

The Provinces of the United States East and West

Joint Retreat, June 18-22, 2007

Contribution of Jean-Paul Hoch

THE CONGREGATION IN THE FUTURE

My dear Friends,

It was a delight to receive your invitation to participate in this retreat. Thank you very much. Unfortunately, at the same time, the Chapter of the Foundation of Haiti is taking place. I thought that my presence would, perhaps, be more useful in Haiti than in the United States. I am sure that one day soon, another occasion will present itself for me to be with you. Perhaps, I hope, the day when you will celebrate formally the fusion of the two provinces.

By the fact that you have organized a joint retreat between the two provinces, you express a conviction that is quite profound. The fusion that you are envisaging and preparing is not solely a technical or administrative process, but rather a new spiritual adventure. As happened in the past, when the Holy Spirit unified Jews and Greeks within the same Church, or again the sons of Poullart des Places and Libermann within the same Congregation, you, too, are invited today to do something new, something in the spirit of unity and reconciliation.

The reflections that I offer with this message are not new or original. They are ones that I offered at the Provincial Chapter in Ireland last year. But as you are on a course to prepare a new future for the Spiritan presence in the United States, it might be useful to hear from me how I see the future of our beloved Congregation as a whole.

For us who are believers and witnesses to the Kingdom that is already here yet still to come, the future which is in the heart of the Father and towards which we are being propelled by the Spirit ...this future is more important than the present. It was a vision of the future that led Jesus to seek baptism from John the Baptist and to announce himself, "The time has arrived; the Kingdom of God is upon you. Repent and believe the gospel" (Mk 1:15). It was also a type of vision into the future that inspired our two founders to do what they did, "as if they could see the

invisible”. In this vision of faith, the future is not a prolongation of the present: it is rather the present which is an anticipation of the future. True, we cannot know exactly what is going to happen; the unexpected keeps taking us by surprise. We can have some inkling of the future by looking at what is happening now. But we also have to have some idea of what we want, of how we see the Congregation and the Church”.

In telling you the way I see the future of the Congregation, I lay no claims to being a “prophet” in the non-biblical sense of the word, that is, of somebody who can foretell and proclaim what is going to happen. But I will try to share three of my convictions with you - each one accompanied by a fear, but a fear that is nevertheless tempered by hope.

First conviction

I am convinced that in the future, there will always be, in the Church and at the service of the Church and the world, a Congregation called “The Congregation of the Holy Spirit”.

This conviction is not just a banality. We know from our history that on at least two occasions, our Congregation almost disappeared. First of all, the disastrous French Revolution led to the dispersal of the “Messieurs du Saint-Esprit” and the confiscation of the buildings of the Seminaire du Saint-Esprit in Paris. Then, in the 1840s, the seminary was hardly able to keep going; without the new blood that was injected into it through the fusion with the missionaries of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, what would have happened to the Congregation? And today, the provinces of Europe and North America are asking serious questions about the future of the Congregation in their areas. Some circumscriptions are explicitly planning for their final stages; others are reflecting about the form under which they will continue; others again, like France, Portugal and Ireland, know that soon they too will inevitably have to face up to decisive questions. During this chapter, you will surely be discussing these things, since the future of the province is listed as one of the three main questions to be dealt with.

My conviction about the permanence of the Congregation is not based on the study of statistics but on yet another conviction: that our Congregation is truly a gift that God has given, and continues to give, to the Church and the world. Today, and even more in the future, the Church and the world have need of the charism that has been confided to us – the evangelisation of the poor, in the light of the spirituality which characterises us. When we visit the circumscriptions of the Congregation, the members of the General Council see at first hand the many great problems and difficulties with which they are confronted. The words of

Fr. Libermann to the confreres of his time are just as valid today: “We are a bunch of poor people”. But we also witness the regard that the people and bishops have for our brothers. The general tendency is not to have less Spiritans but to ask for more; once again, this is not because of our particular qualities but of our charism to which we try to be as faithful as possible.

But this is also where my fears lie: in the near and more distant future, will we still be seriously faithful to this charism? There is always a big temptation to prefer the ‘rich’ to the ‘poor’, to go for ministries which bring prestige and financial reward, rather than those which bring very little, to strive to apply our own policies rather than remain open to the evangelical needs of the time and place in which we are living.

This fear is tempered by a twofold hope. On the one hand, there will always be “prophets” amongst us, confreres who by their words and commitments will know how to wake us up and point us once more towards the essentials. On the other hand, there will also be external events that will force us to react in the right direction. Among these external events, one needs to cite the arrival, in the countries of Europe, a number of immigrants and refugees, a phenomenon that inspired several apostolic initiatives in the older provinces. It is the same for you in the United States, and since so long a time. The last to arrive are the Vietnamese and Spanish-speaking people from South and Central America. Might not the principal purpose of the fusion of the two provinces be the possibility of a better response to this new missionary challenge in your country?

Second conviction

In the future, the Congregation will be truly global in its composition, welcoming confreres from all countries, races and cultures. Like the first conviction, this is not a trite judgement. For the first 150 years, roughly from 1703 to 1850, the great majority of Spiritans were French. But after the “fusion”, the Congregation rapidly became European and North American: Ireland (1859), Germany (1864), Portugal (1867), United States (1875) etc. This first phase of internationalisation lasted about 120 years until the 1970, when the Foundations in Africa and Latin America came into being.

- The Spiritan Directory for 1974 gave a total of 4,213 Spiritans, of whom 3,698 were from Europe, 424 from North America, 16 from Brazil and 75 from Africa (Nigeria and East Africa). Then very quickly, the African and, to a lesser extent, the South American membership saw a big increase.

- The statistics for January 2007 are the following: out of a total of 2, 914 members, 1389 are originally from Europe, 169 from North America, 37 from Latin America, 64 from the Caribbean, 51 from Asia (this includes the 11 confreres from Vietnam from the US West province).

It is obviously impossible to foresee how many we will be in 20 years time. The Superior General's report for the 1980 General Chapter said the following: "*We can foresee that by the year 2000 (i.e. 20 years later) we will have between 1,500 and 2,000 members*". In fact, on December 31st, 2000, there were 3,061 confreres in the Congregation. But it is not so much the figures that attract my attention as the movement of internationalisation within the Congregation: after Europe, North America and Africa, the Congregation is now spreading more and more to South America, Asia and Oceania. It is already taking off in the Indian Ocean, Pakistan, the Philippines, Papua New Guinea and Australia, and we are now looking to Taiwan, Vietnam, China and, I greatly hope, India. Please do not get the impression that I am dreaming or that I am succumbing to delusions of grandeur! I am convinced that to really fulfil its mission, our Congregation needs the support of *all* nations and *all* cultures. It is not they who have need of us; we have need of them!

The provinces of the United States, in a very old tradition, have a truly remarkable trait, a trait that is not found in the same way in the other older provinces of the Congregation. You have always known how to welcome and integrate confreres from diverse cultural and geographical backgrounds. Just read your *etat du personnel* (personnel booklet for the congregation), and you will find the names of just about all the European languages, and, at present, Asian and African. This kind of welcome is not without its problems, obviously. However, one must see all the opportunities that these represent for the future of Spiritan presence in the United States.

With this diverse cultural and geographical background of our members, we must also add the notable increase in numbers of those we call "Lay Associates" or "Spiritan Associates," who carry, alongside us, the concern of missionary witness. Sometimes, it is not they who are "associated" to us, but it is we who are "associated" to them . . .

In thinking about the global character that our Congregation will take on, my fears are for the unity of a body which is made up of such diverse groups. What will keep us together, *cor unum et anima una*? If it is true

that we now live in a globalised world that is superficially unified, it is also true that this same world has a tendency to fragment and that this spirit of division does not leave ourselves unscathed. When going to Portugal for the last General Chapter, I feared that there could be some serious confrontations – theological and missiological disagreements, conflicts regarding the sharing of personnel and finance. There were some tensions in all these areas but, to my great astonishment, the capitulants seemed to share the feeling that the most urgent task was unity in the Congregation and that only a deepening of our spiritual life could bring this about. We cannot be united amongst ourselves unless, through our shared union with Christ, we are united to the Father in the same Spirit. My hope is that this need for a deeper spirituality will be increasingly felt by more and more confreres and that coming together from North, South, East and West we will remain united in the future.

Third conviction

In the times ahead, the Spiritans, who are involved in a multiplicity of activities, will become increasingly aware of the need for reconciliation in our world. The list of concrete activities in which they are engaged is impressive. Simply take the list of participants at this chapter; write in their activities next to their name and make a synthesis if you are able. You will be really astonished. This is another area where we have changed a great deal. For a very long time, the main work of the Messieurs du Saint-Esprit was to train future priests. The products of the seminary, who were then called “Spiritans”, worked in many different ministries in France and abroad. After the fusion, the main and almost unique commitment was to the evangelisation of Africa and other missionary work in different parts of the world. First evangelisation, the building up of local Churches, formation of a local clergy, involvement in different types of education, development work; then later, work for justice and peace, ministering to refugees, to those suffering from AIDS, involvement in dialogue with Islam and other religions etc. At present, it is almost impossible to gather the multiple engagements of spiritan confreres under one heading. I think it is good that this be so: we should not make an audit of all our commitments to determine which are more “spiritan” than others. In the final reckoning, what is most important is not where we are or what we are doing, but rather the spirit in which we do it.

I became aware of the importance of the spirit of reconciliation in our different ministries when I had the good fortune to visit our confreres in Pakistan last year. The Spiritans were sent to Pakistan with a very specific aim: at the request of the bishops of the country, they were asked

to minister to the minority tribal peoples, especially the Marwari-Bills. But having arrived, our confreres soon realised that as well as this minority, there were also others, especially the Christian Punjabis, and that all of these peoples, Christian or otherwise, were immersed in a population that was almost totally Muslim. They could have chosen to concentrate exclusively on the Marwari-Bills, without worrying about the Punjabis or the Muslims. But this was not their choice. While concentrating mainly on the Marwari-Bills, they decided to help the Christian Punjabi communities and to develop the best possible relationships with the Muslims. This has remained their policy to this day.

Seeing this, my thoughts turned to other confreres who had reacted in the same way when faced with similar situations. Those who took part in the General Chapter of Itaiçi (1992) might remember the presentation made by Fr. Cuypers of the Dutch Province regarding his ministry in Lomié (Cameroon), "Working with the Baka Pygmies". He stressed that to join the Pygmies and authentically work in their service, one has to also know how to approach the Bantus and answer their needs. *"The missionary approach can only succeed with patience and a willingness to wait until the time when contact is sought and accepted on both sides. We would like this to happen in understanding with the Bantu communities"* (Itaiçi 1992, p.42). I could cite many other examples along the same lines. All the confreres who are working in the service of special categories (youth, refugees, immigrants, the sick...) know very well that their pastoral action must also reach the global milieu in which these people live. This is what I mean by 'working under the sign of reconciliation'.

This type of ministry is extremely difficult and demanding. Our natural tendency is to choose a particular side, as we do when watching a football match. But our mission has nothing to do with football! We are witnesses to Him who, in Christ, wants to reconcile all things. Here and there in our Congregation, I find that the spirit of division, of non-reconciliation, is very active. Confreres no longer speak to each other. Communities are in opposition. Circumscriptions criticise one another. Confreres, communities, circumscriptions who allow themselves to be contaminated by this virus of division obviously have no credibility when they attempt to carry out a ministry of reconciliation. Faced with this fear, my hope is in the strength of the Holy Spirit and the capacity of communities and circumscriptions to choose leaders who are truly possessed of this spirit of reconciliation.

I hope, my dear confreres, that these reflections will help you in your own discernment. "Where does the Spirit lead us" is the big question that lives in our hearts and souls. We know well that it could guide us towards

unity, towards peace, towards reconciliation, towards joy. But by which path? It is up to you to decide in the course of your next meetings, helped by the inspiration acquired by the common retreat.