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Chapter 18. Young Men Seeing Visions: My Passion for the Spiritan Mission

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Chapter 18

Young Men Seeing Visions: My Passion for the Spiritan Mission

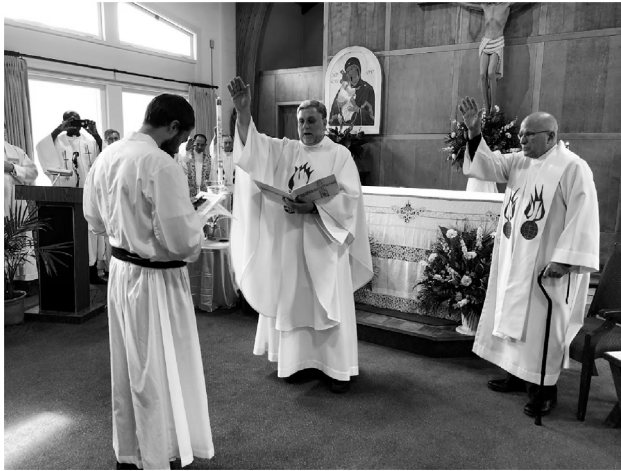
Introduction: A Baffling Decision

Why would a young person from the West take up any sort of Christian mission today, let alone the Spiritan mission? This question is quite misunderstood by many, and is outright baffling to many more. The question is often posed as an ontological-ethical one, i.e., about who one is at the core of one's being and the ethical ramifications thereof, or as a question that relates to some vague concept of "happiness" that finds constant self-fulfilment as the sole valuable mode of existence. Both of these attitudes I find ridiculous. The former sets missionaries apart in their very essence from other disciples and alienates us relationally, and this prevents us from realizing any sort of holy personhood.¹ The latter presents one's life in terms of an amorphous concept that sees gratification as the principal goal of life and rejects the value of asceticism. Ultimately, both equally lack the theodramatics and theo-poetics necessary to communicate the lived experience of authentic discipleship in our world. Indeed, my personal drive towards Spiritan mission, elaborated below, is rooted in the fact that it is not an ontological-ethical decision, self-gratifying choice, or even an existential grounding. Rather, my personal drive toward Spiritan mission is an eschatological-missional response to a particular encounter.

Good Friday: Considering the Horrific

But what is this encounter to which mission is a response? One must return to the turning event of all salvation history, often seen, though not reflected upon

1. The "individual" differs from the "person"; as Zizioulas points out, personhood, especially in the Cappadocian fathers, is necessarily relational. See Zizioulas, John. *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1997) 87–88.



Matthew at profession at Bethel Park, PA,
before Jeff Duaime, CSSp

enough—the Cross upon which the bloodied and brutalized corpse of Jesus of Nazareth is placed. The Crucifixion was a truly brutal affair (as all crucifixions were). It was the ultimate expression of necropolitics by the Romans, i.e., their control over life and death as a means of politics. In my opinion, the Crucifixion, and much of martyrdom too, have been sanitized in order not to offend bourgeois sensibilities or frighten anyone who may have to deeply question their life's meaning and direction in the face of such brutality. Yet, brought into contact with such brutality, one of two options arise: (1) Jesus's body rotted in the tomb and a cosmic meaninglessness must be assumed or (2) something quite radical has occurred that demands our re-examination of the life of the figure before us.

The former option may allow us to relax, enjoy ourselves, and embrace the current *anomie* that emerges out of the ethos of neoliberal capitalism that is poisoning cultures around the globe. In other words, the exploitation of the poor, severe hunger, ecological destruction, and the desecration of life can be reduced to mere facts in the world, rather than something that demands outcry and revolution. Further, corruption, scandal, and abuse in the church, as well as decline in church attendance, are expected, since the church would be predicated on a lie from the outset and, thus, merely set to serve the desires of those in positions of power in it. Lastly, as death becomes the only possible concrete referent for our existence, death forces us upon a path in life that (1) has an unbearable lightness to it due to the rapidly fluctuating dialectic

between the need for meaning and the cosmic meaninglessness of the broader human existence, and (2) is fundamentally self-annihilating and necrophilic, as each decision we make and each moment we live is only related to the eventuality of our death.

The latter option, perhaps, brings about a different course. Yes, the Crucifixion *is* horrific, and it *should* make a Christian sit and ponder every so often. But the questions that arise pose more complications than can be answered by a singular, mysterious tragedy. Why did Jesus get killed? Why did he die? Where do we go from here? How did I fail him? The apostles and many disciples may have asked these questions on the morning of Holy Saturday. In our own times, similar questions arise. Violence towards the marginalized, the ruining of the environment, the struggle for meaning, abuse in, and the decline of, the church, the hegemony of consumeristic capitalism, etc., all portray the Cross in various manners. Therefore, we must return to the core experience of the disciple to better discern what is happening in the advent of Jesus in our lives. Particularly, we must return to the very beginning, i.e., the invitation to follow a strange person about whom one may have until recently only heard strange rumors, historical fabrications, and fantastical tales. And how abounding they are in a world where conspiracies in Dan Brown novels can be confused with history!

Follow: An Invitation to the Mysterious

Recalling the invitation by Jesus to “follow,” the strangeness of each call stands out. For example, the calling of the first disciples in the Matthean and Marcan Narratives (Matt 4:18–22; Mark 1:16–20) suggests that the only real knowledge that the fishermen-turned-disciples had of this Jesus figure was his proclamation of the Reign of God. It is a strange voice that summons us in love and speaks of something different, one that points towards a dawn where the sun rises, like distant Gregorian chants over the horizon, and beckons our curiosity. However, it is important to note what they were leaving behind, namely, the exhausting work of fishing with wet, heavy nets in the hot Galilean sun. Indeed, even for our own selves, when the invitation is presented to participate in the new creation, the choice to accept and explore a life lived alongside this Stranger presupposes self-interrogation. Nonetheless, as one might desire other options, the decision to choose a different way of life, even if one that delivers oneself from misery, is brought on by the encounter with this Jesus, who is proclaiming that the eschatological reality of the Reign is emerging. Perhaps, thus, what they understood

the call to mean was the beginning of a drama, the recognition that *something* was happening that demanded engaging with this Figure, as is communicated in the Lukan and Johannine narratives (Luke 5:1–11; John 1:35–51). Indeed, without this theodrama that mysteriously presents the infinite in the finite, there is no discipleship.

But, once the invitation is accepted, the process of following is not done from a distance, as is implied by *akolouthēō*, the word for “to follow” in Koine Greek. It is a journeying, an accompaniment, of someone who is, evidently, bringing about a certain amount of controversy (Luke 12:49–53, 2:34). One can even see the rumors about him, e.g., that he is actually using the power of demons (Matt 12:24; Mark 3:22; Luke 11:15), that he is insane (Mark 3:21), and, even amongst the apostles, that he is going to bring about a Kingdom of Power and Glory (Matt 20–28; Mark 10:35–45). Thus, there is a necessary confrontation that must occur with the Jesus we *thought* we knew, to truly understand who he is and what he asks of us (cf. Mark 8:27). It is coming to experience the contradictions between the Jesus of pop culture and the Jesus of the Gospels. That is, one begins to realize that Jesus is not really a kind man who does nice things, blesses all decisions one makes without question, attends every American football game where his presence is requested, and performs magical deeds. It is a move towards a Jesus that is far more complex and nuanced, perhaps as a social revolutionary, a religious reformer, and, if we dare to claim it, the Christ and the God-with-us (Mark 8:29; Matthew 1:23; Isa 7:14).

Further, the facticity of this new, emergent reality in the life of a disciple also demands a re-arrangement of one’s ethos. The calling to follow a Man who is much more complicated than the world dares to portray him is not something that allows us to continue our lives as they were. Matthew is certainly not a corrupt tax collector after Jesus summons him (Matt 9:9–10). In other words, a conversion is demanded and it may even involve our own suffering (cf. Mark 1:15, Matt 16:24). Nonetheless, there is always resistance towards re-evaluating our life’s trajectory, rooted in the freedom realized in the Upward Fall in Eden,² i.e., our personal attempts at self-divinization that end with us unfulfilled, frustrated, and in despair due to our inability to do so. Indeed, the invitation to follow goes beyond a Sunday gathering, questioning the state of our soul, the meaningless hyperreality of contemporary society into which we are forcibly submerged, and the essence of human relationships with God, each other, and creation in a neoliberal capitalist

2. Cf. Irenaeus of Lyon. *Adversus Haereses*, 4.38.4. “Upward Fall” is my take on Irenaeus here.

regime. Thus, the initial, existential pondering begotten by discipleship can either remain superficial or, if one dares, can reach the depth of one's soul and, in letting down one's bucket into the deep, drink of life-giving waters cleansed in the light of the Triune Godhead. In other words, one can either make pious gestures that may not amount to much of anything, or truly contemplate. However, as much as contemplation may open wide a door, we have only begun to knock (cf. Matt 7:7; Luke 11:9) and a guide may be necessary.

Remain: Engaging the Divine Other

And in whom could we find this guide? One must turn once again to this Jesus who has called us to follow and, important to our current discussion, to remain with him. Remain, of course, means something more than just existing in the same physical space. Rather, at least in the Johannine conception, to remain also means to commune and engage with one another over a period of time. In this sense, to remain with the Jesus who calls us is to form community with him and, by virtue of our community, to allow the Christic vision of reality to be laid out before one. It is therefore unsurprising that Jesus does not instruct the apostles to memorize every word and thing that he gives to us. Rather, we are to embrace the essence of the Gospel he shares and to engage in praxis based upon it by virtue of the community we form with him. Thus, communing with the Way, the Truth, and the Life (John 14:6), Jesus becomes the mystagogue *par excellence*, leading towards the mysteries that he invites us to experience and live.³

Of these mysteries, the foremost one that we are invited to consider is the Reign of God which defined the ministry of Jesus. But what is it? In the first instance, it is proclamation of an Other place, an heterotopia of sorts, but whose alterity exists only temporally and whose advent is without *différance*,⁴ that is, it does not defer its meaning onto something different. Mysterious as it is, the Divine Alterity of the Reign of God coming on Earth bears the entirety of itself in a world where such *différance* is normative. However, once this alterity is embraced in the soul, the heart

3. See Maximus the Confessor. *Ambigua*, 48.

4. Jacques Derrida coined the term *différance*, playing on the meaning of the French verb *différer* 'that means both 'to differ' and 'to defer,' which encapsulates, "the perpetual slippage of meaning from sign to sign (or from moment to moment)," inherent in language (*Oxford Companion to Philosophy* (ed. Ted Honderich. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) 214). It is used here much like Jean-Luc Marion uses it existentially and theologically to refer to the person's *différance* within time itself and God's temporal *in-différance*. See Marion, Jean-Luc. *In the Self's Place: The Approach of St. Augustine* (trans. Jeffrey L. Kosky; Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012) 197–201.

is transformed and the Reign reveals itself as a place within you or in your midst (Luke 17:21).⁵ Here, in the Spirit, Jesus as the Bread of Life and Life-giving waters gives the soul rest and nourishment to continue through the deserts of earth (Matt 11:28; John 4:13–14; 6:35; 6:63; Rom 8:18–30). In it, there exists the challenge to consider the outcast as a sibling and to understand the little, lost, last, and least in the Beatitudinal paradigm as central to this Reign (Matt 5:3–12; Luke 6:20–26). Yes, against the tide of a consumeristic capitalism and its insatiable drive for property, status, and wealth, we are summoned to share our goods, to forgive those who offend us, and to become poor with Jesus (Matt 18:15–22; Luke 12:33–34; 18:25). Ascetically finding power in powerlessness, i.e., losing our life and thus finding it, the eyes of the soul can see more clearly the image of God in the poorest of the poor (Matt 25:40), the grace of a repentant thief (Luke 23:42–43), all of creation as a sacrament of God’s love (Luke 12:24–28), and the Father’s loving summons through Christ to share this love with all creation in the Spirit. It is this loving summons that concludes the grand crescendo of eternity, i.e., the finalization of the new creation, where heaven and earth shall be one, all shall be restored, and we will find eternal joy. Indeed, in engaging with the Divine Alterity of the Reign, it reveals itself as the sought-after home of the heart.⁶ Of course, we are not left alone either. Instead, Jesus gives us the Eucharist in which (1) there is a re-invitation by Christ to remain with him present and (2) an opportunity to discern how we live in hope of that future and with the God who promises it (cf. Luke 22:14–23; John 14–16). Further, the Spirit is sent upon us to continue to encourage and guide us through our contemporary deserts, so that we might reach this new promised land (Rom 8:26–27).

Invited to live in the Spirit of all grace, the mystery of God’s Reign that Jesus teaches as mystagogue *par excellence* encompasses the entirety of human existence, from the interior movements of the soul to the global structures that affect our world. Thus, I could not say that the mystagogy of the Reign retreats from the world, but, in the renunciation of “the world” (i.e., the present reality and its problematic paradigms), the world can be transformed. Perhaps then, practical union can serve as mystagogy of the Reign, where its signs that irrupt in our midst through grace beget doxology in the Spirit and fuller contemplation of the liberation willed by the Triune God. Practical union, thus, requires attuning oneself, through missional asceticism, to one’s own spiritual intellect

5. Gregory Palamas, during the hesychast controversy, seems to have had a very spiritual and internal perspective on the Kingdom being within you—finding scriptural foundation in this, amongst other passages, for the very interior practice of hesychasm.

6. See Augustine. *Confessions*, 1.1.1

(*nous*) in one's concrete life, to bring our vocation into unity with that of Christ. Although not opposed to the use of the discursive intellect (*dianoia*), practical union is only truly nourished by the encounter with the Spirit, who introduces us to the life-giving dynamism of the Trinity.⁷ This, perhaps, reinforces the need for a particularly Marian flavor and imitation, perhaps akin to the Mary portrayed in St. Ephrem's Hymns on the Nativity.⁸

Yet, despite this Reign's beauty, means of learning its mystery, and the inevitability of its conclusion, very few individuals truly understood it in Jesus's time and, perhaps, many more struggle to grasp it today. Thus, it should be no surprise that many followers fled when Jesus's was arrested, few were nearby during his flogging, no one challenged the crowning with thorns, and only a handful dared to observe the carrying of the Cross, ending with a few women and the Beloved Disciple at the Cross (Mark 15:41b; John 19:25–26a). As more of Jesus's blood was spilt, the fear of the other disciples must have increased, only to be later replaced by intense guilt for abandoning him (cf. Mark 14:66–72). Thus, the tragedy seen on Good Friday begets an intense isolation on Holy Saturday, only adding to the disorientation and existential nausea of the situation.

Sent: Mission, Charism, and the Reign

But, then, upon discovery of the Empty Tomb and Mary Magdalene's proclamation of the Resurrection to the other apostles (cf. John 20:1–18), the realization of what is *really* happening begins. It is the transition from the ambiguity of violence to the conviction of the Reign's inevitable completion. In the transformative suffering of Christ, we are bought back from sin, not just to go to heaven, but to transform the entirety of creation in the joy of the resurrection through a cruciform ministry. Indeed, Mary Magdalene's proclamation is the first case of one being *sent*, i.e., the beginning of the mission to the ends of the earth. For this, the duty of the mystagogue of the Reign is passed onto the disciples on Pentecost and, through baptism, down the generations to us. What begins from here on is "the Spirit-driven, cross-shaped" mission of the disciple.⁹ Thus, our adherence to this mission, i.e., as properly divinizing, is dependent upon our availability to the

7. See Basil the Great. *On the Holy Spirit*, 9.23, 16.38

8. See Ephrem the Syrian. *Hymns on the Nativity*, 4.130–142, 174–177, 182–194.

9. Wright, N. T. *The Day of the Revolution Began: Reconsidering the Meaning of Jesus's Crucifixion* (New York: Harper One, 2016) 407.

Spirit and willingness to experience the Cross in order to bring about the Reign. To the disciple, it was no longer a question of whether one will face trials and sufferings or not, but whether one did it in imitation of Christ or not. Thus, returning to our initial reflection, the bloodied corpse of Christ on the Cross becomes the icon of all missional activity, lest we forget “take up your cross and follow me” (Matt 10:38; 16:24; Mark 8:34; Luke 9:23; 14:27).

This is the beginning of the complete response of the disciple, where, receiving the call from the Father through Christ, there is a drive towards mission and even a missionary community formed in the Spirit (Acts 2:42–47). By participating in it and inviting others to participate too, mission becomes a mysterious territorialization that redraws and reimagines the world as it is being transformed into the new creation, where the lowly, hungry, and the least overthrow the mighty, rich, and the greatest of the old creation.¹⁰ Further, although the church carries on the duty of being the sign and sacrament of the Reign,¹¹ its true existence rests on whether it validly carries out this mission or not. Indeed, the church is a movement of holiness for, and does not exist without, the Reign, but the Reign’s boundaries are certainly never solidified in an institution.¹²

The question of response to the resurrection, thus, becomes a question of ethos, i.e., a way of being rather than a particular structure. Brought into the mystery of the Reign by Christ, these are transformed into *charisms* in the Spirit. However, charism must adequately reflect the mystery expressed above, otherwise there is no mission. In seeking a well from which to drink, I have often contemplated the praxis of the Reign and its drive towards the poor and marginalized in the Beatitudinal paradigm. In the former, one might keep in mind the considerations of practical union as a mystagogy, an idea principally arising from the works of Francis Libermann. Further, one must admire Libermann’s drive towards the poor and, indeed, his vision for his community to do the same.¹³ In passing on his vision to the Spiritans, Spiritan mission rooted in practical union becomes a means by which one can live the mystery of the Reign, with particular attention to the poor and marginalized to whom the Reign is promised (Matt

10. See Boff, Leonardo. *New Evangelization: Good News to the Poor* (trans. Robert R. Barr; Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991) 77.

11. *Lumen gentium*, 48–50.

12. *Lumen gentium*, 8.

13. ND II, 241; XIII, 170.

5:3; Luke 6:21).¹⁴ It is, therefore, a legitimate response to the experience of the Reign in the follow-remain-sent framework of discipleship. Thus, it seemed only fitting that I take it up for the sake of God’s Reign. Indeed, my choice of Spiritan mission was never in itself or as an *a priori* decision, but as a response that exists *a posteriori* to my realization of the Reign’s presence.

This is not to say that the Congregation of the Holy Spirit under the Protection of the Immaculate Heart of Mary itself is perfect. Indeed, like any ecclesial institution, reform is always necessary, both in historical-practical ways (as an outcry against abuse, corruption, and general nonsense therein) and in theological-theoretical ways (*ecclesia semper reformanda, ecclesia semper purificanda*¹⁵). Indeed, it is not an easy thing to take up, but neither is discipleship in general. However, the path of the Reign is always of joy, one that is always life-giving. To find true life amidst the necrophilic deserts of the contemporary world is worth more than anything (cf. Matt 13:45–46); it is like an oasis for soul. Indeed, until that Reign is finalized, it is these oases around which we must find wells to consistently drink to survive the harsh desert. It appears that Spiritan mission is one of them.



Matthew embraces mother and family after the profession

14. See *Spiritun Rule of Life*, 1, 4–5.

15. The church must always be reformed, the church must always be purified.

Conclusion: Spiritan Mission as a Pilgrimage to the End of Time

From this profound contemplation before the crucifixion, mission begins in the power of the Spirit, which I see as best lived through Spiritan mission. Again, it is never a choice in itself, but a response to the Reign. Spiritan mission without attentiveness to what God is doing in our midst to bring about the Reign can never be adequately missional nor Spiritan.

Much more about Spiritan mission can be covered—preferential option for the poor, *kenosis*, integral liberation . . .—but, if you are exploring the idea of Spiritan mission for the first time, I encourage you to just keep searching! May it be a great source of life for you. Yes, it is this searching that puts us on pilgrimage in mission. Even amidst all the study of Spiritan mission that we could do, we await for the finality of history, its grand crescendo, where we shall have the opportunity to find eternal warmth in the luminescence that radiates from the Godhead. For now, Spiritan mission remains our pilgrimage unto the end of time. Until the Reign, my friend, go forth in the Spirit! It is my hope that this well of Spiritan mission can give you nourishment.

*Matthew Broeren, CSSp
Formation House, Brazil*

My Jesus, always be for me a Jesus.
Remain always in me and I in you

Poullart des Places, *Fragments of a Personal Life*
Spiritan Anthology, 1, 41