

One Heart One Soul — Spiritans celebrate 300 years

# Spiritans

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We **WELCOME** the  
World Youth Day **CROSS**

Toronto — Summer 2002

# One Heart and One Soul

**F**or an organization of volunteers to reach its 300th birthday is quite an accomplishment. For a group to be faithful to its mission of walking with the poor and oppressed for three centuries is cause for celebration. For a movement to have survived catastrophic world upheavals and yet to be alive and active in an ever-growing number of countries after all these years says a lot about the spirit and the Spirit which sustains it.

Only a group with the ability to read the signs of the times, to hear the voice of the Spirit, generation after generation, to adapt as the needs of the oppressed change, could continue to grow and flourish after three hundred years.

Michael Onwuemeli put it like this as he spoke at a garden party in our central administration house in Rome on Pentecost Sunday 2002:

*"Scientists tell us that the human body changes completely every seven years, yet we remain the same person and, apart from a few extra wrinkles, we look much the same. In a similar way, we are a very different Congregation to what we were 100 or even 50 years ago — our self image, our outlook, our methods of evangelisation, our theology of mission, our places of origin. Yet despite the differences, despite being a completely new generation of Spiritans, we are undoubtedly still the same family of Claude Poullart des Places and Francis Libermann."*

We mark the Spiritan Year here in Canada with festivities, we celebrate first God the Holy Spirit, patron and inspiration of the group. We celebrate the founders of the movement, as well as the outstanding Spiritans whose memories are revered in our stories and our history. And we celebrate also the living Spiritans, religious and lay, men and women, single and married, those dedicating their whole lives to the cause and those who volunteer for a specific number of years. We celebrate those working in overseas countries and those who minister in their homelands. We celebrate the conservatives and liberals among us, the young, the strong and the active as well as the old and sick who contribute by their prayers and their patience.

This issue of *Spiritan Missionary News* hopes to illustrate the wonderful diversity of people united by one motto, "Cor Unum et Anima Una". We are indeed of one heart and one soul.

After 300 years the Spiritan movement is living and well in the hearts of our members, our helpers, our benefactors and our friends. This indeed is cause for celebration.

Gerald FitzGerald, CSSp

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# Surviving Discouragement

Bernard Kelly CSSp

There were many sudden turnings in Francis Libermann's life. Brought up in a Jewish ghetto in Saverne, he went through a crisis of faith at the time of his rabbinical studies at Metz. At the age of 24, he was baptized a Catholic in Paris. He entered the seminary of Saint-Sulpice but the onset of epilepsy seemed to close the door on his hopes of becoming a priest. The Sulpicians were kind to him and gave him welcome at their house at Issy, where he did odd jobs and went to Paris frequently on messages. He experienced contradictions and failure on the way to establishing his missionary society. In Rome in 1840, his partner in the enterprise became discouraged and abandoned the project. Feelings of rejection swept over him, he found it hard to accept the hopelessness of his situation.

## At war with discouragement

Libermann regarded discouragement as "the universal evil" in the Christian life. This was not a theory that he plucked from the sky, but a truth that he learned the hard way. From personal experience he knew the havoc that discouragement could wreak.

The following extracts from Libermann's letters to the Superior of the Convent of the Immaculate Conception (Castres), in August of 1843, reflect the attitude of a realist at war with discouragement. Faced with a world where good and evil grew together, Libermann saw that encouragement could not take the shape of indiscriminate affirmation. At the same time, he advocated pushing tolerance and gentleness to the limit in the service of encouragement. Encouragement heals because

it reaches the heart. Encouragement liberates, it enables a person to give all that he or she has to give.

"Always remember that gentleness and persuasion penetrate into the soul, while firmness and rigour cause only an external change... Severity and direct opposition to people's evil dispositions serve merely to break them; it almost never leads to a cure. Tolerate the evil for a long time, and if, at times, you think you ought not to suffer it any longer, suffer it still, and you will see in the end that you did the right thing. You will find that you will hardly ever see happy results from severity and direct opposition.

"Remember what I told you in Paris; many people are lost through discouragement. This is the universal evil especially among the devout. Sustain and encourage and you will see that Our Lord will come to your assistance."

The nobleman who was asked what he did during the French Revolution and replied "I survived" was reporting no mean achievement. Today, in an age of "disposables", survival is also an achievement. Amid the pressure of the modern world, the prospect of our same, everyday, average life stretching out before us sometimes blurs the importance of survival. It was when Libermann's interest in survival was at its lowest that most hung in the balance. In his temptation to suicide he could not have guessed that the most creative part of his life was still to come. Ten years later, when God wanted a missionary leader, Libermann was still around, now with special qualities that had developed in the dark days: courage and compassion and a refusal to be overcome by discouragement. ☪

# Big Men with Big Beards

## Bishop Joseph Shanahan CSSp

**H**e arrived in Onitsha, two hundred miles upriver from the mouth of the Niger, in 1902. At thirty-one years of age, ordained just two years earlier, Joseph Shanahan was a tall lanky handsome Irish lad, one of ten children of a respected, hardworking but poor farm labourer.

His fourteen years of education in Spiritan schools and seminaries in France little prepared him for what he found on his arrival in his mission field. Seventeen years earlier the first Spiritan pioneers had arrived from France but had met with scant success in evangelizing the Igbo people. The group, reinforced by new arrivals from France, made little impact on the people apart from the escaped and redeemed slaves, the orphans, the elderly and the dying who constituted the vast majority of the 1300 Igbo Catholics representing the fruit of seventeen years of evangelization.

But the arrival of Shanahan changed the whole picture. His sheer physical energy, his vision for the mission and above all his obvious love for the Igbo people and their great respect for him gave the mission band, dejected by the climate, their poor living conditions, their harsh superior and the high mortality rate among them, a real shot in the arm. Shanahan's ability to lead by example, his capacity to inspire his followers, his concern for the welfare of his mission band were apparent from



his arrival in Onitsha. Within three years he was appointed head of the mission, prefect apostolic of Southern Nigeria. What he accomplished in the next twenty-eight years earned him a place, with Le Roy and Brottier, as heroes in Spiritan history. The big men with big beards were missionary giants.

Shanahan's first initiative was to set up centers for making sun-baked mud

bricks in every mission station. The nine Spiritan brothers, who with twelve priests and ten religious sisters represented the mission team for the millions upon millions of people living in Igboland, spread out to teach the art of making bricks as well as the skills of building and carpentry. Within a year, each mission had a brick house. The health, and with it the morale, of the missionaries took a sudden turn for the better. Step number one had been taken.

### Education for all

But the real genius of Shanahan was seen in step number two. He realized that a vibrant self-perpetuating Christian church could not be built on a foundation of outcasts of society so he decided to put all the talent, energy and funds that were available to him into the establishment of an educational system which would be accessible to all children and be of high quality.

He sent his missionaries to every part of his huge prefecture to persuade the chiefs and tribal elders of the advantages of having a school in their community. The leaders and people endorsed this idea with enthusiasm in most cases. Bricks were made and simple school buildings began to spring up all over the region. Potential teachers were chosen in each community. Teacher training schools were built,