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THE HOLY SPIRIT IN SPIRITAN LIFE



Bede Uche Ukwuije, C.S.Sp.

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All students will adore in a special way the Holy Spirit, to whom they have been specially consecrated.

The aim of this article is to underline the central role of the Holy Spirit in Spiritan life. First, I will reflect on what it means to say that Spiritans are consecrated to the Holy Spirit. Then I will present three dimensions of Spiritan life that help to portray how the Holy Spirit determines Spiritan life: Spiritan apostolic life, Spiritan prayer life, and Spiritan diversity.

Consecrated to the Holy Spirit.

The name "*Spiritan*" means one who is consecrated to the Holy Spirit. Claude Poullart des Places consecrated his small group to the Holy Spirit on Pentecost day, 27th May 1703. At the beginning of the *Règlements*, drawn up for the young students preparing for the priesthood, he states:

All students will adore in a special way the Holy Spirit, to whom they have been specially consecrated. To this they will add a personal devotion to the Blessed Virgin, through whose protection they have been offered to the Holy Spirit. As their two principal feasts they will choose Pentecost and the Immaculate Conception. The first they will celebrate to obtain from the Holy Spirit the fire of divine love, the second to obtain from the Blessed Virgin an angelic purity.¹

As Joseph Michel explains, this consecration to the Holy Spirit cannot be simply explained by the date of the consecration, the feast of Pentecost. Claude Poullart des Places was influenced by Fr. Louis Lallement, a Jesuit of Brittany who founded a school of spirituality that "*stressed the importance of being always attentive to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.*"² In 17th century Britany, retreats and missions were preached under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Already, "*the confraternities of the Holy Spirit had been set up in several parishes in Rennes, and in 1698, a chapel in the church of St Germain was dedicated to the Holy Spirit.*"³

Right from the beginning devotion to the Holy Spirit is connected with devotion to the Immaculate Conception. Joseph Michel explains also that Claude drew the devotion from the Jesuit influence while he was in Rennes.⁴

On the same note, François Libermann always connected the devotion to the Holy Spirit with that of the Immaculate Heart of Mary. He called his society, the *Society of the Holy Heart of Mary*. In his 1849 Rule, Libermann presented the heart of

Bede Uche Ukwuije, C.S.Sp. Mary as “a perfect model of fidelity to all the holy inspirations of the divine Spirit and of the interior practice of the virtue of religious apostolic life” (ND = *Notes et Documents* X, p. 568). In a remarkable explanation of this connection between Mary and the Holy Spirit as understood by our Founders, Lucien Deiss, C.S.Sp. wrote:

*...Spiritans follow
the way of the Holy
Spirit with the Blessed
Virgin Mary as their
model.*

All the marvels we find in the Immaculate Heart of Mary come from the Holy Spirit. It is he, the Holy Spirit, who has formed that ‘eminently apostolic heart.’ It is he who gave her the grace to form the heart of Jesus her child according to God’s will. It is also he who is at the origin of all the good that can exist within our hearts for the service of mission.⁵

Dedicated, consecrated to the Holy Spirit under the protection of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, means then that Spiritans follow the way of the Holy Spirit with the Blessed Virgin Mary as their model. It is the Holy Spirit that puts his desire in them and works through them. The Holy Spirit is the source of their interior life. It is he who commands their discipleship and total self-donation to God in their apostolic life.⁶

The Holy Spirit as Source of Spiritan Apostolic life

The Spiritan Rule of Life (SRL) states that “*the apostolic life is the heart of our Spiritan vocation*” (SRL 3). Traditionally, final profession in the Congregation of the Holy Spirit is called “apostolic consecration.” The renowned French exegete and composer, Lucien Deiss, C.S.Sp., puts it in a more comprehensive way:

*The Holy Spirit is the
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The Holy Spirit is the origin and the life of our apostolic vocation. He is also the strength which supports it day after day. It is he who brings it to its conclusion: to bring human beings to Christ Jesus, and through Jesus, to the Father.⁷

Through their consecration, Spiritans espouse the mission of Jesus which he received from his Father through the Holy Spirit: the service of the poor and the marginalized, service of the reconciliation of peoples and cultures (Luke 4: 18-19; SRL 1). That is why Spiritans “go especially to peoples, groups and individuals who have not yet heard the message of the Gospel or who have scarcely heard it, to those whose needs are the greatest, and to the oppressed” (SRL 4; cf. N.D. II, 241).

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The Spiritan total self-donation to the Holy Spirit is expressed in different ways. They include the following. *Obedience to the Holy Spirit*: “We live out our mission in willing obedience to the Holy Spirit taking Mary as our model” (SRL 5). *Openness and docility*: “Being Spiritan means cultivating an attitude of openness and docility to the Holy Spirit in our lives” (Torre d’Aguilha, 2004, 0.2.2). *Availability*: “Availability for mission is essentially docility to the Holy Spirit” (ID no. 60, *Living Spiritan Spirituality*, February 2007). Or again, what the early Spiritan tradition dubbed *paratus ad omnia*, which includes, attentiveness to the signs of the times (Bagamoyo 2012, 2.2).

The practice of the evangelical counsels, espoused during the religious profession, is meant to free the Spiritan for radical docility to the Holy Spirit in the apostolic life. This is clearly indicated in the way the Spiritan Rule of Life qualifies the three vows. We practice our consecration to apostolic life: “In Chastity for the Kingdom” (SRL 56-60); “In poverty for the Kingdom” (SRL 61-74); “In obedience for the Kingdom” (SRL 75-82).

Spiritans confreres and lay associates interviewed in videos produced for Spiritan animation on *Spiritans Identity and Vocation*, 2013 and on the *Holy Spirit*, 2015, stated unanimously that the Holy Spirit is the cause of their positive attitude in mission to face the challenges of the world against pessimism. It is also the Holy Spirit that leads Spiritans to “launch out into the deep” (Maynooth 1998) and break new grounds in dialogue with cultures and interreligious dialogue.

One cannot but be impressed by the work Spiritan confreres have done and are doing in areas of primary evangelization in Maasai land (Tanzania) and among the Borana (Ethiopia) as well as in Amazonia. Think of the Spiritan courage of mission in Pakistan, Algeria, Mauritania marked by daily presence and humble dialogue with Islam and the service to refugees and displaced people in Kigoma (Tanzania) and Bangui (Central African Republic). I was privileged to visit Spiritan confrères and Christian communities in Northern Cameroon from 30th December 2014 to 6th January 2015. I visited essentially, Guéme, in the Diocese of Yagoua which shares borders with Chad and then, Maroua, Mokong and Bogo in the Diocese of Maroua which shares borders with northern Nigeria. The insecurity caused by the Islamic sect, Boko Haram, is felt in the entire zone. However, I met prophetic Christian communities led by courageous priests, religious men and women, and catechists. They are in good rapport with Muslim communities and their leaders who are also victims of the Boko Haram threat. The

Bede Uche Ukwuije, C.S.Sp. prophetic witness of our confreres and their communities in that zone is the work of the Holy Spirit.

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Think also of the courage of our confreres who embark on the work of development through new schools from kindergarten to university in Nigeria, Tanzania, Ghana and other areas. I see also the Holy Spirit at work in the older provinces like France, Holland, Belgium and Germany where confreres courageously take up new missions in parishes in the new cities marked by what Pope Saint John Paul II described as the new worlds and social phenomena created by urbanisation (anonymous megapoles, youth, migrants, new situations of poverty); cultural sectors (modern *areopagi* which include the world of communication, human rights – women, children, modern slavery, scientific culture); and finally, the yet indefinable religious revival—the desperate search for meaning as the world sinks ever deeper into material prosperity, consumerism and materialism.⁸ These new and bold steps grow from a renewed confidence in the Holy Spirit who is the source of the faith and hope of the missionary.

When one thinks of the fragility and vulnerability of Spiritan missions in the world, and yet discovers the fruits they are able to bear for the innumerable men and women and the local churches, one develops what Pope St. Gregory the Great calls a “fearful joy.” In his *Pentecost Letter 2014*⁹, the Superior General, Fr. John Fogarty, C.S.Sp. reminded the confreres and lay Spiritans that the Holy Spirit is strength in our fragility. He states that our fragilities and vulnerabilities create room for the Holy Spirit “to bring us back to the simplicity of the message of our founders, to the realization that the mission to which we are called is God’s mission not ours and that our role is simply to be docile instruments of God’s service.”

The Holy Spirit in Spiritan Prayer

From the origin, Spiritan daily life is structured as a life of prayer. The *Règlement* given by Claude Poullart des Places required a daily rhythm: half an hour mental and vocal prayer, Morning prayer, Holy Mass, Angelus, office of the Holy Spirit, particular examination of conscience before dinner, evening prayer, daily spiritual readings, etc.¹⁰ All daily activities are to be started with prayer and ended with prayer. To students, he specially recommended to implore the help of the Holy Spirit and the Blessed Virgin Mary at the beginning of every study:

Before every period of study or revision, all shall invoke the light of the Holy Spirit to enable them to work profitably. To

that end they shall recite the *Veni Sancte*, adding an *Ave Maria* in honor of the Blessed Virgin to obtain light from the Spouse. The same prayer shall be said before the spiritual reading and the *Sub tuum praesidium*.¹¹

In this manner, the study of doctrine and sacred Scripture becomes a journey towards an intimacy with God through the intercession of the Holy Spirit and the Blessed Virgin Mary. Other prayers of Spiritan tradition include the wonderful prayer drawn from the French School of Spirituality under the influence of Jean-Jacques Olier and given to the Spiritan family by Francis Libermann:

O Jesus living in Mary, come and live in your servants, in the Spirit of your holiness, in the fullness of your power, in the perfection of your ways, in the communion of your mysteries. Have dominion over every adverse power in the same Spirit to the glory of God the Father. Amen.

The same style of prayer is reflected in the traditional prayer for the beatification of our Founders:

O Divine Spirit, we humbly beg you, through the Immaculate Heart of Mary, to glorify your servants Claude Poullart des Place and Francis Mary Paul Libermann, by granting us through their intercession the miracles the Church requires for the beatification of her children.

The same inspiration is palpable in the classical songs composed by some Spiritans which now punctuate all Spiritan celebrations and meetings. I think of the heritage of Lucien Deiss. “*The Spirit of God rests upon me, The Spirit of God consecrates me, the Spirit of God bids me go forth to proclaim, his peace, his joy.*” Or again, that of another French exegete and composer Claude Tassin, C.S.Sp., “*D’un seul cœur unis dans la prière; d’un seul cœur avec Marie ta mère, nous guettons Seigneur les signes de l’Esprit*” (With one heart, united in prayer with Mary your mother, we watch out, Lord, for the signs of the Holy Spirit).

The Spirit of God rests upon me, The Spirit of God consecrates me, the Spirit of God bids me go forth to proclaim, his peace, his joy.

In a vibrant homage rendered to Spiritan missionaries who initiated him into the Christian faith in Guinea Conakry, Cardinal Robert Sarah, the Prefect of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, dwells at length on the centrality of prayer in Spiritan life. His description of Spiritan prayer life corresponds to the rules given by Poullart des Places in the early 18th century and the teaching of François

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What impressed me most about the Spiritans is the regularity of prayer life. I will never forget the spiritual rigor of their daily life. Spiritan days were ordered as those of monks. Very early in the morning, they were in the church to pray in common or individually, then mass, work, midday prayer and angelus, thanksgiving prayer and visit of the Blessed Sacrament after lunch, another prayer at 16h (Breviary), evening prayer at 19h, dinner, then at 21h gathering at the foot of the Cross (...) I remember that I was conquered seeing the Spiritans walk every afternoon, reading their breviary (...) I was never tired of watching them, marvelled (...) Every day, the Spiritans lived according to the rhythm of the divine offices, of the mass, of work, of the rosary, and they never abandoned any of their commitments as men of God. As a child, I was saying to myself that if the fathers went to the church with such a regularity, they were certainly sure of encountering someone and talking to him in all confidence.¹²

Cardinal Sarah went further to emphasize the originality of meditation, *oraison*, as that which marked the Spiritans style of prayer.

How many times was I profoundly seized by the silence that reigned in the church during the prayer of the fathers on their knees or seating in semi-darkness, saying nothing, “they seemed to be listening to and conversing with someone in this semi-darkness of the church, lightened by candles. I was really fascinated by the practice of “*oraison*” and the peaceful atmosphere that it engendered. It seems correct to affirm that there is an authentic form of heroism, of grandeur, and nobility in this regular prayer life. Man is great when he is on his knees before God.¹³

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Drawing from his initiation into prayer by the Spiritan missionaries as well as from his long experience of prayer, Cardinal Sarah concludes:

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and triune. That is why it is primordial to be silent and listen, to accept to strip oneself and abandon oneself to God who is present in us (...) The interior silence helps us to listen to the prayer of the Holy Spirit which becomes ours. The Spirit intercedes on our behalf. What is important in prayer is not words but to be able to keep quiet and allow the Holy Spirit to talk, listen to him crying and interceding in our favor.¹⁴

These lines correspond to Liebermann's conception of *oraison* (prayer) as rest, tranquility, a humble and confident presence before God.¹⁵ The true *oraison* is not a technical issue but belongs to the order of grace. Its goal is to put the soul in a living and life-giving contact with God. Liebermann insists that this contact is the operation of the Holy Spirit. He liked to quote Paul who says that "*the Holy Spirit comes to help us in our weakness. For when we cannot choose words in order to pray properly, the Spirit himself expresses our plea in a way that could never be put in words*" (Rom 8, 26). Doing *oraison* is simply allowing the Holy Spirit to establish us in a humble and peaceful rest before God. The best way to allow the Spirit do this work is by self-renunciation, renouncing the egoistic dispositions of the mind and human nature. Prayer in the Holy Spirit purifies and changes us (SRL 86). Prayer in the Holy Spirit is the source of what Liebermann calls "practical union" beautifully described in the Spiritan Rule of Life as "*an habitual disposition of fidelity to the promptings of the Holy Spirit,*" or again, "*an instinct of the heart for a person who, having made the sacrifice of self, has become "free ever after to devote himself completely to others and to bring them along to God"*" (SRL 88, quoting N.D. XIII, 708).

The Holy Spirit as Source of Spiritan Diversity

Another mark of the Holy Spirit in Spiritan life is the diversity of membership. Apart from the different states of belonging to the Spiritan life, namely, as professed brothers, priests, and Spiritan Lay Associates, Spiritan communities are more and more international, cross cultural and inter-generational. Diversity naturally creates tension, fear, and sometimes mutual suspicion. Symptoms of ethnocentrism and nationalism which are present in the world are also found sometimes in Spiritan communities.

Nevertheless, Spiritans have always considered this diversity as a gift of the Holy Spirit. It is also the Holy Spirit that assures the unity of the Spiritan family. In a touching testimony given at the Maynooth General Chapter, 1998, Fr. John Paul Hoch, C.S.Sp., then provincial of France stated:

Only the Holy Spirit living and praying in us can bring about this astonishing miracle of keeping in unity a group of men prone to weaknesses and to sin which left to itself, would be more likely to fall apart” (Maynooth 1998, 1,16).

The positive witness of international communities is one of the qualities of Spiritan life...

The positive witness of international communities is one of the qualities of Spiritan life that bishops and priests of the local churches underline as special to Spiritans. They see it as a contribution to the structuring of local churches and the human society. In many places, bishops state this as the reason they want Spiritans to work or remain in their dioceses.

In his Pentecost 2013 Letter¹⁶, the Superior General, John Fogarty, C.S.Sp. noted that it is the “the Spirit of Pentecost who brings us together into one large family, *“from different cultures, continents and nations”* [SRL 37].

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, 1998, p. 117].

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Intercultural 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, 2004, 2.1].

Conclusion

Spiritane life is life in the Holy Spirit, life for the Holy Spirit. It is a life commanded by the Holy Spirit and expressed in the service of the Church and the world. This is the meaning of the Spiritane consecration to apostolic life, precisely the service of the poor and the most abandoned. Spiritans live truly when they identify with Jesus, who quoting Isaiah, says, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor.” (Luke 4:18; Isa 61, 1-2; SRL 1). Spiritane self-donation modelled after the heart of the Blessed Virgin Mary is constantly enriched and sustained through daily prayer and listening to the Holy Spirit. It is when we allow the Holy Spirit to pray in us that we discover ourselves as disciples of Christ.

*Bede Ukwuije, C.S.Sp.
General Council, Rome*

Endnotes

¹Claude Poullart des Places, *Rules for the Community of the Holy Ghost*, Critical Edition. (Rome: Spiritan Sources, 1991), articles 1-2.

²Joseph Michel, *Claude-François Poullart des Places*, translated from French by Vincent O'Toole, C.S.Sp. (Duquesne University, Pittsburgh: Center for Spiritan Studies, 2013), 69.

³Joseph Michel, *Claude-François Poullart des Places*, p. 73.

⁴Cf. Joseph Michel, *Claude-François Poullart des Places*, p. 74.

⁵Lucien Deiss, C.S.Sp. "Holy Spirit, Immaculate Heart of Mary, Mission, Exegetical Approach," *Spiritan Papers*, no. 22 (Rome: December 1988), 31.

⁶Bede Ukwuije, *The Memory of Self-Donation, Meeting the Challenges of Mission*. (Nairobi: Paulines Editions Africa, 2009) discusses this matter in great detail.

⁷Lucien Deiss, "Holy Spirit, Immaculate Heart of Mary, Mission, Exegetical Approach," 7-31, here 17.

⁸John Paul II, Encyclical Letter, *Redemptoris missio, On the Permanent Validity of the Church's Missionary Mandate* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 7 December 1990), n° 38.

⁹John Fogarty, C.S.Sp., *Pentecost Letter 2014*, "It is when I am Weak that I am Strong..." (2 Cor 12,10).

¹⁰Claude Poullart des Places, *Rules for the Community of the Holy Ghost*, n° 26-36.

¹¹Claude Poullart des Places, *Rules for the Community of the Holy Ghost*, n° 30.

¹²Robert Cardinal Sarah, *Dieu ou rien, Entretien sur la foi* (Paris, Fayard, 2015), 45-47. The English translation is mine.

¹³Robert Cardinal Sarah, *Dieu ou rien*, p. 47-48.

¹⁴Robert Cardinal Sarah, *Dieu ou rien*, p.174-175.

¹⁵Cf. *Lettres Spirituelles du Vénérable Libermann*, vol. III (Paris: Librairie Poussielgue Frères, 1888-1891), 462.

¹⁶John Fogarty, *Pentecost Letter 2013*, "Brought Together by the Spirit of Pentecost."