Youth Evangelizing Youth --- The Spiritan Charism in Brazil

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The “Spiritan Year” in Brazil

Mission has its roots in the mystery of Christ, present in the Church through the action of the Holy Spirit. By his calling the Spiritan participates in this mission. Four years ago, the Congregation of the Holy Spirit, present today in five continents, celebrated 300 years of mission in the world. A special effort was made to mark this great occasion in all countries where Spiritans live and work. We in Brazil joined in spirit with all other Spiritans throughout the world to joyfully celebrate Jesus Christ in different cultures, with different faces, with the same desire: “…that all may have life.” While this dream is beyond our own capacities, it is assured by the action of the Holy Spirit, present in all peoples and cultures.

Preparations for the celebration of the Spiritan Year in Brazil commenced at the beginning of the year 2000, and with such thoroughness that the event still lives in the memory of many people. We adopted the theme, “Our Evangelizing Mission in Latin America,” and set three objectives:

- To celebrate three important dates in the Congregation
  - the third centenary of the founding of the Congregation by Claude Poullart des Places in 1703;
  - the second centenary of the birth of Francis Libermann in 1802;
  - the 150th anniversary of his death in 1852. Libermann was responsible for a new phase of growth in the Congregation at a time of crisis, and, therefore, he is considered its “second” founder, being responsible for its revitalization.

- To make ourselves better known – who we are and where we are working;
To strengthen the missionary identity of the youth in our communities, reinforcing the principle that it is the youth themselves who are the most influential apostles of their fellow youth.

**FOCUS ON YOUTH**

It was decided from the outset to focus primarily on youth and a congress of youth, involving young people from Brazil and Paraguay, was planned. After two years of preparation, the congress took place in 2002. Spread over three days, it involved 275 young people from these two countries. This international gathering really marked the life of the Congregation in the region and especially the lives of the many young people who participated. It provided a space where they could look at the reality of life around them, judge this in the light of their Christian faith and with the creativity that is specific to youth, act prophetically, inspired by the example of so many martyrs in their own countries, and celebrate with true missionary zeal the presence of the Spirit of God in our midst. The central theme of the congress was “Youth Evangelizing Youth in a Continent of Oppression.” In his address to the young people present, the local bishop of the Belem Region of São Paulo, Dom Pedro Luiz Stringhini, challenged them in the following words: “The voice of youth is the great instrument of transformation in society…its presence in the Church, in the parish, and in the basic Christian community, is vitally important. We have a future to discern together. Linking with a religious congregation that makes an option for the poor is an indication of young people that are active and engaged… Today the mission of young people is to communicate dreams and hopes for a better world.”

Spiritans bishop, Dom Sergio Castriani, from Tefé in Amazonas, where Spiritans have worked without interruption for more than a hundred years, was also present at the congress. Dom Sergio is responsible for the missionary dimension of the Church in Brazil at the level of the National Conference of Bishops (CNBB). He began his input by speaking about the presence and identity of young Spiritans and the challenges they face in the contemporary world. He underlined the need to reinterpret the charism of the founders in the context and culture of today’s reality. Dom Sergio told the youth: “The Church ought to be a place that offers an identity and a direction to youth… a link to their dreams and hopes.” He challenged those present: “Do you want to be the youth of the Church? If so, your faith needs to have a missionary dimension, and Libermann has the charism to help you.”
See, Judge, Act and Celebrate

The congress was centered on a sharing of youthful values, hopes, and dreams in the struggle for the building of the Kingdom of God. As intimated above, the methodology adopted was that of see, judge, act, and celebrate:

See – The contemporary lived reality. “What are you seeing and hearing?” (Lk. 7, 22). We reflected on the lights and shadows that surround the dreams of Latin American youth today.

Judge – Listen to the Spirit. “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me” (Lk. 4, 18). Here the young people linked the options of Poullart des Places and Libermann to their lived reality. They noticed their capacity for renunciation in order to be present with the most needy, to change situations of oppression, and to announce the Good News in different cultural contexts.

Act – Lines of action. “Go, make disciples of all nations” (Mt. 29, 19). In this context, the focus was on assisting young people to be initiators in regard to the evangelization of their peers, and to develop a spirituality that links their concrete lives to their Christian faith.

Celebrate – the entire meeting was effectively a true celebration.

Follow Up

The congress for youth was probably the single most important event in Brazil marking the celebration of the Spiritan Year. From the outset it was realized that follow-up would be essential to its success. A post-jubilee committee was established which has been very active over the past four years. It has been instrumental in organizing several events related to the Spiritan charism, not only in the city of São Paulo, but also at a national level in the various places where Spiritans are working. Regional groups have been set up with the members meeting together periodically to develop an ongoing Spiritan training program for youth. A special group for Spiritan youth is currently being set up in São Paulo with the aim of living and spreading the Spiritan charism and spirituality. New groups of lay Spiritans have also been created. These commit themselves, in a more radical way, to Spiritan spirituality and to the mission of our Congregation. A website of Spiritans in Brazil has been established, and a calendar, highlighting Spiritan mission in Mexico, Paraguay, Bolivia, and Brazil has been published. All this has been done in a spirit of
partnership between the Brazilian Province, the South-Western District (the Irish Spiritans working in Brazil), the Spiritan Sisters, and the Sisters of the Holy Rosary.

In a very real way we are effectively affirming the hope that the Catholic Church in Brazil has placed in the youth of today. At the General Assembly of the CNBB in May 2006, the bishops clearly stated their wish “to be on the side of young people as they search for meaning in life, liberty, happiness, true love, affection, and tenderness.” In their message to youth, entitled “Evangelization of Youth,” the 320 bishops stated that youth is at the heart of the Church; it gives the Church a jovial face, because its presence, creativity, and missionary dynamism contribute greatly to a more dynamic and prophetic Church. The episcopate called young people to be disciples and missionaries of Jesus Christ, to be leaders in the defense of life from conception to its natural end, and in the construction of a peaceful society, the fruit of justice and love. The CNBB offers formation and accompaniment to young people in order that they may have a critical vision of reality and not merely be victims of the forces of secularization in society. In this context, Pope John Paul II addressed young people during the 17th World Youth Day in the following way: “In the present context of secularization, when many of our contemporaries think and live as if God did not exist or are attracted to irrational forms of religiosity, it is necessary that precisely you, beloved youth, must reaffirm your faith as a personal decision that involves your whole existence. May the Gospel be the great criterion which guides the options and directions of your life. Thus you will become missionaries in actions and words; you will be signs of God’s love, credible witnesses of the loving presence of Christ.”

Handing on the Spiritan Charism

The Spiritan General Chapter of Torre D’Aguilha in 2004 spoke in the following way regarding the transmission of our charism: “The handing on of the charism of the Congregation is the transmission of a gift from God, given to us through our founders. It is passed on in a style of living together and working for the Kingdom, by study of its foundation and history applied to our way of life and spirituality, and by a variety of creative means, some of which were used during our Jubilee celebrations.” (1.2)

A way of life that involves generosity, commitment, and witness is a powerful means of inspiring young people today. Interestingly, the young people here in Brazil singled out the following aspects...
of the Spiritan charism as being particularly significant for them:

- The dream of a more just, fraternal, and inclusive world
- Self-sacrifice, sharing what one has, in order to attend to the most needy
- Working to change situations of oppression, bringing the Good News to the poor
- Changing history
- Passion in what one does

One 25-year old put the challenge this way: “Let us have courage. The mission is difficult and the challenges are many, but the love of God continues alive among us. Let us be a little 'spark of God' that lightens up and nourishes the dreams of so many brothers and sisters who wish to struggle for a more just, united, and fraternal world.”

Let us have courage...

The fruits of the Spiritan Year continue to appear. Most importantly perhaps, it has given rise to new hope and a new dynamism for the Congregation and the Church in Brazil and Latin America.