



Spiritan

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On the Shoulders of Giants

When I was a little boy, "foreign missionaries" were up there among my heroes — along with cowboys, the Foreign Legion, the Canadian Mounties. Through my young eyes, I saw these heroes as men of rugged individualism and vast courage who lived an exciting life in exotic worlds, far removed from my own mundane environment. To this day I remember the words used in our Grade 4 reader to describe the horrible place where Damien volunteered to serve: "Molokai, on whose portals were written, 'Abandon hope all ye who enter here'." Talk about Raiders of the Lost Ark. I was hooked on missionaries.

In my high school years I read more and more about these giants of men, Brebeuf, Ricci, Xavier, Las Casas. And today I just love movies like *Black Robe*, *The Mission*, and *Molokai*, as well as books like *The Englishman's Boy*, *Beau Geste*, and *Sam Steele, Lion of the Frontier*.

So when a real live missionary enthralled my high school with stories of life in the Maasai missions of Kenya, a man who could talk Swahili, and who had photos of lions and elephants, I knew that I just had to join his group, the Spiritans.

In the Spiritan seminary I learned of the missionary heroes of the Spiritan world, especially Joseph Shanahan, the Apostle of the Ibo people of Eastern Nigeria, and Jacques Laval, often referred to as "The Saint of Mauritius". But Bishop Shanahan's career was over long before I entered the seminary, where the great missionary heroes, with their long white beards, were now just photos along its central corridors, their exploits preserved on its library shelves.

No longer foreigners

The colonial era had finished between their time and mine, and Vatican II had sensitized us to recognize the cultural riches of the people we were being trained to serve. Missionaries were no longer white men with long beards. They were men and women, young and old, clerical and lay, from all the different nations of the world. They did not confine their efforts and resources solely to spreading the Catholic faith, but were free to discover the Spirit of Jesus present in the people they served.

Spiritans today, clerical and lay alike, are engaged in a multiplicity of ventures which foster development and peace. From co-op farming ventures to a medical flying service, orphanages to irrigation projects, micro banks to medical clinics, refugee centres to reforestation projects, reconciliation and mediation services to adult literacy programs, they share their lives with the poor, the oppressed, the sick and the handicapped around our globe. They are in Sierra Leone, Ethiopia, Zaire, Haiti, Angola, countries where lives hang on a thread. Their voices join in the cries for justice of people in war-ravaged and famine-scourged areas. They do not have white beards, they are not all white of skin, many are female, but when I visit them in their missions I know that they are the true successors of Brebeuf, Xavier and Damien of Molokai. Like them, they have answered the cry of the poor.

The Spiritan General Chapter of 1998 expressed the philosophy of these new missionaries, "Recently a certain style of Spiritan approach to mission has emerged more clearly: more emphasis is put on being close to people, on the quality of our life, presence, on solidarity, on opening up to new horizons and a greater collaboration with others."

In this issue of *Spiritan Missionary News* you will meet some Spiritans whose mission is with the peoples of the Caribbean.

Gerald FitzGerald CSSy

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"He Pitched His Tent Among Us"

The Way to Compassion

Kathy Murtha

The most powerful words I have ever read are found at the beginning of John's Gospel. "The Word was made flesh and lived among us" (Jn 1:14) The literal translation reads "he pitched his tent among us". That the Divine would take on human flesh was an outrage to many at the time and it continues to baffle and shock many today. John's sentence succinctly and forcefully captures the very essence of Christianity and it is what continues to draw me deeper into the religious tradition that has been handed down to me. I would have no interest in a God who was content to remain comfortable surrounded by billowing heavenly choirs, peeping down on us woebegone folks from time to time and shouting pious platitudes. My heart's deepest yearnings, however, would find joy in a God who left the lofty heavens and pitched his tent among us, willing to drink passionately from the human cup. In the life of Jesus we encounter the astounding compassion of our God and are shown the road of compassion that leads us into the very heart of God.

Compassion means to live with passion. It means to sink ourselves deeply into our own humanity — to know the depths of our needs, fears and sinfulness and to soar the heights of human joy and love. Thomas Merton wrote, "I have the immense joy of being human... If only everybody could realize this." It is only by jumping into our own lives and embracing their fleshy reality that we can enter into solidarity with others. Otherwise we are in danger of remaining trapped on frosty mountain tops calling down pious advice to the less fortunate.

The passion of our Lord

It is unfortunate that the beautiful word "passion" has been grossly misused and stripped of its rich meaning down the centuries so that now it conjures up only images of unbridled lust. Through the centuries those who are uncomfortable with their own humanity, both men and women, have projected "passion" onto women, particularly poor women and various marginal ethnic groups. For a Church which attaches such importance to the "Passion of Our Lord" we often appear to be a passionless institution.

The Passion of Jesus was not limited to his last days. It

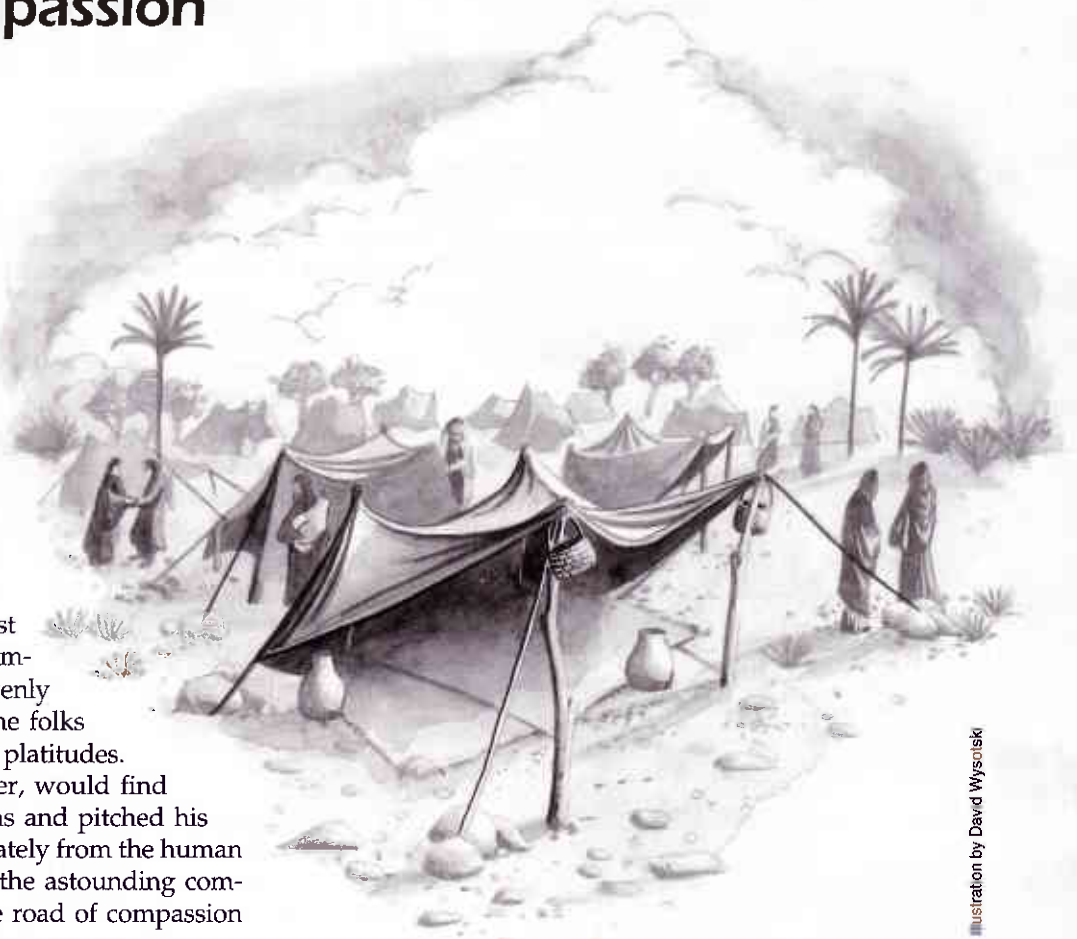


Illustration by David Wysoliski

spanned his entire life. His was a life of passion in which "he pitched his tent among us". Before he actively embarked on a public ministry of compassion and overcame the all so human temptation to rise above our common humanity.

To live with compassion means to live not above or apart but within the joys and sorrows of life in the flesh. Our greatest temptation is to deny our humanity and scramble to rise above the human lot. We all have our own way of deserting our humanity and separating ourselves from others. It could be through money, power, education, refinement or even perfection and self-control. Like our God before us who showed us the way to compassion, we must empty ourselves of all pretensions which mask our clay feet. We must passionately immerse ourselves in our own brokenness and the even greater mercy of a compassionate God, so we will be able to walk together as true companions on the journey which leads into the Divine heart.

In spite of all the tears and pain involved in embracing our humanity there is no greater joy this side of heaven than to experience the powerful connection that unites us all. Let us, as Isaiah proclaims, "widen the spaces of our tent, stretch out our hangings freely ... burst out to right and to left." ❖

Tried in a Furnace

As early as 1779, the first Spiritans arrived in Haiti from France, to work among the slaves in the sugar plantations of San Domingo, the original name of the Caribbean island now divided into two independent countries, the Dominican Republic and Haiti. Ten years later the French Revolution brought an abrupt end to this venture.

When Haiti gained its independence from France, and after slavery had been abolished, the Spiritans were able to return in 1843 under the leadership of Eugene Tisserant. Although Tisserant was drowned in a shipwreck the following year, the mission he had reestablished lived on.

St-Martial

In 1870 the Spiritans opened Saint-Martial College which soon became the premier boys high school. The French Ambassador to Haiti said, just five years later, "the only hope for the regeneration of Haiti lies in the education provided by the Holy Ghost Fathers". From 1870 to 1970 over three hundred Spiritans worked in Haiti and the 150 graves in the Spiritan plot there are proof of their commitment to a very difficult mission.

The Duvalier years

But everything began to fall apart when the dictator, Francois Duvalier, seized control of government in 1956. From the very beginning "Papa Doc" directed his attacks against the clergy. The Spiritans did not escape his attention. In 1958 the first Spiritan was expelled for preaching against Voodoo practices. Between 1961 and 1969 no fewer than five principals of St-Martial were expelled, mostly because their ideas were too "communistic". Worried that the Gospel message of justice

was being taught in the school, the dictator expelled all Spiritans on staff in September 1969. Considering that the "normal exercise of ministry" was now impossible, the remaining Spiritans then withdrew. Most took up ministry among the Haitians in exile in Montreal, Brooklyn, and the Bahamas while waiting out the crisis.

Back to the future

The return of the Spiritans in 1986 was an opportunity for a genuine rebirth, one characterized by the option for the poor promoted by the Latin American Bishops at Medellin and Puebla. They became enmeshed in the events and major crises of the country: the fall of the dictatorship in 1986, the bloody elections of 1987, trickery, oppression, and new kinds of dictatorship, finally the free elections of 1990 which brought President Aristide to power,

Haiti

