A Human Rights Approach to Spiritan Mission for Today

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A HUMAN RIGHTS APPROACH TO SPIRITAN MISSION FOR TODAY

INTRODUCTION
Since the beginning of 2016, I have been working in Geneva (Switzerland) representing a faith-based, non-Governmental Organization (NGO) – VIVAT International – to which 12 religious congregations (female and male) belong. The Spiritans became full members in 2009. VIVAT International has special consultative status with the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) of the United Nations and is associated with the United Nations Department of Public Information (DPI). Members can work with the organization to bring the attention of the U.N. to situations of injustice experienced in their place of mission. They can speak up for those who are voiceless at the international arena of human rights, engaging with the Human Rights Council and other human rights mechanisms. In this way, Spiritans can be what Fr. Libermann asked for, and as our Rule of Life (SRL) directs, “the advocates, the supporters and the defenders of the weak and the little ones against all who oppress them.” That is, we are to help people at the grassroots to live with dignity and respect and to help make their voices heard in the forum of world opinion so that all their fundamental rights are acknowledged and acted upon.

I would like to take a look at a human rights approach to Spiritan mission today from the perspective of my experience here at Geneva and as a Spiritan with a central European background. I do so in the context of the forthcoming Spiritan General Chapter due to take place in my home province of Poland. It is not my intention to give a list of possible answers to the world’s human rights issues and challenges or to analyze or judge the current situation of the world. While the range of views from different parts of the world is significant (political, social, cultural, religious, etc.) I suggest that we should look at human rights issues from the perspective of history rather than from the context of current political disputes.

HUMAN RIGHTS DOCUMENTATION
As I begin, allow me to acknowledge that the area of human rights is very complex. There is an ever-growing library
There is an ever-growing library of international documents describing, protecting, and understanding human rights. The question is: what should we choose to include in our essential library of documents to help us find our way through the world of human rights so as not to lose its essential elements?

Certainly, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted on December 10, 1948, was "a true milestone on the path of humanity's moral progress."3 This declaration guarantees the fundamental rights of every person on the planet. In 1950, the Council of Europe, with forty-seven member states, drafted the European Convention on Human Rights that came into force on September 3, 1953. Then, the Organization of American States adopted the American Convention on Human Rights on November 22, 1969.4 "to consolidate in this hemisphere, within the framework of democratic institutions, a system of personal liberty and social justice based on respect for the essential rights of man."5

African States have created their own the (Banjul) Charter of Human and People's Rights (1981),6 and Islamic States have created the Cairo Declaration on Human Rights in Islam (CDHRH).7 The Asian Human Rights Commission founded by a group of jurists and human rights activists in Hong Kong in 1986, initiated The Asian Human Rights Charter. The charter is described as a "people's charter," because no governmental charter has been issued. We should not neglect the Beijing Declaration adopted by the First South-South Human Rights Forum on December 8, 2017.

As we can see, every region of the World – at different times – has felt a great need to have its own convention on human rights and certainly each one of them has had its own reasons to introduce it: due to the diversity of culture, climate concerns, its own understanding, background, etc. I would not like to open this Pandora's Box of conventions, but we could pose a courageous question: is the Universal Declaration of Human Rights not universal? If it is, then why did every region of the world come up with its own convention? We can go further and ask, "Is it possible to make a worldwide agreement and understanding on human rights that could be universal in practice?"

Pope Francis, in his message for the 2018 Human Rights Day (December 10) wrote,
The fundamental rights of all human beings, especially the most vulnerable, must be respected and protected in every situation. … While a part of humanity lives in opulence, another part sees their dignity denied, ignored or infringed upon and their fundamental rights ignored or violated.

Such a contradiction caused him to ask,

… whether the equal dignity of all human beings – solemnly proclaimed 70 years ago – is truly recognized, respected, protected and promoted in every circumstance.

DISTINCTION BETWEEN CHARITY AND JUSTICE

One of the biggest challenges in taking a human rights approach to Spiritan mission is to look at an issue as a human rights issue. The starting point to address this challenge is to distinguish between charity (direct service) and justice (systemic change). Charity I understand as the giving of help to answer people’s immediate needs with immediate solutions. It provides direct services like food, clothing, shelter, talks, etc. Charity is directed at the effects of injustice and addresses problems that already exist. Very often, we identify charity with individual acts of kindness.

I understand Justice as a response to long-term needs and a look for long-term solutions to people’s problems. It promotes social change in institutions and political structures. Justice analyses the root causes of social, political, economic, and religious issues that cause injustice for people. A famous quotation from Dom Helder Camara illustrates the tension between charity and justice. He said, “When I feed the poor, they call me a sainthood, but when I ask why they are poor, they call me a communist.”

We can say that both charity and justice, are two feet of the same action, therefore, in a human rights approach to Spiritan mission, it would be inappropriate to ask ourselves, “which one should we choose?” While both are important, they are not at the same level and are not applied in the same way. Charity and justice are not either necessarily under the auspices of the same person or organization. However, in a human rights project, it is essential to
In the human rights field it is very difficult to measure effectiveness and demonstrate positive results.

distinguish between the two and see how to relate them in a particular context. In this article, I focus on the importance of the quest for justice as central for Spiritan mission today.

ARE WE ENTITLED TO SPEAK ABOUT SUCCESS STORIES...?

When I talk with others and try to explain what I do, they often ask me about the results of my work; the success stories I have to share. To give an adequate, honest, and fair answer is not easy because in the human rights field it is very difficult to measure effectiveness and demonstrate positive results. Therefore, I need to explain a few components of a human rights project.

As I already said the human rights approach is more about justice than charity, however, both are present. A human rights approach focuses primarily on structural change, rather than on the immediate situation. This is a more demanding task than simply providing for the immediate needs of a particular situation and takes time. Advocacy for human rights requires great patience, adequate methodology and decent resources, human and financial. Put simply, there is no quick fix.

However, in some places, where Spiritans have worked for many years, the human rights situation of the people among whom we live and serve is not only not improving, but, on the contrary, it can seem that there is a deterioration in their rights. In such a situation, we can rightly ask ourselves, "Does the work we do make sense?" Sometimes I ask our partners on the ground about this. Surprisingly, I have always heard from them that it is very important that we continue to work with them to create an awareness that they are not abandoned, that they are supported, and that their lives and their struggles to improve their lives matters to us. This dimension is often overlooked, but it is very important and crucial when we speak about human dignity, the sustainability of projects, and about efficiency.

BEING SPIRITAN FOR THE MISSION

The first and most important orientation in a human rights approach to Spiritan mission is to see the beauty of the Gospel as "the way of life" offered to every person. This is the fundamental motivation of our Spiritan life and work, which is so good, beautiful, great, and true that it makes sense to commit our entire lives to it. Our vocation prompts us to live according to the wisdom of the Gospel and show others the way to that wisdom so that they too...
can discover and follow it as a way of life for themselves in communion with others. I am convinced that our Spiritan founders felt and understood the Gospel as their "way of life," and in their time realized a "program" on how to extend this motivation into the future. Therefore, we are also very much motivated by our Spiritan tradition expressed in our Rule of Life, "The charisms of our Founders, Claude Poullart des Places and Francis Libermann, and fidelity to our tradition urge us to respond creatively to the needs of evangelization of our time." 10

At the heart of this motivation is the conviction that the way of justice and love is God's way for humanity. "To act justly, to love tenderly and to walk humbly in the way of God" (Micah 6:8) comes to full fruition in the mystery of the incarnation. In Jesus, the man from Nazareth, who is the Christ "went about doing good ..." 11 God utters God's word of justice and love. Christians believe him to be the Son of God, the incarnate God. In order to know what this means, we need to be clear about what God wants from us as recounted through the Judeo-Christian tradition in, for example the Decalogue of the Old Testament and, most importantly, with the New Testament commandment of love. What do these commandments mean to us, what do they mean to me?

For me it is clear that with God becoming man, he would surely do as he commands us to do. Christians believe that Jesus of Nazareth is the full realization and demonstration of the commandment to love and fully confirmed in his death and resurrection. Both Claude Poullart des Places and Francis Libermann had intimate experience of God's love for them realized in Jesus. They radically followed his way of love as expressed in their commitment to the most neglected and deprived in the world of their time. They lived and acted as Jesus lived and acted. As Libermann wrote in his introduction to missionaries,

A Missionary who has been sent by Jesus Christ, and who does not make his sufferings holy cannot make others holy in the truth. This holiness must have its foundation in the depths of his being and show itself in the way he lives, works and suffers. This is the way the missionary gives birth to souls for God in the truth, after the example of Jesus Christ, because he gives to them the Savior's life already present in himself. 12
Here is the crucial line of questioning for all Spiritans. To what extent are we convinced about God’s commandment of love?

How have we adopted and placed this conviction at the heart of our “way of life”? What is our radical (intimate/personal and social) fidelity to the Gospel as our “way of life”? How do we show this in everything we do and in the way that we do it? Going from the knowledge, awareness, and conviction of the commandment of love, to concrete forms of action in line with a preferential option for the poor (those that nobody thinks of) is determined by the particular context of time, society, culture, and circumstances. Here it is crucial to observe the inevitable tension between the evangelical motivation on the one hand and the particular actions taken in response to that motivation in the concrete circumstances of our mission.

In any vocation, motivation is recognized as a decisive factor in the quality of a person’s work. This is even more true for the religious vocation of the Spiritan missionary. A person will not do a job well unless, for whatever reason, he wants to do it well. This is basic anthropological reasoning. The evangelical motivation is the crucial factor that distinguishes the work done by religious from those who are not. In ministry, such as the human rights and/or JPIC activities, with its variety of approaches and objectives (profane and/or religious), the religious person (the Spiritan) contributes with their own reasoning and motivation. While personal aptitude is necessary, our motivation must go beyond this. Our rule of life expresses this idea well. “The ‘apostolic life’ is at the heart of our Spiritan vocation. It is ‘that life of love and of holiness lived on earth by the Son of God in order to save and sanctify people. By it He continually sacrificed Himself, thereby glorifying the Father and saving the world.’”

There is often an impression that social commitment is the principal and exclusive agenda for activities in the field of “Justice, Peace, and Integrity of Creation” (JPIC) and/or human rights for many religious institutions, including the Spiritans. The primary evangelical motivation is either neglected, or, at most receives only lip service. For example, it is a topic reserved to official documents, or it only receives mention at the annual spiritual retreat. Without a practical application of a human rights approach to mission then JPIC and human rights fail to animate Spiritan mission and are reduced to institutional ideology.

It is not my intention to criticize or even less to condemn,
How is the personal evangelical motivation of life and behavior of every Spiritan reflected in their social, pastoral, socio-cultural, and leadership work?

but the main question remains: how is the personal evangelical motivation of life and behavior of every Spiritan reflected in their social, pastoral, socio-cultural, and leadership work? This means, in other words, that all Spiritan programs, actions, projects, and activities should show forth the love of God to all with whom we share life. How are we to bear witness to the Christian truth that each person to whom we go on mission is so loved by God that God wants to reveal through another person, precisely through the Spiritan missionary’s commitment to work and engagement in the place that he finds himself?

The Spiritan missionary is required to be creative in his work and life. He needs to be affective and progressive, dynamic and vital, participating actively in mission as a “two-way street” that happens between him and the people he serves. The Spiritan missionary not only gives but also receives. John Kilcrann refers to this dimension as a “mutual endearment.” This he described as, “A strong bond and relationship grows between us and the people we serve.” It is through such relationships that we become aware of the impact of the Holy Spirit in our work and our lives as Spiritans.

The fact that our congregation is called the Congregation of the Holy Spirit, means that the Holy Spirit has an important place in our mission and in every Spiritan life. Therefore, the appropriate question to ask is, “How does the Holy Spirit work?” Certainly, he manifests himself in true communication and in connecting and re-assembling all that the Diabolos, “a liar, and the father of all lies” (John 8:44) displaces, dismantles, scatters, and thereby destroys. The Holy Spirit is the creator, the source of inspiration and strength for what every new situation requires from us in order to fulfill our mission of bringing people together and building a better world for all.

“The evangelization of the poor is our purpose. Therefore, we go especially to peoples, groups and individuals who have not yet heard the message of the Gospel or who have scarcely heard it, to those whose needs are the greatest, and to the oppressed.” This quotation from the Spiritan Rule of Life offers the guarantee for the evangelical motivation for the work of JPIC and human rights.

As Spiritans, we are sent to the most neglected, poorest, and oppressed. In going, we take up the work inspired by the Holy Spirit showing those to whom we are sent that we think
about them; value them, and recognize their God-given dignity. We not only do something for them, we live with them and join in human solidarity with them. It is through this Spiritan life choice that the Holy Spirit's support comes to those who live "on the edge." This is possible only through another person and this is the role of the Spiritan missionary, as was the case with Jesus. The Holy Spirit was manifested in His work, in His lifestyle, and finally in the resurrection. This is the law of incarnation: God manifests himself through another person. Human solidarity is the way to God for human beings. Spiritan mission is about supporting those most in need in their efforts to survive by helping them get out of their misery; so that they can raise their heads and, recognizing their dignity, seek the means to realize it and live it.

The Holy Spirit through Spiritans shows those with whom they live and work that they are not only important to God but also important to the missionary. They come to see or feel themselves as people with rights and recourse by legal means to redress the injustices they face. The missionary's personal presence and advocacy for the acknowledgement and action for human rights strengthens the observance and respect for human rights in general and, in particular, the claims by those they serve to just resolution using legal institutional mechanisms to secure their rights. Through sensitivity to individual human rights and an ongoing struggle to ensure their recognition and acceptance, a new norm of behavior and interaction develops from the basic human right that all are free and equal. Therefore, the social work and the human rights commitment gradually become a way to persuade every one of their importance and uniqueness as made in the image and likeness of God endowed with inalienable rights by the Creator and Father of Our Lord Jesus Christ.

The Spiritan practice of silent and consistent mediation not only honors the place of the Holy Spirit in the name of the congregation, but also deepens the Spiritan charisma of connection and revival enabling a new quality of communication and a greater capacity of listening to others in their need. This is very important in the continuously individualized world in which human rights have increasingly become the rights of individuals.

Grégor Puppinck in his book, *Droits de l'homme dénaturé*, explains historical reasons for the contemporary shift from universal human rights to those of the individual. This shift overlooks
The Spiritan, as advocate for human rights, is called to be the "master of communication," connecting people and creating possibilities for all to live together.

... Come, Father of the poor, Source of gifts that will endure Light of ev'ry human heart, You of all consolers best, Of the soul most kindly Guest, Quick'ning courage do bestow.
In hard labor You are rest, In the heat You refresh best, And solace give in our woe.
O most blessed Light divine, Let Your radiance in us shine, And our inmost being fill.
Nothing good by man is thought, Nothing right by him is wrought, When he spurns Your gracious Will.
Cleanse our souls from sinful stain, Lave our dryness with Your rain, Heal our wounds and mend our way.
Bend the stubborn heart and will, Melt the frozen, warm the chill, Guide the steps that go astray.

Experience teaches us that human sadness decreases as it is shared, while joy increases as it is shared. Therefore, it seems to me that the Spiritan charisma expresses itself through the skills of communication, connectivity, and the creation of communion or unity among those deprived of their human rights. Through loving communication, those individualized in their misery tasting only the bitterness of sadness come to the joy of life God wills for them. The Holy Spirit is the source of this communication that inspires, strengthens, and empowers persistence in the pursuit of human rights. The Spiritan, thus engaged, lives his entire life in accordance with the logic of the wheat grain, "unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of
COMMITMENT TO THE TRUTH

There are many kinds of truth and many ways truth is given or, as we can say, is revealed to us. There is the truth that things are as they are because they cannot be otherwise. This is the truth of internal necessity, as in mathematics, or a logical syllogism. There is also the truth of direct experience and the truth that we come to know through scientific methods in relation to our experience (scientific knowledge in various sciences). There is then a way of truth that appears to be on the sidelines of all this, namely, a truth that reveals itself to us and gives itself to us—a truth to which a person can only attain through the testimony of someone else. Testimony, therefore, is one, perhaps particularly privileged, approach to truth. First it is about truth on a personal level (we leave aside the mathematical and logical ones). When a person does a service to another person, this means that I respond positively to what "YOU" need right now and vice versa. In this way of truth all analytical methods, all checking and calculation fail us; as does the method of human aesthetic pleasure.

The unforced freedom of the "I-AM" of the other person, requires my equal and free "I-AM," which means, my trust and confidence, my respect and contribution in the shared encounter. If I were to leave aside this way of truth on the personal level, I could never meet another person so there would be no authentic "I—YOU" relationship. It is through personal attentiveness and engagement with the other that the wholeness of the truth of who I am—the entire and real "ME"—is discovered and committed. Only with my unconditional readiness and openness will the truth open up to me and help me deepen the awareness of my existence in a specific time, according to specific conditions, with concrete people, drawing me into living life in its fullness (John 10:10). The way of truth is confirmed and experienced through one’s full and personal commitment of one’s whole life “to the end.” This is the learning through blood (blood as a symbol of life). Ultimately, this is the way to encounter God as the Bible, Christian faith, and Spiritan tradition testify.

CHALLENGES

The work I do with the Human Rights Council and other human rights mechanisms in Geneva alerts me to the importance
of initial and ongoing formation for all Spiritans. Holistic human development integrating the Spiritan vocation with personal spiritual identity constitute the necessary elements for the maturity required for Spiritan mission that incorporates JPIC and advocacy for human rights. Working at the international level of human rights, I see that without such a formative experience a Spiritan will feel uneasy and at a loss to cope with the variety of approaches, ideologies, and human rights concepts mentioned at the beginning of this article.

Spiritans formation (initial, specialized, and ongoing) is an opportune time to study one’s own spirituality, to deepen knowledge of the Spiritan tradition, and assess necessary tools for personal growth. From my experience, I can say that there is still a gap in the congregation between academic formation with its emphasis on the acquisition of knowledge, and personal formation with its emphasis on personal maturity. Spiritan formation programs should strive to achieve an equilibrium/balance between the academic and the personal to ensure a more effective and fruitful life for future Spiritan missionaries.

Looking at our commitment in the areas of JPIC and human rights, I know that individual Spiritans and groups engage well as the advocates and supporters of the little ones in the areas of the world in which they live and work. A lot is happening. However, I cannot get rid of the impression, or the feeling, that this happens more at the individual and local levels than at the congregational level with organized and prepared plans and projects. Greater solidarity and spiritual support at the level of the entire congregation, would greatly promote the human rights/JPIC ministry at the individual and local levels. The optimization of human and financial resources for this ministry and the better coordination of existing structures deserves attention.

Andrzej Owea, C.S.Sp.,
Geneva.

ENDNOTES

1. www.vivatinternational.org
2. Rule of 1849; N.D. X, 517 as quoted in SRL 14.
7. Declaration of the member states of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), adopted in Cairo, on 5 August 1990.
8. Cf. African Human Rights Declaration: art. 17; 18.1; 18.2; 27.1; 27.2; (http://www.achpr.org/legalinstruments/detail?id=49 – seen on February 9th, 2021); Cairo Declaration of Human Rights in Islam: art. 2; 3; 5; (http://www.fmreview.org/Human-Rights/cairo - en on February 9th, 2021); American Convention on Human Rights: art. 4; 17.1; 17.2; 32.1; 32.2; (https://www.cidh.oas.org/basic/english/basic3.american%20convention.htm – seen on February 9, 2021); Beijing Declaration: art.1; 2; 4; (http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-12/08/c_136811775.htm - seen on February 9th, 2021); Universal Declaration of Human Rights: art. 1; 16.3; 25.2; 29.1; (http://www.ohchr.org/En/udhr/documents/udhr_translation/eng.pdf - seen on February 9th, 2021).
9. Dom Helder Camara was the Archbishop of Olinda and Recife in Brazil serving from 1964 to 1985 during the time of the country's military regime.
10. Spiritan Rule of Life (SRL) 2.
13. SRL 3 (Rule 1848; N.D. X, 505).
15. SRL 4.
16. Cf. Grégor Puppinck Les Droits de l'homme dénaturé, Paris, Cerf 2018. Grégor Puppinck, PhD, is Director of the European Centre for Law and Justice (ECLJ), which is an international Non-Governmental Organization dedicated to the promotion and protection of human rights.
17. It seems that this is what the Jewish philosopher Franz Rosenzweig had in mind in his article 'Das Neue Denken': Kleine Schriften, Berlin 1937, p. 395-396.

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