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Spiritan Now


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Fr Pierre Jubinville, originally from the Spiritan Province of Canada, has lived and worked for twenty years in Paraguay and is at present a formator in the pre-novitiate there. He also serves the Religious Conference as secretary, and belongs to a theological reflection team of CLAR (Confederación Latino-Americana de Religiosas/os). Spiritans came to Paraguay in 1967. The present group has 12 members from 9 countries.

When I received the invitation to write this reflection, I took it as a call to reflect upon my missionary life now: what it has become after 30 years of vows in the Spiritan congregation, and 20 years working in Paraguay. The “now” part of it is calling me to a new level of Spiritan awareness. I am no longer a parish priest in a rural area, I don’t visit the native communities anymore; no more long trips on bad roads, no great privation of material goods; I now live in the city, in a middle class sector.

I have been working in formation since 2000 and was chosen to act as the superior of the Spiritan Group for two terms. This does not make for exciting reading: “I mailed a note to the General Counsellor...,” “I went to the grocery store...,” “I participated in a meeting...,” “I sat down for an hour with a candidate...” So I feel the urge to ask myself: what has been the meaning, the missionary nerve, during this last decade?

The service of religious life

I was born in the Congregation when the expression “religious-missionary” was coined, in the late seventies, the beginning of the eighties. I remember the effort to end the hierarchical difference between brothers and priests, and I felt part of it. I said during my first years as a Spiritan that I was in for religious life more than priesthood....

Among the confreres as an animator and formator, this part of my creed came again to the front of my consciousness. My work now is in the Postulancy; the first years of formation for newcomers to Spiritan life. I feel that religious life is the basis of our vocation. There are some pre-requisites: the most important is to be a free human being, capable of listening and responding to the call of God. I realize that I have to work hard in that line: to help build, to retrieve, to restore a true freedom and then to listen and respond.

Very soon, in my ministry as animator and formator, I was part of inter-congregational efforts of self-formation. I was drawn to the Religious Conference of Paraguay and found there many religious men and women who were as eager as I was to reflect, to question, to share... I don't know where this reaching out comes from, probably from my father who is a great reader and was a great researcher, but I always had the intuition of using my ignorance to seek other explorers just like me, to form groups, to set goals, and so to learn a great deal. It has been a great blessing.
Exploring the religious landscape

At the centre of our concerns, of our seeking, was the question: what is religious life today? Latin America is going through the same fantastic and accelerated change that most other countries are experiencing or have experienced. The references to God, to authorities, the dependence on supernatural powers, spirituality... most of the religious values that have been at the center of our identity are questioned and often discarded. Autonomous humans seek the right to live without dependence. There is still a great popular religious feeling, but it does not find a place in official religion. We experienced the boom of widespread movements and churches, but this also – it is my feeling – is fading away. Indifference and materialism are creeping in.

Please, don’t get me wrong. I am a child of these tendencies and I was never a valiant warrior to fight them off. They are part of the new cultures. It is not good. It is not bad. It provides many opportunities if we are able to see and grasp them. The fact is that here in Paraguay, in the heart of Latin America, in a country that has been very often isolated and protected from world influences, where the discourse about “recuperating the lost values” is still quite frequent, the secularist wind is blowing hard. And the same familiar question about religious life is emerging: who are we? It is a very interesting and challenging time.

An exhilarating discovery

At a recent Religious Conference meeting, a colleague from Argentina, where reduced numbers and problems of aging have been a reality for much longer than in Paraguay, shared a brilliant reflection on the joy and the beauty of the religious vocation. Respectful of the work of NGOs and social workers, he asked if we were not somehow different. While working side by side with others, deep down, did we not march to the beat of a different drummer?

What is that “somehow different”? I don’t want to answer. I just want to remain on the edge of it, preventing myself from saying the words too fast and too negligently. I want to keep on the shore of the great sea, on the verge of the mystery. Because it is true: our lives, or at least I can talk about myself and say: my life... has no meaning without that mystery. So I have vowed it to be. I have promised to make it a restless learning existence, constantly seeking adventure, some kind of a vital bet... on God, with him, for him.

This is evident, some might say. This is what the book says about religious life. But it has come home to me afresh, surprised
me into a world of wonder that is the now of my Spiritan vocation: I am drawn into the mystery and I feel awed. It does not give me any answers about the animation of the confreres, nor any brilliant new intuition about formation. But I find new excitement in stories of relationships: me and my brothers with God, God and his people.

Many don’t want to talk about this, they prefer to discuss pastoral strategies or the latest development in “the situation” of the country, of the church, of the world... There are plenty of ways to avoid the issue. Maybe the wonder of it can best be welcomed by silence?

The joy of mission

Accompanying the halting steps of the interior journey, I have to confess that the last decade has also brought some adventure to my life. This has taken the form of a street mission. Our formation house is five blocks away from a huge municipal market where many informal workers live and toil. Among them, at any hour of the day or night we estimate that two to three hundred children roam the place.

An NGO was already working there and they asked to use our yard as a place for the children to play. That was ten years ago. Now, this first seed has grown into a lay community with the mission of making contact with the children and their families, trying to enter their world, to become trusted companions on their journey.

Our main activities are to serve a weekly meal and to offer some recreation, to organize games and outings. We try to restrict ourselves to a modest contribution, to the point of resisting many outside offers: proposals of more elaborate education programmes, the introduction of varied health specialists, campaigns for this and that, sponsored by different organizations. Simply being significant persons for the children has become the touchstone of our contribution.

At this present moment, we are praying for light on the next step of our project. What should we be doing, how should we be moving to answer in a more profound way our mission call? And this has been part of the whole adventure: from the beginning, tentative experiences, trial and error, inner motions, discernment, prayer for God’s wisdom, confessing our resistance and fears, meditating in detail on lived experiences, listening to the experiences of our founders, Libermann and Poullart des Places: all this and more we have experienced as being part of the
mission itself and not just mere preparation for the “big one”, “the” project that would bring some kind of a “solution” to some kind of a “problem”.

The story of this project is the story of an encounter, a contact that has deepened, that no hurry can disturb, no fashion can really change, and that will take us we know not where. I have come to realize that seeking and discernment is part of mission. And it brings a feeling of a great peace and great joy. We seek, and lose, and find, just like the lovers of the Canticle of Canticles. It really is a love story. And we are just a few drops in the ocean. Drops of Love. That’s the name of the group: Gotas de Amor.

The courage just to be

Presence is all important. I can’t say very clearly how. To be there, physically or spiritually, with who you are, with what you seek, to be there with your contribution, with what is life’s trend or fight or cause or love; as others gather up and take away to build their own identities, sometimes you will have the joy of tasting the fruit, but most often, without your knowing or seeing, there will arise the no lesser joy of just having been there and having given whatever you have given.

Right now, my hope is that this can happen and that what these others are able to take away from my life contains mostly this relationship with the mystery, that faintly whispers its secrets in our lives. I hope they can hear it, if not loud and clear, at least as a soft voice in my everyday doings. If this happens, I shall truly be a father, the fully loving, passionate, fruitful, fertile father that I was meant to be, because I will have given life to someone else. I will also truly be a brother, a religious companion, a neighbour, a real Christian brother, because we both can stand in awe in front of the great mystery and be filled with joy.

I hope this is happening. Now. It is a blessing God wants to bestow.