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CONSTRUCTING A SPIRITAN SPIRITUALITY OF JUSTICE, PEACE, AND THE INTEGRITY OF CREATION

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A native of Ireland, John Kilcrann joined the Spiritans in 1966. Following ordination in 1976, he worked in Brazil for 20 years where he was actively engaged at local and national levels in various Church-linked Justice, Peace, and Integrity of Creation organizations and projects. He graduated with a Masters degree from Fordham University, New York, and a doctorate from the Catholic Theological Union, Chicago. He is currently Coordinator for JPIC at the Spiritan Generalate in Rome.

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A mission-based spirituality

Because of our charism, Spiritan spirituality and mission are very closely connected. We can only analyze our spirituality, and specifically a Spiritan spirituality of Justice, Peace, and the Integrity of Creation (JPIC), in the context of Spiritan mission. In recent decades a more concentrated reflection on the spirituality of mission generally has taken place. This, without doubt, has helped us to search deeper and to articulate the salient characteristics of our own Spiritan spirituality. The I/D (No. 60), published by the General Council in February 2007, points to the principal sources of this spirituality: the legacy left us by our founders and “*our response to mission situations over the generations.*”¹ While drawing from, and building on, the richness of what we have inherited from des Places and Libermann, the concrete situations in which Spiritans have ministered and are currently ministering continue to be a source of a dynamic, challenging, and life-giving spirituality. Only very gradually are we becoming aware of how much a Spiritan face this spirituality really has.

Over the last forty years or so, we have also gradually become very conscious of how central JPIC is in mission. Much has been written and said on this topic. An emerging Spiritan JPIC spirituality also owes much to advances in theological thinking on mission over this time span. The official document of the 1971 Synod of Bishops gave an authoritative stamp of approval to the principle of the centrality of JPIC to mission. Specifically, it commented that “*action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel, or, in other words, of the Church’s mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation.*”² At the nearer end of the time-scale in question, theologians such as Bevens and Schroeder show how generally unanimous this thinking is today: “*... working for justice in the world is an integral part of the church’s missionary work, equal in importance to witnessing to and proclaiming the gospel and to establishing Christian communities of shared faith, friendship and worship... Like the prophets of the Hebrew scriptures, and like Jesus’ ministry in the New Testament, the church’s mission is about cooperating with God in the call of all people always and everywhere, to justice, peace and the integrity of creation.*”³

An emerging Spiritan JPIC spirituality

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It is in this context that we can observe the gradual emergence and ongoing construction in recent years of a Spiritan JPIC spirituality. There are very definite milestones which can be pointed to along the road. Without doubt, the publication of the Spiritan Rule of Life [SRL (1987)] and the General Chapters of Itaicí (1992), Maynooth (1998), and Torre d'Aguilha (2004) made a very specific contribution to the development and gradual growth of a Spiritan JPIC spirituality. We will have an opportunity to look at this in greater detail later. Other international meetings promoted by the Congregation also made a significant contribution in this area - two examples, amongst several others, include the meeting for Spiritans working among Muslims, which took place in Banjul, the Gambia, in June 2002, and the meeting for Spiritans working with Refugees, Asylum Seekers, and Displaced Peoples, which took place in Durban, South Africa, last April. At the level of provinces and circumscriptions, chapters and meetings likewise have made an important contribution to the development of a JPIC spirituality. Courses and sabbaticals undertaken by confreres also helped significantly within the Congregation to propagate an understanding of the outlines of such a spirituality.

Perhaps one of our most valuable discoveries during recent decades, which helped to develop a Spiritan JPIC spirituality, has been the methodology used during the last three General Chapters. This placed a special emphasis on the grass-roots experience in mission of Spiritans today, and especially so of confreres working in what is frequently described as frontier situations. Such situations are usually characterized by injustice, oppression, marginalization, and great human suffering and deprivation. Since Itaicí, the first part of the General Chapters has been given over to the presentation of "significant experiences" by Chapter delegates. Such presentations brought the context in which Spiritans work right into the center of the Chapter. As each Chapter unfolded, these experiences have been reflected on in small groups, discussed in plenary sessions, and fed into proposals for principles and directives which were subsequently voted upon by the Chapter members. In other words, what is voted on is not something theoretical but springs from our lived experience with the poor and marginalized. Following the General Chapters, many provinces, groups, and communities have used this same methodology to reflect on their mission commitment.

Themes in Spiritan JPIC spirituality

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This General Chapter methodology has provided us also with the opportunity to read and reread our charism in the light of the contexts in which we find ourselves today. It has encouraged us in our search for a relevant spirituality for today's frontier situations of mission, beginning with the lived reality of Spiritans, our faith insights, and what our charism and history offer us. This is a constantly changing and growing spirituality which anchors its roots in the soil of contemporary human suffering and marginalization. The Maynooth document underlined how enriching this methodology is, commenting that *"the most important thing for the Congregation is to tap into the living sources where it is once more seeking meaning and energy for a difficult mission."*⁴

When we examine our recent documents, it is apparent that this General Chapter methodology, alongside our SRL, has helped to promote the emergence of a Spiritan JPIC spirituality. Five themes can be easily identified. These include, in the first instance, an option for the poor, or "the little ones" in Libermann's terminology. In making and living this option, the documents frequently speak of the importance of "pilgrimage," the pilgrimage made by Spiritans to the world and into the lived reality of the poor. A third identifiable theme speaks about Spiritan presence amongst the poor. Two further themes are also very clear in the documents: our service of the poor and solidarity.

A Spiritan option for the poor

A detailed examination of these five themes is not within the scope of the present article. Instead a brief description of each will be outlined. Our Rule of Life (SRL) underlines the centrality of an option for the poor for Spiritans. The evangelization of the poor is our purpose (SRL 4), especially of those who are oppressed and most disadvantaged (SRL 12). Integral liberation of the marginalized from oppression is central (SRL 11 and 14). In fact Libermann's definition in the Rule of 1848 of how this should be lived out by Spiritans is reproduced in SRL 14. There we are called to make ourselves *"the advocates, the supporters and the defenders of the weak and the little ones against all who oppress them."* It would be difficult to find anywhere a more succinct yet complete description of the essentials of a JPIC commitment!

But how do these beautiful but lofty principles become a lived spirituality? The Itaicí, Maynooth, and Torre d'Aguilha documents, in presenting the "significant experiences," bring

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us into direct contact with confreres living this spirituality in very concrete situations: with refugees, on the peripheries of large cities with their large slums, favelas, and pervading violence, in situations of conflict and war, in situations of racial tension and unrest, with oppressed indigenous people, with disadvantaged youth ... in short, with the poor and oppressed in their very diverse contemporary circumstances and contexts. The Torre d’Aguilha documents express well how, in fact, such a spirituality is fundamentally a lived experience. They remind us that a contemporary Spiritan option for the poor is inspired by and imitates such a concrete option made by des Places and Libermann: *“It is the option for the poor that makes us different in a society that excludes large sectors of the population ... The option for the poor means allowing these intuitions of the founders to challenge our attitudes, the choices we make and the work we do, while, at the same time, integrating important insights of modern social sciences with regard to poverty.”* The documents go on to point out that here our spirituality is based not on a “poverty suffered” but a “poverty chosen” and continue by describing some of the characteristics of this option. It *“is a virtue that involves the choice of a simple lifestyle as a sign of solidarity with the poor in their struggle to transform their situation ... To empower poor people we need to avoid creating situations of paternalism and dependency.”*⁵ The cultivation of such a spirituality then is seen as something dynamic; it affects our attitudes, our ways of acting and lifestyle, our style of ministry and mission, our choices, and generally our way of being in the world.

A Spiritan pilgrimage

The concrete living of an option for the poor also requires, according to Spiritan documents, that we undertake a “pilgrimage” or holy journey into the world of the poor. The Maynooth Chapter describes this journey in very concrete terms as *“a crossing of cultural boundaries and a reaching out to groups of people who are abandoned, excluded and oppressed.”*⁶ This journey involves a radical move from where we are to where the poor are. It emulates the Incarnation journey made by Jesus who *“made himself nothing, taking the very form of a servant, being made in human likeness.”* (Philippians 2:5-11).

Torre d’Aguilha sees pilgrimage spirituality as central in mission and as an opportunity for very personal contact with God’s Spirit: *“Conscious that Christ’s Spirit is already present and active in the cultures to which we are sent, mission becomes a pilgrimage of mutual enrichment, where together we identify and seek liberation from the chains that impede the full realization of God’s Kingdom...”*

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This understanding of mission today requires of missionaries a deeper, more contemplative spirituality.”⁷ Similar ideas about mission as a pilgrimage to the world of the poor, bringing about mutual enrichment, where liberation is central and where God’s Spirit is encountered in a special way, are repeated later in the same Chapter documents. The text then goes on to underline an important principle in the construction of a JPIC spirituality – “our experiences show us that our spirituality is deepened by the people we minister to.”⁸

Spiritans presence with the poor

Our documents speak frequently of how our presence in the world of the poor is not something nebulous or vague; rather it brings us into very close contact with the huge segments of suffering humanity which are found there. Here a process that could be described as “mutual endearment” takes place. A strong bond and relationship grows between us and the people we serve: “*Through our presence with migrants and refugees, we come close to the oppressed and disadvantaged ...our outreach makes them feel at home, our advice and training eases the pain of their transition.*” Our presence there “*is a small voice calling for genuine human equality. We speak with and on behalf of the victims of gender and racial inequality, overlooked in a prevailing atmosphere of individualism, materialism and rampant consumerism.*”⁹ Indeed our presence in this world encourages us to raise and voice questions of current relevancy to the people we meet on mission. Torre d’Aquilha, for example, points to our role in questioning the “*military, political and social solutions put forward to solve problems faced by men and women and the young in the countries to which we have been sent.*”¹⁰

Presence permits Spiritans to hear the cry of the poor (Exodus 3:7). The Maynooth documents, in presenting Spiritan ministry with refugees, emphasize that presence is at the heart of our mission: “*Our confreres see the deprivations, misery, confusion, the hopelessness, and they listen to the cries of distress ... Presence is the essence of this ministry.*”¹¹ From the experience of the 27-year-long Angolan war, it was pointed out that Spiritans “*gave witness by the simple fact of remaining with and sharing in the conditions of their people (the apostolate of presence). They stayed when everybody advised them to leave and flee...*”¹²

Torre d’Aquilha, in referring to mission as an “*attentive presence,*” describes how this is lived out in practice in being available day by day to so many who are victims and in pain.¹³ Presence makes significant demands and challenges on Spiritans. It requires

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patience and the ability to start again from zero. Loneliness and rejection can frequently be part of the experience. Because of this, community life is a very essential support here (SRL 30). SRL 24.1 very realistically points out how this call can be translated into a spirituality: humanly speaking we can only live this style of mission if *“our closeness to the poor brings us to hear afresh the gospel that we are preaching.”* This hearing of the gospel in a new and fresh way calls to conversion and to a simple lifestyle.

Serving others

Presence and serving others are closely linked in our documents and our spirituality. In terms of a lived spirituality, Maynooth uses a very descriptive and attractive language to describe what serving others means: *“... just like the ‘Servant of God’ in the Bible, the missionary opts to carry the sin and hurt of the people.... Being with and among the people is an invitation to personal emptying and the discovery that the grace of God comes to us through the poor, the great sacrament of God. Giving of oneself to the service of our brother and sister, assuming the attitude of a servant, admitting to weakness and failure (a kind of martyrdom) creates in us patience, respect, fidelity and compassion.”*¹⁴

Torre d’Aguilha emphasizes that we not only need to respect others but we need also to cultivate an attitude of service. Even though the Christian notion of power is service, we may be tempted to minister from a position of authoritarianism and paternalism by abusing the ‘sacred powers’ attached to priesthood.¹⁵ This follows very much the spirit of SRL 82 which points out that service and power are at two opposite extremes in that *“our consecrated obedience gradually frees us from the urge to hold power and puts us at the service of the poor ...”* SRL 10 reminds us that humanly speaking the strength to serve others is not possible; it comes from the Spirit. The Maynooth documents are more explicit on the role of Spirit as we develop a spirituality of serving others: *“the Spirit leads us to be at the service of all people, especially the poor, the excluded and the marginalized, to support them, to live and work with them, to bring about a realization of the Kingdom of God in works of justice, peace and reconciliation.”*¹⁶

Lived solidarity

In a Spiritan JPIC spirituality, solidarity is another lived consequence of our choice to journey to and take up our residence in the world of the poor. What is called for here is the ability to develop a spirituality for a style of life and mission lived in a frontier situation. Being present and participating in the daily lives of the poor implies living solidarity in very concrete, practical, and frequently demanding ways (SRL 16.2 and SRL

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30.1). Thus the marginalized and the poor are seen not as objects of the worthy pity or the concerned charity of Spiritans. Rather SRL 16.2 reminds us that solidarity is central to the fabric of lifestyle and mission: “*we participate in solidarity with their [the people we work with] joys and sorrows.*” Maynooth reinforces this by reminding us that this solidarity is something very specific with the people and in the situations in which we minister: “*We are called to a practical solidarity with the people among whom we live, especially those who are most poor, vulnerable and excluded from society.*”¹⁷ Here solidarity takes on features which are life-promoting and probably can best be described by the “binding of wounds” imagery of Ezekiel 34.

Itaici and Maynooth see solidarity as a consequence of a lifestyle we have chosen by our consecrated life.¹⁸ It is a Good-Samaritan-like (Luke 10:29-37) solidarity which does not count the cost or risk. We believe that our efforts, however small, make an important contribution. With so many other individuals and organizations today, our faith-inspired solidarity tells us that another world is indeed possible.

Conclusion: “Every tree is known by its own fruit.” (Luke 7:44)

Obviously, a key question in regard to Spiritan JPIC spirituality is whether what we include in documents will have any practical implications for our day-to-day living. Will daily living and our commitment to mission in difficult situations be nourished by this spirituality? In many ways this is the typical chicken and egg question. Which came first: a ready-made spirituality that was life-giving to Spiritans working in frontier situations, or a reflected faith experience inspired by our charism in such difficult situations, which was gradually articulated into a spirituality that could be recognized as having a Spiritan face and feel about it? This brings us back to where we started in this reflection. An authentic Spiritan JPIC spirituality travels and gains its identity on a two-way highway. The inspiration and heritage left us by our founders is enriched, expanded, and developed by Spiritans as they live the call to mission in situations of human suffering, pain, injustice, and brokenness.

This is lived rather than a theoretical spirituality...

This is a lived rather than a theoretical spirituality then which owes much to faith reflection and to the contexts in which Spiritans find themselves today. To bring faith and context into this dialogue, social analysis is one of the essential tools used today in the construction of this spirituality. Such an analysis is used sometimes in a more formal way, other times less so. Indeed, a consciousness continues to grow amongst Spiritans

of the importance of the use of social analysis.¹⁹ This is a rich process which helps us understand our charism more profoundly and re-read it in the light of today's call to mission. The vibrancy of the resulting spirituality has become more obvious in recent years. Such an emerging JPIC spirituality helps significantly to give meaning, energy, and direction to our Spiritan calling.

Footnotes

¹ "Living Spiritan Spirituality." *Information and Documentation*, February 2007, p.5. This is an internal publication of the Spiritan Generalate in Rome.

² Synod of Bishops (1971), *Justice in the World*, paragraph 6.

³ Stephen B. Bevans and Roger P. Schroeder, *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, 2004, p. 369.

⁴ Maynooth, p. 7.

⁵ Torre d'Aguilha, p.35.

⁶ Maynooth, p. 100.

⁷ Torre d'Aguilha, p.18.

⁸ Torre d'Aguilha, p. 34 -35.

⁹ Torre d'Aguilha, p. 58.

¹⁰ Torre d'Aguilha, p. 106.

¹¹ Maynooth, p. 39.

¹² Maynooth, p. 47.

¹³ "Torre d'Aguilha 2004." *Spiritan Life*, No. 15, January 2006, p. 22.

¹⁴ Maynooth, p. 53 – 54.

¹⁵ Torre d'Aguilha, p. 36.

¹⁶ Maynooth, p.10.

¹⁷ Maynooth, p. 99.

¹⁸ Itaicí, p. 79; Maynooth, p.126.

¹⁹ See for example SRL 14.1; Maynooth p. 99; Maynooth p. 102; Torre d'Aguilha p.35.