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SPIRITAN NEWS

N° 145

January/February 2003

CONGREGAZIONE DELLO SPIRITO SANTO - CLIVO DI CINNA, 195 - 00136 ROMA

SPIRITAN YEAR: February 2002 - Pentecost 2003 300 Years of Spiritan Mission

Twenty Five Years of Spiritan Presence in Pakistan: 1977 - 2002

To celebrate an anniversary, like a Silver Jubilee, is always a good occasion to remember the past, with its successes and failures, to express our gratitude for what has been, to renew our commitment and be ready for a new start. Last December, we had this opportunity to celebrate our silver jubilee in Pakistan with the presence of Fr. Pierre Schouver who kindly agreed to be with us at that time and to animate us in a retreat. On 14th and 15th December, we remembered the past in our get-together with the first group who arrived in December 1977 and in our liturgy we recalled the many confreres who served generously over the years. We were happy that some of the Dominicans and FMM sisters who welcomed us at that time were able to be present and share the experiences of those early days. On the 15th, the celebration was during the Sunday Eucharist with the parish. It was a joy for many to see old faces again and all the confreres were feted with garlands of roses by representatives of the parish, the cultural manner of expressing joy and appreciation. A highlight of the occasion was the visit of John Kitchen, one of the original group; the people were delighted to have an opportunity to show their appreciation of him once again.

Asia is the world's largest and most densely populated continent and apart from a few countries, poverty is the lot of the majority of its people. It is also the home of the world's major religions - though less than 3% are Christian. These facts influence the way we carry out our mission in our adopted country, actions on behalf of human liberation and respectful dialogue with Hinduism and Islam. We came to Pakistan, in response to requests from Propaganda Fide and the Pakistan Bishops' Conference, to assist in the evangelisation of tribal peoples. Two years later, we were asked by the bishop of Multan diocese to take care of the parish of Rahim yar Khan and since then we have been serving both the Punjabi Catholic and Marwari Bheel Hindu communities in this area. Both peoples come within the Spiritan charism as, on the whole, they are marginalised and discriminated against primarily because of their low caste or being outside the caste system - outcast and untouchable. This is seen most pointedly in the separate cups for them in the roadside tea stalls.

Besides the discrimination of the majority community due to caste, colour, religion and occupations, our Punjabi Christian and Marwari Hindu for the most part will not share food together either.

In this milieu, we are continually learning from our experience. Thus one of the statements from the 1998 Maynooth Chapter on the characteristics of Spiritan mission today speaks to us in a special way; "We go to people not primarily to accomplish a task, but rather to be with them, live with them, walk beside them, listen to them and share our faith with them. At the heart of our relationship is trust respect and love". From this approach many avenues have presented themselves over the years by which we have become partners in their integral evangelisation and holistic development.

Our ministry with the Punjabi community has much variety. The number of Catholics is small, approximately 1,500 families. Most live in the two main cities of Rahim yar Khan

and Sadiqabad while groups from two to twenty families live all over the district. We visit them regularly with the catechists to celebrate the Eucharist and perform the usual presbyteral duties in the rites of passage. Along with this, we work at improving the quality of catechesis, youth ministry, adult faith development, school supervision, hospital visitation and advocacy with government officials and landlords in cases of injustice etc.



The women's aisle during the Mass on 15/12/2002

With the Marwari Bheel people we are involved in primary education and health ministry, in the training of women community health workers and the running of TB clinics. We operate a successful loan scheme with them as a help in their economic advancement and are active in inter religious dialogue through bhagti - religious devotional singing. A small number have become Christians many years ago while many show interest in the person of Jesus and his way of life.

Looking back over the years among the highlights would be some of the following initiatives which continue to be life-enhancing for us as well as for those we serve:

Last year the students of Holy Cross High School, our central parish school, sat for the matriculation examination for the first time and achieved excellent results. This was the fruit of many years of preparation and it is a confident step into the future at a time when diocesan support in paying teachers' salaries has ended. Likewise the two hostels for boys and girls continue to benefit many as well as being a bridge in overcoming prejudices between the Marwari and Punjabi communities, as children from both communities live and study together. Recently, some of the eight Marwari village schools have formed committees which take care of school matters. While opportunities are limited after primary and even second level education, it is hopeful to see more interest in acquiring at least primary education. The Training for Transformation workshops (which are based on the theory of Paulo Freire on developing social analysis and critical awareness, leading to self reliant and creative communities), continue with a new and updated edition of the Urdu programme being prepared which uses exercises and examples from this society to create awareness and promote critical analysis among the participants.

In a recent national survey, lack of housing was cited as one of the main causes of poverty and drain on family income. From 1982, we have been involved in acquiring land for housing in four places and last summer, we acquired a little more. It is a joint effort between local community representatives, local government officials and our own large investment of time, support and follow up. It is a joy to see the deserving acquire their own plots of land.

We are continually trying to find avenues to bring our Christians to an in-depth living and understanding of their faith through catechesis, bible study (Lumco Seven Step method), Charismatic prayer groups, on-going faith formation through a 'theology for the laity' group, whose institute runs short courses on aspects of local theology on a regular basis.

Through the Vincent de Paul society, we try to get people to support those in need, though much of this is done through the strong family support network.

Over the years, a highlight in the Marwari Bheel ministry has been the annual 'bhakti' - a night of devotional singing. We host this during the summer and invite all those whom we visit during the year. The main religious expression among them is 'bhakti', a tradition that sees God as intensely lovable. It speaks of loving devotion - not fear, of exuberance rather than calm speculation. It is the Hindu tradition that is closest to the values and vision of Jesus. Bhakti is a holistic form of worship that includes music, song, discussion, incense, water, flowers and the sharing of fruit and sweets as a sign of fellowship. The participants (satsang) find it emotional, life-giving and spiritually uplifting. The bhakti ritual is an all-night gathering of religious leaders (bhagats) and invited guests to sing religious songs (bhajans). The songs of Kabir, Birmanand, Mirabhai and many others are discussed and commented on and the ritual ends in the morning with the sharing of the sweets and fruits (bavi) that have been made holy by the night of prayer. We are

regularly invited to take part in the bhakti ritual. We are perceived as Christian bhagats and we and our catechists are given an opportunity to sing a set of four bhajans. Many are impressed by our being celibate, thus offering our whole life in the search and service of the Lord.

The beginning of the community in Sadiqabad and more recently in Mirpurkhas are indicative of our hope and faith in the future. In Sadiqabad our hope is to concentrate principally on Marwari language, culture, bhakti, religious beliefs and expression in contrast somewhat to the emphasis in Rahim yar Khan on the health, education and development aspects. Mirpurkhas has the greatest concentration of Marwari Bheels in Sindh province and at this stage we were hoping to have three confreres there.

Our bi-annual meetings together continue to be a source of inspiration. At one, we have a retreat and at the other, a study session on Scripture or theology, some aspects of culture, anthropology etc. We have had some meetings on future planning, the most recent being two years ago. Besides these activities they are opportunities to come apart from our daily crowded lives and enjoy a little rest, relax in our own company and share liturgies and prayer together.



Pierre Schouver receives a garland from a parishioner

We, and the 'little people' with whom we share our lives, live in the powerful shade of Islam. Christians, Hindus and other minorities make up less than 3% of the population. On the whole, relations with us are good but the global events of the last two years have tended to make attitudes of Moslems whom we do not know so well more ambivalent, to say the least. The recent attacks on churches and Christian institutions, plus the usual tension and distrust of India, make it increasingly difficult for both Christian and Marwari Hindu people. However, the normal interaction in neighbourhoods and workplaces goes on as usual and relations are good. This is often most evident in tragic moments such as a death in a mixed neighbourhood or village. At the recent funeral of the first member of the Marwari loan scheme and our co-worker for many years, the steward of his landlord was crying as his remains were laid out. Relations had always been fair and just with the common interests of land, crops and livestock. It is usually wise not to become involved in serious conversations about religion as this subject is highly emotive and usually leads to tension. Among the more educated, however, there are many Muslim-Christian dialogue groups.

The future is very much in God's hands. At the time of writing, we are just four confreres in the country but three are due back in the autumn after sabbaticals and sick leave. We have five new appointees whose visas are taking much time to be processed. This is a cause for hope.



From R. to L.: Michel Protain with a Marwari Catechist

We have discussed at length and asked advice from other missionary groups in Pakistan about taking vocations. Our experience to date regarding applicants is for them to express an initial keen interest in joining us, but on being appraised that our mission is to be at the service of the

poorest and most abandoned and with those who have not heard the Gospel, there is a hesitancy, because it means pitching one's tent with the Punjabi Christian sweepers and the Marwari Bheels. Fr. Schouver encouraged us to continue with our plan of introducing a form of lay association so that some can share our simplicity, our hope and our experience that the Spirit is with us. This would be accompanied by on-going discernment. Openness to taking vocations is a sign of the authenticity of our mission. We often wonder amongst ourselves whether what we are doing will continue after us, as there is almost no interest in it by the local Church. The words of Pierre give us hope, "We are still in the right way according to our charism and we should go ahead in this field if humanely sustainable".

Finally, What is our motivation? Faith. Faith that the mission of Jesus of Nazareth continues through our little efforts to accompany these people in a way that is life-enhancing for them. It is also the desire to be faithful to people who over the years have become our friends and whose courage and resilience in the face of misfortune and oppression is a source of wonder and inspiration.

An important part of one's spirituality here is to seek detachment from the fruits of one's labours. In many ways, we do not have much to show for a lot of effort, but, at the same time there is a sense of having come to mean something to many people, a feeling perhaps that they experience us as sincere, as being genuinely interested in them, as being respectful of them and of having no self-interest in what we attempt to do.

Spiritan Group, Pakistan

Jean Guth: In the tradition of sacrifice for the mission

The following item already went out as a Newsflash. We are reprinting it here for those who have no access to the Internet

We were very saddened by the news of the death of Jean Guth. We have now received more details of the circumstances of his sacrifice which we would like to share with you.

Jean was always very close to the country people of Congo-Brazzaville, amongst whom he worked for 35 years. He was at the service of everybody, above all the people who suffered so much as a result of the fighting between different militias. He devoted much time to learning the local languages and he was particularly fluent in Lari. He was arrested by the Ninja militia while he was visiting the Christian communities of Kindamba and Vinza during the Easter celebrations. This group, apparently commanded by a M. Ntumi, are in armed revolt against the legal government of the Congo.

From the moment he was arrested, Jean was treated in an inhuman and degrading way: he was stripped, severely beaten and immobilised by deliberately cutting the tendon of his right ankle. He was held prisoner in the forest for four and a half months in conditions which came to light as a result of a post mortem: the condition of his face, lungs, liver and knees gave terrible witness to the way he must have been treated. It is almost certain now that these sufferings continued until his death on 10th August.

The Archdiocese of Brazzaville gave him the honours that such a courageous missionary deserves. People kept vigil over his body throughout the night of 31st September up until the Mass on 1st October. A French Spiritan, Joseph Mermier, reported that "by midday, there was a huge crowd assembled, including all the priests of Brazzaville. It's a long time since I've seen a funeral liturgy conducted in such an atmosphere of peace, despite the great suffering involved".

At the end of the Mass, the Archbishop of Brazzaville, Anatole Milandou, spoke out strongly in the name of all the bishops "against the gratuitous violence by different armed factions directed at men and women serving God". Such violence is not a



Jean Guth, 1939 - 2002

recent thing but goes back for some 50 years. Even if the Church was the primary target, it also included a large

number of men and women, including young people and children, stripping them of all their possessions: "All the armed groups are equally guilty of this dirty work", and yet up until now, they still go unpunished. "The Church insists that the people of Congo can no longer be treated in this barbaric way by their brothers and sisters".

The Archbishop made an urgent appeal to those young people who rallied round M. Ntumi in the Ninja militia: "The bishops, the Christians and all people of good will beg you to lay down your arms. The war will do nothing but mortgage your future and that of our country. To the leaders of our country we say once again that dialogue is the only way that can lead to peace. We offer our services for the reinsertion of the young people into our society. The gratuitous violence must stop, above all the violence against the young people who are in the villages or are leaving the forests". At the end of his speech, Bishop Milandou thanked Jean for his sacrifice in the service of the people of Congo: "Our prayer is that through this sacrifice and the sacrifice of all the martyrs of this country, we may finally obtain justice, reconciliation, peace and prosperity".

His Spiritain confreres took their leave of Jean in similarly strong words: "We feel part of the sacrifice that Jean Guth made of his life. We know and fully accept that to have to shed one's blood is a part of spiritan life. It is in a spirit of gratitude that we are passing through these sad moments. The truth that we missionaries carry, the truth to which we bear witness, is the truth of the suffering of a whole people whose lives we share. If it has to be that a French priest should die amongst the Congolese people for this truth to be expressed with clarity, then the death of Jean Guth will not have been in vain".

The witness given by Jean made a great impression on the Congolese as a strong call to truth, responsibility and brotherhood in their social and political life. One of them, a Lari, having referred to the sort of things that the French and the Lari say about each other, continued in these words: "Nothing like this is true of Père Jean Guth. Feeling sorry for the harsh conditions that the people have to suffer in the bush of Mayama, he felt it his duty to share these sufferings with them. His love spread everywhere as he bore witness to the truth of the Gospel by the testimony of his own life. The blood that he shed is calling us to a deep conversion to the image of Jesus Christ, because to be a Christian means to be gathered around him without distinction of race, tribe, origin or nationality".

Terrible events like these remind us of the words that Libermann wrote to his first missionaries on the coast of West Africa: "You have much to suffer and this will continue; remember that it is for God that you are suffering; he knows how to reward you a hundred fold, even in this life, for all the sacrifices you make for love of him. Remember that he went through unheard of sufferings for the salvation of the world; as disciples of Jesus, don't expect to be treated any better than your master. Never be frightened by the difficulties that you meet; you must not let them discourage you. You are not going out in your own name. It is not you who will do the work but the one who sent you. You are not alone; he is always with you if you trust him, so don't be half-hearted or weak in your faith" (Libermann to the community at Cap des Palmes, 1844. N.D. VI p.3-8).

NEWS ITEMS

Decisions of the General Council

At the request of the Superior and Council of the SCAF, the Superior General, with the consent of his Council, nominates Fr. Loughlin **FLANAGAN** as Superior of the Malawi International Group until the designation of his successor due to occur within the next three years, with effect from the 21st October 2002.

The Superior General, with the consent of his Council, confirms the election of Fr. Oscar **NGOY** as Superior of the Foundation of Congo Kinshasa for a second mandate of three years, with effect from 10th January 2003.

The Superior General, with the consent of his Council, confirms the election of Fr. Herbert **CHARLES** as Superior of the Province of Trinidad, for a mandate of three years, with effect from 2nd February 2003.

The Superior General, with the consent of his Council, confirms the election of Fr. Gerardus A. **HOGERVORST**, as Superior of the District of Central Brazil, for a third mandate of three years, with effect from 21st January 2003.

The Superior General, with the consent of his Council, nominates Fr. James **IBEH** of the Province of Nigeria, as Assistant General Bursar, for three years, with effect from 1st September 2003.

CSSp list of E-mail Addresses

If you have an email address and you are not receiving our *Spiritan Newsflash*; could you please send your address to the Generalate. Would you please do the same for any confrere in your neighbourhood (locality) who is in the same situation. Send the address to csspinfo@tin.it.

Meanwhile, please add the following address to your list: procrm23@nettuno.it for the Assistant General Bursar (Fr. Cyril Anene). And the e-mail address of the Assistant Secretary General (Fr. Pierre Buis) has changed to secrcsp@pcn.net (no longer csspsecra).

OUR DEAD

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