CHAPTER TWELVE

THE PRESENT SUPERIOR GENERAL:
FATHER FRANCIS GRIFFIN

1. Election

B. G. 41, 446 In 1950 eighty-two Provincials, District Superiors, and elected delegates attended the General Chapter. Their most important business was to conduct the election of a new Superior General.

cf. p. 283 In accord with the instruction which the Holy See had given when Archbishop Le Hunsec was elected, the Chapter’s choice did not fall on one of the forty bishops and prelates who belonged to the Congregation. Instead, the delegates chose a simple priest: Father Francis Griffin. It was the first time since 1896 that this had happened.

B. G. 41, 425 Father Griffin, the seventeenth Superior General since 1703, was born in 1893 in County Clare, Ireland. After studying at Rockwell College, he entered the novitiate of the Congregation at Kimmage in 1911. Five years later he was sent to the University of Fribourg, from which in 1921 he graduated summa cum laude in theology. On his return to Ireland he was successively appointed professor of moral theology at Kimmage and Dean of Students at Rockwell. In 1926 he went to Africa, where he became Vicar General in the Vicariate of Kilimanjaro, Tanganyika, a post he held until he was recalled to Europe in 1933 to be made a member of the General Council of the Congregation. After the Second World War he was assigned the task of officially visiting the houses and missions of the Holy Ghost Fathers in the Western Hemisphere. In 1949 he was elected Assistant to the Superior General. The next year, as we have mentioned, he was chosen to govern the Congregation for the current twelve-year period.

2. A Program

After the election of the new Superior General, the Chapter drew up a program of directives and recommendations, from which we select the following points of interest:
1. With respect to the oft-debated question whether the Motherhouse should be transferred from Paris to Rome, the delegates decided to submit the question to an international committee of lawyers before making a definite recommendation. It was felt that the matter should be approached with great caution because of the intimate legal connection between the central headquarters of the Holy Ghost Fathers and their legal standing in France. After a careful study of the question, French, American, and British attorneys came to the conclusion that the legal situation was too complicated to be modified without incurring serious risks. In 1934 and 1935 the Holy See itself had experienced how complex such a situation can be when it attempted to have the Motherhouse of a Sisters’ Congregation transferred to Rome. After several months of negotiation, the plan had to be abandoned for fear of jeopardizing the existence of that Congregation in France. As far as the Spiritans were concerned, the Holy See declared that it saw no advantage in the contemplated transfer. In fact, it envisioned certain disadvantages. Accordingly, the authorities decided to keep the Motherhouse at the historical location which it has occupied since the beginning of the eighteenth century.

2. The Holy See was willing to offer exemption from episcopal jurisdiction in foro externo, but prevailing opinion among the Spiritans was against making the request for it. In past centuries such an exemption might have been desirable and useful, but it was felt that at present no one need fear undue interference on the part of the hierarchy. Exemption in foro interno, which the Congregation enjoyed since 1870, seemed quite adequate.

3. To take care of the ever-increasing demand for a more numerous personnel, it was recommended that new Provinces be inaugurated in different countries where the Congregation has not yet been established. In subsequent chapters we shall survey the efforts that are presently being made to implement this point.

4. The great emphasis on education in modern times both at home and in the missions makes it necessary that the greatest possible number of members be prepared to take academic and professional degrees. This matter was left to the individual
Provinces, however, so that they might determine whether university studies were to be undertaken before or after ordination to the priesthood.

5. To maintain contact between the various Provinces and stimulate interest in each other's problems, the interprovincial Senior Seminaries of Rome and Fribourg were to be used more extensively. Also, an exchange of students between the Provinces, either for theological studies or during vacation periods, was recommended as "normal procedure."

6. Regardless of its geographical location, any group of works which produces vocations and therefore may one day develop into a full-fledged Province will be encouraged by being erected into a Vice-Province. This recommendation is a clear sign of the changing times and the enormous progress made in some districts. Where formerly aspirants from the districts were few and far between, they are often quite numerous nowadays. For example, in 1952 Nigeria was able to open a special junior seminary for the Congregation. It already has 82 aspirants. The District of Trinidad has given to date 31 new members to the Congregation and participates in the Spiritan apostolate in Africa. Even tiny St. Pierre et Miquelon has supplied the Congregation with six priests. In Africa itself, the erection of local novitiates and provinces is a question that must be envisioned in the near future.

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At this juncture, since we have reached the end of the general history of the Congregation, it will be interesting to scan the record in retrospect. Over all, the story of its two hundred and fifty-five years has been a tale of hard work and unobtrusive effort in obscure and difficult positions. In many cases God has particularly blessed Spiritan labors. If one may be permitted to single out a few of the more striking examples, the recapitulation should include:

1Like many other religious orders the Spiritans have never indulged in vociferous advertising nor in calling their achievements to the attention of the world at large. In all simplicity most of them prefer to leave the blowing of trumpets to the angels on judgment day. Even the publication of this book has been inspired not so much by a desire to attract public attention as by a wish to acquaint the Holy Ghost Fathers of the English-speaking world more fully with the record of their past.
1. The struggle of the Spiritans against the eighteenth and nineteenth century heresies of Jansenism and Gallicanism in France. Both by word and by the training given to many thousands of secular priests in the seminaries of Paris, Meaux, Verdun, and Rome, the Congregation has contributed significantly to the final victory.

2. An unblemished record of unshakable adherence to the Holy See, not only in theory but in practice.

3. The restoration of the Faith in the old French colonies and Mauritius after the French Revolution, and the solution of the recurrent religious crises by moving toward the creation of a colonial Hierarchy.

4. The pioneering labor of the Congregation in Africa. The Spiritans were the first to revive the defunct missions among the Negroes on this long-neglected continent. If Church membership has risen from practically zero in 1843 to about twenty-four million in 1957, the increase is due in large measure to the efforts of the Holy Ghost Fathers. Of course, there can be no question of minimizing the important contributions to the common task which other religious societies and missionaries have made. Of the twenty-four million African Catholics, only about four million live in territories that are still entrusted to the Congregation. Nevertheless, despite their numerous commitments throughout the world, the Spiritans have continued to maintain for more than a century a larger staff in Africa than any other congregation. It is only quite recently that another society has been able to equal the number of its missionaries.

5. The preparation of the modern apostolic doctrine of the Church by principles which Father Libermann set forth a century ago. As we have seen in Chapter VII, contemporary Church documents have given their official stamp of approval to these principles.

6. The introduction of a spirituality which is more in accord with man's nature than most of the ascetical currents hitherto in vogue. Libermann's racial descent from a people which shows great gifts of psychological insight has proved highly valuable to the Church.
Turning to the internal history of the Congregation, one is struck rather forcibly by the fact that during the last century the general policies of its Superiors General have varied greatly. One has only to compare the conditions that obtained under Schwindenhammer with the general norms pursued by Archbishop Le Roy to arrive at this conclusion. Nevertheless, it is still more striking that despite these changes in policy, the end result has always been to bring the Spiritans closer to their historical objective. Considered as a whole, the Congregation has undertaken and brought to a high degree of vigor all the works which are in accord with the aims of its Founder and its Restorer: the planting of the Church in Africa, the spiritual care of the old civilized colonies, educational works that train priests imbued with a love for humble work and develop Catholic leadership, and social works that welcome the poor and neglected children of Christ. As Archbishop Le Roy wisely observed:

* N. D. p. VIII

Scanning the phases of our . . . history, one gets the distinct impression that men have counted in it only as the often unwitting instruments of an invisible Master who guided them and who alone saw the goal to which He led them. This fact is for us, and for everyone of us, a source of consolation and great strength.