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International Groups and communities fast becoming the norm for Spiritans

Of the 12 new superiors who attended the meeting this year at the Generalate from September 15th-20th, half were from international Groups. Several observed that this is indicative of a striking new reality of life and mission within our religious family. Amongst the others, there were circumscriptions with a strong international flavour: PAC is made up of Cameroon, Central Africa, Congo Brazzaville and Gabon while FANO brings together Senegal, Guinea Conakry, Guinea-Bissau and Mauritania.

Not so long ago, most Spiritans could expect to live and work for much of their lives with confreres from the same cultural background: arriving in a strange and far off country, the missionary found himself working out of a strong supportive structure with confreres whom he already knew. So he immediately felt at home. The men had their own individuality, of course, but much was already familiar – the ways of thinking, a shared history, a common sense of humour etc. Getting to know the local language and culture was done from the security of the known and familiar. More often than not, Spiritans today are faced with the extra challenge of getting to know and work with confreres whose background is very different to their own. Before immersing themselves in the local culture, they must learn to respect and appreciate the culture of those with whom they will live and share the same mission.

There were many comments regarding these working communities that emerged from the reports and subsequent discussion:

- The current style of formation in our Provinces and Foundations does not yet adequately prepare our young confreres for community life and apostolate in an international setting: they must somehow learn to leave their own country behind and realise that arrogance, intolerance and notions of cultural or religious superiority have no place in a missionary's mentality.
- There is a need for careful reflection and organization before a new international Group is set up. Each community should be composed of individuals who can work and live together, who will be sensitive to the preferences of each confrere.

- In an international group setting, there are cross cultures and customs which enrich each other, but the confreres will not benefit automatically for this situation: it calls for great tolerance, acceptance of one another and a spirit of understanding.
- The quality of community life depends less on the origin of the confreres than on the willingness of each to share their lives with others. Difficulties can arise from cultural background, differing age-groups, the style of formation received; but a sincere and open dialogue is usually sufficient to minimise such difficulties.

International Group	Number of confreres	Number of nationalities
Paraguay	15	11
Croatia	4	3
Mozambique	6	4
Malawi	12	8
Zambia	13	5

- International groups and communities face the same challenges that have confronted our Provinces and Foundations in the past: relating correctly to material goods, a simple lifestyle, self-sufficiency, looking for a supportive base for our missions. While it is true that God does not let his children die of hunger, it is also true that we have a duty to try to find the necessary economic resources for our financial support. The people with whom we work are usually very poor and can give very little to help support us. There are often no financial sources inside the country and expenses are huge: transport, travel, food, formation, etc. Confreres are full of dreams and initiatives for mission work, but dreams can be easily frustrated when there is a lack of financial support.
- We are moving in the direction of regionalization and already important steps have been taken. However, when we look carefully at the situation we see that some Groups that are part of the region are very limited in being able to give concrete answers to the challenges which face them: formation, common missionary projects, finance, personnel etc.
- Solidarity from other circumscriptions and within the groups is increasing but it needs further encouragement, especially among our younger confreres.
- In a globalised world with its constant pressure towards uniformity, peoples insist on their right to existence, while others affirm their identity (and even their aggressivity) loud and strong. It is in this context that our fragile, multicultural Christian communities exist.

- We are on the fault lines between the North and the South, between Christianity and Islam, between rich and poor; we are witnesses to universality.
- Our incarnation into a particular people presupposes a caring desire to be one with that people. This cannot be achieved without a period of time to get to know the history of the country, its culture, religion, customs and language. Only in this way can strong ties be created; when the earth is dry, a tree must develop strong and deep roots if it is to bear fruit.
- Amongst people who are turned in on themselves, we believe in the importance of international communities, showing that it is possible to live together in harmony. It is in this tension between an openness to the universal and the need for cultural identity that we perceive the presence of the Holy Spirit.

The witness value of such communities

The new superiors concentrated on the difficulties and challenges in their discussions, but nobody doubted the extraordinary witness-value of such international and intercultural communities in today's world. It was well expressed by the last General Chapter at Maynooth:

"Conflict, racialism and the cult of the individual are all too prevalent in the world of today. By coming together from

so many different places and cultures, we are saying to our brothers and sisters that the unity of the human race is not just an impossible dream. In this way, our community life is an integral part of our mission and a powerful witness to the message of the Gospel. In the same spirit, we will integrate the apostolic work of our communities into the life and pastoral plans of the local Christian community" (Maynooth 4.15).

Testimonies from outside the Congregation are perhaps even more significant. In an article for *Spiritan Life* written in 1997, René Tabard quoted the comments of the Bishops of the Congo on the witness of international communities:

"As religious, your role is very important...Many of you are living in communities made up of people of different language and racial origins. There is nothing in the history of your countries that explains the efforts you make to live as brothers and sisters: it springs only from your faith. And we know that it is not always easy to live in the same house when people are very different and many things are working against it...In this way, you are an

example for the Congolese people of what is possible through faith in Jesus Christ, the centre of a real and deep unity for the human race. If Whites and Blacks, Senegalese and Nigerians can love each other in this way, how could a Congolese legitimately claim that he cannot share with another Congolese because of a different ethnic origin?" (Episcopal Conference of Congo, 1993 – quoted in S.L. no. 7).

Also in *Spiritan Life*, Ide de Lange talked of the impact that the spiritan international community in Boranaland (Ethiopia) had on the local people:

"Initially, our internationality was not particularly noticed. It was not until we were joined by the African members of our group, Sr. Lydia from Tanzania, Fr Peter Osuji from Nigeria, Fr Jerome Onwughalu from Nigeria, and all the students from Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda, that people began to ask such questions as "How did you people come together?", "Did you know one another before you came to Ethiopia", "What brought you together, being from so

many different nationalities?". The fact that we all preached the same Gospel had a particular impact. It wasn't just a "white man's Gospel" after all. The easy acceptance of one another and the living together in one community baffled people to a considerable extent. They were not sure as to how to see the group as one. Questions were asked, especially

of our African members, such as, "How much do they pay you for the work you are doing for them?" The answer - that they got paid nothing and that the whole group formed one community - did little to clarify the situation. However, slowly people came to accept us as we are, an international team, and our internationality turned into an asset to our work of preaching the Gospel. Answers to the above mentioned questions slowly began to make sense; we were brought together by our common belief in the Gospel and the need to spread the word, by our common call to go and preach the Good News to all who have not yet heard it, to bring hope to the poor, the sick and the disadvantaged. The living together in one community of people of quite different nationalities and cultures gave a strong witness to the unity of all believers. In our meetings with them they realised that we wanted to share something with them that goes beyond the boundaries of individual nations and peoples. Thus our internationality has become a witness to the Gospel for those who are willing to see it. (S.L. 8: "As others see us").



Half of these new Superiors at their meeting in Rome in September were of International Groups