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SPIRITAN SPIRITUALITY *A Latin-American Perspective*¹

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What is Spirituality?

There are many definitions and descriptions of “spirituality”, most of them quite vague. It would be good, therefore, to clarify first my own understanding of spirituality, before going on to talk about “Spiritan” spirituality. In my opinion, the best definition runs as follows: a person’s spirituality is the way that person develops his/her relationship with God (the divinity, the transcendental, the “beyond”), how a person experiences God’s presence, communicates with God and allows God to communicate with him/her, knows God and allows oneself to be known by God, and in God’s light interprets the universe, the world and life.

Each individual, family, religious group, ethnic group, nation, and indeed epoch, can have its own spirituality. The individual or group that does not believe in the transcendental, but only in the material world as experienced through the five senses, has its way of interpreting the universe and life, known as “ideology” – for example, the ideology of materialism, be it Marxist or Capitalist.

We can identify four areas in which spirituality functions—the areas where God relates to us and we to Him:

1. The world of nature: included here are not only the cosmos, earth, air, sun, water, plants and animals, but also the things created by humanity and the events and happenings, planned or not, of our daily lives.
2. The “world” which is myself.
3. The “world” which is other people.
4. The “world” of the “beyond” (transcendental).

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Our whole relationship with God happens within these four “worlds”. Thus, we can describe our individual and group spirituality by the ways in which we use these four areas to enter into contact with and relate with God.

A Common Seed

Today, in Latin America, members of the Spiritan family come from 19 different nationalities (we include here the Spiritan Sisters and also the Missionary Sisters of the Holy Rosary). We are from Portugal, Spain, Ireland, Holland, Germany, Canada, France, US, Paraguay, England, Democratic Republic of Congo, Nigeria, Ghana, Sierra Leone, French Guyana, Australia, Cape

PADRAIG LEONARD, C.S.SP. Verde, Mexico and Brazil. Each of these nationalities has its own spirituality and “face”.

Besides these national spiritualities, we also have our individual spiritualities. Among us there are charismatics, sacramentalists, followers of liberation theology and basic communities, people strong on popular devotions and particular devotions, devotees of Our Lady of Guadeloupe, or Aparecida, or Fatima. In the middle of all these, how can we trace the contours of a spirituality that we have in common as members of the Spiritan family? How can we discover the “Spiritan, Latin-American face”, which is distinct from other faces and spiritualities?

In the forest there are many types of trees; in the fields there are many varieties of plants; in the garden there are many species of flowers. However, it is the seed that determines the type of tree or plant which will appear. I believe that, in order to discover the type of spirituality that distinguishes us from others and identifies us as Spiritans, we have to return to the seed or roots – namely, our founders and foundresses: Claude Poullart des Places, Francis Libermann, Eugénie Caps and Joseph Shanahan.

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We can speak of a Spiritan spirituality only to the extent that we are inspired and nourished by, and living, their spirituality. While we may be able to speak of spirituality or of a Latin-American face, without this we cannot speak of a “Spiritan” face. In this brief presentation, I want to focus attention only on the seed, the roots of our Spiritan spirituality - the spirituality of our two original founders: Claude Poullart des Places and Francis Libermann.

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While the writings of Claude, and of the people who knew him well, are few in comparison with those of Francis, we can see that their way of thinking and relating to God were very similar: Christocentric, with a very strong emphasis on docility to the Holy Spirit and Mary. Both emphasized the priority of an unconditional response to the call of God, going to the marginalized, in a spirit of poverty and service, in the society of their time. This brief synthesis will focus principally on the spirituality of Francis in order to trace the most important characteristics within the context of the four broad areas mentioned above.

1. God in the World of Nature

It is not surprising that the contemplation of nature - earth, air, sun, water, plants and animals - even though frequently referred to in the psalms and biblical literature, is not part Francis’ spirituality. He spent his whole infancy and adolescence living in a city ghetto in Saverne and so had little contact with nature.

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From there he went to another city, Metz, before arriving in the large city of Paris. However, if we include in “nature” the events and happenings of life, Francis was steeped in the spirituality of the Jewish people who recognize the “dabar” (communication) of God in all that happens in our life and world. To quote the Jewish writer, Martin Buber: *“The pious Jew lives in the conviction that the true place of his meeting with God is in the ever-changing situations of life. Repeatedly he hears the voice of God in a different way in the language of the unforeseen and changing situations”*. The God of Jews and Christians is a God of surprises, whose will does not always coincide with ours, and the experiences we have of Him are pure gift and not the result of our own effort. Francis frequently experienced this: in the peace of his conversion, the joy of his baptism, the sadness of his illness, the various frustrations in the different stages of the foundation and early development of the Congregation and the fusion with the Congregation of the Holy Spirit. He always managed to discern the hand of God in both the happy and sad events that he encountered:

“It is wonderful to see how God’s providence arranges circumstances towards the realization of his designs for salvation... Because of this, we need not get too upset about the salvation of souls... We need only follow the example of Our Savior... to be faithful in doing what we can, and cooperating with divine providence in the circumstances which come our way”.

2. God Within Us

As the son of the strict rabbi of Saverne, Libermann could easily have become neurotic, full of self-pity, concentrating all his attention on himself as a person who was marginalized, poor, sick, weak and timid, without roots in his past, without hope for the future. He was certainly a marginalized person: he was a Jew living in a European ghetto. Someone born in Latin America does not know what it is like to be born and live in a ghetto. It is to live in a prison with invisible but very real walls and bars: walls of religious and racial prejudice, if not outright persecution. It is to be the object of contempt, hate, repugnance, without knowing why. It is not to have the courage to move out, to risk life in the world outside for fear of defiling one’s culture or losing one’s faith. It is to speak only one language, which is unknown to the general population. It is to attend an exclusive school and synagogue. It is to court and marry only with other dwellers in the ghetto.

In his writings and life there is no hint of self-pity...

But Francis Libermann did not show any indication of trauma arising from this experience of marginalization in his early years. In his writings and life there is no hint of self-pity, recrimination,

PADRAIG LEONARD, C.S.SP. resentment or hurt, sentiments so common in someone who suffers the neurosis of being a victim. Even after his conversion to Christianity he must have suffered great discrimination as a Jew. The French Revolution of 1789 declared that all people living in France were equal before the law. However, prejudices change much slower than laws. He suffered because he could not speak or write French very well (and the French are so proud of their language). After his conversion to Christianity was discovered, Francis was abandoned and never pardoned by his own father. He suffered from epilepsy, which, at the time, was still considered by many as demoniac possession. At the seminaries of San Sulpice and Issy he was neither a seminarian nor a lay functionary. He considered himself a failure at the novitiate in Rennes. He was judged to be ambitious and proud when he tried to found a new Congregation.

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However, at the time of his baptism he had such a strong experience of the presence of a loving and merciful God living within him, that, from then on, nothing could take away his peace. From that moment until the end of his life he lived as a beloved son, content in the presence of God; consciously at times of prayer (contemplative union) and habitually in his working hours (practical union). When he repeats that he is nothing, that man is nothing, this does not indicate self-depreciation, but is his manner of thanking God to Whom he owes all that he is and has achieved. For him, all is grace; all is God acting within and through anyone who is open to His grace:

“We should not disturb, afflict, upset, torment, nor despise ourselves. This would be very bad, being one of the major obstacles to perfection, and an impediment even to our correcting our defects.”

This conviction of being the dwelling-place of God was the great discovery of his conversion.

This conviction of being the dwelling-place of God was the great discovery of his conversion. For a Jew of the Old Testament, God was generally a distant Being, difficult, or even dangerous, to come close to. Moses met Him in the desert, and later on top of a mountain covered in cloud. From there he descended to give the people the message from Yahweh. Later, God went in front of the people in a cloud by day and a column of fire by night, or lived in the tent of the Ark of the Covenant, where Moses went to meet Him. After the construction of the Temple in Jerusalem, the dwelling place of God on earth was in the furthest part of the Temple, known as the “Sacred Sanctuary”, where only the priests dared enter to offer incense. The people prayed and heard the Scripture read in the synagogues; however, to meet God one had to make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem and to make offerings in the

Temple. But, at the moment of the conception, God, through the power of the Holy Spirit, became flesh in the womb of Mary. And, at the hour of Jesus' death, "the veil of the Temple tore in two from top to bottom", signifying that, from then on, God would no longer be a hidden God confined to one place, but, by the power of the Holy Spirit, would dwell in the body of each person who would be baptized in faith in Jesus Christ, and would thereby accept to be His tabernacle or temple. That incarnation in his heart was the great revelation which Francis felt at the time of his baptism, and which, from then on, became a constant, dynamic presence and the source of all his strength and all that he thought and did:

"When the holy water flowed down my forehead, it seemed to me that I was in the middle of an immense ball of fire; I no longer lived a natural life; I saw nothing nor heard anything that happened around me; things, impossible to describe, happened to me".

...the Holy Spirit dwells in us in a living and life-giving way...

"After our baptism, the Holy Spirit dwells in us in a living and life-giving way; He is in us in order to be, in us, the principle of all the movements of our soul. It is up to us to let ourselves be moved and influenced by Him".

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3. God in the Other Person

Convinced of the presence of God within himself, and that he was called to be the presence of God in the world, it was easy for Francis to recognize the presence of God in the other. In the Acts of the Apostles and the Letters of St. Paul, he would have discovered the presence of Jesus in His Mystical Body. *"I am Jesus whom you are persecuting"* (Acts 9, 5). In addition, Mary, the one who welcomed the incarnate God in her womb and who always lived in the presence of God, became a huge influence in his life.

But for Francis the presence of God in the other had a very special focus. It was God's presence in the poor, the marginalized, in the one that the society of the time judged to be without value. This identification was quite natural for one who had himself been marginalized in so many ways and who now felt himself as privileged by God, despite his weakness and poverty. At the moment of his baptism he experienced a God who had a special preference for the *anawim*, the little ones with whom he could so easily identify. In the Gospels he discovered a Messiah who preferred the company of prostitutes and publicans rather than those well accepted by society and religion. In his free following of Jesus he developed a self-worth, which helped him overcome the contempt and marginalization of his own situation. These

PADRAIG LEONARD, C.S.SP. discoveries became the corner-stone of his choice of the most abandoned as the focus of the new Congregation he founded. It would be a missionary Congregation, with a mission to bring the “good news” to the poor: in the first place, the good news of their dignity as beloved children of the Father and temples of the Holy Spirit. The first recipients of this message would be the recently liberated slaves of the black race, the most abandoned both within and outside the Church:

“We would show the detractors of the African race that their members are as much children of God as they themselves are, that their aspirations are no lower, that they are no less capable of accepting the faith; in a word, that color does not signify any kind of inferiority”.

...the respect and simplicity with which we relate to each person, a very special characteristic of Spiritan living in Latin America, owes much to the focus of the spirituality of our founders.

The process of inculturation, which he encouraged in his missionaries, had its root in the respect that is owed to every person with their own spirituality, without distinction of race, color, religion etc. I believe that the respect and simplicity with which we relate to each person, a very special characteristic of Spiritan living in Latin America, owes much to the focus of the spirituality of our founders.

“In His name, and as people sent by Jesus Christ, the members dedicate themselves completely to announcing His Gospel and establishing His reign among the poor and most abandoned in God’s Church”. “They will be the advocates, supporters and defenders of the poor and the little ones, against all who oppress them”.

Another discovery, which greatly influenced Francis’ spirituality and his attitude of respect towards all, was individual freedom. This did not exist for Jews like his father. The individual’s only obligation was to obey the law of God as interpreted by the Talmud, or cease to be a Jew. Before the French Revolution of 1789, the obligation of the people of Europe was to obey the laws of the Church as promulgated by the Emperor or King. Reading Rousseau, while still a Jew, Jacob discovered that the individual is not just the object of a pre-established destiny, but ought to become the subject of his own destiny, using his liberty to make his own decisions. Liberty was primary in the motto of the Revolution: *“Liberty, Equality, Fraternity”*. Afterwards, reading the Gospels, Francis discovered that this liberty is granted to us in order that we can love responsibly. His conversion to the Catholic Church was his first “cry of liberty”, choosing to freely follow the free man, Jesus Christ, as his response to the invitation of God.

“Our Savior gave me the grace to resist my father, who wanted to uproot my faith: I renounced him rather than the faith”.

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Later, following the Revolution, the freedom of the slaves in the French colonies became his great preoccupation. How could he help these people, uprooted from their tribes, cultures and religion, descendants of generations of slaves, exercise their new freedom responsibly? It is interesting that the two people involved with him in founding the "work for the Blacks" were Frederick Le Vasseur, a native of the island of Bourbon, and Eugene Tisserant from the island that now comprises Haiti and the Dominican Republic, where so many African slaves were beginning to experience freedom.

"It seems to me to be absolutely necessary to help these people realize that they are free, and to appreciate the beauty of the liberty and equality which they have in common with all other children of God. Any idea of inferiority must be erased from their minds".

4. Relationship with the Transcendental World (the "Beyond")

For Jacob Libermann the most important figure in the transcendental world was Yahweh, as shown him by his father, the rabbi of Saverne, who expected so much of his youngest son. But for Francis, the convert to Christianity, the most important figure was Jesus Christ, as shown him in the Gospels and interpreted in the light of the Holy Spirit.

In second place came Mary, not as an object of devotion, but as someone with an essential and specific role in his journey. In contrast to the majority of founders and foundresses, Francis did not propose any special devotion to his missionaries or directees. For him, the Immaculate Heart of Mary represented: "the perfect model of apostolic zeal, always full of the Holy Spirit", "the abundant and always available source from which we should draw on God's graces with the greatest of confidence".

Frequently in his writings he refers to God: God's will; God's glory; God's grace; God's presence etc.; but the title "Father" does not flow easily from his pen. The image we have of God the Father is based on the experience we have, in our infancy, of our own earthly father. So, given the experience he had of the rabbi, it is not surprising that Francis unconsciously avoided giving the name "Father" to the loving and merciful God he met at the moment of his baptism. Indeed we frequently read in his writings phrases like: "We do all for the glory of Our Savior and his holy Mother" (ND, I, p. 674).

PADRAIG LEONARD, C.S.SP. Francis' desire was to live always in God's presence in a union he called contemplative during the time of individual prayer, and active or practical in the midst of apostolic activities. It was this original type of union that he encouraged in his directees, confreres and missionaries. Practicing this, the missionary would always be in the presence of God, consciously or unconsciously, and in contact with His will. The result in his own case was such a great confidence in God's love that it was easy for him to place himself totally in His hands and entrust to Him the success or failure of his plans and activities. To place all in the hands of God did not mean letting life run without any planning. On the contrary, it was to discern and plan to the extent this was humanly possible, but to leave the results in God's hands, sometimes against all human reasoning and advice. Such abandonment is only possible for someone who has had a very strong experience of God's love for him. It demands great attention to the happenings and events of life, and a radical abdication of control over one's own life and that of others. The attitude of "let it happen" or "may it be done" resists the subtle temptation to control God. It demands an acceptance of the provisional, the new, the unexpected, and a relativizing of all, except for the single absolute, God and His reign. The rule of the new Congregation, drawn up by Francis in Rome and presented by him to the Vatican, was a "Provisional Rule". He always underlined that the details would need to be modified with constant reference to different times and circumstances.

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"This rule is called 'Provisional', because experience may bring different modifications regarding the external behavior and the means to be used in the salvation of souls. But the kernel of the Rule, what it says about the spirit of the Congregation, should not be changed".

"In order to achieve a stable result, it is necessary that a vision of the future governs the projects and a perspective of time the execution of the details – things that demand great patience and perseverance".

For him all should be simple, practical and peaceful, as was his own relationship with Jesus and Mary. There are many examples of this in practice: he did not oblige nor encourage his directees or missionaries to follow any one of the traditional methods of prayer - lectio divina, the exercises of Saint Ignatius, the method of San Sulpice, the rosary, novenas etc. In prayer, as in all our attitudes, activities and understanding, we should, according to him, be open to the new, because in the new is the movement of the Holy Spirit, Who is "always renewing the face of the earth". When he speaks of renunciation, he is not thinking of fasting or the rejection of pleasure. The most difficult renunciation is of

The most difficult renunciation is of our own will, of our attachment to what is already known, of our certainties.

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our own will, of our attachment to what is already known, of our certainties. Renunciation implies also compassion, letting go of our judgments of ourselves and of others. It implies accepting as gift our own limits, the limits of others and the limits of our God, pardoning and being pardoned, seeing the good and not the bad in others, the seeds of the divine where the world only sees weakness and depravation.

“Let God act according to His wish. Act always with peace, grace and gentleness of heart. Try to remain in peace, in order to arrive at complete abandonment in His hands”. “Don’t be surprised if you commit faults. Don’t revolt against yourself. Allow yourself to be the subject of these, while God’s wishes to leave you so. What do you gain by being disgusted, disheartened and angry with yourself and your defects? Surrender yourself into the hands of God and abandon yourself to His pleasure”. “Why do you always reprove yourself, when the good God does not?”

Footnotes

¹ Presentation originally given by the author to a gathering of missionaries of the Spiritan family in Brazil, 2003