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SPIRITAN MISSION TO SOUTH-EAST ASIA – TEN YEARS ON

Brian McLaughlin,
C.S.Sp.

Brian McLaughlin enjoyed the challenge of missionary work in Brazil. Later, having done research on behalf of the General Council into a new initiative in South-East Asia, he was part of the first Group to go there in 1997. Since his ordination in 1967 he has been involved in leadership roles within the Congregation in Ireland, Brazil and Philippines for a total of more than 20 years. Recently he has worked part-time in counselling and also in the area of spiritual direction.

*Asia contains over 60% of
the world's population...*

Why did we go to South-East Asia?

“Listening” was one of the key words at the General Chapter of the Congregation in Itaici, Brazil in 1992. The methodology was about listening to what Spiritans were actually doing in different parts of the world, and trying to discern what “mission” might be for us TODAY, and where, and how, the Spirit might be calling us to minister. Regarding the decision to expand in Asia, two presentations at the Chapter were particularly influential. Firstly, the delegates were opened up to a new and unfamiliar culture through the presentation from Pakistan, which was, up to then, the only presence of the Congregation in Asia. Secondly, there was that of the Pont-Praslin Centre in Mauritius, where Christians, Muslims and Hindus come together. Also, another delegate gave a brief input on his sabbatical in India.

Asia contains over 60% of the world's population, with 21% in China alone. A high percentage lives below the poverty line. The great world religions and philosophies, Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Taoism, Judaism, Christianity, Confucianism and Shintoism, all began there. Yet, as the Chapter stated, “the message of the Gospel has scarcely found a home there,” as Christians comprise only 2.8% of the population. Beside the richness of religious traditions, the countries of Asia have the most varied cultural traditions. Further, these countries continue to assume ever-greater influence in terms of world trade. As the Chapter put it, “these facts cannot be simply overlooked by an international, missionary Congregation.” The delegates concluded that “listening” more to the cultures and religions of the East would certainly enrich us.

In fact, during the Chapter the idea had been percolating that, after our long history in Africa, and our growing African membership, the Congregation should now be looking towards missions outside Africa. So, a decision was taken that “another initiative in Asia” be considered and explored. These ideas were given extended life after the Chapter by the widely circulated article, dated May 1994, of that great Spiritan, Henry Koren, entitled “Are we putting too many eggs in one basket? – a plea for further internationalisation.” The “basket” was Africa, and his alternative for expansion was the Far East.

The Decision.

On the invitation of the General Council, from late 1995 on, I gathered information about a possible mission in South-East Asia through contacts with Congregations, entities and individuals in U.S., France, Ireland and Rome. Following this, the General Council decided on initial research in Thailand, Vietnam, Taiwan, Japan, Philippines, and Hong Kong, with brief visits to China and Macao. Initial criteria, to be checked out during the visits, were established. Among these were:

- The possibility of contact and encounter with Asian cultures and the great world religions.
- Work with the poor and underprivileged.
- Places which offer the possibility of our African confreres being part of the new initiative, given that in fifteen years time we will be very much dependent on them for personnel."

Then followed visits to these countries over a period of eighteen weeks.

Based on the report on these visits, and after much discussion, the General Council redefined the criteria for the selection of the places where we should start. In view of later developments relevant among these were:

- We give preference to first evangelisation or some specific/specialised service to the local church or society, or a parish situation, at least initially, as long as it permits the possibility of other outreaches.
- The possibility of awakening missionary vocations. While we are not going to Asia specifically to find vocations, this objective is not to be excluded in the context of our presence and development there.

Eventually the Council opted for Vietnam, Philippines and Taiwan. It was decided that a return visit to these be made by Fr. Schouwer, the then Superior General, and myself. This took place in August 1996. In underlining our position with the various Bishops we stressed: "We come as missionaries with a vision of evangelisation and of helping the local church itself to be more missionary. Our option is to be with the poor and those on the margin, to meet people in society beyond the borders of the established Church, to share our faith with people of other religions and cultures. Initially, this could be from a parish base, as we are new in the country and new to its culture... However, we are not coming to 'plug gaps'. We want, again after a period of adaptation, to be available to the local church for more specialised ministries e.g. youth, justice, formation at all

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*Community is an essential
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levels, minorities, interreligious dialogue etc. Community is an essential part of our lifestyle. We also emphasise teamwork and want to collaborate closely with others.” Following this visit the General Council made the following decisions:

- 1) We will take new initiatives in Asia.
 - a. An initial team (group) of four will be assigned to the Philippines to work in the **diocese of Iligan, Mindanao.**
 - b. A presence in Manila is envisaged at a later stage.
 - c. An initial team (group) of four will be assigned to Taiwan to work in the **diocese of Hsinchu.**
 - d. We continue to seek ways of having a presence in **Vietnam** in the future especially through educational and development projects.
- 2) We encourage confreres, who are willing and have the required aptitudes, to become involved as teachers in Continental China.

Given that foreign missionaries are not allowed in Vietnam, its inclusion might appear strange at first sight. It is a poor country - though this is now changing – and its people have suffered much. Its needs, material and pastoral, are great. It was thought that we could make a real contribution there at both levels. Moreover, we already had Vietnamese expatriates joining the Congregation’s formation programme in Houston, Texas, US.

Beginnings

Taiwan and Philippines

*...two Teams of four each
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As a result of the above decisions two Teams of four each were appointed to Taiwan and Philippines. The first challenge facing us was learning a new language. The option in Taiwan was to learn mandarin, instead of Taiwanese. The former is the “official” language, while the latter is spoken by many in their homes. However, mandarin would give access to Continental China. Both are very demanding, entailing at least two years of individual tuition and study in order to gain a basic mastery. The group in the Philippines spent six months studying “Cebuano” – one of the five major dialects in the country - at a language school run by the Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers. After this, the group split up for five weeks before coming together again to begin work in the Diocese of Iligan. During this time three of them went to live with different Diocesan priests in order to

gain more fluency with the language and an understanding of the pastoral approach in Filipino parishes. This custom has continued with all new arrivals since.

During their language studies, the confreres in Taiwan tried to postpone invitations to start some ministry in order to focus on the language. They only took weekend ministry in English. Jean-Paul and Sean started in a parish set-up, where many of the parishioners were English-speaking immigrants. Sean also began his involvement in prison ministry. James' work was in the ministry to migrants, quickly becoming Diocesan coordinator, while Jean-Pascal moved into Campus Ministry and was soon appointed Diocesan Youth Chaplain.

...the people were poor farmers eking out an existence on subsistence farming.

In Philippines the Congregation was given responsibility for a new parish, Our Lady of Fatima, Digkilaan and the two "younger" men went there. This parish was situated in the mountains, covering a wide area and with 34 small centres, some of which could only be reached on foot. The majority of the people were poor farmers eking out an existence on subsistence farming. When they arrived there was not yet electricity in the area. Daniel immediately became spiritual-director and teacher in the Diocesan Junior Seminary, chaplain to the Filipino-Chinese Community and part of various groups involved in Christian-Muslim dialogue. My initial ministry was as diocesan coordinator for the formation of lay ministers, but I was also involved with groups linked to the family and prison ministries, as well as a Centre for abused girls and young women. So, a great variety of ministries, even at this early stage, but we were happy that all these met the goals of our Mission to be "at the service of local churches."

Vietnam

The presence of a member of the Congregation began in 2002 with the arrival of Brian Fulton of the English Province. He came in partnership with the NGO *Les Orphelins Apprentis d'Auteuil*, which set up a project in Qhuy Nhon 400 Km. from Ho Chi Minh City. As with his colleagues in Taiwan and Philippines, his first task was language studies. Apart from the educational work with Auteuil for children of lepers, he became involved in other social projects for poor families, and a project initiated by his confrere Jean-Pascal in Taiwan for the education of poor Vietnamese children. Tragically, Brian died of a heart attack on 2nd February 2006. At a commemorative Mass organized by the Diocese of Ho Chi Minh, the Auxiliary Bishop praised him as a model religious and a foreigner who came to serve the Vietnamese people.

...Brian died of a heart attack...

Ten years on

Taiwan

The tenth anniversary celebrations were combined with the opening of a new Central House for the Community at the parish of Saint John, Hsinchu for which the Spiritans have pastoral responsibility, along with the affiliated churches of Holy Rosary and St. Joan of Arc. The day was very well planned and the participants celebrated Eucharist together, at which the Bishop presided. It was great to see the number of friends and co-workers of the Spiritans who came. I was particularly struck by the number of Diocesan clergy, a sign of how well the Spiritans have settled in, and been accepted, in the Diocese.

The original group of 4 has grown to 10...

The original group of 4 has grown to 10, with representation from Senegal, Portugal, Vietnam, US, Nigeria and Ghana. This is in line with current Congregational policy of trying to have at least two colleagues from any one country, particularly for those beginning their missionary apostolate.

The variety of nationalities is striking, as also are the ministries they are involved in. Having spent six years in the Diocesan Junior Seminary, one continues as Diocesan Coordinator of Campus Ministry and is also attached to the parish of Saint John, where another Spiritan is Pastor. Yet another who spent 3 years living in a “halfway house” for young offenders, will soon be moving fulltime into prison ministry, a challenging task with five detention centres in the diocese. The two Vietnamese confreres are in Holy Spirit parish. One of these will probably move into Migrant ministry. Another Spiritan now holds the very important post of Diocesan Coordinator for Ecumenism and inter-religious dialogue. While I was there over 1,000 participants from many different faiths anticipated Christmas at a very successful function organized by him. He has also been heavily involved in the scout movement since his arrival. The latest arrivals have their noses to the language grindstone, but also do ministry with different English-speaking communities. One of them is football Coordinator to the best Senior High School in the City – a great opportunity for contact with youth.

One of them is football Coordinator...

For two years, two young Vietnamese who were doing their Overseas Training Programme, joined the Community. They have now returned to Chicago to continue their studies for the priesthood. Again, in a very short space of time, an Associate programme is underway with some 9 lay people, who meet monthly with members of the Community, exploring ways of closer affiliation with the Spiritans.

...260 children are participating in the programme.

A very significant outreach programme is the support given for the education of poor children in Vietnam. Through funding from Taiwan, Japan, U.S., Canada, France, Italy, Portugal, Germany and Ireland, 260 children are participating in the programme. The fund-raising in Taiwan is a ministry in itself, making people aware of the poverty elsewhere. There is a child-to-child connection, with classes, and individuals, in the High School undertaking the sponsorship. A programme of University Students international volunteers is also taking shape, in collaboration with the Spiritans in Tanzania in the area of education. A first group of 16 went to Bagamoyo in August 2008.

The plans for the future include expansion into a new Diocese – possibly Taipei or Taichung. Those assigned to this may learn Taiwanese instead of Mandarin. While not the official language, it is, however, the one spoken by the majority in their homes, especially in the Southern part of Taiwan. Probably, the ministry will be from a parish base, giving the opportunity for involvement in more specialised ministries to the confreres themselves and to the parishioners. Spiritans do not want to be seen just as missionary “specialists”, but as people involved in trying to help the local church become more missionary.

The confreres are also very eager to plan a form of insertion in Mainland China, and are working to build up contacts there, and to plan for personnel and for financial support. They want to be ready for the “moment of God”, 250 years after Fr. Pottier, Spiritan, went to Sichuan Province.

Philippines

There is a similar increase in personnel and ministries in the Philippines. Today there are 11 in the Community, 6 of whom are from Nigeria. Two come from Cameroon and one from USA . Finally there are two Spiritans from Tanzania. With two exceptions, all are on their first assignment after ordination.

Some of the ministries taken on originally continue – e.g. the mountain parish in Digkilaan; Christian-Muslim dialogue, and spiritual direction in the Seminary. Some, in which there was initial involvement, have developed – e.g. the focus in the prison ministry has been expanded to involve working with the prisoners’ families; the Filipino-Chinese Community has developed into a non-territorial parish. With financial help from our European Provinces, a small scale modern farm, overseen by a lay volunteer from France, has been started near the parish of Digkilaan with

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the aim of training local farmers in modern farming techniques and improving the quality of their products and of their lives – as well as providing some income for the new Spiritan formation programme.

As mentioned, the founding of the Congregation in a particular place was not to be one of the criteria in going to Asia. However, the General Council indicated that “this objective is not to be excluded in the context of our presence and development there.” We thought that, after a five-year period, we would be more at ease with the Filipino culture and have a better understanding of, and apostolate to, youth. After much discernment, an overall formation plan was developed and contact made with the first aspirants in 2004. Today there is a fine formation house on the outskirts of Iligan City with three Postulants, all of whom are university graduates. The first novitiate began in May 2008.

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The beginning of the formation programme in Philippines owes much to the various apostolates with youth, which the Community is involved in - the excellent “Catholic Campus Ministry Centre” where third level students meet, share their activities and faith and have a variety of outreach programmes to their peers; also the chaplaincies to Colleges and Universities. Finally, since 2001 a member of the Community has been Chaplain to the Mercy Community Hospital in Iligan, which, apart from the ministry to the patients and staff, also provides some opportunity for a “dialogue of life” with the many Muslim patients – 50% of the total – and their visiting families.

Vietnam

Certainly the visit to Vietnam was a real morale booster. Earlier plans had been centred on Brian Fulton and with his unexpected death, inevitable doubts arose about our future presence there. But, thankfully, that presence has grown to three confreres – Pat, former Irish Provincial, Frederic from Belgium and Trinh from Vietnam itself, but who came to the US in 1993 for medical treatment and joined the Congregation there. The three arrived in Ho Chi Minh City on 24th September 2007. Obviously, for Pat and Frederic, the learning of the language is the present priority, but they also do some English teaching. Trinh is catching up on meeting friends and is also involved in visiting various social projects, particularly a couple which are receiving some financial support through Spiritan contacts living abroad. As with Brian Fulton, the groups hope to serve the Vietnamese people in ways acceptable to the Government.

*But, thankfully, that
presence has grown...*

Candidates from Vietnam may also join, at a later stage, the Spiritan Formation Programme of the Union of Circumscriptions – Philippines and Taiwan-Vietnam - which may also include the Circumscriptions of Papua New Guinea and Australia. A community of Spiritan Students in Theology opened in 2009 in Manila for all students of the Union. Similarly, the Novitiate may, for practical reasons, be organized jointly among the members from the different countries.

Some characteristics of Spiritan approach to mission today

While not necessarily to be taken as a model, the above story of the new initiative in South-East Asia does highlight changes in approach to mission, which are characteristic of the Spiritan missionary charism as lived by its members in various parts of the world today.

Internationality

From very early on, the Congregation became international as the original French members shared their charism in other countries. Today, the Spiritans are present in 65 different countries worldwide. Further, Mission Teams and Communities are now made up of Spiritans coming from different countries and cultures, as is very obvious in the personnel make-up in South-East Asia. Missionaries gain from the riches of working alongside confreres from a different culture, and face the challenges that this implies, as all try together to adapt to the local culture where they now live and work.

Smaller mission groups - from founders to partners

Despite the fact that the membership of the Congregation has fallen from around 5,000 in the 1960s to just under 3,000 today, the number of countries in which Spiritans work has increased significantly. This increase is linked to a shift from being the “founders” of the local church, to being firmly at its service. While first evangelization remains very much part of our charism, and members live in such situations where the Word of God has not been heard, or scarcely heard, the Catholic Church is already established in most places where we are today. In the past, Spiritans were the people who founded the Church in a particular place through education and catechesis of laity, the training of diocesan clergy and the founding of indigenous Religious Congregations of men and women. Candidates to our own Congregation were only accepted after the Church had a firm footing in the particular place. Now, instead of being the dominant force in a diocese, our role is one of supporting the

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local church and working as partners alongside local laity, clergy and religious. As our Rule of Life puts it: “Any particular work is taken on in communion with the Church as it is in our time. The responsibility for carrying on Christ’s mission belongs in each place to the local Church. We, in keeping with the calling that is proper to us, participate in this mission.” (SRL 13)

Increase in the variety of ministries Spiritans are now involved in

“Paratus ad omnia” – “prepared for everything” – was one of the catch phrases during our formation in the past. It typified the Spiritan ideal of being prepared to go where the need was greatest and to adapt one’s ministry to the local, and ever-changing, situation. In this spirit, and just as the number of countries where Spiritans now live has increased, so also have the variety of ministries they are involved in. While we continue to work in parishes, these are, increasingly, seen as the area of ministry of the secular clergy and laity. This allows us to offer our services to the local church for more specialised ministries, and this is happening in South-East Asia. Apart from those mentioned above, worldwide, Spiritans are heavily committed to other needs as these arise in our society – e.g. HIV Aids; projects focusing on the care of the earth; accompanying immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers etc. Also, the new emphasis on smaller groups allows for greater mobility – of doing a job and moving on.

From northern to southern hemisphere – and back again

Among our contributions to any local church where we are, is to help to make it more missionary. One very concrete way of doing this is by founding the Congregation there. The formation of Spiritans in Africa and Latin America constitutes a very visible reminder of the inherent missionary dimension of the Church to their local churches. Of the 32 missionaries in South-East Asia, 23 are from Africa or Asia (Vietnamese who joined in US). This is typical of the membership trend in the Congregation today. On 5th December 2009 there were 2,865 members. 1,363 of these were from Europe and North America – but with almost a 1,000 of these aged 65 or over. More striking are the statistics on formation. Of the 972 in initial formation in March 2009, 38 were European and 8 were North American/Canadian – with the vast majority from Africa, (819), Latin America, (50) and Indian Ocean and Asia, (57). The growth, and future, of the Congregation now lies firmly with our members from the Southern Hemisphere.

Cultures

One very obvious thing about the mission in South-East Asia is the clearly different cultures (note the plural) in the three countries. Vietnam, Taiwan and Philippines are each, culturally, very different. So, while speaking of the “mission to South-East Asia”, or the “Region of South-East Asia”, may feel like we are talking of something homogeneous, in reality, we are not. In the future we will, hopefully, have an increasing Vietnamese contribution to the Congregation, as, also, a Taiwanese contribution and a Filipino contribution – not some nebulous “Asian” influence. Do we appreciate the cultural differences of the confreres from different countries in Africa, South-America and Asia who now live among us? Do we appreciate the gifts they bring?

As mentioned above, we did not go to Asia with the motive of starting the Congregation there. Itaici said: “The ultimate aim of this (new) initiative would be to contribute to making the Asian Church more missionary and self-evangelising.” (No. 7) Also, there was the strong feeling at the Chapter that we would, as a Congregation, be greatly enriched through more contact with Asian religions and cultures, and, later, this became one of the criteria in making a choice of where to go. How, in practice, does this happen? After much discernment, it was decided that having Filipino, Taiwanese, and Vietnamese Spiritans is our best way of contributing to making these local churches more missionary and of our being enriched by their respective cultures. So, within a very short time a formation programme has begun, with realistic hopes that it will develop well.

Conclusion

Looking back over this article, what strikes me most is our continued effort, as a Congregation, to be faithful to our Founders and traditions - “Congregation of the Holy Spirit” – people “led by the Spirit”, who “blows where It wills”. Perhaps, rather surprisingly, at our first General Chapter outside Europe in Sao Paulo, Brazil in 1992, the Spirit pointed us towards Asia. The incoming General Administration at the time very honestly and openly tried to discern what this call might mean. Rarely have I, personally, been so aware of the Spirit in my life as I was during the almost 5 months I spent visiting in Asia. Leaving Rome with a short list of contacts, a suitcase and a credit card, I was amazed at how one meeting led to another, one disappointment seemed to open an opportunity, the most unlikely “coincidences” happened. One proof of this is that, while we had at least heard

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BRIAN MCLAUGHLIN,
C.S.SP.

of “Ho Chi Minh City” or “Saigon”, “Hsinchu” and “Iligan”, were nowhere in the Spiritan vocabulary – and, yet, these are the places where we began in South-East Asia. The developments that have taken place over the last ten years in all three countries are proof of the Spirit abiding with us and of our desire to be faithful to Its urgings.

*...as if, somehow, the Spirit
has gone on vacation.*

The story of South-East Asia is but a repeat of similar stories in other areas where Spiritans live and work. Those of us now living in Europe and North America may, as we get older and experience diminished health, feel our Congregation is slowly dying – as if, somehow, the Spirit has gone on vacation. Maybe It has, but on a “working vacation” to places where Spiritans are in Africa, Latin America and Asia. Let us rejoice that we continue to be “led by the Spirit”, and that the Lord continues “to do great things” among us.