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General Council

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THE ENLARGED GENERAL COUNCIL AT DAKAR, 1995

A "KAIROS" FOR THE CONGREGATION

This is a message from the General Council to all conferees after the E.G.C. at Dakar.

You have already received news and other accounts of the meeting at Dakar. In this paper, we would like to propose for your consideration our own reactions, the calls to action and the general guidelines as we perceive them.

A. THE COMMITMENT OF THE CONGREGATION IN AFRICA

1. A return to the beginnings of our missionary experience

One hundred and fifty years ago, our Congregation committed itself to a colonised Africa that had been ravaged by the slave trade. It was a courageous undertaking - conferees risking their lives so that the African people might be liberated from the evils of slavery, to which the island of Gorée is still a witness today. Despite the prevailing pessimism and the context of violence, a trust grew up between the missionaries and the Africans who accepted the Gospel.

3. The African experience has marked the Congregation

A South American confere, who was struck by the phrase of Libermann written on a banner hanging in the meeting room at Dakar, "I have given my heart to the Africans", wrote the following:

"I got to know the Congregation through Irish and German missionaries who carried Africa in their hearts and their heads... The African experience has marked the
Congregation so deeply that, in my opinion, it has become an essential element of our charism... Our "African-ness" does not just spring from the number of African confreres we have nor from the extent of our commitments in Africa. It is to be found in the spiritual experience of Libermann and in the convictions that drove so many men to give their lives for the mission... One could say that it is not possible to be authentically spiritan if one does not personally retrace the journey the Congregation has travelled that was begun by our founders. This journey is saturated with Africa."

4. We still have a strong commitment in the new African context

This is certainly not the moment to lessen our involvement, when the continent is going through great distress and is being subjected to new kinds of slavery. Confreres have remained in the most difficult situations and are standing with the peoples of Africa in their struggle for life, for justice and peace, even at times giving their lives.

"I will always bless you, Lord, because you have delivered me from certain death this day... I have nothing of value to give you, so I fervently give you my heart and my life, free from all illusions". (Prayer of an Angolan confrere who had escaped death).

5. A new period of our mission in the world, starting from Africa

The future of the Congregation is not just in Africa. It is equally in Latin America, Asia, Oceania, and still in the countries of the North. But Africa has already begun to play a determining role in spiritan missions throughout the world.

B. OLD AND NEW FRONTIERS THAT HAVE TO BE CROSSED

SPIRITAN MISSION TODAY

1. The focus of our missionary engagements

"The trouble with the clergy has always been that they have got stuck in the ideas of the past... We must embrace the new order of things in all openness and simplicity and bring to it the spirit of the Gospel" (Libermann 1848).

The report of the Superior General locates the mission of the Congregation in the contemporary world, which is marked by a secularised society, a meeting or conflict of cultures, the dominance of market-forces, a society that is consumerist and media-based, a society that is lawless, full of fear, conflicts and violence.

The report gives a panorama of our present engagements and new projects. It tries to mark out the road that the Congregation is taking today: the importance of the witness given by a faithful, continuing presence, the importance of the quality of our personal commitment and our relationships; the balance to be sought between our traditional and new undertakings; the stress to be put on first evangelisation, inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue, and work for justice and peace.

This stress comes out clearly in the replies to the preparatory questionnaire (RPQ), which adds: 'Even where
we are appointed to pastoral ministry in the local Church, our work is marked by our cross-cultural experience; we try to make that Church more missionary. And the work of many of us within the Congregation is aimed at making it ever more missionary and spiritan”.


The challenge of the world today

There is a type of aid coming from the rich countries that has sent the poorest countries down a one-way-street of debt, leading inexorably to ever greater poverty and social regression.

Arms sales - 388 billion dollars per year - feed the violence that is ravaging the world. The irresponsible

behaviour of consumerist societies is destroying the environment for everyone living on this planet. Overpopulation, poverty and violence are causing mass migrations. 20% of the world’s population owns more than 80% of the world’s resources.

Sinful structures and the liberating Cross

How did life on earth arrive at this stage as we are about to enter the 21st century? Structures that are characterised by egoism and the desire to dominate always work in favour of the strongest. They can be called “structures of sin”. Jesus came into this world on the side of the little ones. He witnessed to the goodness of God amongst them in the face of the powerful. The forces of death in his society dragged him to Calvary. But because he died out of love, his cross has become a Cross of liberation.

By our presence in situations of death, we want to bring the hope of the resurrection into the social, political and ecological dimensions of life on this earth. Spiritans are engaged in trying to help refugees and in many other concrete works of liberation, in networks for justice and peace, in groups studying international debt, and in Amnesty International.

3. Some recent spiritan engagements

The EGC gave its approval to pursue some new engagements and projects:

- a plan to help refugees in Guinea who have come from Sierra Leone and Liberia;
- an international spiritan group for Mozambique;
- a study with a view to a new spiritan engagement in Asia;
- a study for a regional organisation of Spiritans in Oceania.

In the context of re-vitalising the Congregation in these difficult times, the EGC asked for an evaluation of its organisation and the formation of its members.

C. SPIRITAN FORMATION

The “Guide for Formation” that was accepted by the Dakar assembly, is the result of many meetings and consultations. It takes its inspiration from the contemporary experience of Spiritans, from our own traditions, and from the experience of the universal Church. On-going formation was discussed at greater length by the EGC, and it is the subject of a provisional document which will eventually be incorporated, after further discussion, into the “Guide for Formation” (GF). It is worth giving some serious reflection to the spirit behind all this work on spiritan formation today. Let us try to explain it a little further.

1. The spirit behind the documents on initial and on-going formation

To clarify what is fundamental and common to all

SRL 105 asked each Province to work out its guidelines for formation. But current challenges, as well as the tradition of our Congregation, urges us to unity. The Itaici Chapter (36.3.1) asked us to draw out the fundamental common strands of our formation.
A preparation for our particular mission in all its ramifications

Missionary situations have changed, and have led us to redefine our spiritan vocation. Formation must prepare us for all aspects of our particular mission: we want to move among groups of people not yet touched, or hardly touched, by the witness of the Gospel, among believers of other religions and Churches, among those who are neglected or pushed aside by society; our call is to dialogue and share our faith with them, to work with them for liberation and a better life, for justice, peace, and respect for creation.

A transformation of ourselves

Spiritan formation is much more than just acquiring knowledge or “savoir-faire”: it initiates us into how to live as a Spiritan. It calls for a transformation of ourselves. It passes on to us the missionary spiritual experience of the Congregation. We are given not just a missionary and religious outlook, but “habits of heart”, which we used to call “virtues”, a training to reach decisions in the line of our Rule of Life:

"The Spirit calls us to continual conversion, shapes our personal and community lives, makes us partakers in the death and resurrection mystery of Jesus and prepares us to make the total gift of ourselves for the Kingdom" (SRL 10).

Formation from life and for the whole of life

The above quotation from SRL 10 suggests that formation is not just a stage we go through, but something that is lifelong. "...In each age of our lives, including our retirement, fresh appeals, springing from new situations, reach us. (GF 9).

We perceive spiritan formation in terms of private tuition given to us by the experiences of life, rather than according to any scholastic model; so much so that its fundamental aspects are the experience itself of apostolic commitment and the interpreting of what we see and hear in the light of Christian Revelation and our spiritan tradition. Some of the new disciplines help in this interpretation, discernment and concrete engagement: the religious sciences, and the soundest of the methods and established facts of a certain number of the human sciences.

Integrated growth of the person

Real spiritual, intellectual and apostolic progress demands an all-round growth of the person, that is to say, a satisfying human equilibrium in the physical, affective and social domains. This needs clarity and the help of a spiritual director is essential. But it is worth remembering that it is easier to keep your balance when walking than when standing still to take your pulse!

Initiation into a style of life

We have to be initiated into the riches and the demands of community life, which is "an essential element in the spiritan way of life" (SRL 28).

In a world often obsessed by possessions and consumerism, but at the same time bruised by misery and crying inequalities, we clearly hear the call...to practise justice, to share, to stand in solidarity with the poor, to be moderate in our use of material things (GF 28).

We are also initiated into the life of the local and universal Church, and we grow in faith and charity together with people and pastors of our Church of origin and the Church that receives us.
We have to learn how to maintain a genuine relationship with our family in the light of our spiritan commitment, conscious both of all they have given to us and of our call to leave them, not in order to cut ourselves off from them, but to allow our hearts to open wider,...a call that is also extended to them.

2. The nature of on-going formation: a missionary spirituality that is lived

To keep ourselves truly alive

The aim of on-going formation is to keep us as alive and awake as possible, so that our life might be an exciting adventure right until the end, a constant spiritual searching, an openness to new and deeper encounters and a genuine commitment to serve the poor.

"We believe that our christian and apostolic vocation brings with it the opportunity ...of obtaining a greater quality and fullness of life and relationships. If only we can learn to adopt an attitude of alert vigilance, we can become open to unsuspected developments in our vocation and to a renewal of our apostolic enthusiasm" (GF 104.1).

On-going formation throughout our lives

The objective of on-going formation can be achieved in two complementary ways: by developing habits in our daily routine of life and, from time to time, by more intensive periods of renewal.

The documents approved by the EGC consider first of all this daily renewal of ourselves. It seems that at this point in the life of our Congregation, we have come to a greater realisation that our strongest asset is our life-witness, the christian authenticity of our commitment. But our secularised environment, often foreign or even opposed to our convictions, is no help to our efforts to live by faith, hope and charity. So the essential foundations and convictions on which we build our lives have to be continually renewed. Hence the absolute necessity of making time for personal prayer, a full community life, and spiritan meetings in our circumscriptions...

More prolonged periods of renewal

"A recyclage or sabbatical gives us the chance to step back from our normal work and ambience; the resulting psychological and spiritual freedom helps us to get things in focus, to understand better what has gone before and what is happening now, so that we can be more open to future possibilities". (GF 138).

The EGC wants us to accept the idea of on-going formation as the normal thing. Every Spiritan must be convinced of its necessity and should be ready to do something about it. It should be discussed at all levels by the confreres concerned and the superiors of the Congregation, and the latter should take the necessary steps to make it possible.

A missionary spirituality

In applying on-going formation to the different aspects of our vocation, a spirituality emerges that brings a unity to our commitment: a wisdom which is both "human", and evangelical, personal and communitarian, a gift to receive and a task to be carried out (GF 122).

Certain elements are of a personal nature, other are peculiar to groups of Spiritans, yet others are common to the whole of our religious family. The latter is particularly so of our apostolic orientation which makes us open to the inspiration of the Spirit to whom we are consecrated (SRL 5-6; 8-11; 85-88).

We try to recognise the fruits of the Spirit in the living witness that is found both inside and beyond the Church. We try to live in a state of "practical union" and docility to the calls of the Spirit.

"When we make efforts to identify ourselves with the poorest,...our ministry becomes a place where we meet the God celebrated in the Magnificat "(GF 126).

In short, the apostolate gives food to our prayer, which is the place where we identify, in our lived experience, the fruits of the Spirit and the fruits of sin.
3. Some concrete directives

Sessions of on-going formation can last a few months or a whole year. According to SRL 145, the longer periods should occur about every ten years. The EGC indicated certain times of our lives where evaluation and support are specially needed; so they suggest the following rhythm of longer periods of recyclage in the life of a Spiritan:

- the start of the active life, a period of about 5 years, where confreres need a special initiation, accompaniment and support;
- the middle of life, around 40-50, a decisive stage of transition, where one can draw out the lessons learnt from a long active period and lay down the main orientations of the next phase of life; this is a suitable time for a more extended sabbatical;
- the beginning of the “third age”, an ideal time to prepare for a new type of consecration to mission, a new growth in our human and spiritual lives.

Changes of appointment and times of exceptional difficulties, are also occasions when a period of recollection and withdrawal could be beneficial.

These periods of renewal should be arranged after a consultation between the confrere and the superiors of circumscriptions of origin and appointment.

Spiritans are encouraged to set up international sessions of recyclage. There is a growing need to establish centres specially adapted for this type of meeting, if possible, in places that have a significant meaning for Spiritans.

The General Council will support these initiatives and gather together the information regarding time, place and the type of renewal that is envisaged.

The question of financing these special periods of renewal should be worked out by the community, the circumscription of appointment, sometimes with help from the Province of origin and exceptionally, from Cor Unum, although most of this latter fund is reserved for the needs of initial formation. It is also in order to ask the diocese, where we are working, for financial help.

D. THE ORGANISATION OF THE CONGREGATION

1. A particular vision of the problem of organisation

The vision behind the document on organisation of the Congregation that was accepted by the EGC could be described as follows:

Starting from missionary experience

Our missionary life and methods have changed so our organisation must be adapted to the new situation. Systems of organisation come into being through a mixture of concrete needs and internal convictions, prior to being spelt out systematically. It was thus that SRL encapsulated certain organisational evolutions and it tried to continue along this road of evaluation. So the propositions made in the document are part of a process that is already underway.

Guidelines for the evolution of our structures

This seems to be the moment to clarify the lines along which the evolution of the structures of our Congregation should proceed, following the road that the Spirit appears to be indicating that spiritan mission should take, rather than simply trying to improve our present structures.

This is why we are not in favour of any changes to SRL, which remains our point of reference and already contains in itself plenty of possibilities for adaptation (cf. for example, SRL 163). Instead, we are proposing to you a guide that will give general orientations for present and future decisions concerning the organisation of the Congregation.
2. Movements towards new structures

An increase in the places where we work and the circumscription of origin of Spiritans

There has been a considerable increase in the number of places in which we are working, normally outside the areas of the old districts, usually in fairly small groups, and often working according to a different style.

Most circumscriptions are now providing new members, above all in the North, while the number of vocations in the North has dwindled. Districts which are now receiving very few reinforcements from the North are seeking them in the new Foundations and Provinces.

![New relations between circumscriptions (EGC. Dakar)](image)

**Autonomy of circumscriptions**

Although they are small, the new groups are often autonomous either because they are far away from large circumscriptions or because they are international. The Foundations have been made autonomous so that they can develop their own style and responsibility.

**New relationships between circumscriptions**

The circumscriptions, which are far more numerous than they were, are becoming aware, for different reasons, of their weaknesses and limitations. They are collaborating amongst themselves. The older Provinces are giving financial support to the new Foundations and Provinces, while the latter are beginning to send personnel for missionary undertakings in the North. Circumscriptions are also getting together regionally. So internationality is growing all the time in districts and new groups, and even in Provinces and Foundations.

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**The meaning of these developments**

We can see in these developments that the Spirit is leading us towards a spiritan mission without domination, but lived out in co-responsibility, giving an example of unity in diversity in a world that is being torn apart.

3. The EGC has given guidelines for this evolution, to help to organize spiritan life in a more efficient and relevant way

**a) Guidelines for the types of circumscription**

Some types of circumscription seem destined to get smaller and evolve

Traditional districts are losing some of their responsibilities which are being taken over by the local clergy; the personnel coming from older provinces is far less; the arrival of conferees from Foundations and Provinces in those countries or from that region changes their style; they are caught up in the development of Foundations and gradually relinquish the leadership of the spiritan mission where a new Province is developing.

In line with the evolution described above, it does not seem wise to create any more so-called “Provincial Groups”, i.e. groups that are attached to a particular Province. Those which already exist could develop into international groups and attach themselves to the region to which their country belongs.

**Some forms of circumscription are developing with further changes**

**The Province:** More then ever, this remains the basic unit. In fact, Provinces are taking over what used to be the prerogative of districts: not only are they still supporting far-off districts, but they themselves have missionary engagements in their own area. And new Provinces are being born, usually from Foundations, where originally there were districts.

**The Foundation:** This is an entity in process of becoming a Province. The Dakar document restates the conditions laid down by the Chapter of 1992 governing the transition of a Foundation into a Province. It also spells out certain conditions necessary before a circumscription can begin to accept spiritan vocations, as well as those to be fulfilled for the launching of a Foundation.
The Group: This corresponds to the former "District", but in general it is smaller and, nearly always, international. To assure its autonomy, it normally has a Major Superior.

International Meeting CSSp (Paraguay)

b) The EGC encourages internationality

Internationality can add to the value of the missionary witness. It has to be done step by step. Every Spiritan retains his special ties, both rights and duties, with his Province of origin, in accordance with SRL. But we are convinced that the cultural and ecclesial characteristics that we bring with us are an enrichment for the Congregation.

c) The EGC encourages new relationships between circumscriptions for mutual support

It encourages the fusion of circumscriptions where they are side by side and are serving communities of people who enjoy a genuine unity. Sometimes districts join with new Provinces; others collaborate with them whilst maintaining their autonomy.

When the Congregation takes on a new engagement, outside of existing circumscriptions, in some cases a simple community will be set up which will preferably come under the jurisdiction of the circumscription which is nearest to hand. If it involves a larger number of confreres, then it will be set up as a Group.

As for appointment and rotation of personnel, as well as finance, the group will turn to the Provinces of origin of its members, or even to other circumscriptions, and to the General Council. Regular contact will be necessary between these circumscriptions to ensure the stability of the group. This also holds true for old districts which become international.

The General Council has been asked to encourage circumscriptions to develop their regional organisation. Gradually the regions are replacing the old networks of districts attached to a northern Province. Often several districts and groups form a regional entity around a Foundation or a new Province, to which they direct the vocations coming from that region.

4. Further guidelines for organization and solidarity

The General Council will make more use of the possibilities given to it by SRL to take new initiatives and to intervene in the distribution of personnel, especially as regards new projects and formation.

The EGC also made some precisions regarding organisation and solidarity. It encourages circumscriptions to give all their aid through the medium of Cor Unum. If bilateral aid is given, the General Council should be informed.

The priority for Cor Unum is formation. As regards new or non self-sufficient apostolic projects, new sources of finance should be looked for, relying more on aid agencies and the generosity of christians.
E. THE EGC HELPS US TO IDENTIFY THE SPIRIT THAT ENERGIZES THE SPIRITAN OF TODAY

"The spirit which invigorates Spiritans at this time could be described in these words: to be at the service of the poor, to be open to where the Spirit is leading us, to read our tradition into the actuality of today's mission, to renew our community life and to live in mutual support of each other". (RPQ).

Despite all the difficulties that the Congregation is going through, the EGC showed considerable generosity and courage in supporting initiatives in the service of the most neglected. The response to the calls for help has shown that many are ready to take part in these new projects. The assembly showed a particular concern for distressing situations, and for issues of justice and peace, as if these somehow strike a chord in the deepest feelings of our Congregation.

New possibilities opening for the future

We must make use of the new systems of communication now available for the animation of the Congregation and the sharing of information regarding issues of justice.

The Provinces of the North are looking for a new dynamism through closer collaboration and the welcoming of confreres from the South.

At this time when mission is becoming less clerical, the EGC has asked us to promote the vocation of spiritan brother.

The importance given to prayer became apparent in the careful preparation of the liturgy and the fervour with which confreres participated. These were the central moments of the meeting where we were able to prepare ourselves for discernment. The opening retreat invited us to take up Lectio Divina according to the traditional method, which is now making a come-back as a sure way of christian renewal. It was significant how much stress was put on this aspect of our lives when it came to the question of on-going formation, as if we were more than ever convinced that the Spirit is leading us, and that "if the Lord does not build the house, in vain do the builders labour".

The intervention of the Co-ordinator of the History Group, which was set up to prepare for the celebration of our spiritan anniversaries, revealed the great interest that many confreres have in our sources and our spiritan history.

One of the most gratifying experiences of the EGC was the desire of everybody to meet as brothers and to respect each other's point of view. An extraordinary convergence of opinion emerged. For example, when the Mozambique project was raised, those in charge of the circumscriptions directly concerned immediately made a unanimous decision to set up an international group, made up of two international teams, attached to the South-Central African region.

The financial report revealed a considerable increase in the contributions to Cor Unum. A retirement fund was set up for the new circumscriptions that do not yet have a retirement scheme of their own. These figures are the concrete evidence of solidarity in practice. The EGC discussed the possibilities for collecting funds to finance the new projects that have the greatest need of support.

At Dakar, once again we became aware of our weakness in personnel, the fragility of our communities and the difficulties of our mission, but without in any way becoming discouraged. We went home strengthened by a renewed vision of our spiritan mission and a greater sense of the way that we depend on each other.

"It was the Holy Spirit who brought us together despite all our diversities. In our Congregation, differences do not disappear; it is hardly surprising if everything does not end in one clear and distinct orientation. But one is nevertheless left with a feeling of solidarity, which unites
in the same mission both the old and sick missionary and
the one who still enjoys the vigour of youth in the front line
of missionary engagement.” (A participant).

We have all had the same sort of experience during spiritan
reunions. But we should allow ourselves to express these
profound feelings more often in our everyday life and work.
We often fail to make the effort to find out what exactly
the Spirit is asking of us, what is possible, and how we
should set about it.

Put out into deep water and let down your nets for a catch  (Luke 5.4).

Rome, 10 October 1995

On behalf of the General Council,

Pierre Schouver CSSp.
Superior General.
General Reference documents

Reports presented to the EGC:

The Superior General (SGR), which you are invited to read (36 pages);
Finance;
Justice and Peace;
International Group of Historical Research;
Secretariat for Formation;
Lay Associates;
Replies to the preliminary questionnaire (RPQ).

Documents:

Guide for Formation (GF);
Draft of the section on on-going formation;
Spiritania News No 108 with supplements and current news sheets.

You have received some of these documents. You can find others with the Superior of your circumscription or your delegate to the EGC. Failing that, you can make enquiries to the General Secretariat in Rome.
OUR CONGREGATION IN THE WORLD TODAY

The trouble with the clergy in recent times, is that they have got stuck in the ideas of the past. The world moves on, and our enemies have adapted their armory to the spirit of the age while we are left way behind! Without abandoning the spirit of the Gospel, we must get up to date, do good and combat evil in the spirit of today.

We have to confront the enemy where he is, and not allow him to strengthen his position by looking for him where he is no longer to be found. If we just clamp ourselves to the past and cling on to the habits and ideas of yesterday, all our efforts will be wasted and the enemy will meanwhile be digging in to the new order of things. So let us welcome the new world with openness and simplicity and bring the spirit of the Gospel to it; in this way, we will be sanctifying the world and the world will come to us.

(One month after the revolution in France of 1848, Fr Libermann is answering a Sulpician who asked whether a priest should vote in the forthcoming election. ND X p. 151.)