

1-1-2003

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General Council

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Repository Citation

General Council. (2003). 2003 Vol. 60 The Spiritan Year -- A Message to All Confreres for the Spiritan Year. Retrieved from <https://dsc.duq.edu/id/64>

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THE SPIRITAN YEAR

A MESSAGE TO ALL CONFREERES FOR THE SPIRITAN YEAR



WITH THE POWER OF THE SPIRIT

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

We are about to embark on the celebration of key moments in the history of our Spiritan family. This special Year, decided upon by the Chapter of Maynooth, presents us with a unique opportunity for spiritual renewal. We attempt to rediscover the inspiration of our beginnings by responding creatively to the challenges of our own day. The meaning of this sort of re-foundation is encapsulated in the logo above. It refers us back to the boat of the Maynooth document, inviting us to get on board for a new voyage. The sail is filled with the breath of the Spirit. We are not leaving for a cruise among our archives; if we look back to the past, it is to prepare ourselves, with the power of the Spirit, to set out into the deep for a long journey ahead.

A storm-bound ship

“One day, Jesus got into a boat with his disciples and said to them, ‘Let us cross over to the other side of the lake’. So they put out; and as they sailed along, he fell asleep. Then a heavy squall struck the lake; they began to ship water and were in grave danger. They came and roused him: ‘Master, Master, we are sinking!’ they cried. He awoke and rebuked the turbulent waters. The storm subsided and there was calm. ‘Where is your faith?’, he asked” (Luke 8:22-25).

Jesus leads his disciples to the other side of the lake, which is regarded as a pagan area. In all three Synoptics, attention is focused on Jesus: he is the first to enter the boat and his

disciples follow him (Mt. 8:18-25); he invites them to launch out into the deep. When the storm is raging while he sleeps, they cry out “*Master, Master*”, with the trust in his authority that the Greek word used implies. He shows his power and calm is restored.

The narration is a reflection of the period after the paschal events, when Jesus has passed through suffering and death to enter into the fullness of life. For Luke in the Acts, Jesus continues his presence and action through his disciples. With him, by the power of his Spirit, they too can pass through trials and become his witnesses in the worst of situations. In the same way, he will be with Paul and the other missionaries of the early days. Is he also with us? Are we ready for a new and difficult journey? Are we able to call on him with all our heart? Where is *our* faith?

A search for the truth

Now is the time to seek out the truth, beyond the routine and superficiality of our daily lives, and to live it to the full. In the wake of the EGC at Pittsburgh, we in the General Council have shared together our assessments of the current state of the Congregation and the way in which we could make use of the Spiritan Year as an occasion for renewal. We have tried to dig into the everyday life of the Congregation to see what inspires it. Below are some of the impressions that we have gained from our visits:

In a world of quickening change, cultural diversity, complexity and specialisation, we feel at times that we are losing our footing.



But it is a situation that gives us the chance to exercise freedom because it calls for personal choices. We must get rid of all self-delusion: it is only when we really know ourselves, with all our strengths and weaknesses, that we can integrate our Spiritan vision into the reality of our lives. So much of our life has been cerebral: the old style of formation tended to put the accent on grand ideas, to the neglect of the reality of the way we are, with all our needs and wounds. Some confreres have left the Congregation; we have been affected, to an extent, by the question of paedophilia. This brings home to us the reality of our vulnerability.

We have to learn to make our personal choices with integrity while at the same time being supported by a community and the Congregation. We cannot become free all alone; we need the help of others. But there is often a lack of personal communication between us and we sometimes know little about the confreres with whom we live. If we are to have a common spirituality which touches our lives and our work, we need to interact at a deeper level.

We could ask questions about the role of faith in our lives; does it have incisive repercussions, for example, in the way that some confreres deal with difficult situations? How far does prayer help them to react in the right way? Each of us has to fall back on our well-trying sources: personal and community prayer, Bible reading and celebration of the Eucharist in the light of what we are living, the example of other witnesses. We must let the Lord speak directly to our hearts. A practical spirituality is vital, especially for those who are deeply disappointed and depressed by situations of war and opposition. We should look for ways of reviving our confidence, like displaying texts from our founders in our communities. Others have been inspired by elements of the missionary vision of Libermann. In seeking the truth, we must pay much attention to our life of faith.

Where is our Faith?

Our Congregation made its *aggiornamento* after Vatican II by successive Chapters and the writing of our new Rule of Life. But the challenge of the contemporary world is an on-going thing. As we try to help those who are forgotten, the world today gives the impression of a boat that is out of control, driven by the anonymous force of the law of the global market – the law of the strongest. The media tell us of some societies that are suffering from stress and the excesses of consumption and others that are wracked by misery, chaos and fear. Recent events have spread the suffering to the whole world. We feel so helpless when we try to act against or draw attention to the forces of the globalised world. It can happen that we begin to have doubts.

The difficulty can also come from ourselves. Perhaps our *aggiornamento* has remained superficial and we have ended up by simply re-discovering our old weaknesses instead of producing something new. We can feel there is something essential lacking in our attempts to live a genuine Spiritan life. In the milieu in which most of us live, we act as if everything depends on us, as if we are perfectly capable of finding the right course of action by ourselves. The Christian tradition is often seen as an inherited package of convictions and values where each can draw out what is needed and make his own menu. We are all, to a greater or lesser extent, marked by such an attitude.

But at the heart of the original tradition, Jesus is there, after the paschal events, as a real and living presence in the faith of the disciples, in their relations with each other, in the witness that they give of him before men and women. He is the one who propels them towards an adventure beyond those horizons they have known so far. The power of his Spirit is real and creative in their lives. We, in our turn, must live with confidence in God's unconditional love in our own present experience. Beyond our own strength and competence, there is something that we could



never have given to ourselves: the living presence of Jesus amongst us. Are we able to call on him with all our heart like the apostles?

This thought leads us to identify a source that is the origin of everything. Faced with the huge variety of cultures and religions, we have to discern, more than we did in the past, what is the real origin of things and how it relates to us. We must not allow the face of Jesus to remain indistinct and blurred. Trust in him is lived at the level of the heart, at where we make our decisions and in the actions and attitudes that come from them. The presence of the Lord does not just come to us through what happened in the past: he reveals that he is still with us in the lives of those who testify to him. He continues to inspire us by the charism of our founders, but he also shows himself through the witness of the confreres with whom we live and work.

The Testimony of our Founders

We discover the strength of the Spirit of Christ in the lived experience of those who have made our history up to the present day. Libermann and Poullart are examples of total trust in God and openness to the Holy Spirit. Poullart let himself be led by unexpected events as he moved forward humbly in the presence of God. He wrote in *Reflections on the Truth of Religion*,

“Let others say what they please about me; let them approve of me or make fun of me, treat me as a visionary, a hypocrite or a righteous man! All this henceforth must leave me indifferent. He has given me life only that I may use it to serve him faithfully...God alone loves me sincerely and wants what is good for me. If I can please him, I shall be exceedingly happy. If I displease him, I am the most wretched man in the world. I have won everything if I live in grace. Losing it, I lose everything”.

For Libermann, God is present throughout our history; even if things seem to roll on without him, he is always there with his

merciful goodness. He wrote to the community at Cap des Palmes (15.01.1844):

“Don’t be frightened by the difficulties you meet; never let them discourage you. You have not come in your own name; you are not the ones who are doing the work: it is he who sent you. You are not alone; he is always with you if you remain faithful. So don’t be fainthearted or weak in your faith. An apostle of Jesus Christ can never be put off by obstacles. Put up with them with patience and in peace, but always persevere with your plans when they are truly for the glory of God and the salvation of souls. Wait a bit when you meet difficulties that you can’t overcome for the moment; just wait confidently for God’s moment to arrive. It will come if you don’t lose faith” (N.D. 6: p.3-8).

The power of the Spirit of Christ amongst us today

Although the Congregation is faced with numerous difficulties, as well as its own limitations and weaknesses, many confreres are giving an example of calm strength, perseverance, new initiatives despite obstacles and disappointments, a simple presence amongst the people, of fraternal life amongst different cultures, of a sense of responsibility and a deep concern for spiritual renewal. Their witness is strong and it renews our own faith when we meet them in the course of our visits. These tangible fruits of the Spirit are convincing evidence of the enduring presence of the Master throughout the storm.

We also see the presence of the Holy Spirit beyond the frontiers of the Church before the Gospel is ever preached. Just as Jesus is recognised in the Scriptures and the breaking of Bread, so the Spirit speaks to us through other peoples. He appears to us in the guise of the poorest of people and touches us deeply by their humility and trust.

The Spiritan Year is an opportunity to experience the unswerving love of God in our



lives and to build a greater confidence in him. It is the time to learn once more how to celebrate each day the newness of life that Christ gives us through his Holy Spirit. Our joy is not just that of the feasts that come and go: it springs from a new-found interior freedom, from friendship and forgiveness given and received.

During this year, the decisive question of Jesus will be put to us again: *“Do you also want to leave?”*. Will we give the same reply as Peter, *“Lord, to whom shall we go? Your words are words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are God’s Holy One”* (Jn. 6: 67-69). Are we genuine disciples who are going to be his witnesses? How can we communicate this faith to all those who are joining our Congregation? How can we deepen our own sufficiently to face up to the challenges of our day?

Some practical suggestions for all Spiritans

- We invite every Spiritan to set aside “a desert time” during the first weeks of the Spiritan Year – at least one day – to look at his or her life in the presence of God, to give thanks, to ask pardon, to renew confidence, to ask for needs and look to the future.
- After that, confreres could come together in community (if it is small) or in small groups for the larger communities in order to exchange your reflections of faith with each other. The sharing could then be extended to the whole circumscription on the occasion of other meetings or celebrations.
- Such a sharing could begin by considering our founders: how have they influenced my life, in one way or another?

- These two stages seem to be a good way to proceed towards the indispensable renewal of the whole of the Congregation; the Spiritan Year lasts for 16 months so it is good to spread the programme over several steps.
- We should not allow the process to lose itself in minor considerations; it should focus on our basic experience and the big challenges that we are meeting at this time.

The Prayer for the Spiritan Year

Holy Spirit, you are calling us to seize this favourable time to renew ourselves in our Spiritan life as we celebrate the memory of 300 years since our foundation and the charism passed on to us by our predecessors:

May your gifts of strength and wisdom help us to deepen our service to the poor;

May your gifts of humility and devotion help us to live our religious life to the full;

May your gifts of intelligence and discernment help us to recognise what you are calling us to do at this time; And by the fire of your love, enkindle in us that missionary enthusiasm which filled your Apostles from the day of Pentecost. AMEN

- In our meditation, let us not forget the essentials of our vocation: How can we live in solidarity with the poor, in our personal context as well as on the larger scale? How can we bring about our spiritual renewal? How can we promote greater friendship and fraternal sharing in the life of our Congregation which is ever more international and inter-cultural?

We must thank God for our Congregation and for all that it has accomplished, for all our confreres

and what they are and have been to us. We share all the joys and hopes, the worries and anxieties of the men and women of our time. Our vocation is not to withdraw from this world but to love it and to live out God’s loving plan in it under the breath of his Spirit. But to do this, we must also obey his call to draw aside at times to be alone with our Master.

May the Lord be with each of you and give you the power of his Spirit.

On behalf of the General Council,

P. Schouver

Pierre Schouver

