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## 1998 Vol. 55: Different Faces of the Spiritan Vocation

General Council

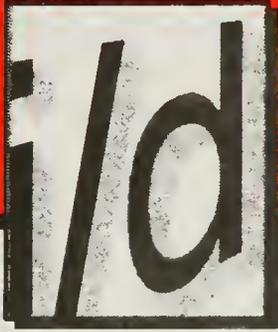
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# INFORMATION DOCUMENTATION

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General Council

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## DIFFERENT FACES OF THE SPIRITAN VOCATION

*"Whatever may be the work we are engaged in as Priests or as Brothers, we aim to bear witness to a kingdom of justice and peace, by living together in community, in genuine charity, in mutual forbearance, pardoning, sharing, ever hospitable and free from prejudice".*

*"In our community, each and all are looked upon as confreres, received from the Lord...each one has gifts from which all draw benefit".*

*"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". (SRL 24, 34, 24.3).*



Brothers of the French Province in Gentinnes in 1993

Front Row: L-R: *B. Le Roux (Vence), P. Villain (Chevilly), Ph. Erny (Neufgrange), H. Le Bourbasquet (Piré), A. Kervarec (Lille), M. Coffin (Neufgrange), J. Boussant (Saint Lô), X. Ziémé (Vence), L. Morvan (rue Lhomond), E. Denoual (Chevilly), A. Gimbert (rue Lhomond): kneeling: J. Cransveld (Gentinnes), D. Damour (Chevilly), M. Jacquet (Chevilly), B. Spitz (Bordeaux).*

Back Row: L-R: *J-M. Krall, (Chevilly), E. Jaouen (Langonnet), C. Bogen (Blotzheim), A. Daniel (rue Lhomond), M. Bochaton (Langonnet), D. Blot (Chevilly), J. Dubois (Langonnet), J. Godin (Chevilly) and G. Chauvin (Allex).*

The General Chapter of Itaici in 1992 said that the vocation of a brother is *"an essential vocation for our mission"*. In 1995, Spiritan brothers were invited to describe the way they live out their vocation in the service of mission today. There were not very many replies: we will quote some of them in this paper, adding others of the same type.

The requests for missionary personnel that come to us each year from the circumscriptions show what a large variety of different openings there are for those who want to join us, so we will add these to the brothers' replies. The whole raises certain reflections and questions at which we will also look.

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***"It can therefore be said that a sense of mission is essential to every Institute, not only those dedicated to the active apostolic life, but also those dedicated to the contemplative life."***

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(Vita Consecrata: No. 72).

## I. BROTHERS - ONE WAY OF BEING A SPIRITAN

### A: Brothers talk about their vocation

#### A gift of oneself...

**T**he spiritan Brother is a baptised person, who is called to give himself...The vocation of brother is different to the diaconate; it is tied to a call to religious life; the work of a Brother is



*"The life of a Brother is within the Congregation even if it is at the service of the local Church"*

Br Stephen Antwi Mensah teaching, Ejisu, Ghana.

*within a Congregation, even if it is at the service of a local Church".*

*"I was thinking about missionary life...I looked around, trying to find what God wanted from me...I finally understood that the Lord was calling me to serve as a religious missionary, to bring the Good News to people by trying to relieve the sufferings of the poor...The life of the Brother is more action than word; it is through his professional competence that he witnesses to Jesus Christ".*

*"A Brother has his own way of living out his religious consecration. Besides fraternal life in community and the life of prayer, his specialisa-*

*tion is important for several reasons: it is a part of the identity of a Brother. It is a chance for self-expression, for putting to use the gifts we have received for the service of the mission. Moreover, through his work, the Brother contributes to the upkeep of his community".*

#### In the service of the mission...

*"The spiritan missionary spirit leads me to live amongst the poor in the bush, doing jobs which unfortunately nobody else wants to do (various health services). It helps me to be aware of various aspects of justice and peace when doing my job, and of a certain ecumenical dimension. I find myself listening to those who welcome me, who share their culture as well as their sufferings in a spirit of complete trust..."*

*"I notice that the further I go, the more my work seems to be moving into the area of the apostolate. I spent many years in charge of a workshop, with a few hours of catechism on the side. Recently, I*



*"One way of being Spiritan"*  
Br Paul Heinz, Germany, repairing a windmill in South Africa.

*am trying to help young boys and girls who are thinking of entering a postulancy or seminary..."*

*"At present I am a nurse specialising in tropical pathology. Being a nursing Brother means, first of all, meeting Jesus in the suffering faces of the sick. It also means being involved in the development of health care: teaching poor people to be no longer the victims of bad hygiene which is a constant threat in their lives, and helping them to look after their own health".*

*"My life as a Brother has led me to serve the mission by listening to people; I often had contacts with adults and children...by catechism and by welcoming them to the parish".*



*"I'm trying to help young boys who are thinking of entering the Seminary"*

Br Paul Ronssin, Director of Foyer Jacques Laval, Valence, France.

### **A completely separate vocation...**

Some Brothers refer to themselves as "*consecrated laymen*" or "*lay Spiritans*". Others insist on the fact that they are "*religious, not laymen!*" Most are perfectly happy to be called "*Brother*": "*I am convinced that my vocation is a special call from God; I am proud to be called a Brother...*"

It is surely a question of emphasis. Those who call themselves "*Brother*" are stressing the fact that they have received a personal vocation to the religious life and that their consecration unites them to all other religious. Those who prefer the term "*layman*" see themselves closer to the baptismal vocation which is shared by all Christians than to that of ordained ministers which would place them in the "*clerical world*".

No doubt all would recognise themselves as "*religious missionaries*" along with all other pro-

fessed Spiritans. Equally, they would see themselves responding to a completely separate vocation with its own special value for the service of the mission.

### **B: Who are they? What are they doing**

#### **A few statistics:**

- \* In October 1997, there were 272 Brothers in the Congregation out of a total of 3,080 members, i.e. a little less than 9%. Of these, 18 are in temporary vows i.e. 5% of the total number of confreres are in temporary vows.
- \* 10% of Brothers are less than 40 years old; 22% between 40 and 60; 25% between 60 and 70; 43% over 70.
- \* Ten Brothers have taken perpetual vows since January 1, 1990.

#### **Young people in formation**

In Francophone Central and West Africa, of those who have just finished their novitiate with the FAC, one Central-African is studying management, a Guinean is specialising in catechetics and audio-visual techniques, and a Cameroonian is training to be a nurse.

In the West African Foundation: a Brother in perpetual vows, who specialised in building, has just received his first appointment; three from Ghana in temporary vows are qualifying as carpenters, while another has just finished his training as a teacher.

In the Nigerian Province, four young confreres are training in woodwork, electricity, mechanics and secretarial work.

In the Indian Ocean Foundation: one Brother has just qualified as a nurse specialising in tropical pathology while another is training in teaching and catechetics.

Elsewhere, other young men are choosing this type of spiritan vocation.

#### **Different types of service**

Brothers have been using their skills for a very long time in many different activities in the areas of construction or material administration, both in mission areas and in Provinces of origin. They

have taken part in the education of young people and in their professional and religious formation, including the formation of young Spiritans. It would be impossible to list the many services, often humble and hidden, that Brothers have provided until today in spiritan communities.

Sometimes they are working for the support of confreres and young people in formation, sometimes for the maintenance of properties, some-

times in administration. Some of these tasks have been shared with confreres who are priests or with lay people.

In recent years, Brothers have taken a more direct part in the apostolic life of communities, in works of education, health, catechetics, the media, rural and agricultural development... In communities, they have taken on the responsibility of Bursar and Superior.

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## Religious Brothers

*"These Religious are called to be brothers of Christ, 'the first born among many brothers'; brothers to one another, in mutual love and working together in the Church in the same service of what is good; brothers to everyone, in their witness to Christ's love for all, especially the lowliest, the neediest; brothers for a greater brotherhood in the Church..."*

*Religious Brothers are an effective reminder to Religious Priests of the fundamental dimension of brotherhood in Christ, to be lived among themselves and with every man and woman". (Vita Consecrata, No. 60).*

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## II. THE WORLD DRAWS UP OUR AGENDA

Each year, the General Council receives a list of priorities from circumscriptions that are looking for additional help along with a brief description of the posts they are trying to fill, either with first appointments or with more experienced confreres.

With a few exceptions, it is not normally stated whether they are looking for priests or brothers. A closer examination of some of the recent requests shows that a good number of them could just as easily be filled by Brothers. Here are some examples:

### Witnessing to the Gospel

In situations of first evangelisation, much of the work consists in giving a living witness to the Good News, making "neighbours" of the most abandoned and neglected groups or individuals, those who are undergoing all kinds of trials. It can take the form of practical initiatives to improve the quality of life in different areas: health, provision of drinking water,



*"The life of a Brother is more action than word"*

Br Joseph Mbah, building the Noviciate, Nigeria.

agricultural development, support for employment schemes etc. This type of request is coming from every direction: Latin America, Africa, Asia.

In certain contexts, first evangelisation can mean a daily religious dialogue that takes place through helping to find solutions to the most worrying human concerns. This is particularly the case in those parts where we are working in significantly or dominantly Moslem societies.

### Working for justice and reconciliation

Many circumscriptions ask for help with developing initiatives to defend the rights of the weakest and those excluded from society: social, ethnic or religious minorities. This is clearly the case, for example, in Pakistan (Marwari), Cameroon (Pygmies), Paraguay and Mexico (Ame-rindians).

Sometimes, this concern for the weakest brings us to minister to immigrants (North America and Europe) or to come to the aid of refugees, particularly in East and West Africa.

### Working with young people

Many requests are seeking help with educational projects, both general and technical, as well as youth movements and chaplaincy work with students. We get such applications particularly from Africa, but also from Europe and North America.

Sometimes it concerns an informal type of education for neglected young people who no longer have any family support. We have such examples in Central Africa and Madagascar.

### Works of formation

It is particularly the young Churches that ask our help for Christian formation for all ages in parishes or basic communities: for example, catechetics, reflections regarding the inculturation of the Gospel, vocations work. Some requests are for training in the use of the media.

Nearly all the new Foundations and many of the young Provinces, are asking for formators for spiritual candidates. As well as the usual aptitudes needed for living in a formation situation, other more specific skills are mentioned: management, agriculture, development.

As well as these specific requests, there are other equally pressing needs which are not normally catered for by first appointments. For example, many requirements are connected with the "internal" life of communities or circumscriptions, for which brothers are sought as well as priests or lay people.

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**In the world of today, these are the tasks, amongst others, that religious should undertake:**

- \* *Preference for the poor,*
  - \* *Care of the sick,*
  - \* *Presence in the world of education and culture,*
  - \* *Presence in the world of social communications,*
  - \* *Be at the service of Christian unity,*
  - \* *Inter-religious dialogue...dialogue of life, dialogue of works.* (Vita Consecr., Nos. 82, 83, 96, 102).
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## III. WHAT IS THE SPIRIT SAYING TO US

The Spirit is the driving force behind all mission. It is he who speaks to people in their hearts, asking them to give their life for the Kingdom and each must give his or her personal response. But it is partly our responsibility to help people who come to us to understand this call and to articulate their reply. This raises several questions for us:

### A: Is our vision of mission wide enough

What does it mean, to "announce the Gospel"? Certainly the specific preaching of the Word of

God is an essential element of any concept of mission. But perhaps we are too circumscribed by the idea of "Gospel" as exclusively concerned with words or a text. Are there not many other kinds of evangelisation? When we practise works of charity in the Spirit of Christ, or work for justice or the integral development of people, are we not also announcing the Good News of the love of God for all these people by making them aware of his respectful and supportive presence?

Mission consists of both a gift and a call to conversion. If we are too obsessed by the idea of

visible results, mission can become something impatient, pressurising people with those requirements that are deemed necessary to hasten the building of the Kingdom; when that is so, we can easily lose sight of the free nature of the gift of God.



*"The Spiritan Missionary Spirit leads me to live amongst the poor".*

Br Maixent Kouka, a Congolese working in Angola, has launched a vast programme in mechanics, tailoring, electronics, farming, carpentry, and gardening for youth aged from 12 to 20 years.

Is our way of living mission sufficiently "disinterested" and respectful of a person's freedom? Do we allow enough time for the Word to germinate? Is our approach patient, tactful, "fraternal"? Are we really aware of this dimension of the Good News and its significance for the people of today?

### **B. Are the calls correctly understood**

Several confreres are asking themselves questions:

*"There are certainly young people today who want to work for mission without becoming priests. One only has to look at the number of 'Coopérants' working with us. The Congregation should welcome these young people and try to make room for the different forms of membership which they are seeking. Perhaps we see ourselves too much in terms of a clerical congregation, and automatically steer those who come to us towards becoming 'spiritan priests'".*

*"From the beginning of our missionary engagement, the vocation of spiritan brother has never been sufficiently appreciated...The dearth of vocations to the priesthood has pushed our vocations work in this direction, leaving aside the call to the vocation of brother..."*

*"Is the Holy Spirit trying to invite some of the laity to take part in the mission of the Church in a new and radical way, inviting us to design new structures to reflect the needs of the age in which we live?"*

Religious Brothers have the opportunity to live close to ordinary people, to the poorest and least important, facing with them the very concrete problems of everyday life, but vocations work has for so long been centered on the ministry of the priest, to the detriment of other kinds of ministry or service.

Lay people want to share our spirituality. Some are asking for a more direct collaboration as associate members.

Looking at the needs of the world today, perhaps we are being asked to break out of the "of certain concepts of what a missionary should be and open our minds to a greater variety of responses to the calls being made upon us".

When a young man asks to become a spiritan Brother as an answer to a missionary vocation, it is our responsibility to offer him a relevant formation:

### **General formation**

*"The more a Brother is trained to the same level as confreres who are priests, the more we will achieve a genuine unity in our religious family...How can he bring the Gospel to the world if he has not received a formation in keeping with the demands of mission today?"*



*"A brother's specialisation is important"*

Br José Lourenço Leitão-Daniel, Central Administration, LIAM, Portugal, who is responsible for the distribution of 30,000 copies of *Accão Missionaria*.

*"Today, a candidate must have reached the standard of secondary school leavers, so as to be able to deal with different problems..."*

### **Professional training**

*"A person who enters the brotherhood should be given the opportunity to study or train in any area of academic discipline or trade for which he has an aptitude. The signs of the time should be studied..."*

*"Brothers should be highly qualified and competent in either the technical or professional field, in order to participate fully in mission life".*

*"The training of a Brother should be pushed as far as possible with the idea of him eventually being an instructor in a particular trade"...*

*"A Brother should be trained more with a view to being an instructor than to simply carry out projects himself".*



*"The spiritan missionary spirit helps me to be aware of various aspects of justice and peace and of a certain ecumenical dimension".*

R-L: Br G. O'Keeffe, Director, Christian Relief and Development Association, 1976-1996, His Holiness, Arch. Paulos, Patriarch of the Ethiopian Orth. Church and Arch. Timotheos, Head of the Orth. Ethiopian Church Development and Inter-Church Aid Department.

### **D. How can we be priests who know how to listen**

As we revise and renew our ideas of the different faces of the spiritan vocation - the Brother more directly involved in evangelisation, the missionary lay person - the spiritan priest should perhaps look again at the way he lives his ministry.

A group of lay associates, while very happy to have shared for a time in the life of a spiritan missionary community, nevertheless expressed

their surprise at the degree of domination that persists in spiritan life, in the relations between priests and lay people, men and women.

To carry out his vocation of bringing together the community, does the priest have to rely on the prestige of his position, or rather on the quality of his simple and generous contribution? Some spiritan priests try to listen respectfully to the initiatives of others; in trusting them like this they give them room to live in their own way and develop their varied gifts.

One spiritan Bis-hop, when he began his ministry, had a vision of himself marching out at the head of his flock. But he admitted that he eventually learnt, not without suffering, that it was sometimes better for him to

be at the rear of the procession, allowing himself to be led by the faithful, where he was better placed to encourage them and help them keep to the right path.

How can we best carry out our mission as priests to watch over the authenticity of the faith of Christians and catechumens? By judging everybody according to uniform and pre-established criteria? Or rather by trying to discern the fruits of the Spirit in their journeyings and their initiatives.

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### **Witnesses to "fraternity" in Christ**

*"The Church entrusts to communities of consecrated life the particular task of spreading the spirituality of communion, first of all in their internal life and then in the ecclesial community and even beyond its boundaries...especially where today's world is torn apart by ethnic hatred or senseless violence...International Institutes especially are called to uphold and to bear witness to the sense of communion between peoples, races and cultures".*

(Vita Consecrata: No. 51).

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Fr. Joseph Lécuyer, our former Superior General, was an expert at Vatican II on the questions of episcopacy, priesthood and diaconate. He always insisted on this point regarding priesthood: through ordination, the priest does not receive a "power" but a "charism", a spiritual gift with which to serve the people of God with the charity of Christ.

As spiritan priests, what sort of results do we expect from our ministry? Do we look for quasi-automatic results which flow from a "sacred power" in a slightly magical way? Or do we think more in terms of the "grain of wheat that falls to the ground", with a fruitfulness that is never possessed in advance? The priest, like any other witness to the Gospel, has to pay the price of fruitfulness: the patient search with others for the truth, death to oneself, and humble service in the image of Christ the servant.

### **E: Do we sufficiently share our skills and responsibilities**

*"I made a deliberate choice to live in community, to share its goods and take part in its plans, not to live a separate life but always to discuss things.*

*I think that mission should no longer be looked on as something personal but rather as the work of a community that is formed for mission. The activities of the various people who make up this community complement each other".*

*"In pastoral situations, confreres should work as teams in accordance with the gifts in the group and not according to a clerical notion of hierarchy".*

A generous pooling of different and complimentary contributions is fruitful both for the announcing of the Gospel and the growth of each individual. Do we take care to ensure that our community life and our sharing of tasks shows sufficient respect for the individual vocation and the particular gifts of each one?

## **Creative Responses**

"Our Rule of Life invites us *"to respond creatively to the needs of evangelisation of our time"* (SRL 2). Such creativity calls for an attentive and precise study of these needs and an openness to the many different ways of replying to them which are complementary to each other.

One confrere, aged 77, comes to this conclusion: *"God goes his own way"*. In the final analysis, he is the one in charge of mission. Our role is to observe carefully and interpret correctly the signs that he gives us, so as to help us remain on the right path.



### **Other References:**

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