The Spiritans: A Third Founding Moment?

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Introduction

The history of any organization has pivotal moments when fundamental choices are made that give shape to its development. Spiritans have known many such moments at local, regional, and congregational level. Times of crisis are part of the Spiritan story and provide opportunity for greater fidelity to the Spiritan missionary vocation. Then there are identifiable “founding moments” in which the Congregation had its beginning, received new life, was preserved from extinction.

The first founding moment was in 1703 with the beginning of the Congregation as a community of poor students with Claude Poullart des Places, a seminarian, as its founder. Its transition in 1734 from an informal residence and school for poor seminarians to a recognized seminary preparing priests for the French colonies put it on the national stage and gave it legal status. Providentially, it survived the French Revolution.

A second founding moment was in 1848 when Francis Libermann brought his youthful missionary society, the Holy Heart of Mary, into the Spiritan fold. Libermann’s leadership rescued the Spiritan Congregation from possible extinction and widened the boundaries of Spiritan mission to embrace the poorest and most abandoned in the world: the freed slaves of the colonies and the peoples of Africa. That missionary thrust propelled the Congregation beyond France to many European countries, beginning with Ireland in 1859, in quest of vocations to complete its missionary work.

A third founding moment, proposed here, is the 1968 XIII General Chapter at which the Congregation rose to the challenge of embracing dramatic change in response to the Vatican II call to renewal. At that extraordinary chapter, described by one of the capitulants, Frans Timmermans, as “the failed coup” of Mgr. Lefebvre, the first historic decisions were made in what would be a difficult period of adjustment and renewal.

In 2018 Spiritans celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of that moment which began a period of dramatic change. Does GC XIII and the time of renewal since Vatican II constitute a third founding moment for the Congregation? In this article, I explore how the Spiritan Congregation’s renewal and adaptations taken in the light of Vatican II (1962-65) might be interpreted fifty years later. I leave it to the reader to decide...
what lessons have been learned from that experience that helps the Congregation today to play its part in the missio Dei.

The Spiritans and Vatican II

Vatican II set a trajectory for the church in the third millennium. It constituted a “paradigm shift” from a hierarchical, juridical, and triumphalist church to a pilgrim, pastoral, and servant church heralding the kingdom of God for all peoples in all places. As part of this shift, the Council called for renewal in all religious institutes.

The Spiritans, as religious and as missionaries, were particularly challenged by the Council’s thinking on the primacy of baptism and the Spirit at work among all the baptized, both individually and collectively in the building up of the church (*Lumen gentium* 12). If all members of the church through baptism were called to be holy, what was distinctive about a religious vocation? What was the role for a missionary institute in light of the Council’s decree on missionary activity, *Ad gentes*, which recognized that the local church was the primary agent for mission and that all Christians by their baptism were missionary?

For some Spiritans, an existential life or death question needed to be asked of the Congregation. Did the Spiritan Congregation have a future? A special edition of the French journal, *Spiritus*, in preparation for GC XIII attempted an answer. In its editorial, Fr. Athanase Bouchard, C.S.Sp., feared that, given the changed circumstances since the General Chapter of 1962 which elected Mgr. Lefebvre, “it is very clear that a failure of this present chapter would have altogether more radical consequences for the Congregation than that of 1962.” Bouchard urged the capitulants to have the courage to “see things as they are: it is certain that there is among us – especially among the young – an easy resignation to the eventuality of a dissolution of the Spiritans; they see no other future apart from this.” He painted an “end game” scenario for the Congregation, giving GC XIII the ominous title of “le chapitre de la dernière chance (a last opportunity chapter).” As in 1848, the Congregation’s very existence was in doubt. Could it survive the demand for renewal in a very changed world? The prospects seemed unlikely with Mgr. Marcel Lefebvre as Superior General.

At the Council, Mgr. Lefebvre was “opposed to episcopal collegiality, which he had already labelled in October 1963 as ‘collectivism,’ and found it impossible to reconcile the new ecclesiology of Vatican II with the ecclesiology heavily marked by an ultramontanist and hierarchical mentality” which he espoused. He had supported the “Catholic order”
of the authoritarian French Vichy regime in the 1940s and saw Vatican II as “the French revolution in the church.” The theologian, Gerald O’Collins, S.J., made an incisive observation about archbishop Lefebvre and his rejection of the Council. In support of his position, Lefebvre invoked “the tradition” (understood in the sense of what came from the sixteenth-century Council of Trent) and “the church” (understood in the sense of French Catholics who longed for the restoration of the monarchy), and avoided appealing to the gospels or invoking Jesus himself and the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

O’Collins analyzed an interview given by Lefebvre to *Newsweek* (19 December 1977). In it, he noted, Lefebvre spoke about the “church” 13 times, about tradition(s) 3 times, and about “God” twice, but there was not a mention of Jesus or the gospels.

**The General Chapter of 1968-69 [GC XIII]**

In October 1967, Lefebvre formally convoked the special extraordinary chapter. The key question at the beginning of the chapter for some well-informed capitulants was, “who controlled the chapter?” Control had to be wrested from Lefebvre’s grip. He had reiterated the announcement made earlier in the year that he and his council would offer their resignations when a new superior general and council had been elected. However, Lefebvre took it that up to that time he would, as superior general, preside over the chapter. But it was pointed out that once the chapter was in session, it was the supreme authority in the Congregation. What then was Lefebvre’s role in the chapter? The capitulants deliberated on whether, as superior general, he should chair the central commission and thus take control. A vote was taken (11 September) and it was decided by 63 votes to 40 votes that he should not.

Following that vote, Mgr. Lefebvre absented himself from GC XIII. His biographer records that on the following day he wrote to the Sacred Congregation for Religious informing them of what had happened. He contested that the vote removing his authority over the chapter was unconstitutional.

Lefebvre returned on 28 September and addressed the capitulants. He explained that he went on retreat to Assisi to reflect on the writings of Fr. Libermann and had arrived at some conclusions. He presented the links between religious life, community life, and missionary activity that were the hallmark of Libermann’s teaching. And, he added, “the realization,
in practice of this community life and religious life, is the observance of the Rule under the vigilance of the superior.” He went on to say,

we must recognize in all humility that this religious life and this community life, such as they are essentially known by our Venerable Father, are no longer wanted by many of us. Why hide it? Already for a certain number of years, slowly, progressively, but irremediably a good many confreres have lost the esteem and the practice of true religious life and community life.  

He called on those, so inclined, “to look elsewhere for another society that may suit them or let them found a new one.” It was Lefebvre who left and, as we know, founded a seminary at Écône, Switzerland and the Society of Pius X that would put him on a “collision course” with the Vatican.

GC XIII continued its deliberations on the Congregation’s renewal and a consensus quickly formed around principles of subsidiarity, solidarity, and unity, and of the governance of the Congregation proceeding from “the bottom up.” That is, from the individual, to the local community, to the district/provincial community, to the general council. GC XIII succeeded in articulating a common vision of the Spiritan vocation as an indissoluble unity of life, viewed as a whole, and in all its aspects, Spiritan and ecclesial, humanitarian and Christianizing, active and prayerful, missionary and religious. 

Continuing the Journey of Renewal

The extent and depth of renewal within the life of the church authored at Vatican II had not been appreciated by Lefebvre and those who supported him. Those seeking reform wanted the Congregation to engage as fully as possible with the spirit of the Council and advocated radical change through an uncompromising identification of first evangelization as the specific end of the Congregation. This approach was based on the logic of *ressourcement* or return to the sources, claiming first evangelization as the founding intention of Libermann for his Congregation. This was articulated in CDD (*Directives and Decisions*, 1969) 1: “to preach the gospel of Christ and to implant his church among peoples and groups who have not yet heard or have only scarcely heard the gospel message.”

GC XIII elected Fr. Joseph Lecuyer as the 19th Superior
General. He called all Spiritans to “an examination of conscience” in 1970. Some confreres, he said, were “unsympathetic” to the call to renewal and he asked, “Are not some prejudiced against the decisions of the general chapter as though nothing good could come from it?” How to implement change and, at the same time, maintain unity was a question that would pre-occupy him and his successor as superior general, Frans Timmermans, from 1969 to 1986 and on to GC XVI which approved the new Spiritan Rule of Life.

GC XIV (1974) held at Chevilly-La-Rue refocused attention on the membership and the building up of community when it emphasised that “our Congregation is a fraternal community” (Guidelines for Animation 3). Community came first as true mission is achieved only from community well lived. The need to realize and be strengthened by a shared Spiritan identity grounded in the founding charism of the Congregation was recognized. A new structure, the Enlarged General Council, (EGC) to meet every two years, was proposed (GA 131-134). Its purpose “is to improve communication and co-operation between the different provinces, districts, and groups and to promote the unity of all with the generalate” (GA 131). The first meeting was held at the generalate in Rome on the day after the Ascension, 1976. On the Eve of Pentecost, the chapter voted in favor of three mission projects, Angola, Paraguay, and Pakistan. Three projects on three continents. Internationality had arrived! Internationality would benefit the Congregation which was still “too Western” and too much influenced by its colonial past. The growth of the Foundations in the “countries of the South” contrasted with a drop of vocations and an older membership in the “countries of the North.”

GC XV (1980) recognized “a new age of mission” characterized by the shift of its center of gravity, both in terms of numbers and vitality, to the southern hemisphere. It was influenced by new “missionary thinking” coming from many sources, such as the International Missionary Congress held in Manila in 1979 which stated, “We have reached a decisive turning-point in the history of mission in the Third World. . . A new era has begun: that of mission by the Third World.” It also recognized works for justice and peace as authentically Spiritan. GC XV marked the beginning of the process for revising the Rules and Constitutions. This took six years and involved the entire membership working through three drafts of new Rules and Constitutions.

GC XVI (1986) agreed the new Spiritan Rule of Life. This was a decisive moment for the Spiritan Congregation as it brought the ad experimentum period to a conclusion and gave
definition to the Congregation’s place in church and world after Vatican II. Much was achieved. The achievements can be summarized as follows.

- a deepening knowledge and love for the Spiritan charism;
- the building of bridges of communication within the Congregation;
- the broad redefining of the Spiritan apostolate;
- the understanding of authority as service;
- the emphasis on the dignity of each member and the spiritual renewal of each one that led to a better service to the missio Dei by the Congregation.

The Spiritan Charism Re-discovered

The Spiritan charism is a lived reality. Its progenitors, Poullart des Places and Francis Libermann, provide the standard and Spiritans both past, present, and to come, follow that standard with personal commitment and community solidarity in the evangelization of the poor. Each Spiritan responds to the call to follow Jesus and to announce the good news of God’s kingdom in the world through creative fidelity to the Spiritan way marked by its rule. SRL “challenges us to discernment, in order to reproduce the spirit of the Founders in the conditions of our time.”

The charism of des Places and Libermann was the seed that germinated into a wonderful plant. The continuing narrative of God’s Spirit at work in individuals coming together in religious community for mission to the poorest and most abandoned has extended far beyond the seedbed of France and grown into a truly international family. The diversification of membership and works since Vatican II is expressive of the Congregation’s creative fidelity to its original inspiration in changing circumstances and new ideas. Henry Koren located SRL in the line of succession of the Congregation’s charism from Poullart des Places and Libermann.

Always open to the Spirit, both Poullart des Places and Libermann remained ready for everything that living the gospel of Jesus appeared to demand of them and their followers in the changing course of history. It is in faithfulness to that Spirit that we update ourselves in our era.

Understanding Spiritan Renewal since Vatican II

An analysis by a noted theologian and commentator on
Vatican II, Massimo Faggioli, on the meaning of Vatican II from the opening of the Council in 1962 to its Fiftieth Anniversary in 2012 provides a helpful sequence in tracing the implementation of change in the church with identifiable parallel moments in the Spiritan Congregation’s journey of renewal.17

- The first moment was that of the Council itself (1962-65). The parallel moment for the Congregation was the holding of the General Chapter of Renewal (1968-69).

- The second moment was a time for commentaries and the early implementation of the Council (1965-80). The parallel moment for the Congregation was the period of experimentation marked by two General Chapters, GC XIV 1974 and GC XV in 1980.

- The third moment, from 1980 to 1990, was marked by a re-assertion of the church’s central authority over the process of implementation, which Faggioli associated with the early years of Pope St. John Paul II’s papacy.18 The parallel moment for the Congregation was the conclusion of the period of experimentation marked by GC XVI in 1986, finalizing the text of the new rule of life and its approval in 1987. There was a gradual re-assertion of authority by the general administration at the Congregation’s center.

- The fourth moment was characterized by scholarly interest and debate on the significance and meaning of the Council, with the publication of many histories on the Council (1990-2000).19 The parallel moment for the Congregation was the period of implementation of SRL marked by two General Chapters, GC XVII at Itaici, Brazil in 1992, and GC XVIII at Maynooth, Ireland, in 1998, and studies on the Congregation’s heritage.

- The fifth moment (leading up to and following on from the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Council) was dominated by the revisionism of Joseph Ratzinger both as Cardinal Prefect of the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith and as Pope Benedict XVI. The interpretation of the Council as a paradigmatic event representing discontinuity with the past was questioned. Instead the Council is better interpreted in the context of the whole history of the church and in continuity with its past.20 The parallel moment for the Congregation was the celebration of the Spiritan Jubilee Year 2002-2003 marking the three hundredth Anniversary of the founding of the Congregation.
by Claude Poullart des Places in 1703 and the hundred and fiftieth Anniversary of the death of Francis Libermann in 1852. The General Chapter of this period, GC XIX, was held at Torre d’Aguilha, Portugal, in 2004 with the theme, “Faithful to the Gift entrusted to Us,” by which the continuity of the Congregation’s 300 years’ history was acknowledged.

The writing of the Rules and Constitutions was likened at the time to an exodus experience for the Congregation. But this comparison came with a warning.

This is not to imply that there is some Promised Land called “Renewal” in which we can find rest. The Second Vatican Council has taught us that the church is a pilgrim people, the process of revision and renewal continues under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. 21

Spiritans continue the journey of mission to the poor in creative fidelity to their founding charism. GC XIII was the first step taken in that journey of renewal which, arguably, constitutes a third founding event of the twentieth century (after Poullart des Places in the eighteenth century and Libermann in the nineteenth century) when the Spiritan identity was re-discovered; the Congregation as a world-wide community was realized; and its mission widened to encompass the oikoumene, the whole wide world.

Dublin

Endnotes

1 The Spiritan Rule of Life (henceforth, SRL) affirmed not only that the Congregation had two founders but also, a “double charism,” with Poullart des Places associated with an outreach to the poor (chimney sweeps and poor seminarians) and Libermann associated with the evangelisation of Africa. Jean Savoie C.S.Sp. has pointed out that the 11th General Chapter (1919) presided over by Bishop Le Roy had already recognized Poullart des Places as founder of the Congregation. This was due more to a legal requirement than an acknowledgment of his charism influencing the Congregation. ‘In 1919, the General Chapter recognized Poullart des Places as the founder of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit, and Libermann as “the second founder and spiritual father.” In the words of Mgr. Le Roy: “Without one of them we would not have existed, without the other we would no longer be in existence.” [Acts of the Spiritan General Chapter of 1919]. See Savoie, ‘The Cause for the Beatification of the Servant of God Claude-François Poullart des Places’ in Spiritan Horizons, 2 (2007) 2-10, here 5.

5Quoted in Faggioli (2012) 32-33. Lefebvre went on to support the military dictatorships in Spain, Portugal, Chile, and Argentina in the 1970s and the National Front, the French far-right party in the 1980s. He traced the changes in the church back to the Reformation in the sixteenth century, the Enlightenment, the French Revolution, liberalism, socialism, and communism.

7Lefebvre’s biographer wrote that Lefebvre had confided to close friends that he intended to resign as superior general as he was no longer listened to or wanted by the congregation. Tissier De Mallerais, Bernard Marcel Lefebvre, Kansas City: Angelus, 2002, 368.

8Ibid., 371-72.
9General Bulletin, 741 (September-October, 1968) 175.
10General Bulletin, 742 (November–December 1968) 363. The vote accepting the document summarized by this formula was 85 for and 7 against.
11It can be noted that no reference is made to the earlier tradition, beginning with the founding of the Congregation in 1703. The Spiritan story did not begin with Libermann but with Poullart des Places. A recognition of the fuller story might well have allowed for a more satisfying solution to the dualism of religious life and the apostolate.

13The first enlarged council meeting in 1976 comprised the general council, provincial superiors, and eight delegates from the districts, one each for South America, West Indies and Guyana, Portuguese-speaking Africa, English-speaking West Africa, English-Speaking East Africa, French-speaking Africa, Madagascar/Reunion/Mauritius and one representing African Spiritans (GA 134). Thinking on the role of an EGC developed over the years. In 2001, the general council thought it important to distinguish between a general chapter and an enlarged general council: “An enlarged council is not a general chapter. Its principal purpose is to provide a forum for progress reports on where we stand now, particularly in relation to the orientations of the last general chapter and where we are going in the future” Spiritan News, 138 (September/October 2001) 1.
14Spiritan Life, 104.
With the ending of the special period of experimentation mandated by *Ecclesiae Sanctae* II, many religious institutes dedicated to works of the apostolate were engaged in a review of their experience. With the approval of their revised constitutions and the coming into effect of the newly formulated Code of Canon Law in 1983, they were moving into a new phase of their history. At that point, they were challenged by Pope St. John Paul II to evaluate objectively and humbly the years of experimentation to recognize positive elements and deviations [Address to the International Union of Women Superiors General 1979; and to Major Superiors of Men and Women Religious in France, 1980]. This was the context for tension within religious Congregations between the two approaches, sometimes contrasted as “traditional” and “progressive.”

Faggioli, *Vatican II*, 15 recognised Giuseppe Alberigo’s five-volume work, *History of Vatican II*, concluded in 2001 as “a major scholarly and historiographical exploration of the debate on Vatican II.”


Farrelly, Thomas, C.S.Sp., “The Process of Revising the Rules and Constitutions,” *Spiritan Papers* 18 (October 1984) 7-18, here 18. Farrelly chaired the Constitution Commission which met at Carcavelos, Portugal from 20 December 1983 to 6 January 1984 to agree the second draft of the new Rules and Constitutions. The twenty-three members came from twelve countries on four continents (France, Ireland, Portugal, Holland, Germany, Nigeria, Cameroun, Tanzania, Canada, USA, Trinidad, and Brazil). Members were competent in different disciplines such as Scripture, theology, sociology.