

REFLECTION

Centennial Closing Eucharist (Jan 15, 2009)

We opened the Centennial Year on the feast of St. Joseph Freinadametz under the theme "*Precious is the Life Given for Mission*". In there we reflected on his missionary life as the one 'sent out' in the literal sense. We close the Centennial Year today on the feast of St. Arnold Janssen the 'missioner' whose theoretical knowledge of the mission saw the birth of the three Congregations. In this reflection we focus on the importance of Arnold Janssen in the animating and pioneering role of Mission Congregations today.

1. Fr. Arnold: The Missioner, The Sender

If the idea of "being sent out" is intrinsic to the understanding of mission, then Fr. Arnold was not a 'missionary' but a 'missioner'. He did not take a single physical step in the direction of foreign mission. He was rather the 'missioner' 'the sender', the 'layer of foundations'. This has special significance for Generalate Communities like ours where the bulk of our mission consists in founding, sending, opening, closing, transferring, visiting and resolving.

I would like to highlight three important qualities of Arnold The Founder.

Arnold: The Sensible and Enterprising Founder 2. Fr. Arnold the searching, and enduring founder 3. Fr. Arnold the optimistic and supportive founder.

Sensible: Fr. Arnold is often seen and at times accused of having many devotions. But facts indicate that he was more sensible than pious. Examples abound. He never felt himself called to religious monastic life; his interest was in mission. He wrote to his Brother William upon the latter's decision to join the Capuchin Brothers, "*In as much as I do not have it... I envy those who are called to serve God in monastic life*". Despite his great esteem for the sacraments and the promotion of Church attendance, Arnold Janssen followed the principle: "*we can no longer save the world with sermons and liturgy alone*".

As a young man he decided to study mathematics and natural sciences. To him faith and reason held no conflict. When purchasing land or building, he analyzed the soil, assessed the water quality, studied the strategic importance of the location and calculated its future prospects including finance.

At the death of Fr. Frienedemetz in 1908 of typhoid fever, Fr. Arnold felt a hard blow; his faith said: "*We now have a powerful intercessor*". But his practical mind instructed that the hospital be disinfected so that the situation does not create more "intercessors". He was sensible to a fault.

Enterprising: For the Founder, mission became the one single driving force of his life which made him capable of continually transcending himself and placing all his talents and resources at the service of the reign of God. And to me this is the single most exhortation of Arnold to us today – to place all we are worth at the service of God's people. Have you ever imagined what Arnold would have achieved if he had a cellphone , a computer or internet that we are fortunate to have today? In his own time Arnold was quite well-known in the ecclesial, social and political sphere of Western Europe because of his connections and contacts. He had a veritable hunger for information, keeping himself abreast with history, geography and anthropology, analyzing situations like a mathematician.

Arnold: The Searching, Enduring Founder

In spite of all his positive endowments, Arnold was a man who groped in the dark worrying about the future of the foundations from some of which no positive news was coming. When success was slow and the going got tough, he bore the brunt of criticisms and humiliations at times overt and public. He was underestimated by others and to some

extent continues to be so even today. Arnold felt deeply the distance and isolation usually meted out to persons in authority by 'respectful' subjects. He had an amazing capacity to sit with the unpleasant, to own his mistakes and to clarify issues.

Brothers and sisters, after having done all we can, there still remains much undone. Rabindranath Tagore, Poet and Mystic, in one of his discourses, narrates a conversation between a flower and a fruit in which the flower asks the fruit: "*O fruit where are you?*" The fruit, still in its primordial form, answers: "*I am hidden within you O flower*". The flower asks, "*O fruit when will I see you?*" The fruit replies: "*If you are waiting to see me, I haven't a chance*". The flower must die confident that the fruit will emerge.

The departure of the members through death or at will, the scandals that engulf Church and mission today and the painfully slow progress in some missions can at times overwhelm the congregation esp. those at the helm. It is here that Fr. Janssen stands out as model of a new definition of success.

1. 3 Arnold: The Optimistic and Supportive Founder

Fr. Arnold managed to think optimistically about the missions even when things on the ground were deplorable. The reason for his optimism was the religious interpretation he gave to all that happened. He detected progress year after year. He spoke of the South American mission "*it is quite different from thirty years ago, and in thirty years time it will be even better*". Optimism shows itself in our capacity to work in small groups and celebrate small victories.

Fr. Arnold gave constant support to his missionaries abroad. He wrote letters choosing words carefully and prayerfully, 'sleeping over it', to use his own words, he sent telegrams and seized every opportunity to connect with his members. Protecting the reputation of others, was for him, one way of showing support. He was insistent that the Sisters should have a convent to call their own.

Dear Brothers and Sisters, until a few years ago it would have been enough to know the language and have some professional training for overseas mission. Today mission animation does not consist so much in strategies by which we encourage our members to go to mission as it consists in supporting and accompanying them. This is especially true of situations where our members, on a daily basis are faced with the grim realities of suffering and death all around them, like for example, those working with persons with HIV and AIDS. Appreciating and listening to their experiences and stories when on home leave or upon retransfer can help reduce the sense of isolation and hopelessness. Arnold Janssen stands singular in the continued accompaniment and support that he gave to his men and women in the missions. He writes to Fr. Neuenhofen in Ecuador: "*Of course I am concerned for the salvation of all people; but my concern for you is greater*".

2. What Is the Value of A Centennial Celebration?

I wish to enumerate three. 1. **Valuing the present**, 2. **Renewal** and 3. **Dialogue and Communion**

2.1 Valuing the Present: A traveler sees a man lazing under a tree on the other side of the river. He shouts over to him: "*How can I get across to the other side?*" The man looks up and replies: "*You ARE on the other side!*" A centennial celebration can at times have a similar effect on the members: gazing at the other side and longing to get across there.

Merely looking back at the good old past in nostalgia does not help for two reasons. One: there is no such thing as 'good old days'; it's a myth. Two: the present time is good enough and is in many ways the work of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, to learn to tap the resources that are there rather than to lament the bygone past may be one invitation of the Centennial.

2.2 Renewal: The Centennial Celebration is an experience of renewal for the members of the Congregations. By 'renewal' is meant a recapturing of the two impulses of mission: the attractional and the sending. In his Inaugural Address to the Episcopal Conference in Aparecida, Brazil 2007, Pope Benedict XVI called the attractional impulse of mission "discipleship" and the sending impulse "missionary action". He says:

"Discipleship and Mission are but two sides of the same coin. When the disciple is in love with Christ, he or she can not but announce to the world that Christ alone saves us. The disciple knows that without Christ there is neither light nor hope, neither love nor future".

The renewal I'm talking of is not confined to a renewal centre or to the recital of certain prayers, articles of faith or pious practices although all these will help. Outwardly, it is characterized by an enthusiasm that is sustaining and steadfast.

2.3 Dialogue and Communion

Back to the story of the riverside: looking at it from another angle, **Who are the people on the 'Other Side' for us today?** We may call them dialogue partners, congregational or geographical priorities or target groups. We may call them people of other faiths, other cultures and people living in constant exposure to violence and deprivation. The General Chapters of the Celebrating Congregations have aptly summarized their responses to those on the 'other side' in two words: Dialogue and Communion.

Dialogue is more than holding a prayer service together in which scriptures of different faiths are read or hymns sung. It's taking time to sit together giving all parties concerned, a chance to talk and a chance to listen. In the deeply divided world of Christians and Muslims, now made worse by segregation, discrimination and outright war, our mission must increasingly take a relating, dialoguing role. All dialogue must eventually lead to communion where unity and interconnectedness are felt in a real way. In their 13th General Chapter the SSpS deepened the theme of Communion as 'that quality which reflects the life and dynamism of the Trinity in our communities'. Living the Prophetic Dialogue for the Society of the Divine Word and living the Chapter Directions as Intercultural, Learning and Authentic witnesses for the SSpS are Congregational indicators where the Spirit is blowing us into action today.

Brothers and sisters, a 100 years is a long time. Down the years we have given new interpretations to our spirituality and charism. Our communities are international in character but different from the Founder's understanding of internationality. Our thrust is still mission but that thrust throws us into situations the Founder could not have imagined. Many things have changed in manner and focus, but what has not changed is the realization that all mission is God's mission and that we are feeble, nevertheless important, collaborators in the '*Misio Dei*'. In the persons of Sts. Arnold and Joseph we come to understand what good theory and good practice can do for mission. God's will was primary in the lives of our two Saints. Therefore, together with Sts. Arnold and Joseph and our members and collaborators around the world, let us hold on to the conviction *"The will of God will only take us where the grace of God will protect us"*.

Sr. Mary John SSpS

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