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WHAT WE DO AND WHAT WE ARE

*Conference given at 30 Rue Lhomond on 2 Feb. 1979
by Fr. François Nicolas, C.S.Sp.*

It is important for us, and for the young men we invite to join us, to realize clearly what unites us and mobilizes us as Spiritans, what is the source of our dynamism and our hope. A Congregation continues to live and grow if it expresses a 'charism' at the service of the Church and of men, resulting at the same time from God's intention for us and His gift, and from a harmony with what each of us is in the depths of his heart, naturally and spiritually.

How much of God's project for us does our Spiritan community of today reflect? To discern this Spiritan charism, inherited from our Founders and in particular from Libermann, we should consider *what we do in common* and *what we are in common* (the Spiritan 'agere' and 'esse').

A – WHAT WE DO IN COMMON

We devote ourselves to the aim of the Congregation, as laid down by our two Founders: the apostolate to the poor and most abandoned, those for whom it is difficult to find workers. We can ask ourselves how we react to this aim. As with many things today, it is submitted to scrutiny and even suspicion:

– There is a tendency today to avoid speaking of *the poor and most abandoned*, because there is something paternalistic and contemptuous about the expression. Speaking of others as the poor implies that they have not got what we have, that we are in some way superior to them (in possessions, culture, spiritual experience etc.). In fact, experience shows us every day that the poor are often not what we imagine them to

be. And those who are referred to as poor feel insulted by the expression.

– One may say too that the aim is rather vague. All the Congregations founded in the 19th century had more or less the same aim. One could interpret the word *poor* to mean children or young people or old people. One could even say that today it is the intellectuals or the rich who are the most abandoned in the Church. This point of view is seriously put forward by some American Spiritans.

– Another discussion arises with regard to the mode of presence required by the apostolate to the poorest. Even taking the poorest in the most literal sense to mean those who have the least money, those who live in poverty, one can ask what is the best way to serve them. Is it necessarily directly, by living among them?

An American confrere put the matter in the following terms:

The expression 'apostolate to the poor and most abandoned people' can be easily misunderstood. The misunderstanding turns on the idea that this apostolate should be directed exclusively to the poor. This view is in contradiction with the facts. As the Good News of Redemption is not concerned exclusively with life after death but with that life already begun in time, so too apostolate implies social betterment or even the removal of all earthly sufferings by the practice of charity. Today the most efficacious means of improving the lot of the poor is to be found most often in scientific research. Whoever discovers a cure for leprosy, for example, does more for the lepers than anything Fr. Damien could achieve. So, someone who can arouse people to an awareness of the social dimension of man or who can formulate or articulate a theology of liberation can exercise a most efficacious apostolate in favour of the poor. . . . Briefly, indirect apostolate, through science in its broadest sense, has a place in a Congregation dedicated to the service of the poor.¹

We see, therefore, that service of the poor leads us to fight on all fronts, but will this not lead us to disperse our forces and even lose our identity?

¹ Cf. Spiritan Papers, n. 8, p. 65.

While reflecting on these questions, the Spiritan Studies Group, at its meeting in Rome last December, tried to define more clearly the mode of action that should characterize us:

1) APOSTOLATE to the poorest

The Spiritan Studies Group wrote as follows: *According to the mind of the Founders, the Congregation is at the service of the Church, and its task is therefore primarily one of evangelization; it is an apostolic Congregation. This does not, however, exclude our undertaking tasks that are not directly evangelical: development, social and economic liberation, 'conscientization', education, etc... All these are part of our mission in so far as they help evangelization and are subordinate to it.*

A poor interpretation of this text could make it seem that we go in for development, education etc. only in order to convert people, but I would prefer to give the word 'evangelization' a wide enough meaning to avoid such an interpretation.

Our proper activity consists in meeting men and cultures *on the level of religious experience* (Which means, for us, the experience of Jesus Christ dead and risen). Libermann gives great importance to the missionary's experience of faith, to his religious life, to his *conversion* (which refers us already to his 'being' as a Spiritan, not merely his activity).

This conversion comprises two fundamental attitudes:

- Humility before those whom we meet: we should take the time to listen to them and discover their customs and culture (Provisional Rule, Ch. 4, Art. 2).

- An uprooting from ourselves of all that would be an obstacle to our meeting God and our brothers.

In other words, can we meet our brothers at the deepest level, that of religious experience, if we are not ourselves men of religious experience, and if we are incapable of meeting our brothers on the more basic levels of justice, human *trust* etc.

Libermann insists a great deal on the trust that people should have in us, not so that we can tame them or 'have' them, but as a *sign* of what we live. The indirect apostolate is indispensable, therefore, in so far as it makes us credible. The man who is capable of listening to his brothers, at various levels of their life, and even acting with them to bring about their human liberation (Populorum Progressio, 21), is worthy of trust: he has certainly had a true spiritual experience. They

can therefore enter on a dialogue with him at this level: «Tell me what you do to change yourself and change the world, tell me how you convert yourself, and I will tell you who you are».

This applies on the personal level and also, especially today, on the collective level – whence the importance of so-called indirect evangelization, as a witness to our conversion.

In the text from the American Spiritan quoted above, one can detect a 'paternalistic' conception of indirect evangelization, which would seem to go against what we have just said. Indirect service would seem to imply at times that we think and act in the place of others and on their behalf. But Libermann, if he asks us to convert ourselves, does not ask us to think for others. For instance, he writes to Fr. Le Berre in Gabon, in 1847:²

In general, we must love all men, whatever their feelings about religious principles or about ourselves. We must also allow them full liberty to think and act as they wish. . . Nobody in the world has ever been able, in the slightest way, to force either the conscience or the will or the mind of his fellowmen.

2) Apostolate to the POOREST

In the Church's general mission of evangelization, in which all Catholics by virtue of their baptism should participate, the Congregation's specific role is to evangelize the poorest and most abandoned, those who even within the Church are the most abandoned, and *for whom the Church has difficulty in finding workers*³

Here too I must interpret the word *poor* in such a way as to avoid the objections mentioned above. The poor are those who are outside our usual sphere of interest, those whom society, and even the Church, condemns to be isolated, marginalized, forgotten. The situation of these reflects very much on ourselves, as it is we who make them poor, because we forget them.

² Jollivet, p. 332. Cf. also N.D. IX, pp. 248-249 and Spiritan Papers, n. 3, p. 40.

³ Provisional Rule, ch. I, n. 3.

One may note that historically the Congregation began by going either to former slaves or to peoples on the coast of Africa who were marginalized with respect to both African tradition and the West: The situation of the former slaves was a reflection on the Church as well as on the West.

But Libermann also had in mind *extraparochial* work in Europe, aimed at those whom the parishes had forgotten.⁴ His idea was similar to that later taken up in Catholic Action and in apostolate to specific groups (which presupposes that those we call poor have their own type of riches and are poor only because of their rejection and abandonment by other classes and groups).

I would like to open houses, he wrote, in some of our main seaports: Bordeaux, Toulon, Marseille, Brest etc. . . There we would be able to test the full scope of our work, not mixing different categories of people, but taking care of each category on its own, with means adapted to each.

In Libermann's mind, this type of specialized apostolate is demanded by a respectful approach to those whom we call the poor. To take everybody together is the surest way to forget and leave aside those who have something original to say.

This does not mean that Spiritans should not take an interest in the salvation of *all* those that they meet, including the rich and powerful. But the Congregation was not founded for these; it was founded to go beyond the usual boundaries, towards those who are forgotten because they are different.

3) The BLACKS

Historically, in Libermann's time, the Blacks appeared to be our poorest brothers, in the sense we have given. We could say that this remains true today: the Third World is the one most condemned to poverty, to isolation, to not having a say in things. It is kept at a distance from the riches of learning, possessions, power. We have merely to consider where the centres of decision-making are today in the economic, political and even spiritual fields.

And, among the people of the Third World, we could say that migrants, especially clandestine ones, are the greatest victims of a type of society that seems made to exclude some.

⁴ Letter to Dom Salier, 30 May 1851, N.D. XIII, pp. 170-171.

However, today as yesterday, Libermann invites us not to confine ourselves to our traditional apostolate, urgent though it may be. He asks us to undertake at least some commitments which are a sign of our openness to all the poor, all the outsiders: *I would like to found a work*, he wrote to M. Germainville in 1847, *which would extend to all the poorer classes.*⁵

4) A METHOD suited to our type of apostolate

Libermann warns us that the apostolate we have chosen is as difficult as it is fascinating. To work for the forgotten and the marginalized is to condemn ourselves also to be forgotten and marginalized (as missionaries home on leave in France have often discovered!). *The contempt with which these people are treated often extends in part to those who work for them, and the latter too are treated as lower-class people.*⁶

If we share in this way the lot of the poor, it means that our methods of apostolate and of contact with them will often also share in this poverty. The poor and ourselves are like Davids before the Goliaths of the modern world. And yet, in our apostolate and missionary animation, we know that where two or three are gathered together in the name of Christ, God's strength is present in the midst of them: it is the strength of the weak.

B – WHAT WE ARE IN COMMON: THE SPIRITAN MODE OF BEING

As we have seen, to define the poor as those who have not got what we have is a mistake. They are rather those who are abandoned and rejected because they are *different*. Someone who is different usually evokes fear in us, and we reject him because he confronts us with our own fear. The old and the sick confront us with our fear of losing our life; people of other cultures, customs and races confront us with our fear of having to change our own accepted set of values.

⁵ Lettre to M. Germainville, 27 May 1847, N.D. IX, p. 147.

⁶ Règle Provisoire, p. 24.

The poor are above all those who are different, and rejected because they are different. They awake in us feelings of aversion, racism, fear and panic. The Spiritan is the man who, because of his faith and even because of his human temperament, is capable of overcoming this fear. He even *likes* to meet those who are different. To have the Spiritan charism or vocation means perhaps to have a natural attraction or curiosity or urge to leave home and go into exile – the charism of being always ready to leave, of being attached only to one's suitcase (and this is to be understood not merely in a geographic sense).

To be a Spiritan, then, means liking to meet people that one does not usually meet. It is a permanent state of mind. And one may note that it is possible to be a missionary in the heart of Africa and still not like to meet others or cross the boundaries of one's own culture. Libermann spent his life crossing boundaries: between Judaism and Christianity, between health and illness, from the Seminary to the Eudist religious life, from the Eudist novitiate to the missionary adventure, from his foundation of the Congregation of the Immaculate Heart of Mary to the fusion with the Holy Ghost Congregation, from Africa to ever new fields of apostolate. In moving towards new fields of apostolate, he knew that he would never be able to do everything, but his heart would include everything.

It is up to each of us to examine how we have lived our vocation – at the beginning and now. Doesn't the uneasiness in some of us spring from the fact that, at some point, our spirit of adventure deserted us.

Some have wished to make of the Spiritan a man who stays in his milieu, who puts down roots, who surrounds himself with walls. That is why we can greet with joy the proposals of the Generalate or Provincial Teams. To speak to Spiritans today of China or of Migrants is to set off once more on an Exodus. Our means are weak, certainly, but, as in the time of Libermann, we need signs to remind us that we have to overcome our fear and set off to meet others.

There is in this a whole spirituality which we could share with those who have to be uprooted and meet others: migrants, exiles, those working abroad, even tourists. In the concrete conditions of our encounters with others, we should try to rediscover in faith how we should live in poverty, open

our hearts to love without boundaries, and live our obedience in the spirit of Abraham. This type of spirituality must be based on faith, for, on a purely natural level, it could lead to people becoming adventurers, dabblers and eccentrics (as has in fact happened in some cases).

In all his writings Libermann has given us advice which will help us to become both missionary and contemplative: meeting those who are different from us is a preparation for meeting God, the One who is totally different from us. And already the transcendent God of Judaism has made Himself more accessible to us in Christ, whom we meet as a Man.