9-1979

1979 Vol. 23: Spiritan Works of Education

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Spiritan Works of Education

Reading a recent issue of Spiritan News (September 1978), it may have come as a surprise to many confreres to find that the Congregation was responsible for Duquesne University, Pittsburgh, where there are about 8,000 students. In Trinidad there are two big Spiritan schools, in Canada there are two more, and in Germany the Congregation is responsible for one. In mission territories Spiritans have built up scores of secondary schools and teacher-training colleges. Some provinces have a long commitment to works of education, dating back to the earliest days of their foundation. However the question may be asked, what does an American university have to do with a missionary congregation? What has teaching in a fee-paying school got to do with 'poor and most abandoned souls'? The question is a thorny one, but in these days, when the Congregation seeks to renew itself and to return to its first fervour, part of its self-examination is to consider and evaluate its works. In this paper the General Council considers its works of education, especially in its 'old' provinces.

History

Our Founders

In 1703 Claude Pouliart des Places founded the Congregation of the Holy Ghost to educate poor students for the priesthood who would dedicate their lives to the most difficult and most abandoned works in the Lord's vineyard. Their first work became the Holy Ghost Seminary. Later, in 1736, the Spiritans took charge of the major and minor seminaries of Meaux, which remained under their direction until 1807.

In the early days of the Society of the Immaculate Heart, Libermann was thinking of engaging his society in a work for the training of priests for Germany; how such a work for the 'poor Germans' could be reconciled with the ends of the Institute he explained in a letter to Le Vavasseur which has been lost (cf. ND II 377). When the Society of the Immaculate Heart became part of the Congregation of the Holy Ghost, Libermann's responsibility was extended to the Colonial Seminary and to the staffing of the old French colonies. Not everybody agreed with the fusion: Mgr Kobës and Mgr Bessieux feared that personnel needed in Africa would be diverted to the Seminary and the colonies. Libermann's experience with the Vicars Apostolic made him feel that the Congregation needed works in Europe to counterbalance their influence. If everybody went on the missions there would be nobody to keep the Congregation going at home: the Bishops would allow the return only of men who were of no use to them; the Congregation in Europe would be nothing more than a seminary for the missions. The Congregation needed works in Europe: there could be communities in the port towns to take care of the working class, of sailors, soldiers, galley-slaves and prisoners (cf. ND IX 289-292 passim). A house devoted to the poor in Brittany could also be used as a base for preaching missions (ND X 201). Some works could provide financial support for the works of formation: the salaries of thirty chaplains for the Navy would provide financial support as well as doing real good (ND XI 323). Personnel for such works could be found among those who had no particular taste for the missions and Spiritans with a strong missionary vocation should not be used in such works, at least.
not for long periods (ND X 202). However no one should be accepted with the condition that he would be kept in France (ND XIII 172). Libermann always saw such works as ancillary to the main purpose of the Congregation.

There was a passage in the Provisional Rule which seemed to forbid works in Europe: The Congregation is destined for foreign and distant missions. Its subjects are never to be kept in Europe for the sole reason of employing them for the salvation of souls; some may stay in Europe but only for the good of the missions (RP Art. 1 Ch. 1). In his edition of the Règlements de la Congrégation du Saint-Esprit (1849), Libermann was able to explain his position better: The general end of the Congregation is to devote itself to the salvation of sinners... Ministry which seeks to support and perfect pious sentiments in souls already established in Christian virtues should be considered as a secondary ministry. However if such kind of ministry has a certain importance in the advancement and support of the principal work, it can be undertaken with a care proportioned to the degree of importance seen in it... The specific end of the Congregation was poor and most abandoned souls and Divine Providence had directed us to exorcise such an area of foreign missions. Works in Europe should not however be given such importance that they would seriously injure the foreign missions, and priests should not be employed in them for a considerable time whose vocation was clearly for these missions (cf. op. cit. Ch. 1 passim).

Libermann felt the need for a strong home base; he saw the need to strengthen the life of the Congregation by undertaking works which would help it to expand and to consolidate; if the Vicars Apostolic needed men immediately they could ask other congregations for help. We would help them to the best of our ability without doing harm to the life of the Congregation. It was not enough for the Congregation "to do and die"; but we must do and keep alive to do again and keep on doing (cf. Mgr. le Roy: Le T.R.P. Frédéric le Vasseur. p. 206, quoting a letter written for Libermann by le Vasseur to Schwindenhammer).

Their Successors

The new Superior-General, Father Schwindenhammer (1852-81) opened the French Seminary shortly after the death of Libermann. Libermann had been thinking of taking on a major seminary in Cincinnati and Schwindenhammer was to have been the first rector (1850). The French Seminary was certainly not a work for 'the poor and most abandoned', even if at the time Holy Church had difficulty in finding apostolic labourers for it. Father Lannurien, its founder, had to defend it vigorously:

Libermann either betrayed his mission, trespassed the commission God had entrusted to him and given a mortal blow to his work... or acted in accordance with God's plans... if Libermann had been called by God to found a Congregation of missionaries only for abandoned souls it is difficult to see for what reason he gave him such extraordinary talents for spiritual guidance and training in the interior life... The gifts of grace possessed by Father Libermann appear to me as signs of the second purpose of his foundation and vocation, namely that God had also destined his spiritual sons for the training of holy and zealous priests (Le Floch: Le Père Lannurien Rome 1910, quoted by Kenen, The Splitting, p. 123).

In the time of Libermann there had been no minor seminaries in the Congregation; the early members were from the ranks of the secular priesthood or from major seminaries. At the time, the accepted way to find vocations was to open apostolic schools. The Congregation was poor and it seemed a good idea to open seminary-colleges: the fees paid by the lay-boys would help to subsidise the education of the poor students for the missionary priesthood. Schwindenhammer founded seminary-colleges in France at Plœrmel, Guerin, Cagny, Beauvais, Langogne, Gravelines, Merville, Mesnières and Rambervillers; in Ireland at Blackrock and Rockwell; in Germany at Marienstadt; in Portugal at Braga; in the United States at Pittsburgh, as well as colleges in Trinidad, Guadaloupe, Haiti and Pondicherry.

Father Emonet, Superior-General (1882-95) founded more seminary-colleges: in France at Epinal, Sessinet, Castelnau-d'ArÈ; in Ireland at Rathmore, in Portugal at Porto; in the Azores at Ponta Delgada and at Balaustre in Australia, at Para in Brazil and at Lima, Peru. Of these establishments some lasted only a few years or even months; some are still flourishing today. But the very number of these educational institutions (and we have not mentioned orphanages) would make one wonder whether the Congregation had taken on the education of youth as one of its principal aims. Some have even suggested that Father Schwindenhammer was a sort of unrecognised John Bosco. However this was not the case: the schools were founded to consolidate and develop the Congregation and its work and to attract vocations: they were always seen as a base from which would help the main work of the Congregation, the evangelization of the poor and most abandoned.

During the generaleate of Archbishop Le Roy (1896-1926), there were big changes in the educational involvement of the Congregation. Due to the new tax laws in France, some of the educational institutions were proving more of a hindrance than a help in achieving the ends of the Congregation. The mandate given by the Chapter of 1896 to the new Superior-General included the following guideline:

Educational institutions which, after the payment of their staff and expenses, supply the Congregation with resources and vocations fall within the means foreseen for the attainment of our purposes. For this reason it is important to secure the prosperity of these houses by supplying them with a stable personnel that is devoted to this sort of work. The personnel must possess the required aptitudes and offer guarantees of the necessary competence, certified, when necessary by degrees (Circul. Mgr Le Roy No. 2, p. 20).

Archbishop Le Roy was not 'against the colleges', however. During his term of office St. Alexander's College was founded, first of all as an apostolic school for the Congregation and for needy dioceses and later it was opened to lay boys: it became the mother-house of the Province of Canada. In 1904 the Combes laws closed all colleges in France which were directed by religious Congregations. In 1910 anti-clerical laws closed Catholic schools in Portugal just as earlier Bismarck had closed schools in Germany. When Catholic schools were again permitted in France and Portugal the Congregation did not take back its former colleges. Some disappeared, some remained in government
hands and some were taken over by dioceses or by other congregations. It was considered wiser for the Congregation to open apostolic schools, membership of which would be restricted to boys who had expressed a wish to join the Congregation. It was felt perhaps that an apostolic school was a more suitable environment for nurturing vocations than a college.

In Ireland there was question of closing Rockwell and St. Mary's, Rathmines. The Archbishop of Cashel wrote a strong letter to the Superior-General warning him of the displeasure of the Irish Bishops if Rockwell were closed and mentioning that he considered Rockwell as the minor seminary of his diocese. St. Mary's Rathmines was closed in 1916 but pressure from diocesan authorities and the Catholic laity caused its reopening in 1926. The two incidents bring into relief a general principle: even if the Congregation sees a work as merely a supporting work of its special purpose, it is still a part of the universal mission and the local church has a part in the dialogue.

Our Works of Education Today and Tomorrow

In the course of nearly five years of visits, the General Council has come to understand better the importance of the school apostolate in certain provinces of the Congregation. They are ancillary works in the service of the Congregation's main purpose. Our present schools, our Duquesne University, are works of the Congregation and are works of which we can legitimately be proud. We foresee a greater rôle of the Catholic laity in the conduct of our schools, and a more pastoral rôle for Spiritans engaged in them. But educational work is a way to live and carry out the Spiritan charism and the Congregation accepts this form of work as an integral part of the mission of the Congregation.

Schools which are professionally competent

Education is a value in itself: it has its own laws, its own justification, its own finality. Catholic schools should be good schools, as good as any in Tokyo, Los Angeles or Moscow. Within the limits of our capacity to judge, it seems to us that our Spiritan schools are run in a professional and competent manner.

Christian Schools

A Catholic school must do much more than achieve academic success. If it does only this, it loses its specifically Christian characteristic, which is its reference to a Christian concept of life, centred on Jesus Christ. As schools get bigger and more impersonal, as religious practice declines, even in traditionally Catholic areas, there is an increasing danger that Catholic schools will become indistinguishable in ethos from other schools. Today there is a strong current of secularism; if a Catholic school is to be Christian in fact as well as in name, it must go against this current. A Catholic school should proclaim the good news: it should train its students knowingly as children of God. The Catholic school should be a faith-community of teachers, parents and children, a community which evangelizes itself and evangelizes others in the larger community of which it is a part. To be fully secular, it must be Christian as well.

Schools which favour Christian vocation

Up to about twenty years ago, large numbers of Spiritans came from apostolic schools or Catholic secondary schools. After the Council there was a belief that 'late vocations' would become more numerous, and become the rule rather than the exception. Today the pathes that bring young men to the major seminary or to the Congregation are more diverse than before. Final commitments are made later in life, but answers to questionnaires suggest that the first seeds of a vocation are often sown in late childhood or early teens. In Europe and America today there is a famine of vocations, but there are some indications that vocations from secondary school level are beginning to increase again. However small the number of vocations that come from a congregation's own schools, they do provide a nucleus which attract other young men. God's hands are not tied by sociological change, he still calls boys to his service.

Traditionally a Catholic school has been judged by the number of vocations to the priesthood and the religious life that come from it. In the past Christian vocation was taken for granted, perhaps too much for granted. Everybody has a vocation from God. The Catholic school today should provide an environment which favours the discernment of vocation, lay, religious and presbyteral. It should do more: it should provide an environment which positively helps the student to answer his personal call by God and it should protect his vocation, accompany it and strengthen it. The school community should provide an environment of liturgical and personal prayer, and, dare we say it, provide spiritual guidance for its students.

Schools which are missionary

The whole Church is missionary, a Catholic school should be missionary and especially a school for which a missionary congregation is responsible. A Spiritan school should be in solidarity with the purpose of the Congregation; it should accept it; it should help it. Young people are impressionable. Unconsciously they accept the values of their teachers, not so much the values they profess but the values they are seen to live by. Pictures on the wall,
audiovisual presentations, lectures and prayer-groups can be of great value in instilling in students a missionary spirit and in providing a dimension to their lives which goes beyond that of worldly success and prosperity. Young people are generous and idealistic and a Spiritan school should nurture their spirit of generosity and self-sacrifice. Our students should be trained to be missionaries in the home church and abroad, as laymen or as religious missionaries.

**Schools which are concerned for the poor**

A Congregation which was founded for the poor and most abandoned must take into special account the words of the recent Roman document, *The Catholic School* (1978).

First and foremost the Church offers its educational services to 'the poor and those who are deprived of family help and protection and those who are far from the faith... Since education is an important means of improving the social and economic condition of individuals and peoples, if the Catholic school were to turn itself exclusively and predominantly to those from the wealthier social classes it could be contributing towards maintaining their privileged position and could thereby continue to favour a society which is unjust (op. cit. Par. 58). It may be true that in the context the words 'Catholic School' refer to the Catholic school system as a whole and not to an individual school, but the passage may have a certain relevance for Spiritans. Today when it is becoming clear that the rich nations are oppressing the poor nations, the Catholic school has the duty to conscientize its students against this oppression and in favour of justice and peace in the world.

**Our Common Spiritan Vocation**

Throughout our history there has always been tension between the demands of the mission and the needs of the home works. From the time of Libermann there has hardly been a missionary bishop who did not complain of men being kept at home, especially for school work. Perhaps the balance was not always kept and sometimes men were kept in schools to the detriment of the missions. However many hundreds of missionaries, thousands even, did come from our schools, and in these days of famine we should not forget this. Then there were always Spiritans who found they did not have a taste for missionary work abroad; there were many who had a true vocation for missionary work who were kept at home against their will, and there were men whose health did not stand up to foreign climates and who were able to work happily and usefully in home works.

In the Congregation there has always been a certain hierarchy in our Spiritan commitments: some men are in the front line, some are in logistics, some are in the commissariat, some in training schools, some in field hospitals. In the course of a Spiritan's life he may find himself in many work-situations: the man who has spent years in first evangelization may find himself in school-work at home or even in a parish in his home diocese.

Some are apostles, some are teachers, some know many languages; some work at first evangelization among the Masai or in Northern Cameroun, others work in administration or in education. Each in his own work-situation should be faithful to the common vocation of the Congregation, and every Spiritan work should contribute to the specific end of the Congregation. Each should be interested in the work of the other, understand it and support it. The man who is working poor among the poor needs the support and sympathy of the the man in a more comfortable situation, and the man at home needs the sympathy and support of those in frontier situations. If one part is hurt, all parts are hurt with it, if one part is given special honour, all parts enjoy it. Now you together are Christ's body; but each of you is a different part of it (1 Cor. 12, 26-27).

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**A SPIRITAN SCHOOL DEFINES ITS PURPOSE:**

The French Province conducts three small junior-secondary schools: Neufgrange, Blotzheim and Allex, which were formerly apostolic schools in the strict sense. In a circular sent to parents in 1978, the Ecole des Missions de Blotzheim defines it nature, its purpose and its style of life:

The Ecole des Missions is a junior secondary school, a boarding school of 120 boys. Its purpose is to give a human and Christian education and to accompany priestly and missionary vocations. It seeks to open its students to the other and to the Third World. Its team of educators includes Spiritans, religious sisters and Christian laity...

The common life of the school requires from the pupils generosity and a spirit of caring for others and openness to them... The Christian school which is ours presupposes that the parents accept Jesus Christ and his Church and desire a good religious education for their children. The boy himself will accept our style of life, which includes expressions of faith, prayers, Eucharistic and other celebrations and careful religious instruction. Since for many years the school was especially intended for boys with a religious missionary vocation, the school gives special welcome to boys who are thinking of giving themselves totally to the service of the Church and the Third World...

We think it indispensable that the parents agree with our stated aims. Nor does the admission of a boy dispense the parents from their duty as the educators of their son. Indeed they are invited to work with the headmaster and the teachers, to interest themselves in the activities of the school and to participate actively in various functions and meetings...