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Personal Testimonies of Some Young Missionaries Concerning Our Spiritan Dedication

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PERSONAL TESTIMONIES

Twelve young members engaged in the Mission, who come from different countries and cultures, were asked to reply to the questions set out below. It would be their own witness concerning the special theme of our Spiritan dedication "to the Holy Spirit . . . under the protection of the Immaculate Heart of Mary", as our Rule of Life puts it.

THE ENQUIRY AND THE QUESTIONS ASKED

Rule 6: "We are dedicated to the Holy Spirit, author of all holiness and 'source of the Apostolic Spirit' (N.D. X, 568).

We place ourselves under the protection of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, who was filled beyond measure by the same Spirit with the fulness of holiness and apostolic zeal (N.D. X, 568).

Rule 85: We are genuine apostles to the extent that, in our daily living, we entrust ourselves entirely to him (the Spirit of Christ).

Rule 89: Mary is our model of willing obedience and faithfulness. We offer her veneration and prayer so that we may, as she did, welcome within us the Holy Spirit who dwelt in her Immaculate Heart, and that he may be for us also the abundant source of our apostolic spirit".

It is in these terms our Rule of Life expresses our 'dedication to the Holy Spirit under the protection of the Immaculate Heart of Mary'.

- 1) What does this dedication, the inheritance from our Founders, mean to you, a young missionary?
- 2) By what means, in your day-by-day living as a missionary, do you strive to realise what the Rule terms the 'Spiritan Apostolic Spirit' (RL 5). "We live out our mission in willing obedience to the Holy Spirit, taking Mary as our model"?

The replies that have come in time for publication by the Spiritan Research and Studies Centre amply bear witness to how truly these texts in the Rule of Life are the heart of our Spiritan tradition.

A further shared thought is that the Rule is only restating and emphasising the special position held by the Holy Spirit and by Mary in the lives of those who have replied.

This thought fits well with a reaction of both young and older confreres from all over. "When you are commenting, with lots of references to our Founders, upon Spiritan spirituality, I feel full of gratitude to God, because you are just sign-posting a road Christ long since laid out for me in my heart". This holds just as true for Puerto Rican or Mexican Spiritans as for those in Papua or Zimbabwe. The road to holiness Spiritans are called to travel by the Spirit of God is the same everywhere. Cultural difference, separate personalities, diversity of apostolate make no difference. They go to enrich the whole, that's all.

Finally, these testimonies show that willing obedience – docility to the Holy Spirit under Mary's aegis – is practised at the still centre of the missionary's daily rounds. Yet each one's witness is quite personalised. Each is quoted word for word.

PART ONE

THE MEANING OF SPIRITAN DEDICATION

OUR INHERITANCE FROM THE FOUNDERS

"What then does this inheritance from our Founders mean to me? For me, the importance of this inheritance consists in these: 1) it confirms and strengthens my devotion to Mary and to the Holy Spirit, and 2) it enlightens and channels this devotion along the right path of true religious – missionary spirituality. There is a form of marian devotion that leads people to an almost completely other-worldly spirituality which shows itself in an attitude of passivity and indifference

to "the things of this world" such as political injustice, economic exploitation, (racial) segregation and denials of basic human rights. There is another form of devotion to Mary which centres around and gives a naive assent to the innumerable visions and apparitions attributed to the Blessed Mother, even when these conflict with our basic Christian and religious-missionary commitment. But the inheritance from our Founders directs my devotion not along such lines but along the sure path of practical conformity to the will of God made Manifest in Christ Jesus.

The Mother of Good Counsel has spoken once and for all. And her counsel to all who would come to Christ through her is, "Do whatever he tells you" (Jn 2 : 5) "

(a Nigerian, serving in Zambia)

"My own feeling is that our dedication to the Holy Spirit, under the protection of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, indicates for us the context, the extent and the nature of our calling.

I understand our dedication in the light of the first article of the Rule of Life. It places me right inside God creating and redeeming activity, by it I can see that I am one on whom God has laid his hand. It is only as a result of this that I am at the service of this sanctifying power, springing from God's very self and solely under his control. This extends a two-fold invitation to me: to allow Him, for the one part, act in me and for the other to strive to act with Him who is working in all creation and most specially in the Church.

That Mary be both model and patroness seems to me something self-evident. She puts us in direct touch with God's salvific plan, realised historically specially in Christ's person and in the Church, which I understand in the context of those realities, as I do my own self and my own calling. Mary is par excellence the redeemed one; Mother of Christ and of the Church. Who better than She may rejoice in God the Saving One, never forgetful of the little ones? Who work so that the salvation Her child has brought us become a joyous reality in the lives of all peoples? Who better than She may solicitously stand by those who are called to announce the good news of God's Kingdom in the footsteps of her own Son? (RL 1) "

(a Portuguese, serving in Guinea Bissau).

"The Holy Spirit and Mary tend to force me back to the essential thing in my (Christian) experience, understanding the Mystery of the Divine Being through them.

Words to express these thoughts came to me as we shared a Gospel passage one evening of the Annunciation feast. We had been chatting about the Congregation, the way things were going, this "new mission" we are looking for, of the challenges we are facing. What struck me in Luke's text is that all the angel did was to recall for Mary the great promises made to Israel. Then he left her, all by herself, a person, a body. I remember it, we stopped with that: the promise is what is passed down to us; we bodily beings receive the promise, we are its temple. And between this two there is the space for a decision that will make the connection: an act of faith. It is Mary who bridges this space with all the strength of her free will.

Our proper Spiritan heritage is no mere memorial from the past, precious though that may be; not buildings nor writings, nor achievements. What it is, is the promise made flesh in Jesus Himself, interpreted and lived out as the Founders understood it and just as a whole multitude of Spiritans have practised their dedication in the way of the missionary. It is a heritage that is easily carried about; it can be transported to serve there where a new situation may arise for us. It's that drive that has enabled so many witnesses throughout the Church and our own Congregation to find original ways to share the Good News that has stirred them up. It is that Spirit who has "come down" after Jesus had "gone up", to make us remember Our Lord.

The other Bible passage that comes to mind and it resembles a little the Annunciation, is Ascension/Pentecost. With Jesus' going-away all that was left was a handful of followers who had heard and seen, who had some idea of the meaning of Jesus' resurrection. Yet within a short time, communities are springing up, a body of people is coming together and forming, which together is to bear witness to God's gifts made to them; will stand up for the dignity of the human person, God's dwelling-place, because one life courses through them all, the Spirit of Jesus. Jesus' Spirit turns death into the source of life. Jesus' Spirit, at work in Mary, makes her body the place the promise becomes flesh. Jesus' Spirit makes the Church Christ's living Body. Throughout the whole world,

Jesus' Spirit shows the great dignity each human being has and the terrible beauty of the body".

(a Canadian, serving in Zaire).

"By her full submission to the Holy Spirit the whole world is redeemed. The whole world gets a new mother. I am called to share in God's continual redemptive work in the ministerial priesthood and as a religious. This won't be fruitful unless, with the help of God, I submit myself to the power and to the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit. We are all asked to cooperate with the power of the Holy Spirit by allowing his transforming power in us; by allowing his guidance. We are all required to have a total 'openness' to Him which most of us are lacking. We are too "closed", too self-centred.

Mary our mother prays for us that we may fully accept the guidance of the Holy Spirit. We are called to put our trust in the Holy Spirit, our Animator in the field of apostolate. . . as the (Holy Spirit) animated the early disciples of Jesus to preach the gospel with certitude, courage and conviction".

(a Tanzanian, serving in Zambia).

"As a missionary, dedication to the Holy Spirit, under the patronage of the Immaculate Heart of Mary means in practise my being in touch constantly with my first experience of faith, my baptismal consecration, my obligation to be a witness. Both these pre-date my becoming a Spiritan.

Born, brought up, educated in a family of Buddhist tradition, contact with Christianity came in my case through the Patroness of Brazil, The Virgin of Aparecida. I was deeply impressed and moved to discover the existence of a lady, a mother so good and to learn that by her intercession so many miracles came to pass that eased the lot and consoled the sorrows of so many, many despairing people. That first experience has ever since shaped my relations with Mary. I tried to see the woman in Mary and to see Mary in each woman.

Later on, after baptism, it is Mary who eased my entry into the parish community. For one who is only a neophyte all signs, all symbols are important. I was still living in my Buddhist home after my baptism. Going into the Church, attending the Eucharist demanded a big effort from me still. So each time I stepped through the Church door I was welcomed by Mary, for her statue, the arms widespread, the

Immaculate Conception, was right there to smile for me. This impressed me more than I can say; it gave me an inkling of the beauty there is in Christianity. I'm helped even still by what happened me in those days in my efforts to understand in depth the people's devotions, their "religiosity" and in my efforts to give prominence to things that are symbolic of our faith.

Finally, I was introduced to apostleship by Mary in the Legion of Mary and a Marian Congregation. I was trying to be Christ's apostle, to bring His message to others in willingly obeying the Holy Spirit. This is the situation in which my calling to be a priest and to be a Spiritan came".

(A Brazilian, working in his own country).

As a Spiritan, I believe that I have received a great spiritual richness from our Founders. At this moment of my life . . . I believe that I am beginning to discover the great depths of my Consecration to the Holy Spirit under the protection of the Immaculate Heart of Mary.

The Holy Spirit is the source of the apostolic spirit. I believe that this is the same source that inspired the apostolic spirit of Our Founder, Claude Poullart des Places. As a member of our Congregation, I must make this same source the driving force of my apostolic activity and my spiritual life. Since I have felt drawn and called by this reality I, as a Spiritan, feel responsible for passing on this heritage to my brothers, especially to those who will follow me as new members of our religious society. And so, I see it as my obligation, as a Spiritan, to keep alive this our special dedication to the Holy Spirit.

In practice, this means that my apostolic work is neither mine nor the Congregation's but is God's action, through the Holy Spirit, in our lives. . . . The same Holy Spirit leads us as a Congregation, in a concrete and special way, to keep alive the true missionary dimension of the Church in its most radical form. And so, as Spiritans, we go by preference to the places where Christ remains unknown . . . Mary as model of docility to the holy Spirit, is one of the things that most characterized Libermann . . . What I admire above all in Mary is her capacity to say an unconditional 'yes' to the work of the Holy Spirit in her. This is something very fundamental for me. I believe, too, that our apostolic life must be inspired by this example of Mary. I think that the great challenge for my spiri-

tual, religious and apostolic life is to seek always that docility to the Holy Spirit, and be capable, at all times, of embracing His Will in myself and in our Congregation, and to live it in all its consequences. . . .”

(a Puerto Rican, serving in Brazil)

“My experience of the Holy Spirit comes mainly from my prayer. I do not feel that I live alone, for there is a power of great force that drives me. I realise the Holy Spirit is in me, that He is helping me, that He works in my soul to get me ready for the divine life of the Blessed Trinity. When I’m praying the psalms, conscious of all this, prayer is a tremendous joy for me. “God is at my side, of whom am I afraid?” Fear no longer exists in my life: the Spirit has driven fear out! All I am doing is, through Him, to the glory of God. Lots of what comes to pass is – it seems to me – fixed for my benefit by Him.

The feast of the Immaculate Conception has for me – as it did for Poullart des Places – great appeal. For me Mary is right next to God. She is interceding for me there so I may reach holiness. She links her praying to mine and so God attends to it. He hears me, through Jesus His son. I keep a small statue of the Immaculate Conception in my room where it reminds me of the love of Her in whom my Spiritan living is kept safe. I speak to her of my love and sing her praises, and so my love for Her Son Jesus Christ goes on growing”.

(a Zairian, studying in Tanzania).

PART TWO

THE SPIRITAN APOSTOLIC SPIRIT

IN THE MISSIONARY’S DAILY ROUTINE

“Were I asked how, in the daily round of life, I try to practise what our Rule terms “Spiritan apostolic life”, missionary living in willing obedience to the Holy Spirit, modelled on Our Lady’s example, my answer would be that I do so, not so much by means of this or that Marian devotion but principally by a keeping Mary in my awareness, keeping her in my mind,

present to me as she has always remained all down the days in my life of faith.

"This presence to me of Mary is a thing both live and active: she intercedes, she protects, she mothers me. She is a model of contemplation – ever in sight, of prayer, of willing obedience to the Holy Spirit, of attentiveness to the wants of people. The wedding feast at Cana from St. John's gospel is a superb example of "apostolic life": attention and sensitivity to the other persons. Mary springs to their aid and yet never loses sight for a moment of God's overall role. To live our lives to the brim can come but from her, for it is only she who perfectly prepared herself for God's giving. The interior dispositions of Mary, seen in the context of the mystery of her child, are for me a basic object of contemplative prayer, as indeed Father Libermann has taught us (cf. Lettres Spirituelles, III. 227-228). All told you see that I hold Mary as a treasure gifted on us by God (John 19 : 27); the very personification of God's grace, the model of apostolic living".

(a Brazilian, serving in his country)

"When I pray or think things over before God I try to see myself as an instrument of the Holy Spirit for the work of the apostolate. Contact with persons gives me personal stimulus for my apostolic ministry. Seeing what needs they have, what difficulties, I appreciate my task of coming to their aid to live the faith we have ever more deeply.

"Joyful obedience" to the Holy Spirit steers one in the direction of my fellow members in community. It stirs me to tell them about what is going on in my ministry, to share praying with them this matter. And this also because my job in the ministry is not a private occupation belonging just to me. It is God's own plan working itself out under our hands. We Spiritans, in community, are acting all as one. Because of this we are able to look at ourselves as being responsible for it as one and we keep trying to help each other along and keep our morale up.

Reading the new Rule of Life has helped me to absorb the charism of our Congregation as well as its apostolic perspectives".

(a Puerto Rican, serving in Brazil).

"As spiritans our mission is through the Church through the congregation. This is to say that in order that our mis-

sion be authentic it must be rooted in the Church. The Holy Spirit, sent to us by the Son as Advocate to complete His work on earth, is the Soul of the Church. Therefore a Spiritan . . . has to search always for the mind of the Church in which the Holy Spirit works in a particular way and has to do what Christ would do in each circumstance. For me, this way of conducting oneself would lead to faithfulness in Christian living.

Obedience to rightful authority in the Church and willingness to take up an apostolate where the Church sends us, would prove our "docility": an important element in our missionary life. I think this is the safest way of living the mission in obedience to the Holy Spirit taking Mary as our model in docility and fidelity".

(a Tanzanian, serving in Zambia).

"Being dedicated to Mary and to the Holy Spirit is for me packed with significance. They help me live as a Christian, as a Spiritan, launch me for the 'voyage' into living - as did Jesus - a divine life in a human nature. . . . And here's what I find as I go - something that's basic right through the Gospel - that the Good News adapts itself to being practised by flesh and blood, not (surely never) practised in high-flown abstractions. God does not come to live in us first in "the bit above the ears", that compartment so clear and logical, cold and well-governed, the region where we (me, anyway) are ethereal generosity, pure self-giving, clear purpose, face-to-face understanding, unsullied justice, . . . God made himself human, bodily, sexual, sentient. I am seeing more and more clearly the many, many lock-outs and refusals the body brings, that obstruct our (mine, anyway!) getting at a simple and powerful gospel. We reject and say no to our own body, ruling it like a dumb beast.

We reject and exclude our Church or our community body - there are lots of ways of pulling out of those! We reject and close our eyes to the society we live in, when chances to be involved would call us to be innovative so as to push ahead in evangelization. I am trying to be ever more and more alive to 'my bodies'; my own, the Church and the Community I'm in. And I do believe that it is Mary and the Holy Spirit that have helped me to penetrate this wonderful mystery".

(a Canadian, serving in Zaire)

"Frequently something like flashes of light come to me, about some topics or things that crop up in conversation. I tell the others about them. Later I realise that they came directly from the Holy Spirit. Here's something that makes me happy and spreads happiness round about me.

While I'm at work, often it happens to me that I'm full of joy in what I'm doing and I can keep it up without fatigue coming on. This really surprises me and then the powerful force that dwells in me comes to mind – the Holy Spirit! I had not been alone at all.

Between me and other people, sometimes I behave loutishly or wound the other. When I find him forgiving or delicate to me as though nothing had occurred, I see the Holy Spirit at work in this and offer Him a prayer that he'll change my heart.

But on the other hand there are gifts of God in me too, talents so I'm able to be merciful, to sympathise, to feel for the other man. It's clear to me that the Holy Spirit is in fact working in my daily living".

(a Zairian, a Brother studying in Tanzania.

"Perhaps I ought to make clear that where I live there is an almost homogenous population, animistic, inhabiting its ancestral lands.

So I can practise "Spiritual apostolic living" in this situation, here is my list of the attitudes I'm trying to be faithful to:

- 1) to live in the first place in union with God. I accept the gift of His salvation made to me personally. I strive to deepen my gratitude to Him. And yet I seek to keep seeing myself among the ones who still need to find God, seeking with singlemindedness. At this level then I'm as one with all persons living round about me here. Conversions, should they come to pass, will be by the Spirit's power for He only can make holy. . . . To recognise that I control neither the persons nor Salvation, . . . that the individual is ever mysterious and sacred at its inner depths . . . So I see myself called to be an apostle in faith and hope and love, called to live a constant dialogue that runs through all I do as a missionary,*
- 2) to push inculturation along but not to look at it as my own work; for it's my belief that in inculturation God is both the*

One who is received and the one who gives the power to receive.

- 3) *to give praying a high priority among the things I organise my work for, but still to be sensitive to the world, to pick up whatever it may be telling me about the apostolic activities that preoccupy me. This is my way to harness what the human sciences offer, something that's not just handy – but really a basic need,*
- 4) *to keep my head – win or lose. Be prepared for the unexpected. Keep up the effort: never quit: get over timidity or trepidation. They are rooted in too great reliance on your own self. Then too I work at being patient, waiting, reminding myself I'm not the controller of the evolution of conversion that is going on in people,*
- 5) *to be "good" to all; no one overlooked nor taken advantage of in my relations with them: I cultivate a sense of what is 'beautiful' – in all simplicity – for I think this will show awareness of two things, our human dignity and a gratitude for all that exists: for Mary, I maintain a son's piety; put Her forward clearly in my preaching and give special care, among popular devotions of the Christian community given to my safekeeping, to marian practices".*

(a Portuguese, serving in Guinea Bissau).

"In my daily life as a religious missionary, I find the rosary a very suitable means of expressing and deepening my devotion to Mary and to the Holy Spirit. I find myself expressing my filial love and confidence in my Mother and at the same time learning how to be a "mother of Jesus". Yes, for the ultimate vocation of every Christian is, in a sense, to be the "mother" of Jesus. Did Jesus himself not say that "Anyone who does the will of God, that person is my brother and sister and mother" (Mark 3 : 35)?

Whenever I pray the joyful mysteries I meditate and pray on my life as a religious, whenever I pray the Sorrowful mysteries I meditate and pray on my life as a priest, and whenever I pray the Glorious mysteries I meditate and pray on my life as a Christian. Take the joyful mysteries . . . the Annunciation . . . means being interiorly attentive and open to perceive the gentle whisper of God's Holy spirit and being ready and willing to respond to Him: "Be it done to me according to your word" as Mary did. The second mystery, the Visitation, tells me that being a religious means being available and disposed

to see God and serve Him in my neighbour. Like Mary, am I able to anticipate the need of the other person and respond practically to it without waiting for him or her to ask? The third mystery, the Nativity, shows me what the virtue of poverty is: choosing the stable that others may have the inn . . . Our model is Jesus who made himself poor in order to enrich others (2 Cor. 8 : 9). The vow of poverty becomes for me a vow of generosity. This has far-reaching implications for an African missionary working among people who are poor and exploited. . .

In the fourth joyful mystery, the Presentation, we see Mary offering up to God the greatest thing she possessed, her one and only son, Jesus. This reminds me of my religious profession in which I offered up to God the one and only life that God has given to me . . .

The fifth joyful mystery, the Finding of the Child Jesus in the temple, speaks to me about religious obedience . . . Jesus obeyed God by submitting to the authority of those under whom God, in His divine providence, had placed him, even if that meant abandoning (or suspending) an otherwise laudable project . . . Mary, . . . is a model of what I am called to become”.

(a Nigerian, serving in Zambia)

P.S. Our sincere gratitude goes to those youthful missionaries – picked on just for this – for their simplicity and openness, which while keeping a real Spiritan quality, serve so very well to highlight and reveal some facets of our family heirlooms.

Alphonse GILBERT, C.S.Sp.

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