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Sylvester Kansimbi C.S.Sp.

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SPIRITAN MISSION IN THE CONTEXT OF SOUTH AFRICA

Sylvester Kansimbi,
C.S.Sp.

Ordained to the priesthood in Malawi, 2001, Sylvester Kansimbi worked for three years in Immaculate Conception parish, Thunga, in the Archdiocese of Blantyre, Malawi. He subsequently obtained a Masters degree in Missiology at the University of KwaZulu Natal in South Africa with a dissertation entitled: "A critical evaluation of the members of the Religious Congregation of Holy Spirit's understanding of their mission to the poor in the dioceses of Bethlehem and Durban, South Africa." Fr. Kansimbi is currently a formator at the Spiritan Theology House in Harare, Zimbabwe, and lecturer at nearby Holy Trinity College.

The year 1994 will forever remain a memorable year of great rejoicing for South Africans and for people everywhere. 1994 marked the end of an oppressive apartheid regime and the new democratic government led by Mr. Nelson Mandela was ushered into power. In the words of Wilfrid Cardinal Napier, the Archbishop of Durban: "The miracle elections of 1994 were not just any achievement, but the achievement of the impossible."¹

A young Spiritan confrere from South Africa, Michael Nkosinathi, who recently completed his theological studies at Holy Trinity College, had this to say:

I can compare the year 1994 with what happened at Vatican II. It was the year of opening the windows for fresh air. South Africa had been a closed nation. Now, with the fresh air, there is a general feeling among all the people, especially the blacks, that they belong to the international community. South Africa could participate in the international games like the African Cup of Nations in 1996 as well as the FIFA World Cup in 1998. What I can say is simply, "Viva Mandela, Viva," and thanks for your patience.²

The Spiritan confreres working in South Africa did not just see the events taking place from afar, but they played a major role in the process of calling for change and transformation. They continue to be signs of hope today. This essay is the outcome of chatting to, living with, and interviewing confreres working in South Africa. It attempts firstly to look at their missionary impact and contribution during the years of apartheid and secondly it seeks to determine how the present group of Spiritans understand and interpret "the poor" in the context of the contemporary South Africa. Before 1994, the poor were mainly the victimized blacks. How then have the Spiritans diversified their mission in the context of the new South Africa? Have they continued to fulfill their charism and mission of "evangelizing of the poor"?³

SPIRITANS IN SOUTH AFRICA

The Spiritan history in South Africa goes back to 1878 when Fr. Charles Duparquet (1830-1888), Vice-Prefect of the Prefecture of Cimbebasia (a million square miles between Angola and the Cape), sought unsuccessfully to open a route to the heart of the African continent through Kimberley. The second missionary journey was in 1924 when the German confreres arrived in newly

created Kroonstad Vicariate under Monsignor Leo Klerlein who was appointed Prefect Apostolic. He subsequently became Vicar Apostolic in 1935. This marked the beginning of the effective presence of Spiritans in South Africa which has continued to the present day.

In 1948, when the Vicariate of Kroonstad was divided, the eastern part with Bethlehem as the center was entrusted to the Spiritans, while the western part with Kroonstad as the center was given to the Dominicans. Today, Spiritans continue to serve in the diocese of Bethlehem which now has become a missionary church.

In 1978, Spiritans opened up two missions, one in Leribe Diocese in the neighboring country of Lesotho, the other in Witbank Diocese in South Africa. In 1987, Spiritans accepted a request to serve in the Archdiocese of Durban, and more recently in the Dioceses of Johannesburg, Dundee, and Kroonstad, where they began their mission back in 1924.

PASTORAL INVOLVEMENT DURING THE APARTHEID ERA

During the apartheid period, the Catholic Church in South Africa tended to exist as two largely separate entities: a settler Church for whites and a mission Church for blacks. White people did not mingle with blacks at any level other than in a master/servant relationship in the workplace and in the home. As Bate Stuart puts it, “a racist Church mirrored a racist society.”⁴ In this period, evangelization implied taking tough and risky political choices. For Spiritans, the choice meant ‘incarnation,’ namely being on the side of the majority, the underprivileged Zulu and Sotho people. Spiritans concentrated their missionary activity on the indigenous black population staying in the controlled townships, the majority of them laborers on exclusively white-owned farms. Thus, any missionary work was to be done on the so-called “white man’s land” where missionaries had to rely on the goodwill of the white man if pastoral work was to proceed.

One long-serving Spiritan, Fr. Gerhard Steffen, recalls a bitter experience when, at gunpoint, he and the little flock that had gathered for Sunday Mass within the white man’s land were ordered off the farm. Quietly, the community left the farm and celebrated Mass outside the farm fence. Commenting on the same apartheid period, Fr. Bernhard Wiederkehr noted that it was not an easy task to be the advocates of the unpopular blacks, whom the white man regarded as less human. The more one became involved in the welfare of the poor, the more one became the enemy of the white man. But there was no other option. “The

...evangelization implied taking tough and risky political choices.

...it was not an easy task to be the advocates of the unpopular blacks...

...they gave hope of a better future to people who were downtrodden...

poor were our friends,”⁵ he added. Solidarity with the poor is at the heart of Spiritan mission. “We must make ourselves the advocates, the supporters, and the defenders of the weak and the little ones against all who oppress them,” wrote Francis Libermann, the co-founder of the Spiritan Congregation, in 1849.⁶

Despite these enormous difficulties, Spiritans as well as many other missionaries continued to make a strong missionary impact through preaching, personal witness, visitation, catechesis, and through the construction of schools and health centers. In particular, they gave hope of a better future to people who were downtrodden by the oppressive apartheid regime.

NEW APPROACHES TO PASTORAL WORK IN THE NEW SOUTH AFRICA

A brighter future finally dawned with the collapse of the apartheid regime and the swearing in of Nelson Mandela as the President of South Africa on May 10, 1994. The incoming Government of National Unity ensured that no one was left out. Those outside would be there by choice. South Africa became the “Rainbow Nation,” to use the phrase coined by Archbishop Desmond Tutu.

NEW FORMS OF POVERTY

...can best be understood as a privilege and an added responsibility for all South Africans...

Though the country was finally liberated, poverty was not eliminated. As Zaba Mbanjwa points out, “the collapse of apartheid in South Africa has cleared the ground for all the people to discover the other forms of suffering that might still hold back the progress and attainment of the realistic dream for the nation.”⁷ The liberation attained in 1994 can best be understood as a privilege and an added responsibility for all South Africans as they are called to a unified force, vision, and method in combating new forms of suffering.⁸ Nelson Mandela in his “Long Walk to Freedom” reflects on his experience of new found freedom in South Africa:

I have walked that long road to freedom. I have tried not to falter; I have made missteps along the way. But I have discovered the secret that after climbing a great hill, one only finds that there are many hills to climb. I have taken a moment to rest, to steal a view of the glorious vista that surrounds me, to look back on the distance I have come. But I can only rest for a moment, for with freedom come responsibilities, and I dare not linger, for my walk is not yet ended.⁹

Several years after the end of the oppressive regime, South Africa continues to experience new forms of poverty and suffering. Pope Benedict refers to new kinds of deserts in modern society:

the deserts of poverty, hunger, abandonment, loneliness and the desert of God's darkness.¹⁰ There is therefore a great need for the Church and for all God's disciples "to lead people out of these deserts towards the place of life, towards friendship with the Son of God who gives life in abundance."¹¹ Fr. Heinz Kuckertz told me that, in his opinion, the call to launch into the deep is now more valid for Spiritans than ever before in the context of contemporary South Africa, where deserts continue to emerge and where human dignity and the goal of human life are often undermined.

THE PRESENT SPIRITAN INVOLVEMENT

...Spiritans are involved in a wide variety of ministries.

At present, Spiritans are working in five dioceses in South Africa: Bethlehem, Durban, Johannesburg, Dundee, and Kroonstad. In these various dioceses, Spiritans are involved in a wide variety of ministries.

Parish Work

Of the twenty Spiritans working in South Africa today, more than half are working in parishes. This involves different ministries:

Proclamation and Teaching

By definition, proclamation is the systematic and verbal announcement of the Good News. "This is the time of fulfillment. The Kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the Gospel," said Jesus at the beginning of mission (cf. Mark 1:14-15). Commenting on this passage, Fr. Jude Nnorom added:

...more than half are working in parishes.

Proclamation takes different forms in addition to verbal announcement. Like Jesus whose life was Good News, our life itself should be proclamation. Our Spiritan communities should be the living Gospel and a school of how people ought to live. Today more than ever we are called to live 'cor unum et anima una.' Confreres may find this uncomfortable, but we cannot avoid what is central. This is the way of doing mission; there are no short cuts. This is the only way we can be credible in the proclamation of the Good News.¹²

Fr. Heinz Gibis talked in terms of teaching:

I see my missionary vocation here in South Africa as trying to teach people the meaning of freedom that was attained in 1994. One cannot take it for granted that all people know the meaning of democracy. There is need for us to help people to use their freedom in a responsible manner. Democracy does not mean waiting for the Government to feed people and to receive handouts. As Nelson Mandela once said, 'with freedom, come responsibilities.' People need to be empowered

*to utilize their potentialities. The grassroots people need to be encouraged and to be seen as building blocks of a democratic society.*¹³

Administration of Sacraments

Every confrere spoke of the administration of the sacraments as something inseparable from the life of the priest. The perception of a layperson is interesting in this regard:

...“they have made us to be Spiritans as we have made them to be Zulus.”

*I like Spiritans for their dedication and commitment to the people in our parish. Since I was young, Spiritans have always worked in our parish. They baptized my parents, my sisters and brothers, myself, and now they are baptizing my nieces and nephews. They are always there for us. They celebrate life with us. I have never heard a complaint about their availability to celebrate Mass, funerals, memorials, and so on. They are always in our midst. They have made us to be Spiritans as we have made them to be Zulus.*¹⁴

Erick Ncengani’s remarks show how close Spiritans are to the people – “they have made us to be Spiritans as we have made them to be Zulus.” As Libermann once instructed his missionaries: “We consider ourselves their servants; we devote all our lives to them, according to the plans of the Divine Master.” The attitude and approach are ‘incarnational’: “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us” (John 1:14).

Home Visitation

Home visitation is an important aspect of Spiritan ministry in South Africa. As many people are unable to go to Church because of HIV/AIDS, sickness, or infirmity, confreres generally set aside time for visitation where they bring Christ to the people. Fr. Bernhard Wiederkehr had this to say:

...if you make a visit to their homes, you come face to face with the reality of people dying of HIV and AIDS, people who are hungry...

*Visiting people in their homes brings one closer to the lived reality and sufferings of people. The impression one may easily get when ones sees people at the parish is that they are doing well. They are well dressed and look smart. Yet, if you make a visit to their homes, you come face to face with the reality of people dying of HIV and AIDS, people who are hungry, broken families, orphans etc. By visiting people in their homes, we become daily sacraments to them. We bring inner joy to those who have lost hope.*¹⁵

Fr. Joseph Nnadi reflected further on the importance of this aspect of his ministry:

South Africa has a wounded past. The wounds inflicted by apartheid cannot be healed within a short period of time. Ten to fifteen years is not enough to think that the country is redeemed. Many people have not come to terms or reconciled

...There is a deep hunger
and thirst for God out
there.

*with the past. There is still suspicion and hatred on account of tribal or racial difference. Wherever you go, if you are attentive, you realize that there are xenophobic tendencies. There are people in the villages who have never been asked about the past. As a priest and a missionary, I see my task as visiting them in their homestead, raising these issues with them, and opening the way to freedom and happiness.*¹⁶

Fr. Jude Nnorom, a former parish priest at Vrede, added: "There is a deep hunger and thirst for God out there. People have broken hearts. Simply being with them is a source of great hope. I see this as essential to Spiritan mission if we are to be faithful to our founders Poullart des Places and Francis Libermann."¹⁷

HIV/AIDS

The pandemic of HIV/AIDS and its prevalence in South Africa is matter of serious concern for confreres. Fr. Nnorom, currently superior of the District of South Africa, summed up the views of many Spiritans in the following remarks:

*This disease is the devil of our time. It is terrorizing and crippling our society and continues to hamper human development. Many able, educated people who are guardians of their families are dying each day. Innocent children are deprived of their parents at an early age. Their future is shattered. It is essential for us in our ministry to address this issue and to attempt to give hope to people, especially to those who are victims of the disease and to those who are orphaned by it.*¹⁸

...grandparents are often left
to take care of the children...

Fr. Michael Klein, the pastor at Mapumulo in KwaZulu-Natal, pointed out that foremost among those victimized are younger people in their twenties, thirties and forties. The grandparents are often left to take care of the children and carry the burden in their old age. Like many Spiritans, he sees the fallout from HIV/AIDS as a particular challenge and responsibility in his pastoral activities.

Promoting the Values of the Kingdom

Violence and crime are daily realities for many in contemporary South Africa and, sadly, appear to be on the increase. Fr. Joseph Nnadi, once a victim of violent robbery, stressed the need to address the matter openly:

We cannot keep quiet over so many cases of killings, violence, and injustice taking place in our society. Crime rate is so high in this country. What is the cause of this? Those who are involved in such atrocities are not people from outside this country! They are with us; they pray with us; they are our children and people whom we know very well. How can

*we address this issue which continues to bring fear among people? This is an area of mission. We have to talk about this in our interaction with people.*¹⁹

An added area of concern for several Spiritans is the fact that abortion has been made more freely available to women since 1996, just two years after the inauguration of the new South Africa. Proclaiming and fostering the sacredness of human life is therefore an essential aspect of contemporary ministry.

Specialized Ministries

Fr. Stan Augustijns shared a brief history of his experience as a chaplain of refugees and asylum seekers (Refugee Pastoral Care) in the Archdiocese of Durban, a project which began in February, 2002:

...refugees and asylum seekers are the poor and abandoned of our day.

*Accompanying refugees and asylum seekers is not an easy ministry as one is involved with people who are victims of injustice, violence, and disorder, people who are in despair and who see no hope for the future. They need material, emotional, and spiritual support. This is not easy in South Africa as the society looks at foreigners with a xenophobic eye.*²⁰

Fr. Stan sees his apostolate as manifestly Spiritan; refugees and asylum seekers are the poor and abandoned of our day. Our Congregation was founded to cater for such people who need our compassion and love.

In another specialized ministry Fr. Peter Sodje is chaplain at Westville Correctional Facility, of one of the country's biggest prisons, located in the city of Durban. With some 13,000 inmates, the prison has five large wings that include a young offenders section and a female prisoners' unit. He described his work as both challenging and fulfilling:

...I had the joy of organizing the sacrament of confirmation in the prison...

*I find joy in encountering prisoners who for me have become simply friends. Like any other person, they need our attention, care, and love. Since I am a frequent visitor, I am now their relative and companion. About three years ago, I had the joy of organizing the sacrament of confirmation in the prison, a ceremony which was presided over by Cardinal Wilfrid Napier. It was a historical moment that brought joy to all the prisoners at Westville Correctional Facility.*²¹

CONCLUSION

My journey of discovery into contemporary Spiritan ministry in South Africa has convinced me that our Spiritan brothers remain faithful to the charism of the Congregation to "evangelize the

poor” and that they do so in creative and inspiring ways. A simple lifestyle, solidarity with the poor and the marginalized, heartfelt compassion for the suffering and the victims of injustice, and a passion to create a more equal, peaceful, and inclusive society have been hallmarks of the disciples of Poullart des Places and Libermann and these are clearly at the heart of Spiritan mission in South Africa today.

Endnotes

- ¹ Napier, Cardinal Wilfrid, “SA Church’s Challenges in Democracy’s Second Decade,” in *The Southern Cross*, April 19-25, 2006, p.9.
- ² Interview with South African Spiritan, Michael Nkosinathi, C.S.Sp., from the parish of Vrede, North Eastern Free State.
- ³ *Spiritans Rule of Life*, 1987, no. 4.
- ⁴ Brian J. & Denis P. (eds.), *The Catholic Church in Contemporary South Africa*, Cluster Publications, Pietermaritzburg, 1999, p.151.
- ⁵ Interview with Bernhard Wiederkehr, C.S.Sp., Glen Ash, June 12, 2006.
- ⁶ Quoted in *Spiritans Rule of Life*, 1987, no. 14.
- ⁷ Zaba Mbanjwa, “The Impact of Catholic Social Teaching on the Development of South African Black Theology: A Look at Three Theologians (Mokgethi Motlhabi, Buti Tlhangale and Mandelinkosi Zwane).” Unpublished dissertation submitted for Masters Degree at the University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg, South Africa, 2002, p.103.
- ⁸ Mbanjwa, Zaba, loc.cit.
- ⁹ Nelson Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom*, Little, Brown and Co., U.S.A.,1994, p.544
- ¹⁰ Cf. Homily of Pope Benedict XVI at the inaugural Mass of his pontificate, St. Peter’s Square, Sunday, April 24, 2005.
- ¹¹ Pope Benedict XVI, op.cit.
- ¹² Interview with Jude Nnorom, C.S.Sp., at Laval House, March 12, 2006.
- ¹³ Interview with Heinz Gibis, C.S.Sp., at Laval House, July 24, 2006.
- ¹⁴ Interview with Erick Ncengani, Kwa Mpumuza Parish, September 2, 2006. Kwa Mpumuza Parish is one of the parishes run by Spiritans in the Archdiocese of Durban.
- ¹⁵ Interview with Bernhard Wiederkehr, C.S.Sp., June 12, 2006.
- ¹⁶ Interview with Joseph Nnadi, C.S.Sp., at Laval House, Pietermaritzburg, July18, 2006.
- ¹⁷ Interview with Jude Nnorom, C.S.Sp., at Laval House, March 12, 2006.
- ¹⁸ Interview with Jude Nnorom, C.S.Sp., at Laval House, March 12, 2006.
- ¹⁹ Interview with Joseph Nnadi, C.S.Sp., at Laval House, July 18, 2006.
- ²⁰ Interview with Stan Augustjins, C.S.Sp., in the form of a written questionnaire.
- ²¹ Interview with Fr. Peter Sodje, C.S.Sp., at Laval House, July 12, 2008.