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"Drinking From Our Own Wells. Bagamoyo 2012 and Spiritan Identity and Tradition"

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Marc Whelan was professed in the Congregation in 1982 and studied philosophy in Ireland and theology in France, including a specialisation in Liturgy and Sacramental Theology. The subject of his research was “A reflection on charism and sacrament / tradition and modernity with regard to the sacrament of the sick in contemporary Africa.” His mission appointment was to the West African Foundation where he worked in Ghana in pastoral work and then, in 1996, was appointed to the Indian Ocean Foundation where he worked in formation in Reunion Island and Mauritius as Rector of the Inter-Island Seminary of the Indian Ocean. Returning to Ireland in 2008 he worked in the Office for Spiritan Life and also with Spirasi, the Spiritan initiative for asylum seekers in Ireland. Currently Marc is on the leadership team of the Irish Province as the Provincial Superior.

DRINKING FROM OUR OWN WELLS BAGAMOYO 2012 AND SPIRITAN IDENTITY AND TRADITION

It has been said of Chapters, and especially General Chapters, that they are often such deep and profound experiences as to render them incommunicable to anyone who was not present at them. And that is the challenge of any assembly or chapter of the Congregation. How does one transmit not just a text and decisions but also a spirit and an élan that encourages and strengthens the community to look to the future with hope and confidence?

This was my first participation at a General Chapter of the Congregation and so I arrived in Bagamoyo with a clear sense of being a neophyte. Much to my surprise and joy, I discovered that I was not the only one in this case. In fact, for a large majority of capitulants this was, indeed, their first chapter. It was to be a baptism for all of us who found ourselves in the same situation. With this frame of mind I thought that the opening ritual was very appropriate when, on the evening of the first day we went down to the waters of the Indian Ocean to pray and participate in the remembering of the first Spiritan missionaries who arrived from across the sea and whose first task was to lift up and liberate the hearts of those whose lives had been enslaved.¹

In his preface to the chapter documents, John Fogarty, the Superior General, recalled that event by reminding us that this simple ritual captured the fundamental significance and purpose of our Chapter. This is the call to return to our sources and to seek new inspiration and new courage for our Spiritan life and mission today.

When I was asked to write this article, my thoughts went back to the chapter to remember for myself what was the water that I was given to drink during those four weeks and where were the wells that would ensure that we Spiritans continue to drink from the source of life.

Sources Present at the Chapter

There are five gospels which speak about the life of Jesus. We find four Gospels in books of the Bible and one Gospel in the landscape and context of the place and time that was Jesus' environment. If we read the fifth Gospel, the others will open up before us. In the same way with this Chapter in Bagamoyo,

the landscape and historical context of the place are key to understanding the spirit and texts of the Chapter.

James Chukwuma Okoye, who was at the service of the Chapter as theological resource person and who punctuated the days of discussion and deliberation with moments of theological reflection, spoke these words as we began the Chapter: “Today Black Africa hosts a chapter of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit! The history of our Congregation comes full circle. The Congregation began with Poullart des Places; the Savoyards and twelve poor seminary students on Pentecost Sunday 1703. Under Libermann, the Congregation took on the enslaved black peoples as its principal mission. Now, the Congregation comes home to roost in black Africa.”² Chukwuma would conclude his reflections at the end of the Chapter by observing that the Congregation is now like a mosaic, or *rainbow family*, defined by a common mission to the poor and in which every member feels a citizen wherever he or she is on mission.³ This might explain the fact that Circumscription Europe elected an African as their delegate and the Circumscription of Kenya chose a European!

Of course, as with many chapters the wells we are looking for can be more like wishing wells. We bring a list of things that we wish for and we seek for change and renewal thinking that this can happen without effort or by simply closing our eyes and making a wish! If only life was so easy. This point was made at the chapter by one delegate who reminded us that the truth and verification of a text is not in its publication but in its being lived out in the life and mission of those who would read it. There was a tendency during this chapter, perhaps because of our relative inexperience, to think that the necessary renewal and correction of dysfunctionality could be remedied by a prescriptive text.

But this inexperience was also a strength at the Chapter. There was a very clear sense of a generational shift in the Congregation that is also part of the demographic evolution that we have been experiencing over the past thirty years. There is the energy of youth which, for any Congregation, is an extraordinary well to be able to drink from. There is a freshness and zest which we experience at these new wells. They might lack the solidity and tradition of some of the older wells but they are capable of irrigating the contemporary field of mission with a new supply of water adapted to ever-changing needs of a world in constant transformation.

It is true also that at the chapter there were a good number of more experienced Spiritans whose long experience and fidelity to their mission was also a wonderful well to be able to drink from.

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At these wells we encountered wisdom and tradition. We could imagine the many men and women who over the years have had their lives touched and transformed by these life-giving waters.

I left Bagamoyo then with a sense that not all our wells have dried up and that there are still life-giving streams within the Spiritan family capable of sustaining us in our mission. Certainly there is always the danger that wells dry up or we lose heart because we have to dig too deep before we find the water we are seeking. In some cases the water has become contaminated and muddied and so no longer fit for giving to anyone to drink. It can happen also that while the well remains in place people have moved on. The well is now too far removed to serve any purpose. Other wells have become weakened and need strengthening in order to find again their primary purpose.

We Drink from our own Wells

“The Word of God is near you, in your mouth and in your heart” (Rom 10:8). The proximity of God’s Word to us is read not just in the text but also the events and relationships that weave together the different strands of our life. By following Jesus’ injunction to read and discern the signs of the times, we acknowledge that it is precisely in this time that God’s spirit is present to us. As Spiritans, as men and women consecrated to the Holy Spirit (Bagamoyo 2.1), we must be particularly attentive to this presence because it is this presence that enables the Word we proclaim to be Good News, here and now.

The expression *We drink from our own Wells* comes from Bernard of Clairvaux in his book *De consideratione* (On Consideration) which was addressed to the new pope Eugenius III in the twelfth century. According to Bernard’s theology we must think, pray and work in the place from which we receive our nourishment. In other words we find and seek to understand our faith identity in the context in which we find ourselves. It is in this space and time that is given us to live that we develop and define our spirituality.

But the phrase is perhaps most familiar to us from the work of Gustavo Gutiérrez and his seminal book on spirituality: *We Drink from our own Wells: The Spiritual Journey of a People*.⁴ Gutiérrez’s theology is well known: “the experience that comes from the Spirit” is to be found in the midst of a people’s struggle for liberation and that it is through this struggle and graced with God’s gift of faith, hope, and love that we become disciples of Jesus. It is this experience of the praxis of faith and Gospel that is our well - the source of living water.

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The Chapter recognises that more and more our mission is to be grounded in a contemplative life which seeks the integration of our life and ministry. Libermann calls this “practical union.” We are invited to become “more aware of the call to a deeper interior life and a greater integration of our work and prayer” (Bagamoyo 2.4). The last three General Chapters and, indeed, many local Chapters and assemblies have echoed this theme that there can be no missionary life, no Spiritan life, unless it draws deeply from a spiritual life.

This attraction for spirituality is becoming more and more a feature of contemporary life. People will say they are “spiritual” but not necessarily religious. Spirituality is now being understood as a seeking for personal fulfilment and an antidote to the stresses and strains of a busy life. Is this the kind of spirituality that we are talking about? If so then it can be a very narcissistic exercise centred, not on my neighbor and the poor as we find with Jesus, but on my own needs and desire for fulfilment.

Gutiérrez reminds us that spirituality is a community endeavour. “It is the passage of a people through the solitude and dangers of the desert as it carves out its own way in the following of Jesus Christ. This spiritual experience is the well from which we must drink. From it we draw the promise of resurrection.”

A Spirituality rooted in Life

Aquinas would remind us that grace builds on nature. A spirituality that is not rooted in the complex mystery of human life and conflict is just an illusion or, at best, a placebo for our perceived ills. In a world which is becoming more and more fragmented and individualized a spirituality that is rooted in the example of Jesus will call us to community, solidarity and inclusion. The Eucharistic tables that Jesus tended to frequent were not located in sacred places but in messy, though, hospitable homes. Access to Jesus, as with access to the spiritual life, is not to be found in privilege but in a capacity to welcome and risk an encounter with the other.

A Spirituality rooted in the Word

To drink from the wellspring of God’s Word is to drink deeply from the experience of humanity’s awareness of God present in the lives of men and women. When we engage in a *Lectio Divina* of the scriptures we encounter the struggles and dreams of God’s people as spoken in the prophets, the wisdom writings, the letters and, above all, the Gospels. It is from this well that we learn how to recognise God’s unfolding and ever surprising presence to the world. There we meet God - Creator, Spirit and Christ. We read of the necessary journeying to understand who God is for his

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people and the struggle of the poor to make heard their voice and to vindicate their right to respect and dignity.

One of the major themes that has emerged in Spiritan spirituality over recent years is that of *pilgrimage*.⁵ The starting point of the pilgrim search is the recognition of one's own inadequacy, hunger, or emptiness. To be a pilgrim is also to recognize the wells which will quench our thirst and sustain us for the journey. Gutiérrez, in his book, points out three aspects to this pilgrim journey. These are the encounter with Christ, walking according to the Spirit, and searching for the Creator. We can recognize these aspects in the life of our own founders, Poullart des Places and the Venerable Father Libermann. But they are also fundamental to any life of discipleship.

Already in 1985, the General Council was employing the metaphor of exodus to describe the evolution that was going on in the Congregation and the need to adopt lighter structures that are not linked to the power and glory of the past. Today more than ever we need to follow the example of Libermann and to recognize that our Spiritan vocation requires us to have no fixed abode, to be always on our pilgrim way. In the past we have been pioneers and builders, in the future we shall be called on to be pilgrims and prophets.⁶

A Spirituality rooted in Mission

The Trinitarian expression of the pilgrim journey that Gutiérrez describes in his book is also how we Spiritans articulate the mission confided to us. We participate in "the mission of God who is revealed as a communion of three Persons: the sending by the Father of the Son and the Spirit into the world reveals God's plan to share his life and his love with all human beings" (Bagamoyo 1.1). There can be no true communion with the mystery of God without participation in the mission of God.

Bagamoyo situates the context of our mission as being in the globalized world. How we understand that the globalized world will be key to how we engage in our mission. It is, as the Chapter pointed out, a complex world where at the same time we see the dominant and often oppressive role played by financial and transnational corporations; a world saturated with data and information but which lacks interpretation and the power of narrative; a massive movement of peoples some of whom are seeking a new life while others are fleeing conflict and terror; a greater desire for democracy and a realization that people can be mobilized to work for a better world and more just structures in society; the improvement in the status of women; a growing secularization and sense of human autonomy with regard to the divine.

It is within this context that we Spiritans must find the wells that sustain us and lead us to a stronger sense of mission. In this mission in a globalized world, the Chapter points to four areas in which we commit ourselves to act and mission. In many respects they are places where we would be drawn to by the magnetism of our charism. They are places where we would go on mission. But they are also places from where we draw life-giving water which refreshes and quenches our thirst. The Chapter's call to renew our methods of evangelization is not just about technique or strategy. More fundamentally, it is a call to recognize our fragility and insecurity and that it is only in emptying ourselves that we can truly drink from the sources of life.

Aspects of Spiritan Mission

These are the four aspects of our mission to a globalized world that Bagamoyo outlines for the next eight years: 1) Evangelisation of the poor; 2) inter-religious dialogue; 3) the promotion of justice, peace and the integrity of creation and 4) education. It also focused on the resources we have in new mission appointments and the need to maintain a healthy tension between consolidating what we have and not being afraid to answer new calls to mission from elsewhere.

Inspired by Libermann

Apart from the Scriptures one of the main sources that we Spiritans drink from is the wellspring of the founders and their manner of living the Gospel. Vatican II calls us to a constant return to these sources which give us the original inspiration for the founding of our Congregation. But this original inspiration, which is our communion with the well of our tradition, must always be seen and understood in the context of today's mission. Otherwise it is just bringing us to stagnant water which has lost its clarity and freshness. This is important if we are to understand and appreciate our founding tradition. It is not in the past that we must look to interpret and understand the present. Rather it is the present situation which leads us to look to the past and tradition and to see how this can bring meaning and significance for us today.

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Bagamoyo, faithful to our tradition, places evangelization of the poor at the heart of our Spiritan mission. In this we share a similar mission to so many religious institutes. In what way then can we say that we are different from other religious with the same objectives if, indeed, this is the case? Perhaps we need to put the question in another way. What is there in our common Spiritan identity that we have inherited from the founding events of our missionary family and which gives shape and form to the way we live our mission today?

An important element in our response to this question is found in the Chapter document on mission. Perhaps influenced by the geographical and historical context, not to mention the Holy Spirit, the Chapter delegates repeat the clarion call of Libermann to “forget about Europe...be African with the Africans...” (Bagamoyo, 1.8).⁷ This refers to the famous mission charter of Libermann, written to the community of Dakar in the perspective of a spiritual grounding of the missionaries who had arrived there on mission. Indeed Libermann calls it their “practical novitiate.”

Libermann’s Theology and Spirituality of Mission

We have in this text of Libermann an abundant source of wisdom and direction for the mission that we live today. Paul Coulon has described it as the “missionary strategy of a mystic.”⁸ Coulon points to the striking affinities between Libermann’s writings (especially this particular letter) and the Pauline corpus of the New Testament. Indeed, as the Chapter points out, this letter invites the Spiritan to two fundamental attitudes.

The first attitude is that of kenosis this self-emptying that Libermann writes about when he invites his missionaries to “Forget about Europe and be African with the Africans.”

The first attitude is that of *kenosis* this self-emptying that Libermann writes about when he invites his missionaries to “Forget about Europe and be African with the Africans.” The missionary should be the servant of his people. We find here an echo of the hymn in Philippians (2:6–11) and its call to conversion and kenosis in the manner of Jesus. It is this radical call that identifies the missionary not as the one who carries within themselves the means and end of evangelization but rather as the one who recognizes the paradox of the Gospel that it is only in losing one’s life that one finds it. It is, therefore, to this attitude of kenosis, of self-emptying that Libermann invites his missionaries so that together we might be raised up to become a people of God. Without this self-emptying we cannot recognize our thirst and the need to drink from the wells of our mission. And when this happens we depart from an essential part of our Spiritan identity which is identity with the life, struggles, and dreams of those who invite us to be part of their lives.

The second attitude of the Spiritan missionary that Bagamoyo identifies is a commitment and readiness to be able to stay for a long time in one place in order to learn from those to whom we are sent. This is why the Chapter recalibrated the Congregation’s position on mission appointments in order not to fix it to a definite period of time. In the globalized world that is ours to live in, where more and more life choices have terms and limits applied to them, the mark of a missionary will be his or her capacity to stay and share the pilgrim road of the people to whom

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they have been sent. Drinking deeply from the wells of mission requires giving it the time and duration that are necessary for thirsts to be recognised and then quenched.

Conclusion

What I have sought to do in these few lines is to engage in a reflection both with the experience and also the texts of Bagamoyo 2012. The invitation given to the entire Congregation at the beginning of the Chapter process to “be fervent in the Spirit” (Rom 12:11) remains valid today. We are being invited to be fervent in the Spirit of God; to be fervent in the spirit of our founding tradition; and to be fervent in the spirit of our common mission with the poor. These are the sources of our life and mission and in which we are constantly invited to drink deeply.

We are at Jacob’s well and with the Samaritan woman we pray to Jesus: “Give us this water so we will never be thirsty again” (John 4:15).

Marc Whelan, C.S.Sp.

Endnotes

¹Slaves were kept imprisoned in Bagamoyo. At night they were transported by ship to the slave-markets in Zanzibar. This explains the meaning of the word Bagamoyo (“Bwaga-Moyo”) “Lay down your Heart”

²James Chukwuma Okoye C.S.Sp., “A Chapter of the Holy Spirit,” Unpublished conference.

³James Chukwuma Okoye C.S.Sp., “What We have Heard, What We have Seen with our Eyes,” in *Spiritun Horizons*, No. 7. 2012. pp. 5 – 13, here p. 5.

⁴*We Drink from our own Wells: The Spiritual Journey of a People*, SCM Classics, 2005.

⁵cf General Council, *Living Spiritun Spirituality* I/D 60, February 2007. p. 11.

⁶Cf. General Council, *Towards a Missionary Spirituality for Today*, I/D 40, December 1985. p. 3.

⁷Cf *Notes et Documents*, IX, 324-332. *Spiritun Anthology*, pp. 281 – 287.

⁸Paul Coulon, “‘Faites-vous nègres avec les nègres’ où la stratégie missionnaire d’un mystique’ in Paul Coulon et Paule Brasseur, *Libermann 1802-1852 : Une pensée et une mystique missionnaires*, Le Cerf. 1988. Pp :489 – 546.