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A NEW SPRING FOR THE CONGREGATION¹

Frans Timmermans,
C.S.Sp.

A native of the Netherlands and a former Superior General of the Spiritan Congregation (1974-1986), Frans Timmermans served as a missionary in the Central African Republic from 1961 – 1974. Working in partnership with other missionary groups to promote collaboration between local churches and missionary congregations, Fr. Timmermans served also as President of SEDOS while in Rome. He subsequently took up an appointment as Refugee Coordinator at the Secretariat of IMBISA (Inter-regional Meeting of the Bishops of Southern Africa). More recently he has served as National Director of the Pontifical Mission Societies in the Netherlands and a member of the Dutch Missionary Council. Fr. Timmermans was awarded an honorary doctorate degree by Duquesne University in 1975.

*(Translation: Vincent O’Toole,
C.S.Sp.)*

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THE SPRINGTIME OF THE VATICAN COUNCIL

For me, and doubtless for many others of my generation, the years 1960-1970 were years full of promise. Everywhere, we felt that the world was undergoing a profound change and, as young missionaries, we were setting out for a recently independent Africa. Everything seemed possible – the Council had opened up opportunities that were beyond our dreams. The Church now wanted to be a servant, to share the joys and sufferings of the whole world. Mgr. Lefebvre and his fixation with the past seemed so out of touch. Spiritans were preparing for a General Chapter that would answer the appeal of Pope Paul VI to look again at our biblical roots, which were the source of our charism, to be able to answer the needs of our world. It was a tremendous grace to have lived through this springtide, which unfortunately turned out to be so short. If I retrace for you the path that the Congregation followed from 1968-1986, I must be careful to put it in its context. It was a period which could not be compared to what went before or what followed on afterwards. It was a pivotal period, beginning with the Council and finishing with the approval of our new Spiritan Rule of Life.

THE GENERAL CHAPTER OF 1968

It was a time of liberation, a new beginning, but it could so easily have turned into a disaster. I will never forget the crisis which exploded in the General Chapter in what could be called the “failed coup” of Mgr. Lefebvre. He was profoundly unhappy with the preparations for the Chapter and the way that events were unfolding, so he tried to force the hands of the capitulants by insisting on taking over the presidency of the Central Commission. In this way, he could control and direct the way the Chapter would go. But the Chapter rejected this by vote so he left the assembly, but not before accusing the capitulants of infidelity to the doctrine of the Church and the charism of the Congregation. He was leaving, he said, because he could not in conscience take part in the betrayal that was being committed by the Chapter which was manipulated by a minority.

There was great confusion, doubts were sown, and the Congregation could easily have disintegrated at that moment. It was Fr. Lécuyer who was the providential instrument that preserved the unity of our Congregation. As a renowned theologian and a confidant of Pope Paul VI, he managed to reassure those

who had been upset by the accusation of infidelity. During the audience at the Vatican which concluded the Chapter (and at which Mgr. Lefebvre was present), the Pope was full of praise for Fr. Lécuyer. Eventually, only one Spiritan left the Congregation to follow Mgr. Lefebvre.

A DIFFICULT TASK

If Fr. Lécuyer had the distinction of having saved the Congregation in this moment of crisis, it was far from being a foregone conclusion. It is true that the great majority of confreres were happy to accept the new orientations of the 1968 Chapter, but there was still a good number who partially accepted at least some of the ideas of Mgr. Lefebvre. Outwardly courteous and likeable, he had considerable charm. He had had an impressive ecclesiastical career, so the atmosphere of distrust that he had sown at the Chapter was not easily dissipated.

In the excitement of the moment, the capitulants perhaps underestimated how difficult it would be to convey the fruit of the Chapter to the circumscriptions. They also saw in the choosing of the General Assistants an opportunity to rehabilitate some eminent confreres who had been marginalized by Mgr. Lefebvre and to honor some of the prophetic voices. But in doing this, they sometimes set aside the preferences expressed by their Provinces of origin. So, in his Council, Fr. Lécuyer had some very original and talented people, but this strength also proved to be a weakness in some ways; they were never really a team amongst themselves and with the Superior General, so their impact on the Congregation as a whole was limited.

After a period of very strong centralization under the Lefebvre administration, the Congregation was determined to apply resolutely the newly acquired principle of subsidiarity. Decentralization was implemented at the heart of our juridical structures and the larger Provinces, above all, put it into practice in choosing priorities, in the formation of candidates, and in personnel policies.

The General Administration had lost much of its power and now concentrated on the new role that had been assigned to it by the Chapter – that of “animation.” In the years 1968-1974, the documents coming from the Generalate showed a big effort to publicize the relevant Church documents of the post-Council period, the general guidelines regarding mission and religious life that were coming from the Union of Superiors General and the meetings of SEDOS – a center of study and documentation set up by missionary congregations after the Council.

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“*Directives and Decisions*,” the document that drew together the conclusions and decisions of the 1968 Chapter, became an important tool for the revitalization of the Congregation.

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THE SEARCH FOR A UNIFIED VISION

But the reality often proved to be intractable and unmanageable. The strong emphasis put on the essentially missionary identity of the Congregation exacerbated, in some places, the contrast between works which were missionary in the strict sense and those which were not. Choices that had to be made in the light of our re-defined priorities sometimes led to conflicts and internal discord. Young confreres in formation, excited by the new perspectives, also joined the debate, particularly in regard to the distribution of personnel and first appointments. Old habits died hard and the ranks closed to defend established positions and traditions. What could be done to counteract this?

This was the thinking behind the choice of themes for the General Chapter of 1974: unity in diversity, solidarity, and the place of our particular mission in the universal mission of the Church.

This Chapter also insisted that the General Council should be a team, united around the Superior General. Being elected first, he would then have a say in the choice of Assistants. And I can bear out that the group elected in 1974 was indeed a solid team, fraternal, enthusiastic, united, and rich in competence and experience. This time, the capitulants had avoided electing candidates contrary to the preferences of their Provinces of origin. The General Council was expected to lead the Congregation as a community, as a team. It was to remain in touch with the grass roots as far as possible, be attentive to the reality of what was being lived by the confreres, gather together what could inspire the entire Congregation, and look for answers on the basis of the lived experienced on the ground.

This resulted in a new style of government at several levels:

- The General Council paid considerable attention to its internal cohesion, and tried to be a real community of living, reflecting, and acting together.
- There were extended periods of reflection and common study twice a year, special times of prayer and celebration as a Council; visitations were prepared together in dialogue with the confreres to be visited.

- A new type of visitation emerged, usually of several Assistants at a time, with the Superior General joining them for the conclusion.
- A new system of conveying information evolved, where the themes to be developed were first of all researched on the ground.

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The Ecclesial Context

The year 1974 was still in the immediate post-Council period. A new wind was blowing, both in the choosing of bishops and in theological and pastoral research. The reception of the new General Council by Paul VI remains an unforgettable event – very cordial, a minimum of protocol, no admonishments, and plenty of encouragement. The new Prefect of the Congregation for Religious was Cardinal Pironio from Argentina. A man of great warmth and encouragement for General Councils, he was a much appreciated guest at our meetings and we listened carefully to what he had to say on the subjects that preoccupied us. There were now two Secretaries (direct assistants to the Cardinal) at the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples: Mgr. Gantin for Africa and Mgr. Lourdasamy for Asia. The latter was the brother of the famous theologian and missiologist Amalor Pavadas, who was later killed in a tragic accident. When bishops came for their “ad limina” visits they found they were talking to men who were well informed about the problems that faced them. The missionary congregations also had easy access to them.

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There were several bishops of high caliber from newly independent Africa, such as Zoa of Yaoundé, Ndayen of Bangui, Amissah and Sarpong from Ghana, de Souza from Dahomey, Hurley from South Africa, Cardinals Malula of Kinshasa, Zoungrana of Burkina Faso, and do Nascimento of Angola – to name but a few. In Brazil there was Cardinal Arns, the two Lorscheiters, Helder Camera, and Luciano Mendes. It was a joy and a privilege to be able to meet and share with them. The Episcopal Conference of Brazil had a number of world-famous theologians. There was a pastoral reflection that was both extensive and coordinated. The Conference of Religious men and women, both in Brazil and in the whole of Latin America, had an influence that was being felt way beyond the limits of their continent.

At the level of General Councils, there were the Unions of Superiors General and General Assistants where experiences were shared and, when necessary, actions coordinated. The missionary congregations had SEDOS (Servizio di Documentazione et di Studio), where a Spiritan, Fr. Bill Jenkinson, was the greatly

appreciated Secretary General for 12 years. In short, there was a climate that was both stimulating and open.

In the Provinces and Districts, one found the same concern for renewal and research in the face of many new challenges: evangelization and development, new missionary situations, internationalization of teams, new forms of belonging to the Congregation, questions of justice and peace, formation of our candidates, renewal of the management of our older Provinces (the famous principle of “rotation” of personnel). It was a real pleasure to set out on long visitations and to share the life of the confreres in the field.

But there were also crisis situations: Angola, torn apart by an unending war; South Africa, where the struggle against apartheid was continuously growing and where the position of the Catholic hierarchy was not always clear or firm. Those directly involved in pastoral ministry were also often divided as to which path to follow. The old and new worlds were colliding and people committed to the Church sometimes found themselves on different sides. Attacks on the Church from outside were painful and often unjust, especially in Angola. Even if there had been mistakes in the past, the missionaries were now the only outsiders to stay with the people, sharing their poverty and helplessness, loyal in their continuing support.

There was also the Province of Portugal which was suffering in its passage to a new age, but courageously went forward, particularly by means of LIAM (a new missionary movement), where it kept in touch with many different groups of young people. The influx of millions of refugees from Mozambique and Angola made great demands on the Portuguese Spiritans.

A CHANGE OF EMPHASIS IN MISSIONARY AND RELIGIOUS THOUGHT

It was very clear that we had now entered a new era of mission, above all in Africa. The “local Church” there was not very old; many were still at the stage of initial consolidation. It was a stage when the missionaries were more identified with these Churches which they had helped to found than with their missionary congregation. The missionary personnel were now diversifying, following the call of the Bishops. A local clergy was coming into existence. The Vatican Council had stressed that the local Church had the primary responsibility for mission in their area, not the missionary institute that had founded this Church.

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The missionary congregations were also coming to realize how much they had in common, in practice, with each other; they were often founded around the same time to meet the same needs. Very many preferred to emphasize what they had in common rather than their particular features, for fear of doing harm to the unity of the apostolic body. On visitation, one could sometimes detect a certain irritation when it was suggested that confreres reflect on the charism particular to our Congregation. The visitors noticed that familiarity with the thoughts and orientations of our Founders was quite poor. They were rarely considered as points of reference. For the most part, members of the Congregation had not been led to discover during their formation the completely original intuition of Fr. Libermann, who was able to unite in his vision both a missionary mysticism and a missionary strategy.

There was another important change of perspective, originating above all in Latin America. The primary goal of mission was no longer seen as the implantation of the Church; it was rather the establishment of the Kingdom of God – good news from a God who frees and delivers. Religious life now had a prophetic role to play: not so much in being a part of the hierarchical structure as in constantly calling for the evangelical conversion of these same structures. In religious life, the accent moved from a personal piety towards the primacy of a witness of solidarity with the poor. And this pendulum at times swung from one extreme to the other.

The familiar framework of religious life, structured around prayer in common and the traditions peculiar to the institute, lost its importance and was replaced by a new model, that of personal and community witness in the service of the poor, through concrete acts of solidarity and availability, by a challenging lifestyle which would highlight the difference with the oppressors, or with those who lacked the courage to live up to their responsibilities. There were individuals and communities who adopted an extreme style of poverty and self-deprivation, often misunderstood by the local hierarchy. Sometimes, these “prophets” were a source of inspiration for their confreres, sometimes a source of division. For this renewal of religious life, people went to new sources that were used by all and were readily available both on the missions and at home while on holiday: sessions of reflection, courses of ongoing formation, an abundant literature, and the living example of Latin America. The new wind was strong, refreshing, and enjoyable.

But unfortunately, there was a tendency to by-pass the sources that could be found in our own back garden, the heritage of our Founders and our tradition. How could we once again present this treasure to our brothers and sisters in a new context and from a new angle?

FROM THE “SPIRITAN STUDIES GROUP” TO THE “CENTER FOR RESEARCH AND ANIMATION”

In 1975, a “Spiritan Studies Group” was set up around Fr. Joseph Lécuyer, who was living in the French Seminary. They produced a publication known as “*Spiritan Papers*.” It started as a study group whose principal task was the publication of Spiritan texts but, after the General Chapter of 1980, it moved towards a role of animation, in close collaboration with the General Council and confreres in the field. In 1982, this group was replaced by the Spiritan Center for Research and Animation, under the direction of Frs. Alphonse Gilbert and Myles Fay. New publications were undertaken and Fr. Gilbert, helped by other confreres, traveled frequently to Provinces and Districts to lead retreats and study sessions on Libermann. Missionary renewal had to go hand in hand with an interior renewal. All this had a considerable impact and helped the confreres to rediscover our hidden treasures. The history of the Congregation was re-written in a remarkable way by Fr. Henry Koren and Fr. Paul Coulon opened up new and exciting paths to make our shared history more readily available. He was joined later by the team of “*Mémoire Spiritain*”; a widespread effort began to put in writing the story of the past.

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We must also mention here the beatifications of Jacques Laval and Daniel Brottier, in 1979 and 1984 respectively, which were opportunities for all of us to give thanks to God for our Spiritan Congregation which was recognized in this way by the Church as a way to apostolic sanctity.

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The Turning Point and the Landmarks

The new and radical re-direction of missionary and religious theory and practice sometimes created considerable disarray. The compass no longer worked and the familiar landmarks by which we had previously steered were not easy to detect. *Evangelii Nuntiandi* had called for integral development and we did our best to respond. We committed ourselves enthusiastically to all sorts of development projects; in the euphoria of the first decade of independence in Africa, everything seemed to be possible. Unfortunately, we were soon to discover that the models of development adopted were quite often faulty and doomed to failure.

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Where policies of confiscating schools and health centers were introduced, new forms of service to the community were also introduced, and the resulting finance that became available was now invested in training centers for catechists and lay leaders. All this meant that strictly sacramental ministry had to be rethought; a new balance had to be found, but this was not always done successfully. What were the priorities to be now?

This was also the time of “personal projects” for those who saw themselves as prophets and committed themselves to works of their own choosing. Sometimes, for example in war situations like Angola, this was quite understandable. The dramatic events in Haiti forced our confreres, exiled with their people, to adopt political positions that were often disapproved of by the bishops. During the Biafran war, new aid organizations were set up by Spiritans which continued to function after the end of the war.

At the same time, many confreres underwent personal crises and left the Congregation. In some Provinces there was a veritable hemorrhage. These confreres were often those who had received a specialized training with a view to posts of leadership or formation in their circumscriptions. The system of formation itself was closely scrutinized but solutions were not always found to the new challenges. Many students left and the number of vocations declined rapidly. Situations differed according to countries, which made it difficult to give general guidelines or directives. The General Chapter of 1980 devoted much time to the problem and, in 1982, an international congress of Spiritan formators was held at Saverne. It asked that formators meet on a regular basis according to region. The first task was to discuss, analyze, and identify the cause of these problems; subsequent Chapters could then give guidelines and directives. At the same time, the General Council initiated a reflection on all these themes in *Information/Documentation*, in dialogue with the confreres; this reflection was then continued during visits to the circumscriptions.

NEW OPENINGS

This shrinking of personnel did not divert the General Administration from trying to answer new challenges as recommended by the Chapter. The accent was now moving from mission territories to what were referred to as “missionary situations.” Young confreres were very keen to get involved in such works, rather than continuing to follow the traditional paths by replacing those who had gone before them. Efforts were made to find a new form of presence in the *Oeuvre d’Auteuil* at the service of young and abandoned people. Commitments were taken on in Yugoslavia, and in Europe and the United States

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working with migrants, drug addicts, and refugees. We tried to look again at the nature of our involvement in education, not without considerable tension.

At the same time we could not ignore the call for more first evangelization that came from the Chapter of 1968. Finally, an old dream of Libermann himself was realized—we went to Asia. In answer to a persistent request from the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, a young and dynamic team was sent to the so-called “tribal peoples” of central Pakistan, a mission that proved to be extremely difficult and unrewarding. We built up our presence in other Muslim countries, Algeria and Mauritania, trying to live fully the dialogue that the Council had asked for.

All this was not without internal tensions, for many confreres could not understand what they saw as the abandonment of our traditional works in favor of the ideas of a passing fashion. In fact, the Congregation was stretched to the limits of its possibilities; it was only by a concerted and coordinated effort of the entire Congregation that we were able to undertake such commitments.

CO-RESPONSIBILITY AND INTERNATIONALITY

If the Chapter of 1974 had insisted on co-responsibility to counter-balance the excessive centrifugal movement after the Chapter of 1968, the time had now come to set up structures to make this possible. Enlarged Councils were introduced for an assessment of progress between General Chapters and existing regional meetings were increased in number. The General Council was already responsible for all first appointments.

In this way, solidarity was given a new form with a view to a sharing of personnel and finance. The first international teams saw the light of day in Pakistan, Ethiopia, Yugoslavia, and Paraguay, all under the direct responsibility of the General Council. The General Administration was re-discovering its role of coordination, while fully respecting the principle of subsidiarity.

NEW FOUNDATIONS AND PROVINCES

Another feature of missionary evolution had a very important place in the period 1968-1986: the young Churches were themselves becoming missionary. They were forming young missionaries to send them elsewhere. This raised serious questions for the old missionary institutes, and there were some hesitations. If they accepted candidates locally would it not interfere with the evolution of specifically African forms of religious and missionary life? Would it not take away good candidates who would

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otherwise have entered the diocesan seminaries? It was discussed at length by Generalates in Rome and they finally opted to open their doors to candidates from Africa (the situation was different in Latin America where there was already a long tradition of religious life).

Spiritans already had a sizeable group of African confreres in Nigeria, with 5-6 years of autonomous development since the expulsion of the Irish confreres in 1969. They had succeeded in organizing their own administration and houses of formation and they already had many candidates in training. Soon their first missionaries were ready to depart; the General Council would have preferred these young confreres to join international teams, but they were anxious to take these first steps on their own so that they could give their work a distinctively African character from the start. Since then, they have deployed to 26 different countries in Latin America, Asia, Oceania, Europe, the United States, and elsewhere in Africa.

Inspired by this experience, the General Council decided to give every encouragement henceforth to a genuine inculturation of the Spiritan way of life. Unlike other congregations, we set up autonomous structures called "Foundations," alongside the old circumscriptions but independent of them. Houses of formation were increased in number, despite the considerable cost involved, to ensure that at least the initial training could be done in one's own cultural environment. Once the idea of these vocations had been fully accepted in the old missionary circumscriptions, the General Administration tried to encourage them, with the generous support of the whole Congregation, and lead them towards full autonomy. The Lord blessed these efforts and the Congregation is now rapidly expanding in Africa. Beginning with the second mandate of our administration, there have always been African Assistants on the General Council, dedicated Spiritans who have made an important contribution to the Africanization of the Spiritan charism.

THE SPIRITAN RULE OF LIFE

All this development was crowned by the approval of our revised Rule of Life. It was the result of a prolonged exercise which had begun with the *Directives and Decisions* of 1968. Many confreres took part. The contributions from Africa and Latin America were significant, especially in the interpretation of the ends of the Congregation according to the writings of Libermann. How can the missionary vision of our Founders be translated for today's world and for Spiritans of different cultural backgrounds? Who are the poor and most abandoned to whom we are now sent,

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and what type of spirituality should be our support? These new insights gave us a dynamic inspiration, especially in Chapter 2 which is devoted to mission. This text aimed at putting into words the aggiornamento to which the Church was calling us and which we tried to put into practice during the 18 years of this period of “experimentation.”

This concluded the crucial period from 1968-1986. Personally, I lived it as a new spring in the life of the Congregation in spite of its limitations, a period of renewal, of new hope. If the future of the Congregation is difficult to foretell for Europe, a new period of youth and vitality has opened elsewhere, especially in Africa. A new sap has arisen from the old tree, whose roots were deep in the plan of God, a plan that was recognized and nurtured by our Founders and their companions. We must continue to read all these developments in the context of the signs of the times and remain faithful to these, lest our love should turn cold.

CONCLUSION

So the publication of the *Spiritan Rule of Life* also marks a new beginning, a new departure, even more difficult than the path that opened up in 1968. The present missionary period is marked by the immense suffering of an Africa torn apart, where hope quickly evaporates, and by a disenchanted Latin America, where the voices of prophets seem to have been partially stifled. Ours is a world that is even harder and more implacable than in the past, after the victory of a heartless and unchallenged capitalism. But our mission is still to question it in the name of the Gospel.

Even in the Church the spring seems far away. Much has changed for the religious orders and the missionary institutes. The Roman dicasteries today look more like organs of control than those older brothers who used to encourage us on the road to the future in the period after the Council. The liberation movement coming from Latin America seems to have been broken. Often courage is swept away by anxiety and the paths towards renewal are more difficult to open up.

But this must not stop us believing in the future and the liberating force of the Gospel. There are still signs of hope and promise. The Holy Spirit remains at the heart of the Church and we continue to be called as his instruments – “light as a feather, carried on his breath,” as Libermann used to say. We pray for the grace to embrace this challenge.

FRANS TIMMERMANS,
C.S.SP.

Footnotes

¹This was a presentation given by the author at a Colloquium in Paris to mark the 300th anniversary of the founding of the Spiritan Congregation. The Colloquium, entitled “Les Spiritains –trois siècles d’histoire missionnaire (1703-2003),” took place at the Institut Catholique from November 14-16, 2002.