

The spirituality of societies of apostolic life

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All of us have noted, with some joy, the renewed interest in spirituality today. Some of its manifestations are wonderfully healthy. Others tend toward the bizarre.¹ But one thing is clear. There exists a hunger, "a profound and authentic desire of 20th century humanity for wholeness in the midst of fragmentation, for community in the face of isolation and loneliness, for liberating transcendence, for meaning in life, for values that endure."²

Our members too yearn for wholeness, for meaning, for transcendence. The Lord calls us, as leaders in the Church, to try to satisfy their longing. We have many responsibilities as superiors general: decision-making, planning, meetings, personal interviews. But I suggest to you today, my brothers and sisters, that there is nothing more valuable that we can do for our congregations than to hold up before their eyes a captivating vision; an ultimate concern that will enable them to integrate life and give it away as a gift; a deep, vibrant, holistic spirituality.

The topic you have asked me to address, "The Spirituality of Societies of Apostolic Life" is very difficult. It would surely be easier to speak about the spiritualities (in the plural) of Societies of Apostolic Life. But that would be an endless task since our heritages are really quite varied. For example, Bérulle, Vincent de Paul, and John Eudes, though contemporaries and collaborators, handed on to their congregations distinctive ways of approaching God. It could be very interesting to talk about their different emphases: about the vow of slavery to Our Lord and the Blessed Mother that was so important to Bérulle but that ruined his relationship with the wonderful Madame Acarie; about Vincent de Paul's creative love for the poor and his commitment to simplicity, the virtue he called "my gospel;" about John Eudes' deep devotion to the hearts of Jesus and Mary. But those are themes for another day.

That, however, is the path I set out on, for better or for worse. Today I offer you a few reflections on *common* characteristics in a spirituality for Societies of Apostolic Life. But first, let me begin with a word about spirituality.

¹ Cf. Meredith B. McGuire, "Mapping Contemporary American Spirituality: A Sociological Perspective" in *Christian Spirituality Bulletin* (Vol. 5, No. 1; Spring 1997) 1-8; cf. also, John A. Coleman, S.J., "Exploding Spiritualities: Their Social Causes, Social Location and Social Divide" in *ibid.* 9-15.

² Cf. Sandra Schneiders, "Spirituality in the Academy," in *Theological Studies* 50 (1989) 696.

I. A word about spirituality

A spirituality is an energizing vision, a driving force. It is, on the one hand, the specific way in which a person is rooted in God; it is, on the other hand, the specific way in which he or she relates to the created world. It is insight as the source of action. It is a vision that generates energy and channels it in a particular direction, thereby enabling a person to transcend himself or herself. For the Christian, it is a way of seeing Christ and being in him that directs the individual's energies in the service of the Kingdom.

All genuine spirituality, both Christian and non-Christian, has a transcendent thrust. A contemporary theologian describes it as "the experience of consciously striving to integrate one's life in terms not of isolation and self-absorption, but in self-transcendence toward the ultimate value one perceives."³ Almost all theologians agree on the main characteristics of spirituality, included in this definition: progressive, consciously pursued, personal integration, through self-transcendence, within and toward a horizon of ultimate concern. In the Christian context, of course, *the* driving force, *the* horizon of ultimate concern is God's love revealed in the person of Jesus.

II. Some common traits in a spirituality for societies of apostolic life today

As I begin to treat this topic I ask you to notice four things.

First, I will speak of only *some* common traits in a spirituality for Societies of Apostolic Life today. There are surely many others. I encourage you to formulate those too.

Second, I speak about *a* spirituality. It takes no great humility to recognize that another speaker might have formulated the matter quite differently than I have and that speakers in the future will undoubtedly do so.

Third, I speak about common traits in a spirituality for Societies of Apostolic Life *today*. In other words, I will mention some traits that, in my judgment, are particularly relevant right now, at the dawn of the third millennium.

Fourth, I recognize that my own Vincentian heritage will inevitably color what I have to say. I trust you will understand this. We all speak from our own background. In any event, Vincent de Paul had a huge influence on the development of Societies of Apostolic Life.

³ Sandra Schneiders, "Spirituality in the Academy," in *Theological Studies* 50 (1989) 684; cf. also, 676-697; cf. also, by the same author, "Theology and Spirituality: Strangers, Rivals, or Partners?" in *Horizons* 13 (1986) 266; cf. also, Michael Downey, "Christian Spirituality: Changing Currents, Perspectives, Challenges" in *America* (Vol. 172; April 2, 1994) 8-12.

So, in that light, let me describe five common traits.

1. *The holiness of their members, their being grasped by God, is intrinsically bound up with their apostolic mission.*

Let me immediately make some precisions.

First, we share this trait with a number of other groups that are not apostolic societies. Nonetheless, all apostolic societies have this characteristic in common as a key element in their spirituality. It is through the apostolic mission defined by their constitutions, through their contact with the people, that they seek to love and serve the Lord. The 25th chapter of Matthew's gospel is a keystone in their spirituality: "When I was hungry you gave me to eat. When I was thirsty you gave me to drink." When I was ignorant you took me into your school. When I was sick you healed me in your hospital. When I was a prisoner you came to visit me. Of course, as this text suggests, the apostolates of various apostolic societies differ significantly from one another. They focus on preaching, teaching, health-care, seminary education, foreign missions, retreat work, human promotion, advocacy for justice, and probably many other objectives. But it is precisely through seeing and loving Christ in the person of those served that the members of apostolic societies seek genuine union with the Lord.

Secondly, today in an era when the Church proclaims again and again her preferential option for the poor, the poor themselves stand more and more at the center of the mission of most apostolic societies. In this context, their contemporary spirituality involves seeing Christ in the poor and the poor in Christ.

Thirdly, in an era where the rights and dignity of the human person have come to be increasingly emphasized, we are conscious that in giving our lives to the service of the poor, we must take into account their own desires, their own hopes, their own values, and their own real needs. They themselves must become agents of their own human and spiritual promotion. So a contemporary apostolic spirituality demands that we listen more than we speak, that we accompany more than we take charge, that we "reap before we sow."

2. *Their growth in God's life also flows from the bonds of deep charity forged with their own brothers and sisters in community.*

Here too, let me immediately make some precisions.

First, we are all members of apostolic *societies*. Therefore, some form of common life is, by definition, an essential element in our identity. Though community life may take many different forms, an integral part of our basic spirituality is the commitment to build up a community of faith and love *with* those

who have pledged to pursue the same apostolic purpose. But if commitment to community is essential, then this must involve using clear, concrete means to build it and sustain it. Especially important among these are healthy initial formation, well-structured ongoing formation, symbolic acts of initiation and incorporation, clearly defined times when the members pray together, share the Eucharist, eat together, relax in one another's company, and have fun together. Community life aims at forming deep bonds of charity among us. Few things are worse in community than a street angel who is a house devil. A genuine spirituality for Societies of Apostolic Life involves taking concrete steps toward building a supportive community that seeks to draw all toward the holiness of charity.

Secondly, our community life is *for the mission*. This is by no means to say that life together is unimportant. Not only is it important, it is essential. Moreover, one of the strongest lamentations that I hear today from young priests, brothers, and sisters is that they do not find the community support that they had been hoping for. Still, even as I emphasize the importance of community living and the need to create structures for sustaining it, let me add that, in apostolic societies, these structures should always preserve their flexibility. They should not be so flexible that they cave in. But they should be flexible enough to allow us to respond to the urgent needs of those we serve. Vincent de Paul had a lovely phrase that he used to express this concept to the Daughters of Charity. He said that they should be free to "leave God for God." If the poor arrive even during prayer, the Daughter of Charity should feel free to leave the conversation that she is having with the Lord in prayer in order to converse with the Lord in the person of the poor.

Thirdly, today almost all apostolic societies have some form of participative community planning on a local level. A key element in contemporary spirituality for apostolic societies is fidelity to such plans. In the past, fidelity was often measured by observance of a universally legislated rule with an order of day that was much the same throughout the world. Today, fidelity can be measured by a member's observance of the covenant that he or she has made with the other members of the house.

3. *The prayer of apostolic societies, a crucial element in their spirituality, has its own particular dynamic, flowing from and leading to action.*

Our members should be contemplatives in action and apostles in prayer. The founders of almost all apostolic societies were incredibly active men and women. But were there any among them who were not also known by their contemporaries as persons of deep prayer? Vincent de Paul used to talk about contemplation to the Daughters of Charity, who were largely young, uninstructed country girls. It is evident from his conferences that he regarded many of them as already contemplatives.

In apostolic societies prayer and action go hand and hand. Divorced from action, prayer can turn escapist. It can lose itself in fantasy. It can create illusions of holiness. Conversely, service divorced from prayer can become shallow. It can have a "driven" quality to it. It can become an addiction, an intoxicating lure. It can so dominate a person's psychology that his or her sense of worth depends on being busy.

The members of apostolic societies are at their best when they hold prayer and action in tension with one another. The person who loves God "with the sweat of his brow and the strength of his arms" soon knows how to distinguish between beautiful theoretical thoughts about an abstract God and real personal contact with the living Lord who laid down his life for his friends.

4. *Let me suggest that one of the characteristics of the spirituality of Societies of Apostolic Life is liberty.*

I will try to illustrate this in a number of ways.

A first striking sign of liberty in one's spirituality is availability and mobility. Almost all apostolic societies had their origins in a need that cried out and that their founders heard. The societies were the advance troops going in to meet that need. With the obedience characteristic of the times, members went from place to place quickly, willingly, and joyfully. They often set out for far off countries with little hope of ever returning to their native lands. Jesus' call resounded in their ears: "Go! Go into the whole world and preach the good news to every creature" (Mk 16:15). Today as the Church repeatedly calls us to a new evangelization _ new in its ardor, new in its methods, new in its expression _ availability and mobility are all the more important. This often means that members of apostolic societies must have the courage to relinquish works which others can carry on, even longstanding ones, in order to be free to meet more pressing needs.

Secondly, many Societies of Apostolic Life are exempt from the jurisdiction of local ordinaries except in those matters expressly provided for in the law. This leaves room for great flexibility and creativity, particularly in regard to life together and government. It seems to me very important that Societies of Apostolic Life rejoice in this liberty and use it creatively in pursuing their apostolic ends and in developing ways of deepening community life and prayer. Particularly in provinces where apostolic societies are in crisis or even appear to be dying, this liberty should move us to act with boldness, to experiment, to try new means for revivifying groups that seem *in extremis*.

Thirdly, in order to be free, members of Societies of Apostolic Life must embrace concrete forms of asceticism as an important element in their spirituality. A contemporary asceticism must be a "functional asceticism" to use Karl Rahner's

phrase.⁴ A member of an apostolic society embraces celibacy in order to be "free for the Lord," in order to go wherever in the world the Lord sends him or her in the service of the Kingdom, in order to give himself or herself single-mindedly to a life of union with the Lord in the service of others, especially the poor. Consequently, the members of an apostolic society see material goods in a new way, as an extension of their own persons. They are truly free in their use of these goods because they want to share them with the poor or because they want to enter into solidarity with the poor by sharing their lot. The member of an apostolic society must be willing to renounce anything that holds him or her back from going on mission freely.

Fourthly, Societies of Apostolic Life are part of the charismatic element in the Church. They do not belong to the Church's hierarchical structure. In fact, our congregations enjoy considerable autonomy not only because we are exempt but also because a large number of the canons regulating the life of religious institutes do not apply to us. Much is to be determined freely by our own proper law. The famous words of Vincent de Paul, as he sent out the first Daughters of Charity, ring with liberty:

They shall keep in mind that they are not in a religious order, since that state is not compatible with the duties of their vocation. They have:

- *for monastery only the houses of the sick and the place where the Superioress resides,*
- *for cell a rented room,*
- *for chapel the parish church,*
- *for cloister the streets of the city,*
- *for enclosure obedience, going only to the homes of the sick or places necessary for their service,*
- *for grill the fear of God,*
- *for veil holy modesty.⁵*

5. *The spirituality of Societies of Apostolic Life is deeply incarnational, rooted in the fleshed humanity of Jesus.*

This seems so obvious, but there is nothing more important that I can say today. One might surely ask of me: does not all Christian spirituality focus on the person of Jesus? It should. But it is very clear, historically, that apostolic societies have had a special role in calling and re-calling the Church to make the humanity of Jesus, his *enfleshedness*, the center.

Christocentrism was at the center of the spiritual renewal initiated by the founders of the original, revolutionary Societies of Apostolic Life. Bérulle is famous for his abstract, mystical Christology, focusing on the states of the incarnation of

⁴ Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations* VIII, 208.

⁵ SV X, 661.

Jesus, his adoration of the Father, his self-emptying.⁶ Vincent de Paul rallies priests, sisters, brothers, laymen and women to follow Christ the missionary, the servant, the evangelizer of the poor. John Eudes focuses on the heart of Jesus, brimming over with pastoral love. All of them captured the deepest sense of the scriptures. The gospels ring with this conviction: Jesus is the absolute center. "I am the way, the truth, and the life," Jesus says. "No one comes to the Father except through me."⁷ "I am the vine."⁸ "I am the gate."⁹ "I am the shepherd."¹⁰ "I am the light."¹¹ "I am the true bread come down from heaven. The one who feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood will live forever."¹²

As a prayer crystallizing this kind of spirituality, let me recall to you today the wonderful words attributed to St. Patrick:

*Christ be with me, Christ within me,
Christ behind me, Christ before me,
Christ beside me, Christ to win me,
Christ to comfort and restore me.
Christ beneath me, Christ above me,
Christ in quiet, Christ in danger,
Christ in hearts of all that love me,
Christ in mouth of friend and stranger.*

So I say to you first of all, my brothers and sisters: the center of the spirituality of all apostolic societies must be the humanity of Jesus _ in his personal integrity, in his union with his Father, in his zeal for the mission that he received, in his deep human love especially for the most abandoned, in his passion for the truth, in his ability to bridge the poles of anger and gentleness, in his hunger and thirst for justice.

Our different congregations may focus on various aspects of that humanity _ Christ the teacher, Christ the preacher, Christ the healer _ but Jesus himself, fully enfleshed, is always the absolute center.

A final word, my brothers and sisters. I am convinced that nothing is more important for our congregations as we face the future than a profound spirituality. Of

⁶ Raymond Deville, *L'École Française de Spiritualité* (Paris: Desclee, 1987) esp. 105ff.; *Bérulle and the French School*, edited with an introduction by William M. Thompson (New York: Paulist Press, 1989) esp. 35ff.; cf. also, Michel Dupuy, "Le Christ de Bérulle" in *Vincentiana XXX* (1986, No. 3-4) 240-252; Benito Martínez, "El Cristo de Santa Luisa" in *ibid.*, 280-309; Luigi Mezzadri, "Jésus-Christ, figure du Prêtre-Missionnaire, dans l'oeuvre de Monsieur Vincent" in *ibid.*, 323-356; Giuseppe Toscani, "Il Cristo di S. Vincenzo" in *ibid.*, 357-405.

⁷ Jn 14:6.

⁸ Jn 15:6.

⁹ Jn 10:9.

¹⁰ Jn 10:11.

¹¹ Jn 8:12.

¹² Jn 6:51.

course, that depends not just on Superiors General, but on all the members of our communities. Still, the task we face as animators is to promote life, principally the life of the Spirit. Our greatest challenge as Superiors General in the Third Millennium will be to breathe out the Lord's Spirit so that it excites our members, enlivens them, and helps them see the world with a compelling vision and live in it with practical love. The great temptation for the members of Societies of Apostolic Life is that they become so caught up in their works that they lose contact with the energizing vision, the driving force that animates those works. Of course our works are extremely important. We must love God "with the sweat of our brows and the strength of our arms."¹³ But our works must flow from our "experience of God, of his Spirit, of his freedom, bursting out of the very heart of human existence and *really experienced*."¹⁴ In other words, our spirituality must be fully alive. A deep incarnational love of Christ must *impel* us, as Paul puts it to the Corinthians.¹⁵ If our congregations are really to *live* in the Third Millennium, then a profound spirituality must root us, so that all those whom we serve see that God has entered their lives through our ministry. Do our congregations presence God? When we are laboring in the midst of the poor, do the needy sense that God is touching them? Do they recognize our members as God-people? If the life of the Spirit is fully alive in us, my brothers and sisters, as the Third Millennium dawns, then apostolic societies will surely be a striking sign in the world that the Kingdom of God is at hand.

¹³ SV XI, 40.

¹⁴ Karl Rahner, "The Spirituality of the Church of the Future" in *Theological Investigations* 20, 149.

¹⁵ 2 Cor 5:14.