

# ***Signs of the presence of the Holy Spirit in the Society of the Divine Savior***

*Milton Zonta, SDS*

"The Holy Spirit himself is harmony.  
Only the Spirit can awaken diversity,  
plurality and multiplicity,  
while at the same time building unity."

**(Pope Francis, 19 May 2013)**

## **Starting Point**

Before anything else, thank you for this chance to speak to you about some of the signs of the Holy Spirit in the mission of Salvatorians today. I want to talk about some things I carry very deep inside of me now that I am in the service of guiding the Society of the Divine Savior. I have delayed writing this reflection for a long time because I first wanted to invoke the light of the Holy Spirit through prayer since he is the one who shows us the right way to take.

Once, when I was in St. Peter's Basilica in the Vatican, I was gazing at the beautiful stained glass window of the Holy Spirit by the famous artist Gian Lorenzo Bernini. In this window there is more than simply a dove with great golden rays. This work of art can also be seen as a window through which God enters and meets us. Naturally, the Church is the place where God's Spirit comes to us and from where we go to Him. Through this glowing window we understand that God is infinite Mercy who walks with us, guides us, and saves us.

The symbolism of the dove in this window of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome made me recall the work of Br. Aegidius Roeder (\*1865 +1928), an illustrious Salvatorian artist who described the Holy Spirit as a vital force at the birth and growth of the Society of the Divine Savior. This is a beautiful message because it reminds us that the Society of the Divine Savior (the Salvatorian Family) does not exist for itself, it is not just any organization, it is not the end point, rather it should send us beyond, to on high, past ourselves. Pope Francis once said about this that the Church is not merely a helping organization, nor a business, nor an NGO, rather it is "...a community of people, animated by the Holy Spirit, who have lived and are living the wonder of the encounter with Jesus Christ and want to share this experience of deep joy, the message of salvation that the Lord gave us." In relation to this, I believe that I can confirm that the Society of the Divine Savior is an organization that has the Holy Spirit at its deepest roots. The Holy Spirit is who makes it possible for us to grow and is at the same time, the one who fuels our

mission. In fact, the Holy Spirit is the secret creative artist of the colors and textures of the Salvatorian life we all know and of the life that is yet unfolding.

The Scriptures say that the free action of the Holy Spirit is known by the effects that come about. No one knows from where it comes nor can one see where it is going. Yet, one of the most beautiful images for me in terms of the revelation of the Spirit comes from a spiritual master who said: "We may compare those who are led by the gifts of the Holy Spirit to a ship running full-sail before the wind; and those who are led by virtues, not as yet by gifts, to a boat propelled by oars with more sweat and noise, and at much less speed." So, my goal in this reflection is to present the Society of the Divine Savior like a ship, sent sailing by the wind from behind, which is the constant movement of the Spirit of Jesus. In other words, I want to help you think about as well as show you, the mysterious greatness of the Holy Spirit who continues to work silently and in the depth of the heart of the Society of the Divine Savior.

## **Some basic convictions**

Before talking about the particular presence of the Spirit of God in the Society of the Divine Savior, I want to voice some basic convictions from my own experience of faith that come from many years of apostolic consecrated life.

- First, I want to tell you that I believe the Holy Spirit exists. Based on human experience, reflected in Holy Scripture and in the Tradition of the Church, the Spirit exists prior to us and acts better than we do. Sometimes it does not make sense to me when we plan our apostolic activities solely from the point of view of a type of sociological analysis that shows the needs of people from the material or economic aspect. Clearly this is useful and needed, but I have learned from the point of view of Father Francis Jordan that the Spirit of God is a needed mystical force, a creative and constructive breath that fills us with confidence even in situations that can appear to have no exit or that simply seem to have no solution. We find in the Founder an example of how much the Spirit of God raises one up and motivates one to act with enthusiasm, with strength, with courage and a spirit of self-sacrifice, who in order to carry out his apostolic works told himself: "Do not despair, the Lord will help you realize your goal. Place everything in His hands, trust firmly in Him, hope and await all from Him" (SD I/211).
- My second conviction is that the Holy Spirit is present not only in remarkable events, such as in a General Chapter, in a World Youth Day, in an Assembly of the Salvatorian Family, etcetera. For me the Spirit of God is present in a particular way in the simplest and ordinary events of daily life. As we read the Word of God we become aware of the reality that God

reveals Himself in small events and episodes, which in the eyes of the world seem insignificant. I believe we all need to train our eyes to see the countless places where the Spirit is present and try to understand what he wants from us. We need to develop the ability to recognize the presence of the Spirit, even though we may not be able to see it. The Spirit is the one who guides our lives along new pathways and in all our decisions, for example, in the personal goal of our Founder who said to himself: "Each day [pray] the 'Veni Creator,' etc., that you may always know and do what is right" (SD II/13).

- Lastly, I am more and more convinced that the Holy Spirit motivates us to open doors. That is to say, the Holy Spirit is the one who saves us from being self-absorbed groups or communities. The Holy Spirit is the one who frees us from navel-gazing and who opens our eyes to new horizons and new pathways. I have seen that in some places there is a danger of closing in on oneself, like a clam, by our experiences, surrounded by paralysis, comfort, bureaucracy, fear, protection of our properties acquired in the past, etc. You can see that when the Spirit is lacking, we tend to allow ourselves to be guided by the fear of making mistakes and so we forget to cultivate the desire to find ways to do things right. So it is important to allow ourselves to be disturbed, to be revitalized, to allow ourselves to be moved by all that the Holy Spirit is raising in these days. We can be sure of one thing: there is no superior, bishop, nor group or community that is not continuously disturbed by the Spirit that in an unforeseen way transforms, stirs and makes one move forward. Our Founder had this conviction very deep inside of himself as we can see in his prayer: "Oh Lord, help me, show me the way! Without You I can do nothing. I hope all things from You. In You, Oh Lord, I have hoped, I will not be confounded forever" (SD II/2).

## **The action of the Spirit in the Society of the Divine Savior**

As I said earlier, the presence of the Spirit has been a constant in our Society. It has been the same Spirit who has inspired the charism of the Founder and that was later transmitted by countless Salvatorians through their distinct mentalities and cultural categories in response to the signs of the times. In the history of Salvatorians on the different continents, we can find this action of the Spirit. It is a vital and unifying experience that serves like a common thread among us. Also, I am convinced that only with the help of the Spirit will Society be able to come to really understand what is its goal in helping the Church to evangelize. As our Founder said himself: "If we desire to exercise the same office as the apostles we need the Holy Spirit. What will we accomplish if we are not illuminated and guided by the Holy Spirit?"

With this as a backdrop, I go now to the presentation of some signs that in my

analysis can be clear signs of the action of God in the Society of the Divine Savior. I will present this topic in three aspects of the power of the Holy Spirit: the creator, prophetic and wisdom dimensions, that clearly always need to be interpreted in a complimentary and unified way.

### **A – The Salvatorian Creator Spirit**

The Creator Spirit in Scripture is presented using the image of the wind, of the breath, of a soft breeze, that the Hebrews named using a word that describes the noise made by the wind: "Ruah." This Spirit was the breath of the Resurrected Christ over the disciples on Easter morning, which makes them a new creation (Jn 20:22), then over the first community in Jerusalem (Acts 2), and over all flesh, thus anticipating the eschatological new earth and the new heavens (Ap. 21:1).

The Scriptures say this wind signifies the robust power and vital force of God: the author of the Universe. It is the breath that gives it life, sustains it, makes it fertile, maintains it and gives it order. This invisible, but real wind, like a constant source of inspiration, I clearly see working in our Society of the Divine Savior, on two levels at least:

***In the origins of the Founder*** – I see the particular action of the Spirit of God in a surprising way in the hiddenness and smallness of Fr. Francis Jordan. I do not hesitate to say that we can only understand the history of our Founder if we take into account what the Spirit of God can raise-up in this world. Two years ago when I was on a canonical visit to Germany, the Provincial took us to Gurtweil, where two Salvatorians are trying to develop a community and a Salvatorian apostolate that is relevant for the times today. As I walked the streets of this insignificant village, literally at the end of the world, I was thinking about the mysterious action of the Spirit. It is amazing to think that from such a remote place, from a simple and unknown family, the wind of the Creator Spirit raised-up the charism of Francis Jordan, which then was made known on all the continents. I am always moved to see how in different countries people speak about our Founder: they think of him as a man of God, humble and in love with Jesus Christ. From my faith experience this is a typical way God acts, who in the History of Salvation turns things upside down by electing the least one, the youngest one, the poorest one, to reveal his presence. How can we not see this Spirit of God, who revealed himself in the Founder, who also reveals himself in us, in our smallness and in the seeming insignificance of our life? I have no doubt that in the history of Fr. Francis Jordan we can recognize how God walks with us and how the wind of the Spirit continues to act in us, even in those situations where we are not able to see or recognize it.

***In the realignment of the Society*** – I can see the action of the Creator Spirit in the process of realignment taking place at various levels in the Society, which has been taking place step by step since 1999. This process was begun with the decision that "missionary expansion" should be the main priority of the Society of

the Divine Savior. It is important to say that until then administrative Units were strong, with a large number of younger members who were well prepared. Each Unit concentrated on the running of its own small world, putting aside the benefits of international collaboration. The Generalate had a role that was more symbolic in nature, rather than coordinating the common lines of development of the entire Society. The first result of this way of being organized was that for almost 30 years there was no new missionary foundation in the Society. The set mentality was that each Unit looked only at its own reality, like looking in a mirror. In my opinion, in the 90's one can see a process of revival that takes place by the grace and work of the Spirit that today continues to break down the walls of self-interest. As a result, in the last 25 years we have lived intensely under a new wind of internal realignment in the Society of the Divine Savior that cannot be reversed. Today we Salvatorians are present in 42 countries, but in almost half of these countries, we have been there less than 30 years. A significant number of Units of the Society are still up-and-coming and give promise of future growth. We no longer have such large provinces as in the past, rather small Units that find their identity in concrete actions of cooperation, under the direction of the Generalate. In this context, the Generalate now has a more decisive role in offering the Society a service of leadership so much needed in terms of orientation, of vision, and of support. In this context of realignment, I can say that the Spirit of God is guiding us to revise the current general governmental structure with a view to strengthening the collaboration among the Administrative Units and, above all with the help of professional lay people in all areas of our mission, formation and communications. How can we not see in this uniting of forces the limitless action of the Creator Spirit of God, and at the same time our duty to always revitalize our apostolic life for the times today?

## **B – The Salvatorian Prophetic Spirit**

This is the Spirit that in the Scriptures is symbolized by anointing with holy oil. Anointing in our Judeo-Christian tradition points to the power of the Spirit that anoints the prophet for a mission related to the practice of law and justice in favor of the poor and oppressed. This is what will be fulfilled in Jesus when in the Synagogue of Nazareth, motivated by the Spirit he proclaims his mission as described in the text from Isaiah (Lk 4:18f).

This Spirit of Prophecy is also part of the Salvatorian apostolic call. It has to do with the Spirit who goes against the current of individualism of the world to transform it into a world of human and fraternal relations. I see this Spirit of Prophecy in the Society of the Divine Savior in at least two areas:

***In its mission to the fringes of the world*** – To explain the presence of the Spirit that has moved the Society into new mission settings, the best example is what has happened in Asia. During a period of exactly 30 years (from 1959 to 1989),

there were only 13 Salvatorians in the entire Asian continent, located in only one country, that is to say, in the Island of Taiwan. From 1989, the Spirit shook and pushed the Society toward an apostolic missionary movement that continues to radically change the Society of the Divine Savior. Today, 25 years later, we Salvatorians are present in six Asian countries (Taiwan, India, Philippines, Sri Lanka, China, and Vietnam). No longer are we only 13 members, but more than 250 Salvatorians, among them religious, novices, and those in formation. Also, among those in formation, some come from other countries such as East Timor, Malaysia, and Indonesia. But, I want to note that there are in Asia, six Salvatorian missionaries from the "north," among them Fr. Gregory Coulthard, who at 78 is giving his best as a great missionary witness. He attends to our young members, teaching them English like a true "father" or better "grandfather," so much needed by our candidates. In a similar way, our Brother Jeffrey St. George also did this very well accompanying our candidates for a time. And with a sense of pride, I mention here Brother James Rieden, may he rest in peace, who started a very valuable apostolate called "Puso sa Puso" ("Heart to Heart"), dedicated to the most vulnerable, as a result making concrete the parts of our mission to promote justice and peace in the world. I want to say that I too – as Superior General – have had the joyful experience of giving the mission cross to some Salvatorians sent to different countries in order to be signs of life and of salvation. In the last three years, under the direction of Fr. Agustín van Baelen, General Mission Secretary, we have established a new missionary presence in Vietnam (2014), in Kenya (2015), and in Peru (2016). These new foundations for me are filled with the Prophetic Spirit because they are marked by the basic lines of being present in situations of poverty, by means of a simple lifestyle and a search for self-sustenance. I have no doubt that it is the Spirit of Jesus, the great Friend of the poor and sinner, who is guiding us to serve those who suffer the most: the weak, the humble, the persecuted, and to fight against situations of injustice.

***In the Salvatorian Office For International Aid (SOFIA)*** – Another sign of the action of the Prophetic Spirit is seen in the development of the missionary projects office we have in Rome, called SOFIA (the *Salvatorian Office For International Aid*). I recall it as if it were yesterday, and I'm sure Fr. Paul Portland does also, when in 2008 we decided to fix up a small room to begin this office. Very few of us imagined then where this small initiative would lead us. Now eight years later I can say it has led us to think in different ways, above all in terms of managing our human and financial resources. SOFIA no longer is a single office that collects money, but rather it is a way of thinking in terms of the management of the Salvatorian mission for today. In fact, with the creation of SOFIA we have changed our way of planning and financing our apostolic projects, as we develop a vision for the long-term, for working alongside laity, for interaction with benefactors, and for concrete actions that help us respond to the Church that suffers. Today, SOFIA for many institutions has become the "face" of Salvatorians in action, action that favors justice and peace. Since its foundation, projects

funded by SOFIA have made a direct contribution to improve the quality of life to around 250,000 people that are assisted within the areas of healthcare, education, human empowerment and Christian values. Personally, under the umbrella of SOFIA, I see the action of the Prophetic Spirit in Salvatorian evangelization projects, in the persons involved in and in love with the Salvatorian charism, all working toward the same goal.

### **C – The Salvatorian Spirit of Wisdom**

We identify the Spirit with the symbol of the cloud. The cloud of the Spirit overshadowed Mary so that she could conceive the Savior of humankind (Lk 1:35-36). It is the cloud that appears at the Transfiguration covering Jesus and the apostles Peter, James and John (Mk 9:7).

The Spirit of Wisdom is exactly this: it is the grace to be able to see everything with God's eyes. It's about an interior light that makes us able to see God's presence in our life and in our history. In the Society I can see this presence of God that accompanies us, guides us and makes us fruitful in two realities:

***In the Salvatorian Spirituality Center in Poland*** – I see the Spirit of Wisdom that is born through our intimacy with God in the activities that take place in the Salvatorian Spirituality Center in Poland. As you know, Poland and other countries went through difficult years behind the iron curtain, oppressed by a political system that was expressly anti religion. In this context, where the "death of God" was proclaimed, Salvatorians began in 1997 what today are "Schools of Biblical Spirituality" in the cities of Krakow and Trzebinia. In only two decades about 50,000 people (laity, religious, priests, formators and bishops) received solid formation in *Lectio Divina*. During this time, the Salvatorians of Poland organized an average of 27 retreats and spiritual exercises per year. They have specialized in this apostolate, and are able to gather a multitude of religious and laity to study and understand deeply with God's eyes. I cannot but affirm that in the context of a Europe that is becoming more secular, Salvatorians are known in Poland and in many other Eastern European countries for this unique service of evangelization. I humbly dare to say that these Salvatorian Spirituality Centers are a living expression of a dimension of our charism which is to form disciples, adult Christians in their faith, guided by a profound experience of God who acts in their lives: in what they think, say, and do.

***In the process of intercultural initial formation*** – I see another sign of the Spirit of Wisdom in the international process of initial formation that is taking place at the continental level. Because of a decision of the last General Chapter in 2012 we are establishing international houses of formation meant to be "centers for Salvatorian formation," organized by continent. In these formation centers, the academic aspect is important of course, but not the main aspect. What we want

today is formation for "life as a Salvatorian" in an environment of cultural diversity and based on the apostolic charism of the Founder. The main reason for this decision is the flowering of vocations that is taking place in the Society. For example, in 1991 - 25 years ago exactly – we had less than 30 novices in all of the Society, now we have around 50 novices. This is evidence that we are in a dynamic of growth in the Society. Twenty-five years ago, our Society had only 240 students, while today we have in initial formation between 460 and 500 Salvatorian students. I want to remind you of what I said earlier, that the Society has vocations in countries where we Salvatorians are not present, such as Indonesia, Malaysia, East Timor, Madagascar, Nigeria, Kosovo... In January of this year, the first Salvatorian from Ruanda professed vows and in the next months the first Salvatorians from Vietnam will be ordained priests. So, I have the firm conviction that the Spirit of God lives in our heart and is moving us to invite others who come from diverse cultures to follow their call through the charism of Fr. Francis Jordan. For me, it is the Holy Spirit that makes us wise in order to see and cultivate these vocations, moving us beyond our "small provincial tradition" to a mentality that sees we are part of an international Apostolic Family.

### **Conclusion: Let our hearts be on fire!**

I want to end by affirming that the actor in salvation and our guide throughout our life of faith today like yesterday is the Holy Spirit. I believe it has been the Spirit who inspired the theme, "On fire with the Spirit," for this Salvatorian Assembly, because the fire of the Holy Spirit is the symbol that summarizes what we feel for the Salvatorian mission. "Without the Spirit, God is far away; Christ belongs to the past, and the Gospel is a dead letter, the Church is merely an organization, authority is domination, mission is propaganda, worship is evocation, and Christian action is a slave morality."

A concern of mine for the Society is that the enthusiasm or passion for the Salvatorian mission not weaken or disappear in us. Do not allow the fire of the charism of Fr. Francis Jordan to be extinguished. Do not allow the charism to become simply a description, a text that we keep in a museum. I like to think about the fact that fire has to reach a certain degree of intensity in order to make water boil. And that is what we need: a high degree of enthusiasm that can enflame others to live according to the values of the Gospel, with a spirit of creativity, with apostolic passion, and with spiritual depth.

I hope that we can always keep our heart open to the voice of the Spirit, who first helps us discern what should not change, because there are non-negotiable values in our mission. But the Spirit also helps us discern those things that should be changed because they are no longer useful today. In everything we do, let us seek collaboration and unity, which are works of the Holy Spirit. Let us not be afraid of differences! A Salvatorian who permits himself to be led by the Spirit is a

fire that lights other fires. For that reason, I invite you to intensify your lives, to live a present full of Salvatorian passion, because only a present marked by this passion has a future.