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## Chapter 10. Evolving Models of Mission: Dayton, Ohio

Francis Tandoh C.S.Sp.

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## Chapter 10

### **Evolving Models of Mission: Dayton, Ohio**

. . . to discern into Spiritan Spirituality, it is not enough to look at what our rules say that we ought to do nor solely what our founders have written. Above all, one should try to discover what really has been and is the driving force of both founders and followers. It seems to me that our best lived Spirituality can be best described as an Evangelical availability. Which remains attentive to the Holy Spirit manifesting himself in the concrete situation of life . . .<sup>1</sup>

I discuss the evolving nature of the Spiritan mission from the perspective of my experience in Dayton, Ohio and my general understanding of the Spiritan mission in the United States today. For over 300 years the Spiritan mission has evolved and will continue to move with the “signs of the times” under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The dynamic nature of the Spiritan mission, as Koren describes in the quote above, is due to evangelical availability. Spiritan life and mission is lived under the direction of the Holy Spirit who manifests himself in the concrete situations of life.

In this same Spirit, members of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit in the United States have been ministering to the poor for nearly 150 years. For example, the early US Spiritans identified themselves with, and worked among, the poor immigrants from various European countries, also among the African American community, who at the time were treated as second class citizens. Historically, Spiritans have never shied away from serving the poor. Hence, we must constantly deal with the dynamic of identifying who are the poor at any moment in history. This search is what brought the three circumscriptions of North America together in October 2011. The aim was for the three provinces to dream together and ask themselves this important question: what would the Spiritan mission look like today if Spiritans were to be newly arrived in North America in the second decade of the twenty-first century?

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1. Henry J. Koren, *Essays on the Spiritan Charism and on Spiritan History* (1990).

After the provinces of Canada, Trans-Canada, and the United States had collaborated for about five years, forty professed and Lay Spiritans from these provinces gathered in Granby, from August 14–19, 2016 to seek answers to this question. Under the theme “Beyond Borders: A Time to Dream Together,” the group shared the stories and hopes of the three provinces and sought to forge a path towards a more collaborative future in response to the “signs of the times” and guided by the promptings of the Holy Spirit. This gathering is what gave birth to a new way of doing mission in North America that is often referred to as Spiritans Beyond Borders or SBB.

The participants left Granby at the end of the meeting but did not leave this deeply important question behind. Instead, they returned to their various provinces still reflecting and exploring how to better live our Spiritan charism in North America in the twenty-first century. As such reflection continues, the Granby team came up with a mission statement:

We believe that we have inherited a legacy of faith, witness, and dedication of Spiritans who have gone before us. This legacy can be carried into and inspire a new future.”<sup>2</sup>

Back in the United States, the provincial team organized regional group discussions that focused on the themes that emerged from the gathering in Granby. Ultimately, the 2018 Chapter of the United States Province chose to embrace and discuss the major themes that emerged from the ongoing reflections. At that Chapter, there was a strong desire from members to do mission in community and to look at the “signs of the times.” Members challenged the incoming leadership to initiate and model a way of living the Spiritan mission that is committed to the following:

1. Creating inclusive communities rooted in our common *baptismal* consecration to give witness as faith communities of “radical welcome” that integrate Professed and Lay Spiritans in common mission (*US Province Chapter Documents*, 2018—henceforth *CD*).

2. Giving witness to the Gospel as embodied in our Spiritan spirituality and charism, forming multidimensional, extended communities with those whom we serve (*CD*, 2018).

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2. Spiritans Beyond Borders Document, *SPARC* (2016: Unpublished) no. 4.

3. Promoting structures of solidarity, that support individuals and communities, in the forms of financial, material, technical and cultural assistance, especially in our inner-city ministries (CD 2018).



## **The SPARC Model**

Out of this discussion emerged the *Spiritan Alliance for the Renewal of Communities* (SPARC). Seeking to be broadly inclusive and multidimensional, this model moves us towards our desire to dream and work together. The SPARC model is a team comprised of Professed and Lay Spiritans and Spiritan volunteers who work with local community organizations that have a clear commitment to responding to the pastoral needs of community members as a source of hope and renewal.

In July 2019, the Spiritan pastors of regions one and two in Dayton, Ohio came to live together under the same roof at Gramont Avenue, the former Resurrection Parish Rectory, with a third person becoming the chaplain moderator of the Hispanic ministry. Prior to this, each Spiritan working in the Dayton area stayed in the rectory of their respective churches. In the current model, however, all Spiritans in the region now live together but each confrère goes to work at his specific place of assignment or ministry. At the end of each day, we all return to the Gramont Avenue Rectory, where we pray together, share meals, and tell stories of our ministry. This is where we call our home. With this model, we evangelize the Northwest, East, and Southwest sides of Dayton. We also run a grade school, called St. Benedict Catholic School. The

SPARC model helps us maintain a visible Spiritan presence in the Dayton area through community life and work.

We held a meeting in January 2020 to review our brief stay together and discuss how best we could make this model work. It was decided at this meeting that we needed more hands, especially lay people who understand our ministry to partner and work with us. So far, we have started recruiting people in our parishes and ministry as Spiritan Friends. Prior to this, I had established a group called the Holy Spirit Prayer Group, who met every Monday to pray the holy Rosary and other prayers for the sick and the intentions of the parishioners. Some members of this group have freely joined us as Spiritan Friends. As a result, we now have more than eighteen Spiritan Friends who are interested in doing ministry with us and sharing our charism. Members of the group have since been participating in the North American Reflection Day each month. The group holds monthly meetings as well.

The following are areas the group has identified as priority ministries they would like to be involved in: educational literacy, tutoring young students, English language fluency, immigrants/refugees, food pantry/soup kitchen ministry, and service to seniors. These programs are still at the early stages of planning, but we hope to be able to come up with strategies to coordinate and execute them properly. Members are from five parishes/seven worship locations. The group is also uniquely diverse—Hispanics, African Americans, Caucasians—they are both urban and rural. Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic has delayed many of our plans. That notwithstanding, we took advantage of zoom, which allowed the group here to commune with other lay Spiritans, Associates and Friends around the States and North America. They have been inspired by that.

Based on my experience in Dayton so far, I can happily state that the SPARC model is gradually fulfilling its purpose of building a broadly inclusive and multi-dimensional Spiritan mission. This model is more inclusive. At Dayton, we now have the foundation of a team composed of Professed and Spiritan Friends working with local community organizations that have a clear commitment to responding to the pastoral needs of community. Ministry should not be the same old sacramental worship that is confined to the parishes and environs, but one that can reach out to the streets and become sacramental to the larger community, where the parish finds itself. Our mission must be a source of hope and renewal for all.

The benefits of the SPARC model cannot be overemphasized. Doing ministry in community offers both spiritual and moral support for each member of the community. The inspiration received from the Lay Spiritans (Friends) is equally invaluable.



It is always good to know that someone has your back, and you are not in it alone. There is no better feeling than to be working with a group of lay people, religious, and priests, knowing that they share the same charism and understanding.

The SPARC model is also being tested at Hazelwood and Baltimore. Fr. Daniel Walsh works in the parish grouping under St. Paul Cathedral, but lives in the Rectory of St. Stephen with our confrères studying at Duquesne. They collaborate with the already established Lay Spiritans in ministering to the poor in and around Hazelwood, near Pittsburgh. In Baltimore there is the hope of another SPARC with two confrères to run two parishes attending to the needs of the homeless and street persons. Hopefully, Detroit and Hemet can establish such ministries, within their “normal” parish ministry.

I must point out in my conclusion that the SPARC model does not mean our community is perfect and without challenges. However, as imperfect as our community may be, SPARC is the direction to which the Holy Spirit is pointing us today. Community life is an important part of who we are. Hence, we need to continue to build strong communities that will drive our ministries instead of relying solely on the efforts of individuals. As Pope Francis writes in his encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti*, “Goodness, together with love, justice and solidarity, are not achieved once and for all; they have to be realized each day.”<sup>3</sup> The dream of SPARC cannot be achieved once and for all; we must all make a daily effort to dream and work together.

*Francis Tandob, CSSp  
Dayton, Ohio*

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3. Pope Francis, Encyclical Letter *Fratelli Tutti* On Fraternity and Social Friendship (Vatican: October 3, 2020) no. 11.