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Spiritana **NEWS** MISSIONARY

50 YEARS OF MINISTRY 1954-2004



From Holy Ghost Fathers to Spiritans

1954–2004: a Spiritan half century in Canada. Initially an all Irish group — fresh off the boat from Dublin/Liverpool to Montreal and then by train to Woodstock. Southern Ontario became its first base camp: an immigrant mission band; St. Rita's parish, Woodstock; Holy Rosary parish, Guelph; then Neil McNeil High School, Toronto. In twos and threes annual reinforcements were sent from Ireland.

Eight years after the initial group arrived, young Canadian men began to join these immigrant Irish priests. New life, new hope. Great expectations. Then one by one they left. Tide in, tide out. The makeup of the group remained as it had been — all Irish.

In the mid 60s an invitation from Alberta dispersed several to Edmonton. Some of the 300 Irish priests displaced by the civil war in Biafra joined their countrymen in Ontario and Alberta.

A decade later the Province of TransCanada came into being. "TransCanada" — not a highway, nor an airline, nor a pipeline. The already well established group of Holy Ghost Fathers in Quebec was officially the Province of Canada. What name to give the newer group of English speaking Irishmen? Numerous nominations. The winner was... Province of TransCanada.

By then Neil McNeil High School had more than a dozen Irish priests on staff. Too many talents for one location. Dispersal followed to community college, school boards, and the founding of three new high schools. Dispersal also to parishes and hospital chaplaincy.

A joint ground-breaking mission in Malawi by Spiritan and Calgary diocesan priests. VICS volunteers went overseas on two-year assignments bringing their skills and personal talents, and their willingness to walk with people of other cultures.

Men and women joined the group as Lay Spiritans — mutual support and challenge, and a broadening of outlook for new and old alike.

At the turn of the 80s came missionary involvement in Papua New Guinea. Far off Oceania turned out to be a training ground for a second wave of Canadian-born members.

No longer *Holy Ghost Fathers*, but *Spiritans*, the group began to mirror the Canadian reality. Spiritans from other lands joined in — some to study, some as landed immigrants from Trinidad, Great Britain, Portugal, Nigeria, Ghana, Sierra Leone, Tanzania and Uganda. Most recently from Vietnam. And later this year from Poland. Many cultures, many backgrounds, many points of view.

The Province of TransCanada has those who much prefer the old wine, as well as those who choose the new vintage. Debates around morality and liturgy, strongly held views both for and against involvement in Justice and Peace, conflicting opinions about the role of women in the church and in society, firm convictions on whether priesthood or baptism is the defining sacrament, different understandings of mission. The wonder is that men and women of such different temperaments, convictions and backgrounds do in fact make room for one and all.

Several in the Province have retired. The group has leaned too long for leadership on those who came in the 50s and 60s. It needs to trust the abilities and gifts of its more recent members. Wanting to take care of the less active, it stumbles in its masculine attempts to be of service.

There were deaths along the way. Departures too. Ongoing remembrance of the dead, close contacts between those who stayed and those who left assure that no one is forgotten.

Perhaps poet, Paul Murray O.P., best captures the 50th anniversary state of mind:

even under / the malign / powers of rust
and rain, the heart / survives, the soul / retains its gift
of weathering.

Patrick Fitzpatrick CSSp

CONTENTS

- 2 From the Editor:
From Holy Ghost Fathers to Spiritans
- 3 Mission Then and Now:
Me ... a Missionary!
- 4 The Group of Six
Their First Five Years
- 6 Founding Fathers
- 8 Parish Ministry in Alberta
- 10 Good Friday in the favela
- 12 Lives of Counter-Culture
- 15 'Put out into the deep water'
- 17 Sophia
- 19 Participant in VICS receives
Order of Ontario
- 19 Lifetime Achievement Award
for Lay Spiritan
- 20 Spiritan Gerry Scott,
Irish Person of the Year
- 21 Fr. John Sheehy, CSSp
- 21 My Mother
- 22 50th Anniversary Events
- 23 An Opportunity for
Reconciliation

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Me ... a Missionary!

Anthony Gittins, CSSp



“Are you a missionary?”
“Well, I support missionaries through prayer and financial contributions,” you might answer. And missionaries in the field will tell you their efforts wouldn’t go very far without that vital support. But, in addition to that, our baptism invites us to be truly missionary in the way we live each day. We are called to be people who make daily efforts to announce the Good News of Jesus. Any baptized person, therefore, who is not “missionary” is not yet fully Christian.

Imagine yourself for a moment as a missionary — not necessarily doing exotic things thousands of miles from home, but perhaps helping out at a neighbourhood shelter for homeless people or a soup kitchen. That or a similar activity could be a measure of your missionary, and therefore of your Christian commitment. Let’s explore this.

“Mission” and “Mass” come from the same Latin word meaning “to send.” At the close of each Mass, the Church sends us forth to continue the saving work of Christ in the world. Just as blessing ourselves with holy water as we enter a church reminds us of our baptism, blessing ourselves as we leave Mass should remind us of our mission.

Announcing the good news

Throughout history several occurrences created new bursts of enthusiasm for mission that challenged the Church to broaden its understanding of itself and its mandate to “announce the good news.”

In years past the Church linked Jesus’ command “Go, teach all nations and baptize them” with axioms such as “Outside the Church, no salvation.” This inspired Catholics to send out waves of missionaries, convinced that eternal damnation awaited those who died without baptism.

The “discovery” of the New World meant missionaries had to be sent out to bring Christianity to the inhabitants of

these lands. Some of the people encountered, far from being blank slates open to Christianity, practised ancient and sophisticated religions. These people were not always thrilled to see and listen to missionaries, no matter how well intentioned, whose message of “Good News” too often brought gun-toting colonizers and deadly diseases.

In the forty years since the Second Vatican Council, our understanding of our faith, our mission, and the mercy of God

its setting. This is what God does for a living.

As we get caught up by God in this ingathering, we are sent out on mission. When we have been embraced by God, we are co-missioned.

To help in this process, God sends his Son in the Incarnation, which is mission brought down to our level. Bringing mission down to earth is the job description of Jesus.

The Mission is not ours. We do not have a mission. The Church does not have

Just as blessing ourselves with holy water as we enter a church reminds us of our baptism, blessing ourselves as we leave Mass should remind us of our mission

has matured. We now recognize better that God’s great gift of salvation is not confined to members of a particular Church. This, coupled with a greater respect for religious diversity, has caused some Catholics to question whether the burst of mission fervour begun earlier last century has not run its course. Still others wonder whether the waning interest in convert-making today is because the Church has changed too much and we have thrown out the evangelizing baby with the baptismal water.

What can we say about Mission now?

God is mission. In fact mission is a job description of God. The life of the Holy Trinity is a cosmic breathing out and breathing in, an outreach and a gathering in. God reaches out to the ends of the earth and gathers in all from the rising of the sun to

a mission. The Mission has a Church. When the Church begins to think it has a Mission, it loses all sense of proportion and no longer is true to its calling.

The Spiritans do not have a mission. The Mission of God called them in 1703 through Claude des Places and invited them to be its instruments. God called them in 1848 through Francis Libermann. They are being called in 2004 to be faithful to today’s call. They were never promised that the movement would last forever. To concentrate energies on perpetuating the Spiritan Congregation is to lose the sense of Mission.

So we ask ourselves how we can be faithful in the present circumstances of our lives. We repeat to ourselves, “The Mission has me.” Then we ask, “What does it call me to do? How can I remain faithful today? How can I be a missionary?”

THE GROUP OF SIX

THEIR



Left: The original chapel at Woodstock.

Facing page: St. Rita's Parish, Woodstock, today.

In 1952 the General Chapter of the Spiritans decided to open new missions in regions in which the Congregation had never been previously engaged. The post-war era was one of an abundance of vocations. The number of Spiritans being ordained in the "home countries" of France, Germany, Quebec, Holland, the U.S., Portugal, Ireland, U.K., Belgium was growing every year. And the traditional "mission countries" were producing their first crop of Spiritan priests and brothers.

The same Chapter also decided to develop new "home countries" which would produce Spiritans to serve in their third-world missions. The Spiritans of Ireland were asked to create a presence in English Canada, known to be a rich source of missionary vocations.

They picked the founding team with great care. Everyone was experienced in some aspect of evangelization. Leo Brolly, aged 50, was a proven administrator and leader of men, with a quarter century of experience in Nigeria. Paddy Walsh aged 44 had had a brilliant career, also in Nigeria, as Vicar General, Superior and Seminary Professor. At 33 Garry McCarthy was the youngest of the group. In his five years as teacher and coach in St. Mary's College, Dublin, he showed himself to be a talented staff member with great influence over the boys in his care. Bob Hudson already had several years experience in vocation animation in Ireland when he arrived in Canada and Nick McCormack was a veteran parish priest with over twenty years as pastor in Trinidad W.I. Des McGoldrick was only 35, but had built a great reputation in Kenya as a giver of retreats and spiritual director.

Each member of this team was selected as a role payer. The plan was to accept a parish in Ontario as the central administrative centre and home base of the new foundation. Leo Brolly travelled to Detroit and stayed with the Spiritans there. They gave him the names of some contacts they had in Canada, including Bishop Cody of London, Ontario, a past student of St. Alexander's College in Gatineau, Quebec, operated by the French Canadian Spiritans. Bishop Cody offered Leo a place to start the new foundation.

Leo travelled north at once to inspect the location in which his team was to create a new parish. There was no church, no priests' residence, but there was a name: St. Rita's Parish,

FIRST FIVE YEARS

Woodstock, Ontario. A large rambling old house near the corner of Dundas Street and Clarke Avenue was bought by the diocese for the Spiritans' use. On Monday October 18th, 1954, the group of six gathered there. In this modest foundation the project took roots.

Right away Nick McCormack set about building a parish with Garry McCarthy as his assistant. Weekend Masses were held in the local school; funerals and weddings were held in St. Mary's Parish Church, the parish from which St. Rita's had been broken off. Within three years a fine church had been built.

In the meanwhile the "mission band" of Frs. Walsh, McGoldrick and Hudson was spreading the name of the Spiritans through missions to parishes, retreats in schools and convents all over Canada. Their spreading of the news soon brought results, as invitations came to the Spiritans from far and wide. The Irish Spiritans sent more men to join the pioneer group every year.

Then an invitation came from Cardinal McGuigan of Toronto to open a boys' high school. Neil McNeil High School was opened in 1958, the same year the first Canadian applied to join the group. In five short years the founding fathers had planted roots. The team had grown, and the first fruits of the harvest were being reaped. ❀

