

## Spiritan Horizons

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Volume 2 | Issue 2

Article 14

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Fall 2007

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### Recommended Citation

Farrelly, T. M. (2007). The Mission and Identity of Spiritan Schools in Ireland. *Spiritan Horizons*, 2 (2). Retrieved from <https://dsc.duq.edu/spiritan-horizons/vol2/iss2/14>

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# THE MISSION AND IDENTITY OF SPIRITAN SCHOOLS IN IRELAND

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Currently the Congregation of the Holy Spirit has trusteeship of five secondary schools (high schools) in Ireland, three of which have primary schools associated with them, giving a total enrollment of 4,600 students. While the main focus of this article is on elementary and secondary education, it may be noted that the Congregation in Ireland also has trusteeship of three third-level institutions and three institutes of community education.

## *ETHOS AND VISION*

Any discussion of mission and identity in the field of education must take into consideration the problem of differences in terminology. In the United States the terms "mission" and "identity" are commonly used, whereas in Ireland "ethos" and "vision" are more frequently used, although other terms are also found. Some educators speak of "ethos and educational philosophy." The Government of Ireland Education Act, 1998, refers to school ethos as "the characteristic spirit" of a school. The Irish Spiritan Province normally uses the terms "ethos and vision."

Ethos and vision are two sides of the same coin. In any organization "vision" refers to how the leadership sees the role and purpose of the organization, whereas "ethos" refers to how the vision is lived out in daily practice. Whatever words are used, the ethos and vision of an organization are central to its identity and work, because they give it inspiration and direction. The purpose of this essay is to explore the ethos and vision of the Spiritan schools in Ireland.

## *STRUCTURES*

The maintenance of the ethos and vision of any organization requires the support of suitable structures. In the field of education the key structures are trusteeship, management, and administration. The year 1988 was a pivotal year for the Irish Province of the Congregation as trustees of schools. In that year the Provincial Chapter gave a clear assurance of the continuing educational mission of the Congregation through its schools in Ireland. Following wide-ranging consultation with all those concerned, in January 1998 the Provincial Council decided to establish a governing body with a company structure for the schools, consisting of the Provincial Council and a Board of

Directors which includes Spiritans and men and women lay members. The company is named after Fr. Claude Poullart des Places, “The Des Places Educational Association Limited” (DEA). The Association was registered in September 1999.

The Memorandum and Articles of Association of the DEA indicate clearly its role as promoter of the ethos and vision of the Congregation in education. The Memorandum begins with two main objects to which the Association is committed (Section A1). The first is “to ensure and foster the advancement of education.” The second is “to further the aims and purposes of Roman Catholic education.” The Memorandum further directs that these main objects are to be pursued “in accordance with the ethos and educational philosophy of the Congregation.” It is clear from the Memorandum, therefore, that the Association shares the ethos and vision of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit. In the Irish context we can say that the Association and its schools share the national educational ethos, the Catholic ethos, and the Spiritan ethos.

#### **SOURCES**

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It will not be possible in this short essay to explore all three aspects of the schools’ ethos. Only the Spiritan ethos and vision will be considered, by investigating three important sources: the inspiration of the founders of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit, the lived tradition, and the written tradition, represented particularly by the Spiritan Rule of Life.

#### **1. The Inspiration of the Founders**

The Spiritan education story begins with Claude Francis Poullart des Places, after whom our Association has been named. He was born in Rennes, Brittany, on February 26, 1679. He studied theology in Paris, where he founded a house for poor students while still a student himself. It was not just a hostel, but a community. This was to be the main achievement of his short life. He was ordained priest on December 17, 1707. Two years later, worn out with his efforts on behalf of his community, he died on October 2, 1709, at the age of 30 years and seven months. His community developed into a seminary, and later the international Congregation of the Holy Spirit (Farragher, 1992).

The second outstanding personality in the Spiritan story is Francis Libermann. He was born Jacob Libermann in 1802 in Saverne, Alsace, the son of a Jewish rabbi. He studied first

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in Metz and later in Paris, where he was baptized into the Catholic Church in 1826. Soon afterwards, he experienced the call to become a priest and in 1827 entered the seminary of St. Sulpice. However, the onset of epilepsy in 1828 meant that Francis' ordination was postponed indefinitely. In 1839, at the age of thirty-seven, he undertook the task of founding a missionary congregation. Having received papal approval for the new congregation, named the "Society of the Holy Heart of Mary," he was ordained at Amiens in 1841. Seven years later, his society merged with the Congregation of the Holy Spirit founded by Fr. Poullart des Places and Fr. Libermann became Superior General. He died in 1852 at the Mother House in Paris (Kelly, 1983).

The inspiration provided by Fr. des Places and by Fr. Libermann for education may best be appreciated by considering some of the values which they passed on to their Congregation and which have become central to its education ethos and vision.

***Openness to the Spirit:*** An important core value in the Spiritan heritage is openness to the Spirit. Des Places dedicated his community to the Holy Spirit. Libermann regarded openness to the Spirit as the guiding principle of his life. Two examples of his openness to the Spirit are adaptability to change, and respect for each person's uniqueness. In an educational context this means respect for each individual's personality and talents.

***A Sense of Community:*** The motto of the Congregation is "one heart and one soul," evoking the first Christian community in Jerusalem. A sense of community was a basic principle for both des Places and Libermann. In education, a sense of community translates into closeness to the students, a family spirit, and accessibility.

***Concern for the Poor:*** It was his concern for the poor that led des Places to found his community for poor students. Libermann focused attention on the most needy people of his day. Education is a potent means of translating that concern into action.

***Global Vision:*** The missionary outlook of the Congregation has given us a global vision which inspires 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.

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***Commitment to Service:*** Des Places devoted himself completely to the service of his community. Libermann continually emphasized the spirit of service in his instructions to his missionaries. He put service to others before his own health and welfare. He saw education as service to the Church and to people in need.

***High Educational Standards:*** Des Places insisted on high educational standards with the students in his community, even insisting on the study of science in addition to theology—a new idea at the time. Under the influence of Fr. Gaultier, who was widely respected in academic circles in Paris, Libermann adopted a policy of encouragement for higher studies which was to provide the Congregation with a number of experts and specialists in various fields.

***Personal Development:*** The Congregation of the Holy Spirit inherited from its founders a respect for the Holy Spirit guiding each person's development, as the Spirit guided Jesus our teacher and model. The concern of Spiritan schools for their students is to promote their moral, spiritual, intellectual, physical, social, cultural, and overall personal development.

The foregoing brief survey shows some of the basic values flowing from the living heritage left to us by des Places and Libermann which inspire Spiritan education down to the present day.

## **2. The Lived Tradition**

The first new educational project undertaken following Libermann's death was the establishment of a national seminary for the French clergy in Rome in 1853. The educational work of the Congregation expanded during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries from seminaries into second-level colleges and primary schools, including the Irish schools. The number of schools grew to thousands, particularly in Africa, from 1927 onwards.

Duquesne University opened as the Pittsburgh Catholic College of the Holy Ghost in 1878 and was raised to university status in 1911. Duquesne University has always had close connections with Ireland. In June 1991 Duquesne hosted an international symposium of Spiritan educators and their lay colleagues which underlined the broad scope of the Congregation's involvement in education. A survey conducted on that occasion indicated that the Congregation had responsibility for 222 schools with 141,000 students and 7,000 teachers.

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### 3. The Written Tradition

The written tradition as a source of the Spiritan ethos and vision is exemplified in the Spiritan Rule of Life. The Rule has been updated at intervals to meet changing conditions in the religious and secular world. In addition to providing religious motivation for education as a means of “announcing the Good News of the Kingdom,” the Rule of Life refers to education specifically in Constitution 18, highlighting the various types of educational services which the Congregation contributes to the local Churches. The written tradition is continually being added to in the form of biographies, histories, and theological and philosophical works.

One form of written source is of particular interest. I am referring to the mission statements of the schools. It will be helpful, therefore, to take a brief look at these mission statements to see how they have interpreted the ethos and educational philosophy of the Congregation. The format of the mission statements is in two parts: a preamble, and the statement of mission either as a continuous text or as a list of aims and goals. The preamble refers to the history of the school and its commitment to the ethos and vision of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit. The second part, containing the statement of mission, varies somewhat from school to school in emphasis and to a lesser extent in content. The following list shows the main aims mentioned in the mission statements:

- An environment supportive of the Christian faith*
- Harmonious development of the whole person*
- A caring community environment*
- High academic standards*
- Social and moral development*
- Community service and social justice*
- Preparation for a career*
- Cultural and physical education*
- Partnership of parents, teachers, and community*
- Global concerns and the mission of the Church*

It is clear that the mission statements include most of the values mentioned in the section on the inspiration of our founders and they can be developed still further. The school mission statements are important means for the Des Places Educational Association in promoting the ethos and educational philosophy of the Congregation.

**CONCLUSION**

This essay has attempted to explore the main sources of the ethos and vision (mission and identity) of the Irish schools conducted by the Congregation of the Holy Spirit. Attention has been focused in particular on the inspiration of the founders, the lived tradition, and the written tradition. We have attempted to show the rich heritage of ethos and vision which inspires the Irish schools of the Congregation.

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