THE HEARTBEAT AND ETHOS OF SPIRITAN EDUCATION

CENTER FOR SPIRITAN STUDIES
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DUQUESNE UNIVERSITY
Jeff Duaime, C.S.Sp.
Jeff Duaime is the current provincial of the US Province. First professed in August 1981, he completed an M.Div at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago in 1986. He was assigned to Haiti immediately after ordination for three years during the time of the Duvalier downfall and was part of the re-insertion of the Spiritan community in Haiti after a 17 year absence. He has also worked 11 years in parish work in the United States in addition to serving as President of Holy Ghost Prep School from 2002-2013. He was Chair of the Province Education Committee which undertook the task of authoring the reflection on Spiritan education in the US as part of the preparation for the 2012 US Provincial Chapter.

THE HEARTBEAT OF SPIRITAN EDUCATION IN THE US

The Congregation of the Holy Spirit does not define its role exclusively as service to either education or social action. While some religious congregations define their role in terms of service to a particular group in society, e.g. the sick, the elderly, the young, etc., and make a valuable contribution by doing so, the Spiritans, like some other religious congregations, have preferred to define their role more broadly in terms of spiritual and human need. This inclusive role of the Congregation was expressed by Francis Libermann in these words: "Evangelizing the poor is our primary end. But the missions are the more specific aim we have chosen, above all, those who are poorest and most abandoned... We would also like to work for the salvation of souls in France, above all the poor, while not abandoning those who are not so poor" (Notes et Documents, XIII, p. 170).

I. A Historical Perspective: Our Founders and the Education Apostolate

a) Claude Poullart des Places

Claude Poullart was born the only son of a noble family in Rennes, Brittany, in 1679. As a young man, aged twenty-two, he arrived in Paris to study for the priesthood. He had given up a promising career as a lawyer to study for the priesthood. He had a profound concern for the poor which expressed itself first in helping the young chimney-sweeps of Paris. In 1703, while still a student, he founded a seminary for disadvantaged theological students and, at the same time, the Holy Ghost Congregation. Claude was ordained a priest in 1707, and died only two years later at the age of thirty years.

After Claude's death, the Congregation he had founded continued to flourish and to maintain his tradition of high academic standards, a simple lifestyle and a religious commitment to difficult ministries. Later, preparation of seminarians for the priesthood was widened to include foreign missionary service. "One may wonder why Fr. Beltout (the Superior General after the French Revolution) so readily decided to limit the Congregation to the training of missionaries. The answer is that the Concordat with Napoleon provided for diocesan seminaries with all the needed scholarships for poor students and thereby removed the main reason for the existence of the Holy Ghost Seminary."

Koren, Essays on the Spiritan Charism, p. 127). As the situation of the Church in France and the demands of the apostolate overseas grew and were modified, the Congregation adapted accordingly.
By the end of the eighteenth century some 1,200 priests had been educated at the seminary on rue Lhomond. It was temporarily suppressed at the time of the French Revolution. After the revolution it reopened and has continued to provide a home for members of the Congregation and others studying at universities in the Latin Quarter of Paris.

b) Francis Libermann

Francis Libermann was born in 1802 in Saverne, Alsace, the son of a Jewish rabbi, and was given the name Jacob. He became a Catholic in 1826, taking the name Francis. Soon after, he felt called to become a priest. However, a short time before he was due to be ordained he was stricken with epilepsy and his ordination was postponed indefinitely. Having spent thirteen years in various institutes of theological education, he became interested in a project to establish a society for the pastoral care and education of freed slaves. Francis was ordained a priest in 1841 and the same year opened the novitiate of the new society, the Congregation of the Holy Heart of Mary.

In 1848 an unusual event took place when, following negotiations between the two Congregations and the Holy See, all the members of the new congregation joined the Holy Ghost Congregation founded by des Places, and Libermann became its Superior General. This union brought an infusion of new members who revitalized the older congregation. Under Libermann's leadership the Congregation continued to grow and to develop its educational, missionary and pastoral work in many countries outside France and her colonies. Francis Libermann died on February 2, 1852, leaving behind a reputation for holiness.

Henry Koren, C.S.Sp. points out how easily Libermann changed his attitude with respect to scholarship and education in the light of what he saw as the needs of the missionary church during the ten years he said he needed for laying the foundations of the Congregation. In his Essays on the Spiritan Charism, Koren quotes Libermann:

"If the Spiritan Rule of Life is to be interpreted as meaning that everyone must go to the missions... If our rule says we may not have several houses in Europe "it is important that the constitutions of the Congregation be changed" (Notes et Documents IX, p. 293).

"In 1850 (Libermann) published a brochure about the Congregation. In its first paragraph he spoke about Fr. Poullart des Places as founder of the Congregation, and in its final paragraph he made an appeal for candidates having a special vocation to teach,"
adding that this would be their almost exclusive task” (Koren, p. 136).

“In his famous 1846 memorandum to Propaganda Fide he viewed it as ‘wholly the duty of the missionary to work ... also at the intellectual, agricultural and technical knowledge’ (N.D. VIII, 248). When his priests objected that the ‘missionary is not a school-master,’ he countered: ‘I understand that it would cost the missionaries very much [to act as teacher]. Nevertheless, it is urgent to undertake the step.’ ‘To abandon the schools is to destroy the future of the missions’” (N.D. IX, pp. 50 and 44).

“The widening of Libermann’s horizons should not surprise us. As always, he wished to be guided by what the Holy Spirit indicated in the concrete situations of life. ‘When he realized that the Congregation would “probably” be obliged to undertake the education of boys in junior seminaries, he also knew that this practically meant accepting colleges’ (N. D. XIII, p. 35). Libermann’s fully formed convictions at the end of his life concerning education continue to animate the Congregation’s educational philosophy.

II. Spiritan Marks of Education

a) Openness to the Spirit

In keeping with the dedication of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit, both des Places and Libermann regarded openness to the Spirit as the guiding principle of their lives and of the Congregation. This represented a departure from the traditional emphasis on blind obedience rather than on fidelity to the Spirit. Two examples of their openness to the Spirit are adaptability to change and respect for each person’s uniqueness. First, they showed a deep respect for the light of the Holy Spirit manifested in the changing circumstances of life. In education, this means responding to the most pressing educational needs of the people of their times. Second, they respected each one’s personal vocation as a manifestation of the Spirit’s guidance. In an educational context, this meant respect of each individual’s personality and talents.

Libermann’s respect for the Spirit at work in peoples and cultures led him to adopt an innovative approach to cross cultural education. In sharp contrast to the “assimilation” policy of both Church and State in the Spanish and Portuguese colonies of the time, he advocated respect for local cultures in both educational and missionary activities. “(The missionaries) must pay particular attention to which customs and habits are characteristic of the peoples and the land. They must carefully avoid disturbing these customs (unless they are against God’s law) and modifying them
They will simply try to make (the people) more perfect in their own way of life and in accord with their own custom. This attitude ruled not merely his own life but also imposed on him the greatest reverence for the way of being proper to individuals, not excluding those who wished to join the Congregation to further its objectives.

b) Global Vision

The missionary outlook introduced to the Congregation in the eighteenth century and reinforced by Libermann has given the Congregation a global vision which inspires the hope for the realization of one world united in peace and justice in the Kingdom of God. In education, it means working for the empowerment of peoples and their liberation from injustice, poverty and ignorance. Catholic belief presumes that the human person is essentially social, created in the image of God who is love, God who is communion, the one God who in essence is personal relations in love. It further presumes that humankind is destined to live eternally in loving union with God and all of humanity.

In education, our tradition has meant combining concern for the disadvantaged with openness to the needs of people from all walks of life. Their global mission in the service of the Kingdom of God enables Spiritans to bring to the poor empowerment through education and to bring to the rich a consciousness of their responsibility to work towards a global society where poverty will be eliminated.

c) A Sense of Community

The motto of the Congregation is "One Heart and One Soul," evoking the first Christian community in Jerusalem. As might be expected, therefore, a sense of community was highly prized by both des Places and Libermann. This is expressed in common living with shared prayer, meals, work and a simple lifestyle. In education, a sense of community translates into closeness to the students, a family spirit and accessibility.

Spiritans educators are mentors. As mentors they face two challenges. On the one hand, they are responsible for communicating a body of objective knowledge to students and holding them responsible for knowing that body of knowledge. On the other hand, they must provide nurture to students in their growth process towards human integration. This mentoring takes place in the ongoing dialogue between teacher and student. Both grow and become themselves through the dialogue. Relationship is at the core of the Spiritan educational process.
d) Concern for the Poor

Both des Places and Libermann focused their attention on the most needy people of their day. des Places first became interested in helping the young “Savoyards” or chimney-sweeps of Paris and later expanded his concern to helping poor theological students who would later work in the neglected rural parishes of France and in overseas missions. Libermann felt called by God to help the slaves and freed slaves in the old French colonies, whose miserable condition had been brought to his attention by two student friends, Eugene Tisserant (whose mother was Haitian) and Frederick Le Vavasseur from Reunion.

Concern for the poor remains a top priority for the Holy Spirit Congregation in fulfillment of its mission “to follow Jesus and to announce the Good News of the Kingdom” (SRL, 1), a priority which it shares with all religious congregations and with the Church in general. Education has remained a potent means of translating that concern into action. For many, education is the beginning of the Good News, leading to spiritual and social empowerment.

e) Commitment to Service

Closely associated with concern for the disadvantaged was the Founders’ commitment to service. des Places was not content simply to pursue his theological studies in Paris oblivious to what was going on around him. He was motivated by a spirit of service to others which inspired him to help the young chimney-sweeps and impoverished theological students. His untimely death in October 1709 was hastened by his prodigious efforts to develop his young society and to provide food for his community during the early months of the year when extremely cold weather caused disruption of the food supply and widespread famine in Paris.

Libermann also had a strong sense of service as shown by his total commitment to the development of his society in the service of the poor and disadvantaged people of his day. His spirit of service also led him to carry on a voluminous correspondence devoted to spiritual counseling in addition to his responsibilities as Superior General of the Congregation. He put service to others before his own welfare, regardless of his weak health. He saw education as service to the Church and to people in need.

f) High Academic Standards

The standards set by des Places for the education of priests were remarkable for his time, when requirements varied widely throughout the Church, in many cases amounting to no more than one and a half years of theological studies. He required
that the course of study should extend over at least six years to include two years of philosophy and four years of theology. He encouraged an additional two-year postgraduate course oriented to law or Scripture. He exemplified commitment to high academic standards in his own life. Having graduated “summa cum laude” as the youngest and brightest of several hundred students, he was chosen as valedictorian of his philosophy class. He then went on to earn his law degree and later took theology in Paris.

Although he had been a brilliant student himself, Libermann at first was not convinced of the need for high academic standards for members of his society. However, he changed his mind after he became Superior General of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit when he came to know the scholarly Father Gaultier who was widely respected in academic circles in Paris. Gaultier had endowed the seminary with a rich library and had attracted a circle of prominent scholars that included the great patrologist, J.P. Migne. Libermann’s policy of encouraging higher studies from then onwards was to provide the Congregation with a number of experts and specialists in various fields.

g) Academic Freedom

When Claude Poullart des Places arrived in Paris to study theology, the University of Paris was dominated by the Jansenist faction. Rather than compromise his beliefs, Claude preferred to forego taking a degree which would have required him to follow courses at the Sorbonne. He took his theology courses instead at the Jesuit School of Theology, in the prestigious College Louis LeGrand, across the street from the Sorbonne.

The struggle for academic freedom and refusal to conform to ways of thinking that were “politically correct” continued for many decades. Poullart des Place’s immediate successors preferred to sacrifice even the lure of a large endowment rather than give up their freedom to teach what they saw as the truth.

The Founders’ concern for freedom was rooted neither in a blind adherence to outdated ideas nor in an appeal to a direct communication from the Holy Spirit. They believed that the Spirit usually speaks to us through events in the contemporary world.

That is why des Places insisted that all his students should master mathematics and the “new-fangled” Newtonian physics as prerequisites for the study of theology. This is also why Libermann insisted on the over-riding importance of learning from experience rather than depending on outdated paradigms, when he undertook the giant task of evangelizing Africa.
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The foregoing brief survey shows that education in the Spiritan tradition is energized by values flowing from the living heritage of the Founders: openness to the Spirit, a strong sense of community, concern for the disadvantaged, a global vision, commitment to service, high academic standards and commitment to academic freedom.

III. Theological Foundations for the Spiritan Educational Ethos and Ministries

Ever aware of the theological image underlying our educational efforts, we turn to some elements and emphases that pervade Spiritan educational ministry. These elements accent and highlight dimensions of Christian adult living that are not the principal focus of education offered by others within the Catholic community, e.g., Jesuits, Marianists, Salesians, etc. These elements are inherent in and flow from our Spiritan vocation and way of life as evidenced in SRL, #18. What is more important, however, is how these attitudes and dispositions of heart are embodied in Spiritans who live our educational ministry. These philosophical and theological characteristics shape the image that embodies the education that we offer and can be found in all aspects of our institutions: modes of governance, curricula, faculty and student body composition, extracurricular activities, community service, standards of academic excellence, etc. Among these elements are:

- Indwelling Presence Of the Transcendent

We educate to bring people to an awareness of the indwelling of the Transcendent God within them (SRL #6). Spiritan educational ministry has a special emphasis on the indwelling of the Divine Spirit in every human person journeying toward becoming fully alive, humanly, spiritually, intellectually and socially. Spiritan education presumes that every human being possesses a specific vocation in and through which the personality unfolds and character is developed. This presumes that all our educational, evangelizing efforts seek to form and provide an “upbringing” in the image of Christ, who is “the image of the unseen God” (Colossians 1:15). Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit (Romans 8:14; Galatians 5:18) those whom we serve in educational ministry are being transformed into and reflect that image in brighter and brighter glory” (2 Corinthians 3:18). “This is the working of the Lord who is the Spirit” (2 Cor. 3:18). What we are sent to teach is meant to bring all to realize that they “are a temple of God with the Spirit of God living in” them as temples who are holy (1 Cor. 3:16-17).