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Chapter 17. Your Old Men Shall Dream Dreams

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Chapter 17

Your Old Men Shall Dream Dreams

Are We Afraid to be Spiritans?: *Vince Stegman, CSSp*

Now eighty-four years young, I am thinking of my fifty-eight years of living as a Spiritan priest. It is a challenging but interesting recollection. I start by saying that many of the things that happened to me took me by surprise because I hadn't planned for some of them. The surprises started early. When I completed my seminary formation, I asked the provincial for permission to go to the missions, but he had a different idea and a different plan. He asked me to teach for two years in one of the high schools the province had taken over in the previous four or five years in different places across the United States. After two years I could make my choice to continue teaching or to go to the missions. I went to teach in Saint Emma Military Academy in Virginia. Our Spiritan Congregation had taken on the responsibility for Saint Emma some years beforehand.

Having been raised in the suburbs of Pittsburgh, I had no experience of African Americans and their different cultural expressions. I did, however, have some idea of them as being "oppressed and most disadvantaged as a group or as individuals" as our *Spiritans Rule of Life* (no.12; henceforth SRL) expressed, quoting Venerable Francis Libermann. To my knowledge then, and after two years in Virginia, the evidence was visible that this ministry fitted the description that Father Libermann expressed as Spiritan ministry. On the other hand, in my inexperience, I was amazed that three or four of the priests teaching with me had rather racist leanings that showed in different ways over those two years. How could Spiritans who, as a congregation, are committed to work for people of color be biased against the people they are supposed to be committed to helping? I had no answer for this conundrum.

The 1960s in America was a time of major ferment and upheaval in the world and in the church. But the experience of living in Virginia opened me up to the plight of people of color as they contend with the culture and thinking

of the white majority. Reflecting now on those years, I can say that I felt lost in teaching because I had no background and no formation to be a teacher. And I had no knowledge of the African American culture. After two years I received permission to go to Tanzania for my first mission assignment. I can see now that if I had stayed in America at that time I might possibly have followed the thousands of priests and religious who left clerical or religious life in the 1960s for a life that appeared to give more satisfaction and security than the Spiritan lifestyle offered. But God was invisibly active in my life.

TEN YEARS OF MISSION IN TANZANIA

The Second Vatican Council ended in 1965 and was slowly being accepted and publicized in the United States. The church in the United States was closed and hierarchical. I found in Tanzania a living and vibrant church growing under the aegis of a Tanzanian community imbued with the teachings and spirit of the second Vatican Council, at least in the Arusha diocese where I worked. I was blessed to live with the companionship and mentorship of theologians and missionaries, such as Eugene Hillman, CSSp, Edward Kelly, CSSp, Vincent Donovan, CSSp, and Tom Tunney, CSSp. These were happy in their priesthood and dedicated to the people they had been sent to evangelize. Living with them and learning was a new and vital experience for me. In numerous evening gatherings, I slowly imbibed the ideas and customs of the Maasai people, the tribe that was most prominent in our Arusha diocese. Along with the differences of thinking and acting of the Maasai, I also came to appreciate the different challenges that missionaries intent on bringing a different way of thinking and acting had to contend with in meeting a pre-Christian people. So many different ideas and challenges to meet.

TWENTY-SIX YEARS OF MISSION AMONG THE BORANA, ETHIOPIA

My ten years in Tanzania ended in 1975 when Ned Marchessault, CSSp, and I were recruited to replace some of the Spiritans who had gone to open a new missionary field among the nomadic Borana in southern Ethiopia. Those that had gone to Ethiopia in the first wave had become sick or had left Ethiopia for personal reasons. A whole virgin territory as far as Christianity was concerned. The two of us joined two Dutch Spiritans there, the remainder of the original

team. In contrast to the church in Tanzania which had a long history by the time I went there in 1966, the Borana culture in Ethiopia was a whole new territory as far as the Catholic Church was concerned, and a virtual *tabula rasa* as far as Christian teachings and culture were concerned.

Twenty-six years among the Borana emphasized to me that the western church did not have all the answers to what it means to be Christian, to live the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. As Spiritans we are called to share the Gospel and enable the church to “carry on Christ’s mission to each place in the local church” (SRL, no. 13.). SRL, no. 16 explains a little of what no. 13 states. I quote: “. . . So that the Christian witness may become integrated in the culture . . .” For us, this was virgin territory as far as the Catholic Church or the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth was concerned. As people from another culture and another religious background, we strive in every way for a fruitful coming together of local cultures and religious traditions with the Gospel of Jesus, the Christ. Those who have never deeply experienced another culture cannot appreciate what that means in a pre-Christian setting.



Fr. Stegman back with friends in 2016 for his golden jubilee celebration of priesthood

I remember being present at the preparation for a celebration with the Borana. We had invited the bishop of our diocese for the celebration. He came together with another priest, a Verona Father from Italy who worked in another part of our diocese. The Verona priest accompanied us early in the morning when we went to the kraal where the bull to be slaughtered for the celebration was being prepared. The leader of the village passed his hand over the back of the bull asking God's blessing on the bull and for the ensuing feast. Then he invited all of us missionaries and all the Borana men who were present to pass their hand over the back of the bull to ask the same blessing. We Spiritans followed the others in the tribal blessing custom. The Verona priest was shocked. He later criticized us for following a "pagan" custom. He completely ignored the numerous statements about incorporating Christian teaching with the local culture wherever missionaries were destined to be. Different popes had encouraged such integration and adaptation over the past one hundred years. And of course, he had never heard of Francis Libermann's famous quote to be "African with the Africans in order to bring them to Christ."

Living all those years among the Borana was a constant learning experience for me. Not to disparage or underplay any part of those years, I would say that some of the valuable learning experiences were the following.

1. **Patience.** People who don't have clocks use the sun as their determination of time. So, a morning appointment can mean 6:00 AM for one event or 11:00 AM when I, in my American way of thinking, have been conditioned to expect the meeting to begin at 9:00 AM. There is more than one way to consider time.
2. **Contemplation.** Not having TV or a cell phone for distraction provides a good opportunity for taking the time to think more about whatever life presents at any particular time and in circumstances that I had never before or since lived in.
3. **The Value of Difference.** Being with people who live in radically different conditions than I did for a dwelling place, food, clothing, and a different value system was a great learning experience about what is necessary to live a contented and happy life.
4. **Family.** The ties of community and family were emphasized constantly in daily life. For the Borana, older people live through their children. So, children are fed and cared for extremely well. Their sense of belonging is lived out in their daily tasks, whether it is herding cattle or goats during

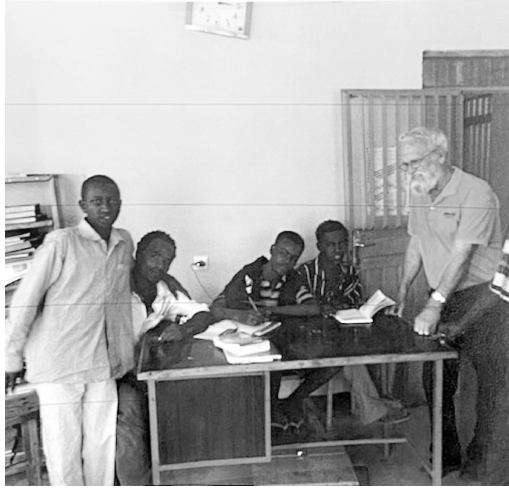
the day or sharing in the stories and tribal values and myths around the fire in the evening. They learned, but I also learned more about myself while comparing my life with theirs. So different from American culture that glorifies individualism carried to the extreme.

BACK TO CAMPUS MINISTRY IN A UNIVERSITY

I left Ethiopia and Africa for the last time in 2011. Being assigned to working in campus ministry at Duquesne University agreed with me. I didn't want to retire and was still healthy enough to do a certain amount of pastoral care. Movements, if I may say so, have developed nationwide, which affect the church as well as the wider community. Black Lives Matter, an effort to finally gain political leverage and social acceptance for people of color, is finally lifting a voice that can be heard. There is activism for civil rights and economic justice that African Americans have not been able to secure over their 400 years on American soil. Police brutality toward people of color is only one exhibition of this racist culture. The LGBTQ appeal for recognition and fair treatment by the church as well as the wider community also cries out for just and humane treatment. Another, and more serious challenge, that the church and the Spiritans have to deal with is climate change and its consequences.

THE MISSION CONTINUES

The above-mentioned items are some of my perceptions of what a Spiritan should be involved with and interested in at this time in history. These are just some of the ways that I feel completely in line with Libermann's and Jesus's commands to help people in whatever circumstances they are. Even the new initiative of the university to open a school for osteopathic medicine has great promise for helping the marginalized, because it will provide medical assistance in rural areas where there are no hospitals and scarce medical services. This follows Libermann's directive to "an apostolate that takes us to those most disadvantaged, as a group and as individuals" (SRL, no. 12). Along with these and others that I've outlined above, I've had the good fortune to become connected to a couple other social action endeavors in the city. These were personal choices for me. And they're in line with Saint John Paul II and his statement to "not be afraid to welcome Christ and accept his power to help the human person and the whole of mankind." Saint John Paul continued his



With students. Spiritans started the first schools
in Boranaland

thought: “Do not be afraid; open wide the doors for Christ. Christ knows what is in man’s heart.”¹

All of the above memories outline my perception of what a Spiritan should be doing at this time in history. They all hold my attention as I move toward a time when I may not be able to be as active as I once was. But I firmly believe that they are in line with Francis Libermann’s advice and our SRL directive to “go to people, groups and individuals who have not yet heard the gospel.” (SRL, 4). As I look at the United States Province I ask myself why we as a province hold back on encountering the challenges of today. Have we truly adapted to the present-day conditions and challenges in today’s church and world? Pope Francis is leading the way in so many areas and activities of society; I wonder if we are being fearful of his call. I have mentioned a few of the needs of today’s society that need pastoral attention. I question if, perhaps, we are too concerned with past ideas and practices and missing the opportunity to move into the future in a constructive and life-giving way.

Vincent G. Stegman, CSSp
Bethel Park

1. Inaugural Sermon of John Paul II, October 22, 1978.

My Story: *Silvio A. D'Ostilio, CSSp*

Father D'Ostilio is ninety-three, and sixty-seven years a priest, currently the most senior Spiritan in the Province. He was provincial superior of the Western Province in the early 1980s

On Sunday, November 30, 1930, the passenger liner, USS Rex dropped anchor at the Port of New York. Who disembarked there among the hundreds of passengers who boarded the ship in Naples, Italy, ten days earlier but two-year-old Silvio and his mother, Elizabeth D'Ostilio. Silvio's father, Joseph D'Ostilio, formed the welcome party with some relatives. And off we went with Uncle Rosario to Branchville, Connecticut.



It was a happy occasion. My mother had lost two small boys, Anthony (seven years old), and Silvio (two years old), to the TB plague ravaging the world at that time. Silvio died first. Anthony asked my mother for another Silvio and so I was born. Anthony died. Shortly after, I also caught the disease. My mother was in despair. Her devotion to St. Anthony of Padua saved her, and according to her, saved me. My brother, Frank, was born in Branchville in 1932, and my sister, Emelia, was born eleven months later, in 1933. Both were baptized in St. Mary's Church in Ridgefield by a Spiritan priest, Fr. Joseph Cassidy, CSSp. We did not remain in Branchville very long but followed Uncle Rosario's family to Bridgeport. There we found lodging close by and both men found work.

Our peaceful living, however, was short-lived, as the friends I made distressed my parents. We moved. What a blessing! As I look back, the consequences were many. A better neighborhood, new friends and, best of all, a new relationship with my family, especially my parents. My father expanded his business of land-

scaping which included me after school and on Saturdays. My mother finally developed the relationship with the Lord that she longed for since coming to this country. I consider that the seed of my vocation was planted in this new soil. I now think of it as a connivance between my parents and the Almighty that I “follow Him.” I did wonder, though, why my parents did not press my brother or sister to accompany them, as they did me. We were in an Italian parish which offered people all kinds of devotions—benediction, missions, novenas etc., all in formal Italian. I understood none of it.

School was not important to me. My parents had little opportunity for schooling in Italy, my mother having gone to the sixth grade, my father to the third. Making a living and feeding a family were more important and urgent. This was the priority, and this was also expected of me. My brother and sister did well in school. They were self-starters, and both applied themselves. They studied, did their homework, passed every grade neatly. I too passed every grade, but not because I worked at it. It was probably because of the IQ scores I achieved. Every year we were given the Iowa Statewide Assessment of Student Progress tests (ISASP). No one ever talked to me about it, but I must have done well. Never did I doubt my ability to think. Never was I encouraged by a teacher. Never did a teacher say “you can do it.” The only special attention I received was from an elderly nun, a sixth-grade teacher, who felt compassion for my poverty and brought me food from her table and sometimes clothing.

First Contacts with the Spiritans

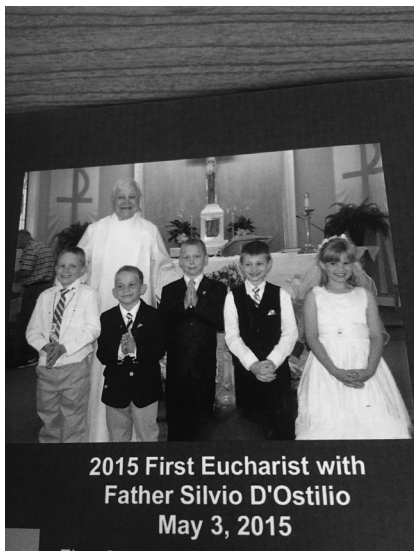
When I was in the seventh grade, a young priest, just ordained, the Spiritan, Joseph Long, CSSp, came to school and gave the class a talk on the missions. He had just been assigned to missionary work in East Africa. I was not familiar with the Holy Ghost Fathers, though their major seminary was in Norwalk, Connecticut, about twenty-three miles from my home. Father Long asked anyone who was interested in the priesthood to meet him outside the classroom. I and five other boys met with him. I had never seriously thought of becoming a priest, never talked about it with my parents. We were invited to the seminary, called St Mary’s Major Seminary or Ferndale, for a retreat. I registered. When I told my parents, they were not surprised. None of us knew what this meant. After a few days a letter arrived from a Fr. Leo Kettl, CSSp, welcoming me to the retreat at Ferndale, advising on how to get there and what to bring. The program made a great impression on me, especially the common prayers and

the singing at benediction, seventy young men strong. I decided to accept Fr. Kettl's invitation to attend the minor seminary at Cornwells Heights, Pennsylvania. I had just completed the seventh grade and was going into the eighth that September. The visit of Fr. Long and my visit to Ferndale might have sealed the case. A couple of obstacles arose, however. The first was from my father. He thought that at twelve years I was still too young to leave home and attend a distant school. I saw the wisdom of that decision. I would attend the ninth grade in the local public school and we would discuss the seminary at the appropriate time. The other problem was more serious. As we approached the end of the school year, eighth grade students had to select the courses they would like to take in high school. Since I was planning to enter the seminary which required college preparatory courses, I selected a pre-college curriculum. Sister did not approve. She did not approve of my going to the seminary, nor did she think that I was capable of doing college work. I was in limbo. I was not approved for college prep work, so had to select common courses like shop, junior business, home economics etc. This caused me to lose all interest in school and I skipped classes weeks at a time. That is, until the truant officer showed up at my home! My mother was working at the time and I had been able to intercept the absentee notices sent by the school.

My parents prudently allowed the situation to work itself out. They both had great faith and trust in divine Providence, and also in me, I suspect. I had a copy of my grammar school records which I was supposed to turn in to the seminary. I contacted Fr. Kettl with information that I was interested. He responded with welcoming information on train travel to the school and instructions on what to bring. I arrived in Cornwells by train in September 1942.

Ordination and Assignments

I was ordained priest on June 3, 1954. My first assignment was to further studies at the Catholic University of America for a doctoral degree in Latin and Greek. The dean of studies' remark to me was, "I am not going to ask you what you think about it." Actually, it was affirming; Catholic University was a good selection for me and my interests. The strength of the school was research and scholarship. After I received the Masters degree and had been accepted to the doctoral program, the dean of studies thought that the Masters was enough and opposed my continuing further. I was then assigned to the *Biblicum* in Rome to study Sacred Scripture. The dean of studies objected because he needed a Latin



teacher for the minor seminary in Ann Arbor, MI. Such is religious life!

But I really was not prepared to teach high school students and would not have chosen this path. I stayed with it for thirteen years because that was what I was sent to do and there was no one who would choose to do it—eight years in the minor seminary and five years at a Catholic high school at Phoenix, Arizona. The year after I left the high school, it closed down—not to plan well is to plan failure.

I do not consider my years in classroom teaching a failure. I enjoyed being

with the students and enjoyed other tasks associated with the school outside the classroom. I played sports with the students, put on plays, counseled many.

Ministering in a parish came quite naturally to me. It was a parish in Bakersfield, California, heavily Mexican, Spanish being the predominant language. I joined four confreres from the Eastern Province for a six-weeks course in Spanish in a Jesuit University in Mexico City. A parishioner, who was a professor at the local branch of the University of California, helped with my Sunday homilies.

Ann Arbor was my first assignment. I asked to study counseling because many of the students came to me for advice. The response was similar to that given by Cardinal Manning of Los Angeles: “Many priests are leaving by degrees.” I asked again when I was at Bakersfield. There were over thirty students in the youth group who attended meetings faithfully and were in need of positive relationships and direction. Praise God that someone on the provincial council saw the point. I received a call from the provincial with permission to attend Loyola University of Los Angeles for a Masters degree in psychology. I was to find my own housing and pay my own tuition. This was a week before classes began! A Spiritan priest at the Bakersfield parish, who was just discharged from the army, told me he was expecting a check from the government and that I could use it for registration and return the money soon to the community. As to a place to live, the brother of Fr. Charles Diamond, CSSp, was pastor of a Los Angeles parish. Because a Spiritan teaching at the diocesan high school was already residing at his place, he suggested I call the neighboring parish. I did.

That pastor was familiar with the Spiritans and respected them. He was pleased to have a Holy Ghost Father reside at St. Mark's parish in Venice, California. Residence and tuition taken care of, thank God. I repaid the loan quickly. I received the MA in Clinical Psychology in June of 1973.

On a trip to Phoenix after graduation, I attended the Silver Jubilee of a local pastor. Several diocesan priests were present, including one whom I knew and who was in charge of Catholic Charities. On learning that I had a degree in psychology, he wanted to meet with me. I told him that I was not looking for a job, but he insisted that I take an application for work "for my files." It was prophetic! For on mentioning this to my provincial, he was immediately interested. "We are looking for a parish in Phoenix," he said. "Would you do this for me?" I began work at Catholic Social Services in September of 1973, as counselor. I enjoyed the work, and after being there a few months, another priest who was employed there said to me: "you are a healer; I am a clinician."

The community retreat in 1975 was memorable for me. It was preached by a Passionist priest, at the time on the staff of CARA, Fr. Cassian Yuhaus, C.P. His theme: planning and the statistical study of all our works. It does not sound exciting or spiritual, but it was. At the end of the retreat, he convinced the province that it needed a provincial planner. I got the job. I began by visiting Fr. Yuhaus at the CARA office and then we met the planning directors at the Maryknoll Seminary. The Maryknoll planning process was very helpful and included the spiritual life of their priests. In fact, one building on their property they call "the Power House." Retired priests who lived there chase a more monastic and contemplative way of life and they supported their active members through prayer.

Unfortunately, that provincial who was very encouraging was succeeded by another. The planning ceased, my attention was diverted to daily routines and to dealing with the resistance among the older confreres who had to experience the new processes and the turmoil after the Vatican Council.

When my term was up, talk began on the two provinces, East and West re-joining. I was appointed head of the planning committee. I began immediately with the planning of the plan and contacted Dr. Mary Gautier of CAPA. We spoke of the process and the basic needs. One of the first things that I learned from Wil Schutz, Ph.D. of University Associates was that organization development without personal growth was a "waste of time." I mentioned this to Dr. Gautier, whose remark was, "If they don't do it now, they will have to do it later." I found out later that the administration had already chosen a consul-

tant, so relations with Dr. Gautier halted. The new consultant was competent, but his field seemed limited. He was more into strategic planning, which is for organizational leaders. He downgraded personal growth and the discussion of spiritual growth. He did, however, heighten the interest in future planning and the merger. The level of interest among the community members increased.

I am now in retirement at Spiritan Hall at Holy Ghost Prep, Bensalem, Philadelphia.

*Silvio A. D'Ostilio, CSSp
Spiritan Hall, Bensalem, Philadelphia*