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What Made the Spiritans Different?: Historical Reflections from des Places to Libermann

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What Made the Spiritans Different?: Historical Reflections from des Places to Libermann

INTRODUCTION

A historian is perhaps the wrong person to ask what is different about the Spiritans. By training and methodology, we are more comfortable tracing sometimes obscure lines of influence and continuity than reckoning with innovation and novelty. But this kind of historical exercise is still valuable for at least a couple of reasons. First, looking at context and precedent is a necessary precondition for discerning what is new and different. And more interestingly, organizations, like human beings, generally get their individuality not from a radical break with the past but by the way they combine the vast pre-existing diversity of their genetic and cultural heritage. Chance, circumstance, and conscious choice led the early Spiritans to particular organizational and conceptual models, which in turn came together to shape the mission, structure, and spirit of the emerging organization. The roots of this process go back as far as one cares to look, and it naturally has continued down to the present; here, I will stick mainly, on the one hand, to the context of a long seventeenth century, what the French call the "century of saints," and, on the other, to the development of the Spiritans in their earliest foundation and then to the implications of their heritage through the old regime and the restored monarchy to 1848.

SOME HISTORICAL CONTEXT

By 1700, when Claude Poullart des Places began contemplating his new initiative, the range of possible models was truly enormous. Still, it is possible to sketch out briefly the general possibilities that would have occurred to the early Spiritans, how they positioned themselves within those parameters, and what they and their contemporaries saw as unique in their decisions. The monastic model that lay at the foundation of regular life in the Roman Catholic Church emerged in the late fifth and early sixth century.[1] The pattern of relatively autonomous and self-sufficient, usually agriculturally based communities governed by written rules and a limited

1. See for example the classic overview in R. W. Southern, *Western Society and the Church in the Middle Ages*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970, 214-99.

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internal democracy under the guidance of an abbot crystalized as the Western Roman Empire went through its death throes. That pattern was not unique to the Italian monasteries associated with the name of Benedict of Nurcia, though the Benedictine version quickly came to dominate—but it responded perfectly to historical circumstances.[2] In the context of rapidly decaying cultural, political, and economic infrastructure where chaos and brutality were the order of the day such communities could be set up anywhere, function with minimal support, and preserve ideals not just of humility and charity but of literacy and civic community that were imperiled outside the monastery walls. Five hundred years later, as security, population, and prosperity very slowly began to return, the Benedictine model underwent a kind of radiation, diversifying in internal organization and spiritual emphasis while experimenting with more centralized, pan-European organizations like the Cluniacs and Premonstratensians.

The twelfth century saw more radical experiments, culminating in the foundation of the mendicant orders (above all the Dominicans and Franciscans). More centralized, less cloistered, and more oriented towards pastoral action than their predecessors, they produced the spiritual directors, educators, and, less happily, inquisitors that an increasingly complex, devout, and tightly governed society demanded. Partly because of a backlash to this burst of creativity and partly due to the period of economic and demographic decline that set in during the fourteenth century, foundations in the last centuries of the Middle Ages were generally variations on or reforms of existing orders, but the Renaissance and the crisis of the Protestant Reformation changed that pattern again. Very broadly, regular groups founded in the shadow of the Council of Trent followed the mendicant line of centralization, pastoral emphasis, and diversification, but (usually) without their distinctive emphasis on radical poverty. Of the new orders and congregations of the sixteenth century, of course, none was nearly as influential, certainly for the Spiritans, as the Society of Jesus.

The Jesuits, who (particularly in their own minds) became for a while nearly synonymous with Tridentine Catholicism, need lit-

2. Henry Koren, "Four Religious Rebels," in idem, *Essays on the Spiritan Charism and on Spiritan History*. Bethel Park, Penn., Spiritus Press, 1990, 35-70, provides an interesting reflection on des Places and Libermann in the context of Benedict, Francis, and Ignatius (though I count five rebels there). This little volume is generally highly germane to our topic.

tle introduction. Formally, they were distinguished by their "fourth vow" to be available for any assignment at the discretion of the pope. Skeptics of the Society were not entirely wrong to see in that vow a sign of even deeper centralization and a commitment (never as absolute as many thought) to ultramontanist ecclesiology and theology; but it also reflected something more diffuse in their practice and circumstances. Their willingness to undertake almost any pastoral task, including basic work of preaching, catechetics, and missionary work in underserved rural areas, quickly became a basic characteristic of the Society. Consistent with their origins as a group of university students, the great emphasis placed by their rule on educational formation, and the explosion in European higher education brought about by confessional competition, economic expansion, and transformations of elite culture, the Jesuits soon made their name as scholars and educators; by the early seventeenth century they were running an unparalleled network of colleges and universities aimed primarily at providing a general education to the Catholic laity.[3]

The Jesuits soon made their name as scholars and educators; by the early seventeenth century they were ... providing a general education to the Catholic laity.

The other field to which popes called the Jesuits was the overseas missions. Missionary work had been a specialty of regular orders since the sixth century, benefitting from the portability of the monastic model, relatively high cultural achievement, and the practical and charismatic advantages of monastic discipline and asceticism. The newly global reach of European power and commerce and the rise of Catholic confessional states, though, meant that, even when it did not take place within the bounds of European overseas empires, missionary work involved close coordination not just with the papacy but with various European governments. The Jesuits developed particularly close relations with Portugal and, when France opened up a presence in North America, the Jesuits took on the role of missionaries to the indigenous peoples there.

SEVENTEENTH CENTURY FRENCH CATHOLICISM AND MISSIONS

New France was an interesting microcosm of the seventeenth-century French Catholicism that shaped the early Spiritans. While Jesuits brought over from the colleges of the Old World sought converts among the First Nations, the growing French-American population was in principle to be cared for by the secular clergy, which was

3. The standard work on the early development of the Jesuit mission is John O'Malley, *The First Jesuits*. Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1993.

likewise to benefit from the Tridentine revolution in higher education. Thus, in 1663 the very aristocratic vicar-apostolic in New France, François de Montmorency-Laval, founded a seminary for the not-yet diocese of Québec (it would gain that status in 1674). Like many such enterprises in the seventeenth-century French world it was underfunded and concentrated more on providing professional formation and a kind of community structure to the existing clergy than on educating the not-yet-ordained. Given the special conditions of North America, Laval also linked the seminary with another project with which he was involved, back in Paris: the new *Séminaire des missions étrangères* (Seminary for Foreign Missions), created with a somewhat anomalous canonical status by a consortium of French vicars-apostolic. Its primary purpose was to prepare priests for missions in Indochina and other parts of Asia on behalf of the closely-connected *Société des missions étrangères* (Society for Foreign Missions), but it took on other roles as well.[4] That marriage proved less than entirely happy; Laval's successors were frequently at odds with their seminary, which they accused of undermining episcopal authority and of not doing enough to promote pastoral work in the (numerous) inhospitable areas of French Canada.[5] To supplement those supposed faults, they turned to a similar though slightly newer Parisian foundation, the Seminary of the Holy Spirit, at one point even considering turning over the oversight of the Quebec Seminary to it.[6] But that is to get ahead of our story.

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Generally, projects designed either to provide Christian education to the disadvantaged in the French world or to prepare people for that ministry proliferated in the seventeenth century.[7] While French participation in overseas evangelization grew slowly alongside the kingdom's commercial and colonial ventures, France responded unusually early and vigorously to the parallel Tridentine imperative of transform-

4. The early history of the *Missions étrangères*, let alone their seminary, has been little studied, but for some background, see Ronald S. Love, "Monarchs, Merchants, and Missionaries in Early Modern Asia: *The Missions Étrangères* in Siam, 1662-1684," The International History Review, 21, 1999, 1–27. See the comprehensive account in Noël Baillargeon, *Le Séminaire de Québec de 1685 à 1760*. Québec: Presses de l'Université Laval, 1977.
5. See the comprehensive account in Noël Baillargeon, *Le Séminaire de Québec de 1685 à 1760*. Québec: Presses de l'Université Laval, 1977.
6. See Henry Koren, *To the Ends of the Earth: A General History of the Congregation of the Holy Ghost*. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1983, 41-85.
7. For a good overview of the proliferation of religious foundations in the *siècle des saints*, see Joseph Bergin, *Church, Society, And Religious Change in France 1580-1730*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009, 61-154.

ing Europe into a devoutly Catholic society, with a special emphasis on what elites saw as the under-Christianized lower socioeconomic classes. This may have been, as historians have suggested, an extension of the sometimes brutal crusading vigor that had emerged in the later stages of the Catholic-Protestant civil wars; the cultural and political confidence that came from a renewed preeminent position in Europe no doubt also played a role.[8]

THE "FRENCH SCHOOL" OF SPIRITUALITY AND MISSION

The "French school of spirituality" was ... theorized by François de Sales, ... Open to contemplative and mystical experience, it simultaneously tended to portray salvation as a drama of action in the world.

Deeply intertwined with these cultural factors was a distinctive spirituality or, as the century progressed, set of spiritualities. What Henri Bremond famously labeled the "French school of spirituality" was first and most influentially theorized by François de Sales, bishop of the lost see of Geneva.[9] Open to contemplative and mystical experience, it simultaneously tended to portray salvation as a drama of action in the world—de Sales' formative *Introduction to the Devout Life* offered guidance specifically for the engaged (and female) laity.[10] Ideally, the sinful human will, probably with the guidance of a skilled and holy spiritual director, will be subsumed by the divine Will; and the French school in all its forms took to heart the Augustinian identification of charity as essential to the divine nature, and thus to the will in conformity with God. Since charity is an action, not merely a sentiment, this necessarily implied that the devout life would be a life of service to others: to one's neighbors, to the spiritually poor, but certainly also to the socioeconomically poor, who were never in short supply in that economically precarious century. Such charity was particularly suitable to the wealthy, secular elites, and throughout the century that segment of the laity poured enormous amounts of effort and money into charitable work inspired by such visions. But inevitably they did so in collaboration with the clergy, and equally inevitably the spiritual ideals of the French School influenced the clergy as well.

Cardinal Pierre Bérulle and the Oratory he helped found on the Roman model of Filipo Neri were perhaps the most important vector of this spirituality within the clergy. (Not that it lacked influence with the

8. See e.g., Barbara Diefendorf, *Planting the Cross: Catholic Reform and Renewal in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century France*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2019.

9. Henri Bremond, *Histoire littéraire du sentiment religieux in France depuis la fin des guerres de religion jusqu'à nos jours*, vol. 1. Paris, Bloud et Gay, 1916.

10. Francis de Sales, *Introduction to the Devout Life*. New York, Vintage Books, 2002.

The Congregation of Jesus and Mary (... the Eudists) with a goal similar to the Sulpicians or the Lazarists but particularly focused on promoting rural missions and the vocations of men of modest means.

general public: the Oratorians developed into a teaching order similar to, and in competition with the Jesuits). Jean-Jacques Olier, a priest who was strongly influenced by Charles de Condren, Bérulle's successor as head of the French Oratory, did a good deal to bring their spirit into clerical training. The Company of Saint-Sulpice, founded by Olier in the Parisian parish of that name in 1645, was both influential and unusual in its organization, being an association of diocesan priests rather than a regular congregation. This did not stop them from participating in domestic missions as well as in missionary work in Canada where they took on from an even earlier date roughly the role in Montréal that the Foreign Missions held in Québec.[11] The Congregation of the Mission, founded in 1625 by another disciple of Bérulle, Vincent de Paul, and its affiliates (along with the Daughters of Charity of his associate, Louise de Marillac) were even larger and more influential with the general public.[12] The Lazarists, as they were called in France after their Paris headquarters in a former leprosarium, combined urban and rural missionary work with the direction of a number of diocesan seminaries which they hoped would train secular priests for a similar ministry.

Another of the first generation of French Oratorians, Jean Eudes, left the congregation in 1643 to organize a seminary in Caen. With his collaborators in that enterprise he eventually formed the Congregation of Jesus and Mary (more succinctly, the Eudists) with a goal similar to the Sulpicians or the Lazarists but particularly focused on promoting rural missions and the vocations of men of modest means.[13] They were particularly active not only in Normandy but in neighboring Brittany—they ran a seminary in Rennes from 1670—and likely had a significant influence on the young des Places. Another peculiarity of the Eudists is that, like the Jesuits but unlike the Oratorians—or the secular clergy of Paris in general—they largely opposed the Jansenist

11. On the Sulpicians in general see Philippe Molac, *Histoire d'un dynamisme apostolique: la compagnie des prêtres de Saint-Sulpice*, Paris, Cerf, 2008; on the Montréal mission, John Alexander Dickinson and Olivier Hubert, *Les Sulpiciens de Montréal: une histoire de pouvoir et de discrétion, 1657-2007*. Montreal, Fides, 2007. The first Sulpicians arrived in Montréal in 1657.

12. See the fine survey of Alison Forrestal, V*incent de Paul, the Lazarist Mission, and French Catholic Reform*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2017. The family of Vincentian organizations is sufficiently complex and diverse that it has been the subject of a proper genealogical study: Betty Ann McNeil, *The Vincentian Family Tree: A Genealogical Study*. Chicago, Vincentian Studies Institute, 1996.

13. On the earlier history of the Eudists see Guillaume de Bertier de Sauvigny, *Au service de l'Eglise de France: les Eudistes, 1680-1791*. Paris, SPM, 1999.

The anti-Jansenist party with which the Spiritans aligned tended to identify more with a global mission than did their opponents.

movement.[14] There is certainly no space here to rehearse the theological details of that bitter and damaging struggle, but its abstruse disputes about the nature of grace carried forward into differences about pastoral practice. Jansenists and their opponents alike were committed to the evangelization of the poor, but the former believed it should be carried out largely by the secular clergy, and the parties differed on the relative roles of preaching, sacramental practice, and popular devotions in missionizing activity. Jansenists, largely for contingent reasons, also took little part in overseas missions, a fact that the Jesuits at least were not above rubbing in their faces.[15] Thus, the anti-Jansenist party with which the Spiritans aligned tended to identify more with a global mission than did their opponents.

CLAUDE POULLART DES PLACES AND THE "POOR SCHOLARS"

Such was the institutional landscape against which Poullart des Places founded his community of the Holy Spirit. Its central aim, of supporting young men of modest means in study for the priesthood and promoting vocations of pastoral and missionary service to the poor, had been a central focus of the French church in the century of saints, and the University of Paris had a long tradition of communities to house and support its scholars, usually in the form of teaching colleges. Poullart des Places thus might well have asked himself why the existing bodies were not sufficient. Part of the answer, and part of his community's distinctiveness, is to be found in very prosaic circumstances. The years around 1700 were ones of very severe social, political, and especially economic crisis in France, as the crushing expense of the War of the Spanish Succession, in which the French had suffered a series of major defeats, combined with some of the worst harvests of the early modern period and the general malaise left by forty years of Louis XIV's decreasingly effective personal rule nearly brought the kingdom

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14. William Doyle, *Jansenism: Catholic Resistance to Authority from the Reformation to the French Revolution London*, MacMillan, 2000; and Bergin, Church, Society, 394-424 are a good place to start on that subject. The Sulpicians and Lazarists also remained anti-Jansenist.
15. The ceiling of Sant' Ignazio in Campo Marzio in Rome, painted by the Jesuit brother Andrea Pozzo around 1685, depicts Jesuit participation in the salvation of the four continents; it drew sour remarks from French Jansenists.

to its knees.[16] This increased the need to support the poor, including in their vocations, but it correspondingly decreased the resources available for that support. The hour was not for the foundation of large organizations richly endowed by the king, the court nobility, and prominent churchmen, as had been the case with so many of the seventeenth-century orders. Those orders themselves were more concerned with preserving themselves through the crisis than with continuing their expansion.

The cook was to take that characteristic to the extreme of going "to the reverend Jesuit fathers' residence to fetch the leftovers that they have the charity to give to us."

Thus, the character of the early Spiritans as a modest, even minimalist community separate from though dependent on a more established order, the Jesuits, was a difference dictated by circumstances; though of course there was much in the Christian tradition to suggest that a virtue could be made of this necessity. The traces of that necessity are easy to see in the records of the community, particularly its first rule (clearly the work of des Places, likely from 1706 or 1707).[17] Take, for example, a near obsession with food. The bursar was to be "extremely frugal," and the cook was to take that characteristic to the extreme of going "to the reverend Jesuit fathers' residence to fetch the leftovers that they have the charity to give to us," giving an idea how thoroughly des Places' project relied on that order. The residents "will neither praise nor … criticize what they have just eaten," will receive strictly identical portions (including the Superior), will never eat outside of the communal meals, etc.[18] Early modern students loved to complain about their food, often with good reason, and communities of students were generally concerned to minimize that; and of course similar practices for religious communities went back to St. Benedict.[19] But the sheer emphasis on the question in

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16. On the disastrous state of French political economy in the years of the War of the Spanish Succession, see Guy Rowlands, T*he Financial Decline of a Great Power: War, Influence, and Money in Louis XIV's France*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2012, esp. 20-30 and 53.
17. The essential elements discussed here carried forward into the formal rule of 1734. See John Daly, ed., *Spiritan Wellsprings: The Original Rules, with Commentaries, of the Holy Ghost Congregation.* Dublin, Paraclete Press, 1986, 43-56.
18. Henry J. Koren and Maurice Carignan, eds., *The Spiritual Writings of Father Claude Francis Poullart des Places/Les Écrits Spirituels de M. Claude-François Poullart des Places.* Pittsburgh, Duquesne University, 1956, 196 (item 157); 214 (227); 178 (73). All quotations from this volume are my translations rather than Fr. Koren's.
19. A classic example of this trope can be found in Francisco de Quevedo's 1626 picaresque novel *El buscón*, bk. 1 ch. 3. Meals take a relatively mod-

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the primitive Spiritan rule and the way it was used to promote a highly egalitarian ethos and a peculiarly intellectualized devotional life suggests how contingent factors could lead the Spiritans to do something old in a new kind of way.

A less contingent point of difference for des Places' community appeared in the first sentence of its rule, and in its name: "all students will particularly adore the Holy Spirit, to whom they will be especially devoted." They would, naturally, celebrate Pentecost with particular devotion "to obtain the fire of divine love from the Holy Spirit."[20] This was straightforwardly a development of des Places' personal piety as seen for example in his "Prayer to the Holy Trinity," which took a strong but not atypical expression of the French School and placed it under the *aegis* of a less Christocentric and more Trinitarian devotion. Notably, both in that prayer and in the early rule des Places combined that and a nearly Franciscan devotion to poverty with the characteristic post-Salesian combination of effacement of the self before God and divine charity.[21] The personal detachment "from all creatures and from myself, so that I may no longer be attached to any but You alone … my spirit and heart no longer being filled by any but You" corresponds to the communal self-abnegation and the Pentecostal fire of divine love of the rule, and that charity is sought particularly in the Third Person of the Trinity.[22] It is also identified, in a way that is clear elsewhere in des Places' modest surviving corpus, with the particular grace of vocation to Holy Orders, which (as I have suggested elsewhere) had become a central concern of French Catholic devotion over the course of the seventeenth century.[23]

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est place in Benedict's *Rule* (chs. 38-41), which does not impose the strict frugality and uniformity of des Places' institute.

20. *Spiritual Writings*, 164 (items 1-2).
21. For a good, recent account of where these matters stood at the turn of the eighteenth century see Bastian Felter Vaucanson, "Between Faith and Works: Fénelon's Conception of Charity for a Monarch," *French Historical Studies*, 46, 2023. 37-56.
22. *Spiritual Writings*, 260.
23. See Jotham Parsons, "Wealth, Poverty, and Vocation in the Life and Times of Claude-François Poullart des Places." *Spiritan Horizons 4*, 2009, 35–50; and "Vocation in Seventeenth-Century France: The Catholic Ethic and the Spirit of Étatisme." *French History 28*, 2014. 322-42. Christopher Lane, *Callings and Consequences: The Making of Catholic Vocational Culture in Early Modern France.* Montreal, McGill-Queen's University Press, 2021, has notably extended this analysis.

The eighteenth-century Society and Seminary of the Holy Ghost had close cousins at St.-Sulpice and the Foreign Missions, or among the Lazarists and Eudists, but it was in no danger of being mistaken for any of them.

The initial Spiritan foundation, then, sought to address a set of practical and religious problems that had preoccupied French reformers for a century with the basically conventional institution of a seminary community. Like many of their contemporaries the Spiritans were a very modest and canonically unassuming group: until 1734 a mere charitable association and from then until 1855 a company of priests of the Archdiocese of Paris (like the Sulpicians)—a protean character that helped them survive numerous challenges including the merger with Libermann's Society of the Holy Heart of Mary. Indeed, the community's most distinctive feature, its dependence on the Jesuits and their College of Louis le Grand, had to be abandoned in the longer run because the Jesuits were expelled from France and their colleges secularized after 1761. The early Spiritans' difference thus lay in more subtle characteristics: the (enforced) modesty of their circumstances and ambitions, the particular configuration of the founder's personal piety, and the way those two factors interacted to produce a distinctive culture and spirituality centered on complementary facets of an egalitarian embrace of poverty and an emphasis on the Pentecostal aspect of the divine charity that was the goal of devotional and even mystical practice. The eighteenth-century Society and Seminary of the Holy Ghost had close cousins at St.-Sulpice and the Foreign Missions, or among the Lazarists and Eudists, but it was in no danger of being mistaken for any of them.

THE EMERGENCE OF SPIRITAN MISSION

The Spiritan community continued to evolve even after it found stability under the rule of 1734. In particular, it expanded beyond just providing practical and spiritual support to young students. Seminary organizations not immediately oriented towards diocesan needs commonly also took direct roles in pastoral care, whether in charity work, internal missions, or overseas. This was encouraged by Tridentine ecclesiology, by the close integration of doctrine, personal development, and charitable action in the French school of spirituality, and by the powerful example of the Jesuits; in one way or another all the groups just mentioned operated this way, as did many others including female orders like the Ursulines. Des Places himself, it is clear, understood and felt this integrative urge. In a striking passage from a spiritual memoir dating from the early years of the Spiritan community, he described his sentiments when he first decided to embrace the ecclesiastical estate:

> I wanted to see myself one day stripped of everything, living only from alms after having given everything away. I thought to keep, out of my temporal goods, only my health, which I hoped to sacrifice entirely to God in the labor of the missions—only too happy if, after having set the whole world on fire with God's love, I should be able to give the last drop of my own blood for He whose mercies were always with me.[24]

The biggest change in the missionary, as in the educational character of the Spiritans came in the 1760s, after the expulsion of the Jesuits.

He had perhaps been reading lives of St. Francis, but the overall sentiment was entirely contemporary: he planned to combine Holy Orders and withdrawal from the world with surrender to divine charity and sacrifice of the self in (apparently foreign) missionary work.

That neither des Places himself nor his institution engaged immediately in such work is no doubt due above all to the unfavorable conjuncture of the early 1700s, but as the century progressed individual Spiritans and former students of the seminary took part in plenty of it; we have already mentioned, for example, their role in Canada and the apparent blurring of the lines between the Spiritans and the Foreign Missions, which doubtless shaped the Spiritan character in ways now hard to reconstruct given surviving sources.[25] There also seems to have initially been a kind of division of labor between des Places and his community and des Place's friend (Saint) Louis-Marie Grignon de Montfort, a product of the St.-Sulpice seminary, whose missionary Company of Mary drew on Spiritan graduates from 1713 onwards.[26] The biggest change in the missionary, as in the educational character of the Spiritans came in the 1760s, after the expulsion of the Jesuits. Not only did they have to take the remainder of their educational mission in-house, at great expense—in the first of what have proved to be repeated examples of the Spiritans being pushed farther towards becoming a teaching order than they have wanted—but they were also

24. *Ecrits spirituels*, 132-34; there is something Jesuit in the concept of health as something to be preserved out of charity, as well as the paraphrase of Luke 12:49 (which inter alia is inscribed on the vault of Sant' Ignazio mentioned above).
25. For some examples see Koren, *Ends of the Earth*, 32-36.
26. Montfort was even more of an enthusiast, even more devoted to poverty, and noticeably less practical than des Places, so his congregation only really got off the ground some years after his 1716 death. The Montfortians are little studied, but see Louis Perouas, "Les Montfortains en France depuis trois siècles: une esquisse historique," *Annales de Bretagne et des Pays de l'Ouest* 110.3, 2003, 97-110, doi 10.4000/abpo.1377.

called on to fill the gap left by Jesuit missionaries in France's overseas empire.

The gap was not as large as it might have been, given the loss of so many territories in the Seven Years' War, but it was consequential. At that point the Spiritans were called on to serve in a more formal way in the model of the Foreign Missions; while there were precedents for that, it is hard to avoid the idea that, as with their hard-won permission to infringe on the University's monopoly on teaching in Paris, this was a move by supporters in the royal government to keep the spoils of the Jesuits in the friendliest hands possible. For the twenty or so years before the Revolution, then, the Spiritans found themselves willy-nilly, not the sole but among the principal heirs of a large chunk of the French church's post-Reformation institutional structure. This was certainly an unusual situation, and it is hard to tell quite what they made of it; among other things, it hardly lasted long enough to reach a stable equilibrium. It certainly both spoke to and developed a capacity for adaptability and improvisation already visible in des Places' precarious foundation. But there are reasons to think that it was in some other ways rather unsatisfactory, and in the longer term had a negative value in showing the Spiritans what they did not wish to be.

Whatever their status, once such men were overseas the Superior had very little authority over them.

TO A REGULATED CONGREGATION

For one thing this situation rendered the already diffuse boundaries of the Spiritan community even harder to discern. Alongside the formal "associates," essentially the faculty and staff of the seminary and its satellites, there were its students and alumni, including members of either group who might have gone out on mission, whether at the Spiritans' instance or not; now, there were also priests otherwise unaffiliated with the Spiritans but recruited by them to serve in their missionary territories.[27] Whatever their status, once such men were overseas the Superior had very little authority over them, particularly compared to Vicars Apostolic or royal representatives on the ground. And as events soon proved, close dependence on government policy and support was a two-edged sword: the Revolution and subsequent political turmoil saw the Spiritans endure several near-death experiences. In this case, what was different about them was that they survived; the small size and periodically tenuous condition of the earlier Spiritan community were not in fact atypical of Catholic religious

27. See the list of old-regime meanings of "Spiritan," which also included Montfortians, in Koren, *Ends of the Earth*, 92-93n.

Strong community life and ties of obedience within the order would avoid the "imminent danger for a missionary who is isolated and master of his decisions and actions" and help them "sustain one another in fervor and piety."

organizations, many of which have come and gone leaving little trace. Joseph Bergin offers the example of the small seminary congregation, not unlike des Places', founded by Raymond Bernal in 1638 in the rural Rouergue, which persisted with decreasing vigor until it was absorbed by the Lazarists in the early eighteenth century.[28] There were several points at which the Spiritans could have met a similar or worse fate.

A more subtle but more basic problem in this early venture of the Spiritans into being a missionary order was that, unlike for example the Sulpicians in Montréal, Spiritan missionaries (however understood) seem to have had little in the way of a communal life. A *desideratum* since the days of Augustine of Canterbury, such a life must have seemed all the more important as government support became erratic and French missionaries overseas had to deal not just with fellow-Catholics and non-Christians but with secularists and even (for the first time since the mid-sixteenth century) French Protestant missionary counterparts.[29] It is no wonder that Libermann and his contemporaries among the pre-merger Spiritans saw this as a top priority.As Libermann put it in an early memorandum for his proposed order, strong community life and ties of obedience within the order would avoid the "imminent danger for a missionary who is isolated and master of his decisions and actions" and help them "sustain one another in fervor and piety," setting (like the seventeenth-century seminary foundations) a useful, imitable example for the local secular clergy.[30] The proposed reforms of the Spiritans prior to the merger moved in the same direction of centralization and promotion of communal life, as, naturally, did the newly merged organization after 1848. Institutionally, this culminated in the formal organization of the company in 1855 into a regular congregation. While Libermann and his contemporaries brought much to the congregation that was new and different, they also proved capable of recognizing

28. See Bergin, *Church, Society*, 118.
29. On the nineteenth-century revival of French Protestant missionary activity see Jean-François Zorn, *Le grand siècle d'une mission protestante: La Mission de Paris de 1822 à 1914*, Paris: Karthala-Les Bergers et les Mages, 1993.
30. From a memoir to the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith, March 17, 1840, in Walter van de Putte, ed., *Provisional Rule of the Missionaries of the Holy Heart of Mary: Text and Libermann's Commentary* Pittsburgh, Duquesne University Center for Spiritan Studies, 2015. 9. Compare Koren, *Ends of the Earth*, 145-47.

when reversion to other, conventional models might be in their best interest.

Their center of gravity has moved decisively away from the Paris seminary, by the peoples with whom they have lived and worked.

CONCLUSION

With Libermann the Spiritans became truly a missionary order, in a mode that owed more to the nineteenth century than to the seventeenth. Aside from the religious, social, and ideological trends of that and the subsequent centuries, they have been shaped more than before, as their center of gravity has moved decisively away from the Paris seminary, by the peoples with whom they have lived and worked. They were not unique in that—their old models, the Jesuits, also went through a major refoundation and reimagination—though certainly, as before, they experienced it in a different way than any other group.[31] But collectively as well as individually what makes us ourselves is our story, or our history, and the story we have just sketched out has remained an indissociable part of Spiritan identity. The early congregation's uncommon path through the common experience of the French religious and political world was, to a great extent, what made it different.

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31. See Robert A. Maryks and Jonathan Wright, eds., *Jesuit Survival and Restoration*. Leiden, Brill, 2015.