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ONCE UPON A TIME

A Familiar Face

I once heard a homily which started off something like this: *God forbid that there will ever again be a persecution of Christians as there was in the early centuries. But just suppose there is, the question I want to ask you is: Will there be enough evidence to convict you?* Here we are into the question of how a person is identifiable as a Christian. It is no easy question, but not any more difficult than the question I have been asked: How is a person identifiable as a Spiritan? or to use Fr. Holmes' words: How do we live our Spiritan spirituality so as to give *our* special witness in today's world?

One of the things I like to do, when I get a chance, is to go with someone to see a good film. I also enjoy the cup of coffee afterwards while the world of the film is still fresh in our minds. I have found that, no matter how strong an impression the film has made, the recalling of the film is made difficult by the fact that we forget the names. The rerun in our minds does not lack animation but suffers from anonymity. *No, not that fellow, the other one, the one who finally married... the blonde.* I'll never forget what's-his-name. We of course are quite happy with our account, we know what we're talking about. We *know* the story. The quiet couple at the next table with their lemon tea do not know the story. They feel unlucky that they have landed within earshot of two vociferous amnesiaics. If, in our defense, we claim that knowing the story would prevent any mistake in categorisation, we must also admit that it matters a lot how the story is told.

We are working round to the Spiritan story, but first I would like to stay with the cinema for a moment or two. Is there anything worse than arriving in the middle of the film? All sorts of things have happened already. All the clues from the beginning that we need to make sense of what is flashing before our eyes are missing. It's bewildering and frustrating. No one likes to come in in the middle of the story. And

yet in the Spiritan story we have no choice. We can't come in anywhere else but in the middle. Luckily the beginning of the story is not irretrievably past. It is still possible to go back and gather some clues that may keep us from tearing our hair out as we give our attention to what is happening at present.

Father Charles Besnard did his studies for the priesthood at the Holy Ghost Seminary. He joined the society founded by Louis Grignion de Montfort and became the third Superior General of the Society of Mary. This is how he described *the young clerics gathered in the Holy Ghost Seminary*:

Trained in all the functions of the sacred ministry and in all the priestly virtues through the careful attention and still more through the example of their wise directors, they possess a high degree of detachment, zeal and obedience. They devote themselves to the service and the needs of the Church, without any desire other than to serve her and be useful to her.

One sees that under the guidance of their immediate superiors and at the first sign of their will – but always in dependence on the bishops – they constitute a kind of military detachment of auxiliary troops, ready to go anywhere where there is work to be done for the salvation of souls. They consecrate themselves preferably to missionary activity both foreign and domestic, offering to go and stay in the poorest and most abandoned places for which it is especially difficult to find candidates. Whether it is a question of being exiled into the remote countryside or buried in the caverns of a hospital, teaching in a college, lecturing in a seminary, directing a poor community, travelling to the farthest corners of the kingdom (of France) or staying there in an austere post, whether it is a question even of crossing the seas and going to the very ends of the earth to gain a soul for Christ – their motto is: Behold, we are ready to do Thy will: Ecce ego, mitte me (Is. 6.8)¹

From this account, the Spiritans of the 18th century were remarkable for their versatility and their availability.

A hundred years later, after the death of Libermann, Fr. Schwindenhammer asked Fr. Lannurien to put in writing what

¹ Charles Besnard, extract from his «Life of St. Louis Grignion de Montfort» in *The Spiritual Writings of Father Claude Francis Poullart des Places, founder of The Congregation of the Holy Ghost*, Ed. Henry J. Koren, C.S.Sp. (Pittsburgh, Duquesne University Press, 1959), pp. 287, 289.

he understood Libermann to have had in mind for the Congregation. Lannurien had been Libermann's secretary. The impression of someone who had enjoyed such close contact with Libermann would be worth having. Here is what Lannurien had to say about the spirit of the Congregation.

(Note: When Lannurien refers to *the founder*, he is referring to Libermann)

The spirit of the founder and of his Congregation.

The spirit which should animate a congregation should obviously be that of its founder, who received in a high degree the gift of this spirit in order to pass it on to his spiritual family. Now the spirit of the founder should be looked for, delved for and discovered firstly in the special grace that the founder radiated, secondly in his mission, in the dedication and aim of his work and thirdly in the teaching that he habitually gave. If we delve into these different sources, I think we will soon see that the spirit of our Congregation ought to be:

1. **a spirit of interior and exterior simplicity**, finding external expression in a simple lifestyle and a poverty which corresponds to what is average. . .
2. **an intense interior spirit**: I think that in this regard we should aim at a high perfection. . . This interior spirit, according to the rules, the teaching, the writings and the final words of Fr. Libermann consists above all of two things: 1) a life of union with Our Lord, and a life of faith; 2) a complete sacrifice: his last words; God in all.
3. **a tender, beyond-the-ordinary devotion to Mary**, to her heart of love and trust; our name and dedication make this clear; and I believe that this ought to be the supernatural drawing power by which we attract candidates to our Society.

I do not mention love or fraternal union even though they were part of his final message. My reason: because they are essential in a very high degree to the very existence of every Congregation, especially an apostolic one; as well, every founder has made special mention of them on his deathbed; they are the thermometer which measures the strength and vitality of every religious Society.²

² Extract from a letter from Fr. Lannurien to Fr. Schwindenhammer, July 1853. Original in the archives of the Séminaire Français, Rome.

Embodying the Story

We have come in in the middle of the story but we can't take our place in the audience, because we are part of the story. In our own time we must embody the Spiritan story, write a chapter of it with our lives. How can we do this authentically may be another way of phrasing the question we are addressing. What is the modern version of a genuine Spiritan?

There are two aspects to this question, which can be talked about separately but which are intertwined in fact. These I will call *being someone* and *doing something*. *Being someone* evokes things personal, quality of life, holiness: *doing something* evokes task, achievement, mission. As you listen to this, you will probably recognise that one of these aspects looms larger than the other in your own personal way of thinking. You are more person oriented than task oriented or vice versa. Simply be aware of this, especially when discussion takes place. What is important is that both aspects be given a fair hearing. A true Spiritan must be holy, but there is no holiness that is closed to the plight of the world. A true Spiritan must be engaged in the work of the Congregation, but geographical location is, in itself, no guarantee of authenticity.

We all know there has been a great deal of discussion about the meaning of holiness, about the meaning of mission. The mere mention of the phrase *the work of the Congregation* is probably enough to send shivers down the spine of Chapter veterans. My intention is not to reopen the discussion. It is to remind ourselves that there are two aspects to the question of the Spiritan life and that we should recognise our own personal leaning in favour of one of them. We may be called to adjust it. In reality there are all sorts of genuine Spiritans, and living with one of them is better than a semester of studying the matter.

In this vein, let us take a very brief look at the interplay of *being someone* and *doing something* in the life of Libermann. Towards the end of the 1837's his task was Novice Master of the Eudists. His own lifeblood and his message to the novices was a life of communion with Our Lord. He sought and preached a greater intimacy with God. Holiness was at the heart of his concern. He was in a sheltered situation and holiness took the shape of a personal project of perfection. At this stage the plight of the world began to intrude upon Liber-

mann's considerations. Frederick Le Vavas seur and some seminarians from Saint-Sulpice were trying to organise the Work for the Blacks – a missionary venture to help the liberated slaves in parts of Africa and the West Indies. A new task beckoned. It was an occasion of conversion for Libermann. Only because he was someone of a certain calibre was he able to hear the cry of the abandoned in the first place. If Libermann had not achieved a certain stance before God, a stance that was shaped by the experience of illness, rejection and failure, if he had not through prayer and renunciation become attuned to the wavelength of the Lord, then he probably would not have become involved in the Work for the Blacks. Because he had become a poor man, who trusted in the Lord, who looked to the Lord for everything, he was able to hear the cry of other poor men and women and feel compelled to do something to help them. *Being someone* resulted in *doing something*.

When Libermann left the Eudist novitiate, the new task brought with it a whole new scene. Now the demands of *doing something* began to have an effect on *being someone*. This is clearly seen in a letter of 1846. Le Vavas seur has become discouraged in Reunion and is thinking of joining the Jesuits. In writing to him, Libermann reveals some of his own feelings about the enterprise they have set in motion:

(For) I am burdened with the duties of superiorship, I bear all the solicitude and responsibility for the entreprise; I bear the brunt of all the most violent attacks, the afflictions and trials which Divine Providence deigns to send; I suffer in sympathy with all the worries that accompany the missionary undertakings; I have worries about the novitiate, the studies, the various houses of missionaries, the arrangement of affairs, the rules that have to be perfected, and the solid foundation that has to be assured for our Society. . .

(Yet) you know how ardently and constantly my heart longs for retreat and solitude. I greatly abhor the world and sometimes feel an almost insuperable repugnance towards it, but I am obliged to keep contact with it. I find it very difficult to converse with men, but it is my duty to do it at every turn. I must be occupied with giving direction to others from morning till night, in spite of the mortal repugnance I feel for it. I constantly have to give instructions, and the least subject of meditation that I am called to prepare for others upsets me

*three hours before I have to propose it. Everything within me seems to go counter to my remaining in my present situation. Every attraction of nature and of grace points in a different direction. There is not one fibre in my body nor one tendency in my soul that does not prompt me to seek solitude. In spite of all that, however, I would consider it actually a crime to entertain such a thought in my mind. God binds me and chains me to that task, which is crucifying, yet most dear to my heart.*³

The demands of *doing something* were shaping the *being someone*.

To live our Spiritan spirituality we must come close to Our Lord and try to share his compassionate look towards men. We must make our own his special love for the poor and abandoned and have the courage to associate with them and help them. Des Places and Libermann have shown the way. Our fidelity to them will not confine us. We are part of a story of apostolic creativity grounded in conversion.

Visions and Dreams

Young men see visions, old men dream dreams. As we reflect on *the relevance (or otherwise) of our vocation to the youth of our time*, we must first of all accept that the visions and dreams will be very different. Our effort then is not to try to modify them until they agree but to try to get the old and the young to bring their dreams and visions to bear on the present reality, which corresponds to neither.

The difference of perspective between the old and the young is at its sharpest in the area of vocation work, though the difficulties attached to this work arise from many other factors as well. As I reflect on my responsibility to encourage vocations, there are many things I can do. There is one thing I must do. I must live my Spiritan vocation fully and joyfully. The relevance of the Spiritan vocation to Spiritans precedes the question of its relevance to the youth of our time.

In considering the relevance of our vocation to ourselves, we should not forget that we are called to community. We

³ Francis Libermann, *Letter to Frederick Le Vavasour, 28 January 1846 in The Spiritual Letters of the Venerable Francis Libermann*, vol. 5, *Letters to Clergy and Religious* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1966), pp. 32, 33.

should not expect our life to make sense by itself. It is woven into the fabric of the Spiritan Community. Only in this context can it make sense. We often joke about Le Vavaskeur. His tempestuous character often gave rise to outbursts that appear comical from a distance. Without him, Libermann would not have become involved in missionary work. Libermann doesn't make sense without him.

At crucial points in its development, the Spiritan story has been marked by the contribution of the young. Des Places was 24 and still a seminarian when he founded the Congregation. His successor, Fr. Garnier, was 23 when he assumed the leadership. Then came Fr. Bouic at the age of 26. The nucleus of the Society of the Holy Heart of Mary was a group of seminarians. The first bishops were young men: Mgr. Truffet was 35, Mgr. Kobès 28. Fr. Schwindenhammer was 34 when he became Superior General. We have been left a legacy of openness to youth.

This openness to young people must be for their own sake. Like Libermann, Spiritans must listen sympathetically to the aspirations of the young. The risk they take is one they share with Libermann - conversion and the disruption of their life.

Listening attentively to the young is not very comforting. Their aspirations often seem to be at odds with Spiritan formation programmes, notably on the question of permanence of commitment. In the province of Trans-Canada, the volunteer lay missionaries outnumber the professed seminarians by about 14 to 1. What should we think of this? Maybe one thing we should remember is that the most spectacular renewal of the Congregation to date came from outside the Congregation and that it had to overcome considerable resistance. Have we considered the fusion in this light?

I don't know how the Spiritan story will turn out, but the Spiritans have so far shown an uncanny ability to survive.