

“Precious is the Life given for Mission”

Reflection No. 1:

The Love of God shines in our Hearts in Rainbow Colors ... (A.Janssen)

Arnold Janssen: the wrong person, at the wrong time, in the wrong place! The wrong person, since Arnold did not have those personal qualities one would normally look for in the founder of a world-wide enterprise. A classmate commented, “Of all our class Arnold Janssen would have been one of the last you would consider suited for such a task.” The wrong time because the 1870s were very difficult for the Church in Germany with Church leaders imprisoned, parishes without priests, religious orders banned. Due to this Kulturkampf he even had to cross the border and found the mission house outside his own country.

The wrong person! Yet here we are a hundred years after his death and Arnold is more talked about and prayed to than ever before. The candles placed by pilgrims before his Tomb in Steyl have been burning continuously, day and night, since his canonization in 2003. The work he started is growing still, and now with various lay associate groups. We work in over 70 countries. More important than this numerical growth are the efforts being made to respond to the challenges of our day, even when this leads us along paths hardly imagined by Arnold. Clearly the right person and the Spirit was able to make good use of this “poor instrument of grace”.

The Spirit can likewise do great things through us if our dedication is as generous and wholehearted as Arnold’s who saw his life and missionary commitment as a response to God’s “inexpressible love”. “All three Persons showed their love for us in a completely new and unheard of way. The Eternal Son by becoming human; the Holy Spirit by coming to dwell in human hearts, the heavenly Father by sending the Darlings of his Heart [the Son and Spirit] to reveal his love to us.” Sharing in this deepest desire of God for humanity was for Arnold what mission work was all about. His experience of God’s love gave him enthusiasm and strength, and to further this will of God he was ready to accept whatever sacrifice was necessary and to put up with the criticism of others.

Not surprising, then, that Paul’s expression, “The love of God is poured into our hearts through the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Rom 5:5), was one of the five texts most quoted by Arnold, for it is the basis of all mission work. Indeed, mission is really God’s love flowing into our loveless world to bring true life and joy. God’s love continued its flow through Arnold out to the world and this led him to appreciate ever more “the value of souls”, the dignity of each person. “Love of neighbor finds its highest expression in spreading the Gospel,” was the basis of his missionary enthusiasm, of his burning passion. “For such a cause no sacrifice is too great.”

And we? Sure, we say mission work is worthwhile and have dedicated our lives to it. Yet all too often the enthusiasm that burned in Jesus and in Arnold seems to be now in us just a smoldering fire, no longer a burning Christ-like passion. “May the Heart of Jesus live in the hearts of all!” remains hardly more than a pious prayer.

How to rekindle the fire? Hopefully celebrating the Centennial Year of Saints Arnold and Joseph can help. Their example can inspire us to foster an attitude of dialogue that consciously tries to appreciate and defend the dignity of every person. In a retreat before a mission departure Arnold said: “Meditating on the throne of God [in the human heart] will help us see what a tremendous value mission work has.

Imagine that we could gaze into the hearts of all those in a state of grace. We would see their hearts suffused and enveloped with light and at the center the Triune God. What an astonishing sight!" This sense of astonishment and awe permeates Arnold's talks. Astonishment that the Triune God would show such love for us poor humans in this way. Awe at the dignity and beauty which this infinite love bestows on every person, "to be a son or daughter of the Father, a sister or brother of the Son, a temple, a spouse of the Holy Spirit." In his last Pentecost sermon Arnold put it like this: "The Holy Spirit is the God of love who comes in order to make humans lovable in God's eyes and to reveal God's love for them."

It is especially when we show love and respect to others that the Spirit helps us to appreciate ourselves as lovable. Here is the key to holiness, a lifelong process. "Love alone widens the human heart." Arnold made conscious efforts to show his love and respect, though not always successfully according to some who lived with him. He was no flawless saint, but he did try earnestly to be open to the transforming love of the Holy Spirit. In 1901 Arnold asked the community: "If you wish to do me a special favor, then help me to pray for something of the fullness of divine love for my cold heart. And what I have in mind here in the first place is not love for God but love for all of you. How grateful I would be if you would pray for me to have such a love." Fr. Gier, one of his early critics, said that for those who knew him in the early days the older Arnold was like a different person. And yet as late as 1906 the Bishop of Roermond had to investigate the validity of serious complaints from some of the Brothers and even some of the Sisters in Steyl.

Like Arnold we too have to struggle against our weaknesses, all too aware of our frailty. But it is a struggle filled with hope, knowing that it is God's love that changes us rather than our own efforts. A hope directed not to some vague future but to the present. The indwelling Spirit of Love makes each person lovable already now.

This is the basis of those fundamental challenges set by our General Chapters:

- to approach the other in dialogue with an attitude of "solidarity, respect and love" (SVD 2006);
- "to be a compassionate presence of Jesus in his prophetic mission" (SSpS 2002);
- to contemplate the mystery of the Blessed Trinity dwelling in us, "whose light we must also be able to see shining on the face of our brothers and sisters" (SSpSAP 2003).

"Just as sunlight," wrote Arnold, "when it shines through falling rain is refracted in the seven beautiful colors of the rainbow, so shines the love of the Holy Spirit in a seven-fold way in the hearts of the saints and gives them that special beauty which delights the eye of a spiritual person."

May the indwelling Holy Spirit lead us to take delight in the rainbow-colored beauty of each person we live with and of those we serve, and indeed above all of ourselves.

Peter McHugh SVD

Bi-monthly Reflections for the Centennial Year of Arnold Janssen and Joseph Freinademetz

Reflection No. 2:

Joseph Freinademetz A Man of Love, Faith and Prayer

The hamlet of Oies where Joseph Freinademetz was born on 12 April 1852 lies in the heart of the Dolomites in the Gader Valley (Val Badia). It was in the small family farm 1500 meters high that little 'Ujop', as he was called in his mother tongue Ladin, learned to pray and to work. There he grew up in the traditions of the Church and the people and with his brothers and sisters experienced what it means to have a home and to feel secure.

Already as a child he left his parental home to study in the town of Brixen. At that time there was no road in his valley and it must have been rather frightening for the ten year old as each step took him further from home. They were the first of many steps that would eventually lead him to bid farewell to his home, to his friends and family. Steps that would lead to the realization of his life's dream, a dream to be fulfilled only after taking many more steps to a very distant land. He was able to leave his homeland, his friends and relatives behind because they were alive in his heart. The goal of his journey, indeed his life's goal, was to live for God and for people and China was the right place for this. He wished to achieve his life's goal with and for the Chinese people.

Living in Love

But that proved to be not so simple. Soon after his arrival in China Joseph had to swallow some bitter disappointments. His report to Arnold Janssen about his first two years shows how difficult it had been for him. At home he had been respected, loved and accepted. In China, especially during the two years in Hong Kong, he felt isolated; he was the marginalized foreigner. He had to struggle not to become bitter or sink into discouragement. He frankly admits that the life of a missionary – his own life – is rich in sufferings. "Thorns cover his path." Being isolated in this way with relatively little success got the better of him and it showed in his prejudices. "The Chinese character has little attraction," he writes in his initial disappointment. If the missionaries did not have a higher motivation, "they would all sail back home on the next ship." Language typical of a person whose expectations have not been met. But Joseph did not remain with these prejudices; he struggled against his disappointments. Years later he would find it impossible to accept if negative remarks about the Chinese were made in his presence.

We should not forget how strange China must have been to him in the beginning. It was the time of imperialism when the white race felt superior to all others. Information about foreign peoples was characterized by this attitude. Joseph tried his best but he had to admit that mere external adaptation, using Chinese clothing, the obligatory pigtail and a Chinese name, did not make him a different person. He realized he had a difficult journey ahead of him. So with full earnestness he began to study "the Chinese point of view, Chinese customs and traditions, the Chinese character and expectations." And he knew that it could not be achieved "in a day, nor a year but only after many a painful operation." "The main point," he came to see, "is the transformation of the inner person."

The longer Joseph lived with the Chinese and worked for them, the more he came to understand them, and all the more did his own personality traits come to the fore. "His charming and engaging friendliness was certainly in part a precious natural gift. But it wasn't just that; otherwise he would not have been able to keep this attitude up so consistently and continuously," was how Bishop Henninghaus put it.

Tough as mountain farmers are, Joseph did not allow himself to be discouraged. Among his Chinese he matured to become a saint, a selfless person in line with his own principle: "Don't refuse anyone anything and don't desire anything for yourself." Or, as Fr. Johannes Blick quotes him: "The pagans will be converted only by the grace of God and, let us add, through our love." For "the language of love is the only language which all pagans understand." Joseph had learnt to speak this language of love very well.

Nothing, neither bodily exertions nor malicious slanders, not painful beatings nor dangerous death-threats, could lessen his love for the Chinese. Not only did he wear their dress, he also spoke their language perfectly and tried to think in their way. So in the opinion of many he seemed even to become a Chinese and he himself felt more and more like one. "I have become Chinese and I want to remain Chinese in heaven also."

So long as he had rejected what was for him a strange world he had not been able to be a true missionary. Adaptation had not been enough; what was needed was "an inner change," his own conversion.

Living from Faith

That he could choose this path of service for people and for God and follow it through was due in no small way also to his family. Life in his parents' house was shaped by faith. The daily rosary was taken for granted just as much as the Sunday trip down to St. Leonard village for Mass. Even during the week one tried to attend Mass as far as possible. Prayers in common and going to Mass were just the outward signs of that deep faith which was rooted in the inner life and which shaped the Freinademetz family, a faith that shaped Joseph and sustained him his whole life, and that had its roots in Oies, in his family. The faith for him was a precious heirloom which he could not just keep for himself; he had to pass it on to others.

The Church now sets him before us a model. This surely means in this connection that we cannot, so to say, hide our faith in our pockets where no one can see it, that faith which we too have inherited. No, like him we have to pass it on to others. To do this in China was *his* special calling. We must ask ourselves where is *our* China, the place where we meet those people in our life to whom we are obliged or privileged to pass on our faith in a concrete and tangible way.

Living from Prayer

When Joseph Freinademetz was ordained a priest, he felt supported by his family. And even as a missionary in distant China he saw himself accompanied by his relatives. With no frills he let his parents, brothers and sisters, his friends and acquaintances share in the joys and pains of his missionary life. In nearly all his letters to his family and to his friend Thaler is the request that they should remember in prayer the Chinese entrusted to him and the whole mission, just as he always emphasizes that he never forgets them and constantly recommends them to the Sacred Heart and the Mother of God. Even before he left his home never to see it again he had written: "Pray and thank God every day at least with an Our Father and

a Hail Mary that he was gracious enough to call a missionary from our family.” In a letter to his parents during the trip to China he admits how hard it had been for him to leave his family and home. But he consoles them with the thought that they would one day meet again, not in Oies perhaps but certainly in heaven. “Pray for me and I will pray for you that that day will be a day of joy for all of us. Pray also that I will have the grace to first do much work in the vineyard of the Lord for the salvation of souls.”

In the spirit of the Bible he writes to his brothers and sisters: “Teach your children as early as possible to despise the world and its riches.” What he means is not to make them the central point of their lives. “To fear and love God; teach them to pray, to be humble and obedient. Pray also for me!”

Joseph was convinced of the power of prayer. That made him fearless. Even if the whole world collapses, God will not allow prayer to go unheard. “The one thing necessary is that we pray much. A life without prayer is the surest way to hell. Never forget to pray for us and for all missionaries.” He was aware that God does not need our prayer; rather our life needs prayer. And he never forgot that prayer is to be not only for our own concerns and problems but above all for those of others. When we pray we become the voice of the Church in the world, as Joseph was in China.

What has Joseph Freinademetz to say to us today in our secularized world?

- Faith is a calling. It brings with it the duty “of helping those people come to the faith who are struggling with their faith.”
- We are called to prayer; God does not need our prayer; our life needs prayer. Through it alone perhaps we won’t change the world noticeably but the power of prayer (God’s power) can inspire people to change the world in the spirit of the gospel till it reaches its fulfillment in God.
- We are called to community. The one who is converted to love becomes a bridge between people and their cultures.
- We are called to be a blessing. In a sermon during the St. Joseph Freinademetz diocesan pilgrimage Bishop Wilhelm Egger from South Tyrol stated: “We will become a blessing when we speak about Jesus Christ and pass on his message... We will become a blessing when we conduct ourselves like Jesus and do good. So let us return home as blessed people. The lives of those who allow Jesus to bless them will be transformed.”

Peter Irsara SVD

Bi-monthly Reflections for the
Centennial Year of Arnold Janssen and Joseph Freinademetz
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***Reflection No. 3:
The Eucharist in the Life of Arnold Janssen***

St. Arnold had a great love for the Eucharist, a legacy from his parents. Arnold's mother had a great love of prayer and especially of the holy Eucharist. During the “Forty Hours Exposition” she remained there praying almost the whole day. On Sundays she arrived at the church around 4:30 in the morning so as to attend the first and all following Masses. Even on weekdays she was able to arrange her work in such a way that she was always able to attend a Mass. She was convinced that without the blessing of the Eucharist she would not be able to finish her work. Her example, as well as that of his deeply religious father, made a strong impression on the young Arnold.

When he was eleven he received his First Holy Communion. He considered it a great grace, for which he prepared himself well, as was the custom at the time, by learning the whole catechism by heart. Nothing is said about Arnold's spiritual experience on the day of his first communion. He said very little about his religious feelings and inner experiences. Two letters, however, written eight years later to his younger brother Peter for his first communion, give us some idea of what that event may have meant to Arnold. They bear witness to his deep feeling about the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist, which we also see in his later life.

“I was filled with joy at the news that this year you will really have the happiness, the incomprehensibly great good fortune, to approach the table of the Lord, to share in food that is the desire of the angels. Oh if only you could recognize what it means to receive the Body of the Lord! Do you really know who it is, whom you will receive? It is the King of heaven and earth, the Lord of eternity, ... the Mighty One who rules the earth according to his will... Prepare your heart already... Pour out your heart before him; recommend to him your joys and sorrows... You will never regret it as I now regret having done so little to prepare.”

In a second letter dated four days later, Arnold wrote:

“The most beautiful and happy day of your life has finally come; the day to which even the hearts of grey haired priests think back with longing, and the memory of which constantly fills them with silent joy. Oh brother, let me congratulate you a thousand times! You are now the sanctuary of the Lord, his inheritance and his love.”

We sense here something of the heartbeat of Arnold's own life. He was gripped by the mystery of the incarnate God whose presence caused his heart to tremble in holy awe, God who allowed him to taste his love. With all his spiritual might, Arnold wanted to respond to that incomprehensible love and to avoid everything that could separate him from it.

A few years later we encounter the same love and reverence in Arnold's letter to his mother, shortly before his ordination:

“It is still dark as I sit here alone in my little room. The candle is still burning and before me hangs a picture of Christ. My soul is silent, very silent. The sound of a church bell from somewhere near or far off is reaching my ears through the darkness. It is calling the faithful to rise from sleep and go to church where the most holy sacrifice is offered to God. I have a wonderful feeling. I'm thinking, soon you, too, will approach the holy altar, stand there in the place of Christ and celebrate the holy mysteries.”

This love and reverence filled Arnold's heart also in his later years: “Jesus lives in us

as God and man at the time of Communion. His divine body touches us and we touch him. But how wonderfully the body of Jesus works! The whole of humanity was redeemed through the suffering and the shedding of the blood of this holy body. And now the holy body of Jesus sanctifies us in Holy Communion.” (Conference, 1894) A poem from his later years (1896) gives us an insight into mystery of Arnold’s love for the presence of Jesus in the Eucharist.

After Holy Communion

O quiet happiness, O blissful fortune! Now he is all mine,
The King, wonderful and great, before whom the heavens bow.
Oh tell me, where is a throne so honored
That God the Father’s Son wishes to repose there?
Where is a castle in whose hall the King of creation dines?
Where was ever a joyful feast that could praise him as guest and friend?

O inexpressible, highest bliss! – I can find no words;
His loving glance fell on me, he came through my door.
He entered my dwelling that is empty of all ornament,
And gave me of the wine of his love, as if I were of equal dignity.
Did ever a prince descend so far from his throne
That he called the poorest of beggars to nestle against his heart?

O highest Son of the King, before whom the world bows down,
My heart, now the throne of your love, marvels in reverence and is silent;
It becomes silent before the fire of your love, in holy rapture,
That you my Lord and my God deign to bless it thus.

There is no doubt that Arnold’s Eucharistic devotion was influenced by the theology and religiosity of his time. According to the theology of Matthias Scheeben, which influenced Arnold deeply, the Eucharist was a source of grace. Arnold often emphasized that the Father and the Holy Spirit are present in the Eucharist together with the Divine Word, though not in the same way. Centering his spiritual life on the central mystery of the Christian faith, the Trinity, gave it an inner unity, depth and vitality. Highlighting the Trinitarian dimension of the Eucharist is characteristic of our Founder’s spirituality and shows why it remained so important for him. It was for him not something apart but was deeply rooted in the central mysteries of the Christian faith: the Trinity, the Incarnation, salvation.

In every Eucharist we celebrate the whole mystery of salvation and we exclaim: “We proclaim your death, O Lord; we glorify your resurrection, until you come in glory.” In the celebration of the Eucharist we take part in the Today of the Christian salvific mystery: the Incarnation, Passion, Death, Resurrection and Glorification of Christ and are drawn into that event. St. Arnold looked on the Eucharist as the memorial celebration of the sacrifice of the cross on Calvary, in which Jesus offered himself to the Father as the divine Lamb. He encouraged his confreres to take part in this total giving through their vows in religious life. “In Holy Mass, therefore, we should offer ourselves with the Savior and renew our vows and the total giving of ourselves which they entail, ready to face any suffering.” Thoroughly imbued with his faith in the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist our Founder treasured and loved in a special way adoration of the Blessed Sacrament. In different ways he expressed his deep personal love for the mystery of the permanent presence of the Lord in his church: in conferences, in the prayers he composed to Christ present in the Blessed Sacrament, and especially in his frequent visits, often staying for a longer time before the Blessed Sacrament.

Especially in his younger years he often spent long hours during the night in the chapel.

From the time of founding the Sisters' Congregation Arnold Janssen had had in mind one congregation with two branches, the Mission Sisters and the Adoration Sisters. He called the latter "missionaries on their knees," since their special task was to pray for the missions. Hermann Fischer emphasizes how for Arnold all work for God's kingdom was in the first place definitely a matter of prayer. What Arnold said in his sermon at the opening of the branch of the Adoration Sisters was typical of his deep appreciation for prayer before the exposed Blessed Sacrament: "The cloistered Sisters should sit like Mary at the feet of the Lord, glorify him day and night through the Divine Office, and as soon as their number allows, maintain perpetual adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, praying in this way for the richness of graces for the Church and the Congregation."

Sr. Franziska Carolina Rehbein, SSpS

ARNOLD JANSSEN AND THE PARABLE OF THE KINGDOM

“The Kingdom of Heaven is like a mustard seed...” (Mt 13:31)

“The simplicity of this beginning should not discourage us. The mightiest tree starts as a single seed and the strongest of giants was once a weak, whimpering baby.” (Arnold Janssen on the inauguration day of the Mission House in Steyl.)

Jesus told the story of God’s Kingdom only in parables. What is remarkable about the parables of Jesus is that they are all simple stories about everyday experience: a sower going out to sow seeds in the field, a fisherman throwing a net into the sea to catch fish, a woman searching for the lost coin, a shepherd looking for the lost sheep, a merciful father waiting for his prodigal son to return home, and so on. Very simple and ordinary things!

The ending of these parables, however, surprises us with something extraordinary: a tiny seed becomes a big tree, the seeds in good soil brings a hundredfold harvest, there is greater joy in one lost sheep found again than in the ninety-nine remaining in the flock, and the merciful father makes a big feast for the prodigal son who has returned home.

The Reign of God is *...like that!* The ability to experience the Reign of God is a kind of sensitivity to see something extraordinary in ordinary things. Jesus, therefore, says: “Blessed are the eyes that see what you see” (Lk 10:23). It is a certain ability to see the forest in the tiny sprouting seed, or to see the secret of the sky and the ocean in a drop of morning dew.

If Jesus told the story of God’s Kingdom in parables, the early Christians told the story of Jesus – his life, death, and resurrection – as the best parable of God’s presence. He is the smallest seed that fell into the ground, died, grew, and yielded a harvest in abundance; he is the bread of life broken and multiplied for the hungry, the living water that flows for the thirsty, the light that shines in the darkness. Later when Jesus sent his disciples to continue his mission, he sent them empty-handed, because he wanted them to follow the path of a small seed that has to die in order to bring new life. Under the guidance of the Spirit the disciples understood this secret of the Kingdom, as did Benedict in the cave of Subiaco, Francis of Assisi who left his parents’ house naked, Arnold Janssen in an old, crumbling house of Steyl, and Mother Theresa serving the poor and destitute on the streets of Calcutta.

Now we can say that the life and the mission of Arnold Janssen have become a new parable of God’s Reign. We recall his famous saying on inauguration day, when many people were disappointed by such a poor beginning of the German-Dutch Mission House: “The simplicity of this beginning should not discourage us. The mightiest tree starts as a single seed and the strongest of giants was once a weak, whimpering baby. We know that with our present resources we cannot accomplish our task, but we hope the good God will provide everything we need. And he may do with us what he wills. If the seminary succeeds, we will thank the grace of God. If nothing comes of it, we will humbly strike our breast and confess that we were not worthy of the grace... So I appeal to all those assembled here: What can we do? First, pray. Beg the Lord of the harvest. Secondly, sacrifice.” First things first: We have to pray because ultimately the Kingdom is the work of God himself and we are just small instruments in his hands. But we have to sacrifice because we are called to follow Jesus through the path of a small seed that has to die in order to grow and bear fruit. In this context we also recall how Arnold started his

missionary project empty-handed and how he put his total trust in the Lord of the harvest and relied on his brothers and sisters who shared and supported his vision.

By dedicating his first mission society to the Divine Word, Arnold Janssen wanted to remind us that “In the beginning was the Word...The Word became flesh and lived among us” (Jn 1:1.14). The first attitude of a missionary, therefore, should be a contemplative attitude of letting the Word become flesh and live among us. We recall a particular example of our missionary saint. Joseph Freinademetz once asked Arnold Janssen how he could best prepare for his mission in China. Arnold advised him to learn by heart the Gospel, because in that distant foreign land he might be forbidden to carry the Bible and would have to proclaim the Good News from his heart. Joseph followed the advice, but what he did was much more than just memorizing texts. He let the Word become flesh in his life so that his person would be transformed by the Word and become good news for the people of South Shantung. When Arnold further sent our brothers and sisters as missionaries to different parts of the world, he actually continued implementing the parable of a sower who went out to sow seeds in the field. Arnold realized that there would be many obstacles on the edge of the path; there would be resistance by the rocky ground and thorny soil, but in the end the Word would find rich soil and produce a harvest in abundance. Arnold, therefore, urged his missionaries to do their best in the work of evangelization because “to proclaim the Good News is the first and greatest act of love of neighbor.”

From the very beginning our congregations (SVD, SSpS, SSpSAP) were designed as international societies. They were intended to receive members from different peoples and cultures; and our missionaries were to be sent to all nations, especially to the places where the Good News had not yet been proclaimed or not yet been proclaimed enough. In this way our societies were designed as signs that “people from east and west, from north and south, will come and sit down at the feast in the Kingdom of God” (Lk 13:29).

If nowadays we reformulate our mission under the catchword “prophetic dialogue” or “life-giving relationships,” we are simply reaffirming and deepening the missionary insight we have inherited from our Founder. Through the work of our missionaries, especially through their commitment to faith-seekers and to the poor and marginalized, we re-actualize the parables of the Good Shepherd or of the Merciful Father. In reaching out to people of other cultures and other religions we emphatically announce the all-inclusiveness of God’s Kingdom.

Listening to the parables of Jesus, reading again the life story of Arnold Janssen, and reflecting on our contemporary mission, we realize that the Lord has indeed done great things through his simple servant from Goch: The extraordinary in an ordinary person!

Thus we joyfully continue our mission today. Even though our membership in West Europe is in decline and our financial resources decrease, our young missionaries from Asia, Africa, the Americas or different parts of Europe will find a new moment of grace in following the Lord along the small path of a seed, because “unless a wheat grain falls into the earth and dies, it remains only a single grain; but if it dies it yields a rich harvest” Jn 12:24. “Worthwhile indeed is the life of one who gives his all,” said Arnold.

Leo Kleden, SVD, Ledalero, Flores

**Bi-monthly Reflections for the
Centennial Year of Arnold Janssen and Joseph Freinademetz
prepared by the Arnold Janssen Spirituality Center, Steyl**

“Precious is the Life given for Mission”

Reflection No. 5:

Mother Josepha, Hendrina Stenmanns

*“God Holy Spirit, to your love and glory
I consecrate my whole life...
When I die, do not forget me!”*



Those of us who have had the opportunity and the grace to closely accompany our loved ones - especially a father or mother- in a time of sickness and death, keep those moments in our hearts as a “precious treasure,” as a personal and family ‘Kairos’, as a sacred memory that comforts us and at the same time calls us to a commitment. In our missionary service we also have occasions to be close to people, our suffering communities, at the hour of pain and death. How many witnesses of faith and hope do we share in the communities, health centers, homes, in the streets, in the fields and the city! How many pages of living spiritual witnesses are we privileged to see, hear, and touch each day! How much we can learn about the value and meaning of living and dying as we follow the missionary path of accompanying and being accompanied!

In these moments of being close to pain and death, we experience human fragility and impotence. At the same time, we experience the strength, the truth, and the beauty of love which permeates every fiber of our being and transports us to another dimension, to the realm of what is ‘real and eternal’. It is precisely here, within the context of the embrace of pain and hope, tenderness and patience, life and death, that gestures, prayers, advice, and words of farewell acquire special meaning. How profound are the footprints that mark these farewells of our lives! Even more so we can allow these memories of love to accompany us as back-ground music while we make our way toward our own Easter.

Certainly it does us good to have special moments to remember and share memories of our loved ones within our family. In that way they remain alive, present and real in our hearts. Their heritage is genuinely appreciated and shared because love will not allow us to forget nor to be careless with our memories. This has a special significance for us as SSpS, SSpSAP and SVD, as we celebrate the Centenary Year of the death of St. Arnold Janssen and St. Joseph Freinademetz and the beatification of Mother Josepha, Hendrina Stenmanns. The spiritual legacy they left us becomes more real.

With this brief reflection, I intend to particularly honor the memory of Mother Josepha whom Arnold Janssen appreciated, admired, and thanked as the co-foundress of our Congregation of Servants of the Holy Spirit. Fr. Arnold expressed this in a letter written from St. Gabriel's to the Missionary Sisters and the Adoration Sisters on the day that Mother Josepha died, May 20, 1903:

“This death is once again a sharp blow for me, because once again I have lost a great support, one whom the Lord has placed at my side for the work of this religious foundation... She has been given the wedding crown after living a fully surrendered life...How simple she was, how faithful her heart, how sincere her obedience and humility, how abiding her zeal, how aware in her motherly concern, how profound her piety, how great her love for God, how edifying her spiritual joy, how life-giving her love for the truth and sense of justice, and finally, how admirable her great patience during her long illness, her constant and silent surrender to the will of God, her fearless longing for death and her desire to arrive at the heavenly kingdom.”

It can be said that our Founder's stunning description and acknowledgement summarizes and reflects to a great degree the innumerable personal testimonies regarding Mother Josepha given by the older sisters of the Congregation, by family members and others who knew her. All agreed that she was not a person of long discourses but rather a prayerful and practical woman who knew how to put her words into action and was able to generate missionary commitment in others. Understandably, many sisters, in referring to Mother Josepha, alluded to the well known refrain that says: “Words move, examples win over.”

Even from her bed of pain during her distressing illness, Mother Josepha motivated all those around her by her living example. With the expression “My heart is ready” she summarized the purpose of her existence and she calls us to focus our religious missionary life on the readiness and dynamism of Trinitarian love. Before she died she said goodbye and expressed her desire for faithfulness and for the continuance of God's project which began in Steyl and which eventually extended to the whole world. Her spiritual testament is a text of major importance in the spiritual heritage of the Missionary Sisters, as well as for the larger Arnoldus family. Today this testament invites us to find new meaning, to re-create and live those evangelical principles and values which allowed her to take risks. It impels us to be faithful and creative, to journey in a process of constant growth and conversion, so that our lives become not only mere discourses but rather, with the grace of God, religious lives that encourage others to answer the call to live missionary witness.

Although Mother Josepha's spiritual testament deserves extensive treatment, we will briefly consider a few main points only. Without a doubt each person and each community could continue reflecting on it and also incorporate biblical and social-cultural insights in a way that its essential meaning would be relevant in our various contexts.

Love and venerate the Holy Spirit... Every breath of a Servant of the Holy Spirit should be: Come, Holy Spirit! Mother Josepha lived a profound relationship of faith, trust and love with God Holy Spirit. From her very first visit to Steyl, probably for the feast of Pentecost in 1880, the prayer and missionary zeal she found there motivated her to write to Fr. Arnold Janssen asking for admission to the Mission House: “With great enthusiasm I asked for the light of the Holy Spirit, so that our Good God would place me there, where from all eternity it had been decided. The thought that I should enter the Mission House does not leave me... I desire nothing more than, with the grace of God, to be the least and to sacrifice myself for the work of spreading the faith.”

She consecrated her whole life to the Holy Spirit, allowing herself to be guided and accompanied by the Divine Breath. In this way she was able to integrate both missionary contemplation and mission activity. Her openness and faith to live in the presence of the Spirit allowed her to walk with her eyes fixed on Jesus, to trust in the goodness of the Father, to let go of anything that would block her self-giving, to attentively welcome the new signs of life in herself and in others, to constantly discern and to mature as a woman - sister and mother - in her missionary vocation. Like Arnold, Mother Josepha strove to give her

daughters a burning awareness that the Holy Spirit is “the principal agent of mission.” She used to say, “The Holy Spirit, ‘Father of the Congregation,’ is the driving force of mission.” Just as the Risen Jesus, breathed the Holy Spirit on his disciples (cf. Jn 20, 22), so also Mother Josepha in her life, and even on her deathbed, passed on to the Sisters the secret of missionary happiness: openness and obedience to the Spirit. “‘Come, Holy Spirit’ should be the breath of every Servant!”

Practice fraternal charity: Both Mother Maria Helena and Mother Josepha lived and transmitted the conviction that personal relationships which are rooted in evangelical charity should generate authentic communion, guarantee personal and community growth, and promote authentic Christian witness. Mother Josepha used to say: “God brought us together to be one heart and one soul...Remain united and take care that the sisters in the different activities have a good relationship.” It can be said that for her the practice of attitudes and concrete gestures of friendship, mutual helpfulness, acceptance, respect, tolerance, care, trust, and reconciliation were the thermometer with which one could measure the degree of evangelical integrity and the internalization of the sentiments of the Son. He is the Son who loved us to the extreme and who, before he returned to the Father, commanded us to “love one another as I have loved you. (cf. Jn15, 12-17). Just as the time of Jesus and the time of our founding generation, namely the time of the *Kulturkampf*, our times are marked by breakups, divisions, and a variety of conflicts. It is now our turn to translate evangelical charity, not so much in words and language, but rather in gestures, attitudes, and acts of communion that humanize our world.

Remain humble and simple: Mother Josepha never rejected nor forgot her social-cultural origin. Even in her childhood she was known for her simplicity, service and humility. Beginning from her profound experience of being loved and cared for by the Good Father, she knew how to grasp the profound desire God had placed in her heart: to be a transparent woman who labored to give herself to the spreading of the Reign of God. The Franciscan virtues of humility and simplicity, which grew in her since her youth, led her to experience intense human satisfaction even during times of great difficulty. Freed from the desires and selfish oppressive pretensions and moved by the Holy Spirit, Father of the poor, she learned to transcend and to resonate the desires of the Son, who did not come to be served but rather to serve and who rejoiced because the Father hid these things from the wise and revealed them to the simple. We now live inserted in societies that idolize comfort, sophisticated things and outward appearances. Mother Josepha invites us to recover the value of littleness and the wisdom of the poor. (cf. Mt 11, 25-30).

Respect for Fr. Arnold as Father and Founder... Pray for priests and cultivate good relationships with the priests and brothers. Mother Josepha acknowledged, valued, and loved Fr. Arnold as the spiritual father and founding father of the missionary congregations. She considered Fr. Arnold to be an instrument chosen by God to carry forward, with broad vision and missionary zeal, the great work of the propagation of the faith. In the letters between Arnold Janssen and Mother Josepha we discover a relationship based on faith, a good spirit of collaboration, communication, sensitivity, and respect. From the very beginning of our three congregations the values of helping, collaboration, prayer, and mutual support were seen as important. Over the years these convictions continued to grow along with the need to recognize the dignity of each person and each vocation, as well as needs and natural differences which enrich us. And this is so, not only for practical reasons or for personal needs, but rather from the understanding and legitimate expression of our Trinitarian spirituality and missionary charism. These same points on the theme of mutual collaboration were mentioned by Fr. Antonio Pernia, SVD, Superior General, in his discourse during the 12th General Chapter of the SSpS in 2002. He pointed out that genuine collaboration cannot be improvised but rather it depends on formation and requires persons capable of dialogue and of eliminating old or new prejudices. It further requires us to know and appreciate our history, charism, spirituality, lifestyle, and mentality. It helps us to face the reality of others and at the same time to have good self-awareness.

During this year of grace, may we continue to rekindle interest and enthusiasm for re-reading and putting into action the witness of our founding generation whose lives, given for mission, are precious. Using the words of St. Arnold Janssen we respond to the desire that we never forget Mother Josepha: “I greatly appreciate Mother Josepha. I am extremely grateful for the many and great services she gave to the Congregation of the Servants of the Holy Spirit in its founding. I am happy that the Lord placed her at the head of all the sisters, who consider her as their good mother.”

Sr. María Cristina Avalos, SSpS

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“Precious is the Life given for Mission”

Reflection No. 6:

Arnold Janssen and the Will of God



The familiar saying from Dante’s Divine Comedy “In your will is our peace” would be a good motto for Fr. Arnold’s life. When he was appointed to work as director for the Apostleship of Prayer he began to understand that as we honor the Sacred Heart of Jesus, we must begin also to unite ourselves to the intentions of that Divine Heart. He often quoted St. Paul, “Have this mind in you which was in Christ Jesus” (Phil 2,5). And he built up a spiritual ideal that “the best form of devotion to the Heart of Jesus is to make our wishes conform to those of the Heart of Christ... As Jesus, we should live our lives not for our own honor and glory, but according to God’s will and for his glory.”

Acting on his conviction that all decisions were to be channeled through fervent prayer seeking the will of God, he showed that he did not keep his spiritual ideal only in the realm of thought and reason. Fr. Arnold took the Word of God in Scripture seriously and when he read St. Paul’s words: “This is the will of God your sanctification” (1Thes 4,3), he considered this a mandate for himself and his missionary society. He told his followers that sanctification is God’s work but it requires our cooperation. He was deeply convinced that an essential feature of surrender to God is the desire to have his will concerning us fulfilled in every regard... Then God will enlighten us and bring us to sanctity and enable us to do all things in him who strengthens us (Phil 4,13).

Fr. Arnold was convinced that God’s will is made known to us in the concrete circumstances of life. He reflected prayerfully on the Incarnation and believed that as God sent his Son into the world as man to teach us who God is and how to follow God’s will, so God continues to let his will be known through human agents and the happenings he allows in our lives. Always attentive to the Word of God that is living and active in Sacred Scripture, he admonished his priests, brothers and sisters to find God’s will in the events of their lives. God, he felt, does not allow anything to happen to us, except for his own purposes. It is important for us to recognize

God at work in our lives. Fr. Arnold always returned to the basic teaching of St. Paul that had so captured him when he began his work for the Apostleship of Prayer: "Have this mind in you which was in Christ Jesus." He was convinced that striving to put on the mind of Christ would lead one to become aware of and to follow God's will, because Jesus came only to do the will of the Father.

Fr. Arnold studied the Word of God in an effort to form his mind and heart according to the mind of Christ. This was the first step in seeking God's will. He searched all sides of any decision that was to be made. He also readily sought advice from many bishops and others in authority, since he considered that they would be speaking God's will to him concerning the foundation of the mission seminary. Yet on some occasions he warned against consulting too many people. In a letter to the Deacon Hermann Wegener he counseled: "Regarding the advice you will seek, I advise you not to consult too many people. That will only confuse you. There is no certain way of knowing the will of God in this life; according to the teaching of the Church, we cannot even be sure of sanctifying grace. Each person has to make the main decision about his vocation himself. If God gives him the grace to embrace a more perfect state, and provided he obtains the agreement of his confessor and has reflected on this with God in prayer, then he can proceed. God enables those who seek him to find the right way to heaven and uses obedience so that the person can achieve the greatest grace." We find in these words an insight into how Fr. Arnold sought the will of God in his own life: fervent prayer and seeking advice from a confessor or spiritual adviser.

In the early days of the mission house, Fr. Arnold's strong belief that what he was doing was God's will caused him to continue on even when the first collaborators, Fr. Bill and Seminarian Reichert left him and there was a possibility that the Seminarian Anzer would also leave him. He reflected at the end of 1875: "...even if the Lord in his inscrutable plan discards the first builders, in order perhaps to replace them with others who are better and more suitable, may the Lord do what he wills. May his will always be done. May he choose the instruments and discard them as he pleases."

He prayed in that first year: "May God give us the grace to zealously seek his will and make ourselves more and more worthy of his heavenly blessings through the attainment of a simple and loving heart."

As he was seeking permissions from various bishops regarding the founding of the mission house he met with many obstacles. Fr. Arnold expressed his struggle: "I have experienced periods of severe struggle and it seemed to me I would have to endure a crucifixion if I were to succeed. On top of that I experienced physical affliction and some adversity. But it seemed to me that to give up would be contrary to God's will. So I hung on, continued working, and I have no doubt that God wants the project and that he is the true agent who deigns to use our poor hands for this purpose."

For Fr. Arnold the will of God and religious obedience were as one. He once wrote: "Look upon the will of your superiors as the holy will of God and try to comply in all simplicity and sincerity." He would have been deeply gratified to read the new document on authority and obedience from the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life (May 2008): "To seek the will of God means to seek a friendly and benevolent will that desires our fulfillment... Obedience is not humiliation but the truth on which the fullness of human persons is built and realized. Hence, the believer so ardently desires to fulfill the will of the Father as to make of it his or her supreme aspiration." In 1904/05 when six priests were appointed to the missions, Fr. Arnold asked them: "Please recognize the will of God in this call directed to you in religious obedience, humbly submit to it and accept it joyfully as a challenge."

When selecting the Sisters to be sent to the missions, he instructed Sr. Josepha: "This matter may not be settled in haste nor unduly rushed; rather you must pray much and ask others to pray, and then reflect a great deal once you have obtained all the necessary information and asked those for their opinion who can give the most exact particulars in every respect... At the same time pray repeatedly to the Holy Spirit and call on the patron saints. The importance of a good choice is obvious. You have to follow the light from above in all

simplicity but also with great care and endeavor to find God's will as it manifests itself through the situation." Again we see his recipe as it were for seeking God's will.

Fervent prayer to know the will of God, he believed, would resolve any difficulties in the way of fulfilling it, as he wrote to Fr. Joseph Freinademetz in China regarding the acceptance of a local diocesan priest into the Society: "If he so urgently wishes to become a member of our Society, he should begin to pray fervently for it, so that if it is indeed God's will, the difficulties lying in the way will be resolved."

Regarding the foundation in Brazil the Founder wrote: "If it is God's will that we remain there, he will ordain things in such a way that his divine will is revealed." When he wanted to establish a mission in Chile he wrote: "Since at the moment we cannot meet the requirements, it is not God's will for us. So we cannot object if the two persons concerned... approach another congregation." In regard to a college in Santiago: "If I take the view that I should not begin new projects on my own initiative but wait to see which way Divine Providence is pointing, I believe I act legitimately... Since Santiago is the capital of Chile and a college would make a great demand on the Society, this principle applies all the more and I must ask God to consider my weakness. If he wants us in Santiago he should tell us by clearly indicating his divine will... If we want to build a college and a church we will need far more money than we have. So I am waiting for some additional signs of God's will."

Always before establishing a new foundation, the Founder prayed and waited for the will of God to be more clearly revealed. In certain situations, as with the founding of the mission house in Techny, it became clear through various events that it was God's will to proceed and he prayed that the new foundation would correspond to God's holy will. In regard to a foundation in Palestine, he followed the reservations of his councilors and asked the Bishop to look for another congregation. He wrote: "We cannot take on the matter just yet; first the will of God must be more clearly revealed."

In June of 1901 Fr. Arnold received a letter of fifty-five pages from Fr. Gier listing his failings and imperfections. This caused the Founder much suffering but he accepted it in great humility. In his address to the community at a feast day celebration on July 19, once again he mentioned his central thought of God's will: "I greatly need prayers. The Society is growing fast. It is God's will that each member dedicate himself to his work... I ask the eternal love of the Holy Spirit to grant me his love more and more... May [the Lord God] establish between us in all respects the relationship that should bind us according to his divine will." In his farewell conference at St. Gabriel's in June 1908, the Founder concluded his recommendations for the future of the mission house with these words: "May God's will be done. This most holy will must always be adored."

We can see from the various quotations, the "will of God" was all pervasive in Fr. Arnold's life. Not only did he strive with all his ability to learn that will and follow it, but he repeatedly asked this of his priests, brothers and sisters. May his prayers for us continue to help all the members of his three foundations to do the same.

Sr. Mary Catherine, SSpSAP

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“Precious is the Life given for Mission”

Reflection No. 7:

Arnold Janssen; a Man of Dialogue



At times one can get the impression that ‘prophetic dialogue’ is a totally new concept and a new ‘cool’ word to describe our mission today. Yet when we look more closely at the life and work of Arnold Janssen we find that he was a model of prophetic dialogue in different ways. The last general chapter SVD shows that “prophetic dialogue entails a recovery of what is characteristically an SVD way of doing mission” (In Dialogue with the Word, no. 6, 2006, p. 8), beginning with Arnold Janssen himself.

It was his faith in the Triune God that led Arnold to be open and attentive to the world’s needs, which in turn influenced and shaped him and gave our congregations its characteristic missionary thrust. From the very beginning, Fr. Arnold understood mission as God’s ongoing dialogue with humanity.

Though he was timid, reserved and rather clumsy in interpersonal relationships, he nevertheless found ways and means to express that which echoed deep within. It is this power to discern and ‘connect’, more than anything else, that authenticates Arnold’s spirituality. This is only possible when one learns to relate or dialogue meaningfully: with self, others, creation, and God. Let’s have a look at some of these instances of dialogue by our Founder.

With self: Fr. Arnold was in touch with himself, aware of his rough character and difficult personality. The sting in his personality put at risk relationships and friend-ships. When his secretary mentioned to him some critical remarks and comments made about him, he asked Fr. Gier to write down the comments he heard. Little did he think that Fr. Gier would take him so seriously and a few weeks later he handed Fr. Arnold 54 small pages of negative criticisms. Fr. Arnold made special efforts to improve. He prayed each day after Mass for “*the grace to understand how a wise father or the heart of a mother ought to be towards my subjects*” (J. Reuter, Proclaiming the Word in the Power of the Spirit, p. 71-72).

Arnold elicited admiration, but he also evoked antagonism. He disturbed many; and frequently this happened through apparently contradictory behaviour, rather than through preached word or inspirational action. To many of us, Arnold remains an enigma, a maverick and often a nuisance. Dialogue and engaging with the real issues involves exposing vulnerability, beginning with Arnold's own vulnerability. Poorly equipped for the task ahead, Fr. Arnold touched painfully the reality of who he was: His great desire to share God's love with all people contradicted his obvious talents. His vision was blurred by many negative reactions and the impossibility of such an enormous task, made more difficult by being at the wrong time in history due to the Kulturkampf. In his inner struggles he touched deeply his humanity in his weaknesses and limitations, yet he set out into deeper waters. Arnold allowed himself to be vulnerable, rid himself of all defences and opened himself to the possibility of ridicule and failure, of being dismantled of personal pride, being hurt, rejected and misunderstood. He surrendered himself in dialogue with the Word.

With others: Fr. Arnold read the signs of the times in a provocatively challenging and disturbing way. He had the inner freedom to listen deeply and the outer initiative to respond in new and fresh ways. From this perspective, Fr. Arnold teaches us that dialogue is a way of being present in history, dialogue is not being passive; rather it is being courageous, restless, taking initiative. Arnold had this daring spirit even to the point of discarding all that which does not produce life in abundance. In those early days his involvement in the Apostleship of Prayer led to his awareness of the wider world. In the language of the Apostleship of Prayer his intentions became one with God's intentions or "*the intentions of the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus.*" While the German Church became caught up in itself and in its own crisis due to the Kulturkampf, for Arnold this was the Spirit prompting it to look beyond itself to the needs of the wider world and thus a new mission was sensed, which led to the opening of the first German/Dutch mission house. "*We live in a time when much is collapsing and new things must be established in their place.*" (Arnold Janssen to Archbishop Melchers of Cologne, 1875)

Arnold was a man of dialogue, dialogue with the world and dialogue with God. "*People can serve God and still dedicate themselves to concern for worldly matters.*" There was no contradiction for Arnold, both were held in creative tension and this led him to be open to the Spirit and to risk relationships. He showed his enthusiasm for mission, cultures, and languages in the way he handled requests from new mission countries. His secretary recalled how he would spread encyclopaedias and maps over the floor in order to learn all he could about the country and culture from where the request came. In his vulnerability, Arnold could choose freely: to be open to others, no matter who that other was, to stand firm in his convictions amid controversy, to risk his voice or action even though there was the possibility of being misunderstood, rejected, or laughed at even among his own, to share his faith and vision even though he might be questioned or criticized, to risk failure, thus discovering his giftedness and potential.

With creation: Fr. Arnold helps us to recognize that what gives real meaning to life are things we often dismiss as being of little value. For example: the sacredness of our created world. We must remember that the first WORD spoken by God was creation in its beauty and diversity (Prologue of John). This is our passion for life.

As a teacher of natural science he discovered God in all things and beings and all things in God: "*In spring we see how the plants, beautifully formed, sprout from the dark, dirty soil and soon stand before us in all their colourful beauty and with sparkling, affectionate eyes gaze at us like messengers from God. Where do they come from? The finger of God, the Holy Spirit, is at work here.*" Awareness of God's presence and openness to the Spirit is the key to his spirituality, for at the core of Fr. Arnold's spirituality lay the mystery of the Blessed Trinity. This was the basis of his union with God, his love for people, and his missionary enthusiasm. It involved every aspect of his life and became a deeply personal relationship to God as Father, Son and Spirit; "*we in God and God in us.*" Everything spoke to him of God, and God spoke to him in everything. Thus his life was one of constant discernment and dialogue. The thousands of letters that he wrote speak for themselves; he remained close to all his sisters and brothers in the missions and supported them constantly. "Obviously the 'spirit of the Founder' is profoundly Trinitarian. It is rooted in the Founder's great devotion to the Holy Trinity. For, the dialogue of life and love within the Trinity is the giving of one's all to the other" ('A Word from Fr. General,' *Arnoldus Nota*: Jan/Feb 2007).

With God: Through his devotion to the Holy Trinity Arnold sought to safeguard and foster the spiritual and more holistic values that underpin life in its fundamental meaning. Dialogue is to be as inclusive as possible and challenge all movements that veer towards exclusivity. Arnold's vision of God and the divine plan for creation led him to perceive in depth through dialogue. He strove through discernment to see the whole picture as God sees it, and the contradictions which others find irreconcilable he held in creative tension. It is the unity of all reality, the whole which is greater than the sum of the parts, that engages the person of dialogue.

When weary of life, Arnold sat down by the well of life and in moments of intimacy and prayer God became his rock, his meaning, his courage, his all in all. "*Meditative prayer is not a time of sterile, cold reflection; rather it should be a heartfelt, loving dialogue with God.*" He discovered that only in unshakable trust and total surrender into the hands of God could his impossible dream become a reality. In those vulnerable, yet graced moments, Arnold faithfully used the potential that God had invested in him, never counting the cost. His weaknesses became his strengths and today we are gifted by the ordinariness of this man. Most importantly, to be vulnerable is to know the paradoxical power in surrendering ourselves to God. It is to allow the power of God's Spirit to take over and to move through us. It is to know that by ourselves we can do nothing, but with a surrendering heart we can do all things in the one who wishes to grace us every moment of our lives, so we can become a blessing for others as Arnold has become for each one of us.

Fr. Michael Somers, SVD

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Reflection No. 8:

St. Joseph Freinademetz: His “Conversion”



I assume that by now St. Joseph Freinademetz is well known to all of us. Is there anything new to say about him? Yes! In a few strokes I'll try to communicate what he means to me.

During my first years in our Society I did not know him very well. Yes, he was one of our very first missionaries, our first missionaries to China. But, there were greater and much better known missionaries in the history of the Church: St. Paul, St. Francis Xavier and many others. In addition: there was our founder, St. Arnold Janssen! He had made a great impression on me. For various reasons he was even very close to my family. Fr. Joseph Freinademetz? No special relationship!

But in recent years great changes have taken place in this relationship. My forty four years in China (23 in Taiwan, 21 on the Mainland) have opened my eyes. Visiting the place where he lived and died, reading the letters and reports which he wrote and those which others wrote about him was a revelation for me: his life, his development from an ideal and zealous young priest to a frustrated missionary in Hong Kong and Shandong, and then again the marvelous change or conversion to the missionary who learned to speak the language of love! Truly, the story of the making of a saint!

When the son of the Tyrol mountains left ship in Hong Kong in April 1879 he was sure that from then on he would save poor pagans and root out idolatry and unbelief. In St. Martin's he had told his parishioners: "If I think of those unfortunate countries and peoples where the true religion is not known, and think of those people who are also our brothers and sisters, my heart beats strongly, my eyes begin to fill with tears." In his farewell sermon he had said: "I know the deep misery of our brothers and sisters beyond the ocean, who, their eyes filled with tears, stretch out their arms and ask us for help."

He had left his home parish in order to save people, to baptize, to fight the devils and demons but no one was interested in him, no one wanted to see him, no one ever called on him, no one wanted to be baptized, no one was interested in his message. Yes, they wanted to see the foreigner with his long nose; they even called him “a foreign devil”. They laughed at him when he tried to say something in the new language.

Back home he had been highly esteemed and honored as a priest and had been well accepted as a person. But here no one seemed to be interested in knowing why he was there. Looking back on those days he wrote: “What I saw, heard and experienced day after day, was often diametrically opposed to the convictions I held hitherto.”

What was totally incomprehensible to him and what he felt most bitterly was the religious indifference he noticed everywhere. Nobody seemed to hunger for the bread of truth and grace as he had expected. Being a man of his time with his European background there was no room in him for understanding the foreign culture and way of life. “The air one breathes here is thoroughly pagan; no inspiration coming from the outside; any encouraging word or inspiring good example is absent. No sound of a church bell, no religious feast, no solemn procession speaks to the heart; in most cases the chapel has the same decoration on Good Friday as on Easter Sunday. Externally, there is no difference between Christmas and Ash Wednesday.” — Moments of despair!

Where was God who had called him, who had sent him to the mission field? There were moments when he tried to share his great frustration in letters to his family and friends, moments when he put the blame for his frustration on the people (the Chinese) whom he had come to save. In letters of these early years we read sentences like the following, full of prejudices: “The Chinese character has for Europeans little attraction. The creator has not equipped the Chinese with the same abilities as the Europeans... The Chinese are unable to deal with higher thought.”

In his letters we read also about his questionable concept of a missionary: “And this is what the young missionary feels with great bitterness: he came full of fervor from Europe. He had hoped that he could preach and baptize every day so many Chinese that his arms would be tired in the evening.” Joseph was a man of his time. There was no place for other religions. To be a missionary meant to win souls for the Catholic faith. Since he had failed to reach this goal, he was disappointed and frustrated.

CONVERSION. His personal disappointments, his lack of success forced him to reflect about his vocation. What had gone wrong? What kind of mission approach had he applied so far? He realized that the wearing of Chinese clothes had not made him into a new man. He began to understand what had to be done: there had to be a change of the inner man. In Shandong he tried to do what in Hong Kong he had failed to do: get to know the Chinese, their customs and habits, their way of looking at things, their language and culture. The result? The more he got to know the Chinese, their language and their culture, the more he appreciated them, the more he admired them and began to truly love them.

Of course, he knew that the process would be painful. But soon Joseph was on the road to success. He was able to look at the Chinese and his work in China in a new way and thus became the great missionary we know. From many of his letters we can gather that he had fallen in love with his beloved Chinese. While preparing for his perpetual vows, he wrote to his relatives: “Now, as the language is no more so difficult for me and I know the people and their ways of living, China has become my home. I want to live and die with my Chinese.”

Joseph’s main problem in his first years as a missionary among the Chinese was that his mission approach did not start from the Chinese: their language, their living conditions, their needs, their religious thinking and practices, their way of life. And he came to realize that he had to use a different approach: he had to pray, to live with the Chinese, get to know them, love them, and befriend them.

Joseph realized that it was not the Chinese who had to change; he had to change, he had to be converted! And it did come to this conversion. Joseph won the hearts of the Chinese. They began to trust him, wanted to be with him, and accepted his new message which he himself lived. He had learned the language of love and together with his Chinese friends he went on the road to eternity where - as he had said - he wanted to be forever with his beloved Chinese. What a conversion!

Joseph's conversion helped him to come close to the people he was serving and thus come closer to God. He found himself on the road to sanctity. He became a model for his contemporary confreres and for all future missionaries in China.

This brings us to our work and our present situation here in Mainland China. We are still dealing with a political system with many problems and dangers for us. We have seen how - at least at certain times, especially in the early years - Joseph faced many dangers, problems and difficulties, creating for him a great amount of sadness and suffering. But when he realized that many of these phenomena were self-made problems, caused by misunderstanding and lack of knowledge, he began to look in a different way at situations and people. He communicated with the people using the language everybody understands. And people began to trust him; they saw the good he did and were ready to work with him.

The political situation is different today. But basic human relationships in China are still the same. Officially, many things can't be done. Unofficially, many things are done. Mutual trust and friendship make many things possible. The language of love is truly the language that everybody understands. Also today!

Arnold Sprenger, SVD