1. Main points

“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” (Smith 2008, 11).

With these words, Francis Libermann, co-founder of the Congregation of the Holy Ghost (later named Congregation of the Holy Spirit), gave his members the guiding sensibility for their congregational “charism,” or central vocational gift. The notion of “practical union” has guided the congregation in its myriad endeavors since its founding in 1703. The Spiritans, an international Roman Catholic missionary order, understand practical union as the imperative to practice their vocation in an unconditional openness to the Spirit. To use again a metaphor from Libermann, they imagine themselves “light as a feather” so as to be blown by the Spirit in the direction that the Divine wills.

Though educational initiatives have regularly been part of Spiritans’ work, these have always been subsumed within the overriding imperative of mission, in whatever form necessary, to the poor, marginalized and religiously diverse. The congregation has focused mission efforts in the global South. Education has been for the sake of bringing empowerment to these populations, with concerted attention to community-building and hospitality. In their recent assembly in Bagamoyo, Tanzania, the Spiritans stated, “We renew once more our focus on education as a way to the integral liberation of individuals and peoples to whom we are sent” (Bagamoyo 1.4, cited in Okoye 2014, 55).

Unlike some other Catholic religious orders, the Spiritans have not developed a full-fledged philosophy or foundational pedagogy for their various forms of “formal” and “informal” education (the former referring primarily to classroom instructional settings and the latter to related endeavors such as campus ministry, apprenticeship training for trades, etc.). Nor do they possess an explicit theory and practice of religious education. The Bagamoyo documents, however, have ignited new, international efforts in these directions.

The proposed paper will seek to build on this new energy and contribute both to the REA conference and to Spiritan educational efforts by looking at how imagination functions in the Spiritan charism, through its emphasis on “practical union.” It will explore the ways in which this union functions with attention to the following Spiritan imperatives:

Evangelization and liberation of the poor and marginalized. The foundational text of Spiritan vocation is the Christian Gospel of Luke’s proclamation by Jesus of the prophetic text of Isaiah: “‘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…” (Lk 4:18). The message of evangelization—bringing the good news of the gospel of Jesus—is also a message of liberation. As Jesus imaginatively applied Isaiah’s words to himself as inspired by the Holy Spirit, Spiritans experience themselves “anointed” by the same Spirit to a similar calling. Thus, as in the Bagamoyo quotation above, education must be imaginatively fitted to the imperatives of a liberating evangelization.

Hospitality and community. The Spiritan ethos is profoundly welcoming to all, seeking to put oneself at the disposal of the guest. Libermann exhorted his colleagues undertaking the African mission to “become black like the blacks” so as to honor fully their personhood as culturally constituted—an exercise of imaginative reorientation. The imperative to community follows, as the congregation orders its life in community built with and among the poor and marginalized.

Because education is a mission activity for Spiritans, and imaginative openness to the Spirit infuses all mission efforts, I believe that examination of primary Spiritan sources with attention to the function of practical union through Spirit-led imagination will yield insights relevant for religious education. My paper will undertake this task.

2. Description of methodology

As inferred above, the paper will be primarily a literature-based review and analysis. I will draw upon writings by and about Spiritans with guiding questions such as:

- How does “practical union” function as a metaphor and imperative for imaginative exercise of Spiritan mission?
- How do Spiritans talk about their mission of liberating evangelization, hospitality and community as this applies to education?
- How do findings for the preceding questions resonate with selected approaches to imagination in education and religious education? What does Spirit-led imagination in the Spiritan mode offer to these approaches?

3. Selected bibliography

Primary sources from the Spiritan Congregation are archived and accessible to researchers at http://digital.library.duq.edu/cdm-spiritan/. Major categories to be consulted are:

- Spiritan Rule of Life and Chapter Documents: The Rules of the Congregation; Superior General Reports; etc.
- Spiritan Papers: a publication of the Spiritan Studies Group
- Spiritan Articles: A collection of 86 articles related to the Spiritan Congregation
- Spiritan Letters and Writings: Unpublished letters and other writings related to the Spiritan Congregation
- *Spiritan Horizons*: A Journal of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit
I also have access to written summaries of a series of dialogues among educators at a Spiritan educational institution regarding the meaning of “Spiritan pedagogy.”


Sources cited in proposal:
