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Chapter 1. The Holy Spirit and the Future of Spiritan Mission: What is the Spirit Saying to the Spiritans?

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Chapter 1

The Holy Spirit and the Future of Spiritan Mission: What is the Spirit Saying to the Spiritans?

The twenty-first General Chapter of the Spiritans was held for the second time in Africa, outside the Tanzanian town of Bagamoyo. Bagamoyo, though small, is highly charged with missionary significance. French Spiritans from Alsace first landed there from Zanzibar in 1868 and shortly afterwards established a Freedom Village for ransomed slaves. Bagamoyo became the gateway for evangelizing the interior of Tanzania and the rest of East Africa.

Twice postponed because of the COVID pandemic, Bagamoyo II gathered 103 professed Spiritans and Spiritan Lay Associates from the four corners of the globe, who during three packed weeks, attempted to evaluate the past nine years of Spiritan mission and map out the next eight years. The Chapter's theme, "Behold, I Am Doing Something New" (Isaiah 43:19), permeated the discussions in plenary sessions and the sharing in commissions, as delegates sought to follow the Spirit's promptings and identify new pathways for mission. We were challenged to re-think our lifestyles and imagine a different world post-COVID-19, "making all things new," as Isaiah and the Book of Revelation suggest.

It was a "young" and "youthful" Chapter, the youngest of the seven Chapters I have personally attended.¹ Many of the delegates were in their mid-30s and early 40s, with 72 out of 103 participants coming from the southern hemisphere, revealing the vibrant new face of our missionary Congregation and a highly significant shift in the global axis of Christianity. The home base of mission is clearly no longer the Northern Hemisphere. It is the churches of Africa, Asia, and Latin America that are generating the missionaries of the twenty-first century. Bagamoyo 2021 was also an historic Chapter, electing Fr. Alain Mayama

1. 1980 Chevilly-la-rue (Paris); 1986 Chevilly-la-rue; 1992 Itaci (Brazil); 1998 Maynooth (Ireland); 2004 Torre d'Aguilha (Portugal); 2012 Bagamoyo I (Tanzania); 2021 Bagamoyo II.

from Congo-Brazzaville as the first African, and the first non-European, superior general of the Spiritan Congregation in its 318-year long history.



Bagamoyo II Venue, Stella Maris Hotel

The Signs of the Times

Key questions that were repeatedly asked during the Chapter were: What is the Spirit saying to the Congregation in the contemporary world? Which “signs of the times” do we need to discern for mission today? This biblical expression, “signs of the times,” is attributed to Jesus in Matt 16:3 and is a term that has become quite popular in the last sixty years. “Signs of the times” was significantly first used in a theological context by Pope John XXIII in the Papal Bull, *Humanae salutis* (Dec 25, 1961), in which he convened the Second Vatican Council that opened the following year, 1962. The phrase was given a specific theological meaning towards the end of Vatican II in its Pastoral Constitution on The Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et spes* (no. 4). There it refers to identifying those events in history characteristic of an epoch in which a significant change is taking place in the world. While the Council was still in its First Session, Pope John published his Encyclical Letter, *Pacem in terris* (*Peace on Earth*, April 13, 1963) in which the term, “signs of the times,” was used three times. A year later, Pope Paul VI employed the same term in his Encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam* (Aug. 6, 1964), where he spoke of the “signs of the times” as part

of an on-going dialogue between the church and the contemporary world. Pope Francis never tires of urging us to listen to what the Holy Spirit is saying to us in the reality of events happening all around us.

Pope Francis as Spirit-Inspired Sign

It seems opportune to use the expression again now during this third decade of the Third Millennium where Pope Francis seems to have himself become a “sign” of the times in his prophetic style of papal ministry which is so different from that of his immediate predecessors. Pope Francis has stated that this period of transition we are presently living through is not merely an era of change, but an actual change of era.² Moreover, it is not too much to claim that we have witnessed a fresh eruption of the Holy Spirit with the election of this Argentinian, Jorge Bergoglio, as Pope Francis in 2013. His name, Francis, surely, is more than just a name. It represents his vision, agenda, and project for the whole church—humble, poor, open to all—with huge ramifications for Spiritan missionaries. In the nineteenth century, at a time of rampant national Gallicanism in France, Francis Libermann, our second Founder, was well known for his passionate fidelity to the See of Peter and to the Bishop of Rome, especially Pope Gregory XVI and Pope Pius IX. As faithful heirs of Libermann, contemporary Spiritans would do well to demonstrate equal fidelity to the teachings and proposals of Pope Francis as we attempt to elaborate our mission priorities for the near future.

Of course, the future is always *terra incognita*, unknown, but a Chapter has to try to map out a way forward for the Congregation. Of the many themes which emerged during the Chapter’s lively deliberations, I would like to focus briefly on three main orientations which are of paramount importance for the future of Spiritan mission and where it seems to me the Spirit is leading us:

- Pope Francis's Vision for a post-COVID-19 world;
- Becoming a Synodal Church;
- Eco-Justice in the Climate Crisis.

2. Papal Address to Representatives of the Fifth National Conference of the Italian Church. Rome, November 10, 2015.

The Holy Spirit and Courage to be Enlivened by a New Imagination of the Possible

Who can forget that haunting image of Pope Francis on March 27th, 2020, hobbling up the sloping steps towards the Vatican Basilica, through a drizzling wet and empty St. Peter's Square to deliver his remarkable extraordinary and unexpected *Urbi et Orbi* Blessing? On that Friday evening, at the beginning of the pandemic, a lone white figure shimmering in a spotlight spoke words of hope and encouragement to an anxious world. The square was silent, except for the background noise of sirens as ambulances rushed COVID patients to nearby hospitals. That iconic image of Francis standing frail and exposed, small in that vast glistening wet Piazza will stay with us for a long time, the rain dripping down like tears on Christ's face on the medieval crucifix standing near to where the Pope was commending the world to the protection of God. In his homily, Francis said: "For weeks now it has been evening. Thick darkness has gathered over our squares, our streets, and our cities; it has taken over our lives, filling everything with a deafening silence and a distressing void, that stops everything as it passes by [. . .] We find ourselves afraid and lost."



The graves of Spiritan Pioneer Missionaries, Bagamoyo

Pope Francis took his text from Mark's Gospel where Jesus and the disciples, crossing the lake, were caught in a storm with Jesus fast asleep in the boat, his head on a cushion. In March 2020, the whole world was being tossed around by the storm of COVID-19. "We are all in the same boat," the Pope said on that night as the world faced the tempest of the pandemic. But are we? The Pope was soon to realize that we are not all in the same boat—some of us are in luxury yachts, others in massive ocean liners—whilst others are on inflatable dinghies, with some clinging by their fingernails to pieces of floating driftwood. Such is the inequality of the human condition!

At that "global" liturgy Pope Francis invited the world to see the Lockdown as a time to focus on what is truly important and essential—a time, he said, "*to separate what is necessary from what is not [. . .] to identify what we really need from what we don't*"! In the eye of the COVID storm, Pope Francis proved himself to be a fine storm-pilot, a competent navigator showing us a way out through this horrific tempest. This Pope became, as it were, the world's Spiritual Director. Perhaps the only global leader who was seriously looking for ways to help humanity prepare for the COVID aftermath. National leaders were often only thinking of their own countries. Francis was thinking of the whole planet which is seriously ill. Pop stars have famously sung . . . "Feed the World," . . . but Francis is urging, . . . "Heal the World" . . . !

In his most recent writings, Pope Francis is outlining his mission agenda and, effectively proposing a new missiology as he offers a road map out of the global pandemic. He used his weekly audiences in the Vatican during August and September 2020 as occasions to catechize the world, and their content eventually crystallized into his Encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* at the beginning of October 2020, followed by his book *Let Us Dream* at the beginning of December 2020.³ These papal gems contain intuitions and insights that can help Spiritans prepare the future of a post-COVID-19 world. To reclaim our humanity, to regenerate our world after the ravages of COVID-19, Francis is inviting us to imagine a new vision of the possible for a post-pandemic world. In *Fratelli Tutti* and *Let Us Dream* we meet Pope Francis at a depth and a level of intimacy we have never seen before. This is Francis at his most personal, his most profound, his most passionate about mission. But do we Spiritans have the *parrhesía*, the courage, to buy into the vision of the world that Pope Francis is offering?

3. Pope Francis, Encyclical Letter *Fratelli Tutti*: On Fraternity and Social Friendship (Rome: October 3, 2020). Pope Francis (in conversation with Austen Ivereigh), *Let Us Dream: The Path to a Better Future* (London: Simon & Schuster, December 2020).

One Single Human Family

Fratelli Tutti picks up where *Laudato Si'* left off, with Francis stating categorically, “We need to think of ourselves more and more as a single family dwelling in a common home.” [*Fratelli Tutti*, henceforth FT, no. 17]. In this one common home each one of us enjoys equal dignity, equal value, and equal worth with everyone else. The goods of the earth belong to all. No one state, no one group, no one individual has the right to monopolize. If *Laudato Si'* stressed that *everything* is connected, *Fratelli Tutti* stresses that *everyone* is connected because our deepest truth is we belong to each other and constitute one human family!

But Francis must first conscientize us to the reality of the context today in which we are called to mission. In Chapter One of *Fratelli Tutti*, ominously entitled, “Dark Clouds Over a Closed World,” he pulls no punches as he describes a litany of calamities, naming the toxicities and darkneses into which the world has plunged. Sadly, everything in society today seems to be pulling away from the foundational truth that we constitute one single human family, shattering any dreams we may have of unity. Francis identifies the polarization and fragmentation, the viruses of individualism and atomization, the narrow nationalisms and populisms, the racism and xenophobia in our communities that are pulling us away from the truth of co-belonging as one human family. Whether we look at Europe or North America or Africa, each continent is torn apart by opposing factions. Tragically, the same is happening within the church herself as culture wars divide and drive religious communities further apart.

The COVID pandemic has thrown a sharper spotlight on these divisions. The pandemic is a crisis, yes, but a crisis is both a *danger* and an *opportunity*. Pope Francis is insistent that the COVID crisis is an opportunity we must not let slip through our fingers. As he says on page one of *Let Us Dream*, “the basic rule of a crisis is that you don’t come out of it the same. If you get through it, you come out better or worse, but never the same.”

COVID-19 has been undoubtedly an apocalypse, a *revelation* which has shaken us profoundly and has unmasked our vulnerability and many false securities. The virus has revealed a sick world. If this visible pandemic has awakened us to so much reality, what about all the unseen viruses that persist in our society? What about the *hidden* pandemics of hunger, of homelessness, of violence, of racism, of climate change?⁴ Are these not the new mission fields for Spiritans? Pope Francis

4. *Let Us Dream*, page 5.

is urging us to seize this *Kairos* moment and re-imagine the future by dreaming big and dreaming together. We simply cannot go back to “*the way we were*” before the pandemic. Francis prays: “Once this health crisis passes, our worst response would be to plunge even more deeply into feverish consumerism and new forms of egoistic self-preservation. God willing, after all this, we will think no longer in terms of ‘them’ and ‘those,’ but only ‘us’” (FT, no. 35). Against a background of polarization and fragmentation, how do we re-imagine a more relational and unified world for our Common Home? How do we create “An Ever Wider We?”⁵ What contribution can we Spiritans make? Are we open to a new era of missionary creativity and imagination? This is where the Spirit comes in.

The Holy Spirit as Protagonist of *Communio*

Since the time of St. Augustine, the Holy Spirit has always been understood as the bond of mutual love, *communio*, between the Father and the Son. The Spirit constitutes the community of life and love that we are all invited to enter as our ultimate destiny. The Spirit is Love and Gift: “the love of God has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us” (Rom 5:5). Part of the mission of the Holy Spirit on earth is to create *communio* among all God’s creatures.

Pope Francis states that it is precisely love which the world needs most at this present time of polarization and fragmentation. He prophetically and eloquently pleads for a new kind of politics, what he calls “a better kind of politics,” a politics of love, of charity, of social friendship, of kindness, of tenderness.⁶ To counteract the ruptures and fissures in society, we need social poets who can build fraternity and social friendship, social poets who are adept in political love. This is the new kind of missionary of the Holy Spirit that the world and the church is crying out for today! Men and women able to create a “culture of encounter,” of dialogue, of care at all levels: local, regional, national, international, and global.

The core of *Fratelli Tutti* is for the precipice we are standing over at this present moment of world crisis. If anyone doubts the reality of social aggression, simply look at the amount of anger, hatred, and abuse that surface on Twitter and Facebook and other social media platforms. In the twenty-first century we

5. Pope Francis, Message for the 107th World Day of Migrants and Refugees, 2021, *Towards An Ever Wider “We.”*

6. Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, Chap 5, “A Better Kind of Politics.”

may be digitally and technologically close, but we are more alone and lonely than ever before. Despite all our hyper-connectivity, there is little real communication in the world today, even in the church. In February 2021, we human beings put robots on Mars—but we are planets away from the brothers and sisters who live next door to us! Pope Francis's strong words ring true: “We gorged ourselves on networking and lost the taste of fraternity” [FT, no. 33]. When will we ever learn that “No one is saved alone—we can only be saved together” [FT, no. 32]. Against a background of individualism and fragmentation, we need the Spirit to inspire catalysts of *communio* who can lead us towards action that builds up communities of belonging and solidarity, rescuing us from our existential loneliness.

According to both Poullart des Places and Libermann, Jesus of Nazareth is our model for holiness and our paradigm for mission. Yet what did Jesus spend his time and energy doing, but trying to bring people together? *Communio* can be seen to be the goal of every single action of Jesus's ministry. He wants to heal divisions and separations. Look at his miracles: all his miracles are about *relationality*. Jesus's mighty deeds are about restoring people to wholeness, helping them to communicate, to relate, to come together. Jesus wants the older brother to come into the party to sit down at table with his younger brother, the prodigal. Jesus wants the vineyard workers who have worked all day long in the heat of the sun to welcome the ones who come at the 11th hour. Jesus wants the Pharisee to eat with the Publican and the Priest to sit at table with the Prostitute. Jesus's vision is of a community of radical equality and total inclusiveness where no one is left out. Just as Jesus of Nazareth's project, agenda and program was *communio*, so too for us Spiritans *communio* must be the project, agenda, and program of our future mission.

Creating *communio*, building bridges between peoples, not walls, is what our ministry is about. The word “*walls*” appears fourteen times in *Fratelli Tutti* as a symbol of the human temptation to shut ourselves off from the needs of others so that we can remain in “cool comfortable indifference.” Pope Francis urges us “to reject a culture of walls [. . .] to resist the temptation to raise walls in the heart, walls on land [. . .] Whoever builds a wall ends up as slaves within the wall, with no horizon to look out upon” (FT, no. 27). We have to shatter this culture of walls by building bridges. Pope Francis talks about bridges over and over again, to reach out to the “other” and “others.” The word “*others*” is probably the single most recurring word in *Fratelli Tutti*. As Spiritans our concern is not to deepen the culture wars but to embrace the vocation of building bridges by cancelling

out the distance and embracing the otherness of the other. The Holy Spirit is inviting us to become experts in the art of Encounter. Our mission as Spiritans in a post-COVID world is to be, like Jesus, catalysts of *communio*, builders of bridges, weavers of dialogue and fraternity in a highly fractured society.⁷



Bagamoyo II, Chapter Delegates at Work

The Holy Spirit as Protagonist of Synodality

In this change of era we are living through, *synodality* has emerged undoubtedly as one of the most characteristic signs of our times. Though it has become a buzzword in the church and a key marker of Francis's pontificate, synodality is not just a fad or a passing trend. As our Chapter was unfolding in Bagamoyo in October 2021, Pope Francis himself was inviting the whole universal church to embark on a process of synodality, beginning with consultation in every diocese and ending with the Synod of Bishops in Rome in October 2023, entitled *For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission*.

The Spiritan Chapter itself turned out to be a classic exercise of synodality in action. In the lively debates and discussions, by listening *with* and *to* one another, the delegates engaged in a process of communal discernment, trying

7. "Weavers of Dialogue and Brotherhood": Pope Francis's Homily at the Final Mass in Slovakia, September 15, 2021.

to agree on common goals and plans of action, attempting to discover what the Holy Spirit is saying to the Congregation today, and where the Spirit will be leading us to mission in the immediate future. The participants had many signposts helping chart the course along the way—our Spiritan Founders, the *Spiritan Rule of Life*, the Spiritan tradition, the superior general and his council's 2021 Report, the *Instrumentum Laboris*, all the preparatory documentation—but the navigational tool, the compass indicating the direction was without question the Holy Spirit of God.

It is well known that the word “synod” comes from the two Greek words “*syn*” meaning “with” and “*hodos*” meaning “path, way, or road.” Etymologically, *synod* and *synodality* imply “being together on a journey, walking together on the same path.” As missionary disciples in a pilgrim church, we are all on the way and followers of *the Way* who is Jesus of Nazareth himself. A Synod is never static or sedentary, it is dynamic. Not just walking in the same direction, but listening deeply to one another, sharing together, above all, *praying* together, sharing silence, and adoring together. There can be no synodality without spirituality, for the synodal process is essentially a spiritual discernment attempting to capture the whispers of the Spirit.

The Pope's emphasis on synods as something fundamentally different from secular legislative assemblies is crystal clear: a synod does not follow the dynamics of democracy where majority votes clinch the deal, nor is it a homely parlor for cosy chats! It is not just another meeting to reach a consensus or an assembly or a gathering or a one-off event. It is the actual *way* of being church. “The Synod is a protected space in which the church experiences the action of the Holy Spirit [. . .] for the Spirit is always the primary actor of a Synod.”⁸

On October 17, 2015, in Rome, halfway through the Second Synod of Bishops on the Family, in a speech marking the Fiftieth Anniversary of Pope Paul VI's original creation of the Synod of Bishops in 1965,⁹ Pope Francis spoke revealingly of his desire for a Synodal Church:

From the beginning of my ministry as Bishop of Rome, I sought to enhance the Synod, which is one of the most precious legacies of the Second Vatican Council. We must continue along this path [. . .] It is precisely this path of *synodality* which God expects of the church of the third millennium [. . .]

8. Pope Francis, Opening Speech of the 2015 Synod on the Family, October 5, 2015.

9. A speech which could rightly be called the “Magna Carta” of synodality.

A Synodal Church is a church which listens, which realizes that listening is more than simply hearing. It is a mutual listening in which everyone has something to learn. The faithful people, the College of Bishops, the Bishop of Rome: all listening to each other, and all listening to the Holy Spirit, the “Spirit of truth” (John 14:17), in order to know what the Spirit “is saying to the Churches” (Rev 2:7) . . .

Synodality is a constitutive element of the church.

And then, using a dramatic image, in stark contrast to the classic pre-Vatican II image of the church, Francis in the same speech stated:

But in this church, as in an inverted pyramid, the top is located beneath the base. Consequently, those who exercise authority are called “ministers,” because, in the original meaning of the word they are the least of all.¹⁰

This “inverted-pyramid” model of church is a revolutionary paradigm shift for the Catholic Church. Before Vatican II we were used to thinking of the church as a kind of pyramid. At the top were the Pope, the Cardinals, the Roman Curia, the Archbishops, the Bishops, the Priests, the Deacons—each of them in charge, each of them presiding, teaching, sanctifying, and governing, possessed of authority and power (and all of them men!) Then came the Religious—first, the Brothers, and next, the Sisters. Then, at the very bottom of the pyramid came the Laity, the Christian Lay Faithful, passive recipients who seemed to occupy a clearly secondary and inferior place.

A Primacy of Listening

Yet, Pope Francis, following the Second Vatican Council’s *Lumen gentium* and *Gaudium et spes*, works out of a very different vision of church; his is a *synodal, collegial* church. The focus is on the entire People of God. Pope Francis’s style of primacy is a primacy of listening that works from the bottom up and envisions a “listening primacy” within relationships with other Bishops (collegiality) and with all the People of God. Pope, Bishops, and Laity sharing in a circular

10. Pope Francis, Address at the Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops, October 17, 2015.

“interdependence” is rooted in the mystery of the Trinity, in a church operating through mutual discerning in which everyone has something to learn. The aim of this synodal inversion or conversion is to retrieve the style of the Early church that was a synodal church in which no one decided alone (e.g., the Council of Jerusalem: “it is the decision of the Holy Spirit and us,” Acts 15:28). We are being called to create a “Listening Church,” leaving behind a pattern of competition and entering a pattern of cooperation and circularity.

The core of Pope Francis's vision of synodality is captured in his three key-words for the Synod: *communion*, *participation*, and *mission*. Each of these words is identified specifically with the work of the Holy Spirit. It is the Spirit who creates communion; the Spirit who empowers participation, and the Spirit who drives us to mission. And when a Pope, the Bishop of Rome, the Vicar of Christ says that “synodality is the path which God expects of the church in this millennium and that synodality is constitutive of church,” we believe he is inspired by the same Spirit.

Francis wants a church that is entirely synodal at all levels—not just *some* of the Bishops and the Pope *some* of the time—but *all of the church, all of the time!* Francis spells out very clearly what he thinks is required for the twenty-first century—a synodal church, a journeying together in *communio*, with a sound de-centralization in which there is free and open debate and consultation. Pope Francis wants every voice to be heard and invites us all to come up with bold and creative ways, while listening with humility and with an open heart to all others. In other words: speak boldly and listen attentively!

Synodality is not a process to reform the Roman Curia or to change ecclesiastical structures; *it is the new way of being church in the Third Millennium*. It is the key to a church that is more participatory and dialogical, more merciful and listening, with greater involvement of people at the local level and the periphery. If the *sensus fidei*, highlighted in *Lumen gentium* 12, pertains to *all* the faithful, then the church has much to learn from the experience of its skeptical and alienated members, its disillusioned youth, the separated and divorced, the LGBTQIA+ community. Many Catholics have left the church behind and in some cases feel ignored, excluded or forgotten. A synod is not just for the saved. Everyone’s voice needs to be listened to. Passionately convinced that the Spirit is present, and active among the whole People of God, we Spiritans need to implore the Holy Spirit, first of all for the gift of listening for ourselves so as to listen to those on the edges—to listen to God, so that *with* God we can

hear the cry of his people, the cry of the poor and the cry of the earth. We need to learn to listen together in community and discern the ever-new horizon the Spirit is opening up for us.

What Part do Spiritans have to play in building up a Synodal Church?

The Spirit is surely asking Spiritans in the 2020s to embed synodality into our own Congregation, inviting us in the coming years to embark on a time of prayer, discernment, and listening that is much more than simply hearing. Spiritans can be bridges between bishops and layfolk, raising awareness of synodal processes and finding new and creative ways of fostering synodality. We are to live our identity as agents of communion, renewal, and mission. As men and women of prayer, we can promote the synodal process as a spiritual experience.

As religious missionaries, through our experience of community life and discernment lived as “a common listening of the Spirit,” we have an essential role to play in promoting synodality among those we minister to, forming lay people and other pastors in discernment and synodality for the future vitality of the church. As a strategic thinker, Pope Francis knows that processes yield more lasting results than quick political gains. The challenge is for Spiritans to translate synodality into practice.

Climate Action is Mission—Ecology is at the Core of Mission Today

“A thundering Wake-Up Call” and “a Code Red warning for humanity!” was how the UN Secretary General, António Guterres, on September 21, 2021, described the latest Report from the Inter-Governmental Panel on Climate Change [IPCC]. The Chapter ended just days before COP26, the United Nations Climate Summit, began in Glasgow, where 30,000 delegates from 197 countries met to tackle the climate emergency. Sandwiched between these two ecological landmarks, how could the Chapter not be imbued with a sense of overwhelming urgency about the devastating climate crisis. The Chapter’s motto, “Behold, I Am Doing Something New” certainly came into its own here; never before had any Spiritan Chapter devoted so much time and energy to discussing the themes of environment and ecology.

There is no doubt at all that the climate emergency is one of the most pressing signs of the present times; in fact, the climate crisis is the major global issue of the present age. What is new, though, is the realization that climate action belongs to the *core* of mission! Never until now has ecology played a major role in missiology. But when it comes to mission, climate action cannot be peripheral, detached, or optional. It is an integral dimension of mission, indeed, it now belongs at its core. We human beings only have one planet and its very survival is being threatened as never before. Up to recently we have been used to talking about “climate change.” It is no longer simply climate *change*, rather climate *emergency*, even climate *catastrophe*. Time is running out; “There is no planet B”!

Since the 1990s it has been widely accepted that the promotion of Justice, Peace, and the Integrity of Creation [JPIC] are integral dimensions of our mission. But in practice our Spiritan JPIC ministries focus and energy have been far more on Justice and Peace issues and much less on Integrity of Creation! We have invested far more in development projects than in protecting the planet. The Spiritan General Chapter woke us up to realize that climate action is not additional to mission, but intrinsic to it.

For many years now, we have been aware that mission begins in the heart of the Trinity. That it is not the church’s mission or any religious Congregation’s mission, but God’s mission, *missio Dei*. Mission, in essence, is not about us going out and saving people, but God’s overflowing love creating and saving humanity and the whole world, with us participating in that flow. We co-operate in God’s active ongoing creation and that requires both individual action as well as collective action to bring about systemic, structural change to save our wounded planet.

The Creator Spirit and Eco-Justice

The Holy Spirit, the “Breath of Life,” is the creative “Lord and Giver of Life,” who breathes life into our exuberant, evolving universe. This vivifying Spirit “blows where it wills” (John 3:8) and is at play everywhere in the stunning diversity of the natural world, “renewing the face of the Earth,” ceaselessly luring creation onwards and upwards. It is to be welcomed that at this time of crisis through humanly caused climate change, global warming and environmental devastation, theologians are developing an ecological theology of the Holy Spirit

which at last does justice to the role of the Spirit, not just in creating the cosmos, but in sustaining and conserving the life of our beautiful, yet fragile planet. The Creator Spirit is surely directing all of us today in the church, and, especially all Spiritans, to respond to the challenge to love in a new key, calling for responsible, compassionate care of our common home, the Earth, as Pope Francis pleads for in *Laudato Si'*, significantly, signed on Pentecost Sunday, May 24, 2015.

At the heart of *Laudato Si'* (henceforth, LS) is Pope Francis's appeal for an "Integral Ecology." What the planet is experiencing is not two separate crises: one environmental and one social, but one single complex crisis which demands an integrated approach (LS, no. 139). "Our relationship with the environment can never be isolated from our relationship with others and with God. Otherwise, it would be nothing more than romantic individualism dressed up in ecological garb" (LS, no. 119). The human environment and the natural environment deteriorate together; we cannot adequately combat environmental degradation unless we attend to causes related to human and social degradation (LS, no. 48). We cannot address the climate crisis without addressing questions of poverty, justice, and fairness.

Ecological Conversion

Pope Francis is right: "There can be no renewal of our relationship with nature without a renewal of humanity itself. There can be no ecology without an adequate anthropology" (LS, no. 118). Protecting, caring for, and healing the Earth is primarily about protecting, caring for, and healing humanity. In his trenchant critique of the technocratic paradigm, Francis uses several strong adjectives—*misguided, excessive, distorted, tyrannical*—as he laments the faulty kinds of anthropocentrism that human beings have adopted vis-à-vis the Earth (LS, no. 116–119). Addicted to compulsive consumerism (LS, no. 203), immersed in a "throw-away culture" (LS, no. 22), treating the excluded as discarded trash (LS, no. 22), turning our common home into "an immense pile of filth" (LS, no. 21), more than ever before do we need to undergo an "ecological conversion" (LS, no. 216). Quoting Emeritus Pope Benedict XVI, Pope Francis says: "The external deserts in the world are growing, because the internal deserts have become so vast", (LS, no. 217) therefore, we need develop an *ecological spirituality* based on the ecological virtues: respect, reverence, restraint, gratitude, wonder, appreciation, temperance, moderation, sobriety—in

a word, we need to cultivate an ecological *asceticism*. The energy at the center of this spirituality is God's creative Spirit, still filling the universe, still making all things new (Rev 21:5).

Sustaining a Culture of Care

The ever-increasing number of eco-refugees indicates that climate is replacing conflict and war as a formidable cause of humanitarian catastrophes through severe weather events, demonstrating that the hardest hit are always the vulnerable and poorest populations whose lifestyles contribute the least to climate change. Numerous environmental disasters witnessed in recent years are clear consequences of humanly induced climate change. Extreme meteorological events, such as heat waves, droughts, wildfires, and floods, melting polar icecaps and rising sea-levels tragically have the greatest impact on the most vulnerable amongst us, the poor countries of the South. Thus, as we damage our planet we also ruin the lives of poor and vulnerable people and their communities.

To disregard the body of evidence on humanly induced climate change is to risk settling for what Pope Francis describes as a "globalization of indifference" (LS, no. 53). We Spiritans are asked to combat the culture of indifference by cultivating a *culture of care*. As heirs of Libermann we must "make ourselves the advocates and defenders of the weakest and poorest." But is not planet Earth herself today the poorest and most abandoned of God's creatures? We must listen to both the cry of the poor and the cry of the earth. Commitment to climate justice can no longer be an optional or secondary aspect of our Spiritan mission. Eco-justice belongs now to the definition of our mission. As *Laudato Si'* reassures us, we can all make a difference.¹¹ No action is too small—we can all become protagonists of "small everyday things," and "small gestures of mutual care," that are concrete instances of civic, social, and political love building up a "culture of care" and a "civilization of love" (LS, no. 230–231).

What do we need to do individually and collectively? We need action to lessen the impact that we have upon the climate by reducing our own carbon footprint, by reducing pollution and the use of fossil fuels, by cutting greenhouse gasses which are heating up the planet, by switching to renewable sources of energy (e.g. solar panels, wind power), reducing high-carbon transport use such as flying,

11. As Greta Thunberg famously said: "I've learnt that no one is too small to make a difference"; Greta Thunberg, *No One is Too Small to Make a Difference* (London: Penguin, 2019) 14.

turning off lights, not wasting water, recycling correctly, etc. As a Congregation, we have considerable influence and clout. Collectively, we can be involved in prophetic activism to bring about structural change, by lobbying local authorities to become more “green,” by conscientizing the alumni of our universities, colleges, schools, and members of our parishes and by collaborating with NGOs etc. Together we can create a healthier planet and protect our common home.

Conclusion

Mentioned several times in the General Chapter were the notions of the “new poor,” the “new poverties,” the “new peripheries” in need of evangelization in this epochal shift of era we are living through. If mission for so many generations meant the geographical expansion and implanting of the church outside of the North and the West by religious men and women from Europe and North America working for the salvation of souls in the global South (Africa, Asia, Latin America), since the Second Vatican Council this no longer is the dominant understanding of mission.

Where are these new peripheries that the Spirit might be calling Spiritans to today? The center of gravity of mission has clearly shifted—with many from the South now ministering in the North; the rural has also given way to mission in the new urban conglomerates and sprawling megapolises. New arenas of mission have opened up: the world of migrants, refugees, asylum seekers; the world of youth; the world of social media and tele-communications, the world of IT and the digital revolution, the world of technology and scientific research, the world of culture, journalism and politics, all a veritable new “Areopagus” (cf. *Redemptoris missio*, no. 37.) The exploited and wounded earth itself is a new locus of mission! It will take at least the same amount of courage and skill to engage with these new arenas of mission as it did for our missionary ancestors, the pioneers, to face the challenges of the classic mission fields.

The Holy Spirit is inviting us to be adventurous and courageous, imaginative, and creative as we identify the new paradigms of mission in the Third Millennium. Pope Francis has asked for Spirit-filled evangelizers who have the courage (*parrhesia*) to leave the safety of the shore, the port and the harbor to reach out to the deep, to go to the geographical and the existential peripheries, risk standing out at the crossroads, get mud on their shoes and smell of the sheep, out on the streets ministering to people where they are at, in a church that is forever going forth, *una Chiesa in uscita!* (*Evangelii gaudium*, 24–49.)

Alongside the traditional mission fields, the Spirit is leading Spiritans today to minister with victims of criminal gangs who specialize in human trafficking, creating a modern slave trade in children, women, and men of all ages; with the increasing number of refugees, migrants, and asylum seekers; with the sick in hospital, with people with mental health challenges; with prisoners in jail. Others will engage in an inclusive ministry to the LGBTQIA+ community with a special concern for “Trans” people, remembering that Pope Francis says God’s style always has three elements: closeness, compassion, and tenderness.

The Spirit is not calling Spiritans to multiply pious words, but to commit to heal the wounds of humanity and our fragile planet emerging from a global pandemic. The Spiritan of the future will be, above all, a catalyst of *communio*, a weaver of dialogue and fraternity, personal, relational, inclusive, always ministering at the peripheries, a facilitator of synodality, collaborating with lay women and men as equal partners in mission, committed to listening to all others as a promotor of a synodal way of being church, an eco-warrior who fights for eco-justice, on mission to the poorest and most abandoned, always joyfully communicating to them the Good News of Jesus Christ, the inclusive, unconditional love of God.

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Their divine Master is sending them to the poorest of people.
Therefore, they will only take on missions amongst the most neglected
and abandoned

Spiritan Anthology, 1, 487. *Provisional Rule*, ND X, 450–569.