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They minister to me, and I to them

Tony Gittins CSSp

How do the descendants of Claude Poullart des Places live in a way that is essentially faithful to their ancestor, yet very different in its expression? How can we be loyal yet different, consistent yet creative, faithful yet path-breaking? How can Spiritans, and the authentic Spiritan charism, thrive in places and circumstances so very different from those of their founder?

Poor and most abandoned

“The poor and most abandoned souls” has never been a phrase that has really resonated with me, even though the spirit and sentiments behind it are extremely significant. Many other religious communities of women and men espoused the very same motto, and even used the same words. So what is special about the Spiritans?

“The poor” and “the most abandoned” are abstractions, categories; but there really is no such thing as “the poor” *in the abstract*. God does not make abstractions: God’s creation is always specific, and every human person is identifiable by name. In order, therefore, to be really committed to the poor and most abandoned people, we must endeavour to know them by name, to identify and relate to them in a personal way.

This, of course, epitomizes the ministry of Jesus, and his warning that we must be very careful to reach out to “the least” in such a way that we actually relate to them and their needs. This, as I understand it, is the real core of the Spiritan charism. But it remains for each and all of us Spiritans to absorb and reapply this spirit, whoever and wherever we may be.

Mission in reverse

Mission is always a two-way street. That is to say, what we call “mission in reverse” is a critical component of every authentic missionary experience, and any authentic missionary charism must therefore exemplify how it can and should be lived.

“Mission is reverse” is about the ways in which those who profess to bring the good news are also recipients of the same good news; about the ways in which we evangelizers are ourselves evangelized and converted. The days are long gone, one

hopes, when missionaries thought they were bringing God to Godless people, or that they were the givers and the people were simply the recipients. Such half-truths are highly dangerous, though they were a powerful idiom of a former age. By now we should have discovered how God’s Spirit lives in others’ lives, and how much we ourselves have to learn and receive from others, lest preaching to others we should ourselves be condemned.

Saturday afternoon crèche

After ordination, I was sent to the University of Edinburgh to study Anthropology and Linguistics, spending a total of nearly six years there. How was I to live the Spiritan charism in such

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an academic — and swinging sixties — environment? The Catholic Students’ Union ran a crèche on a Saturday afternoon for children suffering from spina bifida or born with the devastating effects of the thalidomide drug. All these children demanded full-time care from their parents, and these Saturday afternoons were, for most parents, the only respite in their week. For the children, they were a time of excitement and unpredictable forms of entertainment.

As for me they were a respite from more academic pursuits; they were also a first lesson in “mission in reverse”, for I not only learned to love those children deeply, but I learned to be

loved in turn by them. But they were never just “souls”: lacking limb or bladder control, they were radically embodied, incarnate, and in need of constant physical as well as emotional attention.

Sierra Leone

A number of years later I got to go to “the missions.” Now, I thought, it should be significantly easier to live the Spiritan charism. To Sierra Leone I took some of the implicit theology and clericalism I had learned in England, and all of my own immaturity, arrogance and myopia. After thirty years I still cringe at certain memories, and am keenly aware of having so often missed the meaning and failed to be enriched by the possibilities of mission in reverse. Maybe that this why all of us have experiences and memories: so that we can still learn before it is too late.

Chicago

For more than twenty years now, my Spiritan life has been lived in Chicago. The first nine of those years were spent in the context of the Spiritan formation community. By then I was the only “survivor” of the initial group: everyone had been ordained, or left, or been reappointed. But I had discovered a new place where the Spiritan charism could flourish: among some of the most “poor and abandoned” people in the richest nation on earth.

Edwina Gateley who had founded the Volunteer Missionary Movement, had started a house for women trying to escape

prostitution and was looking for an appropriate male presence, I spent several days and nights each week at Genesis house. I also volunteered overnight at a shelter.

Homeless woman’s funeral

A few months after arriving in Chicago, I took the funeral of a homeless woman who had frozen to death in a dumpster outside McDonald’s one bitter winter night. She had been kept at

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the city morgue for several weeks, because the ground was frozen and she was unclaimed. Finally, several of us managed to claim the body in order to give it a real burial, rather than have her buried alone in an unmarked grave — in *Potter’s Field* on the edge of a cemetery.

After the service, to which all the homeless people had been invited and to which more than a hundred came, we returned to the shelter for a well-prepared meal of fresh meat and vegetables. But there was insufficient cutlery, and I borrowed from someone else. As an immediate result I contracted Hepatitis B, was quite unable to work (teaching theology) for months, and was eventually unfit to return to the missions. The wheel had come full circle; yet again it had become necessary for me to rediscover how to live the Spiritan charism.

For the past twenty-two years, homeless women of Chicago have ministered to me, and I to them, in a very informal way. I simply bring food, cook, and serve meals; they eagerly but graciously take and eat; we get to know each other personally and by name. It’s a kind of Eucharist. These women (the vast majority of whom, it so happens, are African-American) mediate “mission in reverse” in my life. I, in turn, attempt to live the Spiritan charism among these poor and abandoned women. If we ask people what they need, rather than simply tell them what we intend to do for them, then we will be effectively practising “mission in reverse”.

Each and all of us must embody the Spiritan charism wherever we may be: “Each Spiritan will look for opportunities for action within his grasp in order to become the voice of the voiceless.” ■

