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# The Place of the Congregation in the Church

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## THE PLACE OF THE CONGREGATION IN THE CHURCH

We can expect of the Rules and Constitutions that they describe the place of the Congregation in the Church. It is for the Church to discern and to authenticate the religious charism "in wisely regulating the practice of the evangelical counsels, in authentically approving the rule proposed to it in such a way that a mission recognized as that of the Congregation is conferred on it, that a commitment to found new Churches is fostered in it, and that specific duties and mandates are entrusted to it" (cf *Mutuae Relationes* 8). The Church is, however, a spiritual and a sociological reality; it exists in time and space; it is subject to cycles of growth and decay, of birth, life and death, and the same is true of a religious group like the Congregation of the Holy Ghost. In the 280 years of its history it has changed enormously; existentially speaking, it has changed its nature and its purpose several times during this period. The world writes the agenda: this was one of the slogans of the Chapter of 1980. The Congregation has changed, as the Church has changed and as the world has changed: inevitably, will it or no, it adapts itself to changing circumstances; it changes, sometimes by the wisdom of farsighted superiors, and sometimes for reasons outside its control: it bows to the will of God manifested in the *fait accompli*.

### HISTORY

In the eighteenth century the Community and Seminary of the Holy Ghost was a small crypto-religious society, devoted to the work of training seminarians and with a special devotion to poverty and obedience. Its spirituality was partly inspired by the exercises of St. Ignatius and by writers like Lallemant and De Caussade. Its Rules and Constitutions had affinities with the Summarium of the Constitutions of St. Ignatius.

The French Revolution was a great disaster for the Congregation. When the government restored its property and allowed the Holy Ghost Seminary to reopen, its purpose was no longer to train poor clerics, but to supply priests for parochial work in the French colonies. The changes made in the Rules and Constitutions by Fourdinier and Leguay point to a loss of the sense of a common life in poverty. The Community of the Holy Ghost was in decline during the first half of the nineteenth century, and it was the fusion with Libermann's Society of the Holy Heart that saved it.

Libermann was very conscious of his founder's charism; he wrote the Provisional Rule before the Congregation was founded, to give it its spirit, while intending to revise it afterwards in the light of experience. In the Provisional Rule it is clear that he visualized the Congregation as being "strictly missionary": only the minimum of personnel was to be kept at home in Europe. Ten years' experience taught him the need to have a strong home base, and he rewrote the first chapter of the Rule to allow for this. He saw that one of the weaknesses of the Holy Ghost Congregation in the first half of the century was that it was nothing more than a seminary. Thus the first chapter of the Règlements of 1849 allowed for works in Europe, provided they did not seriously damage the thrust of the Congregation to "distant lands".

After the death of Libermann, Schwindenhammer continued a policy of bulding up the home base. The form of work he most favoured was the seminary-college. After his death the Congregation became more heavily involved in works at home. Some of these proved financially disastrous, until Mgr Le Roy led a revolt which changed the direction of the Congregation towards a much greater missionary involvement. With Mgr Le Roy began the golden age of Spiritan missionary work. The Congress of Berlin (1885) had begun the scramble for Africa, and everywhere missionary societies were springing up to win Africa for Christ and for the various colonial empires of Europe. The tide was rising, and the Congregation grew bigger and bigger, became international, until in the aftermath of the second world war colonialism came to an end. The Congregation, significantly, reached its biggest numbers in 1962 (5000) as one after another the African colonies were gaining their independence of their former colonial masters.

Since 1962 the Congregation has been in steady numerical decline for causes which affect all other Western-based religious Institutes, and not only missionary Institutes.

The last three General Chapters — 1968-69, 1974 and 1980 — chronicle efforts of the Congregation to take account of the great changes which are taking place in the Church and in the world and in the Congregation, and to discern what is the will of God for the Congregation in the years to come. In retrospect, the Chapter of 1968-69 was not as forward-looking as its members believed it to be. Its texts on first evangelization are more a description of the work of the previous eighty years than an inspired prophecy of the future, and its policy of decentralization under the guise of subsidiarity has not produced anything of lasting value. Nor did the Chapter of 1968-69 foresee the vigorous growth of the Congregation in countries which were then regarded as at the receiving end of mission; the new foundations were not represented at the Chapter. No one foresaw that in 1984 the Southern Hemisphere would be the growth area in the Congregation. Today we are living in a new world, a new Church and a new Congregation, or at least in a Congregation which is striving towards renewal and which needs new structures to help it to do this. We are at a moment in our history as important as the Fusion. The rest of this essay is an effort to describe this new Church and the changes of structure which the Congregation must make if it is to take its place in it. What is the place of the Congregation in the Church of 2000?

#### A COPERNICAN REVOLUTION

In very recent years the Church's consciousness of itself has been revolutionized. It has become aware of the existence of cultures other than that of the European culture within which it has lived almost since its foundation. The Church has become aware that it lives in cultures other than that of Europe; it no longer takes it for granted that the European culture in a Christian culture, or that Christianity cannot be incarnated in cultures very different from that of Europe.

The process began perhaps with the realization of some missionaries that the Kingdom of China had a culture as valid as that of European culture. The Congregation of Propaganda

condemned the Chinese rites, but it always retained a bad conscience about the matter. However, it was not until 1926, after thousands of Chinese priests and lived and died in subjection to European bishops, that the first Chinese bishops were ordained. In 1939 there were only two African bishops. The growth of new sciences like social anthropology and cultural anthropology helped the Church to change its consciousness, as did the ending of European colonialism, in the decades after the second European war. When the second Vatican Council opened, the bishops of Europe and of the European diaspora found themselves surrounded by hundreds of African and Asiatic bishops. To some extent these changes were, for the time being, merely cosmetic, and some third-world bishops allowed themselves to be used as mouth-pieces for European theologians. Successive Synods of Bishops in Rome have since made it clear that the second Vatican council was the last of the European Councils. If the Rhine flowed into the Tiber in the years 1962-65, in the next Vatican council there will be mighty contributions from the Amazon, the Niger and the Ganges. Europe is becoming peripheral to the church, even if the central administration of the Church will always remain in Rome.

#### UNIVERSAL CHURCH AND PARTICULAR CHURCHES

Vatican II saw the Church as a communion of particular Churches making up the universal Church. The universal Church and the particular Churches are not two separate and distinct realities: the Church is everywhere, universal and particular, catholic and local. In the heart of each particular Church the universal Church is present and in each Church the bishop is the steward of the grace of the supreme priesthood, and his mission is to see to it that the faith professed in it is the faith of the universal Church, and to celebrate the eucharist. By faith and eucharist the particular Churches are united with each other and with the particular Church which holds the preeminence: the Church of Peter. The one holy catholic and apostolic Church "constituted and organized in the world as a society subsists in the Catholic Church, which is governed by the successor of Peter" (LG 8).

FROM ROMAN MISSION TO MISSION  
AS THE COMMUNION OF CHURCHES

While it was always theologically accepted that diocesan bishops, as successors of the apostles, had a missionary responsibility, in fact missionary work was considered to be the special responsibility of the Holy See. This was true as far back as the time of the evangelization of the Celtic, Germanic and Slav peoples of Europe. Patrick, Augustine, Boniface, Cyril and Methodius were all legates of the Roman Pontiff. The missionaries were almost without exception religious: Celtic monks; Benedictines; from the 13th century, Franciscans and Dominicans; later still, Capuchins, Jesuits and other groups. In those days there were no "specifically missionary congregations": it was sufficient to be a religious to be a missionary.

The vision of Vatican II of the Church as a communion in faith and eucharist presided over by the Church of Rome brought with it a drastic change in its understanding of missionary activity. For a thousand years mission had been seen as from Christian Europe to the rest of the world, and as the special responsibility of the Papacy and the religious institutes. But though the Council repeated the words of Leo XIII, that "on the successor of Peter was imposed in a special way the great duty of spreading the Christian name", it added that "the task of proclaiming the gospel everywhere on earth devolves on the body of pastors, to all of whom in common Christ gave his command" (LG 23). The bishops of the particular Churches now became the major partners in mission, and the religious institutes had to take a lower place. The erection of the indigenous hierarchies in "mission" territories formerly entrusted to various missionary congregations in many cases preceded the decrees of Vatican II and perhaps helped to form them. In future, mission was to be the work of the communion of Churches, young and old, and within a decade or two many of the new Churches were sending out missionaries to sister Churches. Mission became exchange between Churches.

FROM "THE MISSIONS"  
TO "MISSIONARY SITUATIONS"

Another factor changed the Church's consciousness of its missionary duty. The rapid decline in religious practice in the Western Church in the years following the Council, the fall in religious and priestly vocations, together with the growing strength and consequent missionary outreach of the so-called young Churches, has thrown the geographical concept of mission into confusion. There are large groups of unevangelized in the old Christendom. In the context of "the young Churches" Ad Gentes makes a point which is applicable also to the older Churches, that, since the particular Churches are bound to mirror the universal church, "let them realize that they have been sent to those living in the same territory with them who do not believe in Christ" (AG 20). There is a growing consciousness in the Church that mission cannot be defined merely in geographical terms and that there are missionary situations in every local Church.

THE CULTURAL DIVERSITY  
OF THE PARTICULAR CHURCHES

The Church's consciousness of itself as a world Church is helped by a growing perception of cultural diversity; we are beginning to realize that local Churches live in different socio-cultural and linguistic milieus and that each local Church must incarnate itself in the local culture. Here, however, we must beware of phrases like "Christian culture" or "non-Christian culture". Cultures are not fit subjects for baptism, they do not have souls to be saved. The Spirit is present in all that is good in a culture, but sin is present in it also. The day that Christianity becomes really indigenized in a culture is the day when people who wish to follow Christ must flee to the desert. The particular Church, if it is to remain faithful to the gospel, must challenge the sinfulness of the cultures and not allow the culture to be distorted by it. The baptism of slaves does not legitimize the slave traffic.

For centuries European culture has, in the mind of its possessors, been seen as identical with Christianity, and often a missionary thinks he is challenging another culture in the name of the gospel when in fact he is imposing the customs of the tribe he belongs to on another tribe which he sees as inferior. Even today the Western missionary at times seems to be more a missionary of Western life-style and Western habits of thought than a messenger of the gospel. As Western cultural influence declines, Westerners will be more and more subject to severe cultural shock by phenomena such as the Iranian revolution. The worst form of oppression is cultural oppression. By and large, a cultural revolution still has to come in the African Church and when it comes the European missionary will no longer feel at home.

In the measure that one Church differs from the other in its special socio-cultural milieu, there should be differences in liturgy and Church discipline, in theological and catechetical orientations and in the methods of the apostolate. At this level there is all the richness of diversity but also many possibilities of misunderstanding. As the Church becomes more culturally diverse, a certain strain will be put on its concrete and visible unity, which, if fragile, is not less precious and indispensable. Unity requires diversity, and diversity puts a strain on unity.

#### UNITY AND DIVERSITY IN THE CONGREGATION OF THE HOLY GHOST

The first internationality to be introduced into the Congregation of the Holy Ghost was the foundation of national provinces in the leading colonial countries of Europe. The Congregation has now become international and inter-racial in a way that could not have been foreseen by Mgr Le Roy. It has taken root not only in European countries and in the countries of the European diaspora like Canada and the United States, but also in South America and in Africa. Unlike other missionary congregations, the Congregation of the Holy Ghost took a decision to decentralize formation at a provincial level, since it was foreseen that each province would work in the colonies of its mother-country. In the past this organization was seen as favourable to the colonial organization of the great colonial

powers. Today such an organization is outmoded and singularly unfitted to meet the challenge of a Church and a world of great cultural diversity.

The Church, in its new-found consciousness of cultural diversity, asks religious "to accept the duty of necessary adaptation . . . Furthermore they should form candidates in such a way that these can really live according to their own local culture" (*Mutuae Relationes* 18). "The differences of cultural situations affect the particular life-style and duties of religious and exact difficult adaptations, especially on the part of institutes dedicated to apostolic activity on an international level" (*ibid* 17). For a Congregation such as ours, not only international but inter-racial as well, and with the special purpose of transcultural mission, the difficulties are much greater. Not only must our candidates be formed "in such a way that they can really live according to their own culture" (*Mutuae Relationes* 18), but they must also be formed to live in cultures not their own, to learn to respect them and, within the measure of the possible, to learn to understand them.

How can our Rules and Constitutions meet such a challenge? In some of the big provinces national formation is still in possession by force of inertia. It is easier to leave things be than to make a difficult change. The smaller provinces are obliged to use the facilities of the larger provinces, or to join in national consortia with other religious or missionary groups. In Africa the Province of Nigeria and the East African foundation are large enough to have each its own system of formation. The question to be decided is whether such formation fits students to live in the new era of mission. Does it not perpetuate ethnocentricity, which militates against universality and forces the smaller provinces to accept a master-client relationship with the big provinces? Has the time not come to devise a coherent system of international and inter-racial formation under the direction of an International Formation Secretariat?

In retrospect, it is clear that French, German, Italian, Portuguese, Irish and American missionaries founded Churches after the model of the Churches which gave them birth. The process of indigenization of these Churches is only now beginning, with the decline of western missionary influence. Should the new provinces and foundations continue in the old framework of provincial formation and found Nigerian and

Tanzanian Churches wherever they go, or is the Congregation young enough and daring enough and resourceful enough to institute a system of formation which will be, among other things, a controlled experiment in living with and accepting and understanding the inevitable tensions of international and inter-racial living? During the first Timmermans administration, two short experiments in international formation took place, one in Aranda, Spain, and the other in Gentinnes, Belgium. The first was short, too short to allow tensions to manifest themselves. The second was longer, and before it ended tensions were beginning to appear. As anyone who has lived in an international community can tell you, French ways are not Irish ways, and Tanzanian ways are not Nigerian ways, and Americans are not Europeans. In the days of colonial masters and subject races, it was possible for a missionary to impose his own culture on the Church he helped to found; it is possible no longer. The missionary profession, if one may call it so, is much more difficult now than it was in colonial days. Today a missionary must become Greek with the Greeks in real earnest, and not ask the Greeks to wear our uniforms, sing our songs, dance to our tunes and accept our culture. The missionary today must accept the habits, law and culture of the host country; he must suffer a real kenosis: it is a special calling that requires a special formation and a special grace from God. If a student cannot survive international formation, he may not have a vocation to be a missionary in transcultural situations.

#### ARE WE A "STRICTLY MISSIONARY SOCIETY"?

A more radical question may still be asked. In the document of the 1968-1969 Chapter the Congregation was defined as a missionary congregation for the first time in the history of its Rules and Constitutions (cf CDD 1). Hostie and other writers have remarked on the growth of "missionary societies" in the second part of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century. There is an undoubted relationship between these foundations and the growth of colonial expansion during the same period. Our own Congregation did not become "strictly missionary" until the Napoleonic period,

and then by imperial decree. In the history of the religious life are not "strictly missionary societies" recent and passing phenomena? How does a missionary society differ from another religious order which does not use the word "missionary" in its title? It is surely not in the amount of missionary work which is undertaken in countries foreign to the countries of birth of its members. No missionary Congregation has ever had as many missionaries on the field as the Jesuits. Compared to the missionary work of the Capuchins, the Jesuits, the Dominicans and the Salesians, the missionary work of the "strictly missionary societies" is small. What then is the difference between the Spiritans and, say, the Jesuits or the Capuchins? One important difference is that Spiritans feel guilty if they work in their home province whereas a Capuchin feels in his place whether he is working in Pakistan or in Pittsburgh.

There must be few Spiritans who are unaware of the many hundreds of their confreres who have been obliged to return from transcultural missionary situations and for whom the Congregation has no place within its own structures. For the most part these Spiritans find work for themselves where they can (cf CDD 15). The Congregation requires a radical reconsideration of its position within the Church. It requires a formulation of its missionary purpose which does not make a large number of its members second class citizens. Transcultural missionaries are like commandos: they need special training and their period of service in transcultural situations may be limited. Nowadays deportation orders or refusals to renew re-entry permits are no longer exceptional. The Congregation requires a strong home base in the countries of origin of its members. It should not regard the "home province" as merely a place for recruitment, training and retirement of its members. Transcultural missionary work has become so specialized, so demanding, that it is not to be expected that a Spiritan will spend the whole of his working life abroad. We must move from the "strictly missionary" stance of the Provisional Rule to the more mature and experienced statement of the work of the Congregation to be found in Libermann's Règlements of 1849. Here it can be noted that the first chapter of CDD, on the Specific End of the Congregation, is based on the Provisional Rule and that the wider purpose of the Congregation described in Libermann's Règlements was a closely-

kept secret in 1968-69. The "missionary society" model is outmoded and a relic of colonialism. If the Congregation is to survive it must move from a pretense to a situation which reflects the truth.

#### WE ARE MISSIONARIES BECAUSE WE ARE RELIGIOUS

As we have seen, there were religious missionaries long before the first "missionary society" was founded. The vast majority of missionaries have been religious because the religious life is missionary by its very nature. A contemplative community is missionary by its centripetal force: it attracts people to itself. An active religious community is centrifugal: it goes out to people. Paul VI said in *Evangelii Nuntiandi* that, "thanks to their consecration, religious are eminently willing and free to leave everything and to go to proclaim the gospel even to the ends of the earth" (69). *Mutuae Relationes* speaks of the "missionary call inherent in the religious vocation" (18).

#### AN INTERNATIONAL APOSTOLIC INSTITUTE REQUIRES CENTRALIZED STRUCTURES OF AUTHORITY

An international religious institute which has a mission from the Church needs structures functional enough to fulfil its mission. If the contemplative life and the recitation of the divine office in choir is the special task of the institute the structure which will best favour this work may be that of autonomous monasteries united in a loose federation. If, however, the institute is devoted to apostolic works, and especially if transcultural mission and the foundation of new Churches are part of its specific work, it needs an organization which favours apostolic mobility and disponibility. Just as the universal Church needs a coordination centre for its missionary work, so also an international missionary institute. In this respect it is important not to see the principle of subsidiarity as merely a norm of decentralization. The principle of subsidiarity preserves to each level of authority its proper competency. Such elements as interdependence, co-responsibility, mutual bonds and communion are part of its meaning. Unfortu-

nately this was not sufficiently adverted to by the capitulants of 1968-69. In the name of subsidiarity the Congregation was turned into a confederation of almost independent provinces, and the Generalate lost its power of coordination. The movement back to centralization began in the Chapter of 1974.

#### ANIMATION AS A METHOD OF GOVERNMENT

The capitulants of 1974 sought to strengthen unity. That Chapter introduced new structures to bring about this unity, notably the Enlarged Council and various regional meetings of superiors. It gave the General Council the special office of animation, and asked the Superior General and the General Council to visit every circumscription once in the six years of its mandate. But is animation a suitable model of government for an international missionary congregation? As studies of the Union of Superiors General have confirmed, the animation model of government is suitable only for monastic confederations. It is the function of the Abbot General of a monastic congregation to renew the monasteries under his care in the Rule and spirituality of the founder. Government in the strict sense belongs to the local abbot and his council. But if animation is the principal function of the Superior General and the General Council of an apostolic congregation, then the institute is not a unified apostolic institute, but a confederation of independent monasteries. Animation as a model for government of a Congregation like ours reminds me of a doughnut: it has a big hole in the middle where the government ought to be. The Chapter of 1980 did return some powers to the Generalate, notably the right to make first appointments. But until the Superior General can freely dispose of personnel throughout the Congregation the unity of the Congregation and its continued existence in the Church is in doubt.

#### MODE OF APPOINTMENT OF MAJOR SUPERIORS

The mode of appointment of major superiors has been the subject of much debate during the last three General Chapters and throughout the Congregation. Since 1980 each circumscription has a choice of two modes; the first allows direct

election by a Chapter and the second allows for a choice by the Superior General of the one of three or five who head the list in a first vote. Since the results of the first vote must be published, it would be a brave man who would accept appointment as major superior if his name was not at least a close second in the vote.

#### CONCLUSION

What will be the place of the Congregation in the Church of 2000? It will be the place its members choose for themselves intentionally or by default. If in some ways it retains outmoded structures, it is also in tune with the Church today, as its adaptation to changing circumstances shows. At the moment its median age is very high, but time will solve this defect. It still carries works which have almost outlived their usefulness, but time will solve these problems too. The will of God is often most clearly manifested in the crunch of the *fait accompli*. In the year 2000 the place of the Congregation in the Church will be that of an international religious missionary congregation, smaller but younger and more vigorous than the Congregation today. The year 2000 is only sixteen years away. The Chapter of 1986 must define the place of an international and inter-racial apostolic institute, which by virtue of its indigenization in many particular Churches of different cultures is eminently fitted to be an instrument of mission in the universal church, a mission which is one of communion and exchange between Churches. Of our Congregation should be said what Diognetus said of the early Christians: "They pass their lives in whatever township, Greek or foreign, each man's lot has determined; and conform to local ordinary usage in their clothing, diet and other habits . . . Nevertheless, though they are resident at home in their own countries, their behaviour there is more like transients; they take their full part as citizens, but they also submit to anything and everything as though they were aliens. For them, any foreign country is a motherland, and any motherland is a foreign country" (Office of Readings, Fifth Week of Easter).

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