

Fall 2017

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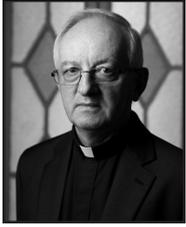
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Recommended Citation

Fogarty, J. (2017). Responding Creatively to the Needs of Evangelization of Our Time. *Spiritan Horizons*, 12 (12). Retrieved from <https://dsc.duq.edu/spiritan-horizons/vol12/iss12/6>

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RESPONDING CREATIVELY TO THE NEEDS OF EVANGELIZATION OF OUR TIMES (SRL 2)



Fr. John Fogarty, C.S.Sp. Fr. Fogarty, C.S.Sp. of the Irish Province was ordained priest on 27 September 1981. He obtained a Licentiate in sacred theology from the University of Fribourg, Switzerland (1982). He did pastoral work on mission in Kumasi diocese, Ghana (1982-86), served on the provincial council of Ireland, before returning to Ghana as Rector of the Spiritan Institute of Philosophy in Ejisu (1990-1994). In 1994, he returned to Ireland as assistant provincial till 1998 when he was elected first assistant to the superior general in Rome. He became the first Director of the Center for Spiritan Studies (2005-2009), then Provincial of the US Province (2009-2012), and is currently the superior general of the Spiritan Congregation.

A Biblical Model

Twenty years ago, in May 1996, the much-respected Brazilian biblical scholar, Carlos Mesters, gave a seminal address at the annual meeting of SEDOS¹ in Rome. Although the specific title of his presentation was, “Religious Life and its Mission among the Poor, in the Light of the Word of God,”² Mesters addressed at length the difficult context in which many religious missionaries are called to live out their charism today—a loss of identity and privilege, a sense of powerlessness, a situation where previous paradigms have broken down, where traditional evangelization is no longer able to interpret the facts, and the symbols that have traditionally mediated and supported God’s presence in our midst have been taken from us. As a biblical scholar, he asked the question as to whether there were any precedents in biblical history to which we could look for inspiration and encouragement. He suggested that the period of the Babylonian captivity of Israel offered a key to interpreting our current experience and to providing a new direction forward. He claimed that the conditions in which we now live closely resemble the situation of the captivity: it was a major crisis in the history of God’s people; the crisis of faith was structural, not merely situational; everything was destroyed, they lost everything which supported their faith in God (land, Temple, cult, king, Jerusalem); their identity as a people was shattered, they were without power, privilege or direction.

Many committed Jews, understandably, lost all hope and prospects for the future. However, a small anonymous group of men, women, and children – the disciples of Isaiah – continued to believe that God was present and active in their midst and in the world around them, if only they had eyes to see. *Behold I am doing something new; it is emerging; can you not see it?* (Isa 43:18-19). They ultimately became the carriers of the hope of the people, responsible for the most hope-filled passages in Scripture (Isaiah 40—66), the source of a new birth and new understanding of mission, and a new departure in the history of the People of God. *These texts, said Mesters, are conspicuous for their courage and their openness to rethinking everything. They knew how to be creative. They went beyond the frontiers of the traditional, and, faithful to true tradition, dreamed of a new world.* Through a process of reflection, listening, and dialogue, this small group faced the perennial threefold challenge before all

committed Christian communities: to understand and experience the newness of God present in history; to put it into words and to transform it into good news for the poor; to incarnate it and express it in new forms of common life, in such a way that the people could understand its power for life. In so doing, they came to understand that some of their most precious faith concepts of the past were tied up with ideologies and needed purification and redemption and, most importantly, they came to realize that they had a new mission as a people – they were called to be a light to the nations, a Servant of God for all peoples, to carry the sufferings and the burdens of others - a role without privilege, recognition, or prestige. *The Order or Congregation to which we belong goes on being born every day*, concludes Mesters. *We are challenged to bring the charism to rebirth at each historical moment. We are called to recreate, not to repeat.*

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The European Experience

Drawing largely on this inspirational text of Carlos Mesters, the general council in 2003 encouraged the provinces of Europe to begin a process of reflection on the future of Spiritan presence and mission on the continent. A number of these provinces had not seen any new entrants for several years; all were deeply conscious of ageing and diminishing resources (the membership of the Province of France, for example, dropped from around 1500 in 1969 to some 500 in 1999), and there was a widespread sense that the era of mission *ad gentes*, with which we had been so familiar, was coming to an end. The general council stressed the missionary challenge for the Congregation of contemporary Europe pointing to a context of growing secularization and an ever-increasing absence of the sense of the transcendent, the marginalization of youth from poorer backgrounds, the influx of immigrants often forced to live in precarious situations, and a general indifference in the population vis à vis the negative influence on developing countries of European and US foreign policies. The general council noted that any vision for future Spiritan mission on the Continent of Europe would clearly have to involve collaboration with the wider Congregation and, in particular, with Africa from which the majority of our vocations were emerging.

The provinces accepted the invitation of the general council and together set about identifying agreed criteria for future Spiritan mission in Europe: youth ministry, work with migrants and refugees, and JPIC ministry. They subsequently identified 14 projects across Europe in which they were currently engaged that corresponded with

*...a new hope for
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these criteria and which they believed should at all costs be continued into the future. Gradually there emerged the conviction that some organizational structure was necessary to underpin this collective view for future Spiritan mission and, in 2004, the concept of a new type of circumscription or entity was introduced into the *Spiritan Rule of Life* to cater specifically for this eventuality. Thus in 2006 the general council created Circumscription Europe, comprising initially the European Secretariat community in Brussels, the community in Rostock, and the European Novitiate in Chevilly, Paris. The mission of the new circumscription was “to ensure the continued presence of the Spiritan mission in Europe, particularly through the development and animation of missionary projects in Europe.” The circumscription, centered on Brussels, would continue as a structure of animation and collaboration, to be at the service of the existing provinces of Europe, and should be open to initiating new developments. It was noted that other circumscriptions could opt to integrate into Circumscription Europe, thus becoming a Region thereof. The provinces of Germany and Belgium did so in the years that immediately followed. Initially, consideration was given to placing all 14 projects in the different provinces of Europe under the jurisdiction of Circumscription Europe and its major superior, but this was ultimately deemed inappropriate as the presence of such projects within the existing circumscriptions had already begun to create a new missionary consciousness in the circumscriptions themselves and a new hope for the future with which all members both young and old could identify. The ten years that have followed the creation of Circumscription Europe have seen the emergence of a new missionary dynamism across the continent, including in provinces that had once resigned themselves to disappearance. Today Province Europe, the new designation for Circumscription Europe in the wake of the Bagamoyo Chapter, has 8 vibrant missionary projects (Rostock, Stuttgart, Molenbeek, Charleroi, Notel, Heiligen Geist Gymnasium, MaZ and the recently opened Antwerpen-Turnhout) three of which are entirely run by lay collaborators. Three essential dimensions characterize all present and future projects: international/intercultural community, collaboration with lay people, and response to the needs of the local church in the areas of first and new evangelization.

Interestingly, there has been a parallel development in a number of the other provinces of Europe which has brought new life to the circumscriptions concerned. Holland now has two projects at the service of immigrants and a third due

to open shortly. Britain now has several missionary projects in line with the original criteria elaborated by the European provincials at the outset of the reflection process. Italy has a non-parish-based project at the service of three different linguistic immigrant groups. Finally, Switzerland has recently received a request from the local church to assume pastoral responsibility for two multi-ethnic parishes in line with our charism. For the most part, these projects are either a collaborative venture between members of the province by origin and those by appointment, or alternatively are entirely run by members appointed to the province by other circumscriptions. As our circumscriptions become more and more intercultural and international, we are being invited to move away from a nationalistic understanding of Province or Group – where there are those who belong and those who have come to help - to the concept of international Spiritan presence and mission in a particular country, where every confrere feels at home and an equal partner in the life and mission of the circumscription. This is a much more inclusive notion from the point of view of creating a true sense of ownership of the Congregation's mission. It also presents a major challenge to the receiving circumscriptions, in terms of fostering a genuine sense of belonging for those who come from “outside” and in ensuring their inclusion in the decision-making processes of the circumscription, as well as to the confreres concerned in terms of identifying fully with the mission to which they have been appointed.

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Strategic Planning for Mission

The Bagamoyo General Chapter, you may recall, requested a three-year strategic mission plan in keeping with our charism at the level of every circumscription (1.9); this is a challenge that to a large extent is yet to be addressed. Perhaps insistence on a three-year time span for such a plan was unrealistic but the intent of the directive remains vital to the future of Spiritan mission throughout the world. Among the concerns shared by the general council are the following.

- the risk of the “diocesization” of Spiritan mission in a number of countries, particularly where we have a lengthy history and tradition. The emphasis in an increasingly autonomous local church goes to responding to requests from bishops to staff parishes, sometimes to the detriment of community life, rather than to searching for new peripheries in accordance with our missionary charism;
- the tendency towards “nationalization,” especially but not uniquely in a number of some recently created circumscriptions, which though understandable

from the point of view of consolidation of the circumscription, is undermining our international character and witness;

- the difficulty of finding confreres with genuine leadership ability, especially in smaller circumscriptions, who are capable of fostering unity and imparting a missionary vision.
- congregational investment in inter-religious dialogue (1.13) remains an ongoing challenge, as does the call to protect and foster the integrity of creation (1.26) in the light of the recent Papal Encyclical, *Laudato Si*.

There are, of course, many encouraging signs of the presence of the Spirit in our midst, among them the inspiring daily witness of many of our members, the increasing demand for Spiritans at the service of immigrant communities in Europe. Other signs are, as we have seen, the growth of Spiritan vocations in Vietnam and India, now integrated into the Union of the Circumscriptions of Asia and Oceania, the current discussions here at Granby with regard to mission beyond borders, involving the provinces of Canada, TransCanada and the USA. All these developments present new challenges and new opportunities. In a sense, the Provinces of North America have taken the lead in a process that will ultimately have to involve the entire Congregation. We need to initiate serious research and reflection into the future of Spiritan mission on a continental basis, in the light of our charism and our resources, by way of preparation for the next general chapter. What is the future of Spiritan mission in Africa, in Latin America, in Asia? A failure to take responsibility for the future, despite its uncertainty, is ultimately a failure in leadership at all levels.

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Challenges for Spiritan Mission Today

We live in a time of crisis that touches various sectors of existence, not only the economy, finance, food security, or the environment, but also those involving the deeper meaning of life and the fundamental values that animate it.³

Three years ago, a thought-provoking presentation was given at the bi-annual meeting of the Union of Superiors General in Rome. Political theologian, Bartolomeo Sorge, S.J., addressing the topic, “The Service of Leadership in Religious Life Fifty Years after Vatican II,” referred to a structural crisis in contemporary society. We have seen the emergence today of a new globalized and technocratic civilization marked by the separation of culture from faith,

of politics and economics from ethics. This new civilization is pervaded by an exaggerated individualism, materialism, and subjectivism that again affect all of us, religious and non-religious alike. What is clear is that the models of evangelization of the past no longer work. We need to return to the originality and simplicity of the gospel, to the witness of lives transformed by an encounter with Christ. Fr. Sorge noted that each time the church becomes rich and powerful, weighed down by human privilege, each time diplomacy prevails over prophecy, when the Christian community falls back on its own internal problems and loses its missionary zeal, the Holy Spirit intervenes to purify and renew the church and bring it back to the purity of its origins.

The Quest for Meaning and Hope

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The men and women of our time need the secure light that illumines their path ... (Message for World Mission Day 2013). At a recent homily on the role of religious in the contemporary world, Fr. Adolfo Nicolas, outgoing superior general of the Society of Jesus, said he was convinced that the world today looked to Congregations like ours primarily for wisdom. He added that he had spent virtually all of his missionary life in Japan believing, like many, that wisdom was one of the essential values contributed to humanity by Asian spirituality rather than by the West. He was now persuaded that it was the single most important contribution that religious everywhere were called to give to a world that had lost direction and was desperately seeking meaning and hope.

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“Can you live crushed under the weight of the present? Without a memory of the past and without the desire to look ahead to the future by building something, a future, a family?” asked Pope Francis in his dialogue with Eugenio Scalfari, atheist editor of the Italian newspaper, *Repubblica*.⁴ *“This, to me, is the most urgent problem that the church is facing.”* The fact that even non-believers look to the church for direction today was clear from Scalfari’s reaction:

The world is going through a period of deep crisis, not only economic but also social and spiritual... Even we, non-believers, feel this almost anthropological weight (of the present). That is why we want dialogue with believers and those who best represent them.

We are reminded of the prophetic words of Vatican II: *“The future of humanity lies in the hands of those who are strong enough to provide coming generations with reasons for hoping and living”* [*Gaudium et Spes*, 31].

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Mission and Powerlessness

The difficulty is, of course, that the church of recent years has lost much of its credibility as an authoritative source of hope and meaning for others. The financial scandals and internal political intrigues in the Vatican, the clerical sex abuse crisis across the globe, and the failure of church leadership to address the matter with often disastrous consequences for those involved, have all undermined the validity and effectiveness of the church's voice in contemporary society. At the Bagamoyo General Chapter there was a profound awareness of the need for us as a Congregation to bridge the gap between the words we speak and our lived reality. There was a collective consciousness of our own fragilities, our mistakes and failures, and a realization that, at the heart of our mission today is an internal call to conversion, to greater authenticity, integrity, and accountability. We heard a pressing invitation to relinquish a sense of mission based on strength and to embrace one rooted in fragility. The Holy Spirit has intervened to bring us back to the simplicity of the message of our founders, to the conviction that the mission to which we are called is God's mission not ours, and that our role is to be docile instruments at God's service. A sense of powerlessness, therefore, should not lead to paralysis but to a renewed conviction that God's power is most effective in our human frailty. In fact, as Timothy Radcliffe pointed out, a sense of our own powerlessness is actually an essential condition for credibility as a preacher of the Word of God today:

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To be a preacher is not just to tell people about God. It is to bear within our own lives that distance between the life of God and that which is furthest away, alienated and hurt. We have a word of hope only if we glimpse from within the pain and despair of those to whom we preach. We have no word of compassion unless, somehow, we know their failures and temptations as our own. We have no word which offers meaning to people's lives unless we have been touched by their doubts and glimpsed the abyss.⁵

Spiritana Mission and the Quest for Meaning

In the light of the above, it seems clear that the primary contribution we are called to make in the contemporary world as Spiritana missionaries pertains more to the quality of our own personal and community witness than to the nature or multiplicity of our activities. We are reminded of the

words of Francis Libermann:

Your principal preaching consists in the holiness of your own life...⁶

If our conduct is not in line with the holiness of our ministry entrusted to us and does not transmit the teaching we have to impart, the people to whom we go will notice the difference. This will prevent them from benefitting from our words; they will say that we are (simply) doing our job – we are mere agents.⁷

In short, if there is a perceptible gap between what we preach and the way we live, the credibility of our way of life and the effectiveness of our ministry are seriously undermined. Unfortunately, this is a reality with which we are all too familiar of recent times.

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Personal Witness

A missionary, in the first instance, is a person who has found God in his or her own poverty, whose life has been utterly transformed by this experience, a person who has discovered joy, hope, and meaning in his or her own life and is able to put words on his or her experience for others.

The church – I repeat once again – is not a relief organization, an enterprise or an NGO, but 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.⁸

To use the imagery of Pope Francis, we are people on a pilgrimage with humanity in search of a God we have already found.

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The work of the new evangelization consists in presenting once more the beauty and perennial newness of the encounter with Christ to the often distracted and confused heart of the men and women of our time, above all to ourselves.⁹

The touchstones of the new evangelization are a renewed encounter with Christ in contemplative prayer and in the faces of the poor:

The other symbol of authenticity of the new

evangelization has the face of the poor. Placing ourselves side by side with those who are wounded by life is not only a social exercise, but above all a spiritual act because it is Christ's face that shines in the face of the poor. (Ibid).

Community Witness

The 2009 CARA¹⁰ study in the USA, based on a survey of 4000 religious who had entered or made final profession over the course of the previous 16 years revealed that 85% had been attracted by the members of the particular community they joined, their sense of joy, commitment and zeal. The most important aspects for them were community life and prayer. Reflecting on the results of the study, the National Catholic Reporter (*NCR*) journalist, John J. Allen Jr., noted that "high-tension" communities are more attractive to new members today because they represent

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a church full of passionate members; a community of people deeply involved in each other's lives and more willing than most to come to each other's aid; a peer group of knowledgeable souls who speak the same language (or languages), are moved by the same texts, and cherish the same dreams.¹¹

In a world marked by rootlessness and alienation, young people are searching today for places of inclusion, acceptance, and belonging - where gifts are recognized, affirmed and enabled to flourish.

There has been a growing realization in our Congregation of recent years that the increasingly international and intercultural character of our worldwide community is not simply an inevitable consequence of the geographical spread of our commitments but that it is integral to our mission as Spiritans in the contemporary world. In a world where conflict, racialism, and the cult of the individual are all too prevalent

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by coming together from so many different places and cultures, we are saying to our brothers and sisters that the unity of the human race is not just an impossible dream. In this way, our community life is an integral part of our mission and a powerful witness of the Gospel" (Maynooth Chapter, 1998, p.117).

International community living is a "response to the call

of the Holy Spirit to all of us, to witness to a new quality of human solidarity, surpassing individualism, ethnocentrism and nationalism” [Torre d’Aguilha Chapter, 2005, 2.1].

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Finally, a word about the ongoing mission of our retired and sick members. An over-identification of mission with activity and accomplishment often results in a sense of uselessness among those who for reasons of age or health can no longer function as they did in the past when they were younger and more active. In the contemporary world, where human beings tend to be measured and valued by their ability to produce and consume, and where the elderly are often isolated and forgotten, the importance of the witness of older and ill religious missionaries living in community and accepting their limitations and sufferings with joy, dignity, and grace cannot be overstated. Surely confreres who give such a wonderful testimony to people who serve in our retirement communities and people who visit them are among those who assure the future of humanity in providing others with reasons for living and hoping (cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, 31 above).

In the final analysis the credibility of our missionary activity today and even our right to engage therein are more than ever dependent on the extent to which we ourselves have been evangelized by the gospel we preach to others. Mission today is much more about who we are than what we do. To quote Meister Eckhart: “People should not worry so much about what they should do; rather they should worry about what they should be. If we and our ways are good, then what we do will be radiant.”¹²

Perhaps the most appropriate biblical model of Spiritan mission today can be taken from the Prophet Zechariah 8:23: “*in those days, ten men of every language will take a [Spiritan] by the sleeve and say, ‘We want to go with you, since we have learnt that God is with you.’*”

*Very Rev. Fr. John Fogarty, C.S.Sp.
Superior General, Rome*

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Endnotes

¹Service of Documentation and Study of Global Mission, Rome – an open forum for Institutes of Consecrated Life.

²*SEDOS Bulletin* 28 (1996) 171-179.

³Message of Pope Francis for World Mission Day, 2013, dated the Feast of Pentecost, May 19, 2013, and released on August 6, 2013, World Mission Day.

⁴The Italian version in *Repubblica*, July 13, 2014. Citation here from http://www.repubblica.it/cultura/2013/10/01/news/pope_s_

conversation_with_scalfari_english-67643118/ Translated from Italian to English by Kathryn Wallace.

⁵Radcliffe, *Sing a New Song: The Christian Vocation*. Springfield, Ill.: Templegate Publishers, 1999, 125.

⁶*Notes et Documents*, XIII, 143.

⁷*Provisional Rule of Father Libermann. Text and Commentary*. Pittsburgh: Center for Spiritan Studies, 2015, p. 50 (Part I, chap 1, art ix).

⁸Message for World Mission Day 2013.

⁹Final Message of the Synod of Bishops on New Evangelization for the “Year of Faith,” 2013.

¹⁰CARA stands for Center of Applied Research in the Apostolate. It is based in Georgetown University, Washington D.C.

¹¹“‘High tension’ and ‘low tension’ religious life,” *NCR*, August 14, 2009.

¹²Cited from Radcliffe, *Sing a New Song*, 125.