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3-1-2002

### Spiritan News, No. 141

Congregazione dello Spirito Santo

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#### Repository Citation

Congregazione dello Spirito Santo. (2002). Spiritan News, No. 141. Retrieved from <https://dsc.duq.edu/spiritan-news-en/150>

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## CHALLENGES AND FIDELITY

### A hundred years of Spiritan presence in Algeria

On December 7, the Spiritans in Algeria celebrated the centenary of their presence in the country along with the whole diocese of Oran. The Superior General and a Vicar Provincial from France were present for the occasion.

It all began with a courageous project to help children. In 1849, Père Abram of the diocese of Montpellier, struck by the suffering of the orphans in Algeria, founded the Institute of the Brothers of the Annunciation to help them. (It is interesting to note that the same Père Abram had asked the Spiritans in Rome to help him in 1853 when he was seeking canonical approval for his new institute.) After much hesitation, the French government gave them a military camp at Misserghin, but not before sparking a debate in the National Assembly led by anticlerical members. The orphanage at Misserghin, about 15 km from Oran, was destined to become a green oasis of vines and citrus fruits, thanks to the work of the orphans and the brothers. Everything went well until the death of the founder, who was the only priest and the only one capable of running the enterprise. The Brothers, despite their generosity, found that the material side was beyond them and their community religious life began to suffer.

Père Xavier Libermann, the nephew of François, arrived in 1900 in answer to an appeal from the Bishop of Oran and the last superior of the brothers, Frère Ligouri. The 18 brothers who wished to continue in religious life were received as novices into the Congregation of the Holy Spirit, which inherited not just the large property of Misserghin but also its debts. Amongst the novices was Frère Clement, the inventor of the fruit that still carries his name, the "Clementine".

The first trial was soon upon them. The anti-clerical laws of M. Combes (Prime Minister of France) brought about the closure of the orphanage. The property was confiscated and confided to a civil administrator; all the fit confreres had to leave on the first boat on 7<sup>th</sup> February 1904. The administrator agreed to retain the old Brothers of the Annunciation and the Spiritans who were sick as long as they kept a low profile. One newspaper suspected the continuation of "a mysterious monastery at Misserghin"!

After the First World War, the community was once again left in peace and a Spiritan was put in charge, but the confrere concerned caused plenty of trouble for his superiors. The agricultural side provided the Province of France with a good table wine, fruit and a modest revenue (but not as large as people imagined). The house also catered for confreres worn out by work in the missions, those with tuberculosis and others who were retired. They acted as chaplains to the Trinitarian and Good Shepherd Sisters who lived nearby. They helped out in parishes and in the senior seminary of Oran. Of these confreres, 72 died in Algeria and were buried in a small cemetery which has now been reclaimed by nature.

**"Wafa"** an Arabic word meaning **"faithfulness"**



Misserghin gave the impression of a community of peasant-monks, closely tied to the work and the neighbourhood of the Moslem Algerians, but even closer to the colonialists whose technical concerns they shared. The Christians of the diocese used to go there for their communion and confirmation retreats but it was rare to see any Moslems on the premises.

Several confreres were mobilised during the Second World War and the property

suffered as a result. Even more disturbing, the army (including, for a time, the Americans) occupied the compound until 1962. In 1970, the military Commandant, Chadli, ordered the superior, Père Bruder, to give the property over to the army, but the legal documents of our ownership were in order so nothing more happened.

Meanwhile, the French authorities had asked the Spiritans either to reopen the orphanage that was closed in 1903 or to hand it over to the social services. The Congregation opted for the former and asked Père Crueize to take charge of the project. He started receiving orphans and other needy children from 1952. It was the "Centre for Trade and Agricultural Training in the region of Oran" that now took up most of the time and energy of the community. Young Algerians were among the students, but they were still in the minority. The war of liberation did not have much effect on the peace and work of the centre. Amongst the soldiers who occupied

part of the property, there were many conscripts who were willing to put their skills at the disposal of the school, either as general teachers or in more specialised areas.

Independence day (5<sup>th</sup> July 1962) was marred by a sad event for the community; Frère Marie-André left for Oran by car, accompanied by the parish priest of Sidi-bel-Abbès, his housekeeper and her child. They never returned and were almost certainly murdered. At this time, many French people left the country, including the Spiritans who were working in the parishes. The financial effects were considerable.

Nobody thought of leaving the Centre. A new era began. Many young Algerians now attended the Centre and people of many different nationalities and religions helped to run it. Between 1965 and 1975, over 60 French "coopérants" worked in the Centre and the number of students rose to 230, nearly all boarders. The youth of the teaching staff, the desire to help in the development of a young country, the Vatican Council, the idea of Algerian socialism, the arrival of some young Spiritans - all these things combined to create an extraordinary enthusiasm. They believed in dialogue, they established relationships with the families of the students and the annual feast days brought many people together. The collaboration with the diocese of Oran became closer.

In 1975, the "agrarian revolution" decreed by Boumédiène put a stop to the whole project. The Centre was nationalised (shortly followed by all the other schools of the diocese) and the school and property rapidly deteriorated. But the Spiritan presence continued because the French Province had committed its services to the bishop of Oran. As there were no longer any Church institutions, the confreres got involved in public works. Raymond Gonnet went to the Cité de l'Enfance, a state orphanage, and

There are 4 confreres from the West African Province (WAP) on a pastoral experience programme in Algeria : Michael Gomez (The Gambia), Paul Karim (Sierra Leone), Isaac Donkor and Innocent Abagoami (both from Ghana). We arrived in Algeria full of eagerness and enthusiasm for 'mission', but in the beginning we still kept dreaming about a mission that went beyond mere presence, a mission that we were so used to in West Africa.

Eventually, we realised that mission in Algeria is being present to the people, a people truly and entirely Muslim. Hence our silent presence with the students who come for English and French classes, with the many handicapped boys and girls whom we visit, with people in the hospitals and at funerals. A good number of our students come to our classes armed with various degrees of prejudice and formed opinions about Christians. However, with our interactions together in the classrooms, many of them have changed their opinions about us.

The handicapped children and the patients at the hospitals have become our friends. But the story in the beginning was not as simple as it appears now. We were refused entry into some handicap centres and hospitals. At other times we were suspected of either proselytizing or being spies. Initially, we were called by names such as « negro » or « le noir ». While some people took us for footballers or university students, others thought we were a group of illegal immigrants trying to pass to Europe through Algeria.

In the midst of these experiences, we realised that not to have confronted challenges was equivalent to not to have attempted the mission for which we were sent. The missionary presence in Algeria is indeed a necessary one. There are many complementary values that both Christians and Muslims learn from each other.

*Abagoami B Innocent*



*The Monument to the famous Brother Clément (the Inventor of the "clementine") in the community cemetery of Misserghin*

took part in the pastoral activities of the diocesan centres. René You and Claude Brehm established themselves in Sidi-bel-Abbès and taught French in the secondary schools of this city of 350,000 people. Their community was open to Christian "cooperants", coming from a variety of countries and religious traditions. The Spiritan group itself became international with confreres from Poland, USA and Zaire and on 25<sup>th</sup> March 1986, the community was transformed into the "International Spiritan Group of Algeria".

In 1987, there was a new challenge: the State decided that henceforth they would not accept "cooperants" from abroad; we would now have to rely on associations. Raymond Gonnet helped to create an association for the mentally and physically handicapped. At Sidi-bel-Abbès we continued our policy of creating "meeting-platforms" of different kinds, primarily a library and courses to help students. In 1991, the Group took over responsibility for the Christian community of Mascara.

From 1993, we could no longer risk having new young confreres appointed to the Group and several confreres left the Group for a variety of reasons. Consequently, we were reduced to two French confreres who were no longer young, Raymond Gonnet and René You. In 2000, another French Spiritan, Pierre Veau from Mauritania, came to work at Ghazaouet, and the West African Province started to send students to do their stage in Algeria.

The Church became a victim of violence: Mgr. Claverie and his chauffeur were assassinated as well as 18 male and female religious. But nobody even considered leaving this suffering Church. The little Group continued its work, encouraged by the General Council and the Province of France. The policy of creating "meeting platforms" was continued with the African confreres on stage who found many opportunities of contact with young Algerians; it is hoped that they will also open new paths for our apostolate of presence and witness.

So we are a community that neither François Libermann nor his nephew Xavier (the first Spiritan in Algeria) could have imagined. We are grateful to the Lord for the last hundred years, for all the good that has been done by the men who served as his instruments, for all the help that Spiritans have received from so many benefactors, both Christian and Moslem. We thank him for the Good News that has been given and received in this country and in this Church.

*After a report from René You*

## MEETING OF THE EUROPEAN PROVINCIALS: 16-24 January, 2002

In future, the meeting of the Provincials of Europe will always take place in January, coinciding with the closure of one pastoral year and the opening of the next. This year they met at the Kongolo Memorial at Gentinnes, Belgium, being the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the massacre.

From the reports of the different commissions of the Spiritan European Region it emerged that, despite the ageing of its members and the reduction of its personnel, the Region is moving ahead. This is a continent that continues its journey towards greater unity (this is the year when the Euro was born) but also provides us with the problems of de-christianisation and secularisation. To speak of Europe as a "mission" is no longer a literary device employed to shock people but an obvious reality.

One Commission has now finished its work - that of *History and Anniversaries*. The Spiritan Year is well under way and joint actions are planned (pilgrimage for young people, pilgrimage for the old, a University colloquium...) alongside the events arranged in the different Provinces - not forgetting the Pilgrimage of the Congregation in 2003.



*Provincial Assembly at the European Parliament*

Amongst the initiatives and decisions taken by the meeting this year, the following should be mentioned:

- It is hoped that a new European Regional House at Brussels will be set up in the coming months. There is also a need for another confrere to be appointed to the European team because the work-load is increasing all the time.
- An International European Novitiate for the whole Region will be opened in September, 2004; the place and the make up of the team to run it have yet to be decided. The first cycle formation of Spiritan candidates must include a missionary "stage" of one or two years (depending on the knowledge of the language concerned) in a cultural context different to their own.
- The scope of the missionary project at Rostock (Germany) is to be widened at the request of the Archdiocese of Hamburg; it will include a pastoral work for tourists which is not being covered by the diocesan clergy.

Fr. Noel O'Meara, attached to the General Bursar's office, spoke to the meeting about the financial solidarity of the Congregation. The provincials visited the headquarters of the Belgian Province at Nijlen and the present European house in Brussels. They also went to the European Parliament and met a Portuguese deputy and the person in charge of the AEFJN - the organisation of missionary institutes (including the Spiritans) which keeps an eye on decisions being taken that could have repercussions in Africa.

Peter Marzinkowski, the Provincial of Germany, will be at the helm of our European ship this year, aided by his counterparts in Ireland and Belgium, a bursar from one of the circumscriptions and the Secretary of the European Region. We are in the Spiritan Year - a time of grace for us to tell ourselves and others once again the "why" and the "wherefore" of mission today.

*Jean-Pierre Gaillard, European Secretary*

### An Award for a Swiss confrere

Fr. Fernand Coupy of the Swiss province was presented with the Medal of the National Order of Merit of the French Republic on 8<sup>th</sup> March 2002. He was born in 1918, professed in 1940 and ordained in 1944. He first arrived in Reunion in 1946.

"As we celebrate the passion, death and resurrection of Christ, it seems the memory of Sept. 11<sup>th</sup> is still reshaping our world-view. We can observe daily the pain of continued violent tribal, religious and civil strife in Afghanistan and the Middle East, and the threat of further terrorist events at home and abroad. More recently, our church struggles with the pain and anguish caused by reports of priests who have violated their sacred trust with innocent and vulnerable youth,

and what was at times a woefully inadequate response by some of our bishops and others in positions of responsibility. In some ways we all bear the wounds of these tragic events.

It is a time of deep soul searching and awareness of the great need for healing and reconciliation, in our church and in the world. No one is immune to the frailties of the human condition. It is this very human condition of sinfulness that Christ took to himself in his

humanity, and bore upon the Cross. It is by His wounds that we are healed.

This Easter it is both an act of faith and an act of hope to rejoice in the victory He won for us and for all. We cannot be saved if we don't know what we need saving from. Fortunately recent events remind us in dramatic fashion what salvation really means. Good can come out of every evil, and new life out of every dying to self'.

*Don McEachin, US/E Provincial*

## NEWS ITEMS

### DECISIONS OF THE GENERAL COUNCIL

The Superior General, with the consent of his Council,

- has decided to open a novitiate for the South American Region at San Lorenzo in the outskirts of Asuncion (Paraguay) with effect from 2<sup>nd</sup> February 2002.
- nominates Fr. Jean Paul HOCH as Superior of the Spiritan Community of Taiwan for a second mandate of three years, with effect from 1<sup>st</sup> March 2002.
- nominates Fr. Brian McLAUGHLIN as Superior of the Philippines Community for a second mandate of three years, with effect from 1<sup>st</sup> March 2002.
- appoints Fr. André OWCA as coordinator of the International Group of Croatia for a mandate of 3 years, beginning on 1<sup>st</sup> March 2002.
- prolongs the mandate of Fr. Noel O'MEARA as Assistant General Bursar for the service of Fundraising for a period of two years, with effect from 19<sup>th</sup> March 2002.

Following the request of the Provincials of Europe and after consultation with the Provincial of Germany, the Superior General, with the consent of his Council, decides to detach the community of Podvinje (Croatia) from the German Province and to erect an International Group in Croatia that will depend directly on the General Council. The confreres currently working in Croatia are appointed to this new Group. This decision takes effect from 1<sup>st</sup> March 2002.

The General Council has appointed Fr. Jean-Jacques BOEGLIN as the Postulator to the Holy See for the causes of François Libermann, Jacques Laval and Daniel Brottier, with effect from 8<sup>th</sup> February 2002.

### SPIRITAN YEAR: UPDATE re PUBLICATIONS FROM THE GENERALATE

1. *The Spiritan Diary*: work on the English and French versions of the Diary have now been completed by Fr. Vincent O'Toole and Fr. Christian de Mare and have been given to the printer. Fr. Domingos Neiva is working on the Portuguese translation of this publication.
2. *Liturgical Resources for Spiritan Celebrations*: work on this booklet has been completed by Frs. Tom Whelan and Eugene Uzukwu. The English and French versions have also been given to the printer. The Portuguese version has reached

the final stage of proof-reading, and will hopefully be ready to be sent to the printer very soon. We expect that all three versions will be ready for despatch by early May.

3. *Special Hymn for the Spiritan Year*: Fr. Claude Tassin has now completed this work in the French version. We have received the text of the hymn, but still await a copy of the music. An attempt will then be made to see if we can produce an English and Portuguese version of this hymn that will be compatible with the music composed for the French version.

### GENERALATE PERSONNEL

Pierre Buis has replaced Jean-Yves Urfié as assistant General Secretary.



Born in Paris in 1929, he made his profession in 1948 and was ordained priest in 1957. He taught science at our school at Alex and Old Testament at the consortium of missionary studies (Lyon, Chevilly and Paris). He worked in Guinée-Bissau from 1979 to 1988 and then taught exegesis for the FAC in the scholasticates of Libreville and Brazzaville.

Returning to France in 1996 for health reasons, he was appointed to the library of the French province at Chevilly.

### OUR DEAD

06 February	Fr. Antoine MARTIN.....	France 84
08 February	Fr. Henry KOREN .....	N/Lands 89
10 February	Fr. Georges BOUVIER .....	France 73
15 February	Fr. Paul LEYENBERGER .....	France 67
16 February	Fr. Seamus CLEMENTS.....	Ireland 82
18 February	Fr. Maurice CASTELAIN.....	France 69
20 February	Mgr Denis DURNING .....	U.S/E 78
22 February	Fr. Antonius HEURKENS .....	N/Lands 80
04 March	Fr. William J. McELROY .....	U.S/W 84
10 March	Br. Petrus van EKERT .....	N/Lands 92
12 March	Fr. Cornelius G. J. ZAAL.....	N/Lands 79
21 March	Fr. Denis M. O'BRIEN .....	Ireland 87
21 March	Fr. Denis M. O'BRIEN .....	Ireland 87
05 April	Mr. Fidelis ANYOR.....	Nigeria 27
09 April	Fr. Stanislas SOFFE.....	Ireland 73
13 April	Fr. John JENDZURA.....	US/E 84
15 April	Fr. Jean CRIAUD.....	France 80