Encounters through Spirit-Led Imagination: Spiritan Mission and Implications for Religious Education

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Abstract:

This paper will analyze writings of the Catholic Congregation of the Holy Spirit to explore “Spirit-led imagination.” Spiritans seek encounters with God termed “practical union,” which involve imaginative openness to the Holy Spirit and orient them toward life-giving encounters with others. They carry this disposition into a variety of cultures, with particular commitment to the poor and religiously diverse. Through examination of Spiritan writings, the paper will uncover how “practical union” influences their educational commitments, and consider implications for religious education.
In the mid-nineteenth century, Rev. Francis Libermann wrote to his confreres in the Congregation of the Holy Spirit:

Action or practical union [with God] consists in divesting oneself of natural impressions to open one’s soul to divine impressions ...Then we have a superabundance of truth...we see the things of God effortlessly and clearly, because our soul is in its element, the divine light.¹

In 2013, a group of educators from this same congregation wrote:

Spiritans, through openness to the action of God in self and others, become capable of seeing the divine image in both self and others. The nature of such openness involves an act of the imagination: the divine image, invisible to our eyes, becomes evident through the Spiritan’s faith-based conviction of its presence. Education and all other forms of ministry proceed accordingly, with priority given to forming others in knowing themselves as “the image of the unseen God.”²

Bringing these expressions together, a particular character emerges for the nature of “Spiritans” spirituality and education: Spiritans, through openness to the action of God in self and others, become capable of seeing the divine image in both self and others. The nature of such openness involves an act of the imagination: the divine image, invisible to our eyes, becomes evident through the Spiritan’s faith-based conviction of its presence. Education and all other forms of ministry proceed accordingly, with priority given to forming others in knowing themselves as “the image of the unseen God.”

The Congregation of the Holy Spirit (the Spiritans) is a Roman Catholic order of vowed religious men, present in diverse parts of the world. My university, Duquesne University of the Holy Spirit, sustains a Spiritan-infused educational vision. Through twenty years at Duquesne, I have observed how the distinctive aspects of this vision promote what I will call “imaginative encounters,” conducted for the sake of greater human and planetary flourishing.

Accordingly, this essay will advance the following thesis: The Spiritan vision of education, as grounded in its core sense of mission in evangelization and liberation of the poor and oppressed and its vision of “practical union” with God and others, both fosters and is itself shaped by imaginative encounters. Religious educators can benefit from attending to and incorporating Spiritan educational sensibilities in order to foster imaginative encounters.

In pursuing this argument, I will turn first to a brief overview of the Congregation and how one of its founders, Francis Libermann, developed a spirituality called “practical union” which shaped the members’ imaginative openness to union with God in conjunction with mission to others. Guided by this spirituality and the foundational importance of the Christian Gospel text, Luke 4:18-19 this spirituality shaped commitment to evangelization and liberation of the poor and oppressed. Continuing into the present day, Spiritans’ growth in the global South (and

diminishment in the global North) challenges them to new imaginative encounters as they seek to live interculturally.

Next, I will offer a further exposition of Spiritan education today as imaginative encounter, with reference to work by Duquesne University faculty on its key pedagogical elements. Preliminary analysis of data from a study of Spiritan educators’ self-understanding and practice will also be incorporated. I will bring these findings into dialogue with the approaches of scholar Douglas Sloan in his major work, *Insight-Imagination*. Finally, I will offer some openings for religious educators to draw upon Spiritan sources in their own cultivation of religious education for imaginative encounter.

The Spiritans

The Spiritan congregation was “co-founded” through the establishment and subsequent merger of two Catholic men’s religious congregations (orders). 3 Claude Poullart des Places, a young Frenchman, founded the Congregation of the Holy Ghost in 1703 in Paris, along with a seminary for poor students preparing to become clergy. The order soon began focusing on preparation of missionaries for work outside the European continent during the eighteenth century, journeying to North America, Asia and sub-Saharan Africa.

In 1841, Francis Libermann founded another order, the Congregation of the Holy Heart of Mary. Libermann, a convert to Christianity from Judaism, was especially interested in ministry with emancipated slaves, and promoted outreach in the French occupation areas of the Caribbean, the Indian Ocean and Africa. In 1848, the two congregations were merged into a single Congregation of the Holy Ghost, with Libermann as its leader. 4 Its ministries expanded in both North America and the global South throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. “Today [Libermann’s] spiritual descendents serve in 62 countries on five continents, and more than 3,000 members.” 5 Today, most men “in formation” preparing to become Spiritans, as well as fully professed Spiritans, are from the global South, with North American and European members a decided minority.

From the beginnings of the Spiritan congregation, lay people (non-vowed and non-ordained, women and men) have been attracted by the Spiritan vision. Accordingly, various configurations of lay supporters are affiliated with the congregation in regions where they are exercising their mission. Those who wish to commit themselves formally as “Lay Spiritan Associates” participate in formation and are immersed in the spirituality and mission activities of the congregation.

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4 Duaime et al. summarizes this history, 101-103.
Spiritan Themes as Related to “Imaginative Encounter”

Douglas Sloan, whose work I will discuss below in greater detail, relies on the work of David Bohm in his characterization of imagination as epistemic catalyst: “All genuinely new knowledge comes by means of passionate, energy-filled insight that penetrates and pierces through our ordinary ways of thinking.” We depend on our imaginative capacities to receive and interpret data from our perceptions, organizing these into coherent ways of apprehending and responding to our world, as well as communicating these to others. This activity is multifaceted, drawing upon affect as well as cognition, physicality as well as the capacity for abstract generalization.

With this provisional description, let us turn to three themes of Spiritan spirituality and mission that provide fruitful openings for consideration of imaginative encounter in education.

Practical Union

In his important document, “Instruction for Missionaries,” Libermann provided an exposition of how he understood “practical union.” As a person’s operative state of being, it is characterized by such complete openness to the gracious presence of the Holy Spirit that one is able to set aside one’s “nature” and embrace the “supernatural” as a “habitual state of union with God.”

Personal needs and preferences are renounced in order to embrace the priorities of God, known through the promptings of God’s Holy Spirit and the wisdom of the Spiritan community. Indeed, one of Libermann’s best-known metaphors focuses on the human’s disposition as being “light as a feather,” thus able to be directed wholly by the Spirit’s breath. As Leonard comments,

> The attitude of “let it happen” or “may it be done” resists the subtle temptation to control God. It demands an acceptance of the provisional, the new, the unexpected, and a relativizing of all, except for the single absolute, God and His reign.

While solely made possible by God’s grace, practical union requires that a person employ free will for intentional cooperation with this grace, thus forming the “habit” of seeking oneness with the divine.

Libermann recommends some key practices to foster this habit, with regular prayer and the discipline of self-abnegation. Here we will note a tension between the positive role for imagination that I argue is integral to Spiritan thought, and the language used by Libermann. In a discourse on “mental prayer” in the “Instructions for Missionaries,” he highlights three “acts” integral to this prayer type:

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8 Cited in Smith, 15.
1) **Recollection**, as “the mustering of all faculties” in disposition toward God, in which “a certain diligence is needed to curb the wanderings of the imagination to guide and feed our devotion”;\(^\text{10}\)

2) **Steady attention**, in which the pray-er seeks to avoid the distractions of “the senses and the imagination”\(^\text{11}\) that can be exacerbated by a hot climate (experienced by many missionaries to the global South!), the desire for physical comfort, exhaustion and a low mood; and

3) **Union of wills in love**: Libermann was convinced that the proper exercise of prayer would foster self-denial, leading to a holy union of the person with God. However, this required that we “earnestly apply all our powers to some consideration about our Creator and Redeemer, in the spirit of faith, hope and love.”\(^\text{12}\) In such exercise, one’s own desires are perfectly merged with the will of God.

While prayer in these dimensions clearly involves the person’s continual and conscious choices, Libermann makes evident that such acts of the will are only possible through God’s grace. The contemporary reader may justifiably question his dualistic language of nature and supernature, and the corresponding emphasis on abnegation of “fleshly” inclinations in favor of a purity-focused surrender to supernatural union of the soul with God. One might also wonder whether “imagination,” given Libermann’s negative view of it, can be redeemed for religious educators seeking a more holistic approach to imaginative encounter. The next paragraph will address the issue of dualism; later in the paper I will address the question of a positive Spiritan view for the imagination.

In interpreting Libermann’s thought on practical union and its relevance, other Spiritan scholars have uncovered insights that resist dualism and illuminate a deeper, more unified understanding of this approach. In their 2013 Bagamoyo document on education and Spiritan mission, the congregation stated:

> 2.4 We have received a spiritual heritage rooted in the “apostolic life” (SRL 3). Fidelity to prayer sustains and supports our “practical union”. We are becoming more aware of the call to a deeper interior life and a greater integration of our work and prayer.\(^\text{13}\)

This text, like others by Spiritan authors, emphasize that Libermann’s practical union should be understood as an ongoing habit of integrating their “contemplative” and “active” commitments. Similarly, in a study of Libermann’s correspondence with some Spiritan missionaries to Africa, French Spiritans Coulon and Brasseur propose that for Libermann, a complete union of “the urgency of mission (apostolic life) and the urgency of sanctifying contemplation (interior life) combined in a contempl-action” (Coulon, 32).\(^\text{14}\) James Okoye, in a reflection on the Bagamoyo conference, likewise points to this essential unity as a central insight of those gathered at the

\(^\text{10}\) Libermann, 45 and 46.

\(^\text{11}\) Libermann, 50.

\(^\text{12}\) Libermann, 53.

\(^\text{13}\) Bagamoyo Chapter Documents (2013). SRL refers to the *Spiritan Rule of Life*.

\(^\text{14}\) Coulon and Brasseur, “‘Make Yourselves Negro with the Negroes’: The Missionary Strategy of a Mystic (1847),” Excerpt from *Libermann 1802-1852*, trans. Fagah (2013), 32.
event: apostolic activity must be nourished by prayer, and prayer gains its direction and depth through its connection with action.\textsuperscript{15}

I infer that in this dynamic interrelationship, imagination must be at work as the capacity continually to translate between and among the everyday demands, uncertainties, joys and griefs of mission—“apostolic life”—and the way one prayerfully seeks union with the will of God—“interior life.” Contemplation helps to stir up passionate commitment to God and others through bringing the images of one’s complex missionary relationships into continual discernment and reshaping in light of the divine purpose. Action, in turn, offers the opportunities to transfer passionate, Spirit-infused commitment into transformed encounters and actions.

Spiritan mission has specific qualities and contexts in which its members seek to live “practical union,” as shaped by their foundational Scripture texts. These comprise our second theme.

\textit{Spiritan Mission as Evangelization, Liberation and Intercultural Identification}

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus enters a synagogue in his home town, Nazareth, and reads from a scroll of the prophet Isaiah:

\begin{quote}
“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord.” (Lk 4:18-19; New American Bible Revised Version)
\end{quote}

Spiritans find in this passage the core of their mission imperative: to follow Jesus by evangelization of the poor and liberation of the oppressed. As noted in my first section, this outreach began in des Places’s care for impoverished seminarians and workers in Paris, and spread through international missionary efforts. These efforts brought Spiritans into difficult and dangerous situations in which a number of them perished, particularly from disease. Their commitments to evangelization and liberation, heightened through imaginative insights, helped to sustain them.

Coulon and Brassuer develop in their essay a central aspect of Spiritan spirituality through which the missionary enters into imaginative identification with the \textit{kenosis}—self-emptying—of Jesus on the cross. This theological theme is rooted through the Christian apostle Paul’s hymn in his letter to the Philippians (“Rather, he emptied himself… he humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross…” Phil 2:7-8). Coulon and Brasseur go on to argue that for

\textsuperscript{15}James Chukwuma Okoye, “What We Have Heard, What We Have Seen with Our Eyes,” \textit{Spiritan Horizons 7} (2012): especially 7-8.
Libermann, “mission is to be thought and lived out in terms of conversion (first movement: l. 49-63) and in terms of both cultural and spiritual kenosis (l. 63-74) in imitation of Jesus Christ.”¹⁶

Spiritans, as highlighted through their work in Africa, understood their mission to the poor and oppressed as a calling into such “cultural and spiritual kenosis.” One of Libermann’s most famous injunctions to these men encapsulates both the priority of the calling to evangelization and liberation, and the imaginative moves of inculturation in obedience of this calling. He wrote that rather than listening to those who insist on retaining European mores in their mission work, Spiritans should “‘Make yourselves Negros with the Negros.’”¹⁷ One can detect here the importance of imagination in an interior, kenotic move through which white Europeans attempted to set aside their culturally constructed identities and adopt the identities of the “others” they encountered, for the sake of service to them.

While our own perspective today may lead us to critique of Libermann’s language as well as doubt about whether such a move is possible, it is apparent that Spiritans’ spirituality for mission holds this as an ideal. Further, in Coulon and Brassuer’s reading, Libermann intended this especially as a move from a rationality-based consciousness to the supposed African emphasis on emotion. Again, while such language may seem somewhat dualistic and patronizing today, the intent was empathetic identification with a different worldview and reasoning process. From an educational perspective, we can consider this as a call to an epistemological conversion, made possible through God’s grace and openness to God’s Holy Spirit, but given form and sustained through the scriptural texts’ call to evangelization and liberation, and imaginative identification with the self-emptying character of Jesus Christ. By “making oneself Negro,” one is taking on a new identity which simultaneously puts one in greater union with Christ and with subjects of one’s encounter—Africans—to whom the Good News of Christ can then be most effectively addressed.

Furthermore, this disposition emerged for Spiritan missionaries in a larger context in which poverty, enslavement and the Christian evangelistic imperative were linked in specific ways that fostered their practical efforts in Africa. Coulon and Brassuer point out how support for abolition was growing in Europe in the early nineteenth century, as well as the fervor for liberty in the wake of the French Revolution. Libermann’s confreres were making the connection between ending slavery as an institution and bringing Africa, the source for slaves, to Christianity. Coulon and Brassuer contend that the central insight here was that by bringing the Gospel to Africans, Spiritans were directly participating in “proclaim[ing] liberty to captives” (Lk 4:18). Consistent with this message, they also strove to liberate through practices such as purchasing enslaved

¹⁶ Coulon and Brassuer, 28; emphasis in original. Their references are to Libermann’s letters.
¹⁷ Coulon and Brassuer take issue with the usual translation of Libermann here as “Be Negro with the Negros…” They state, “The nuance can be important. Libermann’s approach implies a movement of volition and an active effort” (1). This emphasis on volition is also important in my analysis of Sloan’s relevance for Spiritan spirituality later in this essay.
people and creating settlements for them, providing educational, agricultural and spiritual support.

Today, the Spiritan Rule of Life (SRL) continues to emphasize the call to evangelization and liberation as central to Spiritans’ mission. Members declare themselves ready to take on mission activities which are oriented toward “those oppressed and most disadvantaged,” and to offer themselves for tasks which other church workers are unwilling to attempt. These very commitments are a source of renewal for the missionaries: “Our closeness to the poor brings us to hear afresh the gospel that we are preaching. It becomes an unceasing summons to conversion and an invitation to adopt a simple style of life.”

In preaching the Gospel to the poor and marginalized, Spiritans seek to form new community with them. This inclusive character of Spiritan mission, then, leads to my third priority for imaginative encounter: the nature of communal living by Spiritans and those with whom they minister.

*Community, Hospitality and (Radical) Intercultural Living*

Spiritans have embodied the commitment to community throughout their history; as their motto encapsulates, they seek to be of “One Heart. One Spirit.” As with other Roman Catholic congregations, they dedicate themselves to God and one another in shared vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. Their Rule of Life provides guidance for this lifestyle. A Vietnamese Spiritan, Pfung Manh Tien, points out that the Rule lays the foundation for community in the Holy Spirit’s call to unity amid diversity. Members are urged to ongoing conversion toward this unity. “Thus we are invited to live every experience in the Spirit of God—our joys, our hardships and our pains, the works we undertake in our zeal, and even our failures (SRL 88).” Associated with “practical union” in the SRL text, this habitus is one in which the Spiritan exercises imaginative capacity, through belief in the continual presence of the Holy Spirit, to uncover the Spirit’s working in the midst of community life. This animates a corresponding impetus and orientation for mission engagement—from one’s religious community, into the building of new community with others beyond the congregation.

Unity provides strength to continue the mission, especially when experiencing great difficulties. However, the diversity resulting from Spiritans’ international membership and locales makes the work of building community especially challenging. Their insights regarding the accomplishment of this task through attention to cultural differences thus provide us with

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19 SRL, 24.1.
particularly valuable guideposts for imaginative encounter. In this section I will focus on the work of two Spiritans who write for a broader academic audience, yet show in their attention to our encounters with “the other” a distinctively Spiritan flavor.

A Nigerian Spiritan theologian, Gregory Olikenyi, draws upon his Igbo cultural identity in a theological exploration of hospitality as a model for Christian evangelization. He outlines the three essential elements in the practice of hospitality: host, guest and reciprocity. Igbo hosts and guests encounter one another in prescribed ways and with understanding of identities that may be surprising to other cultures, especially individualized cultures such as those of the global North. For instance, the “host” is not simply one person or household, but by extension the entire local community. And the “guest” carries a sacred character “in the sense that he [she] is highly esteemed and treated with respect and care.”22 Most strikingly, there are implicit assumptions held by all about the nature of reciprocity in the host-guest relationship that prevent these becoming permanent identities. Olikenyi maintains that reciprocity entails “an unconditional readiness to share (give and take) both material and non-material things such as foodstuffs, clothes, visits, ideas, condolences and so on.”23 In the rituals of host-guest encounter such as initial greeting, traditional offering of the kola nut, allowing time for the guest to become acclimated prior to stating his/her reasons for the visit, and so on, each partner in the relationship understands that whatever is received in this encounter may require the readiness to give in another encounter.

While this mutuality is explicit in what Olikenyi calls the “direct reciprocity” afforded between family members, it is more implicit in the “indirect hospitality” among those not related by blood. Here, since all Africans understand themselves as “potential travelers,” the expectation is that one who is a traveler and receives hospitality will exercise it in turn to other travelers.24 I believe that such recognition of interdependence requires a disposition of imagining oneself, while in one role, continually living in the potential of the other role—thus the guest must anticipate a future role as host, and the host as guest, for true reciprocity to grow. Thus the reciprocity of hospitality offers a dynamism to each encounter that imaginatively roots it in past and future as well as the present.

Anthony Gittins, a US sociologist of religion and Spiritan, has offered to all those in mission work a model for “intercultural living” which speaks to the pressing needs of international religious congregations today. Building on the assumptions of shared community life, he argues that today’s multicultural realities make the fostering of community both more challenging and potentially richer experiences for living toward unity in the Spirit. Like many others, Spiritans have found their center of gravity shifting decisively toward the global South, as the congregation’s membership grows there and the numbers of members in the global North shrink dramatically. With these shifts, a kind of “reverse mission” is on the rise, as the Southern

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23 Olikenyi, 105; emphasis in original.
24 Olikenyi, 108.
cultures who formerly received missionaries become the source of missionaries to the Northern locales! And as responsibilities to sustain the congregations’ work passes more fully to the members of the newer cultures, communal living is increasingly multicultural. (At my university, for example, the resident community of Spiritans includes members from Nigeria, Ireland, France and Mauritius, as well as the United States.)

Gittins presents three models for community. In the first, “community of invitation,” new members are invited in and expected to conform to the existing community’s cultural norms. Here the expectation is that the community remains “monocultural” and that new members are assimilated. The second model, “community of inclusion,” welcomes new members with the hope that their new perspectives will enrich the community and help it become more faithful to its mission. While ostensibly more “multicultural,” this model can lead to confusion and upheaval because the direction of incorporation is often from the top down. In discounting inherent power dynamics, it can result in mere tokenism and unchanged communal structures.25

Gittins’s third model, “community of radical welcome,” seeks to move into a genuinely intercultural communal identity. It requires reassessment by all members of the community’s resources, with explicit attention to the contributions made by the newer members. “Theologically speaking, intercultural community members are drawn from diverse cultural backgrounds but share an intentional commitment to fellowship, motivated not simply by pragmatic or commercial considerations but by a shared religious conviction and common mission.”26 For Spiritans, their founding spirituality and its embodiment in their Rule of Life show that their particular openness to the Spirit requires the sustained commitment to mutual engagement with others while honoring others’ uniqueness in race and culture (“Make yourselves Negro…”).

This intercultural approach requires a kenotic spirituality consonant with the ministry of Jesus Christ:

Jesus chose to become a person of the margins, a sociological and biblical “stranger” rather than a person of power and influence. Influential people occupy central positions where power and authority lie. But Jesus chose the most effective way to encounter the people marginalized by circumstance and by society: outreach to society’s “them” or “other”—whether by gender, ethnicity, religion, lifestyle, or social or moral standing. For him, margins and boundaries were points of engagement rather than marks of separation or discrimination.27

Yet, to invoke Olikenyi’s notions of reciprocity in hospitality, the vulnerability of intercultural community members is mutual. Each must, by turns, be “host” and “guest” as a new entity emerges from its disparate elements. Virtues such as respect, tolerance and forbearance are essential, as well as knowledge of helpful concepts from psychology and sociology to make sense of the complexities of intercultural engagement. Members continue to look beyond their ongoing, sinful failures to live in true mutuality, toward an imaginative immersion in the eschatological possibilities that God offers for the beloved community.

With this selective overview of prominent themes from Spiritan history and current thinking, let us move to educational considerations. In what follows, I will introduce interweave categories from educational philosopher Douglas Sloan’s *Insight-Imagination* with some key themes emerging from current work on Spiritan education and pedagogical styles at Duquesne University, along with data from a current research study in which I am participating. I believe that this will provide support for finding in Spiritan spirituality a vision of education as imaginative encounter. This use of Sloan will also help to reclaim from Libermann’s writings a contemporary appreciation for the exercise of imagination in “practical union.”

*Sloan’s “Insight-Imagination,” Spiritan Education and Imaginative Encounter*

For several years, a lively discussion has taken place among Spiritans and other faculty at Duquesne University regarding the nature of Spiritan pedagogy—focused, though not exclusively, on faculty-student encounters in teaching and learning. In panel presentations, essays, brochures and many informal conversations, key elements have surfaced that are consonant with many themes already presented in my essay. Concurrently, two colleagues (Anne Marie Witchger Hansen and Steven Hansen) and I have undertaken a research project in which we have surveyed Spiritan educators and “formators” (those involved in the formation of new Spiritans) throughout the world. We have posed questions designed to elicit Spiritans’ self-understandings as educators and the types of experiences they consider educative.

In this section I will weave together key aspects of Douglas Sloan’s educational theory from his major work, *Insight-Imagination*, with the Spiritan themes already described and the current practices of Spiritan and Spiritan-inspired educators. I believe that this correlational analysis yields new insights worthy of consideration for religious educators interested in fostering imaginative encounters.

*Imagination, Not “Imaginative Fancy”*

As noted earlier in this essay, Sloan’s interest in imagination arises from its capacity to catalyze new knowledge through inspired rearrangement of elements into new configurations, reshaping our accepted thought patterns into something more than the sum of their parts. He cautions, however, that this capacity must be distinguished from “imaginative fancy,” in which one focuses on “memories, habits, personal biases and predilections, social conventions, and so

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forth,” in ways that reinforce prejudices and rigid epistemological structures. He posits that avoiding these flights of fancy involves the use of both “formal logic” and exercise of the “will.” Logic is required to order one’s categories into coherence, but must always be subordinated to the authentic use of imagination. The latter draws its authenticity from the exercise of the will to create “the active openness of the whole person to the influx of new meaning and new perception.” The habit of such openness to imagination-insight (terms used by Sloan synonymously) will then be characterized by “openness, spontaneity, anticipation, affirmation, and sustained, critical directedness.” New insights emerge in the will’s ability to hold “tension between openness and involvement.”

Here, I believe, is the answer to the problematizing of “imagination” by Francis Libermann. Instead of authentic, Spirit-led openness, Libermann was concerned with sensory and affective distractions that prevent the cultivation of a disciplined will which is sufficient to sustain the “practical union” necessary for the difficult work of evangelization and liberation. Libermann’s merging of contemplative and apostolic unions into practical union mirrors Sloan’s tension between openness and involvement as a way to foster new insight.

At Duquesne University and among the Spiritan educators in my research study, the work to hold teachers and learners alike in this tension takes many creative forms. One Duquesne professor described, for example, a class in which the students were struggling with a difficult textbook. She invited them into a contemplative exercise in which they were able to reflect upon and speak honestly about the nature of their difficulties, then supported them in a rereading in which they searched for sentences and short passages that were compelling and shared these with peers. “Rather than trying to understand a text that is outside of them and “inaccessible,” students inquired about the contact between interiority and information, where knowing emerges.”

In our research study on Spiritan educators worldwide, my colleagues and I have been struck by how readily these people imaginatively identify non-schooling environments and encounters as occasions for claiming their identity as “educators.” For example, a Spiritan in Africa recounted how one of his school’s young students fell critically ill, and how he worked with his confreres to provide medical assistance to her. “[B]efore she died, she confessed that her soul was at peace because of the love she has received and that she had seen a difference in the Catholic Church through the Spiritans.” Others spoke of international gatherings of Spiritans who “educated” one another through their shared commitments to their mission to the poor and to intercultural living as distinctively showing “Spiritan education” at work.

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29 Sloan, 166.
30 Sloan, 167.
31 Sloan, 167
32 Sloan, 168.
Besides reflecting a broad view of education that religious educators will find congenial, such accounts make evident how the Spiritans’ willed openness to divine encounter through the Holy Spirit allows them to name imaginatively the educational dimensions of important, transformative experiences. (Spiritans also have an established vocabulary of “formal” and “informal” educational activities, which encourages a broadened construal.) As with the Duquesne professors, the conviction that the Spirit is moving within and among all educational participants keeps teachers committed to a style of teaching-learning in which learners can be gently invited to share in the “tension between openness and involvement,” finding in the formal or informal educational space the possibility of imaginative insights. As Sloan puts it, “The imagination is not only that sense in Mary Warnock’s phrase that ‘there is always more to experience, and more in what we experience than we can predict’ (and control), but it is also the means wherein that more to and more in can be revealed.”

Caring, Holistic and Reciprocal Encounters

In Insight-Imagination, Sloan continually emphasizes the importance of emotions in the creation of new knowledge through imaginative reordering processes. Again, this is not a superficial sentimentality (as so often encouraged in contemporary media and other forms of communication). Rather, there is an agential emphasis as people are taught to “feel for themselves,” rather than passively accept external emotional manipulation, and to discern appropriate and inappropriate feelings for various occasions. Here Sloan is insistent that other-directed emotions are crucial for imaginative construction of knowledge: “In love and compassion feeling becomes not only an organ of perception but also an organ of cognition in which experience and knowing are one.” And in the disciplined encounters with others in which one negotiates the tension between the others’ integrity and the imperative to relationship, we are able to receive what is revealed through them.

I find in this emphasis of Sloan’s a strong resonance with the work of Olikenyi and Gittins. While Spiritans are enjoined continually to move, in the words of some of our research study participants, in a “center/out” direction, this is for the sake of creating new “centers” of mutuality in service and love. As Olikenyi maintains, the practices of Igbo hospitality are premised on reciprocity—one is sometimes a host, sometimes a guest. In teaching and learning, while there may be unequal relationships within formal educational contexts, care for the other involves continually working to increase the other’s ability to participate as co-learner and co-teacher. Relationships of love, compassion and concern for the whole person invite such mutuality and reciprocity, and in turn, increase the possibility for imaginative insights as participants shift their perspectives.

In a moving educational narrative, a Duquesne professor describes how she brings her students into empathetic encounter with underserved populations in the local neighborhoods. Starting with the students themselves, she does a series of class exercises in which they are invited to

35 Sloan, 148-49.
36 Sloan, 163.
37 Sloan, 164-65.
place themselves imaginatively within meaningful locations—beautiful landscapes, their childhood homes, the center of campus—and develop attitudes of care and involvement as a result of the awakening of their emotions. They are then ready to throw themselves into a variety of community-engagement projects to serve the poor and marginalized. The professor comments, “I think that Spiritan pedagogy must awaken the heart and then appeal to our students’ competence, creativity, and professionalism and show them that they have a gift to give to the world. We drive with the learners so that they themselves can drive the bus.”38 Through being “guest” in their own studies to the “host” professor, students become ready to encounter others and treat them, in turn, as “guests.” Similarly, a research study respondent, when asked to describe a “distinctively Spiritan educational experience,” simply responded: “Teaching students how to go into the community and listen to clients and staff and to BE present to them, building relationships first.”39

When this happens, as another research participant expressed it: “For me a Spiritan educational experience is one that is "center/out". It begins with the lived experience of the student, their center, and from that base pushes them out to the margins of their world. At the margin they experience diversity in thought, person and worldview.”40 As classroom “guests” who are treated with respect and care, they gain the confidence and security to become “hosts” and servants. Rather than the educational setting as a position of privilege, it is a center of community offering strength and clarity for the mission “out.”

Conclusion

I hope that the preceding analysis offers religious educators some insights to ponder for their own practice in fostering imaginative encounters. Here I will briefly suggest some implications.

Religious education as broadly construed and concerned with continual reshaping of both religious and educational forms. The Spiritan model in dialogue with Sloan calls to mind Maria Harris’s characterization of education as the “work of giving form. . . . especially concerned with the creation, re-creation, fashioning, and refashioning of form.”41 When the entire community is co-responsible for shaping and reshaping its forms, then imagination will be continually at play among the participants, and will be directly catalyzed through their willingness to encounter critically their religious traditions, other participants and the cultures in which they are immersed. By their very nature, such educational encounters will move far beyond the traditional classroom. They will require a discipline of “center/out” movement, both for the sake of fidelity to the religious tradition’s ethical imperatives and from the conviction that truly, education happens in the encounter with diverse others. In Gittins’s framework, such encounters lead to forging of intercultural communal relationships with them—new models of community attentive to the changing dynamics of the faith community’s mission.

“Orthopraxy” guides all religious-educational efforts, including formation in “orthodoxy.” Religious education within faith communities is justifiably concerned with handing on the faith,

38 Hansen et al., 101.
39 Witchger Hansen et al., data from research in progress.
40 Witchger Hansen et al., data from research in progress.
41 Maria Harris, Fashion Me a People: Curriculum in the Church (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1989), 40.
yet the Spiritan example of imaginative encounter suggests that mission should become the
driver and testing ground for any efforts for formation in core communal beliefs. If, as Sloan
suggests, both cold logic and flights of sentimentality block true insight-imagination, so will dry,
didactic and non-contextual presentations of religious traditions block appropriation of the
dynamism of tradition. Francis Libermann told his confreres that their mission work would be
their “second novitiate,” writing to them that in their first novitiate they made idealistic
resolutions based on “imaginary situations”—but now, in the field, “your resolutions will be
based firmly in reality.” Spiritans and Spiritan educators’ continuing efforts to be guided by the
realities of mission settings provide a model for religious educators to engage in their work
attentive to participants’ developmental and contextual “reality.”

Religious education must create opportunities for the conscious appropriation of religious
identity which is both flexible and faithful. A theme of the data from Spiritan participants in our
research study is that effective Spiritan education requires that one work consciously as a
Spiritan. While this may seem self-evident, the experience of “being Spiritan” resonated across
many respondents’ descriptions of educational experiences. Thus a participant, when asked to
“Describe a learning experience that you facilitated that you felt was distinctively
Spiritan,” simply responded: “As a teacher of theology at a Spiritan theological institute I am
trying to walk in the footsteps of those who taught me, who gave their best without asking for
much in return.” In his own educational context, then, this Spiritan sought to adapt creatively
the wisdom of his teachers. Another, when asked, the same question, answered: “It's who I am. I
cannot say much more without sounding pretentious. I do in fact emphasize the Holy Spirit as
the essential animator of mission and Christian living, but I would hope I would do that if I were
not a Spiritan.” Thus, while guided by his congregation’s vision and thus steeped in its
particular identity, he is able to imagine this openness to the Spirit even outside his vowed
membership.

Religious educators also continually live with the tension of particularity and pluralism, seeking
to draw strength from the first for the sake of the passionate and transformative engagement with
the second. The witness of Spiritans in mission and education offers rich insights for us as we
seek imaginative, just and transformative encounters within our work.

42 From Libermann’s 1847 letter to the Community of Dakar and Gabon, printed in Coulon and Brasseur, 23-24.
43 Witchger Hansen et al., research data in progress.
44 Witchger Hansen et al., research data in progress.
References


Libermann, Francis Mary Paul (N.d.). Instructions for Missionaries. Spiritan Collection, Duquesne University.


