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Spiritan Charism, Vocational Commitment, and "A Different Kind of Excellence": A Study of Spiritan Educators

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Dr. Steven Hansen

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This study will explore how vowed and lay Spiritans involved in education manifest the Spiritan charism in their teaching practices

SPIRITAN CHARISM, VOCATIONAL COMMITMENT, AND “A DIFFERENT KIND OF EXCELLENCE”: A STUDY OF SPIRITAN EDUCATORS

Introduction

For several years, faculty and staff from across Duquesne University have engaged in lively conversations on the topic of Spiritan pedagogy. From a variety of disciplines, backgrounds, and teaching styles, they have come to appreciate commonalities in their teaching styles that resonate with the Spiritan vision and ethos of the university. Several writing projects have already emerged from this fruitful dialogue, some published in the pages of *Spiritans Horizons*. The University’s Center for Teaching Excellence and Center for Catholic Faith and Culture have promoted these developments by sponsoring several sessions each year through which interested faculty come together for ongoing discussion.

During this period, Drs. Steven Hansen (Center for Teaching Excellence) and Anne Marie Witchger Hansen (Occupational Therapy and a Lay Spiritan) began to dream of conducting formal research that would go to the heart of the Spiritan educational charism by studying the central, living embodiments of this charism: Spiritan educators. They gathered other DU faculty to discuss the contours for such a study. After several consultations, they and Dr. Maureen O’Brien (Theology) devised a qualitative research project titled “Describing a Spiritan Pedagogy: The Expression of the Spiritan Charism in Teaching Practices of Spiritans and Lay Spiritan Associates in Secondary Education, Higher Education and Spiritan Formation Houses.” To our knowledge this is the first such study.

We three researchers formulated the study’s purpose as follows: “This study will explore how vowed and lay Spiritans involved in education manifest the Spiritan charism in their teaching practices. The results of this study will surface Spiritan pedagogy as it is currently practiced by Spiritan educators.”

We determined two major phases for the project. First, we designed a survey and sent it to all English-speaking Spiritans we could identify as either currently or previously engaged in education or formation. Besides basic demographic information, the survey included open-

ended questions designed to surface the foundational educational, spiritual, and mission-oriented dispositions and practices that appear distinctive in a Spiritan educational vision. The questions included attention to such areas as participants' description of what constitutes a Spiritan educational experience, their own stories of participating in and facilitating such experiences, sources of inspiration and challenge for them as Spiritan educators, what they have learned over the years about the nature of Spiritan education, and important supports and barriers to functioning effectively in this ministry.

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We received twenty-four richly detailed survey responses. The respondents are themselves well educated, with over 50% holding a bachelor's degree and almost 49% possessing a doctoral degree. They are also experienced, with over 81% having taught or worked in education or formation for ten or more years. Most are currently working in either North America (59%) or Africa (25%).

After initial thematic coding of the survey responses, we launched the second phase of the project, a focus group of Spiritan educators held at Duquesne University on June 18, 2018. Fifteen Spiritans consented to participate in the six-hour focus session. These educators, whose collective experience spans a number of countries in North America, Latin America, Africa and Asia, helped us to validate and expand significantly upon the survey results with their in-depth comments on the themes we had surfaced, and also contributed individual "short stories" of their memorable Spiritan educational experiences. Audio recordings of their responses were transcribed, and the research team coded these results.

Our qualitative analysis¹ of the surveys and focus group transcripts surfaced three broad commitments that the Spiritan educators display: 1) Spiritan educators are committed to reflecting the Spiritan charism and Gospel values in their teaching, interactions and personal lives. 2) Spiritan educators are highly committed affectively and vocationally to their work, despite significant challenges. 3) Spiritan educators are committed to fostering both academic excellence and service to the poor through their schools and individual efforts, yet navigate a tension between these priorities. In this essay we will explore each commitment with illustrations from the data.²

Spiritans share a common desire to serve those on the peripheries and the margins

some Spiritans in our study expressed frustration in the disjunction between a charism that privileges the poor and the present reality of the congregation's educational commitments

1. Commitment to Spiritan Charism and Gospel Values as Educators

Our data found that Spiritans share a common desire to serve those on the peripheries and the margins, reaching out to those in greatest need and in places where others will not go. Spiritans cultivate relationships that are other-focused, intercultural, inclusive and center-out, with community building as a core commitment. Spiritan educators draw upon the wellsprings of the charism; they are Spirit-led and motivated by Gospel values. To illuminate these values, the major findings in this section are grouped as responses to the following questions:

- With Whom Do We Privilege Relationships?
- What Kinds of Relationships Do We Cultivate?
- How Does the Charism Motivate Us?

With Whom Do We Privilege Relationships?

Participants made clear that for them, Spiritan education involves service to those on the peripheries: poor and marginalized people, and those in greatest need. As one commented, this occurs “when we go to places where nobody has ever preached the Gospel yet, to places where nobody wants to go” (Focus). This Spiritan and others also highlighted how these commitments can involve personal cost and risk. “I think that’s part of it, is that it’s a trust in the Spirit that facing even incredibly difficult circumstances—not necessarily physically threatening but maybe ... then the whole thing of ‘to the poor.’... [T]hat is very much part of our charism” (Focus). Furthermore, as will be shown below, Spiritans not only serve those on the margins of society, but also learn from them.

However, some Spiritans in our study expressed frustration in the disjunction between a charism that privileges the poor and the present reality of the congregation’s educational commitments. As one exhorted, “Come on! Let’s get there and teach and let’s not just talk about it. I just don’t think we’re there. Where are the biggest cracks in society that need to be filled? And even if we fall in them and fall to the bottom of them, we should be there” (Focus). Section 3 will address some ways that Spiritans navigate this tension.

What Kinds of Relationships Do We Cultivate?

Spiritans responses reflected how participants cultivate



Dr. Anne Marie Witchger
Hansen

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Spiritans engage in community building among their students - one described it as “setting the center”

relationships from the “center-out” through commitments to mutuality, empowerment, and transformation. Being a missionary is about going to the margins from the center, which means engaging with diversity in inclusive ways, which brings mutual transformation. Key aspects of these relationships are described here.

Center-out: community building for the sake of other-focused, inclusive and intercultural outreach

In the words of one Spiritan: “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” (Survey).

Thus, Spiritans engage in community building among their students - one described it as “setting the center” - cultivating relationships characterized by collaboration and care for each member of the community and his/her perspective and gifts. Spiritan educators help “people see their own potential” (Survey). They foster authentic relationships and support their students and one another, modeling community in their relations with other congregational members. As one Spiritan stated, “We are best when we are united and display our community experience, when the students see us as one, enjoying one another and supporting one another” (Survey).

While establishing and sustaining this strong “center,” Spiritan education intentionally moves “out” as other-focused, interculturally engaged and committed to inclusive relationship building and oriented toward the margins. As one stated, “center-out” teaching requires valuing other cultures, people, and perspectives with a “wider world view, knowledgeable, outsider perspective, empathetic” (Survey). Another Spiritan commented that a unique quality of a Spiritan education is “integration of, and attention to, how the voices of the Southern Hemisphere can be and are included in the curriculum at hand” (Survey).

Relationships of mutuality: learning with and learning from

Spiritans educators seek to create a community of mutual learners where teachers and students learn with and learn from one another. They believe teaching is concerned with the whole student in whatever they are facing--from academic and personal needs, their contexts

and circumstances, to discerning their own calling. As one Spiritan states: “[it happens] often ... in reflection papers and discussions with my students from different social classes and different cultures and different religions ... I learn from the other, they learn from me ... together we grow!--mutuality-learning from each other--co-learners and co-creation of knowledge” (Survey).

Attentiveness to mutuality becomes even more important and challenging as Spiritan educators encounter diverse cultures and needs

Attentiveness to mutuality becomes even more important and challenging as Spiritan educators encounter diverse cultures and needs. During the focus group, several Spiritans discussed the importance of intercultural awareness for the practice of mutuality. As one stated, “[Mutuality] encompasses a lot of things, but [it especially requires] attentiveness to where we go or what we meet. Sometimes cultures differ and sometimes certain things we take for granted means a lot for the people ... learning from them, they can enrich us and we can enrich them. [In these situations] mutuality is very important” (Focus).

Participants emphasized a non-patronizing approach to people, communities, and cultures, with the Spiritan educator valuing the dignity, basic goodness, and gifts of each individual, culture or community. Repeatedly, respondents eschewed condescending, paternal, and parochial attitudes and approaches in favor of mutuality and cultural sensitivity. One respondent compared this educational approach to his missionary training: “It’s kind of ironic that how they taught us to be ‘missionaries’ as priests and religious seems to me very much my sense of how to be an educator in the classroom, and I don’t see a big difference between the two and that fundamental approach [is that the people you’re with] have something and to realize it’s a gift that you get from those people. I never come into a classroom like—‘Here I am to teach you,’ but it’s ‘Here we are to learn’” (Focus). Another respondent added, “It begins with the formation of ourselves, having known that we go in and we approach people in a very simple way with great simplicity and great respect for them, knowing that they also have something to give” (Focus).

A Spiritan educational experience is empowering and transformative

For empowerment and transformation

A Spiritan educational experience is empowering and transformative, emphasizing service to the Kingdom of God. A Spiritan education encourages students to see their full potential. “The specific Spiritan formation provides an inclusive world view, an informed and guided anthropology,



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education has been the means of raising people up, and I think that part is very Spiritan

helping to empower people, helping people see their own potential" (Survey).

During the focus group, one participant described an empowering and transformative educational experience as a ministry working *with the poor* and *working for the poor*. "Working with the poor and working for the poor ... really emphasizing the human aspect, respect for people! And as an individual created in the image and likeness of God. And this should be very fundamental" (Focus). Another stated, "Spiritan education is both supportive as well as empowering for students to see their full potential, pushes the boundaries and margins ... education has been the means of raising people up, and I think that part is very Spiritan" (Focus).

How Does the Charism Motivate Us?

Participants in our study described an educational experience as "Spiritan" in nature when it is rooted in the Spiritan charism, motivated by the legacy of Spiritan founders and mentors, and integrated in Gospel values and a theological anthropology of human dignity.

Spirit-led, rooted in the charism

Spiritan educators are inspired by Spiritan identity and charism and their motto, "*One heart and soul.*" This charism is meant to be modeled in Spiritan educational institutions by the Spiritans, staff and students, and supported and encouraged by the administration of the Spiritan Congregation. One Spiritan educator identified key characteristics of a Spiritan education that is "spirit led" and rooted in the charism as building authentic relationships, praying together and listening to one another. The Spiritan charism permeates all activities at a Spiritan educational institution, including extra-curricular activities, prayer, farming and an atmosphere of "brotherhood." One Spiritan explained this in these words: "The institutions I taught in were Spiritan. We did everything in a way typical of the Spiritans" (Survey).

Legacy of the Spiritan founders and other exemplary Spiritans

Spiritan in our study found a wellspring of support and motivation enlivened by the legacy of the Spiritan founders who gave of themselves and did not count the cost. Some Spiritans also reported they are inspired by their own Spiritan mentors and those they live with in community. "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” (Survey). Further, several participants noted that this commitment to the Spiritan charism is reflected in how they, in turn, mentor and provide spiritual guidance for students who seek to realize their full potential. “The Spiritan Experience extends to helping those in need, academically and spiritually. The spiritual needs of many of our students can be great” (Survey).

Incarnational, Gospel-based theological anthropology

Spiritun education includes a model of inculturation that does not presume the Gospel comes from “outside,” but emphasizes how the Divine is already present within cultures

Spiritun education includes a model of inculturation that does not presume the Gospel comes from “outside,” but emphasizes how the Divine is already present within cultures--reflective of a highly incarnational, Catholic theological anthropology. In one participant’s words, “And I guess it makes me think of Libermann’s famous ‘Be black with the blacks,’ ‘Be African with the Africans,’ when he was speaking to Europeans and reminding them, You’re not there to bring Europe to Africa, you’re there to help people discover Jesus in their midst already” (Focus).³

Spiritun educators are clearly inspired by Gospel values. As one Spiritan stated, “The Spirit of the risen Lord and the spirits of our founders are my sources of inspiration” (Survey). Further, Spiritun education reflects a theological anthropology built on human dignity. “There is a personal discipline involved, grounded in a transcendent anthropology that locates all interaction and each individual within a divine providence that confirms a shared human dignity and common journey into truth and goodness” (Survey). Another Spiritan reflected a Spiritan theological anthropology in his approach to others: “I think we as Spiritans, when we go out, we have to appreciate what people have. And from there we grow together and help them to realize those values, those good things they have, and help them to realize and to develop them and make them their own and own them” (Focus).

Many challenges arise for Spiritun educators in seeking to live their commitments within the opportunities and difficulties posed by real-life settings. The next section will explore these tensions between charism and reality through highlighting the role played by affective and vocational commitment for our participants.

2. Affective and Vocational Commitment

*unparalleled situations
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precedent and clear
guidance*

Spiritans in our research display a high degree of affective and vocational commitment. According to research in human resources, the development of *affective commitment* occurs through recruitment, selection, and socialization into an organization.⁴ For our purposes, we can consider how the Spiritan charism and formation process contribute to the affective commitment of the Spiritan educators we studied. However, our study shows that as they move into their vocation as Spiritan educators, they regularly find themselves in unparalleled situations amidst poverty and isolation, without precedent and clear guidance. Given these extraordinary contexts, the Spiritans in our research also show a high degree of *vocational or career commitment*, referring to a sense of motivation to work and persevere in one's chosen career role.⁵

In many ways, the career commitment of Spiritan educators in our study is consistent with insights about "protean" careers that require versatility in the face of changing circumstances. Protean careers involve working in highly evolving situations, in which individuals must manage their own development and progress. People working in protean careers show a high degree of adaptability and self-awareness in developing skills for an evolving career situation.⁶ In our study of Spiritan educators, we find important expressions of affective commitment and career commitment in relation to the protean nature of their work, their adaptability and their sense of self-awareness as Spiritans.

Expressions of Affective Commitment

*Walk with those you have
been given to form and
educate*

Affective commitment is a person's emotional attachment to their work and the organization to which they belong. As mentioned above, organizations lay the groundwork for affective commitment primarily through recruitment, selection and socialization. In our survey, respondents showed a high degree of affective commitment grounded in their own formation as Spiritans, including the founders' inspiration and the guidance of those who formed them. One respondent, in describing the greatest lesson that was learned as a Spiritan educator, emphasized the role of "the Spiritans who formed and educated me. They respected me and encouraged me and so that has been my guidepost. Walk with those you have been given to form and educate. Invite them on the journey that has given me fulfillment and joy

as a Spiritan” (Survey). And despite the meager resources of a formation house, another respondent described the experience with great affection: “The demands on our living conditions were great and we often went without basic things but maintained a good spirit of care and respect for one another. While students of other congregations had greater security we seemed to have more fun. We were characterized as a happy and open community” (Survey).

Spiritun educators sustain their affective commitment through their educational work with others. In describing what it is like to be a Spiritun educator, one said: “In my own situation, I feel a sense of joy welcoming younger confreres into our Theologate and following them until their priestly ordination. I also experience greater joy when they go on mission and are challenged with responsibilities” (Survey). Another stated that “I am inspired when I meet any former student and see how he has developed and embodies being a Spiritun. It gives me a sense of generativity, that I helped him become who he is and what he has accomplished. [I am inspired by r]eceiving their respect and gratitude toward me whenever we meet” (Survey).

Thus, the affective commitment of Spiritun educators begins in formation and deepens or grows through leading others in formation or education. As the quotations above make evident, “joy” is an especially prominent emotion that they express regularly throughout their journey.

However, the Spiritans’ affective commitment characterized by joy does not preclude the experience of negative emotion. The Spiritans in our survey feel at times isolated and challenged to persevere in difficult circumstances. In describing what it is like to be a Spiritun educator, respondents occasionally hinted at these issues.

It is a pretty isolated, disconnected experience.
And, we are hardly noticed (Survey).

I must admit it’s difficult (Survey).

Painful (Survey).

Some of these negative feelings arise from personal challenges due to an educator’s perceived lack of educational community in the congregation, or their own aging, motivation, and sense of fit and abilities.

We take each other far too much for granted and do not encourage or show real interest in our Spiritan confreres (Survey).

Getting old, lack of energy, limits of time, talent, and expertise (Survey).

There are too few of us (Survey).

My own limitations and lack of ability to see the potential in others (Survey).

Despite these negative feelings, however, the generally strong positive affect of Spiritan educators shows a high level of commitment to their work as educators.

Expressions of Career Commitment

The career commitment of Spiritan educators is remarkable given the ever-changing, protean nature of their work. To help us appreciate this, we will present some respondents' answers that address their adaptability and sense of self-awareness. We will also consider their career commitment in light of some vestiges of a division between "educators" and "missionaries" within the congregation.

Spiritane educational work is ultimately protean. One respondent reveals its changing nature in the following way:

The job is always changing. Whether it is the situation, or the subject, or the students you always have to adapt. We keep getting moved about either by Superiors or by circumstances beyond one's control. You have to do it yourself because no one has ever done it before. You are not allowed to get into a rut as a Spiritan, that is, doing the same thing year after year (Survey).

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The protean nature of Spiritane educational ministry is further compounded by the fact that the work regularly occurs in remote areas without access to resources, amidst poverty and isolation, and without precedent and clear guidance. Many of our respondents discussed these difficulties. These types of situations call forth a high degree of adaptability, evident in the following responses:

We improvised to circumstances and events. We took everything one month or semester at a time (Survey).

I never trained as a teacher, even though I got myself

immersed in pedagogical principles along the way (Survey).

Unless you belong to a select “in-group” in which you will be sent to any school and have it all paid for, you had better have an incredible love for education and for doubling down on whatever is necessary for you to develop your skills and expertise (Survey).

While they are highly adaptable, their self-awareness as Spiritans and self-validation of their educational efforts grounds their commitment to their protean work:

I am convinced I am doing a very important work, probably the most important work for the congregation (Survey).

I feel the obligation of being a true witness of God’s presence in the totality of the educational process beginning with myself (Survey).

“Being a Spiritan first” (Survey) and “maintaining a Spiritan identity and perspective in my teaching” (Survey) are also challenges related to self-awareness that respondents cited. While they admit a need to remind themselves “of the importance of the work” (Survey), the danger of “becoming rote in their role as an educator” (Survey) and the reality of their “own limitations and lack of ability to see the potential in others” (Survey), these concerns manifest their own self-awareness and genuine vocational commitment as Spiritan educators.

Participants sometimes alluded to a tension that exists between the relative status of educational ministry and missionary ministry among Spiritan confreres

Participants sometimes alluded to a tension that exists between the relative status of educational ministry and missionary ministry among Spiritan confreres. One focus group participant recollected an earlier time in his ministry when “there was such a split between what we called ‘missionaries’ and ‘educators’ back then that they divided into two camps . . . I mean, to have been an educator you were looked down upon” (Focus). But generally, the participants believe this division has decreased over the years. The same focus group participant continues: “Fortunately, time allows things to settle and the Holy Spirit begins to work, so that it was for the first time in the last general council that something specific was said in the council documents and in the council activities about education as a legitimate kind of ministry” (Focus).

However, there are vestiges of the earlier division

between missionaries and educators that appeared in the comments of the focus group and survey participants, manifested in three ways. First, some Spiritan educators feel conflicted because of the tension between “educators” and “missionaries” as they perceive the differences between these roles; for example: “I always saw myself called to direct service to the poor and the education ministry removes that to a degree. I understand the need to prepare others to participate in the church’s mission but I miss being in direct service” (Survey).

A second way that vestiges of the division still appear is that the educators in our study occasionally feel challenged by a lack of congregational focus on education:

No formal or structured manual to assist Spiritans in education or teachers in Spiritan schools. Also, to my knowledge, there is no ongoing formation for Spiritan educators (Survey).

I think that if we had some kind of vibrant sharing of intellectual life that is visible and encouraged (perhaps along the lines of a blog, perhaps retreats on agreed upon themes, perhaps some workshops) it would set the tone that education as well as mission are important components of our vocation (Survey).

A third way that the study participants reflect vestiges of the tension between “educators” and “missionaries” is in their interactions with confreres and superiors. Study participants find it challenging when “other confreres not in education” do not recognize “education as a ministry” (Focus). This could be evident at the basic level of scheduling congregational events while schools were in session, as one Spiritan explained:

So it’s somehow—at times the fact that the other confreres don’t see [education] as a ministry equal. [Sounds of agreement from group] Because even when we have our recollections, retreats, it’s so frustrating because it’s always during the week. And then they tell me—I remember I had again a different superior then, not the one now—it was a five-day thing and he got so angry. I said, “It’s exam week, it’s midterm exams.” [The superior responded] “Well, if you’re a Spiritan—” and it was really as if you’re a traitor to the cause (Focus).

Study participants find it challenging when other confreres not in education do not recognize education as a ministry

Despite many challenges, Spiritan educators in our study show considerable evidence of maintaining their vocational commitment. Participants expressed a strong desire for opportunities within the congregation for educators “to come together, learn from one another, and see all aspects of the evangelizing process within the congregation and the major contribution that education has” (Focus). They are deeply committed, highly adaptable and self-aware as Spiritans despite the protean nature of the work and vestiges of a division between “educators” and “missionaries” within their experience.

As this section makes evident, there are many challenges navigated by Spiritans in their ministry. In the third section, we highlight a striking theme from their reflections that illustrates a particular tension in their identities as both Spiritans and educators.

3. Commitment to Academic Excellence in Spiritan Education of the Poor and Non-Poor

Spiritans are cognizant of educational standards and hold a commitment to excellence in their educational ministry, attending conscientiously to their own professional development.⁷ Yet our analysis yielded a nuanced, sometimes contested and organically creative picture of how “excellence” is best understood and realized within the distinctively Spiritan practices of giving preferential attention to the poor, while valuing all students and fostering their fullest growth. Below are two notable dynamics from the participants’ reflections.

Navigating the Tension between Academic Excellence and Solidarity with the Poor

Participants forthrightly acknowledged the difficulties in sustaining “academic excellence”—a category used across educational institutions—alongside the particular Spiritan commitments to education that serves the poor and those on the peripheries of society. Thus, some respondents serving in Catholic schools sponsored by a diocese or another religious congregation expressed some dissonance between the expectation to perform in ways consonant with that “style and spirit” (Survey) rather than in one’s Spiritan commitment, and the resulting concern that Spiritan commitment will then be experienced as “more internal than external” (Survey). And one stated, “especially for some of us working in government-funded schools, it is becoming

Participants forthrightly acknowledged the difficulties in sustaining “academic excellence”

increasingly difficult to build, promote, and nurture an educational experience that is 'Spiritans' in nature" (Survey).

However, both survey respondents and focus group participants were most passionate in their critique—and defense—of a standard educational understanding of “excellence” when criticizing elitism perceived in *Spiritans* schools, viewing this notion of excellence as existing in tension with the central charism of outreach to the poor. As one commented, “I think we have to recognize that there is always going to be a tension between the service to the poor and [being] professional ... there's a value on both sides” (Focus).

Participants' contributions revealed the complexities of navigating the tension as well as creative ways of doing so. For example, sometimes “excellence” was associated with “education for the rich and middle class,” while “education for the poor” had a different aim. Thus for at least one respondent, resolution of this tension would mean that Spiritans should not seek academic excellence at all, since the aspirations of the non-poor and the consequent focus on such excellence constitute a barrier to authentic Spiritan mission commitment:

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There is a temptation in all educational endeavors to strive for excellence. For the church, and especially for Spiritans, it is a temptation we should not give in to. Education for the genuinely poor will never be excellent. That is not its aim. Education for the poor should be as good as we can make it, but the aim is to educate the poor; excellence will be found in other quarters. Hopefully the children of the current poor students whom we are educating will be able to pay for excellence. Meanwhile, as it stands, we are often letting the truly marginalized, the genuinely poor, go unserved (Survey).

Others, however, resisted this formulation and sought to sustain a balance between excellence and prioritizing the needs of the poor, while acknowledging many challenges in doing so. For example, in global South contexts characterized by extremes of poverty and wealth, some disadvantaged students are limited both economically and by their academic background. Here, Spiritans' efforts to establish schools characterized by excellence may have unintended consequences. As vividly expressed by one focus group participant:

Many times in our Spiritan institutions in—I'm sure in Asia as well, but definitely in Africa—we will go out to a poor community, we will establish an educational institution. We insist on academic excellence. When we have academic excellence, those who have more resources will be drawn to it because we have an excellent school. And pretty soon the school that we have established for the poor is being attended by the rich! (Focus)

Further, these seasoned educators are well aware of the financial and human resources required to maintain their mission, both to the poor and to foster academic excellence. As one wryly commented, with others laughing knowingly, “It’s very expensive to educate the poor” (Focus).

Issues of justice to one’s own staff also exacerbate the tension:

Even [at Duquesne University] we need more money to pay better and better to excellent faculty and yet ... that money has to come from the students ... That challenge is a really dividing thing in the heart of any Spiritan. How can we keep the tuition low and yet have excellent education? And pay well the faculty who deserve it (Focus)?

Some participants from both the global North and South advocated navigating the tension by acknowledging economic disparities and admitting both the poor and the non-poor to Spiritan schools, pragmatically drawing upon the resources of the latter group in order to provide for the former. For others, making the effort to educate non-poor students with an orientation toward reducing poverty also provides a rationale for Spiritan education:

So what we are doing is not to justify, but we are saying that, Okay we take the children of, say, middle class, we educate them so that they can appreciate—they can fight the poverty in society and transform the society as we go along (Focus).

Or as another put it, Spiritan schools educating wealthy students should be preparing them to be attorneys defending the rights of the poor, or nurses working with marginalized populations, and so on.

It should be known because we’re focusing on those kinds of areas and that’s what I mean by not looking

Spiritan schools educating wealthy students should be preparing them to be attorneys defending the rights of the poor, or nurses working with marginalized populations

at excellence, *academic* excellence. Looking at a different kind of excellence that focuses [in this way] and then you attract the students who are interested in serving the poor (Focus).

“A Different Kind of “Excellence”: Education of Both Poor and Non-Poor as Shaped by Spiritan Charism and Mission

No solution proposed in the previous section won full consensus among participants. However, our study suggests that in navigating the tension between external standards of academic excellence and the Spiritan charism as oriented toward those in greatest need, Spiritan educators creatively and organically shape such standards within their own institutions, giving them unique form through efforts to educate in faithfulness to their charism. In the participant's words cited above, they work for “a different kind of excellence”--or what we might call “Spiritan excellence.” Our findings show a commitment to an excellence that does not abandon external standards and professional growth. Rather, it keeps these in dynamic, tensive relationship, focusing on one's particular students--the poor and non-poor alike--and the absolute priority of attending to their individual growth, guided by central supports of the Spiritan charism.

The considerable resources of charism and affective/vocational commitment that Spiritan educators bring to these efforts are evident in Sections 1 and 2 of this essay. Study participants offered further illumination on how these resources come into play in shaping a distinctive “Spiritan excellence” in education. For example, one participant eloquently expressed how the legacy of Poullart des Places showed a way to negotiate academic excellence amid the deprived circumstances of his early seminary students. For him, faithfulness to this approach today required attention to building up the students' sense of self-worth by giving them “that which is best”:

legacy of Poullart des Places showed a way to negotiate academic excellence amid the deprived circumstances of his early seminary students

I was told that when Poullart des Places took the poor, he wanted to give them the best education, so he wanted for them to achieve academic excellence. They were coming from a very poor background he wanted them to overcome their inferiority complex.

There has been this tension in the congregation until today that academic excellence is sometimes equated with educating those who come from a very well-to-do background or a rich background and they are giving

them that which is best. *But I think we can achieve both. You can take students who come from a poor background and then you give them the best education so that they also become among the best participants in the affairs of society Regardless probably of the background where the students come from, but to give them that which is best.* And I think it's a duty as educators, that's how I look at it (Focus; emphasis added).

Spiritan educators were called to take each student as they are and holistically guide them toward their own fullest flourishing

Others highlighted how Spiritan educators were called to take each student as they are and holistically guide them toward their own fullest flourishing. One focus group participant enthusiastically named this as an educational disposition of “intellectual charity” in leading students toward truth:

Yeah! Intellectual charity is to be able to address the intellect of people so that they can see truth and then apply that truth in their own lives. Whether they come to us with a zero on an entrance exam or one hundred on the entrance exam, our job is to provide them with the intellectual tools which will also be affected by their emotional life, their human life, their social life, and their spiritual life as an integrated whole. It's wonderful that I hear all this around this table! (Focus)

For another, the Spiritan charism was motivational in his efforts to tutor students toward higher levels of academic achievement, starting at the appropriate level for each student and giving everything he could to that student:

I can talk of people I started with that couldn't write an essay and I took them on, gave them private tutorials, and built them up to the extent that by the time it was time for them to write, to take exams, they were able to do that *I had time to take them on, to really bring them up, and I think that's where I would think of that excellence. We don't say, Okay, let them remain there. Bring the best they can be* (Focus; emphasis added).

Thus, regardless of students' poverty, the educator's personal limitations, insufficient resources and other constraints, Spiritan education can attain a Gospel-based excellence that does not romanticize poverty or cater to wealth

Thus, regardless of students' poverty, the educator's personal limitations, insufficient resources and other constraints, Spiritan education can attain a Gospel-based excellence that does not romanticize poverty or cater to wealth, but works seriously for enhanced knowledge and

opportunities for *all* students, guided by the charism and the values of the Kingdom of God. They bring their best in order to bring out the students' best.

Conclusion

We have explored three broad commitments that Spiritan educators display. 1) They are committed to the Spiritan charism. This commitment shapes their approach to education as building relationships to help the poor and marginalized. It emphasizes mutuality, diversity, inclusion, non-patronizing attitudes and relationship building with a goal of empowering and transforming others. 2) They display a high degree of affective and vocational commitment. Their affective commitment, typically characterized by a sense of "joy," arises from their formation as Spiritans, and deepens and grows through leading others in formation or education. The vocational commitment of the Spiritans in our study reveals that Spiritans are highly adaptable and self-aware as Spiritans despite the protean nature of the work and ongoing vestiges of division between "educators" and "missionaries." 3) They are committed to educational excellence in tandem with their mission-driven efforts to educate the poor. Excellence for Spiritan educators is organic in nature. Spiritans are committed to a form of academic excellence that does not abandon external standards, but rather, keeps these in organic, tensive relationship, both through maintaining their emphasis on education of the poor and through sustained focus on the needs and potentials of one's particular students, regardless of economic or social status.

We hope that our research will spark further dialogue among Spiritans as they continue to discern the place of education and formation within their charism. We know that the wisdom expressed by participants in our study will continue to inform our own work as Spiritan-inspired educators.

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Endnotes

¹Qualitative research in a “grounded theory” mode, as in our study, develops theory as it emerges from the gathering and interpretation of data through in-depth or “thick” descriptions, rather than beginning with a formal hypothesis and testing it through gathering large-scale data. See, for example, Glaser, Barney G. and Anselm L. Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research* (Chicago: Aldine, 1967).

²Sources for quotations will be indicated in parentheses as either “Survey” or “Focus” (for Focus Group).

³Donovan, Vincent, C.S.Sp., gave a distinctively Spiritan expression to this commitment in his classic *Christianity Rediscovered* (Chicago: Fides/Claretian, 1978; new edition Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004).

⁴Mercurio, Zachary A., “Affective Commitment as a Core Essence of Organizational Commitment: An Integrative Literature Review,” *Human Resource Development Review* 14 (2015) 408.

⁵Hall, Douglas T., “A Theoretical Model of Career Subidentity Development in Organizational Settings,” *Organizational Behavior and Human Performance* 6 (1971) 59.

⁶Hall, Douglas T., “The Protean Career: A Quarter-century Journey,” *Journal of Vocational Behavior* 65 (2004) 6.

⁷See Duaine, Jeff, “The Heartbeat of Spiritan Education in the US” *Spiritun Horizons* 8 (2013) 105-106.