

Declaration of the General Chapter regarding the Holy Spirit: February 15 and 16, 1885

The capitulars decided, “to believe in all humility” that the Holy Spirit [in a vision of Miss Leitner] had “called us sons of His Words.” Furthermore it was decided that we were to consider the Holy Spirit “as our father and true founder; he gave us the guiding thoughts as is the task of a founder” (ibid.).

Completion of the February 1885 Rule

By the middle of February the Rule, that is the first and second part of the later full or September Rule, had been so far accepted that vows could be taken on it as a provisional Rule. It was presented to all those who had already made vows on the statutes of 1876 as well as to the seven novices. All were willing to make vows on this new rule. From February 20 all of them took part in retreat conducted by Fr. Arnold.

Vows on the new rule

The first vows on the February 1885 rule were taken in the evening of February 23, 1885. “With lighted candles we all approached the high altar of the Upper Church and, after the *Veni Creator*, then the Prologue of St. John’s gospel sung by Krampe, we four (Arnold] Janssen, Anzer, Wegener, [John] Janssen) made our profession according to the new Rule and vowed for life poverty, chastity and obedience according to its regulations; then, for different time-spans, Mueller, Holthausen and Blum for three years; Erlemann and Weber for four; Steger, Krampe, Weissenfels and Henninghaus for five, and the rest for seven years. Then followed the *professio fidei* [profession of faith] for the candidates for ordination, the taking of the oath prescribed by the Propaganda, and the *Te Deum*” (Alt, *Journey in Faith*, p. 212).

For the final vows the formula read: “Herewith, I, N.N., take vows on this rule of the Society named, and in honor of the Holy Spirit, and trusting the help of my holy patrons I vow poverty, chastity and obedience according to the regulations of this rule and I do so for the time of my life which is still left to me.” “Those who only made temporary vows, made the appropriate changes in the formula” (H. auf der Heide SVD, *Die Missionsgesellschaft von Steyl. Ein Bild der ersten 25 Jahre ihres Bestehens* [The mission society of Steyl. A picture of the first 25 years of its existence], Steyl 1900, p. 111).

Vows and still secular priests

In the Steyl mission magazine “Kleiner Herz-Jesu-Bote” (Little Messenger of the Sacred Heart) we read in January 1886: “In the month of February the development of our Society took an important step forward through the writing and acceptance of a provisional Rule. According to this rule the members, even though remaining secular priests, bound themselves together to a united congregation by taking the three-fold vow of voluntary poverty, chastity and obedience.”

Ordination to the subdiaconate

The eventful month of February 1885 ended with the ordination to the subdiaconate of 6 Steyl major seminarians on February 28, 1885. This ordination was later followed by the ordination to the diaconate and priesthood.



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The Arnoldus Family Story

THE FIRST GENERAL CHAPTER (1884-1886)

Lay partners: January 27, 28 and 30, 1885

On January 27 and 28 the capitulars had discussed an “institute of secular cooperators to help the missions” – mission helpers, and on January 30 its essential features were decided upon: “Since some pious people living in the world wish to join us in our spiritual endeavors, it was resolved to offer them that possibility by establishing an institute of secular cooperators as mission helpers. It was resolved: To grant them a share in all the good works and prayers of the Society.” Mission helpers had to be willing to lead a good Christian life, to join “spiritually in the endeavors of the Society of the Divine Word”. They should also where possible receive “Communion on the feast of Pentecost for the missionary work of our Society, offering it up at least partially for the greater sanctification of the priestly state.” In addition, they should offer up “a Holy Communion once a year for the mission work of our Society, if possible totally for this purpose, in order thus to have a greater share in the good works of the Society.” Finally, they also should sometimes give “a donation to help the missions or urge someone else to do so”. Only the Superior General “and those he delegates have the right to accept someone as a mission helper, who thus shares in the good works of the Society”.

The Society of the Divine Word will every month, “whenever possible on the first Monday, in every bigger house of the Society” offer a Mass “for the mission helpers and their intentions, and the members of the Society are invited to offer their Holy Communion for the same intention. At the same time the helpers are invited to commend to God the Holy Spirit at Communion or in their prayers, if possible on this day or another day, the works and the intentions of the Society” (Josef Alt, *Journey in Faith*, pp. 213-214).

Decisions of the General Chapter of February 12, 1885 – incorporated into the February 1885 Rule

Name and Explanation of the name of the Society

“The name of the Society is: Society of the Divine Word (Societas Verbi Divini). We declare that the adjective *divinum* refers to all three divine persons; therefore we understand the *Verbum divinum* in this way:

The Word of the divine Father or the second person of the Godhead,

The Word of the divine Son in his holy humanity or the gospel of Jesus Christ, The Word of the Holy Spirit or scripture in its entirety, and in a subordinate way also the priestly word for the admonition and instruction of people, insofar as it is proclaimed on behalf of and in line with the mind of the church.”

Members of the Society

The Society consists of *fratres clerici* (clerics) and *fratres laici* (lay brothers). All of them first take temporary and then final vows.

Purpose of the Society

The purpose of the society is in the first place the “adoration of the Divine Word and the spread of the devotion to the Holy Spirit; furthermore the promotion of the veneration of the angels and saints and help for the poor souls in purgatory.” The second purpose is to work for the greatest possible sanctification of the priests and to preserve the sanctity of the sacraments. In addition, those confreres who are able to do so, should pursue scholarly studies according to the mind of the Church. In third place we read: “The most preferred work, however, is work for the conversion of heretics and unbelievers and let us continue to regard this as our main task.”

The Vows

“All the vows include the observance of poverty, chastity and obedience according to the norms of this rule. The temporary vows of the *fratres laici* will be made three times, each time for three years and each time dedicated to one of the three archangels; the final vows are to be dedicated to the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary. The *fratres clerici* make the temporary vows immediately for nine years in honor of the most Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary; this time can be shortened for the *fratres clerici*, and also for the lay brothers, by a dispensation granted by the superior general. After temporary vows the *fratres clerici* make the final vows in honor of the Holy Spirit.”

Main Patrons of the Society

- a) The most Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary, the holy foster father Joseph.
- b) The holy Archangels Michael, Gabriel and Raphael.
- c) The following holy apostles: The princes of the apostles, *Peter and Paul*. They are the chosen sons of the Father for the foundation of his holy church on earth. *John* as the apostle of the Eternal Word and protector of the holy Mother of God. *Andrew* as a great example of the denial of everything earthly and dedication to the guidance of the Holy Spirit.
- d) As representatives of the later church: Pope *Gregory* the Great, the bishop and doctor of the church *Augustine*, the priest *Vincent de Paul*.

Secondary Patrons of the Society

A future general chapter should determine these, however, the following must be among them: Francis Xavier, Joachim and Anne, the holy Three Kings and the founders of those three religious orders which contributed particularly many missionaries to the church: namely Saints Dominic, Francis of Assisi and Saint Ignatius. Overall, there is

freedom; and those saints can be chosen which are particularly suitable for veneration by the ordinary faithful in the missions (all of this from: *Fontes Historici SVD*, vol. I).

The Influence of Miss Leitner during the general chapter

Fr. Arnold gave such convincing testimony regarding the truth of Miss Leitner’s visions that the capitulars were assured of their supernatural character (Fritz Bornemann, *Ferdinand Medits und Magdalena Leitner in der Geschichte des Steyler Missionswerkes* [Ferdinand Medits and Magdalena Leitner in the history of the Steyl mission organization], *Verbum Supplementum* 4, Rome 1968, p. 74). She practices veneration of the Holy Spirit, “in a way we find in only few saints and doctors of the church; secondly, what she says about the dignity of the priesthood and the sacrifice of the Mass are church doctrine at its best” (ibid.). For the Society it was important that according to her, it was the express will of God that the Society work for the veneration of the Holy Spirit and for the priesthood. And then Fr. Arnold made a remark which is most interesting for the present day development of the SVD: “The inner structure and institution of the Society has [in the constitutions] and through her [Miss Leitner’s] admonitions reached such a fullness and grandness which in hindsight astonishes even ourselves. Probably through this, it [the Society] will detach itself sooner from its national limitations and will be more easily able to achieve greater expansion” (ibid., p. 75).

Declaration of the General Chapter regarding Miss Leitner - February 15 and 16, 1885

The chapter wanted to give special honor to Mother Gregoria [Miss Leitner] because of her services to the Society and, therefore, gave her the title spiritual Mother of the Society. This title, however, did not place her in competition with the superiors of the Society; they remained the only ones to give orders which could not be rejected by reference to Mother Gregoria (ibid., p. 77). Furthermore, the Society would always have the right to examine whether in an individual case she [Miss Leitner] was expressing only her personal opinion, or if she had not understood something well or whether she had perhaps been deceived herself (ibid.).

A Sisters’ congregation is to be founded – February 15 and 16, 1885

During these days the foundation of a Sisters’ congregation was discussed and decided upon. Looking back at the foundation history of the sisters, Fr. Arnold wrote later that during the first General Chapter the foundation of a Sisters’ congregation had been discussed and had been accepted in principle (Alt, *Journey in Faith*, p. 336-337). Fr. Bornemann SVD writes that this decision also included a time frame for the foundation for which the capitulars expressly referred to the will of the Holy Spirit as it had been made known by Miss Leitner. According to this time frame, the foundation had to come about before six years and five months had passed (Bornemann, *Ferdinand Medits und Magdalena Leitner...*, p. 65). Since the capitulars believed in the supernatural character of Miss Leitner’s visions, for the time being they had also to believe that the foundation could not be postponed indefinitely. The congregation was to have two branches: cloistered adoration Sisters and active missionary sisters, not cloistered.