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# Why This Gathering?

From a talk given by Eugene Uzukwu, CSSp (Nigeria)

We gather here in Maynooth as one Spiritan family to reflect on our commitment to the cause of Jesus, whose compassion for suffering men and women makes his followers agents of reconciliation. We are gathered around Him and the most important thing we must do here is tell our story.

We listen to one another to learn what the Spirit has been doing among us. The Igbo of Nigeria talk about dropping one's ear on the ground to hear the cry of an ant. The tiniest task in which our confreres are involved, the mission on the margin which may not attract our attention may turn out to be of particular interest and may challenge us as the way towards the future of the Church's mission shared by Spiritans.

We dare to claim that we are the friends and collaborators of Jesus. We narrate to the Lord in restful repose what we have done and taught in his name. The ministry really belongs to him and we share in it. We are not unimportant, and yet we are not indispensable.

It is important for us to reflect on where our preaching of the word has erred; to review the problems surrounding the cultural background of the agents of evangelisation; to revisit the intimidation of a stranger/missionary by hosts who determine what aspects of the life of their people are to be evangelised; to critique the preoccupation with numbers, the focusing of attention on statistics and the emphasis on sacramentalization as signs of successful evangelisation; to face the uncomfortable reality of the power which money gives and the intimidation which poverty brings to those who come from poorer countries to participate in the work of evangelisation.

## The Eucharist, a sign of community

The major concern of Jesus' mission is to salvage humanity by putting an end to all aspects of inhumanity. The great sign of humanity saved is the meal where all sit on the green grass or at table to partake of the one bread as brothers and sisters. This experience is ritually made new in the Eucharist where all distinctions as to sex and class, race and colour break down. Here humanity is renewed radically through the ability to relate without frontiers.

The pattern of Jesus' behaviour is a statement on the kind of community he wanted to form and who should be part of that community: a community without frontiers between persons and groups; a community where the warmth and friendship of family life dominate; a community where the rejected, the sinners, the tax collectors, those at the garbage heap of life may recover a taste for humanity. There are people who have lost faith in fellow humans. Jesus' mission is to give them back that taste.

Eating and drinking with sinners is sharing life with them — one shares their dreams, their stories, their successes and failures. Wherever the story of Jesus is told, his conversations with these non-persons in society are remembered.

Jesus chose eating, drinking, and the service at table as the key images to communicate his type of life in the world. The last named activity is a function generally reserved to women in Jewish as well as in African societies. To serve in Jesus' community is to be like a mother. Ministry is mothering.

The power of the Spirit of Jesus directing our life and work makes us resilient, able to live in a state of openness to the Spirit calling us to tasks and decisions we may not be able to predict from day to day, week to week, year to year, international assembly to international assembly. This Spirit ensures our youthfulness whatever our age. ☪

## CONTENTS

- 2 Editorial  
Why This Gathering?
- 3 Jubilee Reflection:  
Our Call to Jubilee
- 4 "In Chapters Often ..."
- 7 None of Us Owns God
- 9 Mission
- 12 Justice and Peace
- 14 Living in Community
- 16 Sources of Inspiration
- 18 Risking God  
in a Time of Crisis
- 20 The Spiritans and  
Maynooth
- 21 Digesting All I Heard
- 22 HOME AND AWAY

**Front Cover:** (left to right) Mike Doyle (Canada), Pedro Iwashita (Brazil), Martin Keane (Ireland), Maureen Soares (England), John Kwofie (Ghana), Mary McAleese (President of Ireland), Pierre Jubinville (Paraguay), Pierre Schouver (France, Superior General), Jean-Paul Hoch (France), Michael Onwuemeli (Nigeria), Eduardo Miranda (Portugal)

**Back Cover:** Courtesy of *Missionwide*

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# Our Call to Jubilee

Joy Warner, Lay Spiritan

The four principal themes of the Spiritan International Chapter are relevant to all of us in this confusing era of conflicting value systems and competing ideologies. We may not have the luxury of setting aside four weeks to reflect on who we are and where we are going in our lives but nevertheless we do need to take time, as followers of Jesus, to think about our mission, our sources of inspiration, our living together and our collaborative ministry.

How often do we ask ourselves what is our mission in life? Is it to be successful and wealthy, to convert others to our way of thinking since we have the only truth, to climb the corporate or institutional ladder even at great cost to our family and community relationships? Or is it to act justly, to love tenderly, and to walk humbly with God? Pope John Paul II's message for the 1998 World Day of Peace clearly spelled out our mission. "Individuals, families, communities and nations are called to live in justice and to work for peace. No one can claim exemption from this responsibility."

If we are to persevere in works of mercy and justice we will need sources of inspiration to sustain and nurture our enthusiasm and commitment. Activists for social justice often burn out because they neglect the spiritual underpinnings which motivated them to action in the first place. As Christians our first source of inspiration is Jesus himself, closely followed by those holy saints and lay people who truly lived and continue to live out their lives according to gospel values. We must root our efforts in regular prayer and scripture reading. Perhaps too, we need to review our reading and entertainment materials and ask ourselves if they are truly sources of inspiration or do they encourage self-indulgence and acceptance of the unjust status quo?

## Living and working together

The question of living together challenges us to reflect on community life at all levels, family, city, nation and the world. Certainly as a global family we are clearly dysfunctional. The poorest fifth of the world's population saw their share of global income fall from 2.3% to 1.4% in the past 30 years. Over the same period the share of the richest fifth rose from 75% to 85%. 1.3 billion people earn less than \$1 per day and the 10 richest billionaires have more wealth at their disposal than the 48 poorest countries in the world. The early Christians

sold all they had to share with those in need in the community. Jesus' restoration of the ill and the outcast to the community, his feeding of those who followed him, his open invitation to all to join in the new community forming around him — all demonstrated the return of right relations within the community which is at the heart of Jubilee.

The fourth important theme of collaborative ministry asks the question, with whom do we work? Who are our companions on the journey? Whose side are we on? Perhaps we need to review our relationships with people of different faiths, socio-economic class, education levels, age, political beliefs, and ethnic background. As the Canadian Ecumenical Jubilee Initiative so eloquently states: "From country to country and from people to people, we can communicate with each other as never before. There are more and more seekers for

new visions, for new hope. This time of crisis, perhaps as never before, invites the Christian community — in dialogue and co-operation with other faiths and all concerned people

— to proclaim a radical, passionate and living vision of hope that sounds the strongest call for justice, peace and integrity of creation that has ever been heard." (*A New Beginning: A call for Jubilee*, p. 9)✠



# "In Chapters Often..."

Michael Doyle, CSSp (Canada)

**N**ot another chapter", groaned one of our Spiritan confreres when the preliminary documents heralding the pre-millennium chapter of 1998 were delivered. As with several of his brothers and members of other Congregations he was feeling a little punch drunk from the wave of chapters that has washed over religious families since the second Vatican Council instructed religious communities to re-think their apostolates and community life in terms of the challenges of the modern world, the Gospel and the charism of the founders. The chapter (meeting/assembly), with its democratically elected participants, became the instrument of choice to accomplish this task.

Since 1968 Spiritan leadership has convened six General Chapters. One can follow the development of the Congregation by analysing, even superficially, the atmosphere and concerns that characterised these meetings. For the sake of convenience and brevity we will look at them under three arbitrarily chosen headings: Costume, Colour, Charism.

**COSTUME** The first post-Vatican II gathering began in Rome in the summer (northern) of 1968 and reconvened in Paris the following year. Most delegates appeared in clerical garb (soutanes or black suits and collars). A few showed up in more casual attire and were regarded as mildly rebellious. By 1974, again in Paris, secular dress was much more in evidence. By 1980 (Paris) little black was visible, and by 1986 (Paris), 1992 (Itaici, Brazil) and 1998 (Maynooth, Ireland) it had disappeared altogether. Important? Hardly earth shattering but the trend does suggest, perhaps, a growing willingness to change, to let go of old certainties, to risk a little and to seek ways of inte-

grating more fully into today's world.

In 1992 a 289-year male monopoly was breached when, for the first time, a woman attended the Chapter as one of two Lay Spiritan observers. The number of laity increased to three in 1998, two of them women. Amongst other things, the presence of women added another dimension to the changing sartorial style.

**COLOUR** Whatever about dress, the changing colour composition of the Chapter is a matter of considerable significance. In 1968/69 the cast was virtually all white, drawn from the tribes of Europe and North America; even Africa and Latin countries were represented by missionaries whose roots had developed elsewhere. This situation gradually changed until in 1998 more than 20% of the chapter delegates were from African, West Indian or Latin American cultures as well as one of Asian background. Not only did their presence change the hue of the gathering but these delegates, because of their youth and vitality, injected a new enthusiasm into a community that had been in danger of becoming moribund.

The chapter of 1980 saw, for the first time, an African (from Nigeria) elected to the General Council (governing body) of the Spiritans. In 1986 the process was repeated. 1992 produced two African Councillors (Nigerian, Angolan) while the chapter of 1998 went a step further and appointed three (Nigerian, Angolan, Tanzanian) to the six-member Council. The Spiritans may well be the first international religious order to have 50% of its top administration chosen from the African continent. Far from tokenism this development is a realistic and practical recognition of the direction in which the Congregation is heading. Can an African Superior General be far behind?

**CHARISM** While dress and ethnic mix are two of the more visual indicators of the development of the Congregation, it is the agendas of the



meetings and the resolutions generated that best capture the changing scene. Even the format of the booklets containing the resolutions seems to reflect something of the atmosphere. For instance 1968/69 chapter gave us 427 units in a green volume whose title, *DIRECTIVES AND DECISIONS*, set in bold upper case, exudes a certain confidence tinged with authority. In contrast the cover of the 1992 document reproduces a Latin-American tapestry depicting a non-white Risen Christ surrounded by a multi-ethnic crowd of believers, the title, not on the cover but on the first page, a question that seems to hint at some uncertainty, *Where is the Spirit Leading Us?*. In between there were other documents, the most important being the revised *Spiritans Rule of Life* in 1986.