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### III. Obedience: The Path of Communion

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- Do community meetings allow Spiritans to account for their activities and their initiatives?

### 2.4.3 At Circumscription Level

- How does a circumscription deal with confreres who are guilty of criminal acts? Does it cover up such deeds and allow the matter to pass away? Does the circumscription assist confreres to take responsibility for such acts and take the necessary sanctions? How does the circumscription help the victims of such confreres' acts?

## III. OBEDIENCE: THE PATH OF COMMUNION

### 3.1 OBEDIENCE FACE TO FACE WITH INDIVIDUALISM AND AUTHORITARIANISM

*E*veryone is in agreement on this point - obedience sits very uncomfortably with two contradictory realities - individualism and authoritarianism.

In the case of individualism, the person builds up a private domain around himself where no one has the right to look in. In this case, obedience is in conflict with personal interests. It is beyond doubt that Spiritans share in a general tendency, often decried in so many chapters but still very tenacious within us - the tendency towards individualism which undermines common projects and promotes both misunderstanding and suspicion. Despite the beautifully-worded messages from capitular documents on community life, the facts are self-evident and individualism continues its way undisturbed.

It is also well known that authoritarianism is no help to the practice of the vow of obedience. Our environment is no help to us here. The world of economics and politics continually gives us examples everyday where those who take decisions impose their wills without any kind of discussion or dialogue. It is very clear that their subordinates are not one with them in their plans. One finds in them nothing but forced submission and bitterness. The same problem can often be encountered in religious life. Certain individuals believe that everything is permitted to them by virtue of the single fact that they have been invested with power over others. However, their way of intervening and of making decisions destroy both confidence and peace of mind.

With both individualism and authoritarianism, it appears very difficult to envisage any kind of constructive dialogue. However, obedience lived in a positive manner opens up a path of communion.

### **3.2 FATHER LIBERMANN, A CATALYST OF COMMUNION**

*F*rom the very moment when he became involved in the Work for the Blacks, Father Libermann was acutely conscious of his role of gathering people together. Nothing was more difficult than when he had in front of him personalities who were so diverse.

He wrote to M. Le Vavasseur in acute distress: "Don't tell me 'I am ready to do whatever you order me to'. It is the feeling of your heart that I ask for. Blind obedience is not enough. What is required is a union between us that is perfect, full and complete, so that God can use the two of us as a single man to create his work. There must be no more premature judg-

ments, no more fixed positions. What is needed is one heart and one soul. Otherwise, I would say that God's moment has not yet arrived."<sup>18</sup>

However, with regard to the intrepid M. Arragon, who disputed the appointment of M. Graviere as Superior, we note a change in tone. If on the one hand he gave him a rule of obedience so that he would give his observations on all matters, on the other hand he reproached him for his language which was "too brusque, too harsh, too high-blown, too crude." He invited him to take into consideration "union, charity and religious cordiality". And Father Libermann concluded with precision: "I direct you therefore in the name of Our Lord Jesus Christ, to receive M. Graviere with friendliness, with charity, with all the sentiments that one ought to have towards one's Superior."<sup>19</sup>

These two examples might give the impression that Father Libermann was contradicting himself. In fact, he was seeking above all else a deep-seated fidelity of the heart to the one project where all are concerned with one single aim, the success of the missionary enterprise. This explains why, when he was criticised on his choice of missionaries, he wrote at length to his detractors explaining his position and recalling that union which was essential for all. When the confreres in Goree and Dakar demanded that he explain himself on the acceptance of the Australian mission, he replied to them not so that they might adopt a spirit of perfect obedience but to lead them to a unity of hearts. In discussing the question, he used six times the term "disunity" and "division" and six more times, he mentioned the word "union". By taking on a new

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<sup>18</sup> Letter of 27/04/1847, ND IX, p. 132.

<sup>19</sup> Letter of 08/05/1846, ND VIII, p. 142-144.

mission he had no wish whatever to “destroy” the mission to Guinea, but, as far as he was concerned, “without unity, the entire work that has been entrusted to you will disintegrate.”<sup>20</sup>

### 3.3 THE VOW OF OBEDIENCE FAVOURS THE GROWTH OF UNITY AND COMMUNION

The Spiritan motto “*Cor Unum et Anima Una*” could become no more than an empty slogan if Spiritans do not become more open to each other in mutual listening and discernment.

#### **Discernment in Community**

Discernment in community should be a customary form of the practice of the vow of obedience. SRL 77.2 reminds us of this, inviting all to availability. In this demanding situation, it is not a question of speaking louder than all the others to impose one’s point of view; rather is it readiness on the part of everyone to listen to each other in all truth. God speaks through all, including the least and the most humble. In this area we all certainly have much to learn about communicating with respect for the other person. The discernment process leads to a recognition of Gospel values, the needs of the world, of the Church and of the confreres. But the term “process” implies much more than mere courteous respect for a decision. It involves each person in taking effective responsibility so that one moves away from one’s own opinion and that one remains in dialogue to bring to fulfilment the decisions that have been taken for the good of the community and of the mission.

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<sup>20</sup> Letter of 09/05/1846, ND VIII, p. 150-152.

## To Live In Covenant with One Another

Each community adopts the means necessary for living harmoniously. It seems superfluous to recall that the model of community life is not that of a democracy but of a covenant - a covenant between God and the community and between the members that make up that community. In this context, which has served as the background of the history of the people of God, his people are led to obedience, an obedience that begins by the observance of the commandments. When he calls his disciples "friends", Jesus invites them "to do what he commands them" (Jn 15, 14-15) because entering the New Covenant has done away with the master-servant relationship.

If the community is built on a covenant relationship, it will enjoy the consequences of this. By working out the community project, it will define the relationship between the members that make up that community.

Relations between the members will be those of respect and of love, all the more necessary when the confreres are living in an international community. It is appropriate too that we learn to appreciate each other.

These relationships permit each confrere to feel that he is part of the tasks that have to be accomplished. It is not a leader who commands and underlings who carry out his orders, but rather confreres who experience solidarity among themselves.

These relationships will include reconciliation when inevitable difficulties arise. It is not always possible for community life to be experienced in a warm and harmonious atmosphere. Certain decisions have to be taken in the pain of childbirth. That is why the vow of obedience invites us continually to reconciliation (Mt 18:25-35).

## **Authority at the Service of Communion: Obedience to Superiors**

How do we reconcile authority and obedience? There have been so many misunderstandings and wrong approaches! On the one hand, some denounce the abuse of authority, acts of discrimination, manipulation, blackmail. But superiors sometimes find themselves confronted by walls of incomprehension. Libermann was well aware of the difficulties. In the case of M. Blanpin, he wrote as follows to his superior, M. Le Vavas seur: "Obedience exacts an enormous cost from him if one does not deal with him with great gentleness or if one seems to be putting him under constraint... I have never had any difficulty in this regard... I have always spoken to him in ways with which you are familiar, without harshness, without any tone of definite and commanding authority... He has always done what I told him to do, without any retort, even when what was asked of him was against his taste."<sup>21</sup> How happy superiors would be if it was always like that!

In order that authority might facilitate communion, it is necessary that the various roles be clearly defined.

- The superior is not a mediator between God and the individual religious but between the charism of the Institute and the religious. Neither is he responsible for the smooth operation of the enterprise but rather he suggests the various stages by which the charism might be put into effect and suggests both its insights and its demands. To reach this point, he must have a profound grasp and a deep respect for the Spiritan Rule of Life and for Chapter orientations.

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<sup>21</sup> Letter of 15/06/1847, ND IX, p. 191-192.

- The superior does not take arbitrary decisions but rather shows deep respect for individuals in their own particular path by listening to them with great attention.
- When faced with authority, whatever form it might take, confreres listen to the pressures, the difficulties or the demands with which superiors are faced. The request of a confrere for a particular task obliges superiors to display great humility and, for his part, the confrere concerned is called on to show great openness and availability.
- Simply taking decisions is not enough. These decisions must be accompanied and followed up. When a superior appoints a confrere to a particularly difficult task, he must give the confrere in question the means of accomplishing the task and to help him effectively, beginning with frequent visits.

### **Authority at the Service of Communion: The Obedience of Superiors**

Communion will be facilitated if superiors themselves do not place themselves outside the demands of the vow of obedience. Indeed, how could they do this when they themselves must submit to the word of God and to SRL? Father Libermann was acutely aware of this: "God has bound me and fettered me to this crucifying work, yet dear to my heart. I am deeply aware of the need to sacrifice my own rest, my consolation and my happiness in order to respond to this powerful will which holds me. With all the fullness of my soul, I submit to the divine will which grasps me and ties me up with such rigour. I believe that I can truthfully say that my soul has not made the slightest movement to loosen the chains which the divine will imposes on me. Better to be the last in the kingdom of the heavenly Father and to go there with submission



to the holy will and for the salvation of so many abandoned souls, than to be among the first by abandoning the way traced out by this adorable will.”<sup>22</sup> If superiors submit themselves to the will of God, they will be even more ready to listen to the confreres.<sup>23</sup>

As a consequence of this, superiors will avoid any kind of arrogance which only serves to crush others. They will not seek to make themselves “lords”, to dominate, to have others serve them, to give themselves titles (Mt. 23, 8-12, Lk 22. 24-27). Rather will they adopt the attitude of service, like Christ washing the feet of his disciples (Jn 13, 14-15). Libermann willingly develops this image of the servant. “Superiors should consider themselves as servants whom Our Lord has placed over their brothers so that they might take constant care of them and to ensure that the latter lack nothing that they might need for both body and soul.”<sup>24</sup> These words which were written before the establishment of the Society of the Holy Heart of Mary find an echo in the advice which Libermann sent in writing to the Mother Superior of Castres: “As far as being superior is concerned, a general rule which includes everything is that you have not come to be served but to serve. You are the first servant of your community... Our Master has said: ‘I have not come to be served but to serve and lay down my life. These words embrace all the duties of being a superior because it is to superiors that he is speaking.’”<sup>25</sup> It is clear that he himself put this advice into practice because he knew from experience that “gentleness

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<sup>22</sup> Letter of 28/01/1846 to M. Le Vavasasseur, ND VIII, p. 30-31.

<sup>23</sup> “No Superior can neglect his mission of animation, fraternal support, encouragement, listening and dialogue”. Cf. *Beginning with Christ* no. 14.

<sup>24</sup> Provisional Rule, Part III, chapter II, article VIII, ND II, p.317.

<sup>25</sup> Letter of 08/08/1843, ND IV, p. 293.

and persuasion win souls over while firmness and rigidity bring about nothing more than an external change".<sup>26</sup> A superior's strength does not lie in an attitude of domination, because this kind of attitude leads only to violence and frustration, but rather in an attitude of service of his confreres (SRL 46). Accordingly, they will be careful in their use of titles in their relations with their confreres.

### **Dealing with Conflicts**

It is vitally necessary though, to intervene to re-establish communion and unity when conflicts arise. Too often issues that have been left unresolved as well as other misunderstandings make situations impossible to live with and bring with them undesirable consequences. Not only does community life become a counter-witness but the very work of the mission is affected adversely. On the other hand, difficulties which have been overcome can become a factor in helping the community to grow (SRL 39.2). In seeking a solution to a conflict, confreres will have recourse to various possibilities:

- A body set up for listening to the individuals involved – it will be possible to identify the difficulties because of this unprejudiced listening;
- The assurance that the individuals involved strive to move beyond the conflict and to forgive each other. Even in the case of a serious conflict between confreres, they will not have recourse to civil courts in an attempt to resolve their differences;
- A meeting between the confreres involved. They will listen to each other without interruption under the direction of a third person;

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid p. 295.

- The service of an arbitrator, often a superior, who will suggest ways of getting beyond the conflict and who is also a witness of reconciliation.

Very frequently it is the superior who will be the first to help confreres. It would be normal for him to receive appropriate training in tackling such situations.

### **A Sense of Belonging to the Congregation**

So that obedience would truly become a path to communion, each confrere, regardless of his area of responsibility, will be open to the needs of others.

In addition to a desire to live the charism of the Congregation, a new need is making its appearance felt – that of developing the sense of our belonging to the Congregation. This has nothing to do with declarations which are no more than stunts, useless and often harmful! Through our listening to the needs of the world and of the Church and our availability to respond to them, we all become part of the same family. It is from this that we receive our mission. At the very heart of the Congregation, we show our solidarity not just in matters of finance or personnel but first and foremost in a spiritual manner. Obedience lived in this way forges our identity and reinforces our communion.

### **“Sentire Cum Ecclesia”: Obedience to the Church and in the Church**

The path of communion which we adopt within the heart of the Congregation does not distance us from the heart of the Church. On the contrary, this path leads us to it. From the very beginning, our founders sought to place themselves at the service of the universal Church, in fidelity to its missionary orientation. When Libermann presented his plan, he

made it clear that it would lead to good only through submission to and dependence on the Holy See. He was brought to this conclusion by reasons which were both theological and practical.<sup>27</sup>

The vow of obedience leads Spiritans to develop a sense of belonging to the Church to “sentire cum Ecclesia” (“feel with the Church”) SRL 81.

- Locally, Spiritans develop an attentiveness to the local Church and participate in it (SRL 18-19).
- On a wider scale, they develop an openness to the preoccupations and suggestions of the universal Church as, with the Church, they strive to respond to the signs of the times. In particular, it is desirable that the themes of the various synods would stimulate prayer and reflection in all.
- Spiritan priests will remember particularly that at the moment of their priestly ordination, they take an oath of obedience to the diocesan bishop.

### **3.4 SO WHERE ARE WE AT?**

#### **3.4.1 At a Personal Level**

- What are individual modes of behaviour which are an obstacle to fraternal communion?
- What does “belonging to the Spiritan family” mean for me?
- How do I live in deep solidarity with the members of the community, of the circumscription and of the Congregation?
- When a conflict arises between members of the community, do I do my best to resolve it?

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<sup>27</sup> Memoir to Mgr. Cadolini, ND II, p. 72-74.

### 3.4.2 At Community Level

- What means has the community adopted to put a covenant relationship in place among the members?
- What process of reconciliation do we put in place to help confreres resolve differences?
- How are the bonds between community superiors and other confreres lived?

### 3.4.3 At Circumscription Level

- Has the circumscription put in place opportunities for listening to confreres when some individuals are experiencing pain in their relationship with other confreres?
- What is the circumscription doing to promote a sense of belonging to the Congregation and to combat individualism?
- How does the circumscription show its solidarity in a concrete way with confreres who have received particularly difficult appointments?

## IV. OBEDIENCE AT THE SERVICE OF MISSION

### 4.1 THE MISSION THAT HAS BEEN RECEIVED AND PERSONAL PROJECTS

*T*he response to the call that one has heard thrives in the willingness to serve and becomes concrete in the definitive commitment of the Spiritan. It goes without saying that this response needs to be refreshed regularly. The events of life and unexpected happenings mount up to challenge our willingness. And we must make mention too of personal projects. How often has it been observed that confreres show lit-