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Spiritans for Today: Vincent Donovan, C.S.Sp.

Janie M. Harden Fritz

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Dr. Janie Fritz Harden

Dr. Janie Harden Fritz is Professor of Communication & Rhetorical Studies at Duquesne University. She is the author of *Professional Civility: Communicative Virtue at Work* (Peter Lang, 2013), and with Ronald C. Arnett and Leanne M. Bell coauthored, *Communication Ethics Literacy: Dialogue and Difference* (Sage, 2009). She is coeditor of several works, including *Problematic Relationships in the Workplace* (Peter Lang, 2006). Her work appears in a variety of scholarly journals, including *Management Communication Quarterly*, *Communication Research Reports*, *Journal of Business Communication*, and *Journal of Business Ethics*, and she has contributed chapters to multiple edited volumes. Dr. Fritz is a past president of the Pennsylvania Communication Association, the Eastern Communication Association, and the Religious Communication Association. She has received several awards for teaching, scholarship, and service.

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FR. VINCENT DONOVAN: A SPIRITAN FOR TODAY

The distinctive Spiritan charism manifests itself in an evangelical availability that is “attentive to the Holy Spirit manifesting himself in the concrete situations of life” (Koren, 1990, p. 15). The two aspects of this availability include availability to God and availability to others, which, in turn, involve a life of prayer and union with God that is the essence of life devoted to others (Koren, 1990). Such availability also involves the material and spiritual elements of an evangelical poverty. The spiritual face of an evangelical poverty is marked by “openness to the experience of life in its ever-changing evolution; openness to the world” (Koren, 1990, p. 16), or an openness to the real needs of particular others in a given historical moment and in a concrete material setting, all of which have a temporal constitution that invites responsiveness to the “new now” ever brought before us and revealed by existence.

This orientation toward existence and toward the world, this phenomenological turning, shows up in Spiritan ministry throughout every century that members of this order have walked the earth. Each historical moment brings questions to which Spiritans have responded, demonstrating a spirit of openness and welcome to what existence presents. This turning was manifested abundantly by Fr. Vincent Donovan, C.S.Sp. a Pittsburgh native from Hazelwood and Spiritan missionary to East Africa. His life manifested evangelical ability through his openness to others and to Otherness, a commitment to learning from difference, and a respect for understandings of life rooted in concrete local traditions. Mission work is, at its heart, educational; Fr. Vincent Donovan shows us that education is responsive and creative, and that it moves in more than one direction, even when one party is formally in the role of teacher. For those of us engaged in the Spiritan mission of higher education, Fr. Vincent Donovan’s life offers wisdom for today.

Historicity tells us that many moments over the centuries do not manifest themselves as new, although they may be the most recent in temporal sequence. The questions raised by a given historical moment may be quite similar to questions raised before. For example, the time of the prophet Isaiah was marked by diversity and difference, a multiplicity of gods and goods, and an awareness that the worship of Y—H was one of many approaches to the divine in the milieu of ancient Israel’s context.

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Our contemporary moment is likewise diverse, with competing worldviews and awareness of difference; in this sense, our moment is not new. In similar fashion, a single figure may embody an approach to elements of the life world characteristic of both the historical moment within which that figure is embedded and a future historical moment. Looking back at a previous historical moment from the vantage point of our own, we may identify such a figure and find wisdom for this moment. Vincent Donovan is such a figure, someone we may rightly identify as a Spiritan for today. He was a remarkable man who worked in a historical moment rife—or rich—with social change, theological development and controversy, and shifting understandings of the human person, a moment posing questions similar to those offered by our own.

Fr. Vincent Donovan was born August 15, 1926, was ordained in 1952, served in Tanzania working among the Maasai and Sonjo peoples for a number of years, and died May 13, 2000. In this essay, I engage elements of his life, drawing primarily from his missionary letters, which were written between 1957 and 1973 to friends and family and collected into an edited volume by John P. Bowen, and from his book, *Christianity Rediscovered*, which emerged in response to his work in East Africa and illustrates the learning he gleaned—and welcomed—from the people to whom and among which he ministered—and who ministered so powerfully to him.

In order to frame Fr. Vincent Donovan as a Spiritan for today, I introduce the work of Arnett, Fritz, and Bell (2009) on communication ethics literacy, an approach resting on dialogue and difference that insists on learning as the first good in today's historical moment. This dialogic learning model (Arnett, Bell, & Fritz, 2010) recognizes our historical moment as one of narrative and virtue contention, in which people do not agree on the content of moral and ethical positions, or what is good for human persons to be and to do; in the public square, many world views vie for adherence, and the minimal common ground is often simply an agreement to keep the conversation going, with the implication that multiple voices will be heard. Such a context does not suggest that firmly held positions or convictions are unimportant or unhelpful; indeed, such monologic positions are the starting point for dialogue and anchor human identity and meaning. A dialogic model of communication ethics recommends that we be acutely aware of our own ground and articulate about where we stand, even as we come to understand the ground of another, and welcome what emerges in the encounter.

Spiritans who engage mission work hold a position of conviction—of monologic clarity—that is simultaneously responsive to Otherness in dialogue. This position is one of hospitality and openness, offering the good news of the gospel to those who would receive it and finding ways to assist in rooting the Christian message effectively and appropriately within the local soil of a culture. The work of Vincent Donovan, as illustrated in his missionary letters and theological treatise, illustrates this approach, speaking to us today as we face a historical moment of change and difference that challenges us as persons of faith to hold firm to conviction while also being respectful of and responsive to those whose positions differ, often radically, from our own.

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For educators who encounter students, the learning environment, and the larger world, Fr. Vincent Donovan models a dialogic responsiveness to Otherness and to existence—a stance marked by attentiveness to the historical moment; awareness of one’s own ground; dialogic encounter with and learning the ground of the Other, rooted in respect for understandings of life manifested in concrete local traditions and the real needs of people in their lived experience; existential responsiveness to those concrete elements of particularity and to what life brings; and engagement of what emerges between persons (Arnett, Fritz, & Bell, 2009)—such dialogic meeting of horizons opens up new vistas of possibility for all engaged in the encounter. The first element, the historical moment, situates the other elements.

The Historical Moment—Then and Now

Brian McLaren writes in his foreword to *Missionary Letters Rediscovered*. He notes that he and his friends found the work of Fr. Donovan and other missiologists of great value as they faced “a post-modern, post-Enlightenment, post-Christendom, post-Constantinian culture in the West . . . a culture that was growing as distant from conventional Christianity as the cultures of the Maasai and Sonjo” (Bowen, 2011, p. x). Fr. Vincent Donovan, in a temporal moment removed from our own by almost half a century, encountered questions similar to those facing us today in our technological age, a moment in which traditions continue to face challenges and we face uncertainty and little common ground. His engagement of that moment provides wisdom for us in our historical moment. For educators in the Spiritan tradition, this moment invites careful consideration of how to carry on the educational mission of Duquesne University in a way responsive to the purposes of our founders and to new realities facing education today (e.g., Fritz & Sawicki, 2006).

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McLaren notes seven themes emerging from the *Missionary Letters*, all of which support an understanding of Fr. Vincent Donovan as a Spiritan for today: Fr. Donovan's ecumenical instinct, his progressive instinct, his emergent instinct, his evangelical instinct, his theological instinct, his Socratic, questioning instinct, and his creative instinct. The ecumenical instinct shows up in Fr. Donovan's willingness to learn from and adapt the work of theologians outside the Catholic tradition, while at the same time remaining "thoroughly Catholic" (Bowen, 2011, p. x). Fr. Donovan was progressive, ahead of his time in recognizing the role and leadership gifts of women in the Church and the need for liturgical renewal and adaptation. The emergent instinct is manifested in an understanding of Christianity as "a work in progress" (Bowen, 2011, p. xi) and indigenous leadership as key to the success of mission. The evangelical instinct manifests itself in a conviction that the gospel is a message of hope; theologically, Fr. Donovan oriented to the gospel as a story of God's love for all people and saving of all creation from human sin. Fr. Donovan questioned assumptions about mission work, the Church, and Christianity as a reflective missiologist while remaining faithful to authority and tradition. Finally, Fr. Donovan's creative instinct led him to understand the Christian message as capable of being embodied in various ways, manifested particularly in the Maasai creed that he helped to create (p. xii), which, although taking a new form, holds and enlivens the essence of the gospel message.

The seven themes identified by McClaren correspond with the tenets of the Arnett, Fritz, and Bell (2009) model of dialogic learning: knowing one's ground, learning from others and from difference, responsiveness to the concrete situation, and engagement of what emerges between persons, all of which yield new insights and understandings. Fr. Donovan's experience enriches us today and speaks to our understanding not just of mission, but to the importance of everyday life as a location of the sacred and an opportunity for responsiveness. Such a stance is fruitful—indeed, necessary—for educators in the Spiritan tradition. The next sections explore Fr. Donovan's missiological work through the lens of these elements of the dialogic learning model.

Ground

Articulating our ground—the narrative or worldview commitments that provide a standpoint for finding meaning in the world—is not an easy task, for the assumptive base that constitutes such ground almost invariably operates at the implicit level (Taylor, 1989). The task of a missionary is to make the ground of faith explicit, which Fr. Donovan was adept

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at doing. As he made his own ground clear, however, he was responsive to the concrete particularities of the culture within which he found himself a guest. When he decided to bring just the essential message of Christianity to the Maasai, he had to work across cultural understandings. There were “whole areas in their life and language that would be blank as far as Christian concepts go—no word in their language for person or creation or grace or freedom or spirit or immortality” (Donovan, 20p. 21). The Maasai had their own ground on which to stand and their own understanding of the divine, which Fr. Donovan sought to understand, as well; the Maasai articulated their ground as Fr. Donovan articulated his, and through a meeting of horizons, new understandings emerged even as clarity of ground remained. In many such encounters, elements of Maasai culture and the gospel message met and found resonance.

For those who welcomed the gospel, Fr. Donovan offered encouragement to make their new understanding explicit in ways faithful to the gospel message and simultaneously responsive to the local culture. For example, he notes that during the second wave of evangelization among new villages, his practice was to identify someone in the first meeting who demonstrated a very good grasp of the message. He would talk to that person afterwards, inviting the person to offer a review during the next meeting of what was covered during the previous meeting. This approach, which has the hallmarks of Spiritan pedagogy (see Durbin, Martin, & Margolis, 2014)—or andragogy, in this case of educating adults (e.g., Fritz & Cini, 1999)—is dialogic and invitational, providing an opportunity for new learners to articulate in their own words the key ideas of what had been taught and thereby assume ownership—or personal stewardship—of the ideas.

Fr. Donovan’s approach to missions reminds us that we have a responsibility as educators to speak from our content-rich disciplinary ground to students who hope to learn from us (Murphy, 2015). As Duquesne University educators, we also speak from a ground of narrative commitment tied to the university’s mission. As we articulate our disciplinary ground within the mission of Duquesne University, we invite students to locate their own ground and bring it into conversation with ours. As students make ideas their own and become reflective about their own commitments, they begin to embody the mission, which they will take out into the world. Activities such as service learning (Roberts, 2008) provide a place to share mission ground with students; activities such as internships (Grabowsky & Fritz, 2007) provide a place for students to practice carrying that mission into the marketplace.

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Meeting the Existential Moment

Fr. Donovan faced the circumstances that presented themselves to him. Rather than bemoaning the nature of the people to whom he was ministering, he moved forward into the opportunities that the unique situation presented. We see this willingness in his attitude toward evangelization and in his response to those who rejected the message he traveled so far to bring. He notes, “Evangelization is a process of bringing the gospel to people where they are, not where you would like them to be” (Donovan, 2003, p. xii), and he recognized that he could not control the outcome. Evangelization is unpredictable, “a process leading to that new place where none of us has ever been before” (Donovan, 2003, p. xiii). This commitment is nowhere seen more clearly than after his experience of the rejection of the message in response to his initial presentation of the gospel to the Sonjo village of Ebwe. Rather than becoming discouraged or giving up, he learned from the experience (Bowen, 2011, pp. 174–177).

We, too, meet students where they are, not where we wish they might be. Students come with different levels of preparedness, different purposes for their studies, and different abilities. Our own openness to students where they are reflects Fr. Donovan’s approach to his work. As we learn new approaches to education, whether alternative ways of engaging students face to face or translating face to face classes into offerings for the online context, whether students are of a traditional age or nontraditional adult students, we engage the moment of our existence with hope and creativity as he did. Our students may not learn as we hope they might, nor love our discipline as we do; perhaps they are simply trying to fulfill a requirement and merely pass the class. Regardless, we meet them where they are, give them our best, and trust that the Spirit Who gives life will provide what they need in their time, not ours.

Dialogic

Fr. Donovan’s approach to his work was profoundly dialogic. We read in the preface to the first edition of *Christianity Rediscovered*: “...[M]ission is not a one-way street moving away from the home church to the foreign mission field. The new, the young, and the particular churches of the Third World, spoken of by Vatican II, have something to say, in turn, to the church at large” (p. xi). His stance was to move away from previous conceptions of mission work and to start over from the beginning with “a belief that Christianity is of value to the world around it,” but without other preconceptions, a type of phenomenological bracketing (Sokolowski, 2000). To do so,

one would need to reach out to cultures who have not heard the gospel with an openness to the unexpected and the unknown, “a willingness to search honestly for that Christianity and to be open to those pagan cultures; to bring Christianity and paganism together and see what happens, if anything happens; to see what emerges if anything can emerge, without knowing what the end result will be” (p. 1).

Fr. Donovan did not adopt a “telling” mode with the people to whom he ministered. Even his explanation response to an inquirer who asked whether he and his people had found the High God, implicated himself as someone on the search along with his audience: “No, *we have not* found the High God. My tribe has not known him. For us, too, he is the unknown God. But we are searching for him. I have come a long, long distance to invite you to search for him with us. Let us search for him together. Maybe, together, we will find him” (Donovan, 2003, p. 36; see also Bowen, 2011, p. 143). This refusal to “tell” implies a willingness to learn from the Other, which shows up in a later incident that sheds light on the “seeking” metaphor.

Educators work dialogically with students as they remain open to the insights students provide. Even as we professors retain our role as subject matter experts, we continue to learn, modeling for students how to work at the edges of our understanding. Professors and students learn together as professors model their own struggles with writing and publication, listen to students’ perspectives, and guide student understanding. Professors working in programs with graduate students engage their own graduate students as apprentices seeking to master the craft (Maier & Aungst, 2015); programs serving undergraduates can reach out to undergraduate students, inviting them to serve as teaching assistants and encounter the material differently (e.g. Flinko & Arnett, 2014).

Learning from the Other and Difference

Fr. Donovan was talking with a Maasai elder about belief and unbelief, and that the translation of “faith” was “to agree to,” which was not a robust enough word to express the notion of faith. This translation was like a hunter shooting from far away with only the fingers and eyes participating. The elder said that true belief was like a lion after its prey, with all senses engaged in the process, from picking up the scent to running after it to embracing it and making it part of the lion. Then the elder went on to say that God was the lion—that God had come to his people through Fr. Donovan, and that God did not need to be searched out—God searched *them* out and found them. “In the end, the lion is God.” Fr. Donovan used that metaphor later with

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Learning from difference is part of the ecumenical spirit McLaren notes in Fr. Donovan's approach to faith...

another person to illustrate God's relentless love for and seeking after people (Donovan, 2003, p. 87).

Intercultural communication speaks of communication as having two key purposes—factual, or informative, in which representational truth is primary; or communication as a social lubricant, in which relationships are primary (Hall, 2005). Fr. Donovan's engagement with the Maasai of East Africa showed his grasp of the importance of words as "not to establish logical truth, but to set up social relationships with others" (Donovan, 2003, p. 22). He illustrates how one might communicate in order to deal with someone breaking a window in a school. One could ask point blank: "Did you break the window?" The answer would be "no," because a direct question like that would do damage to the relationship, and the response is an attempt to repair that social damage. An indirect approach might inquire about the student's studies and health, which could then lead to a description of what happened—the student might note that he is big and strong now and can kick a football fifty yards—in fact, through a window.

Learning from difference is part of the ecumenical spirit McLaren notes in Fr. Donovan's approach to faith, as well. Fr. Donovan cites several Protestant theologians, including Paul Tillich: "Paul Tillich points out that only if God is exclusively God, unconditioned and unlimited by anything other than himself, is there a true monotheism, and only then is the power over space and time broken. He lists as examples of limited spatial concepts such things as blood, race, clan, tribe, and family. . . . God must be separated from his nation to become the High God" (Donovan, 2003, p. 34). This openness permitted Fr. Donovan to find truth wherever it was located, whether in theologians from another tradition or a culture different from his own.

Educators learn from difference as they engage a disciplined interdisciplinarity (e.g., Hechter, 2003) in their approach to knowledge and learning. While remaining anchored in a tradition, professors can draw on sources from multiple disciplinary traditions, making use of insights to enrich student education. Such an approach recognizes the need for an academic home for learning (Murphy, 2015) and engagement of difference and otherness. Within the disciplines, students encounter ongoing, specialized conversations that provide them a literacy that helps them distinguish thought and propaganda (Murphy, 2015, p. 29).

Existential Responsiveness to Concrete Realities of Local Culture and Practices

Fr. Donovan was committed to a stance of responsiveness to the culture within which people found their meaning and existence.

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He notes the need to bring the “naked gospel” to bear “on the real flesh and blood world in which we live, ... a new Church in a new place, ... out in the midst of human life as it is lived in the neighborhoods,” cities, and in all walks of life (Donovan, 2003, p. xiii). There was no abstract gospel for him; enduring truth was always enfleshed in the local.

This responsiveness extended into the very outworking of the gospel within a given cultural community. Fr. Vincent Donovan understood a reflexive praxis in which “every theology or theory must be based on previous missionary experience” (Donovan, 2003, p. xiii). His prescience foreshadowed later approaches also seeking to honor the mutual informing of lived experience and theory/theology: “One day the theologians of liberation would say that *praxis* must always be prior to theology” (Donovan, 2003, p. 21). Fr. Donovan knew that he would have to work from practice to theory, and whatever theology grew from his work would be rooted in the life and experiences of the people to whom he ministered—“the pagan peoples of the savannahs of East Africa” (Donovan, 2003, p. 21).

Fr. Donovan was committed to enculturation. The job of the missionary is to bring the gospel; it is the job of a given cultural group or people to respond to the call of salvation within their cultural framework. It is the job of those who hear, within that culture, to make the gospel incarnate—how they live out their lives as Christians and celebrate the central ideas of the faith—for him, all “would be a cultural response to a central, unchanging, supracultural, uninterpreted gospel” (Donovan, 2003, p. 24). In fact, he believed that all people were “ready” for the gospel and did not believe in “preevangelization” (Donovan, 2003, p. 42).

Fr. Donovan recognized that the possibility of salvation already resides in the nations—that “... God enables a people, any people, to reach salvation through their culture and tribal, racial customs and traditions” (Donovan, 2003, p. 23). This realization was the foundation of Fr. Donovan’s responsive approach to evangelizing the Maasai. Such responsiveness addresses secular academic approaches to intercultural communication, who look on any attempt to influence another culture as profoundly unethical and take a position of noninterference (Moreau, Campbell, & Greener, 2014). Fr. Donovan echoed those concerns in his introduction to *Christianity Rediscovered*, as he notes that the term “conversion” has developed a connotation of “proselytism,” laden with misgivings and concerns related to missionary history, including violence perpetrated on “the cultures, customs, and consciousness of peoples [and] the callousness and narrow-mindedness found in that history” (Donovan, 2003, p. 1).

However, cross-cultural encounters are part of the human experience, and influence within and across cultures is inevitable. It is part of the human condition to encounter others and experience new technologies, practices, and ideas. Persons from one culture seek out information and practices from other cultures, adopting them to fit a new context, and some cultures are more open to new experiences and ideas than others, as research on diffusion of innovations demonstrates (Rogers, 1962; Srivasta & Moreland, 2012). Fr. Donovan encountered other cultures with respect and openness, unafraid to encounter the unfamiliar, to permit new learning to broaden his horizons, or to offer to others what he held dear.

Our students come to us with varied particularities. Teaching returning adult students can be understood as a type of intercultural communication, given their distinctive needs and background (Fritz & Cini, 1999). Teaching traditional undergraduates may feel to some instructors like teaching indwellers of another culture, given generational differences, particularly in technology use, as the term “digital native” indicates (Prensky, 2001). Fr. Donovan’s example encourages us to embrace the particularities of our student populations, finding ways to meet their needs in ways that honor their particularity and remain faithful to the educational mission of Duquesne University.

Conclusion

Fr. Donovan is a Spiritan for today. Particularly for educators in the Spiritan tradition, Fr. Donovan models a response to a historical moment like our own. In a time of turbulence and change, where narratives once taken for granted are no longer even recognized, Fr. Donovan reminds us of the importance of responding to the moment as it is, of being open to others and to Otherness, of respecting the situated particularities of life wherever we find ourselves. As the landscape of higher education reconfigures itself, inviting reconsideration of approaches to education and a reminder of a need for reflective engagement of our purposes and projects, let us consider the life of Fr. Donovan, who stands as an exemplar of evangelical availability, ever open to learning, to life, to existence as it presents itself. As we look to an unknown future, we can move forward with confidence and hope, just as he did, guided by the Spirit Who gives life.

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*Dr. Janie Harden Fritz
Duquesne University*

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