (no. 20). This lived solidarity, this predilection for those who “are less likely to experience the good news of God’s love in their life” (no. 6), allows the Brother to be the impetus for a community “on the move” towards the fringes, outside of parish institutions where we risk being confined by a too narrow and clerical conception of the Spiritan mission.

The consecrated person called “Brother,” as a “living memorial” of “Brother Jesus” (no. 15), is the visible sign of universal brotherhood, recalling by his lifestyle that we are all children of the same Father. This mission of the Brother to serve as a reminder of the ideal of fraternity among Christians is articulated throughout the document, particularly in no. 11: “[brotherhood] is the pearl that religious Brothers cultivate with special care. In this way they are, for the Church community, the prophetic memory of its origin and an encouragement to return to it for renewal.”

It is in this respect that the religious Brother is prophet amidst his clerical Congregation, in the sense that he reminds all his confreres of the horizontality of their vocation, anchored in their common religious consecration: “[the presence of religious Brothers in clerical congregations] is important (…) above all because they are the permanent reminder in these Congregations of the fundamental dimension of brotherhood in Christ which all members should strengthen” (no. 11).

He is also prophet to all Christians, for whom he recalls the primary dimension of service following in Christ’s footsteps, beyond the seductions of money, power and honor, when the temptations of patriarchy, authoritarianism and clericalism endanger the truth of our witness:

> As for you, do not be called ‘Rabbi.’ You have but one teacher, and you are all brothers. Call no one on earth your father; you have but one Father in heaven. Do not be called ‘Master.’ You have but one Master, the Messiah.” (Matt. 23: 8-10).
The document proposes several evangelical “icons” to deepen understanding of the identity of the Brother.

The icon of the washing of the feet, linked to the institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper, is presented as illuminating the diversity of ministries deployed in the Church to unfold the mystery of salvation. On one hand, priests renew the gift of Christ in the Eucharist through the remembrance of His death and resurrection. On the other hand, the “faithful,” inspired by the Spirit, convey Christ’s presence by their attitude of service (no. 12), by developing multiple charisms and ministries in service to fraternal communion. For the Rome document, Brothers are clearly on the side of washing of the feet. That certainly isn’t untrue, but the same can be said for ordained ministers, for it is the apostles, priests and bishops first among them, who are called to this “attitude of service” that the document appears to attribute only to “the faithful.” If the dimension of service “characterizes the consecrated life of religious Brothers,” (no. 19), it is no less fundamental to the consecrated life of religious priests, even if it can unfortunately end up being pushed aside.

Another icon the document presents as a model for the religious Brother is that of the Good Samaritan. Through this figure the entire sphere of service to one’s neighbor is emphasized: the closeness to the poor, the “being with” that has in fact inspired the vocation of many Brothers (but not only!). In reality, it is of course always Jesus who is the central icon, “who invites us to be the memory of his love” (no. 33). But it is all religious, and through them all Christ’s disciples, who are called to reflect upon the challenge of human solidarity within and beyond their community: Who is my brother? For whom or to whom do I become brother?

Finally, what is new in this text? Can we detect in it any original steps forward regarding the place of religious Brothers in the Church?

The great merit of this document may ultimately be that it exists, and that it demonstrates an interest and a real concern about the future of the Brother’s vocation. It responds to the wish expressed by Pope Francis, who reflected during his meeting with the Superior Generals in November 2013: “I don’t think at all that this type of vocation belongs to the past, but we must understand what God wants from us.”
In some respects, the document implicitly draws on a somewhat outdated and uninspiring image of the Brother, one that we would do well today to move beyond. Note in particular the question of manual labor (no. 31) and the reference to material services provided by the Brothers in clerical Congregations (no. 11). Even if these features have a historical basis, must we systematically link the identity of the Brother, even in part, to the work he performs? At the risk of limiting his role and importance to the mission to the material and financial support he provides? It’s a question we must honestly ask ourselves.

In the final section of the document, “Being Brothers Today: A Story of Grace,” the challenge of the objectives put forward by this document becomes clear: to accord more status to the vocation of religious Brother by seeking the foundations of an identity that may ultimately be unknowable, and to open new paths for the future. In this regard, certain reflections are surprising, especially the series of propositions “prophets for our time” (no. 37), which ties the Brother’s vocation, pell-mell, to affirming feminine values, protecting the environment and the wise use of new technologies.

Yet we note in the second-to-last paragraph (no. 39: “new wine in new wineskins”) a group of comments and suggestions that, if not representing a revolution in thought, remain nonetheless pertinent. For example, in the case of mixed Institutes, the encouragement “to establish among all members a way of relating based on equal dignity, with no more differences than those arising from the diversity of their ministries.” In the same point, the text addresses “the question concerning the jurisdiction of Brothers in these institutions” (understood to mean the possibility that a Brother be named Major Superior), by hoping that it be resolved “with determination and within an opportune time-frame.” Let’s recall that in 1997 Jean-Paul II in Vita Consecrata already expressed the wish “that the parity of rights and obligations be recognized for all religious in these Institutes, except those that derive from the sacred Order.”

In truth, the question of relations within the Congregation goes beyond the canonical sphere, as our recent General Chapters have reminded us. It calls for a truth process about the authenticity of what we claim to live and the conditions for a relevant and effective Spiritan mission. What matters today is to maintain the preference...
for diversity and complementarity in service to the same mission, among a Spiritan family where priests and Brothers, religious and lay associates, men and women of diverse origins may be united by the same desire for justice and sharing.

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Endnotes

1 On December 31, 2014, there were 115 Brothers (including 88 in Europe and 19 in Africa) among a total of 2,706 Spiritans.


3 No. 10: “Religious consecration has its roots firmly planted in Baptism.”

4 This negative formulation is clumsy, but it highlights the problem of vocabulary used to describe ecclesial realities. How to externalize the fact that a Spiritan priest is first and foremost a religious, meaning a brother? There is of course the term “confrère” but that alludes more to a professional relation. In our Congregation, the term “Brother” is never used to refer to a priest, unlike the Dominicans and Franciscans. The term “lay” is also mainly used to refer to Christians who have not entered the priesthood or religious life (cf. Lumen Gentium 31). If the main point remains the fact of fraternal relations, the vocabulary is nonetheless important.

5 Meaning in reference to a norm, which implicitly ends up being that of priests . . . We are indeed a clerical institution. Does that mean that the Spiritan identity must then be conflated with the priesthood? It is a debate which does not appear to be completely settled in practice, even though the Congregation’s latest documents are at least clear on the question (Torre D’Aguilh 6.16; Enlarged General Council Ariccia 2008 in Anima Una no. 62 §3.2.1.; Bagamoyo 2.6).

6 Why would a Brother be presumed to be more of a “worker” than a priest? We are influenced here by an outmoded typology
that draws a distinction between the laboring classes and intellectuals, and which applies in only the most caricature way to the complex reality of today’s Congregation.

7“Support turns out to be necessary to prevent professional retirement from resulting in religious retirement,” (no. 36).

8*Anima Una* no. 64, *Spiritan Priests*, June 2012, § 2.1.

9SRL, no. 4.

10*Anima Una* no. 64, *Spiritan Priests*, June, 2012, § 2.3.

11This rhetoric of opposition to the world does not seem to be among the most productive: is the lifestyle of Brothers, modelled on the Gospel, really “opposed to what the world promotes”? In a certain sense yes, but it is not a question of engaging in some type of hostile counter-culture: in the world around us, many individuals, movements and organizations also promote values of solidarity, mutual aid, simplicity, communal life, etc. in full accord with the Gospel. It would be absurd to renounce these. Furthermore, our own communities are all too often influenced by those “worldly” values denounced by Pope Francis. The Rome document in fact raises this point by speaking of the “fragility” of the sign that our religious communities represent.

12The document refers here to *Vita Consecrata* 46. However, John-Paul II’s exhortation to be witnesses of fraternity and communion isn’t addressed to religious Brothers alone but to all the consecrated!

13Bagamoyo 2.6

14Regarding feminine religious life, the document states in its introduction that most of what is said about Brothers can also apply to Sisters. The ambiguity nonetheless pertains more to the identity of the religious Brother, given that men can be called also to the priesthood (in a religious setting or not), and that is precisely what is at issue in the document. Plus, much has been written on religious life in general.


16No. 19: “The dimension of service that characterizes that consecrated life.”

17No. 9: “The consecrated life, predominantly lay in its beginnings (. . .) seeking to imitate Christ in his way of living: poor, obedient and chaste.”
“Clericalism and privilege.”

In the sense of *Vita Consecrata* 61. It thus in principle is not the case for the Congregation of the Holy Spirit which is from its founding a clerical Institute.

Jean-Paul II, *Vita Consecrata*, no. 61.

Torre D’Aguilha 6.16; Bagamoyo 2.12.