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## 2000 Vol. 57: Spiritan Lay Associates

General Council

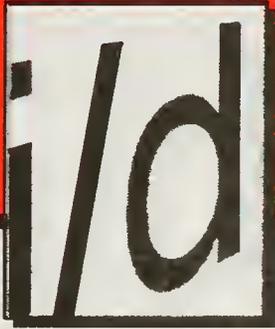
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# INFORMATION DOCUMENTATION

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I/D 57

General Council

March 2000

## SPIRITAN LAY ASSOCIATES

Since the Second Vatican Council, an ever increasing number of lay people have associated themselves with religious life. Through their contacts with various religious Congregations, they have come to share in their mission and their spirituality. In their families and their work-place, they try to live out the ideals of religious life from day to day. These ideals come to them as a breath of fresh air, giving a new meaning to their lives and helping them to deepen their faith and their commitment to the mission of lay people in the Church.

In many of the circumscriptions of our Congregation, lay people have shown the same interest in our mission and spirituality. In their search for a better way to fulfill their own Christian vocation and mission, they have been attracted by the Spiritan charism, especially when they have seen its concrete expression in the lives and example of individual confreres. Some are principally attracted by our spirituality, our sources of inspiration, our community life and prayer; others are inspired by our missionary undertakings. And, of course, some are inspired by both.

Today, the Spiritan family includes a large number of lay Christians who share our life and mission at different levels. Following the guidelines of Maynooth and the degree of their sharing in our spirituality and missionary commitment, we could distinguish various categories:

- Friends of the Spiritans – collaborators in our work, who by their prayers, their sacrifices and their gifts help us to carry out our mission.
- Lay people who are attracted by the spirituality of our founders and who form groups for shared prayer and missionary reflection (*Les Fraternités Spiritaines*). By sharing and

living our spirituality, they also take part in our mission.

- Some lay people, having completed a period of training, commit themselves to a deeper association with the Congregation. As a sign of this commitment, they make a contract with the circumscription which receives them. These are the Spiritan Lay Associates. As such, they undertake to live according to these three ideals: the defense of the weak and the poor in society; a life of community and prayer (the details of which are adapted to each case); a precise commitment within the mission of the Congregation (according to their individual circumstances).

The purpose of this I/D, basing itself on the insights of the Maynooth Chapter, is to invite the whole Spiritan family to reflect on this aspect of the life of the Congregation, to support and strengthen the movement of Lay Spiritan Associates.



*The group of Lay Spiritans at the meeting in Knechtsteden, Germany.*

## Where are they?

After the Second Vatican Council, several Spiritan circumscriptions tried to respond to the appeal it made to missionary Institutes "to use their experience to train and help those who would like to spend some time in missionary work" (Ad Gentes 27). Gradually, groups of Lay Associates began to emerge in our family from those who wanted to share our mission and spirituality.

At present, there are approximately 60 Lay Associates in the Congregation, divided amongst the following circumscriptions:

- 1 in **Australia**;
- 1 in **Belgium**;
- 2 in **Canada**;
- 11 in **England**, including three married couples;
- 3 in **France**, including a married couple;
- 2 in **Germany**, amongst many other lay helpers;
- 3 in **Holland**;
- 1 Brazilian lady in **Puerto Rico** who works in missionary animation;
- 2 in **Spain**;
- 11 in **TransCanada**, including 5 married couples. This Province probably has the longest experience of working with Lay Associates.
- 2 in **USA/East**;
- 17 in **USA/West**, including one married couple, 8 members and 7 candidates in formation.

Some Provinces have had a missionary awareness programme in their country for a long time and lay people have an increasing role in this work. Some put the accent on spirituality (*Fraternités Spiritaines*), others on help and commitment to mission (missionary groups). In an effort to bring the two aspects together, spirituality and mission, most Provinces have formation programmes and are putting a great deal of hope in this lay movement.

## What do they do?

Many are involved in varied works for justice and peace;

others collaborate with us in missionary awareness programmes in local Churches. They help in the training of volunteer missionaries and even, in some cases, of professed Spiritans. They are involved with our mission "ad extra" in Africa, Latin America and Australia.

Since 1995, the Justice and Peace portfolio in England has been in the hands of the Lay Spiritan Associates. In TransCanada, they have been working for a long time with native peoples in religious education, in support of immigrants and in the preparation of missionary volunteers for VICS (Volunteer International Christian Service). In USA East and West, they train missionary volunteers and lay people who want to be associated with us. In Holland and Germany, several groups of Spiritan collaborators are deeply involved with the Congregation and carry out work which would be impossible to maintain without their help – like missionary awareness, presence in schools and support for immigrants and those seeking asylum. In Spain, lay associates participate in welcoming immigrants and raising missionary consciousness.

For the last 15 years, lay representatives of the North American Provinces have been meeting together and they have produced a Guide for Associates. Europe began similar meetings three years ago. The first meeting of associates from the whole Congregation took place in Pittsburg in 1991. Would it not be good to have another such international meeting in the Spiritan Centenary Year?



*Maria Marguerita (Spain) with a group of young people who are working with the poor.*

## What do they say about themselves?

One of the aims of this edition of I/D is to give the Associates a chance to speak. A questionnaire was sent to Associates and we received answers from several individuals and groups. Here are some extracts from their replies:

### a) What attracts us to the Spiritan family

#### ❖ *The Spirit, the breath of our life*

*"I have always been attracted by the name and the presence of the Spirit, the great "Unknown", but so present, necessary and intimate to the life of the Church and of each person"* (M.L. Spain).

*"I was given a book on the writings of Libermann. I became completely absorbed in the writings. It was as if Libermann himself was speaking to me. I identified with his spirituality in his mission to the Blacks. Whatever direction the Spirit may lead, I am indebted to the Spiritans for sharing their spirit with me"* (S. S., USA/W).

#### ❖ *Mission to the poorest*

*"What is "appealing is that Spiritans really are present among the poor and the outcasts. They live out their spirituality. They do not live for themselves"* (Lay Spiritans from Holland).

*"I was struck by the fact that they prefer to help people who live in the worst conditions and have the least opportunities"* (H.G.S. Germany).

#### ❖ *Proximity and simple life-style*

*"What really attracted us to the Spiritans was observing the ones ministering to the African Americans in our parish. There was a genuine concern for the plight of the African American people. They were*

*always available for the people and of course, they were so happy ministering to the poor of which our parish had many. ... These guys were so human and yet there was something about them that made them very special. If these ordinary people could be so committed to living the gospel values, we wanted to know what their secret was so we could do the same"* (J. & P. S., USA/W).

#### ❖ *The possibility of living mission*

*"The mission overseas is also appealing... It helped us to open our views about mission overseas and in Holland. It helped us to look critically at our society, our lives and our contribution to society"* (Lay Spiritans from Holland).



*Professed and Lay Spiritans united in the same struggle for justice and peace: in the human chain at Cologne, calling for the remission of debt for poor countries.*

### b) Our place in mission

#### ❖ *Living mission: in the service of the Kingdom*

*"There are many ministries, but the same Spirit. Through Baptism we are called to be His witnesses to the ends of the earth. Anything that does not require priestly ordination can be carried out by Lay Spiritans"* (S. S., USA West);

*"We think that most of the work could be done by lay associates... It is important to have occasions when we can meet, reflect on our work and lives, broaden our view of being a Christian at this time and on the impact of Christianity on our lives"* (Lay Spiritans from Holland).

### ❖ **Many possibilities**

*"Lay people can work in teaching, in hospitals, in kindergartens, in orphanages, in justice and peace projects, in supporting unions, in centres of missionary awareness. There is also a role for us in the professions as doctors, nurses, agricultural advisors, etc.(M.L.A. Brazil).*

*"...in reading and writing classes for the marginalised, caring for the sick and those who live alone, helping in centres for alcoholics" (M.L. Spain).*

*"The Spiritans were living in very poor conditions and were constantly ill. In response, I myself and other men travelled to PNG to build them a proper house. I have lived there constantly since 1983 and take part in their meetings and planning" (K.C., Australia)*

### ❖ **Mission "ad extra" and missionary awareness**

*"Some of us worked for 4-5 years in Tanzania and Zimbabwe; others visited the missions overseas...We work in the field of mission awareness and support groups of young people who are going to visit a country in the south. We accompany groups of volunteers who have had a mission experience and whose members want to reflect on their experiences and on the impact it has had on their personal lives" (Lay Spiritans from Holland).*

### c) **An added dimension to our lives**

#### ❖ **Being more adult and attentive to others**

*"Contact with Spiritans has helped me to become more mature in my faith, more responsible and attentive to others, beginning with my own family" (M.D. Portugal);*

*"What I do flows from who I am. My collaboration with the Spiritans has helped me to become a better person. I am in the process of becoming all that God created me to be. Through the inspiration and guidance of the Spiritans I am growing daily. My personal, professional and religious relationships have all grown because I have grown" (S. S., USA).*

#### ❖ **Growing in the spiritual life**

*"The regular reading of Libermann's life has made a difference in our faith-life. We are very conscious of our being Lay Spiritans and that our colleagues expect more from us than they would from the 'ordinary lay people' - although we are just ordinary lay people who are Lay Spiritans" ( J. & P. S., USA/W);*

*"The spirituality and the mission of the Spiritans is something dear to my heart. I thank the Congregation for all that it is doing and for all that it has done for me" (A.M. Portugal);*

*"The Spiritans give me space where I can get my breath back and where I can reflect on my life" (B.A. Germany);*

*"The Congregation of the Holy Spirit has become for me, down the years, a place for re-charging my batteries, a place of stock-taking and discernment, a place of listening and sharing. Special times like retreats, shared prayer, discussions with different priests have all helped us to continue on the road that God has mapped out for us, to go further in our commitment without losing sight of the essential. The Spiritan community has given me the strength to go where I had no intention of going" (D.F. France).*



*The Spiritan family, the rainbow, where everybody is welcome.  
Mrs. Sharon Sani, a Lay Associate from USA West.*

### ❖ Living professional life in a different way

*"We can live out our professions with a missionary perspective. For example, as teachers we have opportunities to arrange meetings and experiences for our pupils where they can come face to face with the needs of the poor and acquire a sense of social responsibility" (H.G.S. Germany).*

### d) What we seek from the Congregation

*"The Congregation can help us with living out our particular Christian vocation by continuing to welcome us as part of their community with all the support and love that being a part of a family brings" (Lay Spiritans from England).*

*"The Congregation can help us to attempt to live the "Rule of Life" for they are the ones who called us to be Spiritan by the way they live it. All we ask for is encouragement and support in our attempting to live out the Spiritan mission" (J.& P. S., USA West).*

*"The Congregation could help, in that it wants to ensure a continuity of the Spiritan spirit in its work where it is itself unable to continue. This would help us to look together for the most suitable way for lay people and the members of the Order to work together" (H. G. S., Germany).*

### e) The meaning of a formal commitment

*"In wishing to be associated with the Congregation, we express our desire to collaborate fully with the Spiritan mission and to support its projects... We want to increase our commitment and have close ties with the Spiritan community that is nearest to us" (D.F. France);*

*"By becoming an Associate we feel that we have become more spiritually aware. The feeling of belonging we have is an immense strength in our daily life. The monthly meetings we attend and the special days of reflection are very uplifting and important to us all. There is a very special need to come together as a 'community' to pray, share, discuss and socialise" (Lay Associates from England);*

*"The commitment makes me feel a part of the Congregation and it gives me a concrete way of living my faith in communion with the Spiritans; in sharing their spirituality, I feel an especially deep relationship with the Spirit of the Lord" (M.L. Spain);*

*"I feel there is no need to enshrine our living relationship into a contract. But if there has to be one, it should be a reciprocal commitment which clarifies the most important points" (H.G.S. Germany).*

### A possible way forward

*Based on their experience, several circumscriptions offer the following programme to those who wish to become Spiritan Lay Associates:*

- 1. Some criteria for admission: live a committed Christian life; maintain regular contact with Spiritans; certain limitations of age;*
- 2. Training: a period of Christian and missionary preparation, including a formation in the spirituality of our founders. Several factors must be borne in mind: the duration, the family circumstances of the candidate and his/her availability. The hope is that the candidate will discover and live out this vocation as a concrete way of following Christ, in the context of a deep communion with the Spiritans and other Spiritan Lay Associates;*
- 3. Request for admission: this should be done in writing and, if possible, accompanied by a recommendation from a professed Spiritan or a Spiritan Lay Associate;*
- 4. Admission and acceptance: the candidate is accepted by the Provincial and his Council;*
- 5. Formal commitment: this takes the form of an agreement signed by the candidate and the Congregation. It is initially for three years and is renewable. There is then the possibility of a permanent commitment. By this act, the Lay person declares his/her readiness to accept a concrete commitment in the Congregation.*

## OUR RECENT HISTORY (some important moments)

### 1 Openness to the idea and conformation by our Rule of Life

Collaboration with lay people is part of our Spiritan tradition. The question was raised in our post-conciliar Chapter of 1968-69, in response to the recommendations of Vatican II, under the heading of new forms of membership. This Chapter declared that *"Major Superiors can accept as Associate Members priests and laymen who wish to consecrate themselves to the work of the Congregation by adopting our way of life"* (14b).

Subsequent Chapters (1974 and 1980) encouraged this initiative. For example, the Chapter of 1974 said that non-judicial ties could be made with the Congregation by individuals who would like to live our life of prayer, get to know our spirituality, help our missionary apostolate or even share our community life for a period of time. If they so wish, these persons could ask for a more precise commitment in the Congregation (63).

The Rule of Life took things further. Article 24.3 allowed for further experimentation or development of existing systems: *"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. In every case, there is a written agreement"* (cf. also SRL 135.1 and 247.1.19).

### 2 The Chapter of Itaici (1992): Official welcome of lay people

For the first time, two Lay Associates were invited to take part in a General Chapter. Summing up the ways in which lay people wish to be associated with us, the Chapter said: *"In the past twenty years, many lay people have shown a special interest in the Congregation and in different ways have worked and prayed alongside us. Some seek an on-going loose association, others a closer connection for a limited period, others again a more permanent commitment to the life and works of the Congregation"* (Itaici 18).

Itaici saw Lay Associates as a gift of God and an enrichment of our Spiritan family; it is a sign of the value of our spirituality and a challenge that we accept with hope and confidence. Even if we are not sure at the moment where this path will lead us, we nevertheless see it as a sign of the times and an invitation from the Holy Spirit to move forward, without too much nostalgia for the past.

### 3 The Chapter of Maynooth (1998): Lay Spiritans in the Spiritan Family

This Chapter saw the presence and the witness of three lay people as a great blessing; they had a considerable influence on the reflections and decisions taken and helped the capitulants to realise that sharing our mission and our spirituality are essential parts of our vocation.

The Chapter encouraged Lay Associates *"to form their own structures according to the needs of each particular group"* (4.22). The Congregation was asked to give *"a special welcome to those who feel attracted to our spirituality and work; we will help them to discern their personal vocation in the Church"* (5.6). *"A professed Spiritan will be appointed to accompany the Lay Associates in each circumscription where they exist"* (4.23).



*Lay Spiritans play their part in mission; catechetics, teaching, building. Kevin Conway building a church tower in Papua.*

## WHAT OF THE FUTURE?

### 1. Charisms are meant to be shared

Charisms are gifts from God for the *whole* Church. The apostolic exhortation on Consecrated Life points out that religious have realised that their charism can be shared with the laity. (Vita Consacrata 54).

The way a charism is lived is not something fixed once and for all. We live in a changing world where new needs and challenges are constantly arising. So there are different ways of living the Spiritan spirituality and vocation. Is it not a sign of the times that a growing number of lay people want to be associated with our Congregation? They certainly do not arrive empty-handed; they bring us their experience, their talents and their know-how. They also produce new insights and take dynamic inspiration from the charism of our founders, thereby making this sharing of our inheritance into a new source of enrichment for ourselves.

This bringing together of our spiritual life and a different set of experiences gives the Congregation a new lease of life. Professed and lay people together can discover a new enthusiasm that is imaginative and creative and thus produce relevant answers to the questions and needs of society today.

### 2. The role of lay people in evangelisation

For centuries, spirituality and the study of theology was the preserve of clerics and religious. Mission and evangelisation were also seen as reserved to religious and clerical institutes. But Vatican II insisted that there is a fundamental equality in the Church: all baptised people receive a missionary vocation from Christ in line with their particular circumstances. Christians have to help each other to live this vocation.

If we define evangelisation as the building up of the Kingdom of God, lay people can bring the Good News into the various secular activities in which they are engaged just as much as priests and religious. Is it not true that the signs of the times are telling missionary institutes that they must be open to a greater participation from the laity? And is this just a passing phenomenon or will it be a permanent feature of missionary congregations in the future? There is no denying that very many congregations today are seeking ways of integrating lay people into their religious families.

### 3. Mission in a spirit of collaboration

*"The Chapter experiences underlined how collaboration is an essential dimension of contemporary mission. Such is the complexity of mission today that we cannot effectively accomplish it in isolation. Working with others strengthens us in our commitment and also benefits those with whom we collaborate in the pursuit of common objectives"* (Maynooth 5).



*There are married couples and individuals in the Lay Associates.  
John and Mary Notaro, a married couple from USA West.*

In our day, a growing number of lay people are expressing the desire to share in mission and adopt the spirituality of different religious orders as associates. We do not know where this will lead us, but we are convinced that the Holy Spirit is behind this movement. It is sure to bring about changes in the way we look at the laity and religious life. The Maynooth Chapter urged us to be open to this collaboration, while remaining faithful to our charism and preserving our identity.

### 4. This sharing is an opportunity for spiritual and missionary renewal

*"We see that lay people and professed Spiritans are in a way being pushed towards each other. On the one hand, the Congregation seeks to enhance its identity, its charisms, its spirituality, its tradition as a useful resource for the future of the world, for the setting up of the Kingdom of God... On the other hand, many people are looking to religious traditions to seek meaning for their lives. Many are looking for companions who will work with them*

*with a view to building a better world for all” (Frans Wijnen. Maynooth 1.18).*

This collaboration is also a grace for us because it leads us to change our way of living mission and ministry. It prompts us to look again at the way we carry out our mission as Spiritan priests – never as an exercise of power but always as a service, eradicating any trace of authoritarianism and clericalism from our relationships. It pushes us to be as close as possible to

people – their culture, the concrete realities of their lives – and to share our faith with them. Finally, it forces us to a deeper and more genuine fidelity to our Rule of Life:

- A more radical commitment to the poor;
- A greater intimacy with God and a return to our sources of inspiration;
- A better quality of relationships and community life.



*Professed and non-professed Spiritans have already travelled far together. But there is still a long journey ahead in the service of the Kingdom and the Church. Have courage, the Spirit of God is leading us.*

*“We are searching for a community that is united heart and soul – a community of professed Spiritans and Lay Associates with a spirit of openness, simplicity and kindness towards one another, working together to build the Kingdom of the God of love, justice and peace”  
( Lay Spiritan Guide from TransCanada and USA West ).*