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## The Constitutions and Diversity of Cultures

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## THE CONSTITUTIONS AND DIVERSITY OF CULTURES

As members of a missionary Congregation we are directly concerned by the fact of cultural diversity, not only because we are at the service of different cultures but also because our Congregation is becoming more and more heterogeneous. We live in an intercultural and transcultural situation<sup>1</sup>. Although Libermann did not know or use the word "culture", he anticipated the ideas of modern anthropology about the missionary's attitude towards other cultures. He understood evangelization as aiming at the formation of a Christian community that would be self-sufficient; therefore it should be rooted in the local mentality, customs and culture rather than in that of the missionary's home country.

Rid yourselves of Europe, its customs and mentality. Become Negroes with the Negroes, and you will judge them as they ought to be judged. Become Negroes with the Negroes, to train them as they should be trained, not in the European fashion but retaining what is proper to them. Adapt yourselves to them as servants have to adapt themselves to their masters, their customs, their taste and manners, in order to perfect and sanctify them, to raise them up and transform them slowly and gradually into a people of God<sup>2</sup>.

Again he recommended:

Take note of their characteristics, likings, desires. Take pains to use proper ways of gaining authority over their minds, of finding entry into their hearts and of winning their affection and trust<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf H. Koren, *The Spiritans*, Duquesne 1983, p. 260.

<sup>2</sup> ND X 330; H. Koren, *op. cit.* p. 260.

<sup>3</sup> *Directoire Spirituel* p. 537.

This is necessary because the missionaries

must pay particular attention to which customs and habits are characteristic of the people and the land. They must carefully avoid disturbing these customs (unless they are against God's law) and modifying them in a European fashion. They will simply try to make (the people) more perfect in their own way of life and in accord with their own customs<sup>4</sup>.

But to adapt or inculturate does not mean, of course, to reject or slight one's own culture. A Brazilian, for instance, has no need to abandon his Brazilian "being", but should rather contribute — by his way of living, thinking and acting — to a constructive meeting of cultures.

One point strikes us in all this. Libermann, without ever going to the missions, had these intuitions revealing acute observation, and clearly made an effort to be informed on conditions in the missions, so as to be able to furnish precise orientations for his men. His sensitivity and openness to other cultures is explained by the fact that he himself lived in an intercultural situation, by his very conversion from Judaism to Christianity.

Thus the spirit of our founders, especially Libermann (since Poullart des Places was not faced directly with the problem of cultural diversity), has marked generations and generations of missionaries, who, active in different fields of apostolate, particularly on the missions, have given their own mark to this approach and mission strategy. I would call this "Spiritane culture". It is not confined to a cluster of ideas but is a life based on the inspiration of the founders, translated into concrete action in a specific Spiritane way. It gives us one family-feeling despite our heterogeneous make-up. Nevertheless, the Congregation's charism is not something we can frame within a phrase or some propositions. It is above all a gift of the Spirit, a living reality, and will so remain as long as we stay faithful to our historic identity<sup>5</sup> and the call of the signs of the times.

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<sup>4</sup> ND X 452; H. Koren, op. cit. p. 260.

<sup>5</sup> Cf P. Sigris, History and Identity, in *Spiritans Today*, no. 1, 1982, pp. 37-46.

The formulating of our new Rules and Constitutions takes place in the richness of lived experiences. The founders' plan has been tried and lived, and our great challenge is to be faithful to our historical identity, our Spiritan cultural heritage, while at the same time being attuned to the needs of our own day in setting up objectives for both present and future. Time moves on and the Spiritan family has grown. The new Rules and Constitutions cover not only the Spiritans of Europe but also the members of new provinces and foundations.

This diversity is manifestly enriching, as we realized in the commission at Carcavelos. I do not know if I can speak for the members of the new provinces and foundations, but personally I feel it is vital that the new Rules and Constitutions reflect faithfully the spirit of the founders. The link between the Congregation's history and its tradition matters. In the more recent provinces and foundations the situation may be usual that Spiritan sources are difficult to come by, either because matter by or about Poullart des Places and Libermann is non-existent or is not translated. When I came from Brazil I was surprised to find writings of Libermann in Europe wholly unknown to me. We had heard of the Spiritual Writings and Spiritual Directory in the novitiate but could not consult them. I had to come to Europe to read the *Little Treatise on the Interior Life*<sup>6</sup> and the *Instructions to Missionaries* (7), wherein what I call Spiritan culture is to be found, namely, the outline of what we are and what we do. However it is to be recorded that the generalate team have been very helpful with their relevant publications.

The new Rules and Constitutions will make us more conscious of who we are (our historical identity), of what we want, faithful to our own charism and to the signs of the times. This approach will also remind us of the cultural diversity within the bosom of the Congregation, so that we can unite in what is common to us and complete each other mutually by what belongs to different groupings.

Fr. Pedro Iwashita, C.S.Sp.  
Brazil 1984

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<sup>6</sup> *Ecrits Spirituels du Vén. Libermann*, Paris 1891, pp. 271-280.