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# What We Have Heard, What We Have Seen. A Theological Reflection on the XX General Chapter at Bagamoyo

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James Chukwuma Okoye became the Director of the Center for Spiritan Studies at Duquesne University, Pittsburgh, this Fall. He taught for sixteen years (1996-2012) at Catholic Theological Union, Chicago, becoming a full professor in 2008 and holding the Carroll Stuhlmueller Chair of Old Testament Studies. Prior to that, he had been a *peritus* helping to prepare the first Synod for Africa (1992-1994), general councilor in Rome (1986-1992) and Provincial Superior of the Province of Nigeria. A graduate of the Pontifical Biblical Institute, Rome, he did MA studies in Biblical Languages and the doctorate in Targums in Oxford University (England), with a thesis on the Palestinian Targum to Genesis 1—11 (1980). His most recent books are *Israel and the Nations: A Mission Theology of the Old Testament* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2006) and *Scripture in the Church. The Synod on the Word of God and the Post-Synodal Exhortation Verbum Domini* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2011).

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## WHAT WE HAVE HEARD, WHAT WE HAVE SEEN WITH OUR EYES

What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we looked upon and touched with our hands concerns the Word of life—for the life was made visible; we have seen it and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was made visible to us (1 John 1:1-2).

### What We Have Heard

We began this chapter with a day's recollection; it is appropriate that we end it with a theological reflection. In so doing, we underline the fact that we have been in a process of prayerful discernment of Spiritan life and options for the immediate future.

Bagamoyo 2012 is about life, our life as Spiritans and that of those to whom we are sent. We elaborated *an experience*, not a text. We heard afresh the Word of life. The living Word of God came and went among us in his Spirit. We saw and touched him, we have received new life from him. Renewed and more deeply committed to the evangelization of the poor, we proclaim what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes and touched with our hands.

Bagamoyo made history. Karl Rahner<sup>1</sup> marked three periods of the Church: Jewish Christianity, the Hellenistic and European Church, and the “*world church*” of Vatican II (1962-65). At Bagamoyo, we as a congregation emerged as a truly worldwide “*Rainbow Family*” (Pierre Schouver at Torre d’Aguilha) defined by a common mission to the poor and in which every member feels a citizen wherever he or she is on mission. The language and culture blocks of the past now belong to history. The Union of the Circumscriptions of Europe elected an African as their delegate, the African Kenyan confreres elected an Irish delegate! In its three hundred year history, this is the first time the congregation is holding a general chapter on African soil. By the grace of God, over 90% of candidates in formation come from the southern hemisphere, the majority being from Africa. The congregation has come home to Africa to roost.

Right from the beginning we knew this was a Chapter of the Holy Spirit. We implored the Holy Spirit to make us docile to his promptings as was the Holy Heart of Mary and through us to produce results of holiness and salvation for souls. Certain structures put in place before the chapter helped promote solidarity. The meetings of new superiors in Rome each year since

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Pierre Haas and his council (1986-1992) familiarized superiors with one another and promoted collective concern for the entire congregation. The Unions of Circumscriptions fostered by Jean Paul Hoch and his council (2004-12) formed superiors to think *congregationally* and act *locally*. At Bagamoyo, most of us knew each other on a first name basis. Most spoke or understood two of the three languages of the congregation (English, French and Portuguese) and quite a few spoke and understood the three! It used to be that successes were “*our*” successes, problems “*their*” problems; now no longer. The successes and failures of individual confreres and circumscriptions have become the concern of us all. The corridors, coffee breaks and aperitifs are important participants at any chapter, also here at Bagamoyo. That is where some of the business of the chapter is transacted, like the election of the superior general and his council. The food was great, the atmosphere relaxing. Our Tanzanian confreres pulled out all stops to make us welcome and comfortable. The chapter process worked well and the spirit was very good, even if the drama of elections and the toll of hard work began to register in the fourth week. We had an abiding sadness: the absence of our superior general, Jean Paul Hoch, due to ill health. We kept him informed of the progress of the chapter; he in turn kept in spiritual union of suffering with us. We remain eternally grateful to him and his council for their service of leadership and the excellent preparation that made our work easier.

### **What We Have Seen**

*Bagamoyo* means “*here I throw down my heart.*” It was a point of no return for African slaves taken across the Indian Ocean by Arab slave traders. Spiritan pioneers planted the cross on Bagamoyo Beach on July 16, 1868. They were among the first to bring the light of Christ to the whole of East Africa. They bought and freed slaves and gave them new life through education, agriculture, arts and crafts. Through their efforts, Bagamoyo came to mean “*here I release my spirit*” for a full human life. We came here on pilgrimage in the footsteps of our heroic Spiritan pioneers. Urged on by their total self-offer, we experienced a renewal in the Spirit.

Events of note punctuated the chapter. Polycarp Cardinal Pengo of the archdiocese of Dar es-Salaam presided over the Welcoming Eucharist on Sunday, June 24, with 21 bishops, including the Apostolic Nuncio and almost the entire Tanzanian Episcopal Conference. The French Ambassador was in attendance. An enthusiastic Swahili choir colorfully sang the liturgy. That evening, Bishop Augustine Shao of Zanzibar, Spiritan, re-enacted the arrival here of Spiritan pioneers. He came by boat, waded through the waters and handed over to us

the Cross of Christ. On June 29, the President of Tanzania, His Excellency Mrisho Kikwete (who hails from Bagamoyo) officially opened Stella Maris Hostel where the chapter was holding and lunched with us. A Muslim and product of Spiritan education, he pleaded that we extend our involvement in development to the empowerment of rural women. The weekend of July 7-8 we went on pilgrimage to Zanzibar where the first Spiritans arrived on June 16, 1863. On July 14, we received the former President of Tanzania, Mr. Benjamin William Mkapa, a Catholic and another product of Spiritan education, with a retinue of highly placed past students of Spiritans. They stayed for the perpetual profession of six confreres (two Tanzanians, two Kenyans, one Ugandan and one Ethiopian) soon to receive mission appointment. Two days afterwards, July 16, we celebrated the arrival of Spiritans in Bagamoyo this day 144 years ago with a ceremony at the grave of the pioneers and Eucharist at the Grotto. Bishop Rogath Kirmayo, Spiritan, bishop of Same and former general councilor, presided the Eucharist on July 18 and dined with us.

### **The Word of Life**

Touched by the Word of Life, the chapter focused on two urgencies of our times: *Spiritans Identity* and *Solidarity in Mission*.

### **Spiritans Identity: Apostolic Life for the Evangelization of the “Poor”**

We chose Rom 12:11 as our motto: “be fervent in spirit.” The words of Libermann continued to ring in our ears.

I want our project to be solid, fervent and apostolic; in other words, a commitment to all or nothing! This “all” is a great deal, and weak people will not be ready to give or do so much. But this is something to be happy about: we don’t want timid people joining a Congregation which is completely apostolic. We only need fervent and generous members who will give themselves entirely and are ready to undertake and suffer all things for the greater glory of God. I believe that all who are called to give themselves to God in this work must be ready to undertake and suffer anything. They will be left in no doubt when they see that the Rule demands a high state of perfection and a total dedication to the Lord (December 28, 1939. *N.D.* I, 659-65. *Spiritans Anthology*, 104-105).

We sought to make Libermann’s words true of us and of every Spiritan. We placed a new accent on Spiritans identity as a *religious missionary* institute, dedicated to the Holy Spirit under the invocation of the Holy Heart of Mary (*SRL* 2). Our mission as

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described in *SRL* 4 gives the thrust to our apostolic life which we live in community, practicing the evangelical counsels. We even hit upon a new phrase to express this identity: “*Spiritan culture*.” For the coming eight years, it will be a priority of the general council to build up and strengthen our identity. A part of this animation may be greater consciousness of the place of the Holy Spirit in our Spiritan life and mission.<sup>2</sup> The general council will continue the strengthening of research and animation on Spiritan spirituality (mandated by Torre d’Aguilha), making online materials in this available in the three languages of the congregation.

Mission along the lines defined by *SRL* 4 is central to our identity.<sup>3</sup>

The evangelization of the “poor” (cf. Luke 4:18) is our purpose. Therefore we 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. We also willingly accept tasks for which the Church has difficulty in finding workers.

This mission to the poor molds our Spiritan formation, prayer, the practice of the evangelical counsels and the various structures of governance. We felt a new call to renew our radical commitment to the evangelical counsels in our service of the poor. The poor for us are the “poor” (*ptōchoi*, ‘*anawīm*) of Luke 4:18, that is, people whose existence depends on another, who “beg for their bread” literally, figuratively or spiritually. Evangelization is for us kingdom-related, the integral salvation of people reflected in Paul VI’s *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 18:

“For the Church, evangelizing means bringing the Good News into all the strata of humanity, and through its influence transforming humanity from within and making it new.”

In obedience to the “*signs of the times*,” we wish to stress mission *ad gentes*, JPIC, education as liberation and interreligious dialogue. We are determined to cross and transform the various frontiers—ethnic and geographical, cultural and religious (cf. Maynooth 1998: 2, 5-6).

Community life is our way of mission; it is the strongest symbol of who we are,<sup>4</sup> our foremost form of evangelization and of experiencing God (Torre d’Aguila 13.4.2).<sup>5</sup> The capacity to live in community must be a decisive factor in admitting a candidate and especially in advancing him to final profession. We insisted on the “community mission statement” (*SRL* 44.3;

French *projet communautaire*) as an ongoing tool of animation of our common life and mission. Some community leadership has been ineffectual. Renewal will depend to a great extent on the effective service of community superiors as bridge-builders and guarantors of the unity of the community. Superiors are to lead and supervise the community in its fidelity to the gospel of Christ and the mission of the congregation. They will be firm and rigorous in insisting that every confrere and community carry out the orientations coming from this chapter, the general council and the circumscriptions.<sup>6</sup> We will assure these superiors adequate formation, perhaps in annual meetings, for the mission entrusted to them. We will periodically evaluate their performance.

Brothers have been an indispensable part of Spiritan life and mission. They outnumber priests in the pioneers' graveyard at Bagamoyo. We asked the general council to promote this vital arm of the Spiritan vocation, making sure that brothers share important responsibilities.<sup>7</sup> In future chapters, the general council will give a vote to brothers who have not been elected delegates but whom it invites. As a sign of the new order, we elected a brother, Marc Tyrant, to the general council; he had been one of the three moderators of the chapter!

We drew some conclusions from revisiting our identity. We reworked and strengthened the *Guide for Spiritan Formation* to make sure that Spiritan formation is not merely for self-actualization but prepares candidates for our mission in community for the evangelization of the poor. As part of initial formation, each circumscription will arrange for a period of missionary experience (*stage*). This experience will normally last for two years and be in a culture different from that of the candidate. This stage of formation is crucial for the evaluation of the religious missionary vocation of the candidate. We pondered for long whether the General Council should present choices for mission appointment by type of mission or country of work. In the end we decided to lump them all together: type of ministry, activities and country of work.<sup>8</sup> Mission appointment is open-ended and is in principle intended to be of long duration. It will require the agreement of the sending and receiving superiors and approval by the superior general and his council to withdraw a person from his mission. Specializations and further studies are in view of our common mission and must be done in obedience to lawful superiors. Initiation to JPIC will be obligatory in all stages of formation and our works of education will have a preferential option for the poor and marginalized.<sup>9</sup> We pondered why some confreres tend not to persevere on mission or shun the difficult missions proper to our charism. We decided that such persons

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and others intent on their own projects and self-realization will be pursued with compassion and firmness, but that such situations should not be allowed to linger. After the due dialogue foreseen by the *Spiritan Rule of Life*, due process will take its course.

Our discernment process will continue on some spheres of Spiritan identity. The status of “associates” caused us some soul-searching. We decided on the term, “*Spiritan lay Associates*” and asked the general council to clarify their statute. The substantial issue in the drawn-out debate touched on the laity’s vocation “in” the world, our identity as a *religious* missionary institute and how to respect the variety of experiences with associates.

Discernment concerning help to needy families of members was not easy. The *Spiritan Rule of Life* made this a responsibility of the circumscription of origin (SRL 40.1). It was pointed out that modalities differ. Southern confreres generally need financial help for families in need, northern confreres generally ask for a considerable amount of time of compassionate leave at the Congregation’s expense. It was finally decided to refer to the Rule but to add the instances of the confrere concerned, his community and the superior of the mission of appointment.<sup>10</sup> We believe that this would contribute to a sense of one’s full belonging to his circumscription of mission.

We adopted a charter for the protection of minors. We as a congregation are deeply sorry for the failures of some members in this regard and are resolute about protecting the human and spiritual good of minors entrusted to our care.

### **Spiritan Solidarity**

SRL, 29.1 lays out the implications of our motto *cor unum et anima una* (one heart and one soul, Acts 4:42) as follows: “sharing our possessions and our talents, mutual support and affection, and discerning in common God’s will for the community and for its mission.” Even with the work of the chapter some of us took out time to listen to the needs of other circumscriptions to see how they might help. We reinforced solidarity between communities and circumscriptions with various measures. For example, we decided to reserve 5% of Cor Unum, the official channel of solidarity for formation in the congregation, for the training of formators.<sup>11</sup> We will reinforce the Apostolic Projects Fund to enable financial support for new and primary evangelization projects and fragile missions.<sup>12</sup> And we propose to revisit the inventory of moveable and immoveable goods with the aim of sharing resources.<sup>13</sup>

The Unions of Circumscriptions have proven a valuable structure of solidarity; we voted to write them into the Rule of Life, while allowing them all flexibility. Foundations and Districts are abolished, leaving Provinces and Groups. Torre d’Aguilha mandated a study of the possible centralization of the Second Cycle. We agreed to act on this matter, stipulating that the general council, in collaboration with the circumscriptions and Unions, work towards the rationalization of the Second Cycle, including finance, students and formators, and the location of international formation communities.<sup>14</sup> The general council will also encourage the exchange of personnel for our educational works.<sup>15</sup> There was even a suggestion that solidarity and collective responsibility would be promoted if general councilors were not correspondents for their home regions.<sup>16</sup>

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The election of the superior general and his council is one of the most important businesses of a chapter. We elected superior general John Francis Fogarty the Provincial Superior of the United States of America. We gave him six councilors, of whom we elected Pierre Jubinville of Paraguay as First Assistant and Bede Ukwuije of Nigeria South-East as Second Assistant. As already mentioned, we elected a brother general councilor who happens to be a physician by profession.

### **Conclusion**

I conclude with Paul’s appeal in Rom 12:1-2, 11.

I urge you, therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, your spiritual worship. Do not conform yourselves to this age but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and pleasing and perfect... Do not grow slack in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord.

What Paul says here, “offer your bodies as *a living sacrifice* ... your spiritual worship,” corresponds to what Libermann describes as “*practical union*.” In practical union, we live our whole life and do our work in close union with God in a conscious spirit of self-offer. For “the more the Holy Spirit becomes the principle of the movements of our soul, the more he influences our sentiments and dispositions, the more we follow him, the more perfect also will be life in us and so much more holy shall we be” (Libermann, Commentary on John 3:5. *Spiritans Anthology*, 116). The result is that we

live all day long in practical union with God; not only doing one’s holy duties in the spirit in which they should



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be done, but also exercising a gentle and peaceful guard over oneself, and accomplishing everything according to God's good pleasure in a spirit of faith and love. The missionary's joys, difficulties, sufferings, works of zeal, and even failures are lived in the Spirit of God (Instructions for Missionaries, 1851. Ch. 13).

Practical union is not enough by itself. It is fed and nourished by prayer ("contemplative union" in Libermann's terms). So, "we... have to work at [prayer], because without it, we cannot really enter into practical action, and practical action is not good if it is not joined to contemplative union... they will perfect each other and produce the complete life" (Last Conferences to Novices, 1851. *Spiritual Anthology*, 209-10). We shall faithfully use the rich prayer traditions of the church, being faithful to daily personal prayer for at least half an hour (*SRL*, 91). In this manner we respond more adequately to the pull we feel to greater interiority and achieve greater integration of prayer and work in our evangelization of the poor.<sup>17</sup>

We began this chapter by re-dedicating ourselves to the Holy Spirit, imploring him to renew us in spirit and make us instruments of salvation for the poor. We conclude it in grateful thanksgiving for graces received and for being with us during this process of discernment. News arrived the afternoon of July 18 that a ferry sank between Dar es-Salaam and Zanzibar, the very route we took on July 7-8. Of over 300 persons in the ferry only about half are accounted for. The casualties include a priest of the diocese of Zanzibar. We thank God for our safe journey, while begging him for mercy on those who perished in the waters.

We now return home to our confreres to share with them "what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we looked upon and touched with our hands [concerning] the Word of life... the eternal life that was with the Father and was made visible to us" (1 John 1:1-2). Some chapters mint texts. Bagamoyo is not a text, but an *experience* of the Holy Spirit.

"Be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord."<sup>18</sup>

### **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup>"Towards a Fundamental Theological Interpretation of Vatican II," *Theological Studies*, 40/4 (1979) 716-727.

<sup>2</sup>Cf. On Spiritan Identity and Vocation (Final Draft, July 16, no. 8).

<sup>3</sup>Spiritual Identity and Vocation, 1.

<sup>4</sup>Spiritual Identity and Vocation (Draft 1, July 10, 2012) 1

<sup>5</sup>Fraternal Life in Community (Draft 2, 1).

<sup>6</sup>Fraternal Life in Community (January 19) proposal 5.

<sup>7</sup>Spiritans Identity and Vocation (Amendments July 19) no. 10.

<sup>8</sup>Mission in a Globalized World (Jan 19) no. 16.

<sup>9</sup>Draft Document on Mission, 2.2

<sup>10</sup>Fraternal Life in Community (January 19) proposal 4.

<sup>11</sup>Finance Proposals (July 20).

<sup>12</sup>Ibid.

<sup>13</sup>Financial Solidarity (General Bursar), no. 8.

<sup>14</sup>Formation for Mission (Draft 2, Amendment to no. 4, July 19).

<sup>15</sup>Mission in a Globalized World (January 19) no. 32.

<sup>16</sup>Commission 9 (July 12).

<sup>17</sup>On Spiritans Identity and Vocation (July 10) no. 10.

<sup>18</sup>I saw the function of “theologian/spiritual director” of the chapter as helping articulate your thoughts, presenting you with a balance sheet of where you have been, and sometimes attempting to clarify the theological and spiritual foundations of the issues you discuss.