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Spiritan Life and Mission Since Vatican II

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WILLIAM CLEARY, *SPIRITAN LIFE AND MISSION SINCE VATICAN II*, OREGON: WIPF & STOCK, 2018. ISBN: 978-1-5326-3469-7. USD \$34.

“Throw open the windows of the church and let the fresh air of the Holy Spirit blow through” were the prophetic words spoken by Pope St. John XXIII at the opening of the Second Vatican Council in 1962. Vatican II brought about a new understanding of what it is to be church and what it is to be on mission. This new understanding called for the renewal and adaptation of religious life. William Cleary, in *Spiritan Life and Mission since Vatican II*, provides a detailed narrative of how the Congregation of the Holy Spirit responded to this call and found its path to renewal through a re-discovery of its founding charism, faithfulness to the teaching of the church, and attentiveness to the Holy Spirit. St. Paul’s teaching on charisms as gifts of grace given through the Holy Spirit for the building up of the Christian community; the theology of Vatican II; and careful study of its founders; provide the key points of reference for Cleary’s interpretation of the congregation’s renewal. This narrative of renewal is in three parts.

Part 1, *Archbishop Lefebvre as superior general and Vatican II*. Archbishop Lefebvre, as superior general, interpreted Vatican II through a conservative lens and resisted significant change. Consequently, from 1962 to 1968, the congregation’s leadership, sought to live more in the familiar past than embrace the future with its many challenges. Lefebvre saw his role as holding to the *status quo* by “emphasising with firmness that Spiritans must maintain the fundamental and absolute principles which make up the very life of the congregation, that is, faith in the Lord, in Peter and in the church” (54). Lefebvre’s resistance to change was troubling to many who could quote Scripture, “no one puts new wine in old wineskins” (Matt 9:17). Aware of this discontent, Lefebvre offered his resignation at the Extraordinary General Chapter of Renewal of 1968, but only after the election of his successor. Until then he proposed to preside, as was his right. The majority of capitulants saw the danger in this and rejected his proposal. Lefebvre took leave of the chapter and the congregation (73).

Part 2, *The “ad experimentum” period from General Chapter XIII to General Chapter XVI (1968-1986) culminating in a new Rule of Life in 1986*. GC XIII was uncompromising in asserting the primacy of the missionary aspect of the Spiritan vocation, with religious life lived in community as the means by which this vocation is realised. It declared that the specific end of the congregation was “missionary activity among peoples and groups whose material and spiritual needs are greatest and who are the most neglected” (91). The many changes of GC XIII proved too radical for some and the unity of the congregation was threatened.

The general chapter of 1974 (GC XIV) “refocused attention on membership and the building up of community” (113) and called for animation of the membership. From 1974 to 1980, the focus was on new foundations in the southern hemisphere, which marked a new era of international and intercultural community living in the congregation. GC XV (1980) recognized the action of the Spirit in the development of new ministries,

particularly in the area of justice and peace. GC XVI in 1986 finalized the *Spiritans Rule of Life* (SRL): an authoritative point of reference for all future discernment in the congregation.

Part 3, *The Implementation of the SRL as interpreted through intra-congregational Discourse, particularly from GC XVII to GC XIX*. Cleary attaches great importance to general chapters as “moments when the entire congregation meets through representation to reflect, evaluate, and decide on the apostolic and religious vitality of the membership and its missionary activity” (176). Beginning with the general chapter at Itaici, Brazil, 1992 (GC XVII), a new way of reflecting on Spiritan life and mission emerged. The sharing of lived experiences by confreres from different parts of the world and discernment of current world affairs provided the context for the interpretation of SRL. Enlarged general councils, held midway between general chapters, both followed up on previous chapter decisions and prepared for the next.

Vatican II spoke of a church on pilgrimage in the world. Spiritans cannot do otherwise but be part of that pilgrimage. They have already experienced, what Cleary describes as, a “metamorphosis: from law to Spirit; from missions to Mission; from institutions to Community; from an aggregation of provinces to an International Congregation” (244). The journey continues as Spiritans, led by the Spirit, strive to embody the Gospel message among the poorest and most abandoned in creative fidelity to its founding charism. The journey that began at Vatican II is an unending process as “change is not merely necessary for life. It is life” (31).

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