

Fall 10-1-2023

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Lazarus Langbiir CSSp

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Recommended Citation

Langbiir, L. (2023). The Spiritan Mission & Communication: Guided by the Spirit to Respond and Adapt to the World. *Spiritan Horizons*, 20 (20). Retrieved from <https://dsc.duq.edu/spiritan-horizons/vol20/iss20/9>

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THE SPIRITAN MISSION & COMMUNICATION: GUIDED BY THE SPIRIT TO RESPOND AND ADAPT TO THE WORLD

INTRODUCTION

Fr. Lazarus Langbiir CSSp is a graduate of Duquesne University and a member of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit, also known as the Spiritans. He earned both his MBA and Ph.D. in Communication and Rhetorical Studies from Duquesne. He is the co-author of the article “Responsiveness to the Revelatory: Engaging the Spiritan Mission” published in the *Journal of Communication & Religion*. His work focuses on the connections between corporate communication, communication ethics, and the philosophy of communication.

Members of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit are called to respond to the needs of the world in living fidelity to the charisms of their founders – Claude Poullart des Places and Francis Mary Paul Libermann. Founded in France in the year 1703, the Congregation of the Holy Spirit is a Roman Catholic religious missionary congregation. Otherwise known as the Spiritans, their mission in the Church is “the evangelization of the ‘poor’... they go especially to peoples, groups and individuals who have not yet heard the message of the Gospel or who have scarcely heard it, to those whose needs are the greatest, and to the oppressed ... and willingly accept tasks for which the Church has difficulty in finding workers.”¹ Spiritans believe that their mission is made possible by the power of the Spirit working in the Church and in the world.² At the heart of this mission is evangelization, which demands communication. By communicatively responding to those whose needs are greatest in the world, Spiritans share a commonality with them. Additionally, through communication, they shape a world in need of direction and salvation by embodying and meaningfully living out their mission.

In his book, *Embodiment, Relation, Community: A Continental Philosophy of Communication*, Garnet Butchart presents communication as embodied relations that go beyond a mere mechanical process of transmitting information. Communication in this case is more than just a tool. Butchart points to the fact that we embody communication, shaped by language, and refers to the signs and contexts of human interaction as “embodied communication communities.”³ The Spiritans express their mission as a community, guided by the Holy Spirit, through the interaction of language, subjectivity, and communication. As Butchart writes, “consubstantial with the life of its members, community will occur, or arrive, in multiple ways ... then speaking of community in

1. *Spiritans Rule of Life*, 4.

2. Cf. *Ibid.*, 8 – 11.

3. Butchart, Garnet C. *Embodiment, Relation, Community: A Continental Philosophy of Communication*. Penn State University Press, 2019, 9.

The life-giving openness of each Spiritan in the company of others, reflects a community irrevocably bound to the possibility of human communication

discourse, as in philosophy must, in its turn, be taken or regarded as part of the uncertainty inherent to *communication*.⁴ The life-giving openness of each Spiritan in the company of others, reflects a community irrevocably bound to the possibility of human communication.

Bringing Butchart's understanding of communication to the expression of the Spiritan mission in today's world, I present the Congregation of the Holy Spirit as a community that embodies⁵ Spiritan mission, through community life and evangelization. I also present the mission of the Spiritans as stated in the *Spiritan Rule of Life* and the major themes of the last General Chapter (GC XXI) as values that must be protected and promoted by the current General Council to give the community direction and purpose.

SPIRITAN MISSION TAKES "CENTER STAGE" IN BAGAMOYO

Spiritans participate in the Catholic Church's mission, according to their proper vocation. Multiple considerations shape how Spiritans respond to their vocation: (1) the needs of a given historical moment/place, (2) the concrete experiences and circumstances of life as lived, and (3) the charisms of their founders, des Places and Libermann. In response to God's call, Spiritans navigate a world guided by the Holy Spirit and responsive to their vocational commitments to the Spiritan Life.

The mission of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit in the Church is the evangelization of the poor.

We count the following as constitutive parts of our mission of evangelization: the "integral liberation" of people, action for justice and peace, and participation in development. It follows that we must make ourselves "the advocates, the supporters and the defenders of the weak and the little ones against all who oppress them" (*Rule of 1849*; N.D. X, 517)⁶

Spiritans demonstrate their commitment to the poor in this way and contribute to the promotion of justice in the world. While the

4. *Ibid.*, 116.

5. Embodiment from the perspective of Butchart is to have and be a material form of the sign systems that bring structure to sense and meaning to human experience of the world.

6. SRL No. 14.

commitment to the poor remains the same, the meaning of “the poor” continues to evolve and it is necessary to communicatively clarify this purpose when the historical moment demands it. Bagamoyo II⁷ reflected on some of the issues that demand the attention of the world today and for that matter will help us re-define the poor in contemporary society. Bagamoyo II identified the following important issues:⁸

- the considerable importance of communication, beyond cultural differences,
- a universal awareness marked by major ecological challenges and their urgency to safeguard “our common home”,
- a heightened awareness of peoples’ rights, especially of women and minorities, with demands for equality,
- a new understanding of the relations of power, with demands for participation and consideration of citizens’ aspirations.

“We
[Spiritans]
were
challenged
to re-think
our lifestyles
and imagine
a different
world post-
COVID-19.”

These issues – communication, ecology, peoples’ rights, and relations of power – immediately point to the major concerns of today. These elements are the context within which Bagamoyo II reflected on the Spiritan mission in contemporary times.

BAGAMOYO II DEFINES AND UPHOLDS THE SPIRITAN MISSION IN CONTEMPORARY TIMES

The Congregation of the Holy Spirit is organized into circumscriptions in different countries around the globe and a General Council based in Rome. The General Council is elected by a General Chapter, that is, the gathering of representatives from the various circumscriptions. At their most recent General Chapter held in Bagamoyo, Tanzania, in August 2021, the Spiritans chose the theme, “Behold, I am Doing Something New” (Isaiah 43:19). In an article, published in the special edition of *Spiritans Horizons* (2022), Fr. Eamonn Mulcahy, a Spiritan himself, states that “... delegates sought to follow the Spirit’s promptings and identify new pathways for mission ... ”⁹ Continuing this discussion about Spiritan mission in the contemporary world in this essay, I wish to add my voice to his excellent suggestions by stressing the importance of communicative engagement for an impactful

7. The 21st General Chapter of the Congregation since its founding in 1703.

8. Bagamoyo 2021. GC XXI, *General Chapter Document*, 9.

9. Mulcahy, Eamonn. “The Holy Spirit and the Future of Spiritan Mission: What is the Spirit saying to the Spiritans?” *Spiritans Horizons* Special Edition, 18, 2022, 11.

*Attention
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changing
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Spiritans mission in an ever-changing world.

Firstly, Mulcahy notes the diversity of the members who gathered for the General Chapter. Delegates of professed Spiritans and Spiritan Lay Associates from the different circumscriptions made up of various age groups and nationalities gathered for this chapter. The Bagamoyo II delegates reflected the shift in the global axis of Christianity from the Northern Hemisphere to the Southern Hemisphere as the home base of mission.¹⁰ The chapter lasted three weeks and ended with the election of the first African, Fr. Alain Mayama as Superior General and six Councilors to form the General Council for the next eight years. In his assessment, Mulcahy pointed to the changing face of the global Spiritan community, as youthful and heavily concentrated in the Southern Hemisphere. Such significant changes call for a shift in communication approaches to align with the emerging composition of the Spiritan community and the new direction of mission. Butchart suggests that “the concept of community and the phenomenon of community are longstanding as thematic guides for human communication inquiry.”¹¹ Thus, we must note that community is not static or a “certainty,” and ought to be maintained through improved communication. Therefore, attention to the changing face of the Spiritan community and Christian missionary work is necessary.

Secondly, Mulcahy addresses two key questions discussed during the gathering in relation to Spiritan mission in the contemporary world:

- 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?

Delegates of the now 320-year-old congregation sought to understand their role in the contemporary world by reflecting on the two questions above. In his discussion, Mulcahy sees this role in the meaning of the phrase “signs of the times” and thus expands upon it in terms of its biblical and theological contexts. The expression “signs of the times” is first attributed to Jesus in the gospel of Matthew¹² and popularized by various popes over the last 60 years.¹³ The phrase was given a spe-

10. *Ibid.*

11. Butchart, 117.

12. Matt. 16:3.

13. Pope John XXIII in *Humanae Salutis* (Dec 25, 1961) & *Pacem in Terris* (April 13, 1963), and Pope Paul VI in *Ecclesiam Suam* (Aug 6, 1964).

cific theological meaning towards the end of Vatican II – “identifying those events in history characteristic of an epoch in which a significant change is taking place in the world.”¹⁴ The questions and major themes that emerged during the chapter now serve as a roadmap for the current General Council of the Spiritans, led by Fr. Alain Mayama in this post-COVID era. For Mulcahy, the Holy Spirit is calling Spiritans to be courageous in exploring new possibilities for mission.¹⁵ In communication terms, this involves paying attention to the historical moment and the communicative environment that frames Spiritan mission.

Like Pope Francis, contemporary Spiritans should be open to the guidance of the Spirit leading them to “new arenas of mission.”

Thirdly, Mulcahy presents Pope Francis as an exemplar of one who embodies the mission of the Church and whose teaching and actions reflect the “signs of the times.”¹⁶ He calls upon contemporary Spiritans to demonstrate fidelity to the teachings and proposals of Pope Francis as they look for new ways of living out their mission. Just as Butchart urges us to engage with the communicative body, Mulcahy calls on Spiritans to engage with the “new poor” in need of evangelization as we live through significant changes such as the shift in the mission base of the Church from the Northern Hemisphere to the Southern Hemisphere. Like Pope Francis, contemporary Spiritans should be open to the guidance of the Spirit leading them to “new arenas of mission.”¹⁷

Bagamoyo II sought to enliven Spiritan mission today by challenging members of the congregation to inventively cross traditional lines of doing mission and squarely face the uncertainties that may emerge with courage and skill, while trusting in the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Since Mulcahy has already dealt with the Holy Spirit perspective of this discussion, I would like to focus my discussion on the imperative to communicate and understand the ontologically communicative body. To communicatively sustain and enhance Spiritan mission in the contemporary world, all Spiritans must dedicate themselves to the direction of the General Council led by Fr. Alain Mayama and pay attention to the communicative environments within which they live out the Spiritan mission.

14. Mulcahy, 12-13.

15. See Mulcahy 13-24 on Pope Francis as Spirit-Inspired Sign; The Holy Spirit and Courage to be Enlivened by a New Imagination of the Possible; One Single Human Family; The Holy Spirit as Protagonist of the *Communio*; The Holy Spirit as Protagonist of Synodality; A Primacy of Listening; and Climate Action is Mission.

16. Mulcahy, 13.

17. *Ibid.*, 27.

The topic “Spirititan Mission in the Contemporary World,” was in response to the invitation of Bagamoyo II for us to do “something new” in relation to our Spirititan identity and mission.

Following Bagamoyo II, the Superior General and his council have launched the first phase of a congregation-wide animation plan for members to reflect on the call for renewal in Spirititan mission. In his letter dated October 2, 2022, the Superior General announced that the two-year long animation process under the topic “Spirititan Mission in the Contemporary World,” was in response to the invitation of Bagamoyo II for us to do “something new” in relation to our Spirititan identity and mission. He also tasked all circumscriptions to reflect on and discuss the following:

- what are we doing/what have we done that is new?
- what gives us joy in the Spirititan mission we live today?
- assessing our missionary engagements, and based on the requirements of Spirititan mission today, what are some of the places and missions we could leave because they no longer respond to our charism?

By September 1, 2023, the superior of each circumscription is expected to present to the General Council a summary report of their reflections and discussions.

Since this process is still ongoing, I will not discuss these questions here. However, it would be interesting to find out what the various circumscriptions will present to the General Council at the end of this first phase of animation to frame Spirititan mission in the present age. This initiative of the General Council extends the experience of Bagamoyo II to the various circumscriptions and tasks all Spirititans to reflect deeply on the mission of the congregation in the contemporary world. As people seeking to embody Spirititan mission through community life and evangelization, it is a step in the right direction to require all members involved in the mud of living the everyday mission, to share their reflections on these essential questions with the congregation.

COMMUNICATION AND THE CONTEMPORARY UNDERSTANDING OF SPIRITAN MISSION

The reality of communication is that it cuts across human life. In the words of Butchart, “to be human is to exist communicatively.”¹⁸ We are always in communication even in silence, over noise, or through what we call communication breakdowns. A common saying in the discipline of communication is that “one cannot not communicate.”¹⁹ This means

18. Butchart, 13.

19. This statement was developed by the “Palo Alto Group,” researchers at the

*Any healing
associated with
a preferential
option for
the poor must be
the work
from and/or
of the poor.*

that we are not just bound to communicate or interact with one another, but we are also capable of paradoxical behavior that may lead to miscommunication.²⁰ As Butchart and Chang wrote: “Communication takes place always under its own shadow, moving forward only insofar as it also speaks back to what it leaves behind. And thereby, in this speaking back, it keeps a degree of what is left behind.”²¹

Spiritans manifest the event of communication in the form of their missionary life and work. This is critical because what we utter, do, or fail to do as Spiritans reflect or bear witness to Spiritan mission. Thus, the imperative to communicate as part of Spiritan mission calls for reflexivity, since we both manifest and communicate Spiritan mission. Communication continues through the punctuated moments of Spiritan life in an ongoing process from the day an individual enters the congregation and embraces its mission and continues long after them.

The continuous process of communicating or the manifestation of communication is not limited to a particular event but extends to all events and “unfolds in what unfolds in it, demonstrating all that it cannot but continue to demonstrate.”²² This explains why Spiritan mission begins even before the individual arrives in a mission land and continues long after they have left the place. In communication terms, this is known as “a fore-sending” or “a sending before all that is sent.”²³ The message is sent before the sending begins and outlasts the person that is sent. The present approach to mission by contemporary Spiritans is only but a promise of the future. The future life of the Spiritans will reflect the life and work of contemporary Spiritans similar to how the present outlook of the congregation reflects the life and work of those who came before them. If we keep going back, we eventually end up with Jesus who was both the message and messenger of the gospel.

Butchart deepens our understanding of communication through his “philosophical description of human communication.”²⁴

Mental Research Institute in Palo Alto, California.

20. Even what we call ‘miscommunication’ or ‘communication breakdown’ is still communication. The dictum “one cannot not communicate” assumes that communication does not ever fail or breakdown.

21. Chang, Briankle G. and Butchart, Garnet C., *Philosophy of Communication*. The MIT Press, 2012, 3.

22. *Ibid.*, 4.

23. *Ibid.*, 5.

24. Butchart, Garnet C., *Embodiment, Relation, Community*, 117.

He describes how communication emerges through the intersection of subjectivity, human embodiment, and human community. Whereas subjectivity refers to consciousness, human embodiment refers to life and human community refers to the semiotic crossing of identity boundaries. Building on this in terms of Spiritan life and mission, we can connect subjectivity to the Holy Spirit who directs the work of Spiritans as their consciousness; human embodiment to the life of the individual called to live in community as a Spiritan; and human community to mean the world in which the Spiritan is called to serve.

The way Butchart thinks of communication is akin to how contemporary Spiritans are beginning to and in fact should think about their mission today.

The contemporary understanding of Spiritan mission considering the issues identified by Bagamoyo II, offers us a perspective of communication or evangelization that aligns with what Butchart discussed in his analysis of the contemporary philosophy of communication. Butchart writes “from a contemporary perspective,” the task of philosophical thinking about community deepens our understanding of “relation, existence, difference, communication, noncommunication, community, and immunity by way of an examination of coexistence, or with, that is elemental to thought and experience of self, other, me, you, us, them, and how we are together.”²⁵ In other words, the way Butchart thinks of communication is akin to how contemporary Spiritans are beginning to and in fact should think about their mission today.

If we think of Spiritan mission in semiotic and phenomenological terms, it “helps us identify the task and demand of human communication,”²⁶ and gives us a key to communicatively understand the world before us. Although it may appear odd to link Spiritan mission to semiotics and phenomenology, I argue that the semiotic phenomenological approach to understanding Spiritan mission broadens our horizon for thinking about the “signs of the times” and how human communication can enhance the purpose of the Spiritans in the contemporary world. Semiotic phenomenology is a “continuous, mind-opening, and non-totalizing discourse where the problems and shortfalls of both classical philosophy and contemporary theory meet with insights into existential, psychological, and aesthetic issues that were consciously bracketed and excluded after the structuralist turn.”²⁷ Semiotic phenomenology directs our attention to the lived world and signs that constitute the experience of our shared world. The acknowl-

25. *Ibid.*, 117-8.

26. *Ibid.*, 118

27. James, *Fragmentary Demand*, 219. Cited in Butchart, *Embodiment, Relation, Community*, 118.

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edgement that we live in communion with others helps us to promote a world in which everyone is valued and respected.

There are three steps involved in the semiotic phenomenological process: The first step is to describe the pre-reflective state of consciousness or basic sense experience.²⁸ From a description of conscious awareness the process moves to refining the procedure by looking back to consider the “active experiencing of awareness” with the goal of determining which parts of the description are essential to conscious experience.²⁹ The second step is hermeneutic, that is, an interpretation of the reduction.³⁰ The final step leads to a new interpretation of what Butchart calls “the awareness of being aware.” Engagement in this process helps us to pass judgment on our lives as we live it in our current reality and experience it with others.

Since we co-exist or live in community with others, and Spiritan mission sends us forth to places where the need is the greatest, it is important to think of communication and the Spiritan mission in terms of relationships. Prioritizing relationship is not merely a contemporary idea but fundamental to human existence and the gospel. If we think this way, we cannot deny the existence of anyone or fail to act for the sake of those who are in need. If we prioritize relations, we will focus on what enhances community and resist words and actions that divide us.

The Semiotic phenomenological approach to communication that I am suggesting is a practical way of thinking about Spiritan mission that has emerged from Bagamoyo II and hopefully will become even more evident following the animation process launched by the General Council. I offer this approach as a guide for a contemporary understanding of the Spiritan mission in relation to human communication. In the final section of this essay, I will discuss why it is essential for Spiritans to “embody their mission.”

EMBODIMENT AND THE SPIRITAN MISSION

Butchart argues that human embodiment is an essential part of the semiotic phenomenological method. He cites various scholars in his definition of embodiment. According to Lanigan “human embodiment refers to ‘having and *being* a body’, not merely occupying space and persisting in time.”³¹ For Isaac E. Catt and Deborah Eicher-Catt

28. See Butchart, Garnet C., 119.

29. *Ibid.*, 121.

30. *Ibid.*, 124.

31. Lanigan, “Human Embodiment,” cited in Butchart, 121.

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“embodiment is the *essential point of mediation* between us and the cultural signs and codes of discourse under which we inescapably live.”³² Frank J. Macke “draws our attention to the body as the medium of conscious awareness: not only are we conscious of our bodies but by way of my body and its thinking and reflective properties, I am also conscious of being conscious.”³³ Together, these definitions present embodiment as an essential part of human consciousness and a point of mediation with the signs and codes of communication. For Butchart, embodiment is a basic, semiotic, and phenomenological condition of being human, of being an expressive and perceptive or communicative being.³⁴ In summary, embodiment as an essential part of the Spiritan mission means that we assume a condition of being human, expressive, and perceptive of our purpose in the church and the world.

Regarding the importance of embodiment for Spiritan mission in the contemporary world, I argue that we need to view the verbal and nonverbal codes of communication that relate directly to our mission as valuable resources that we can draw from as we seek to respond and adapt to the world. Our verbal codes may include the Bible, the *Spiritan Rule of Life*, official Church documents, letters of the Superior General, and Chapter Documents. Nonverbal codes may include our experience of the Christian faith, community life, and personal character. In addition, how we perceive the semiotic and embodied conditions of being in communication and community with others is equally important. Therefore, we live in the world as the embodiment of Spiritan mission attentive to the “signs of the times” and guided by the Spirit to serve the poor and respond to the world. We give ourselves over to those who need us, as Jesus Christ offered Himself for us.

In the experience of mission, there is a mutual relation of contact with and separation from people. Through communication there is a giving of oneself for the common good. This kind of self-donation is fundamentally human and may be as simple as reaching out to hold someone’s hand as an act of support. In our shared contexts, communication nourishes relationships and exposes us to

32. Deborah Eicher-Catt and Isaac E. Catt, eds *Communicology: The New Science of Embodiment Discourse*, cited in Butchart, 121

33. Frank J. Macke, “Body, Liquidity, and Flesh: Bachelard, Merleau-Ponty, and the Elements of Interpersonal Communication,” cited in Butchart, 121.

34. Butchart, Garnet C., 122.

An essential objective in this effort is to find ways ... to ensure that every member embodies the decisions of the chapter and so fulfils the mission of the congregation.

the existence of other people. Embodiment helps us to think about our lives lived in a shared world. Human communication and embodiment offer us a perspective with which to interpret and live our Spiritan mission. The mission is embodied and lived through communication, which according to Butchart “not only precedes each of us ontologically but also is experienced in the vocabulary we use routinely, sometimes unreflectively, to bring structure and meaning (sense) to our communities.”³⁵

CONCLUSION

The major topics discussed and agreed upon during GC XXI, held in Bagamoyo, Tanzania, in the middle of the Covid pandemic, are grounded in the mission of the congregation and are materially binding on all Spiritans. Also, the Superior General and his council are entrusted with the task of ensuring that the entire membership of the congregation embodies and acts upon its decisions as they continue to live out the Spiritan mission in their various places of work. An essential objective in this effort is to find ways of navigating challenges such as personal and cultural resistance at various levels of the congregation and to ensure that every member embodies the decisions of the chapter and so fulfils the mission of the congregation.

This task of the Superior General and his Council to animate and implement the decisions of the General Chapter demands an understanding that sometimes communication may be experienced as miscommunication or misunderstanding. Therefore, they must go beyond simple information transfer and engage their communicative efforts as embodied relations that lead to the formation of communication communities within the congregation. The leadership team must be seen to be going through the struggle of embodying the decisions of GC XXI as they invite all Spiritans to embrace them in their lived experience. It is important to relate the understanding of communication as embodied relations to more successfully advance the General Chapter’s priorities.

*Lazarus Langbiir CSSp,
Duquesne University,
Pittsburgh, PA, USA.*

35. Butchart, Garnet C., 136.