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A JOURNEY THAT SHAPED OUR LIVES

Reflections of a Lay Spiritan

Gary Warner

G. Warner and his wife Joy are Lay Spiritans in the Province of Transcanada. Dr. Warner has taught courses on francophone literature and on peace and international development at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario, since 1967. He has been active in the Hamilton community for some 35 years on issues related to international development, anti-racism, human rights, refugee settlement and social justice. A recipient of several awards for his contribution in these areas, he was named to the Order of Canada in 2005. Gary and Joy have four children and four grandchildren.

*...Radical Gratitude...
begins when we stop
taking life for granted.*

Along with my wife, Joy, I became a Lay Spiritan after what seems in retrospect like a long journey of life-based formation for Spiritan mission. The initial thrust of the Spiritan Congregation as a “mission to the Blacks” is reflected in its contemporary mission of service primarily to the most disadvantaged and disenfranchised. The Danish philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard, once said, “Life can only be understood backward, but must be lived forward.” In the following pages I will try to understand the unfolding of the formative experiences that eventually led me to this Spiritan commitment, which continues to shape my life choices today.

Life as Gift

Mary Jo Leddy remarks in her book, *Radical Gratitude*, that in our consumer culture we are conditioned to be never satisfied. Perpetual dissatisfaction is integral to our economic system, “which expands to the extent that it can continue to expand the needs and wants of consumers.” She recommends as an antidote “Radical Gratitude [which] begins when we stop taking life for granted. It arises in the astonishment at the miracle of creation and of our own creation.” Having almost been killed by a falling coconut as a child in Trinidad and having escaped unscathed from two serious car accidents in Canada and England as an adult, I am acutely aware that life is a precious God-given gift and that we each have a unique presence and role to play in the world. In traditional African thought, awareness of this unique role for every individual is so strong that it is believed that diviners can identify this special purpose even before a child is born and that it is the responsibility of the community to help the individual to remember and focus on her or his life purpose.

I had the good fortune several years ago to attend a retreat led by the Spiritan theologian, Vincent Donovan, author of *The Church in the Midst of Creation*. Fr. Donovan reminds us in this book that “[t]he Gospel begins with God the creator and God’s creation. Everything else must flow out of this creation. We know God only in relation to creation and to humankind...The God of revelation is a God who entered into human history, into earth history.” Our lived experiences are an important pathway to encounter God and the sources of inspiration that God provides for our guidance. It is in this light that I reflect on my lived experience and on the convergence of factors that led me eventually to become a Lay Spiritan.

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Life as Commitment

The theologian Jon Sobrino writes that “Our spirituality is our profoundest motivation, those instincts, intuitions, longings and desires that move us, animate us, inspire us...But it is also our ultimate concern or orientation or goal, that person, object, ideal or value that attracts us, that draws us, towards which we incline... to where we go. If you like, it’s the inner life of the cup. But our spirituality is not just interiority. It is also our choices and actions; it is where spirit is given flesh, where intention becomes action, where we practice what we preach. Our spirituality shows up just as much in how we spend our money, our time, our abilities, as in how we say our prayers. If you like, it’s how we use the cup”.

In that spirit, for me, “what we say with our words is so much less important than what we mean with our lives...” I have come to see my own calling as living in the secular world, translating my Christian spirituality into the everyday world of family, work and civic interactions, being a witness, working for the building of God’s Kingdom of love, justice and peace by the vision I bring and the choices I make in my family, professional and social life. This is the essence of the formal commitment we make as Lay Spiritans in TransCanada.

The Early Years

As a young student at a Spiritan school, St. Mary’s College, Port-of-Spain, Trinidad, I acquired my first experience of faith-inspired social outreach through the praesidium of the Legion of Mary of which I was a member. One of the activities I recall in particular that was assigned to me on occasion was visiting the sick at the General Hospital. This experience nurtured in me a sense of compassion for people who were experiencing pain and suffering in their lives. Shortly after I finished high school and was teaching junior classes at the college, and before I left for university abroad, I was invited by one of the teachers, Mr. Pantin, to join a small reflection group which was studying the social teachings of the Church. In retrospect, both of these experiences served as important sources of my Spiritan formation without my realizing it at the time.

As a university student in France during the first half of the 1960s, I was privileged to know two chaplains in particular who contributed significantly to my ongoing formation to a life of faith in action. L’abbé Zaire was the chaplain of the Fédération Antillo-Guyanaise des Etudiants Catholiques (FAGEC), a national organization which regrouped Catholic students from several

university campuses across France. The FAGEC held an annual congress in Paris at which the theme for the year was debated, resolutions made and an editorial team assembled to publish the reflections emanating from the congress. One year, for example, was devoted to studying the role of the Church in the contemporary social, political and economic context of the French Caribbean “départements d’outremer” (overseas departments). L’Abbé Zaire was a charismatic and inspiring leader who deepened our social consciousness as Christian students. An added bond for me was that, at the end of our studies, l’Abbé Zaire later married Joy and me at the Eglise St. Julien, the university parish church in Caen, where I had been a student.

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the “good news”...*

I have never forgotten the words of Fr. Gwenaël, the Franciscan chaplain of the FAGEC group at the Université de Caen, in Normandy: “When you pray the Our Father and say ‘Your Kingdom Come, Your Will be done on earth as it is in heaven’, it doesn’t mean that you fold your arms passively and wish for the coming of the Kingdom - you must be an active agent working in the vineyard.” The message I took from his words was that we are called upon to be bearers and liverers of the “good news” - not the bad news that the poor will always be with us, with the implication that poverty, deprivation and marginalization are ordained by God - but the good news announced in Isaiah: “Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free and to break every yoke?”

*...is not this the fast
that I choose...to let the
oppressed go free and to
break every yoke?*

Together in Canada

We moved to Canada in 1967 where I took up my appointment at McMaster University in Hamilton. Joy and I soon became involved with a vibrant Roman Catholic community on the McMaster campus, led by a kind, loveable Jesuit priest, Fr. Gerry Gallagher, who challenged us and himself to think of our religion with the same intellectual curiosity that we brought to our academic studies. It was during this period that I first read Gustavo Gutierrez’ *A Theology of Liberation*. The theology of liberation challenged the Church and people of faith to be active participants in helping to change the economic and political systems that maintain social injustice. In Latin America, traditionally, the Church had been an ally of the rich and powerful. This was a call for a preferential option for the poor. Gutierrez explains that “God’s love excludes no one. Nevertheless, God demonstrates a special predilection toward those who have been excluded from the banquet of life. The word *preference* recalls the other dimension of the gratuitous love of God—the universality.” This is the good news that Archbishop Oscar Romero preached and for which he

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was martyred. There are several dimensions to liberation. At one level, it means liberation from the immediate causes of poverty and deprivation, recognizing that poverty is not an accident or a misfortune but an injustice. The Canadian Catholic Bishops also recognize poverty as injustice when they write in *Do Justice: The Social Teaching of the Canadian Catholic Bishops (1945-1986)* that “[t]here is nothing inevitable about the realities of being rich and poor in the world today...The gap is the product of our own making as men (people) of history. We have the responsibility of choosing the kind of social order we want to develop as a human family. The development gap is no less than a critical problem of injustice for (hu) mankind.” At one level liberation recognizes the dignity to which every human being is called and as such entails enabling the poor and marginalized to develop themselves in freedom and dignity by addressing the constraints placed upon them. At another level, based on the vision of Christ who liberates us from sin, it refers to liberation from selfishness and sin, which is “the ultimate root of all disruption of friendship and of all injustice and oppression”. It means re-establishment of right relationship with God, with others, and, we would add, with the planet (which we now know to be a living web of complex interaction). In a world of growing disparities, this option for the poor could not be more relevant nor more in keeping with the Spiritan charism.

Sabbatical in Senegal

The Dominican priests whom we met during the sabbatical year that we spent in Senegal became a source of inspiration for me. The elder of our two sons was born in Dakar in mid-January 1974 and was baptized at the Eglise Saint Dominique in Dakar where we went to church. During our stay in Senegal we got to know the priests at the Fraternité Saint Dominique quite well. I volunteered there as an English teacher for the youth in the alternative school which they had created. The classes were open to all youth regardless of their religious background. The Fraternité Saint Dominique also served both as an outreach center and as a “centre de réflexion” (center for reflection), known as the *Centre Lebret*. The Center not only mobilized the parish to learn about and contribute to rural development projects but also engaged the Senegalese students to become themselves directly involved in rural development work. The Dominican Center also organized presentations and discussions. One of the sessions that I remember most vividly was a presentation followed by a discussion on the inculturation of the Church in Africa. I had great admiration for the respectful, dynamic and progressive witness of this Dominican mission in Senegal, a predominantly Muslim country. The *Centre*

Sources of Inspiration

I have derived great inspiration in pursuing volunteer work in the area of anti-racism and civil rights from people like Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., Nelson Mandela, and Bishop Tutu. Martin Luther King had a vision of the Beloved Community that was broad in scope. This was a vision of human relationships, at both the local community and the global level, which embraced diversity and recognized the inter-relatedness of human beings everywhere. It envisioned a world where values of love, justice, and peace prevailed and where the activities and choices made by institutions, whether public or private, for-profit or not-for-profit, took into account ethical concerns. The Beloved Community would be a community free of racism and the many forms of physical violence (such as child abuse, domestic violence, sexual assault, racial profiling, acts of state- or group-inspired terror, and war) but also of economic injustice and exploitation.

Action for Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation

Systemic racism, often unintended and unconscious, but resulting in the limiting of opportunities or discrimination against specific groups of people, has been a major focus for me. Campaigning on issues related to racism has taken many forms for me over the years. I have served on a few occasions as a volunteer advocate for individuals who felt that their voice would not be heard by large institutions in the face of which they felt intimidated. It has involved delivering many workshops, alone or with my wife, Joy, to schools and in the community, in Hamilton and elsewhere; also, serving on school board committees developing antiracism policies. I have also been active in antiracist organizations, including chairing the Working Committee of the Strengthening Hamilton's Community Initiative (SHCI), created by the Mayor of Hamilton following an upsurge in racially motivated incidents, including the burning of the Hindu Temple and an attack on a mosque in the wake of the September 11, 2001 attacks in the US. I have envisaged my service on the Board of Directors of Settlement and Integration Services Organization (SISO), and on the advisory committee for a Center for Civic Inclusion being launched in Hamilton, as an extension of the same commitment, through working to facilitate the integration of refugees and immigrants locally and to create a barrier free community.

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International development work and advocacy for global justice have also been avenues for me to translate my faith into action. The words of the Australian Aboriginal woman, Lilla Watsoa,

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invariably come to my mind when I think of the concept of development: "If you have come to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together." This is the spirit in which I have approached international development work, not in a donor-recipient mode, but as a partner, ready to listen and willing to both give and receive. One of my students sent me a card explaining how she came to an understanding of Lilla Watsoa's words during a visit she had made to India. "I bought a basket made of leaves and filled with flower petals from a young girl in a city on the banks of the Ganges. I lit the small string among the petals and knelt beside the rushing waters of the river to set afloat my basket and make a wish. I wished for the well-being of the young girl who had sold to me my promise of good fortune upon my visit to her city on the banks of the Ganges. Only seconds after releasing my basket to be swallowed up by the waves of the holy river, I realized my mistake. My mistake was not in the selfless act of donating my wish to another - but why hadn't I asked the young girl what she wanted me to wish for?" I thought that this was a simple yet profound insight, one that is fundamental to development work.

I have had fairly extensive involvement in international development, mainly through serving overseas with CUSO and later as Director of my university's International Office. Project investigation, planning or monitoring, has taken me to several countries in West and East Africa, Indonesia, and the Caribbean. Development has also become the core of my teaching. I include a segment on spirituality and development in my teaching. Contrary to the still dominant concept of development as essentially an economic issue, with mass consumption as its highest state, Pope John-Paul II, in his encyclical *On Social Concerns/Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, puts development in truer perspective:

"Today, perhaps more than in the past, the intrinsic contradiction of a development limited only to its economic element is seen more clearly. Such development easily subjects the human person and his deepest needs to the demands of economic planning and selfish profit... True development cannot consist in the simple accumulation of wealth and in the greater availability of goods and services, if this is gained at the expense of the development of peoples, and without due consideration for the social, cultural and spiritual dimensions of the human being."

We have also come to see more clearly the links between peace and development. In most religious traditions, as peace scholar Elise Boulding points out, we find two contrasting forces, which

...we find two contrasting forces...holy war culture and holy peace culture...

she calls “holy war culture and holy peace culture...The holy war culture has tended to encourage the exercise of force at every level, from family to international relations... There is also a holy peace culture, whose voice has often been historically muted, that works to restrain the use of force and for peace and reconciliation.” A peace culture offers an alternative vision of human development, which as Mahbub ul Haq put it, is “a child who did not die, a disease that did not spread, an ethnic violence that did not explode, a dissident who was not silenced.” Supporting the building of a peace culture has taken for me the form of participating in the work of the Center for Peace Studies at McMaster, helping to build peace locally through projects such as the Civic Center and the SHCI, and working through the Development and Peace group in my local parish. The Spiritan Congregation has itself considered peace and justice work important enough to devote resources to the coordination of work on Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation across the Congregation.

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University Community

Faith in action for me is also reflected in my everyday role as a teacher and former administrator and as a member of the university community. Active for many years in the McMaster Catholic Community, which was ministered to by Spiritan chaplains in the 1970s and early 1980s, I considered it important for faculty and staff to be a witness and mentor for students at all times. One of the Spiritan chaplains in particular, Fr. Seán Byron, was a tremendous source of inspiration to me and many others. Seán had the uncanny gift of anticipating your questions and your needs before you articulated them. One important lesson that I learned from him is encapsulated in the story he told about walking from the house to the Chaplaincy Center on campus, meeting people on his way to work and thinking as they stopped him that he was being held up from arriving at work. It was when he got to the office that he realized that his work was really with the people he had met on the way. It was Seán who introduced Joy and me to the Lay Spiritan group in Toronto. He also introduced me to Raimundo Panikkar, an extraordinary scholar priest, author of over 40 books, son of a Hindu Indian father and a Catholic Spanish mother. Raimundo Panikkar portrays himself as being in no way a cultural or religious “half-caste”, but as 100% Hindu and Indian and 100% Catholic and Spanish. I have been struck, in the context of inter-religious dialogue which has been one of his central preoccupations, by the interesting distinction he makes between dialogue and “duo-logue.” Indeed, he prefers to speak, not of inter-religious dialogue, which he defines as established religions confronting questions of doctrine and discipline, but of

intra-religious dialogue which is more of an exchange of religious experiences and insights, without resorting to relativism or religious syncretism. He describes the dialogue between religions not as “a strategy for making one truth triumphant, but a process of looking for it and deepening it along with others.” Inter-religious dialogue is also an important dimension of contemporary Spiritan outreach.

Convergence of Values

It was not until the early 1990s, about a decade after we were first introduced to the Toronto Lay Spiritan group by Fr. Seán Byron, that Joy and I opted to become Lay Spiritans. We recognized formally in this way the convergence between the values we were trying to live and the Spiritan vocation. My early education at St. Mary’s College combined with our close association with the Spiritan priests who ministered to the McMaster Catholic Community and our involvement with Volunteer International Christian Service (VICS), for which we organized orientations for outgoing volunteers over a decade or so at the invitation of then VICS Director, Fr. Dermot Doran, cemented our Spiritan ties. We were attracted by the Spiritan charism of special concern for the marginalized and the excluded, recognizing that God’s Spirit resides in every human heart, and the willingness to be guided by the Spirit which blows where it will. Lay Spiritans commit themselves to an active prayer life and, following the prompting of the Spirit, to work to give options to those who are most poor, vulnerable and excluded from society, enabling them to break out of their cycle of misery. Spiritan spirituality is characterized by what Libermann called “practical union”, finding the divine in the ordinariness of everyday life and being available to go where we discern the Holy Spirit to be leading us.

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Worldwide Community

As Lay Spiritans associated with the TransCanada Province and with an increasingly multicultural international order, we have privileged access to the inspiring example of service and holiness exhibited by so many Spiritans around the world (over 3000 in 62 countries), as well as to the rich spiritual resources of which the Congregation is the depository. We found inspiration in the life of the founders, especially Fr. Libermann who, despite much suffering in his life, retained an unshakable trust in God and brought new life to the Spiritan mission. We feel part of a worldwide community. Joy and I have been privileged to spend a month participating in the two most recent international Chapters of the Spiritans as lay delegates, myself in 1998 in Maynooth, Ireland, and Joy in 2004 in Torre D’Aguilha just outside Lisbon,

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GARY WARNER

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Portugal. For many years the Spiritans have also provided us with a priest for a small monthly home worshipping community – we are grateful for these privileged moments of prayer and intimate sharing. As the outcome of our largely life-based formation, we were led by the Holy Spirit to make a lifelong commitment as Lay Spiritans. We see our role as bringing the Spiritan charism and spirituality to the areas of secular life in which we are involved as lay people.

SILENCE

Cothrai Gogan,
C.S.Sp.

Cothrai Gogan, C.S.Sp., is a Spiritan of the Irish Province. He has worked as a missionary priest in Nigeria, Ivory Coast, Tanzania, Mauritius and Kenya, where he is currently chaplain at Star of Hope Children's Home in Ruiru. Cothrai has published a number of works of poetry and prayer including *God Knows: A Journal of Sorrow, Poems of Prayer, Come Deaf Now Hear, Something Else* and *Hymns of the Universe*.

*"The sense of a vessel is not
in its shell but in the void"*

Dag Hammarskjöld

Some things require an emptiness
a space of silence
a nothingness:
like shells that whorl and twirl
around a curved naught
or bubbles blown
that float
bared in the sunlight
flashing light signals
resting on a bloom
one borrowed moment

Some things require an emptiness,
a round of space
a little silence – me.

Or think of atoms
set in phantasmagoric speed and space
electrons aeons apart
infinitesimal ultimates
ringing inner void
zero essentiality...
you

Some things require an emptiness
a round of space
a little silence
even to be.