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## PERMANENT VOCATION AND EXISTENCE «FOREVER» OF THE CONGREGATION?

It was a pleasant surprise for me to receive the kind invitation of the Province of Canada to come and celebrate the tricentennial of our venerated Founder together with you. Needless to say, I was happy to accept it at once. There is good reason to have a special celebration in Canada, for this is the country in which the Congregation found the missionary vocation which for the past two centuries has dominated our history. As a matter of fact, it was the marvelous work done by the priests of Holy Ghost Seminary in Canada during the eighteenth century which gave the Abbot of Isle-Dieu, Chaplain General of the Colonies, the idea of asking the authorities to entrust missions to the care of the Congregation. Moreover, it was to Quebec in Canada also that one of the seminarians, who had been educated by Father Poullart des Places in person and had been one of his assistants as «repetitor», came in his later years to work and end his days under Bishop de Pontbriand. His name was René Allenou de la ville d'Angevin, the founder of the Daughters of the Holy Spirit. Thus the bonds uniting Canada with the Congregation go back to its very origin and to its historical vocation.

There is an issue of great importance for today's Spiritans which deserves to be considered among us on the occasion of this tricentennial. Do we have an enduring vocation in the midst of «the People of God» and can such a vocation guarantee our existence «forever» or, to use the words of Father Thomas, the first biographer of our Founder, «until the end of time»? Before attempting to answer this double question, let us say something about the driving force or «soul» of the Congregation and its vocation according to our Founder and according to the Venerable Francis Libermann.

For our venerated Founder, the «soul» of his followers must consist in faithfulness to the Holy Spirit, so as to become wholly filled with «the fire of divine love». They offer themselves to this Spirit under the protection of the Blessed Virgin,

who herself was enflamed by this fire and became the first human being to believe in Jesus with all her heart. Filled with this divine love, the Spiritains naturally tend to extend the reign of the Holy Spirit and are «ready to go anywhere, devoting themselves preferably to the work of the missions either abroad or at home». Whether it be a matter of comforting the sick in hospitals, being the pastor of the poor in the isolated countryside, or teaching in a seminary or college, they say: «Here I am; send me.»

As far as Libermann is concerned, the core of his spiritual message may be said to consist in the joyful and total surrender to the Holy Spirit (for which Libermann uses the untranslatable term «abandon»). You must follow, he says, «the Spirit of Jesus, the Holy Spirit, who wishes to be alone the beginning and the end of all your desires and all your actions». And the preferred apostolate of his disciples should be among the most poor and most abandoned people.

Some congregations are called to fulfill a temporary task in the Church. Once this task has been accomplished (or rendered impossible), such a congregation no longer has any reason for continued existence and therefore should fade away. There are others which are destined for permanence because their task will never be finished. They should survive indefinitely. The former, however, may survive the end of their original destiny and the latter may perish. I am not referring here to the always possible death of a congregation as the result of external persecution, but to a death that is a consequence of the disappearance of its purpose, which renders its existence superfluous. A congregation whose purpose has disappeared may survive by modifying its original purpose, as has happened to an Italian congregation which was founded for the purpose of preaching to the bandits infesting the rural areas of that country. A congregation with a permanent purpose may disappear because it has lost its soul, its driving force, *its will to live*. Let us rather say, its vocation.

When the expression «loss of vocation» is used, two things must be carefully distinguished: the appeal that comes from God, and man's response to that appeal. God, I think, will never fail, but man's response can. Even though God's call is «forever», in order not to perish, it needs our ceaselessly renewed response throughout the ages in every human generation. Now, the new generation may be «of good will», but it

cannot respond to the Spiritan vocation unless that vocation be lived in a way which discloses its evangelical attraction for our time and for the contemporary situation. Let us say rather «the contemporary situations», for the different parts of the world and even the various elements which compose a single nation are not necessarily on the same level. At any rate, everywhere and at all times Spiritain life must present itself as being evangelically meaningful. It must have meaning, that is, be a sign that can be understood with ease by people of good will; and it must provide orientation, indicate the direction to be travelled by the People of God on their way. Our past, no matter how glorious it may be, does not provide the needed attraction all by itself – no more than the «glorious» Middle Ages of the Church attract people today. A glorious past can even become a shelter in which one hides and tries to escape from having to face today's reality.

Nevertheless, even if we Spiritains do everything we can to make our vocation become a living evangelical reality in each one of us, no one can guarantee that our congregation will not become extinct in any particular nation or even on an entire continent. The Church herself has no such guarantee of permanence in its branches. Father Werner's book *ORBIS TERRARUM CATHOLICUS* contains three sad pages: they list the 900 local Churches or dioceses which existed in the 4th and 5th centuries in Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco, all of which have disappeared since then. Similarly, according to some authors, there are 100,000 tombs of anchorites in the deserts around the Red Sea; they remain the silent witnesses of Churches and of a religious life which flourished there at one time and which have vanished since then. It is not impossible for such things to happen again in other parts of the world. Now, what can happen to local Churches can befall also local religious congregations. The disappearance of some provinces, however, even the disappearance of many, does not necessarily entail the extinction of the Congregation itself.

Undoubtedly, to the extent that such things can be foreseen, our congregation, like others, will experience a further diminution of numbers in the countries of the First World. But there are also the Second World and the Third World. The center of the Church is moving toward the southern hemisphere, to Latin America, Africa and parts of Asia. About 150 years ago, the Blessed Anne Javouhey spoke prophetically in

one of her letters. The year was 1830, a short time after the French government had closed Holy Ghost Seminary and the Congregation was practically reduced again to two men: Father Bertout, who was approaching his eighties, and 44 year old Father Fourdinier. Blessed Anne wrote then that the Seminary (and the Congregation) had been dissolved, but added, it «can re-establish itself abroad, in the abandoned regions of the colonies; they will be true apostles there». And Poland shows that religion can survive and even flourish in the Second World. Perhaps it is toward these two worlds that we ought to direct our efforts even more than we have done until now.

Finally, there is no reason to be too pessimistic with respect to all the countries which hitherto have been our traditional sources of vocations. I know one small monastery which continues to receive each year about ten candidates eager to lead an evangelical life. Sadly enough, I must add that nearly all of these young men who have entered there have also left disenchanted, saying: «We do not see here the spirit of the Gospel, fraternal love, solidarity with the poor, or enthusiastic prayer arising from hearts afire with God». There are still young people of good will who search but fail to find what they are looking for. Such people could join us if we retain or recover the will to live an authentically Spiritan life of total evangelical availability, attentive to the Holy Spirit, as he reveals himself in the concrete and ever-changing situation of life.

Let us finish with a quotation taken from a letter which Fr Le Vavas seur wrote to Fr Schwindenhammer at Libermann's request: «It is not enough (for the Congregation) to *do* and *die*; we must *do* and *stay alive forever*, to keep doing again and forever» (quoted by A. Le Roy, *Le T.R.P. Frédéric Le Vavas seur*, Paris, 1930, p. 205 f.).

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