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From the Editor and Table of Contents

Patrick Fitzpatrick

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Reverse Mission

Part of the missionary endeavor is to enable different cultures, different people, different religions and different backgrounds to come into contact with each other. The hope is that such contact will be mutually enriching.

God taught St. Peter that lesson in Jaffa when two experiences intermingled: Peter's vision of the clean and unclean creatures that he was invited to have for lunch followed by the invitation to come to a centurion's house in Caesarea and heal that Roman officer's servant. He accepted the invitation and ate with Cornelius. "God has taught me that I must not call anyone profane or unclean... I now really understand that God has no favourites, but that anybody of any nationality who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him." The vision and the visit enabled Peter to break through the boundaries that his culture and religion had placed on him.

St. Paul and his traveling companions carried the gospel message from the Middle East to Europe. Many Europeans took to heart the good news they carried. But these newcomers came from different backgrounds, spoke different languages, and had different customs. How much of traditional Judaism had they to buy into if they wanted to become followers of the Way? A formal debate ensued in Jerusalem and a compromise was reached: no more than what was necessary for mutual respect was to be imposed on the new believers.

After Christianity had taken root in mainland Europe it sent its missionaries to the western islands of Great Britain and Ireland. The Celtic people of Ireland took to St. Patrick's good news in large numbers, and with Patrick's encouragement organized churches according to their local government way of life. Its contributions included private confession to a 'soul friend', local churches gathered around monasteries under the leadership of the abbot rather than a bishop appointed by Rome, local rites and customs in worship, a different day for celebrating Easter. Within a few generations reverse mission took place as these western outposts exported their Christianity to Scotland, England and back to the European mainland. It escaped the clutches of Rome for a few centuries until Rome opted for uniformity over plurality at the Synod of Whitby in 664 and Roman Catholicism became the established religion.

"The wind blows where it pleases: you can hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." Jesus said these words to Nicodemus, a religious leader who came to him by night. Can we harness the power of this spirit/wind as a source of energy? Can we construct windmills to face and catch the changeable wind? The Spirit drove Claude des Places' early missionaries from Paris to the French countryside and overseas to the French colonies and Canada. The Spirit drove Francis Libermann's early followers to West Africa, the Indian Ocean and Haiti. Later that same Spirit carried Spiritans to many European countries and from there to the English, French, Portuguese, Dutch and German overseas territories.

Today the Spirit/wind is driving many African Spiritans across their own continent and to many parts of the world. Europe and North America are no longer mission-sending continents. They stand in need of outside help. But one-time receiving countries such as Nigeria, Ghana, Sierra Leone, Tanzania, Cameroon and Congo have become mission-sending countries. Tide out here, tide in there — the ebb and flow continues its never ending movement.

This issue of *Spiritans* includes several stories from Nigerian-born missionaries who, having left their homeland for mission elsewhere, bring with them an infusion of young life, new vision and joy. Along with their fellow African Spiritans they are most responsible for the current vitality of our Congregation. Their stories also underline how windmill driven Spiritans realize that the Spirit fills the whole world and is already present wherever they go. When host and visitor interact both are enriched.

Pat Fitzpatrick, CSSp

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