

# THE FOUNDER & CO-FOUNDRESSES



**FOUNDER  
AND CO-FOUNDRESSES:**

**FATHER ARNOLD**

**MOTHER MARIA**

**MOTHER JOSEPHA**

**MOTHER MARY MICHAEL**

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Labbe, SVD**

**Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception**

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Dear Reader,

In the following pages, the writer would like to share with you his discovery of an inspiring relationship which grew up between a priest and three young ladies. The priest was Arnold Janssen. And the ladies were Helena Stollenwerk, Hendrina Stenmanns, and Adolfine Tonnie.

Helena discerned in prayer that God was calling her to become a missionary. In vain she sought a congregation of missionary Sisters, whom she could join.

Learning about Father Arnold, who had established a mission seminary for the formation of young men who wanted to become missionaries, she implored Father Arnold to help her to become a missionary.

Father Arnold promised to consider her request and to pray over the matter that he could find God's will. The best he could do for her at that time, he said, was to accept her as a maid of the Sisters of Divine Providence, who had charge of the kitchen.

She gladly accepted the position of maid with a firm confidence in God, who gave her a missionary vocation, and in Father Arnold, that some day she would become a religious missionary Sister.

A little over a year later, Hendrina joined her.

The relationship which developed between Father Arnold, Helena and Hendrina is wonderful to contemplate. It was a spiritual relationship, pure and loving, entirely rooted in the love of Jesus and his missionary work. Father Janssen declared each of them after their death to be a Co-Foundress of the Holy Spirit Missionary Sisters.

Adolfine, who joined later, became one of the pioneers of the Holy Spirit Sisters of Perpetual Adoration, Father Arnold's third foundation. Father Arnold appointed her superior of this new congregation, which she directed for twelve years during the life time of Father Janssen and for twenty-five years after his death.

The relationship between Father Arnold and the Co-Foundresses bore the fruit of sanctity. Father Arnold was declared "Blessed" by the Church in 1975; Helena, who became Sister Maria, was declared "Blessed" in 1995; Hendrina, who became Sister Josepha, was declared "Blessed" in 2008. The cause of Adolfine, who became Sister Mary Michael, has still to be introduced; the writer is convinced that once it has been introduced it will make the same progress as that of the Founder and that of the other Co-Foundresses.

"Father" Arnold Janssen is being used in this booklet. He was canonized together with Joseph Freinademetz by our Holy Father, Pope John Paul II on October 5, 2003.

The writer

**Note well: *This work is dedicated to Our Blessed Mother!***

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## A Summary of this Booklet

Father Arnold Janssen saw the need of Sisters in the missions, and two young ladies, Helena and Hendrina, wanted to become missionaries. Together the three of them founded the Holy Spirit Missionary Sisters.

Likewise, Father Arnold realized the need of Sisters to pray for the active missionary Priests, Brothers, and Sisters. With the help of Adolfine, later Mother Mary Michael, he founded the Holy Spirit Missionary Sisters of Perpetual Adoration.



Helena

Fr. Arnold

Interview, March 19, 1882 Solemnity of St. Joseph

***Who was Father Arnold Janssen?  
When he met Helena and interviewed her, he was a 44 year old  
priest, founder of St. Michael Mission Seminary.***

### **Arnold Janssen**

Father Arnold Janssen was born in Gock, Germany, in the year 1837. He became a diocesan priest and taught high school boys religion, mathematics, and the sciences for twelve years. On vacation days he went around from parish to parish and established units of the Apostleship of Prayer. In 1873 he resigned his teaching position and started a mission magazine. On September 8, 1875, he founded a mission seminary for preparing young men to become missionaries.

In the very first issue of his mission magazine he had written about the need of Sisters in the missions. Sisters, he explained, are best in winning the sympathy and confidence of people. They educate young women and consequently form Christian mothers, the foundation of Christian families. From these families come vocations to the priesthood and religious life.

In his life thus far, Father Arnold had some contact with women and girls. He was, of course, close to his mother. And he had two sisters, an elder and a younger one, plus aunts and cousins. The family had a maid. As a teacher in school and an assistant in the parish, he had dealings with the mothers of students and the women of the parish. Then after he resigned from the school in Bocholt, he stayed with the Ursuline Nuns in Kempen as their chaplain and taught their students, who were girls. He related likewise with the Sisters of Divine Providence, who temporarily took care of the kitchen and laundry of the mission seminary community. That was about the extent of his contact with women and girls up to the time that young ladies began to appeal to him to help them become missionaries.

When young ladies began to appeal to Father Arnold to help them become missionaries, he was not sure that God wanted him to found a congregation of missionary Sisters. True, he had the conviction that missions needed Sisters, but that he should found a congregation of missionary Sisters had never occurred to him. He began to pray and reflect on this matter in order to find the will of God.

**MAY THE DARKNESS OF SIN AND THE NIGHT OF UNBELIEF VANISH  
BEFORE THE LIGHT OF THE WORD AND THE SPIRIT OF GRACE. AND  
MAY THE HEART OF JESUS LIVE IN EVERY HEART!**

*(Prayer motto of Father Arnold Janssen expressing his missionary goal)*

***Who was Helena?***

***When she met Father Arnold Janssen, she was a 29 year old young lady who since she was a teenager had wanted to become a missionary.***

In 1881, Helena had found the address of Father Arnold Janssen and wrote to him that she wanted to become a missionary. Could he not help her to become a missionary to China? Father Janssen had sacrificed everything to found a mission seminary for young men, but to help young women to become missionaries - that was something different. What did God want him to do? To reject her request or to be open to God's will and wait patiently for a clearer manifestation of that will? He chose the latter course.

**Helena**

Helena was born on Nov. 28, 1852. Her father, Peter Stollenwerk, was a widower with eight children from his previous marriage. He owned a farm and an inn. Her mother was Maria Bogards, a farmer's daughter. When Helena was seven years old, her father died. After Papa died, her mother married another widower with three girls about her age. Thus, she had plenty of half sisters and brothers.

As a young girl, she was a member of the Holy Childhood Association; the children of this organization collected money to support abandoned babies in China. Twice she was chosen to give her name to the baby whom the children of the parish sponsored. Eagerly she read the publication of the Holy Childhood Association about the missionaries in China. At the age of sixteen she already perceived the grace of a vocation to be a missionary.



**Helena reads about the missions while she pastures the cows.**

She imposed mortifications upon herself and fasted. She took care of the sick in the village. If a quarrel arose in her father's inn, she appeased the angry men. She avoided dancing. Young men sought to court and marry her, but with the permission of her spiritual director, a priest of the parish, she made a private vow of virginity, thus keeping herself in readiness for the life of a religious and missionary. When she was 19 years old, she told her spiritual director about her desire to be a missionary to the Chinese people. To test her vocation, her spiritual director forbade her to read or speak about the missions. She obeyed, waited, prayed, and worked on the farm. After a number of years, she again brought up the topic, sought a convent which could help her become a missionary, found none, but found the address of Father Arnold Janssen, Steyl, Holland. She wrote to him and pleaded: "Accept me for the love of God! I do not mind even being sent immediately to China, if only the true religious spirit reigns in the convent. I am healthy and twenty-eight years old."



### **Helena Cares for the Sick**

Father Arnold invited Helena and her parents to visit him, for he needed to have a personal talk with her to discern whether or not she had a true missionary vocation. Helena gladly accepted the invitation and persuaded her parents to accompany her to Steyl. On the arrival of Helena and parents, Father Arnold was summoned by the porter to the parlor. "Welcome to you, Helena, and to your parents. Welcome to Steyl!" Father Arnold invited them to sit down and have some refreshments. After they had gratefully partaken of these, he showed them the chapel and the park. He had made arrangements for their overnight stay. The following day, the Solemnity of St. Joseph, March 19, Father Arnold and Helena had a personal talk; purposely he had arranged this talk for the Solemnity of St. Joseph, for St. Joseph knew how to relate properly with Mary, the Mother of Jesus; he would help him, Father Arnold, to relate correctly too with this Mary and other "Marys."

Father Arnold listened carefully to Helena as she gave an account of her vocation and he tried his best with the help of the Holy Spirit to discern whether or not this young lady before him had a true vocation to be a missionary. Having heard her tell of her longing to serve the Lord as a missionary and having learned something more of her character and spirituality, he saw the possibility of her having a genuine vocation. But he himself did not as yet have a clear idea as to whether God wanted him to found a missionary congregation of Sisters. He told her frankly that he could assure her of nothing but that she could enter the mission seminary as a maid of the Sisters in the kitchen while waiting for God to make clear his will. Helena was happy when she heard of this possibility of helping in some way with the preparation of future missionaries. She trusted Father Arnold and with feminine intuition guided by the light of the Holy Spirit saw that he was the person the Holy Spirit had chosen to help her become a missionary. Her parents, however, when they heard of the proposition after the interview, were not pleased with the prospect of their daughter being a maid.

In August, Helena came to Steyl for another talk with Father Arnold. She repeated her desire to become a missionary and again asked his help. Germany had no congregation of missionary Sisters; she put her hope in him, who had founded a mission seminary for the formation of young men desiring to become missionaries.

In October, Father Arnold wrote to Helena and repeated his proposition: "You can enter our house as a maid. All further development we must leave up to the good God... At the moment, therefore, there is no need for you to set your affairs in order. We are not yet that far." In her zeal, Helena wanted to burn all bridges behind her and go full speed ahead, to come to Steyl and become a missionary. Father Arnold, however, cautioned her to go slowly.



**Mother, "Don't leave me, Helena!"**

**Helena, "Mother, God is calling me to be a missionary. I must answer!"**

Her spiritual director strongly opposed the idea of Helena being a maid; for his directee, he was convinced, had solid virtue and showed the signs of having a genuine religious vocation. He wrote to Father Janssen: "I will never give her permission to enter as a maid!" The reader must try to understand the mind of the spiritual director as regards his directee. She, as a young girl, had excelled in religion classes. Much of Sunday afternoon (All the Holy Masses in those days were in the morning.) she spent in church before the Blessed Sacrament and fostered her intimacy with Jesus; she assisted the sick and gave alms to the poor. Thus her spiritual director insisted that she wanted to be a religious Sister, not a maid.

Father Arnold tried to understand the view of her spiritual director and so calmly by letter explained his own situation: "Under the present circumstances, I cannot proceed until I know clearly and exactly what God's holy will is... I told Helena that if she wished to enter anywhere else, she need only to apply there. But if she has a desire for our house only, she can first be taken only as a maid. It would be dishonest on my part to make promises to which I cannot strictly bind myself... Helena retains her freedom, just as we retain ours... She will be a maid in a religious house, living under the same roof with the Blessed Sacrament. I will allow her time for prayer and visits to the church, to the extent that circumstances permit, since I desire above all that she develop into a truly spiritual person."

After an exchange of letters with Father Janssen, her spiritual director left the decision up to Helena. He told her, "I don't want to be the cause of you losing your vocation." I leave you free. You may enter Steyl or you may remain here."

Being free to become a maid in the mission seminary, Helena wrote to Father Arnold saying that she would enter on December 30. Again she expressed her desire of becoming a missionary to China and promised to cooperate with Father Arnold in helping her to reach that goal. She knew that the Holy Spirit was guiding him and would guide her through him. Father Arnold appreciated her faith and trust in God and her confidence in him.

He answered her letter and welcomed her. "From the bottom of my heart," he wrote, "I wish you joy and happiness in attaining your desired goal at last... Courage! Your hand is in the hand of the heavenly Father and He will direct all things according to his holy will. Together with you, the sister of a good student (seminarian) will also enter as a maid. So you will be three in all, and can pray together, work together, have spiritual reading together, and so forth" He concluded the letter, "May the Lord bless your coming and accomplish in you all that He has in mind in your regard."

On December 29, when she arrived with her parents, Father Arnold gave her a warm welcome. She showed herself brave in leaving parents and home. She considered this entry as a maid, as mentioned, to be the first step in becoming a missionary Sister. Her parents, however, especially her mother departed sad since they would be separated from a loving daughter.

During the whole time that Helena worked as a maid in the mission seminary, Father Arnold faithfully month after month entered in the books her salary and that of the other maids, though Helena never claimed any of it. But the bookkeeping helped to keep the maids' position clear.

From personal experience Father Arnold knew the depth of one's longing to serve God. Helena, convinced of her missionary vocation, did all in her power to become a missionary. Father Arnold, if God so willed, would do all he could to help her

and the others. Someone expressed the spiritual relationship which developed between Father Arnold and Helena as follows: They had the same expectant faith in the will of God, confidence in his guidance, and a divinely inspired certainty in which they found strength and grace to persevere through the period of waiting until a clear sign was given to begin."



**Helena in the Community Kitchen**

#### **Who was Hendrina?**

When she came to St. Michael Mission Seminary and joined Helena in the kitchen, she was a mature young lady 32 years old. She had fulfilled her promise to her dying mother to raise her younger brothers and sisters, and now she wanted Father Arnold to help her realize her vocation to become a missionary.



**Hendrina Helps Support the Family.**

## Hendrina

Hendrina was born on May 28, 1852, the same year as Helena, and baptized the following day. Her father, Wilhelm Franz Stenmanns and her mother, Anna Maria Wallboom, had married a year before her birth. She had six brothers and sisters. In school, she was a good student and loved everything religious. Besides helping take care of her younger brothers and sisters, she worked daily at the loom at home and specialized in making silk umbrellas to supplement the family income.

As her apostolate, she took care of the sick and old in the village. By attending to them and their needs, she acquired a deep insight into persons who were suffering in mind and body. Offering support to the dying, she obtained a sense of lasting values rather than a desire for the fleeting pleasures of this life. And she was leading a mortified life as a member of the Third Order of St. Francis.



### **Hendrina Takes the Place of Her Deceased Mother.**

Hendrina visited Steyl in 1879 at the invitation of Lambert Welbers, a former apprentice of her father, a tailor. She had helped Lambert financially to enter the new seminary there. She too felt the call to become a missionary. Her problem was this: Whereas there was a seminary established for preparing young men for the missions, none existed to prepare young women for the missions.

In 1883 Hendrina again visited Steyl and met the maids in the kitchen. She wished to join them since she too wanted to become a missionary. She had to settle things at home, however, and arrange for her sister, next to her age, to take over as mother of the younger children. In her interview with Father Arnold she explained that she could not enter earlier because as the eldest in the family she had to take care of her young brothers and sisters. Father Arnold asked her to make a formal application.



### **Hendrina Writes her Letter of Application to Father Arnold Janssen**

*1884, January 6, Issum*

*Very Reverend Father Rector:*

*...I beg you, Reverend Father, to be so kind as to accept me as a maid in the Mission House. I desire nothing more than with the grace of God to be the least and offer myself in sacrifice for the work of evangelization... On May I will be thirty-two years old. It was not possible for me to seek admission anywhere earlier since I had to fulfill the promise which I had made to my dear mother on her death-bed, to look after my brothers and sisters... My father agrees to my entering.*

*In the love of the most Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary, I am*

*Obediently yours,  
Hendrina  
Stenmanns*

Upon receiving this letter of application, Father Arnold wrote to the Parish Priest of Issum, her home parish, and made inquiries about her. He received a very favorable report: "... She has always shown an inclination to the religious life. She is pious without ostentation, attends Mass every day. She is healthy and strong, energetic and industrious."

Upon receipt of this letter of recommendation, Father Arnold wrote to Hendrina a letter of acceptance. She reported on February 12, 1884, as kitchen maid. Now she too considered that she was on the way to becoming a missionary Sister.



**Helena and Companion Welcome Hendrina**

### **The Maids**

The maids lived in a separate section of the mission house, which was reserved for the Sisters of Divine Providence. There in the Sisters' quarters they had one small room, which served them as dormitory, dining room, and prayer room. The only decoration was a small altar. Since the room had no stove, it was often bitter cold in the winter of northern Europe. But they never complained since they accepted poor living conditions and penance as part of their becoming missionaries.

Together with Father Arnold, the maids worked out a daily schedule for themselves. They got up at 4:30 A.M. and, after a short prayer, started making coffee for breakfast and preparing the noon meal. At 5:30 A.M. they went to the chapel, made their meditation and participated in Holy Mass. They worked throughout the day except for their meal time and short periods of recreation. Strict silence was observed during their work. By 9:45 P.M. they were in bed.

This was Father Arnold's assessment of the maids as expressed in a conversation with a confrere, "Not even a single time did one of them ask me whether they could have hope of soon becoming Sisters. I am beginning to believe that God the Holy Spirit is calling them and bringing about in them particularly the virtues of silent patience and of quiet, contented perseverance."

Helena chose the heavier tasks in the kitchen, such as washing the bigger and heavier pots and pans. Yes, big pots and pans had to be used to cook for the 350 occupants of the mission seminary. Hendrina, although smaller and not as strong as Helena, did not avoid any work but did her share of it cheerfully. Whenever Father Arnold chanced to meet one of the maids in the garden, he always gave her a friendly greeting and, although there were many demands on his time, exchanged a few words with her.



Love of prayer characterized Hendrina so much that the Sisters of Providence nicknamed her "the praying auntie." With her she had brought a good number of religious books, which she loved to read, although she had very little time for reading.

### **Helena, First Superior**

In 1884, Father Arnold asked the maids to call on him. He still had a fever since he was just recovering from pneumonia and yet intended to leave for Austria that afternoon to continue negotiations for establishing a mission seminary there. He asked the maids to pray for God's blessing on his efforts. He also recommended that they pray fervently for a good superior for themselves. Then he asked each one to write down on a piece of paper her choice for superior. They all did so. Helena was chosen as the first superior, and Father Arnold approved of the choice.

Did Father Arnold Janssen's confreres approve of him founding a congregation of missionary Sisters?

The Founder, Father Arnold Janssen, had called a meeting of the four pillars of his mission house, namely, himself, Father Anzer from China, Father John Janssen, and Father Wegener. The four of them had set up the then existing organization of Brothers and Priests as a religious Society with a Constitution, and members taking the three vows of chastity, poverty, and obedience. During the course of those meetings, which lasted many weeks, Father Arnold had consulted the others about founding a

congregation of missionary Sisters. They were in favor. That his close associates were in favor indicated to Father Arnold that it was most likely the will of God that he found a congregation of missionary Sisters. Still he hesitated because he could hardly do all the work required of him as the Superior General of the Society of the Divine Word with a mission in China.

The burden, which he, as Superior General, carried and the hesitation, which he experienced in founding a Sister congregation, were expressed in a letter of June, 1887, to a priest friend of another Society, "...I shy away from making such a decision (namely, to found a congregation of missionary Sisters.) It will mean a lot of problems and worries, and I don't really know how I can properly take care of my present duties."

### **New Hope**

During the first days of July, 1887, as the Brothers, who had increased sufficiently in number, started to take over the kitchen, the Sisters of Providence began to leave and return to their former apostolate in their own country. Did this change put the maids out of a job and out of the mission seminary? Or did it give them now hope of eventually becoming missionary Sisters? By the grace of God, it was the latter.

As a result of the meetings of 1885, the Priests and Brothers now constituted a religious Society. They had taken their vows on the new Constitution. The members could find guidance from the Constitution as to how to live their vowed life as religious. This development helped Father Arnold see his way more clearly toward founding a congregation of missionary Sisters since every decision regarding the Brothers and Priests no longer depended only on him, the Founder.



**Convent of the Three Linden Trees**



**Helena and Hendrina Carry a Basket of Laundry.**

With the agreement of the four maids, Father Arnold arranged that they take over the laundry and move into their own house, an old one. The seminarians called it the "Convent of the Three Lindens" since the house was near three linden trees. Father Arnold encouraged the young ladies with these words, "This should be the beginning of the future convent." For them it was a definite step forward. Joy filled their hearts. Hope grew stronger.



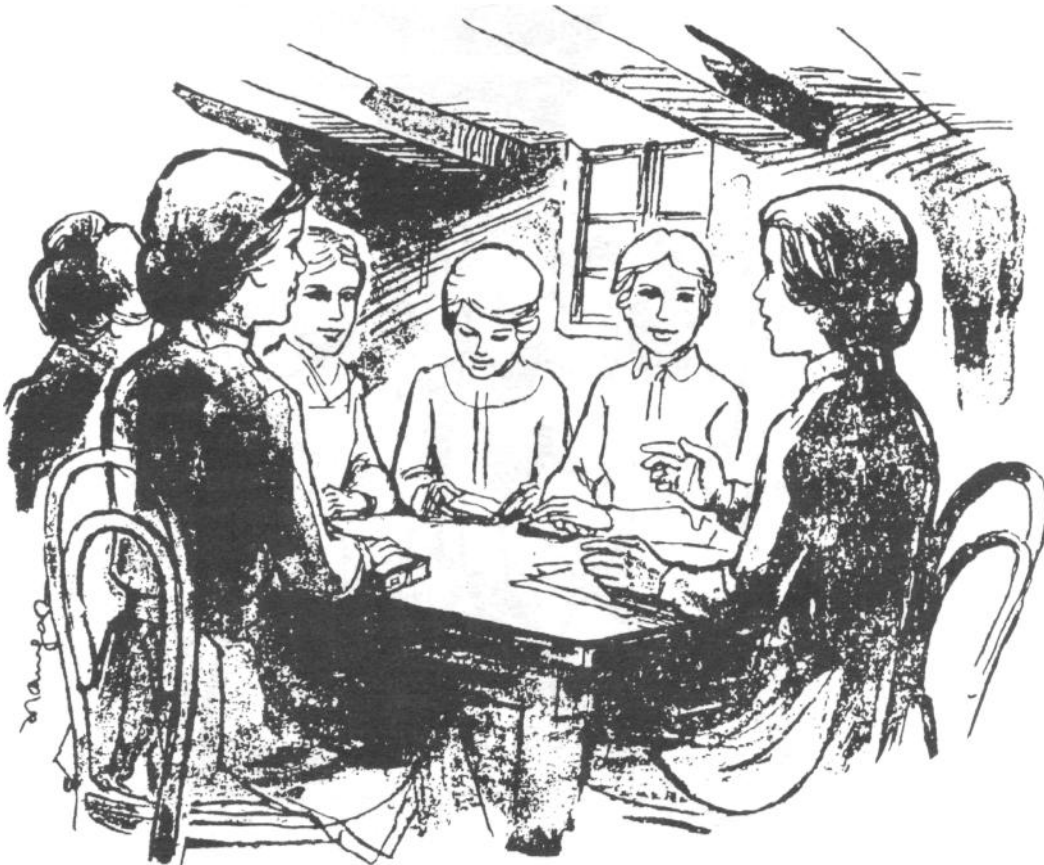
**Helena, Hendrina, and Companions Mend Clothes**

The Brothers in the kitchen sent over already-prepared food for the maids. In that way they did not need a kitchen and did not have to cook. Doing the laundry for the whole large community, however, gave them more than enough work.

Father Arnold realized the need of a real covent for the Sisters before the congregation could be founded; the young women needed a decent and fitting place where they could live, pray, and undergo the necessary formation for the religious missionary life. The problem was that at that time the Society of the Divine Word had no money with which to build one because of the construction going on in Austria, the building of St. Gabriel Mission Seminary, and the needs of the China mission. If the Lord wanted a congregation of missionary Sisters, He Himself would have to provide a more suitable and bigger building for them.

### **Hendrina, Superior**

In December, 1888, Hendrina replaced Helena as superior. Because Father Arnold discerned in Hendrina qualities which made her fit for the office, he appointed her superior to give her a chance to develop those qualities.



**Six Maids Now**

During their first year and a half in the Convent of the three Linden Trees, the maids were very much on their own to implement the temporary rule and order of the day, and to form themselves into a closely knit community.

When Helena, in a moment of downheartedness, expressed to Father Arnold some doubts as to whether the whole enterprise would develop into anything permanent, Father Arnold with prophetic vision encouraged her: "Hundreds will join you." Yes, the Lord showed that He did want a congregation of missionary Sisters by providing a bigger and better place for them. How?

On November 19, 1889, Father Arnold was able to rent in Steyl the monastery of the Capuchins, who had returned to their homeland. "The Capuchin Provincial has signed the rental contract!" exclaimed Father Arnold, "so the Congregation of Sisters will be established!" When informed, the young ladies rejoiced in the Lord that their prayers had been heard in a way they never thought of or imagined.



**Fathers Arnold, Wegener, and Steger conduct the six Maids to the former Capuchin Monastery, which Father Arnold rented.**

## **A Good Move**

The evening therefore of December 7, 1889, became a cherished memory for the maids. Why? Because Father Arnold accompanied by two priests, Fathers Wegener and Steger, led the way, and the six young ladies walking two by two passed in front of the mission house and the village church and then entered the large garden of the rented property. Once inside the property the little procession stopped and turned toward the gate. Father Arnold sprinkled it with holy water. Then they proceeded to the chapel, which had been decorated by the Brothers, where a hymn of thanksgiving was sung. Father Arnold next escorted the young women through the various rooms to acquaint them with the building before he and his companions left them.

What joy these future missionary Sisters experienced! Now they had a big house and plenty of room for more young ladies who wanted to become missionaries. Although the building was not quite perfect for Sisters, it seemed like a castle compared to the Convent of the Three Linden Trees.

### **Foundation Day: Solemnity of the IMMACULATE CONCEPTION**

The following day, December 8, 1889, was and is considered the foundation day of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit Missionary Sisters. On this great liturgical celebration of our Blessed Mother, namely her Immaculate Conception, Father Arnold Janssen, declared the six young women as postulants of a religious missionary congregation. Now they were no longer maids but Sister Postulants. Helena had spent almost seven years and Hendrina almost six as maids patiently awaiting this day. What an uplift in spirit did these postulants feel! They were on their way to their goal of becoming professed religious missionary Sisters.

During those years, Father Arnold had not been idle in regard to founding a congregation of missionary Sisters but had prayed and sacrificed to discern the will of God, and had been working on a constitution for the new congregation. God, however, had this date, the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception, from all eternity on his calendar for the founding of the Holy Spirit Missionary Sisters. God had given the grace to Father Arnold, Helena, Hendrina, and their companions to prepare for this day; they had cooperated, and the foundation now became a reality.

During the first seven months of their stay in their rented convent, the Sisters still participated in the Holy Mass and other religious services in the church of the mission seminary, for in those days it was very difficult to obtain permission to offer Mass even in a chapel such as was in the former Capuchin monastery, and especially difficult to receive authorization to reserve the Blessed Sacrament. Permission from Rome was needed. Although Father Arnold had applied for permission through the Bishop of the diocese as soon as the Sisters moved into the monastery, only after seven months, backed by the prayers of the Sisters, did he obtain it. Thus it was not until August 17 that Father Arnold for the first time could offer Holy Mass with the Sisters in their own chapel and could place the Blessed Sacrament in the tabernacle. The lighted sanctuary lamp burning merrily, now gave great spiritual joy to the Sisters, for it gleamed forth the good news that Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament lived with them in the same house.

## **A Real Convent for the Sisters**

After the Sisters had Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament with them, the development of the congregation went ahead rapidly. The Augustinian Nuns of Steyl, who had been exiled from Germany, returned to their homeland. Father Arnold bought their convent. Thus on September 29, the Solemnity of St. Michael the Archangel, the postulants, who now numbered ten, transferred to their own convent. They had been in the rented Capuchin monastery only a little more than nine months. Now they had had a real convent built for Sisters.



**Father Arnold Janssen about 50 years old**

## **Become a Missionary Sister!**

With the Sisters now having a real convent and plenty of room, Father Arnold thought he could publicize the new congregation. In the St. Michael Almanac of 1891 with 120,000 subscribers, he wrote: "A house has recently been opened...for the formation of missionary Sisters, that is, Sisters who will work...especially in the missions and in particular among women and girls." Then Father Arnold expressed his plan for the future contemplative branch of Sisters: "In addition to these missionary Sisters, others will also be accepted who feel called to a life of seclusion. They will pray for the missions...particularly to God the Holy Spirit, whom they will venerate in a special manner."

## Adolfine

On May 1, 1891, Adolfine Tonnies arrived as the sixteenth postulant. She was to have a special place in the envisioned contemplative branch of Sisters.

### Who was Adolfine?

**She was a 30 year old teacher with 10 years of teaching experience in a mission school in that part of Germany where the Catholics were in the minority. She was the niece of Father Herman Wegener, one of the four founding Fathers of the Divine Word Missionaries.**

Adolfine was born on January 7, 1862, in Westphalia, Germany. She was the third child of Johann Tonnies and Matilda Wegener. Her parents were persons of deep faith and uprightness who reared their eleven children in the love of God and neighbor. Her father was a hardware merchant - a quiet, earnest, and conscientious man whose integrity and dependability won for him the respect and trade of his townfolk. Her mother was a woman of faith who lived this faith by her selfless and loving service to her family and also to the poor.

Even as a child, Adolfine was serene and loved Jesus. She was a child of responsibility and fidelity to duty. Already she became a tutor to the neighbor children.



### **Adolfine and her little Sister probably looked like this when Adolfine made her First Holy Communion**

(N.B. Children made their First Communion in those days at about the age of eleven.)

Having finished her nine years of schooling, she went to a Normal School and became a qualified elementary school teacher. She accepted a position at a mission school in the German diaspora. There she taught all the children in the school, participated in daily Mass,

played the organ, decorated the altar, and spent long periods of the evening in adoration of Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament. The totally dedicated parish priest appreciated such a teacher, who cooperated very well with him.

Gradually she discerned a possible vocation to the religious life. She consulted a Jesuit retreat master, also the priest with whom she worked and who was her spiritual director, and finally her uncle, Father Herman Wegener, SVD. Father Herman encouraged her to put aside all hesitation and mentioned the new congregation at Steyl. When her mother refused her permission to become a religious, she appealed to her uncle, who went personally to visit his elder sister and persuaded her to allow Adolfine to enter.

Perhaps Father Arnold reasoned upon receipt of Adolfine's application that if she was like her uncle, Father Herman, she would surely be an asset to the congregation. Being accepted by Father Arnold Janssen, she entered on May 1, 1891. Father Arnold, no doubt, thanked God for this new postulant, a mature person possessing a sound judgment and a resolute will with 10 years of teaching experience. He himself had been a teacher for 12 years and he needed help to teach the Sisters and prepare them for their missionary work.



**Adolfine, the devoted teacher in the mission school in that part of Germany where there were few Catholics. She likewise assisted the zealous Parish Priest.**

Since the basic Rule or Constitution for the Sisters, which had been written by Father Arnold, was approved by the highest officials of the Society of the Divine Word during their series of meetings in 1891 and the postulants had a place conducive for formation, Father Arnold started giving them regular conferences three times a week to prepare them for the novitiate. These conferences according to a Sister, who was a postulant at that time, were like a confidential spiritual conversation between a father and his daughters. If, for example, the Gospel of the Sunday was about the multiplication of the loaves, he would tell them of the many products the Brothers had harvested on the farm. After such a conference he would open the tabernacle and allow the Sisters to hold adoration of the Blessed Sacrament until evening to give thanks to the Lord of the harvest.

During these conferences, Father Arnold introduced the Sisters step by step to the various spiritual exercises of the religious life. He explained the Holy Mass and the Divine Office. He also practiced the praying of the Divine Office with them. He prepared them for celebrating with the right disposition the various liturgical seasons, solemnities, and feasts of the Church. He explained and also encouraged such practices as meditation, the rosary, the way of the Cross, visits to the Blessed Sacrament, examination of conscience, and so forth. For their community prayers and devotions, he himself provided a prayer book. Thus he fostered among the Sisters both a liturgical and popular piety.

### **The Ideal Team**

In August, 1891, Father Arnold had the postulants vote for a superior, her assistant, and a councillor. Although the postulants had been consulted and had expressed their choice by vote, Father Founder retained the liberty to organize the team as he thought best for the community. Hendrina had the qualities of a humble assistant who could cooperate with Helena. Thus with Helena as superior and Hendrina as her assistant, Father Arnold had an ideal team for forming the Sisters into a true religious missionary congregation. He could work with Helena and Hendrina and they with him; and all three worked under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit to help the Sisters in every aspect of their formation.

Never satisfied with mediocrity in himself and in his work, Father Arnold continued working on the Sisters' Constitution and made a new draft which filled ninety-two pages. He then submitted this new draft to selected priests for corrections and additions; these filled thirty pages. These corrections having been incorporated into the text, Father Arnold submitted the Constitution to the Bishop for his approval. At that time, Arnold wrote to someone, "As soon as the changes are inserted which the Most Reverend Bishop may still desire, I will let the Sisters see the Constitution and I will talk with each individual Sister about it...." (A Constitution or Rule lays down the aim of the religious congregation, and spells out how the three vows of chastity, poverty, and obedience are to be lived, and outlines a way of life.) The Bishop approved the Constitution; the Sisters could now begin their novitiate.



### **Helena Superior, Hendrina Assistant**

To prepare the postulants for their novitiate, Father Arnold guided them in a retreat. In the meantime the Constitution went to the printing press that each Sister could have a copy for studying, praying over, and making comments about to the Founder, Father Arnold. Thus the Founder let the Sisters work with him in producing a Constitution fitting for the Sisters of the new missionary congregation.

### **Novices**

The novitiate began with a clothing ceremony. Father Founder presided over the ceremony. Each Sister received a blue habit and a new name. Helena became Maria; Hendrina, Josepha; and Adolfine, Michaele. Maria felt very grateful: What a privilege to bear the name of the Blessed Virgin Mary! Hendrina rejoiced at her new name. It constantly reminded her of St. Joseph, who always kept himself in the background. Hendrina's ideal was to give service without being praised for it. Adolfine received the name Michaele; she, like St. Michael the Archangel, was to be strong and totally dedicated to God.

In a letter to the Sisters, Father Arnold explained that it was by the grace of God that they had a Constitution: "...We ought to rejoice that we have so quickly devised a Rule. Some congregations have been in existence for fifty years or more and have not reached this point. Fortunately, through God's Providence, some excellent time-tested Rules came into my hands and so I was able to accomplish what could never have been done without these models and guides. Besides, I could draw on the experience I have acquired...Neither was there lack of consultation with others when this seemed helpful."

"After receiving my letter," wrote Father Arnold at a latter date, "The Sisters went to the chapel and sang the Magnificat and the Veni Creator... These Sisters (thirty of them already) give me great joy. They asked repeatedly, and I finally gave them permission, to spend the night from Thursday to Friday before the Blessed Sacrament, alternating three Sisters at a time."



**Father Arnold gives the Blue Habit to Helena, Hendrina, Adolfine, and Companions. He changes the Name of Helena to Maria, of Hendrina to Josepha, and of Adolfine to Micheale.**

Novices need a novice directress to introduce them into the religious life of the congregation. Father Arnold had invited a Sister of another congregation to direct the novices. Since she died, however, just before the date for beginning the novitiate, he took this as a sign that he himself should introduce his spiritual daughters into the religious missionary life of the new congregation.

Father Arnold himself thus became the novice master of the Sisters. "I give them a conference three times a week," he wrote later on, "and I question them... None of them, neither the eldest nor the youngest is afraid to raise her hand. These Sisters have given me great joy and I can truthfully say that an excellent spirit prevails among them. But this is just between you and me." Sister Maria and Sister Josepha praised the Lord in their hearts for his Providence in providing Father Arnold to be their novice master; they had followed his guidance over the years and through it had grown in closeness to Jesus. They felt that a strange novice directress could not give them the same help.

After three months, Father Arnold appointed Sister Maria to be novice directress of the older novices and Sister Michaele of the younger novices. (This appointment of Sister Michaele shows the great esteem he had for her and the confidence he placed in her, although she was somewhat new compared to those who had begun as maids.) Both Sister Maria and Sister Michaele would have preferred to be novices only and not have the additional task of directing other novices, but God revealed his will to them through their superior. One of the Sisters, a novice at that time, tells something more about Father Arnold's method of giving conferences: "The conferences Father Superior gave us were often in the form of catechesis. He would ask us questions about the topic which he had just explained... Again and again he let one Sister after the other express her opinion. Afterwards he would correct those who were wrong. By means of this method, the Founder introduced us to all the practices of the spiritual life. He treated both oral and mental prayer extensively."

Although novices, Sister Maria carried the additional burdens of being superior of the congregation and novice directress, and Sister Josepha faithfully assisted her as assistant superior. Convinced of the Founder's charisma, they tried to learn in detail his will in all the problems which came up in the congregation. He would carefully examine the matter, which they presented to him and try to arrive at a correct solution. On his part, Father Arnold, impressed with the competence of Sister Maria and Sister Josepha, allowed them the freedom to carry out the concrete details of his decisions. The Sisters helped Father Founder form the religious missionary community by their suggestions, questions, and references to the Constitution.

## **Work Room**

The Sister novices not only prayed but also continued to work. They set up a work room in the convent where a number of Sisters folded and trimmed sheets of the magazines, printed by the Steyl press. Soon they were also stitching the pages of books. In doing all these tasks, they were helping the mission seminary and the missions by promoting good reading materials for individuals and for families, who in turn would pray for and help the missionaries and their people. They also felt that by doing this work they were likewise contributing to their own support.

By the arrangement of Father Arnold, all the expenses for food, clothing, and so forth, were taken care of by the Society of the Divine Word. This complete financial dependence on the goodness of Father Arnold gave the Sisters the advantage of having no financial worries. Besides, no restriction was placed on their expansion except that not more than forty postulants were to be admitted each year. With gratitude Sisters Maria and Josepha accepted this arrangement. As it was, they looked for more time for prayer.



**Sisters in the Work Room of the Convent**

### **Retreats for Lay Women**

The mission seminary, almost from the beginning, had opened its doors to men retreatants during the days when no classes were given. The seminarians made their beds available to the retreatants and waited on them. Father Arnold now encouraged the Sisters to make their building available to women and girls for retreats. Sisters Maria and Josepha, the superiors, only too gladly agreed to cooperate in this important apostolate, although they foresaw the inconveniences and extra work this would involve.

About a hundred women attended each of the four courses of retreats which were given during the first year. The Sisters made the retreatants feel at home, gave them their beds, waited on them at table, and invited them to join in their prayers and devotions. Father Arnold himself preached the retreats during the second year; he preached to six groups.

All the women and girls making the retreats became acquainted through the Sisters and the retreat master with the missions. The Sisters also got a number of new applicants and also some benefactresses. Because of the sacrifice involved in making their facilities available and the extra work entailed, Father Arnold, Sister Superior, and her Assistant, had constantly to motivate themselves and the Sisters to offer the sacrifices needed. The fruit, however, that many lay women were brought closer to Jesus and became friends of the missions made the sacrifices worthwhile.



### **Serving the Retreatants**

On March 12, 1894, Sister Maria, Sister Josepha, Sister Michaele, and nine others reached the fulfillment of some of their hopes, for on that day they made their First Profession of Vows. They became professed religious missionary Sisters, not yet perpetually professed but for a period of seven years. They were not physically in the missions but totally dedicated to the mission work of the Church. Sister Maria, Sister Josepha, Sister Michele, and their companions could not express fully to the Lord in prayer and hymn their inner peace and joy. All their waiting, hoping, and suffering then seemed a small price to pay for what they then experienced.



### **First Profession of Vows: Father Founder Presiding**

## Preparing for the Missions

About four months before the first profession of the first Sisters, Father Arnold had already begun to organize classes for the Sisters to prepare them for the missions. He started out with Spanish, which he himself taught to the first group. He was thinking of Argentina as the first mission for the Sisters since China at that time was too dangerous a place to send Sisters. The second group of Spanish students he entrusted to Sister Michaelae. Then came courses in English, German, Bible History, Catechism, organ playing, and so forth.

Interestingly, Sister Michaelae was the organist and her uncle, Father Herman Wegener, was in charge of the singing. He taught the Sisters Gregorian chant and practiced hymns with them. Realizing that although his niece played fairly well, she had no formal studies in theory, he arranged for her take lessons under a professional teacher, and he himself supervised these lessons with plenty of constructive criticism of his niece's performance in putting the theory into practice.

Father Arnold had given Sister Michaelae charge of the postulants besides her tasks of being organist and teacher. He must have recognized her solid spirituality and talents, and wanted her to develop them.

## Continue to Serve

In August, 1894, Sister Maria called Father Founder's attention to the fact that her term as superior was coming to an end and added: "I have a great longing to be released from office. The responsibility is great and my qualifications so meager. I am much concerned about the duties incumbent on me and therefore often feel greatly distracted in my interior life of prayer."

In spite of her request to be relieved of her heavy burden of serving the community as superior and her difficulty in concentrating on her prayers, Father Arnold appointed her to continue. She had proven to have the qualifications of a superior and had cooperated perfectly with him. Having received her reappointment, she accepted it as God's will, expressed through her superior. She thanked him in writing and summed up her generous spirit in these memorable words: **"To God the honor; to my Sisters the benefit; and to myself the burden."** To help her solve her problem in regard to prayer, she requested permission to rise earlier than the other Sisters that she could have more time to pray early in the morning since during the day the Sisters and her duties made constant demands on her attention and time. She received permission.

About this time, Father Superior expanded the Council of the Sisters to seven members. The councilors would help Sister Maria with the burden of administration. Her main help though was still Sister Josepha, her assistant. A new novice mistress was appointed. Sister Michaelae, however, remained in charge of the postulants and had her teaching load.

In the direction of the community, Sister Maria worked, as mentioned, side by side, with Father Arnold, the Founder and Father, who had introduced her into the religious missionary life. Father Arnold and Sister Maria usually communicated by letter. Since she wanted everything to be done in the spirit and with the consent of the Founder, through whom she believed God's will was made known to her, she reported and made inquiries about many things referring to the order of the house and the formation of the Sisters, for example, problems of

individual Sisters, free time, new purchases, and so forth. On the other hand, she also made proposals concerning the daily order, the clothing ceremony, the remodeling of the kitchen, the laying of the water pipes. Nor did she hesitate to ask to have regulations changed if they proved too difficult for the Sisters to carry out. Yet she pointed out that she let the final decision to him, that is, to Father Superior. "For myself," she would say, "I'll be just as joyful to receive a refusal as permission."



### **Sister Maria, Superior**

Since Sister Maria's duty was to have the Constitution put into practice by herself and the community, Father Founder had a special copy of the Constitution book interspersed with blank pages printed for her to enter proposals for changes. Father Arnold wanted to give life to the Rule and make it practical. He emphasized Sister Maria's role in this process.

Once when she asked Father Arnold whether a certain book might be read by the Sisters, he answered that she should pray, read the book and see whether it was good for the Sisters, and then decide. Although very obedient, Sister Maria did not fear to express her opinion to Father Arnold. She stated her belief, for example, that too much time was being given to studies. He explained to her, "The intellectual pursuits of the Sisters, studying Spanish and learning to play the organ, for instance, are much more important than the physical ones. Therefore I ask you to give them priority. Folding sheets (of our magazines) is good in itself, but it is much more important that our Sisters prepare themselves to serve the dear Lord in the missions...."

## **Ideal Assistant**

As the number of Sisters increased and the work multiplied, in November, 1894, Father Arnold appointed Sister Josepha to be in charge of the work and the physical plant. With such an official appointment, Sister Josepha could relieve Sister Maria of half of her responsibility. Sister Maria could concentrate on the continued spiritual formation of the professed Sisters while Sister Josepha took care of their formation in the practical tasks of doing the needed work in keeping the house clean and in repair, and in carrying on the retreat apostolate. This arrangement most probably had been in effect already, but an official appointment made it clearer.

## **Father Arnold and the Sisters**

Another Sister tells how Father Arnold sought the blessings of God for his Priests and Brothers, and for his projects through the prayers of the Sisters. "He often came," she relates, "to visit us and when he did, all the Sisters were called to the chapel. Usually he wanted to recommend some special intention to our prayers. It seems that he never made a decision without much prayer first."

Father Arnold was a man of principle; some would call him strict; nevertheless he could be very fatherly. On major feast days, he readily allowed conversation throughout the day. (The usual practice was silence throughout the day except for short periods of recreation.) On special occasions, he gave the Sisters a free day. "When our superior, Mother Maria," narrates a Sister, "asked for permission to have private exposition of the Blessed Sacrament on the feast of the Epiphany, and at the same time send a cake to the mission seminary, the Founder replied, "You may have private exposition until Compline but give the cake to the Sisters for breakfast and afternoon tea..."

## **Teachers' Training College**

On March 12, 1895, Father Arnold Janssen, as mentioned, formally opened a Teachers' Training College in the convent of the Sisters to prepare many of them to be teachers in the missions. If the Sisters were teachers, they could be more efficient in the missions. As teachers, the Sisters could stand side by side with other professionals. Although Sister Maria and perhaps Sister Josepha did not see the advantage of Sisters becoming teachers as clearly as did Father Arnold, they wholeheartedly endorsed the project and went along with it. Sister Michaela, however, knew from experience the advantage of being a teacher when it came to mission work. The superiors together with Father Arnold selected the Sisters who would take the four year course that had been organized. They realized that not all the Sisters had the talents to teach; these would receive a training fitting their particular gifts.

For the faculty of the College, Father Arnold chose Sister Michaela and another Sister, also a former teacher; Father Arnold himself, Father Wegener and a few other priests also taught some subjects. As the number of Sisters increased, some of them former teachers,

more and more of them were assigned by Father Arnold to teaching. With a full time teaching job plus her religious exercises to occupy her, Father Arnold relieved Sister Michaela of her task of being postulants' directress and gave that post to Sister Josepha.



### **Sister Josepha, Directress of Postulants**

Because of her sunny disposition and engaging naturalness, Sister Josepha was very well suited to prepare the girls for the novitiate, which is the introduction to the religious life. She had the required understanding for their difficulties. She had the virtue of prudence, helped by her experience before entering the convent, of caring for her younger brothers and sisters and also in the convent of dealing with the younger Sisters. She tried to form the young ladies in the spirit of sacrifice, much needed by a novice and later on even more by a missionary. She promoted a spirit of joy among the postulants. So humble was she that if she made a mistake, she asked their pardon. To ask pardon of subordinates, when one is wrong, reveals a great character.

Twice a day she gave the postulants a conference to prepare them for the novitiate. By these talks she introduced them to mental prayer and to a greater self-knowledge. A number of her highly motivated postulants desired not only to be missionaries but also martyrs; so she tried to give the right perspective and make them realistic in their ideals and daily living. She explained: "Oh indeed, it is probably not so hard to lay one's head on the block once and let it be chopped off. It may be harder one's whole life long to die daily to self and daily to offer oneself anew to God " Although not so glamorous, the daily carrying of one's cross behind Jesus, she continued, is what sanctifies a person. And this daily carrying of one's cross is possible for all.

She also attended the conferences which Father Arnold gave to the postulants and with them she put his suggestions into practice. She likewise tried to know her postulants and guide each according to each one's individual personality.



### **Sister Josepha Consols a Troubled Postulant**

When she had to refuse admission to the novitiate to one lacking a vocation or who was incapable of following it, she combined firmness with kindness. Her understanding love, it was said, was capable of alleviating for a young lady even such a refusal.

### **The First Sisters for Argentina**

The first four Holy Spirit Missionary Sisters to leave for the foreign missions left Steyl on September 11, 1895, for Argentina. This was truly an historic event. Father Arnold and the Sisters' council of seven members had made a selection of Sisters to be sent.

The selection and sending of the first Sisters to the missions had been preceded by several years of preparation, not only spiritual and academic but also through a developed method of selection.

Father Arnold had worked over the several preceding years with the superiors of the Sisters in selecting applicants for admission to the convent, the acceptance of novices for first vows, the assignments of professed Sisters, and now in the appointment of Sisters for the foreign missions. To make good decisions, information was needed.

How did Father Arnold obtain this information and have it available for himself and the Council of Sisters? In considering, for example, who should be promoted to first profession, Father Arnold had prepared an extensive questionnaire that contained as complete a checklist as possible of the talents, and of the good and less good character traits of each novice. It was filled out after much prayer and mature reflection by the superiors, formators, teachers, and fellow Sisters. Sister Superior had studied these filled-out questionnaires, especially that of the novice directress, and collated them.

Then after studying all the information, she had discussed each Sister with her council and added to the report her own and the council's reasons for or against promotion to vows. This report then on each Sister was given to Father Arnold Janssen, who made the final decision as to admission to vows.

Thus Father Founder and the Superiors of the Sisters had at hand a comprehensive record of each Sister, which was especially valuable not only for promotion to vows but for future assignments to the missions, and even for the selection of superiors.

### **Receiving the Mission Cross and Setting Out**

In the spirit of sacrifice, the Sisters decided not to go home before leaving for Argentina (although they had permission to do so); instead they invited their parents to Steyl to witness their reception of the mission cross. Father Founder himself in a simple but touching ceremony in the chapel of the Sisters gave each of the departing Sisters her mission cross to be her strength and consolation in a distant country. Father Arnold and the Sisters then went to the statue of Our Blessed Mother and the community sang the Marian hymn "Ave Maris Stella"<sup>1</sup> (Hail, Star of the Sea). After Father Arnold had given the Sisters his blessing, they left the chapel and entered the waiting carriage to take them to the train station.

These first four missionaries were on their way to Argentina! They had the privilege of being the pioneers of this new missionary congregation. Filled with joy, they thanked God for their missionary vocation. They waved farewell to their generous parents with whom they would be eternally united in heaven, no more on earth. In those days, going to the missions usually meant never returning home.

### **Prayer Mottoes of our Founder**

MAY THE DARKNESS OF SIN AND  
THE NIGHT OF UNBELIEF VANISH  
BEFORE THE LIGHT OF THE WORD  
AND THE SPIRIT OF GRACE.

AND MAY THE HEART OF JESUS  
LIVE IN THE HEARTS OF ALL!

MAY THE HOLY TRIUNE GOD  
LIVE IN OUR HEARTS!

Sisters Maria and Josepha escorted the missionaries to the train station. They themselves were not among the missionaries, but with Father Arnold they had helped to prepare the departing missionary Sisters for their mission. In some way, they were going to the mission in those they had help form. With prayers and letters, they as superiors, would continue to support the missionary Sisters in their faraway place.

Father Arnold thanked God, as the carriage drove away, with all his heart for the help He had given in founding the Holy Spirit Missionary Sisters. The congregation was well established at home and was now sending out missionaries, the first of many. To Father Bccher, the superior of the mission in Argentina, he had written concerning the Sisters: "The foundation of the South American province of the Sisters has been laid... But now the spiritual edifice must be built... I have spared no effort in laying a solid foundation for the spiritual edifice of the Sisters' congregation. I took upon myself the entire administration at first. I even gave Spanish and English lessons in the Teacher's Training School until T was able to assign someone else. I still them three conferences a week... Furthermore, I still hold the quarterly personal interview with each of the seventy Sisters...."

In November 1896, another group of Holy Spirit Mission Sisters left Steyl for a mission country; this time for Togo in West Africa. Father Arnold had asked the Sisters for the names of the Sisters who would make good missionaries in Africa. Among those receiving the highest number of votes was Sister Mary Michaelae. She received her appointment to Togo, which was later cancelled. Perhaps Father Arnold had tested her to see if she had the true missionary spirit. He needed, however, good capable Sisters in the mother house and was now about the found the contemplative branch of the mission Sisters.

### **Martha and Mary**

Seven years had passed since the founding of the Holy Spirit Missionary Sisters. Although Father Arnold had in mind from the beginning to have both Marthas and Marys, that is, both active and contemplative Sisters, he waited for the time which the Lord had established in his divine providence for the founding of the cloistered branch of Sisters. The time had come, the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception, December 8, 1896.

Both branches of Sisters would be missionary; but each in its own way, namely, the active by physically going to other countries and working with people there, and the contemplative by going to the missions by their prayers and sacrifices, winning grace for the active missionaries and their people.

In preparation for starting the contemplative branch, some years earlier Father Arnold had offered the Sisters the option of remaining an active missionary Sister or becoming a contemplative missionary Sister. He had asked each Sister to express her wish in writing.

Sister Josepha had written in her letter: "...I believe I am called to be a missionary Sister. I am entirely satisfied: I pray gladly, I practice interior prayer by placing myself in God's presence and saying ejaculations... I do fairly well at meditation...." Sister Maria answered in her letter that her one wish was that the Superior (Father Arnold) dispose of her "unconditionally." "The Superior's will is for me the clearest indication of the will of God," she wrote. "I would be content with either." Father wrote at the top of her letter: "Cloister." Sister Mary Michaelae volunteered for the cloister.

The name of Sister Michaela headed the list of the seven Sisters appointed by Father Founder to begin the cloistered branch of Sisters. He likewise appointed her as novice directress. The Sisters were asked to vote for a superior; the unanimous choice fell on Sister Seraphim, whom Father Arnold then appointed as superior of the new congregation and Sister Michaela as her assistant.

On the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception, therefore, after Father Arnold had given the last conference of the Retreat, he celebrated Holy Mass in the chapel of the new annex, the home of the new branch of Sisters. The seven Sisters chosen to be contemplatives exchanged their blue habit for a pink-colored one and began their novitiate. They would sing the divine office and take turns in adoring Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament. As soon as their number would permit, they would have perpetual adoration. Each of the Sisters received the name Mary. Hence, from now on we must call Sister Michaela, Sister Mary Michael.

**Father Arnold**



**Man of Action  
Man of Contemplation**

**Patience in Suffering, Model of Humility**

In the new arrangement, Sister Seraphim was superior of both the contemplative and active branches of Sisters. Thus Sister Maria, superior of the active, was under her authority. This arrangement proved a time of crucifixion for Sister Maria and her assistant, Sister Josepha. After one month, Father Arnold saw that the election and appointment of Sister Seraphim had been a mistake. Although Sister Seraphim was devout, there was something in her personality that brought dissension and dissatisfaction among the Sisters. It seems she was a domineering person and not emotionally well balanced. When Father Arnold brought this matter before the Bishop, the latter advised, since they had elected her, patience and the necessity of preparing the Sisters for a change of superior.

So in conferences given during the year, Father Arnold would mention the advantage of a change of superiors. Then exactly one year after the foundation, with the consent of his council, he appointed Sister Mary Michael superior. When the change took place, Sister Maria and Sister Josepha found that they could work well with the new superior. They thanked God wholeheartedly and also showed themselves grateful to Father Arnold for the change of superior in the contemplative branch.



### ***An Emblem of the Holy Spirit Missionary Sisters of Perpetual Adoration***

#### **Sister Maria: From Active to Contemplative**

Hurt feelings between the two branches of the Holy Spirit Sisters had still to be healed. How to bring about this healing? By prayer, of course, and forgiveness. Would some other means also help? Father Arnold thought that Sister Maria could do much to bring about good relations between the two groups of Sisters. She loved them all and they loved her; so Father Arnold asked her if she would like to transfer to the contemplative Sisters. She answered that if Father Superior so desired she would make the transfer but she added, "My preference is to remain with the missionary Sisters." Twice more at later times Father Arnold asked her if she would like to transfer. He stated that in this case he would not give her a command, nor should she take his question as an express wish.

Sister Maria, however, felt that this question was a request and therefore God's will. To clearly discern the will of God, Sister Maria consulted two other priests about the matter. She was told that if she transferred, peace again would be established between the two groups. She then of her own accord asked to be admitted into the congregation of the Adoration Sisters. She wrote: "The transfer is extremely difficult for me. I am taking the step because in it I see the holy will of God. I love and revere the missionary vocation as much as ever."

Thus on December 8, 1898, the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception, two years after the founding of the cloistered branch, Sister Maria exchanged her blue habit for a pink one. She started again as a novice. Like the Lord she emptied herself from being superior general to becoming a novice. Father Arnold had given her the name Maria as an active missionary Sister, now he added Virgo to her name when she became a contemplative missionary Sister. She was now Sister Maria Virgo.

*Note: This act of humility received special mention by our Holy Father when he declared her "Blessed."*

With zeal Sister Maria Virgo lived the life of a novice. Sister Mary Michael, who had been her subject, was now her superior. The two harmonized. Sister Maria Virgo sought no special consideration, and Sister Mary Michael gave her freedom to work at healing the relationship between the two branches of Sisters by giving her permission to talk in the parlor with the active Sisters, who wished to consult her, and by writing to the Sisters in the missions.

**Sister Maria Virgo**  
*(Novice again)*



**Sister Josepha, Superior of the Active Branch**

On the same day that Sister Maria Virgo became a novice of the adoration branch of Sisters, Sister Josepha was appointed by Father Arnold as superior of the active missionary Sisters, who now numbered 130 Sisters. Letters reveal that Sister Josepha felt her personal inability but with complete trust in God left everything in his hands, for she wrote: "With God's help, everything will be all right."

As superior, Sister Josepha had a special eye for the sick and suffering Sisters. She visited them daily, brought them little presents to cheer them up, and spent time at their bedside in earnest prayer. To the Sisters leaving for the missions, she would give a little gift as "a remembrance of the mother house and of their spiritual mother." Yes, she tried to be a mother to all her Sisters in the convent and likewise to those in the missions. Forgetful of herself, she gave herself entirely to Jesus and her Sisters for love of Him.

Sister Josepha prayed much for priests and urged her Sisters to do the same. Father Arnold had made praying for priests one of the main aims of the Sisters, both active and contemplative. She had the insight: "Prayer for priests includes not only the priests but in them and through them the whole Church."

In 1899, the Sisters began to work also in New Guinea. Thus the active missionary Sisters were working side by side with the Divine Word Missionaries in various parts of the world: South America, Africa, and Asia.

Father Founder's words and example bore remarkable fruit among the Sisters, due very much to the extraordinary example of Sisters Maria, Josepha, and Mary Michael.

## **First Profession of the First Adoration Sisters**

Sister Mary Michael and her companions finished their three years of novitiate and pronounced their First Vows as Holy Spirit Missionary Sisters of Perpetual Adoration on the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception, 1899. The office of superior did not weigh too heavy upon Sister Mary Michael, for she had a good preparation for the office and natural ability; besides Father Founder kept the direction of the Sisters mostly in his own hands. The cloistered Sisters numbered twenty-seven already, including the postulants and novices in spite of Father Arnold's strictness in the admission of the many applicants. He wanted quality more than numbers.

## **Sister Maria Virgo Enters Eternity**

In 1899, Sister Maria Virgo started to become ill. She felt nauseated, had headaches, and ran a high temperature. In spite of her sickness, she carried on with her adoration, prayer, and work in the community as best as she could. In November, however, she was forced to stay in bed; her body could manage no longer to follow the routine. When informed that Sister Maria Virgo was sick, Father Arnold, who was at St. Gabriel Mission Seminary in Austria at the time did not realize the seriousness of her illness, for she had never been sick.

Sister Mary Michael requested permission of Father Arnold for Sister Maria Virgo to make her profession of vows as an Adoration Sister. Although not fully aware of her very serious condition, Father Arnold readily gave permission since Sister Maria Virgo had been so many years in formation. So she made her profession on January 31, 1900, as a Holy Spirit Sister of Perpetual Adoration.



The doctor diagnosed her case as tubercular meningitis and gave no hope for a cure. Whenever she was asked during her final days how she felt, she would reply, "Well."

The last distinct words of Sister Maria Virgo were, "Jesus, I live for You; Jesus, I die for You!" On February 3, 1900, at the age of 47, Sister Maria Virgo died.

Notice of her death was sent to Father Arnold at St. Gabriel's. After recovering from the initial shock of the news, he sent a telegram which read:

### **"SISTER MARIA TO BE HONORED AS FOUNDRRESS"**

A letter followed:

***Esteemed Cloistered and Missionary Sisters of our Congregation of the Servants of the Holy Spirit:***

***I have just received the sad news... that our good former Mother General, Sister Maria, has been summoned by the God of life and death from this passing life into eternity. This is a great sorrow for me, both because I greatly esteemed and respected the deceased and because God the Lord called her to assist me as first Co-Foundress of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit.***

***She fulfilled her mission most faithfully and often edified me by her virtue and piety... What a marvelous example of humility she gave us all when she resigned the honors of superior general to become a simple novice....***

***In the love of the Holy Spirit,  
Arnold Janssen, Superior General***

### **Mission Work Continues: Sisters to U.S.A.**

In 1901, Father Arnold, in consultation and cooperation with Sister Josepha and her council, sent Sisters to the United States. The Divine Word Missionaries were working there and had bought property for the Sisters. Father Arnold and Sister Josepha knew that the Sisters could do good work there as they were doing in Argentina. Besides, Father Arnold foresaw that they would eventually be able to be especially efficient among the African-America people.

### **Forever**

According to Church Law, religious make a temporary profession of vows for some years before they are allowed to make their perpetual vows. On September 8, 1900, the Birthday of our Blessed Mother, Sister Josepha and eight other Sisters made their profession of vows for life. What an historical event! Sister Josepha and the others had waited for many years for this day. Praise and thanks welled up in their hearts. From heaven, Sister Maria Virgo rejoiced. They were now spouses of Christ, committed to Him forever. The Founder too, Father Arnold, rejoiced in the Lord and thanked God sincerely for now having Sisters in perpetual vows.

**Sister Josepha: Bride of Christ**



**We Have Been Chosen by Christ as His Spouses!**

## Working Together

In 1902, Sisters were assigned to and left for Brazil. Father Arnold and Sister Josepha were pleased that they could supply another country with missionary Sisters. The people of that vast Catholic country lacked religious instruction, which the Sisters could help supply.

An harmonious spiritual relationship existed between Father Arnold and Sister Josepha. Sister made proposals, for example, concerning personnel, as to who was capable of nursing or teaching, who could stand the tropical climate and who could not, which Sisters could live in harmony, and who would be a good superior, and so forth. When she advised Father Arnold about an intended change of personnel, she presented the merits and capabilities of each of the Sisters concerned. She would add, however, to her recommendations, "We will pray that your Reverence will find the right ones." Her presentation, though, was so convincing that Father Arnold usually decided according to her recommendations. It is interesting to note that Father Arnold in collaboration with Sister Josepha, as superior, sent fifty Sisters to the missions.



### Sister Josepha and Father Arnold

Around Pentecost, 1902, the cornerstone was laid of a much needed new building for the Sisters. More and more young ladies were applying to become missionary Sisters. Although they went through a thorough screening process, many showed signs of a true vocation and thus were accepted.

Sister Josepha not only took good care of the Sisters in the convent but showed great concern for the Sisters sent to the missions. Special joy radiated from her face during the conferring of the mission crosses during the mission sending ceremony. Her ambition to go to the missions had not been realized, but she saw and accepted God's plan for her. As a formator and superior, she contributed much to forming good missionary Sisters. Eagerly she awaited

news from the Sisters abroad to learn about their trip, how they were settling down, and how they fared in their mission work.

In her conferences to the Sisters in the convent, she continued to stress the need of discovering God's will. She knew the price Father Arnold had to pay for discovering and doing the will of God in regard to founding and administering the congregations of missionary Priests, Brothers, and Sisters. She likewise mentioned charity repeatedly. And as an application of charity, she did not tolerate fault-finding in the community.

She shared Father Arnold's loving devotion to the Holy Spirit. Frequently on her lips came prayers to the the Holy Spirit, especially the short ejaculation: "Come, Holy Spirit!" This practice she recommended to her Sisters. In respect to the Holy Eucharist, she esteemed the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass most highly, participated in the Holy Sacrifice as best as she could, and spent as much time as she could afford in prayer before the Blessed Sacrament.

### **Failing Health**

After the laying of the cornerstone of the new building for the Sisters, the health of Sister Josepha began to deteriorate. While the work kept on increasing, her strength kept on decreasing. She carried on, however, with an iron will. She suffered a persistent cough and then came attacks of asthma. She also had a severe case of dropsy. At her own request she received from Father Arnold the Anointing of the Sick. On that occasion Father Arnold prayed a long time at her bedside. That the Founder himself took time to administer the Sacrament personally and to pray at her bedside gave her great consolation.



**Sister Josepha on her Death Bed Encourages Devotion to the Holy Spirit.**

With the permission of Father Arnold, she received Holy Communion daily (a great exception in those days before Pope St. Pius X re-introduced the practice of daily Holy Communion.) She had requested this privilege out of her great love for Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, and Father Arnold with the understanding heart of Pope St. Pius X did not deny the request of the complained dying Sister. He knew she was well disposed. She never complained of her sufferings because she united them with those of the Suffering Savior. Through bearing her pains, she understood better and appreciated more all that the Lord had endured to save her and all people.

On May 20, 1903, the Solemnity of the Ascension, Sister Josepha died. She was fifty years old.

Upon receiving news of her death, Father Arnold wrote the following:

**How simple her disposition was, how childlike her heart, how sincere her obedience and humility! How assiduous her diligence , how solicitous her motherly care, how profound her piety, how ardent her love of truth and justice, and finally how admirable her great patience in her long illness, her uncomplaining resignation to God's will and her yearning for the heavenly kingdom.**

**How ardently the deceased loved and venerated God, especially the Holy Spirit, and his angels and saints, how greatly she loved and revered holy Church and the priesthood. Tirelessly she cared for the good of the congregation and all her daughters.**

And then Father Arnold solemnly declared:

**"Sister Josepha "is rightly called a co-foundress of the Congregation of the Sisters Servants of the Holy Spirit."**

Fittingly, she was buried beside Sister Maria Virgo. In life they had prayed, worked, suffered together; in death their bodies lay side by side. In heaven they continue to pray for their Sisters and for the Divine Word Missionaries.

### **Testimonies**

Mother Josepha was a good, pious, and able person who truly worked for God. Both she and Mother Maria were pliable instruments who carried out the will of the Founder. Each rendered great service to the Sisters' congregations. Both died because of their many problems and cares and have attained their crown of glory. (A Divine Word Missionary)

A good relationship existed between Father Arnold and his two co-foundresses. Whatever pleased the Founder pleased Mother Josepha and Mother Maria. No Founder was ever more fortunate than Father Arnold was with his two co-foundresses. They not only accepted his views; they made them their own and did so even when his views did not properly suit them. What did suit founder and co-foundresses was their zeal for souls and their love of prayer. (A Holy Spirit Sister)

## **The Surviving Co-Foundress**

Meanwhile Mother Mary Michael continued to guide the Holy Spirit Missionary Sisters of Perpetual Adoration. She had imbibed the spirit of Father Arnold and encouraged the Sisters in their missionary task of intercessory prayer for the Church and in particular for priests, SVDs and all priests. Father Arnold had told the Adoration Sisters: "The main portion of your prayer belongs to Christ and his Church, his intentions, his service, his love, and to the salvation of immortal souls."



*Mother Mary Michael Tonnies*

## **Mother Mary Michael**

Mother Mary Michael survived the Founder, not only survived him but lived for many years after his death on January 15, 1909. Her many talents flowered with the greater responsibility she had for the congregation after the passing of Father Arnold. As superior general of the congregation, she established convents of Adoration Sisters in several countries besides Holland, namely in Germany, the United States, the Philippines, and China, seven in all. She guided her Sisters for many years, more than 36 years, until her death on February 25, 1934. Her last words were: "Jesus, Mary!"

## APPENDIX

In the history of the Church, some contemplatives went off the right path in regard to their faith and religious life. They fell into false practices. This happened because they tried to bypass the sacred humanity of Jesus and go directly to God as a Spirit only and not bother about God having become man. St. Theresa of Avila, a model contemplative and doctor of the Church, makes the statement that no one can go to God except through the sacred humanity of Jesus, for Jesus says in Holy Scripture: "I am the way, the truth, and the life." He is the Mediator between God and man; He is the God-Man.

By making his contemplative Sisters adorers of Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, the Founder, Arnold Janssen, made certain that they would not become false contemplatives but would always approach God by being in communion with the sacred humanity of Jesus truly present in a very special way in the consecrated Host.

### *Holy Spirit Adoration Sisters*



## Sources of the Material in This Booklet:

**Rooted in the Virgin Soil of Love: Life of Mother Maria** by Sister Ortrud Stegmaier, SSpS

**Breath of their Spirit: Life of Mother Josepha** by Sister Ortrud Stegmaier, SSpS

**Life is Mission: Helen Stollenwerk**, a biography by Odo Haltermann

Drawings by Maria and Hanns Manhart

**Arnold Janssen** by Fritz Bornemann, SVD

## Acknowledgments

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Thank you

Note: The first six Holy Spirit Missionary Sisters reached China in 1906,  
and the first seven Holy Spirit Missionary Sisters of Perpetual Adoration in 1932.

### **FATHER JOSEPH FREINADEMETZ**

(One of the first two missionaries whom Father Arnold sent to China.)



*A Model Missionary*

Birth and Baptism, April 15, 1852

Ordination to the Priesthood, July 25, 1875

Departure for China: March 2, 1879

Missionary work in Hong Kong area from 1879 to 1882

Missionary work in South Shantung from 1882 to 1908

A pioneering missionary, always being sent and going to non-Christians;

Instructing them,

Baptizing them,

Preparing newly them baptized for Confession and First Communion,

Defending Catechumens and new Christians,

In constant danger of death, beaten bloody, May 23, 1889,

Pushing ahead in spite of TB for the last ten years,

Death, January 28, 1908

Beatified together with Arnold Janssen on Mission Sunday, 1975

Canonized together with Arnold Janssen October 3, 2003

Memorial Mass: yearly on January 29