The Challenges and Future of Spiritan Mission

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THE CHALLENGES AND FUTURE OF SPIRITAN MISSION

Introduction

The first concrete instance of Jesus’ mission is presented by Luke in an account of his visit to Nazareth (Luke 4:16-20). Luke, in quoting Isaiah (61:1-2), portrays Jesus as the one who was to come to offer all who do not see the possibility of seeing him. In the apostolic era, the church received the mission mandate to carry Jesus’ message to all men and women. This means that the church manifests her nature in doing mission. We, Spiritans, are involved in that mission of the church, we undertake the duty of evangelization ad gentes. This task is not an easy task to perform. As the church in her history faced challenges, our Congregation faced and continues to face challenges as far as mission is concerned. Therefore, we ask: What is Spiritan mission all about? How is it operated within the mission of the church? What can be its sources, its potential challenges, and its future in this world challenged by the dictatorship of globalization?

For a better understanding of our work, we begin by talking about Spiritan mission as seen by the founders, how it is related to conciliar and post-conciliar documents, and as it is presented in some Spiritan documents. The last part will be consecrated to the challenges of mission at all levels and her future.

FOUNDERS’ IDEAS OF MISSION

Poullart des Places

The Spiritan mission was born on the day of Pentecost, 1703, when Poullart dedicated his congregation to the Holy Spirit under the guidance of Mary Immaculate. Koren writes: “Mr. Poullart des Places ... then only an aspirant to the ecclesiastical state, began the establishment of the said Community and Seminary consecrated to the Holy Ghost under the invocation of the Blessed Virgin conceived without sin.” Poullart formed missionaries who could devote themselves to the Holy Spirit in order to continue and bring to completion the work of Jesus.

The missionaries Poullart des Places formed were to accept mission wherever it was found. Koren presents the characteristics of Spiritan missionaries in Poullart’s expectation: “Claude wanted his priests to be priests in
the true sense of the term, good shepherds, not hirelings. This was the reason why they should be willing 'to accept and even prefer the most humble and difficult functions in the church, for which it is difficult to find laborers.' The emphasis is on the verb to accept and the expression where it is difficult to find laborers. Those two elements show the commitment, the passion Spiritan missionaries developed in Poullart’s time as far as Spiritan mission was concerned.

Francis Libermann

One hundred and thirty years after Poullart, Libermann became the leader and preserved the idea of mission developed by Poullart des Places. But he just replaced the idea of “going anywhere where there is work to be done,” by “for the Slaves and Black people.” Slaves and Black people became the heart of Spiritan mission:

Eight days after Hérard closed his eyes in death, Libermann had a first vision showing his future role in the work for the Blacks […]. The members of the Congregation consecrate themselves wholly to preaching the Good News (of Jesus Christ) and establishing his kingdom among the poorest and most abandoned souls.

Francis Libermann, as he directed his mission to the Blacks, also advised his missionaries to be led by the Holy Spirit whom he considers as the agent of mission. Father Malinowski comments on Libermann’s teaching on the Holy Spirit as follows: “… In the complexity of coming to the aid of the poor, weak, and oppressed, the poverty of means and the powerlessness of human endeavor called for continued and greater reliance on the Holy Spirit. The Spirit was now called upon to be a light to the missionary path and a consoling presence in the missionary’s labor and fatigue.”

Some Challenges

What we can retain from the two founders about mission is that it was directed to the poor, the most abandoned, the slaves, and Black people. The first Spiritan missionaries sent by them faced some challenges, like language barriers, travel by boats that took a long time to arrive at the place of mission, the challenge of converting Africans, the challenge of organizing African societies considered as colonies of the colonizers for so long, and, lastly, the challenge of studying the character of the people and examining the tendencies of their hearts, their
inclinations and affections.\textsuperscript{6}

**VATICAN II DOCUMENTS AND SPIRITAN MISSION**

Vatican II really influenced Spiritan mission since it gave the church a new direction as far as mission was concerned. What we can surely affirm is that Spiritan mission has not moved away from the new direction the Council had given to the church. That is why the Vatican II documents can be considered as one of the major sources of Spiritan mission today.

**Ad Gentes Divinitus**

The Church finds its nature in doing mission, and that mission is led by the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit (AG, 2). This view of the Holy Spirit as the agent *par excellence* of mission was already at work in Libermann’s time, especially when he invited Schwindenhammer to be led by the Holy Spirit: “The Holy Spirit wants to be the soul of your soul. Our task is to make him absolute ruler of our spirit so that he will share his life and action with us. Let him act within you as our body lets our soul act within us, moving it as it will…”\textsuperscript{7} Today we, Spiritans, still consider the Holy Spirit as the agent *par excellence* of our mission.

In the same perspective of mission to the Gentiles, Spiritan mission is still based on sending Spiritans where the church has difficulty finding laborers. Spiritan mission extends to all over the world, including Islamic lands, as is the case with Pakistan, where Christianity is not yet a recognized religion. In short, we can say that *Ad gentes* has really encouraged our Congregation in terms of maintaining our founders’ ideas of mission - to spread the Gospel in the very difficult areas.

**Gaudium et Spes**

*Gaudium et spes* made some missionary Congregations revise their Constitutions in order to incorporate the ideas raised by the Conciliar Fathers regarding mission. The key goal here is for the church to show solidarity with all men and women.\textsuperscript{8} Related to that, Spiritan mission is also about bringing joy and hope to all, and especially to the hopeless and joyless found in Africa immediately after the end of the shameful slave trade. The Spiritan missionary has a task to show solidarity with the people he finds in mission. This solidarity must be expressed in listening to them, living and walking with them, and bringing them joy and hope. Is this
what we have done so far in our personal mission experience?

Evangelii Nuntiandi

One of the first Apostolic Exhortations of Pope Paul VI, *Evangelization in the Modern World*, expounds on mission and the role of missionaries in the Church. Just ten years after Vatican II, Paul VI clarified the roles of the various constituents of the People of God: the successor of Peter (Pope), Bishops and Priests, Religious, the Laity, the Family, and Young People. We shall just take a look at the role of Religious, for it is more concerned about our topic. To Paul VI, there are so many tasks of mission in the church accomplished by different groups of people: “The whole church therefore is called upon to evangelize, and yet within her we have different evangelizing tasks to accomplish. This diversity of services in the unity of the same mission makes up the richness and beauty of evangelization.” In addition, the most important thing is where he presents the role of religious dedicated to mission, which includes us Spiritans. He states:

Other religious, in great numbers, give themselves directly to the proclamation of Christ. Their missionary activity depends clearly on the hierarchy and must be co-ordinated with the pastoral plan, which the latter adopts […]. Thanks to their consecration they are eminently willing and free to leave everything and to go and proclaim the Gospel even to the ends of the earth. They are enterprising and their apostolate is often marked by an originality, by a genius that demands admiration.¹⁰

From the above quotation, we clearly notice that the role of Spiritans is to evangelize all men and women, and to work in harmony with the local church. We shall now analyze some Spiritan documents about mission.

Spiritan Mission after Vatican II: A Crisis in the Spiritan Family

I consider this point very important as it shows how our the Spiritan family became divided in the wake of Vatican II. The spirit of Vatican II was based on *aggiornamento*, a renewal of the life and mission of the church. The Congregation of the Holy Spirit, sharing the same mission of the church, also wanted to renew its way of doing mission. Three years after Vatican II (1968), a general chapter of the congregation was held when Mgr. Lefebvre was the
superior general. He decided to move away from the Congregation and from the Catholic Church, for he was against collegiality and collegial government. Let’s pause for a moment and consider how there could be a Congregation without a shepherd. Fortunately, a good number of Spiritan missionaries did not follow him, and Fr. Joseph Lécuyer became superior general and took over the leadership. How did Spiritan mission survive?

By means of three General Chapters (1968-69, 1974, and 1980), the Congregation progressively defined its role in the mission of the church […]. “The Congregation is one of the Church’s living cells. Its purpose is the preaching of the Good News of Christ to the world.”

SOME SPIRITAN DOCUMENTS ON MISSION

Spiritan Rule of Life (SRL)

Spiritan mission is well defined by the SRL. It promotes mission to the “poor” (anawim, the “Poor of Yahweh”) led by the Spirit. Briefly, it presents Spiritan mission as having its origin in the person of the Trinity (no. 1), mission is for the poor (no. 14), for those who have not yet heard the Gospel message or who have scarcely heard it, those oppressed and most abandoned, where the church has difficulty in finding workers (no. 12), and the Holy Spirit is the agent of mission (no. 5).

General Chapter 1968-69, Decisions and Directives, and Spiritan mission

The spirit of this general chapter of 1968-69 was to update (aggionamento) or revise our missionary activity in the spirit of Ad gentes. According to this Spiritan document, Spiritan mission is directed “to people who have not yet been evangelized” (no. 380), to non-Christians (no. 381); no. 382 insists on the preaching of the Gospel message to those people or groups who have not yet heard it. The general chapter also insists on the fact that Spiritans should develop a real missionary spirit; for instance, by teaching the catechism not only to converted people, but also those considered as pagans. Related to our missionary activity, the general chapter warns all Spiritans that money is for the purposes of evangelization. According to no. 384 of this document, Spiritans should devote and equal portion of men and money to the evangelization of those still outside the church (cf. AG, 30). This effectively reminds
us our poverty of life is for the purpose of advancing God’s kingdom. Also that the whole congregation is to be in solidarity with those on mission by allocating funds to them. Experience today shows the need to listen again to the instruction of this document for some have become slaves, dependent on and addicted to money. How many cases have we witnessed where issues concerning money and ethnicity are ruining Spiritan communities on mission? For Spiritans, money should only be a means for the success of mission and not a goal.

**Itaici (1992) and Spiritan mission**

Itaici (1992) stresses our capability to identify ourselves with the people we are sent to, our commitment to the poor, our support in time of crisis, and to some extent being the voice for the voiceless as far as justice and peace is concerned, and our ability to care for the refugees. The same document sees Spiritan mission as dialogue and ecumenical evangelization. It also directs Spiritan mission to the poor children, and to the Asiatic world (nos. 5 and 7).

**Maynooth (1998) and Spiritan mission**

On Spiritan mission, Maynooth emphasized preaching among the nomads of Boranaland (Ethiopia). Spiritan mission is also directed towards educating people; for instance, teaching them catechism, giving them new options, new views of life, and making them get back their due place in the society, in the economy of the country. In missionary activity, Spiritans are called forth to strive to develop the sense of belonging and togetherness, to teach them that people of different colors, races, and ethnic groups can live in perfect harmony. In short, Spiritan mission is about developing people as we evangelize them. Maynooth also insisted on our solidarity with the people, to improve their way of living, and to make them understand the word of God in their local language, for example:

We go to a people not primarily to accomplish a task, but rather to be with them, live with them, walk beside them, listen to them and share our faith with them. At the heart of our relationship is trust, respect and love … Mission is not to be conceived primarily in geographical terms but as a crossing of cultural boundaries and a reaching out to groups of people who are abandoned, excluded and oppressed. As these frontiers of mission change, the frontline of mission must also move.
POTENTIAL CHALLENGES AND FUTURE OF SPIRITAN MISSION

Ethnicity and Nationality within the Congregation

For me, the challenge of ethnicity and nationality constitute the first hiccup of Spiritan mission. I can’t imagine this situation happening in our congregation that has an international character. This is the case where some of our confreres are still ignoring the precious heritage our founders left us, community life. They forget the fact that we are in the same family founded by Poullart des Places and Francis Libermann. To me, ethnicity and nationalism are two main factors that, if we are not careful, can contribute much to the downfall of our Spiritan mission. It is really a shock when one notices that in some countries, Spiritan mission is reserved only to Spiritans born in that country. Ethnicity and nationalism are the counter-values of Spiritan mission. What have we done to our solidarity in the congregation as it was discussed during the general chapters in Itaici and in Maynooth? An instance is the situation in Cameroon. Can anyone tell us how many non-indigene confrere Spiritans are presently working in Cameroon? Where is our sense of internationality?

Another case arises when more than two Spiritan missionaries are sent to a particular place for mission. An unfortunate sight to behold two confreres running away from each other because they are not from the same place. Why can’t we practice what our forefathers have given us? What does it cost to welcome your confrere from abroad to preach the Gospel in your native place? Is the Congregation going to die? Spiritan mission is really challenged by the lack of community life among ourselves. What do our founders think looking at us from above? Finally, some of us are still thinking that the Congregation belongs to them, it is our own business in the sense that we have even managed to change the direction of Spiritan mission. They consider themselves masters of mission instead of Jesus Christ through the work of the Holy Spirit. The new trend of mission seems to be mission as no longer received but chosen. Our Spiritan mission is dying because some of us have lost the sense of belonging, have decided not to embrace our Spiritan identity.

Insecurity and Spiritan mission

This is one of the biggest challenges of Spiritan mission. Though Spiritan mission is about bringing Jesus’ message
to the ends of the earth regardless of identities, races, tribes, cultures, background, we need to acknowledge that it is not an easy task. Even the expression itself “where the Church finds it difficulty to send laborers” is signal of a serious matter. Far from being pessimistic, I am tempted to say that it is very difficult to evangelize people from another religion like Islam, or people who are still attached to their beliefs and traditions, as we can hear from Fr. Apolinaris: “In Zanzibar, it is the Christians who convert to Islam. It is tough working with people who do not trust you fully but such is the challenge and calling.” These are the kinds of challenges Spiritan missionaries face when doing their mission. But as we have said, Spiritan mission is not one’s business, the Holy Spirit is always ahead of us to prepare the environment. The Spiritan should just accept to empty himself, to let the Spirit take over. We should then together take the initiative to encounter and spread the Gospel among those Muslim and indigenous people. But then, to be led by the Holy Spirit is a challenge to accept.

The Problem of Street Children and Refugee Crisis

As Spiritan mission is to carry the Gospel to the most abandoned, we Spiritans are automatically challenged by the phenomenon of street children. The causes of it can be either the cost of educating the children or the crisis of broken families, especially here in Kenya. The Spiritan missionary must be challenged by a beggar child, street child, destitute child, exploited child, depressed child, because they are those to whom we have been sent since the beginning of our Congregation in 1703. Whenever we see them, we should always remember the first poor scholastics Poullart des Places took care of. Did they have homes at that time? Was not Poullart des Places their new father? He was just a deacon when he realized his project. How many years do you have in the Spiritan family and what have you already done? Maybe it is a call for us now to realize something in mission regarding those abandoned children because there is nowhere to escape them, they are the recipients of the Gospel.

The refugee crisis is relevant here in Africa and it needs to be addressed here as one of the challenges of Spiritan mission. There is no need to google it, we all know that most of the regions of the refugee crisis are increasing, especially here in Africa, such as South Sudan, Sierra Leone, Angola, Rwanda, Senegal, Ethiopia, Uganda, Burundi, Somalia. To remind us, the refugees are among the people to whom
our mission is directed. As Spiritans in mission, we should be challenged by them, because they are in need, they are hopeless and joyless. Our task is to bring them Jesus, the source of hope and joy. But this is not done by word of mouth. It implies commitment, solidarity, accompaniment. It is not an alternative, we have no choice in the matter, rather this is a duty to which we have been called. Fr. Patrick Roe reminds us: “This remains our task today as we find ourselves once again challenged by the movement of history which has brought the stranger to our shores.”

**Spiritan Mission and the Dictatorship of Globalization**

Intrinsically, globalization is something good. The world becomes more inter-connected. In short, it is a process by which the people of the world are incorporated into a single world. But there are some bad effects, when, for instance, it affects the sovereignty of a state, allows some people to oppress the rest, places some cultures on top and reduces the others, promotes capitalism and reduces human dignity, or when it does not promote equality in global economics. As Spiritan mission is done within this single world where people are incorporated, the Spiritan missionary is therefore challenged by that world. He will face situations in which human dignity is less valued than the economy of the state. Globalization is not something we shall think about, it has already occurred and has brought several problems that threaten the life of the powerless today. It has already turned into a problem, exactly the way Fr. Mkulima predicted: “it is still in our memories that by the end of the twentieth century globalization had turned world order into a problem.” Hence, Spiritan mission is already challenged by the phenomenon of globalization.

**The Growth of Urban Poverty and the Issue of Famine**

How is Spiritan mission challenged by the issues of poverty and famine? The answer is in the field where missionaries are sent for mission. The people to whom we are sent are exposed to poverty and famine, and to some extent to drought. In his missionary activity, the Spiritan should be able to uproot the causes that enslave the people and help those people get back their basic needs and rights. This is really a challenge that can be overcome if we let ourselves be led by the Holy Spirit, the agent of mission.
Some Other Challenges according to Frs. Kimayo and Mkulima

Fr. Kimayo and Fr. Mkulima mention other challenges to the Spiritan mission. Kimayo writes:

The phenomenon of refugees, the tribal and ethnic wars, tribalism, injustices at all levels, mismanagement of the common good, lack of political good will, growing individualism, misappropriation of public funds, violation of human rights, bad leadership, rampant corruption, suffering from diseases such as HIV/AIDS and malaria, illiteracy, laziness, the growth of urban poverty, the international debt, the commerce of arms for wars, demographic problems, women’s freedom, and modern practice of slavery.\textsuperscript{20}

Fr. Mkulima emphasizes four major challenges of Spiritan mission. I summarize these as follows. First is \textit{intercultural hermeneutics} that makes people understand the dynamics of living in multicultural societies and the effort Spiritans must make to penetrate the cultural world of the people they are serving. The missionary needs to understand the language and the meaning of the cultural symbols in order to mediate the word of God. Second, \textit{marketing the church}, which is an invitation, a call for us Spiritans to read the signs of the times and to be attentive to the emerging trends. Third, the need to take positive options; and lastly, \textit{Spiritan pedagogy} which is about how to evangelize people or communities in an integral way.\textsuperscript{21}

These four challenges are very relevant in the sense that they really challenge the Spiritan in how to integrate the culture of the people to whom he has been sent, how to read the signs of times in terms of decision making, as directed by Francis Libermann; lastly, they impact how we as Spiritans evangelize the people we are sent to and how we consider the place of the Holy Spirit in mission.

THE FUTURE OF SPIRITAN MISSION

Because of the above challenges, it is objectively very difficult to predict a positive future for Spiritan mission as the world is getting spoiled by the rise of globalization, in the sense that people are more interested in what is happening in the USA and China than in what the priest preached in today’s Mass. But the missionary is still the one who can bring them back to the church. The success and failure of the mission is the missionary himself as we can
The success and failure of the mission is the missionary himself

read from K. Paul: “In all formation to mission, the person of the evangelizer is the secret to the success or failure of mission.” However, for the future of Spiritan mission, we need to point out the following conditions.

Living Spiritan Solidarity

For the future of our mission, we need, first of all, to strengthen ourselves by revisiting what Itaici (33.1; 33.2.1; 35.4) and Maynooth (Introduction 4.24-4.26) say: solidarity is also lived within the congregation. We all know from our founders that community life and solidarity are the two major pillars of our Spiritan mission. What can be the future of our mission without those two pillars? We need to accept that a confrere from another country can bring something new and constructive to my native province. This is what Fr. Mkulima refers to as updating the mission behavior. We need to develop the spirit of openness and stop categorizing or choosing the confrere we want to live with.

Formation of missionaries

From the challenges we just talked about, we all know that theological studies are not enough for the survival of our congregation as far as its mission within the mission of the church is concerned. We really need to form, prepare, and train our missionaries in several fields where human existence is threatened, and that before they are sent on mission. For sure, theology alone will not help unless they are in a place where there none of the above challenges exist. I propose one way of training future missionaries: we could give confreres in initial formation the possibility of studying something else while they are studying theology. Some can specialize in inter-religious dialogue, mechanics, electricity, plumbing, and others in agriculture, soldering, finance, education, leadership and management, counselling, health care, etc. In short, specialization or professionalism will be very useful for the missionary to overcome some potential challenges encountered in mission. This program can be implemented during initial formation time or the year after.

Constructing a Spiritan JPIC Spirituality

As the phenomenon of globalization tends to unite countries around the world in terms of politics, economies, culture, and even in the environment, there is a necessity to develop a Spiritan spirituality of Justice and Peace and Integrity of Creation. For sure, the world is wounded, and some countries are still affected by what happened in the
past, and because of that, they refuse to embrace the process of unification. For instance, South Sudan is hesitating to join the East African Community (EAC) because they have been oppressed for so many years. For that particular case, we need Spiritan missionaries, well trained in JPIC, to live with them, talk with and listen to them, and even make them understand Jesus’ way of forgiveness and reconciliation.

Attention to Emerging Trends

This is not the time for priests to be comfortably seated on their chairs in their offices waiting for some generosity from the Christians. We no longer live in the era when Christians respected the Bible or were passionate in listening to the priests. Of course today, we still find some Christians doing that. Rather, we are in a time of change led by the phenomenon of globalization. Spiritans really need to read the “signs of the times,” we need to be very attentive and responsive when some matters arise. Again, Fr. Mkulima presents some cases that I find very relevant today and even for the future: “How to deal with the issues of divorce? What is the pastoral care given to homosexuals and lesbians? How do we deal with the prostitutes? How to handle the issues of rich but corrupt people in the parish?”

We need to be ready to face any matter arising from the people to whom we are sent to preach the Good News.

CONCLUSION

This article reviewed the topic of Spiritan mission with a focus on its challenges and future. Beginning from our founders’ ideas of mission, and visiting some conciliar and post-conciliar documents and some Spiritan documents, we observed that Spiritan mission shares the mission of the church in general, but has some particularities: it is directed to the poor, the most abandoned, and the marginalized; it is focused on where the church finds difficulty to send laborers. Spiritan mission has its origin in the missio Dei, with solidarity and community life being the two main pillars of mission.

Concerning the challenges of Spiritan mission, we noticed many but not all: ethnicity and nationality within the congregation, insecurity in mission, the dictatorship of globalization, the challenge of street children and the refugee crisis, injustices in treating others, mismanagement of the common good, rampant corruption, lack of political good will. And for the future, we said that we need solidarity.
lived in the congregation, and that missionaries need to be formed for different areas of life. We also need to construct or develop our Spiritan spirituality of JPIC, and lastly, we need to read the “signs of times” as far as pastoral issues are concerned.

Jean Maturin Mougheney, C.S.Sp.
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Abbreviations of Church Documents

AG Vatican II Decree on the Church’s Missionary Activity, Ad Gentes Divinus, 7 Dec. 1965.

EN Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation Evangelii nuntiandi, 1975.


Abbreviations of Spiritan Documents

SRL The Spiritan Rule of Life, 2013.


References


Koren, Henry, Essays on the Spiritan Charism and on the

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Endnotes

1AG, no. 2.
2Koren, To the Ends of the Earth, 10.
3Ibid., 15-16.
4Koren, Essays, 21. Fr. Hérard was the last surviving Spiritan missionary of the 18th century.
5Cleary, Spiritan Life and Mission, 22.
6See Burke, No Longer Slaves, 108.
7See Spiritan Anniversary Diary 1703-2003, 19.
8GS, no. 3.
9EN, no. 66.
10Ibid., no. 69.
11See Mkulima, 150 Years of Successful Evangelization, 30-31.
12Ibid., 31.
13Itaici, nos. 4, 6-7.
14Maynooth, 18.
15Ibid., 99-100.
I credit this information from an interview of some of natives here in Kenya.
Roe, “Refugees and the Challenge of Horizons,” 104.
Kimaryo, *Venerable Fr. Libermann*, 78-79.
See Mkulima, *150 Years of Successful Evangelization*, 33-37.
Mkulima, *150 Years of Successful Evangelization*, 42.