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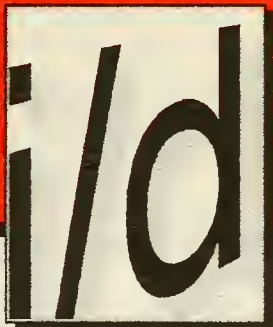
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GENERAL COUNCIL

MAY 1997

"THE SPIRIT BLOWS WHERE IT WILLS"

300 YEARS OF SPIRITAN LIFE

We are fast approaching three important anniversaries in the history of our Spiritan family: February 02, 2002, the 150th anniversary of the death of Francis Libermann; April 12, 2002¹, the second centenary of his birth in Saverne; May 27, 2003 the third centenary of the founding of the Congregation.

We will celebrate these anniversaries not because we want to establish how venerable we are as a Congregation, but to recall a missionary movement that has lasted 300 years because it has been loved by God and urged forward by his Spirit. At certain moments, it may have seemed becalmed, but against expectations, it moved again. The Spirit had only paused for breath! It is this breath of the Spirit, yesterday, today and tomorrow, that we want to celebrate as we turn our attention to these anniversaries.

Let us begin by looking back at previous centenaries, tracing the guidance of our family by the Spirit, seeing how often he brought good out of evil, success out of apparent failure, joy out of sorrow and despair...

A: ANNIVERSARIES IN OUR STORY

May 27, 1703

"M. Claude François Poullart des Places, on the Feast of Pentecost, 1703, then only an aspirant to the ecclesiastical state, began the establishment of the Community and Seminary of the Holy Spirit, under the invocation of the Blessed Virgin conceived without sin"²

A handwritten signature in cursive script, enclosed in an oval border. The signature reads "Claude F. des Places".

earliest register of our archives. After celebrating the feast of Pentecost at the church of St. Etienne des-Grès, Claude and his dozen friends consecrated themselves in the chapel of Our Lady to bring the Gospel to the poor, then went home to their

Such is the birth certificate of our Congregation, as stated in the rented house in the rue Des Cordiers.

May 27, 1803

A hundred years later - what should have been the first centenary. Much had been accomplished. Hundreds of priests who had been trained in the Holy Ghost Seminary were working throughout the world: in North America, China, Cambodia, Vietnam, Siam and India, as well as the French colonies. And in 1779, the first two Spiritans landed in Senegal, Africa. The reputation of these men was of the highest, thanks to the in-depth spiritual and academic training they received, in contrast to most of the contemporary clergy.

But there would be no celebrations for the first centenary, because there was no Congregation: it had been dissolved in 1792 in the wake of the French Revolution, its possessions confiscated, its students dispersed. The members of the Society were scattered; some were in Switzerland, others in Italy, England and the United States; some stayed in hiding

in France, even in the area around rue des Postes (the present *Rue Lhomond*). Only one³ had followed the path of compromise by taking the schismatic oath imposed on the clergy by the Revolutionary Government. Many had been imprisoned or exiled.

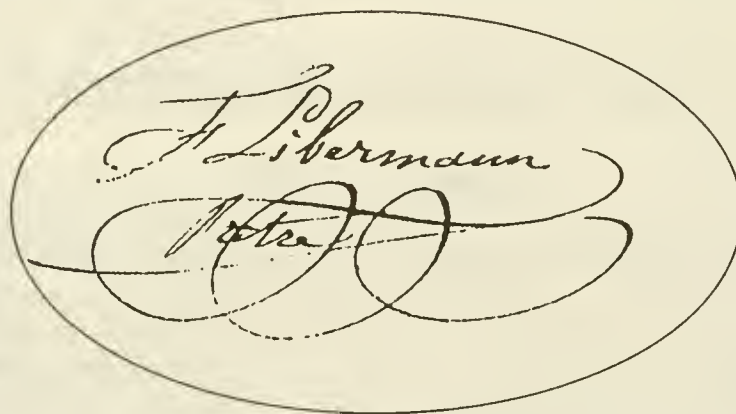
But there was a glimmer of hope. Napoleon, for his own good reasons, was being a little more accommodating towards the Catholic Church in France. Père Jacques Bertout had returned from England and was trying to contact the scattered members and making tentative steps to recover some of their property. He was able to regain possession of the Motherhouse and re-open the seminary which would provide hundreds more priests for service in the old French Colonies. Yet unbeknown to the Spiritans at that time, the greatest hope of all lay in a one-year-old child in Saverne, the son of the local rabbi.

May 27, 1903

Another centenary. The merger of Libermann's Congregation with the Spiritans had resulted in a flourishing and expanding missionary family that was now playing a central role in the missionary life of the Church. There were 1,400 members and several new Provinces were being developed in Europe and north America. But just as in 1803, another grave crisis was threatening the very heart of the Congregation. By a decree of February 24, 1901, the Supreme Council of State in France had decided that the Congregation of the Holy Spirit had ceased to exist in 1848 when it had been absorbed into the Congregation of the Missionaries of the Holy Heart of Mary. As the latter was an illegal religious congregation, according to the government's new categories, the Superior General, Mgr. Le Roy, had been told to send all the members back to their dioceses of origin where they could work as secular priests⁴.

Le Roy did not know where to turn. He had kept the impending disaster from his confreres and even the General Council did not know how desperate the situation really was. But he was blessed with a super-efficient General Secretary and Archivist, Père Désiré Barillec, known affectionately to his confreres as "*the little white mouse*" because of his ability to

sniff out any needed document from his voluminous files; he went rummaging amongst his papers and was finally able to prove, to the obvious disappointment of the French Government, that the exact opposite was the case. It was



the Congregation of the Holy Heart of Mary that had been suppressed in 1848; the present Congregation was the direct descendent of the foundation of Poullart des Places and thus enjoyed all the privileges of that missionary society, which included legal recognition by the Bourbon kings and Napoleon.

But the danger had not gone away. The new Prime Minister, Emile Combes, was even more anti-clerical than his predecessors and declared fifty four religious orders in the country to be illegal. They were told to leave their houses and disband. Even though the Congregation of the Holy Spirit was now regarded as "authorised", its houses were not, apart from the Mother House in rue Lhomond. Dispersion and exile were again a real possibility so property was being sought as a refuge in various countries, including England, Belgium, Switzerland, Canada and Holland, in case the worst should happen⁵.

So understandably, the centenary celebrations were very modest. Mgr. Le Roy, in a circular letter to the

Congregation, regretted that *"the present circumstances do not allow us to celebrate this second centenary of our foundation with the joy and solemnity that we would otherwise have liked"*.

They had to be content with special prayers to be recited at Benediction ("Te Deum" and "Subtuum"), and a novena in the lead up to Pentecost. But he urged the confreres to take courage from what had gone before:

"Our history, the history of these last 200 years, should teach us never to despair...because God does not abandon those who remain worthy to serve him".

Mgr Le Roy, 1903

"Our history, the history of these last 200 years, should teach us never to despair...because God does not abandon those who remain worthy to serve him".

May 27, 2003

We will be 300 years old. This time, with God's help, we are determined to celebrate in a fitting way, giving thanks to God for all he has done through us over three centuries and looking forward with renewed confidence to our future role in the missionary vocation of the Church.

Since the last centenary in 1903, the Congregation has played a major part in the extraordinary mission story of the Church. And looking around the Congregation today, we see so many signs of hope for the future that we cannot fail to be optimistic about our continuing role in mission, convinced that the Spirit is still calling us to new and exciting challenges.

In this century, the Congregation has become truly international. Today we work in 54 countries; our 3,109 members represent 51 different nationalities; of these, 692 are Africans from 24 different countries.

Colonial power has waned, the world is divided into zones of economic influence. Justice and peace issues have become central as the reign of God struggles to emerge through the reign of market forces.

Our mission has evolved. It remains the proclamation of the risen Christ, the one who hears the cry of the poor, but it has put on some fresh garments. It still takes the side of those who do not count, but there is a new emphasis on presence, on listening as a first step in a respectful dialogue. There is collaboration with other missionaries and with people of other faiths. There is a high appreciation of the ministry of lay people and a most welcome development in the area of lay associates.

Our organisation is changing to meet the new missionary challenges. Spiritan missionary teams are smaller, more international. There is a corresponding movement towards regional association of circumscriptions. Solidarity throughout the Congregation, both in finance and personnel, has become the way to survive.

Spiritans may work in northern cities or in southern savannahs. In a tough tropical climate, they may offer the strength and vigour of their youth; or from a nursing home, the sacrifice and suffering of their old age.

There is newness in the air; new foundations in Africa, new developments in Latin America, a new mission in Mozambique, a new initiative in Asia...and a new consciousness that it is when we are weak that we are strong.

B: PREPARATIONS

The strength of a tree is in its roots, unseen and largely forgotten. Each generation of Spiritans has to reflect on its identity, and there are special moments in time which are particularly apt for such stock-taking. Our anniversaries are surely such a moment. Throughout the Congregation, groups have been established in various circumscriptions to promote historical research, and some individuals have already published the fruits of their personal investigations. To help promote this reflection, the General Council has set up a commission, the **International Group for History and Anniversaries (GIHA)**⁷ to encourage us in this reaching back into our Spiritan traditions.

The Commission began its work in November 1994 and has had two further meetings. Next September it will meet for two weeks at Chevilly. It has been asked to organise a number of projects⁸ which will require the cooperation of confreres throughout the world:

1. An illustrated booklet (Album), aimed at the general public, which will describe the 300 year history of Spiritans in the service of Mission. If they so wish, circumscriptions will be able to add some pages dealing specifically with their own mission history. This Album will be completed by the autumn of 1997.

2. A diary, which will record each day the anniversaries of significant events for our Congregation and circumscriptions, and a short accompanying text from our Spiritan heritage. A sample will be submitted to the General Chapter in 1998.

3. A collection of significant texts which have influenced our Spiritan identity and motivated our missionary service. They could be seen as a rough draft for a future Spiritan Anthology. The texts will be published with a contextual commentary, and it

is hoped that samples will be available to present to the General Chapter.

4. A new biography of Francis Libermann.

5. To propose to the General Chapter **other ideas** to commemorate the anniversaries, both locally and

“Although it will be their duty to strengthen the Congregation internally and to extend its works externally, they will beware of the desire to exalt it. They will beware of the all too natural desire to see it grow in numbers and to see it grow in importance. They will be content to put themselves at the disposition of their Divine Master in peace and confidence and to profit from the circumstances which the providence of God will provide to make it more useful in the Church”.

(Rule 1849; ND X, p 536, Art. IV)

at the level of the Congregation.

Local celebrations

Another important role of the Group is to encourage circumscriptions, both old and new, to **write their own histories** and to draw up their programme for the local celebration of the anniversaries e.g. spiritual preparation, Spiritan retreats and pilgrimages, new commemorative pastoral projects, local exhibitions, meetings and colloquia etc.

C: THE CENTRAL ROLE OF ARCHIVES

A question of attitude

The crucial researches of Fr. Barillec quoted above are a dramatic illustration of the importance of archives and archivists. If we are aware of our history today, it is largely thanks to our predecessors who took care to record and preserve

what was happening - the great events as well as the small. Each community kept a daily journal, missionaries wrote up their trek books, letters were carefully filed away, personal documents of deceased confreres were kept as well as photographs recording the development of missions. They felt it was their duty to record these things for future generations of Spiritans.

Somehow today, we seem to have lost many of these excellent habits. Perhaps the ease of communication that we enjoy with each other has diverted our minds from the duty of communicating with those who will come after us. Whatever the reasons, we are in danger of losing much of our history simply because of our failure to record and preserve. And this in a period when so many new provinces, foundations and projects are coming to birth.

Whatever the reasons, we are in danger of losing much of our history simply because of our failure to record and preserve. And this in a period when so many new provinces, foundations and projects are coming to birth.

What does this mean in practice?

In the last thirty years, our Congregation has become very decentralised, with much of the authority and responsibility going to the individual circumscriptions. Archives are no exception. At the level of the Congregation itself, we have the General Archives at Chevilly, containing the material of the General Administrations from 1703 to 1962. The archives office in Rome has the task of preparing contemporary documents for eventual transfer to the General Archives in France. Both of these archives come under the responsibility of the General Secretary and, ultimately, the General Council. Outside of that, each circumscription is responsible for the preservation and management of its own archives, and this involves everybody to a greater or lesser extent.

The first thing is to ensure that important documents are kept safely in conditions where they will not deteriorate. Preservation is the *sine qua non*: no preservation, no archives! What should be kept? Obviously, not everything is of the same importance; common sense is the first guide. But remember that sometimes the importance of documents only becomes apparent with the passing of time. So if in doubt, keep them, or at least seek advice from others. They can

always be thrown away later, but once they are in the dustbin, they are gone for ever!

A Journal should be kept by each community.

They are often of great interest to future researchers, giving an informal and heartfelt commentary on events as they happen. A fitting and suitably detailed obituary should be written for each deceased confrere. The standard of obituaries varies considerably from one circumscription to another. When properly done, they can be a rich historical source as well as a fitting record of the life and work of our departed brothers. The funeral homily, while often edifying, has a different purpose in mind and is no substitute for the formal obituary.

Photographs are a particularly striking record of the past, but it is important to identify individuals appearing in them. People soon forget! Other types of illustration, such as maps, paintings, films etc. should also be carefully preserved.

Each circumscription should collect and preserve the **basic Spiritan literature** so that research can be done locally: e.g. *the General Bulletin, Notes and Documents, Spiritan News, Information/Documentation* etc.



*Père Désiré Barillec CSSp,
"The little white mouse"*

To oversee all the above, it is vital for each circumscription to have a **designated archivist**. The "Administrative Guide for Superiors of Circumscriptions" (1996) notes that *"the archivist of every circumscription should henceforth be listed with the official functionaries in all directories"* (4.4) At their meeting last June, the

European archivists expressed their willingness to help train those taking up archival work for the first time. A *"Guide for Archivists"* in the Congregation is being prepared and will be circulated later in the year.

D: A LIVING, CHANGING CONGREGATION

Scientists tell us that the human body changes completely every seven years, yet we remain the same person and, apart from a few extra wrinkles, we look much the same. In a similar way, we are a very different Congregation to what we were 100 or even 50 years ago - our self image, our outlook, our methods of evangelisation, our theology of mission, our places of origin. Yet despite the differences, despite being a completely new generation of Spiritans, **we are undoubtedly still the same family of Claude Poullart des Places and Francis Libermann.** This is because our history, both written and oral, is more than just a link with the past; it is at the very heart of our continuing identity.

But this continuity cannot be taken for granted; its quality will depend, amongst other things, on respect for our history, the way we love and preserve it, the way we understand the lessons from our past and apply them to present and future challenges. It is highly imprudent to take important decisions without a backward glance at those who preceded us. That is what the English writer, G.K. Chesterton, meant when he said:

"Tradition means giving the vote to the most obscure of all classes - our ancestors. It is the democracy of the dead. Tradition refuses to submit to the small and arrogant oligarchy of those who merely happen to be walking around!"

Henry Koren wrote in 1986 that *"Among religious institutes, few have had so extraordinary a history as the Spiritans"*. But it is extraordinary not so much as just another piece of secular history, but rather as an illustration of what the Holy Spirit can accomplish through men of good will, despite their fragility and inadequacy, despite the obstacles and set-backs thrown up by the tide of history. Which is why we look forward to the next hundred years with excitement and confidence.

But when all is said and done, the best way to write our own Christian and Spiritan story is to live it to the full. **The witness of our Spiritan lives in the service of the poor is by far the most important contribution we can make to the celebration and preservation of our Spiritan tradition.** This living testimony is the assurance that we have truly heard the call to renewal in the spirit of our founders.

Dates to remember

February 2, 2002:	150th Anniversary of death of Fr Libermann.
April 12, 2002:	200th Anniversary of his birth in Saverne.
May 27, 2003:	3rd Centenary of the Foundation of the Congregation.

Notes

1. Until 1903, it was thought that Libermann was born in 1804, but further research at the Mairie of Saverne showed that he was in fact born at 9 a.m. on April 12, 1802
2. "Notes et Documents relatifs à l'histoire de la Congregation du Saint-Esprit", p 1: (1917), quoting the "Registre des Associés à la Communauté et Séminaire consacré au Saint-Esprit".
3. Père Moranville of Guyanne (1760-1824), who later retracted and died a saintly death, having laboured for many years in Baltimore. (cf Henry Koren: "A Spiritan Who was Who" p. 11).
4. A dramatic account of this crisis can be found in "Un Grand Missionnaire - Mgr Alexandre Le Roy" by Père Henri Goré CSSp, pp 151 - 185.
5. In the event, the Spiritans were not expelled from France, but several new Provinces were started as a direct result of the persecution.
6. Bulletin Général: May, 1903, p 128-129.
7. cf. "Spiritans News" no. 105, January-February, 1995.
8. cf "Spiritans News" no. 110, November 1995