

JOSEPH FREINADEMETZ
Examples from his life as a stimulus for our own Christian life
and for our relationship with God and with our brothers and sisters.
by: P. Pietro Irsara, SVD

Joseph Freinademetz came from Oies, a tiny hamlet which makes up part of the village of Badia, amid the beautiful and majestic mountain scenery of the Dolomites. The house where he was born has become a place of prayer where both pilgrims and tourists love to pause in order to experience a moment of silence, of tranquility, of peace. They lay their tensions, worries and preoccupations before the image of the Saint. The local people are very devoted to 'Ujöp da Oies', and you are likely to find an image of the saint in almost every house of Val Badia and South Tyrol. Every parish church in the valley has a corner dedicated to this great missionary. In Alto Adige there are two churches and several chapels which bear his name.

The figure of Joseph Freinademetz captures the attention and arouses the curiosity of those who visit the place. What attraction was powerful enough to cause a young man of 27 to leave behind his family and his beloved valley and travel to China -- never to return?

He left the Val Badia for China in March of 1879, and became the bridge linking his little valley to China. A medal struck by Martin Rainer, a South Tyrolean artist and sculptor, portrays well the missionary identity of Joseph Freinademetz. The front shows a bust of Joseph with the inscription: *Freinademetz Josephus SVD*.

With great skill Martin Rainer helps us grasp the essential character and missionary life of our saint. Freinademetz is shown very realistically - though in the style of modern art. He is immediately recognizable as the person we know from the many photographs - an adult, mature, lean of face, worn out by the toils and hardships that brought with them so many sacrifices, renunciations and deprivations. He is wearing a Chinese robe, readily identifiable as a Chinese among the Chinese. Later he would say: "*By now I am more Chinese than Tyrolean. and I want to remain Chinese even in Heaven*".¹

His feelings of love and his dedication to those entrusted to his care helped him to discover and admire the treasures of Chinese culture. This esteem for the Chinese people finds no better expression than in his words: "*Even in heaven I want to remain Chinese*".

In his hands Joseph is carrying an enormous book in the center of which a large cross is engraved. The fingers of his right hand eloquently point to the book which contains the Word of God - come to us in the person of Jesus. Christ - whom Joseph announces and proclaims.

The words of the book of Lamentations: "*The babes cry for food, but there is no one to give it to them*" (Lam 4,4) signify the hunger for truth and for God of so many pagans immersed in their darkness. These words deeply touched the heart of Joseph Freinademetz who already as a student believed that he saw in these 'babes' the pagan babies of China. He felt himself driven to carry the bread of the Word of God to the poor pagans and used to say: "*Who could be poorer than these poor unfortunate pagans who do not know their Creator and who have no hope of eternal life? So let's help them with all our strength and we won't lose a thing*".²

¹ Pietro Irsara, *Lettere di un Santo. L'amore per il prossimo, la famiglia e la Badia*. Letter 40: to Franz Thaler 9 February, 1892, p. 67

² *ibid*: Letter 25: to his parents, 28 July 1885, p. 47

The reverse of the medal shows Joseph standing upright in a boat at sea. On the left is a shoreline with the parish church of Badia and the year of his birth - 1852. Joseph was baptized in the church in Badia and celebrated his first Mass there. It was from there that he said his final goodbye to his loved ones. On the right we see another shore with a Chinese pagoda and the year of his death - 1908. The saint - once again dressed as a Chinese - is carrying in his hand a large cross on which can be seen the symbol of the Trinity: the triangle with the eye of God in the center. God never lost sight of His missionary on his voyage to China and in China. Three years after his arrival in China he wrote to his dear friend and benefactor, Franz Thaler: *"Well now, dear friend, the good God has finally led me to the place where I so wanted to be, that is, where I can be alone in the midst of the pagans. From now on my life will be one of trekking from one place to another in an attempt to win over as many souls as possible. What a wonderful destiny! And God chose to call me to this life without the least merit on my part. I regret nothing, except perhaps this, that I am not the good missionary that I should be. But God is used to having mercy on our frailty, so I don't lose courage and I try to do what I can. The rest I leave to the Lord"*³

Only with the guidance and the strength of the Holy Spirit was Joseph able to be so fruitful. At the right of the triangle there is a hand - the hand of God the Father - as if God himself is pointing out the path to His missionary. The hand of God was always upon him, and Joseph often experienced the *"rich blessings"* which the good God frequently gave him.

Joseph - on the high seas - is carrying the Cross from his native valley to China, from a Christian land to a pagan one, from one continent to another. The Cross in his hands is very large and is intended by the artist as the sign of the inconceivable love of God. To accept the Cross of Christ means to accept the love of God but it also means accepting suffering in my own life so that I can become the bridge to a richer life in eternity. Freinademetz often spoke about the 'blessing of the Cross'. He carries the Cross, but at the same time he takes shelter under the Cross as an instrument of protection. The fragile boat on which he finds himself - at the mercy of the waves - alludes to the precariousness of a missionary's life and reminds us that the missionary has stepped from solid ground to an unsteady world, to a world in crisis, where only his faith can sustain and comfort him.

Joseph carried the gospel of the Cross from one continent to another, from one culture to another. He was possessed of an unflappable certainty - that God had made Himself known in Jesus Christ and that Christ must therefore be announced and proclaimed to the whole world, since only in Him is salvation and eternal life to be found.

His goodbyes to his family, to his beloved valley and to his friends cost him a lot of tears since he knew from the start that his departure meant goodbye forever. Even at sea, bound for China, he couldn't hide his homesickness at having left his valley for good. He wrote to his parents: *"I would gladly spend a fortune if only I could in a flash fly across the immense seas, the countries and mountains that now separate me from you, my dear father and mother, and appear at least for a few hours with you in your living room"*.⁴

At Hongkong he can no longer find his beautiful Val Badia and his parents' house at Oies. Father, mother, brothers, sisters and so many good friends are now far away on the other side of the sea. But he consoles himself that he didn't go to China *"on a whim or to get rich with silver or gold, but to win souls, bought with the most precious Blood of a God"*.⁵

³ ibid: Letter 20: to Franz Thaler, 2 July 1882, p. 39

⁴ ibid: Letter 9: to his parents, 14 April 1879, p. 20

⁵ ibid: Letter 10: to his parents, 28 April 1879, p. 23

He had already prepared himself for this new reality before leaving for China. He knew full well that he was going to have to face up to difficult moments in a foreign land, without knowing the language, far from parents and friends, and where he was going to feel obliged to start from zero. He wrote in this vein to his good friend before his departure from Steyl: *"Dear friend, sometimes it's really tough to live far away from all those whom my heart has loved, leaving behind my homeland full of friends and happiness to go in search of another homeland where I'll have to begin from scratch if you will, like a little child who is just beginning to live, to learn new and quite difficult languages, to laboriously get to know people with completely different interests and customs - in a word, poor pagans, who hate no one in this world more than they hate the missionary. Even though he has left his parents, friends and homeland for no other reason than out of love for them, the only thing that they call him is 'European devil'! It's difficult to begin such a life, after having been so happy among you Ladinos. And I can tell you straight out that I would never have done it for the whole world or for a million worlds never! But for the sake of the good God above I feel very content and very happy to be able to do so, and even if I should be headed straight for a thousand deaths, I know that His grace will never let me down "*.⁶

That long voyage, from his Val Badia to China, eventually led him to undergo a profound transformation in order to make the love of God real. Joseph is aware of the many graces and of the goodness with which the Lord has blessed him, so that he feels constrained to care for those who live ignorant and lost. They are those 'unhappy' countries and those peoples where there rules only the deepest darkness of the night, where they do not know the true religion. Despite this, even they are 'our brothers and sisters'. Even in his sea voyage to China he feels compassion for the other passengers because *"they don't know anything about our holy religion."*⁷ He wrote: *"Sometimes I am almost reduced to tears when I look at the unhappy state they are in."*⁸ In his first letter to his parents shortly after having landed in China, he gives a glimpse of his deep and passionate sensitiveness for the pagans. Freinademetz considers himself fortunate and embraces his vocation with immense gratitude to God, for having himself received *"our holy religion"* thanks to the infinite mercy of God. *"Oh, when I think of these poor pagans, buried in such misery. Oh, when I think that if God had not been so merciful to me, I could very well be one of them instead of being a missionary sent to them, The thought is enough to bring tears to my eyes."*⁹

Moved by this infinite love, he spends himself, sparing no pains for the salvation of the people that God has entrusted to him, and he determines what will be the plan for his life: *"to work for the glory of God and the salvation of these poor pagans, and them to join all of you (parents, brothers and sisters) in heaven to praise God for ever."*¹⁰ He feels anguish at seeing so many souls who are lost, so many souls bereft of every aid, without faith in God, without any hope for eternity. (He also is occasionally seized with the fear that one of his dear ones might be lost.) *"If I am given the grace to be able to accomplish something for the Sacred Heart of Jesus and for the salvation of this poor people, then I cannot possibly desire any other state in the world than to be a missionary in China. "*¹¹

This desire to work for the Kingdom of God grows to such an extent that he can say that he is ready to die for the holy faith: *"I know very well that I am not worthy to die for our holy faith.*

⁶ ibid: Letter 5: to Franz Thaler, 18 February 1879, p. 15

⁷ ibid: Letter 8: to his parents: Feast of the Annunciation, p. 19

⁸ ibid: Letter 9: to his parents, 14 April 1879, p. 20

⁹ ibid: Letter 10: to his parents, 28 April 1879, p. 23

¹⁰ ibid: Letter 13: to his sister Theresa, 22 December 1879, p. 27

¹¹ ibid: Letter 15: to Franz Thaler, 23 July 1880, p. 31

*But if I pray very much, perhaps our good God will in time grant me this grace, since He has already given me so many others."*¹²

What is most striking about the life of St. Joseph is its fundamental quality. His principles are few, but they are absolutely basic. He follows his path in life without any stops along the way. He is aimed straight for God and lives the path of nothingness. Salvation is the one great commitment of his entire life. He lives only for heaven *"...I console myself with the thought of that great day when I will joyfully see you all once again -perhaps not at Oies - but in heaven!"*¹³ As a result, everything on earth loses its value and every hardship is bearable.

We would be prideful *"if we only wanted to think about being comfortable in this world, but the little bird flies away as soon as the cage has been finished!"*¹⁴ *"We don't remain in this world for very long and our whole life flits away as if it were a dream. Our one big concern is to prepare ourselves for a good eternity."*¹⁵

In these few simple words he seems to sum up all of his thought. He reveals the secret of his life. Trials don't count. The tribulations of the present life don't count if through them it is possible to reach heaven. They don't count if through them it is possible to save even a single soul.

Joseph and his family

When he took leave of his family in March of 1879, it was for ever. He never again laid eyes on his beloved valley and on his loved ones. And yet he remained very close to them. He always felt himself to be accompanied and surrounded by his own family. His family and his relatives, even though far away, remain for him a source of help and support. He is not alone in China laboring for the Kingdom. His whole family is there with him, taking an active part in his mission through their fond thoughts, their many prayers, the alms they collect and the constant contact by means of letters. He wants to get his whole family involved in his apostolic work and insists that they pray continually for him and for his mission, just as he prays for them in each and every one of his Holy Masses. *"You can be certain, dear members of my family, that I do not forget you in even one single Holy Mass. I do have to admit, though, that outside of the Mass I scarcely have a moment to think about you or to allow myself to get homesick for my beautiful Val Badia."*¹⁶

His family is with him and so they need to know how the mission is getting along, what the difficulties are. They need to understand his state of mind. Joseph writes to them of the things that happen to him. He writes about his joyful moments, but he doesn't sugarcoat things and writes in detail about the difficulties and the dangers that he meets, the persecutions and the mistreatment that he suffers. The fact that he is a missionary in China is not due to any merit of his own. It was his parents who guided him to this decision, so they too are going to share in the reward: *"Make sure that you don't start regretting sending me off to China."*¹⁷ Or: *"I ask you now, isn't the mercy of God without end if I tell you that this year, from the feast of St. Joseph until now I have baptized about 200 new Christians with my own hands? Father and Mother, are you still unhappy about having sent me off to China? Don't you realize what blessings you are going to reap on earth and in heaven as well from these 200 new*

¹² *ibid*: Letter 22: to his parents, 7 February 1884, p. 43

¹³ *ibid*: Letter 9: to his parents, 14 April 1887, p. 21

¹⁴ *ibid*: Letter 4: to his family, 29 October 1878, p. 13

¹⁵ *ibid*: Letter 59: to his God-child Thaler, 28 May, 1902, p. 87

¹⁶ *ibid*: Letter 25: to his parents, 28 July 1885, p. 47

¹⁷ *ibid*: Letter 22: to his parents, 7 February 1884, p. 43

Christians?"¹⁸ *"God saw fit to use even us as His instruments and this is an immense grace for us as well as for you, my dear parents. Give thanks to God. Over and over again pray to God and to the Blessed Virgin to bless you and, even more importantly, to bless our efforts."*¹⁹

A child of his times

There can be no doubt that Freinademetz is a child of his times. In comparison to other peoples not yet arrived at the Christian faith, his manner of thinking was conditioned by the theological vision of the Church as the sole mediator of eternal salvation. *"Nulla salus extra ecclesiam."* *"Outside of the Church there is no salvation."* This is the concept that formed the foundation of the need for salvation via the Church. She alone could be the mediatrix of eternal salvation. This means that whoever does not receive baptism and does not become an integral part of the Church, whoever closes himself off to the Word of God, will never reach the Kingdom of Heaven. In his farewell sermon at the parish church of St. Martin in Badia he said: *"What must I do except kiss His hand, full of joy and gratitude, and say with Sacred Scripture: 'Behold, I come.' and, like Abraham, abandon my father's house, my homeland, and you my loved ones, and go to the country that the Lord will show to me, especially since I know the misery of the vast majority of these our brothers across the sea who, with tears in their eyes, are holding out their arms to us and pleading for help."*²⁰

So we can say that Joseph Freinademetz showed an immense love for God and for his neighbor. He takes upon himself the great sacrifice of abandoning homeland, family and friends. *"To save one soul would be reason enough for slaving away an entire lifetime."*²¹ That's why there's no time to lose in going to *"wage war against the devil and against hell, to tear down the temples of the false gods and in their place to erect the wood of the Cross, to make known to the poor pagans, who are nonetheless our brothers, the love of a crucified God, of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, of Mary Most Holy, etc.; if I think of all this I can never thank God worthily for having led me to China."*²²

The love of suffering

He finally arrives in China, the goal of all his dreams. Gradually he begins to distance himself from his homeland in order to begin to live in the Chinese world. He has his head shaved, he takes off his European clothes and puts on Chinese dress. He throws himself into the study of the Chinese language, and as soon as he is able to express himself in halting Chinese he sets out to visit the many outstations of the mission. He spends weeks walking, from one village to another, like a sailor going from one little island to another, always on the lookout for a few Christians.

*"Little by little we will try to get to every corner of our mission, -- he will be able to write a little later -- but we have to be very careful not to put too much salt in the soup. Meanwhile, we send Chinese teachers ahead of us to various places to baptize dying babies and to try to open up the people to Christianity wherever they can. They are able to do all of this much more easily than we; they are Chinese, the people call us 'European devils', and at first they receive us everywhere with a great show of the nastiest, meanest prejudices."*²³ The

¹⁸ *ibid*: Letter 25: to his parents, 28 July 1885, p. 47

¹⁹ *ibid*: Letter 24: to his parents, 22 January 1885, p. 46

²⁰ Last sermon preached at St. Martin, 11 August 1878, just before leaving for Steyl

²¹ *ibid*: Letter 24: to his parents, 22 January 1885, p. 46

²² *ibid*: Letter 10: to his parents, 28 April 1879, p. 22

²³ *ibid*: Letter 20: to Franz Thaler, 2 July 1882, p. 40

catechists, whom Freinademetz calls "*Chinese teachers*" are the great novelty of the mission. Freinademetz has no illusions whatsoever that, despite his great love for the Chinese, he will always remain a foreigner. If he did pretty well at changing his outside to look like a Chinese, it costs him a great deal of grief and effort to bring about an inner transformation. He really suffers for the continual misunderstandings and prejudices that he has to encounter. The missionaries are viewed by the simple people as '*Western devils*': sources of the '*evil eye*', bringers of sickness and of death. The ideals which he had harbored as a young priest and his dreams soon fade away, leaving behind disappointments and failures. Soon even he begins to speak and write negatively about the customs, the mores, the behavior and the religious practices of the Chinese. Their celebrations become for him "*festivals in honor of the devil*".

He writes: "*It is incomprehensible and very bitter to realize the superficiality of this people in religious matters. The young missionary comes from Europe bursting with enthusiasm, hoping only that at the end of each day his arms will fall exhausted to his sides after so many baptisms and sermons, and that every year a few more pagodas will be destroyed to make way for as many churches. But the reality is just the opposite. For the Chinese, the Europeans are 'the long noses', the devils who come from across the sea. Chinese adults insult and mock us in public, the little children run after us shouting names behind us. It seems that even the Chinese dogs find a particular satisfaction in chasing us and in barking at us. One old missionary once said to me: 'The missionary is hated by many, tolerated by a few, but loved by no one.'*"²⁴

He would have to put up with bitter disappointments and failures. In his letters he vents his spleen and tells how he can find nothing good in the Chinese. "*For us Europeans, the Chinese have very, very few attractive qualities*". If the missionaries weren't motivated by very different ideals, "*they would take off like a shot on the first ship setting sail for Europe*". According to Freinademetz, the Chinese is incapable of thoughts about higher things. He is incapable of grasping the fact that the missionary has come to China driven by his ideals, and that he cares for the sick for no other reason than out of love. He points out that the Chinese are generally indifferent to religious values.²⁵

So why is it that with all the bitterness, the difficulties and the disappointments with the coldness and the difficult dialogue with the Chinese people, Joseph didn't just get on that first boat and go straight back to his homeland?

What holds him back and keeps him in China is his love for souls. The desire for Heaven gives Joseph Freinademetz the strength to face every danger, to live in the midst of so many difficulties, dangers and persecutions without backing away, but overcoming every test with great passion. He feels that he is responsible for the salvation of everyone. He longs for the salvation of everyone, and for this salvation he is ready to face up to any sacrifice and to throw himself into missionary work without setting any limits.

With a great spirit of faith he plunges into the trials and hardships of the 'wandering missionary' in an immense region of China. He travels on foot or horseback. He visits the little Christian communities and begins new ones, entrusting to the native catechists the instruction of those preparing for baptism. He is not in any rush to baptize, except for an occasional baby or old person whom he finds in danger of death. His reason for this is that he

²⁴ Fritz Borneman, Giuseppe Freinademetz, *Missionario Verbitia*, pp. 64-65; cf. Freinademetz, *Berichte aus der China-Mission* p. 38

²⁵ Fritz Borneman, Giuseppe Freinademetz, *Missionario Verbitia*, p. 63; cf. Freinademetz, *Berichte aus der China-Mission* p. 38

wants the catechumens to be really tested for a long time to see if their will to persevere in the faith and in Christian living will stand the test of time.

It is precisely his bitter sufferings which give witness to his heroic love for Christ and for souls. Joseph accepts the sufferings and failures with patience, with courage, and follows the path God has laid out for him with complete resignation, because it is not enough to preach. One has to set out and carry the Cross just like Jesus carried it.

Abandonment to the Will of God.

Another example that Joseph Freinademetz leaves to us is precisely that of complete abandonment to the will of God. It is an abandonment that is both simple and total. He places himself in God's hands. Filled with trust in Divine Providence, he leaves his homeland and sets off as a missionary to bring the good news of salvation and the comfort of the faith. That's what he can't be afraid: *"Don't think that I am afraid. God his here with us just as He is with you and we have need of nothing else."*²⁶ So he lives in serene joy in the midst of difficulties, hardships and continuous persecutions of his missionary life. Joseph made this abandonment to the will of God a part of his spiritual life even as a young priest and as soon as he had left his beautiful Badia. That's how he summed up his own interior life in the first letter that he wrote to his loved ones from Steyl: *"My dear family and friends, as I already told you before leaving, you should not be at all concerned about me. Leave everything to me - or, rather, to Almighty God If things don't go well, and even if they go very badly, what does it matter? as long as we always do the will of Him who is above. There is nothing at all on the earth, on the sea, or in hell itself that I fear except sin alone. And for this I pray to the Lord, that He protect both you and me."*²⁷ At times he is overcome by the desire to *"appear for even a few hours in the midst of his loved ones, but "*, he adds, *"the Lord does not wish it and so I do not really wish it either"*.

*"When all's said and done, the duty of the missionary is solely that of rendering testimony to Jesus Christ before the pagans, of sowing the good seed, and then of entrusting himself completely to the Lord, whether the seed bears fruit or not."*²⁸ *"If only I may do the will of God!"*²⁹ The writer and mystic Divo Barsotti writes of Freinademetz: *"He (Joseph), like all of the saints, understands that perfection consists of a conformity to the will of the Lord that grows more complete every day. To this he continually exhorts his loved ones. This is what he seeks for himself in prayer. There is in his correspondence an expression that stands out and is particularly striking, the one phrase perhaps that echoes the language of the mystics: "Let us try to maintain patience, and to conform ourselves ever more to the holy will of God."*³⁰

Joseph, a man of prayer

The Chinese came to know him as a man of inexhaustible goodness -- open, trusting. They were attracted by his simplicity, his serenity, his gentleness. The testimony which Thomas Cardinal Tien, SVD, gave in a May 12, 1963 sermon in the church of Badia, the saint's home parish, is well known: *"For many years now I have desired to visit the homeland of your saintly missionary... I felt obliged to visit you in order to tell you about him, since I had the great good fortune to be with him for eight years... He was a perfect missionary, not only because he had to carry so heavy a cross, but also because in his new homeland he became*

²⁶ *ibid*: Letter 17: to his family, 29 October 1880, p. 35

²⁷ *ibid*: Letter 4: to his family, 29 October 1878, p. 13

²⁸ *ibid*: Letter 15: to Franz Thaler, 23 July 1880, p. 31

²⁹ *ibid*: Letter 16: to Franz Thaler, 26 October 1880, p. 33

³⁰ *ibid*: Letter 41: to Franz Thaler, 19 July 1892, p. 68

all things to all men." Cardinal Tien also told how he remembered him as a very prayerful man. *"During my seminary years in Yenchowfu, I met Fr. Freinademetz often, because there was a rule that every Sunday after the High Mass each of us was supposed to go to talk to him. He would first spend some time kneeling in the choir of the church, and for us who were able to get a glimpse of him, it was an extraordinary experience to be able to watch him pray. This image of this priest on his knees has indelibly engraved itself on my memory. He looked as if absolutely nothing could distract him in his prayer. He was a great man of prayer".*

Freinademetz knew how to unite prayer and work. It would sometimes happen that he would remain absorbed in prayer before the tabernacle, even late into the night. In all of his letters to his family and his friends, he never failed to invite them to pray for him and for his Chinese. He was aware of the importance, or rather of the absolute necessity of prayer. *"It is always necessary for us to pray much, -- he wrote -for life without prayer is nothing but the road to hell. Never forget to pray very much for us and for all missionaries."*³¹ For his part, he recommended his loved ones to the Sacred Heart of Jesus and to the Madonna. He prayed for everyone, every single day, but he also asked that the others pray for him. In front of the immense task that faced the missionaries, he felt the need to be sustained by his loved ones' prayers for himself and for all of his companions in the mission.: *"Always pray again and again to God and to the Blessed Virgin to bless both you and our own efforts."*³² *"Let us remember always that this is a time for work and for warfare, and not for repose. Let us serve God with our whole heart and we will see one another again in Paradise perhaps even before we expect."*³³ *"I beg you again and again, help me with your prayers, and get others to pray as well, so that God will assist me."*³⁴

For Joseph Freinademetz, prayer is both nourishment for his life and a source of joy. The first two places in his spiritual life are occupied by the daily Holy Mass and by the prayer of the breviary. When on his long and tireless missionary treks he never overlooks these two duties. Even during the times of hardest work, he tries to set aside some time for prayer, praying either on his knees before the Blessed Sacrament or while walking up and down. At various times throughout the course of the day he can be seen kneeling for long periods before the altar, totally absorbed in prayer. It might well be said that apart from the times that he spends on other duties, the rest of his time he dedicates to prayer. He is a man of prayer. At times he walks for hours until he finally reaches some place where he can celebrate Holy Mass, often fasting until well into the day. He feels that prayer is indispensable for a fruitful apostolate: *"The conversion of China will not occur without much prayer, because for the Catholic missions prayer has the same role as the rain has for the seed that has been sown."*³⁵

A tireless man

Father Ujöp Freinademetz traveled tirelessly from one mission to the other. The sense of mission was so strong in him that he constantly neglected to look after himself in order to be able to carry out his duties. In a letter to family of Aug. 13, 1883, he wrote: *"I fear only one thing: and that is to not carry out my duty as a missionary well enough".* This anxiety, this preoccupation drove him to work without rest, to be always on the road visiting the Christian communities, to carry the good news of salvation and the comfort of the faith to everyone. Life was no joke! It is precisely in this that the greatness of our saint lies. For the sake of this

³¹ *ibid*: Letter 37: to his parents, probably from 1891, p. 64

³² *ibid*: Letter 24: to his parents, 22 January 1885, p. 46

³³ *ibid*: Letter 24: to his parents, 22 January 1885, p. 46

³⁴ *ibid*: Letter 23: no indication of recipient, 8 July 1884, p. 45

³⁵ cf. Jakob Reuter, Giuseppe Freinademetz, p. 36

salvation he had left his homeland as a missionary and for this he remembered in prayer all those that he left behind. He remembered them one by one at the altar of his prayer.

In conclusion, we can say of St. Joseph Freinademetz:

- He was a man convinced of his faith. The decree on the heroic nature of his virtues says it in so many words: *"He lived on faith"*. His missionary vocation draws its origins from this profound conviction of the existence of such a virtue. In his writings we find the very beautiful expression: *"Our faith is the shining star that lights up the dark night of this world."*
- He was a man who was obedient to the call of God. *"There is nothing more beautiful and more grand in heaven and on earth than the holy will of God."*
- He was a zealous and untiring in his missionary activity. *"The time that has been given to us on this earth is for work and for struggle, and not so that we can rest. So let us serve the Lord with all our heart. We will see one another in paradise."*
- He was a man of great goodness, understanding, loving kindness and patience. Bishop Henninghaus said of him: *"Because of his mild and lovable character, there flowed out from him a kind of fascination that conquered the hearts of all who came close to him."*
- He was a man who was faithful in times of testing. There was no lack of lies spread about him, persecution, mistreatments, failures and disappointments. But in the midst of all these sufferings, Joseph never got discouraged. He was profoundly convinced that crosses and trials were, in fact, a blessing from the Lord: *"Disgrace is a grace. The Lord does not send us crosses in order to crush us, but to sanctify us"*.
- He was a man of prayer. *"Prayer is our strength, our sword, our consolation and the key that opens the gates of paradise,"* he used to say. He felt that prayer was indispensable for a fruitful apostolate. *"The conversion of China will not occur without much prayer, because for the Catholic missions prayer has the same role as the rain has for the seed that has been sown."*³⁶ Bishop Henninghaus wrote: *"Prayer was a vital need for him and the joy of his life."*

St. Joseph Freinademetz is one who, at the end of this life, had reached the highest point where heaven and earth are one. He is one of us who arrived at perfection in his relationship with God. With him we can touch both heaven and earth at once.

Reflections

To set off towards God does not have to mean leaving one's homeland. It simply means leaving one's own self, freeing one's self from 'I' and 'my', and taking up the cross in order to be able to understand life as a path towards God. He who sets out from the homeland of his own self, who denies himself, is free to travel new highways and will find happiness and a life that is totally new.

What are the impediments that keep me from discovering the 'pathways' of God and of living them?

Do I succeed in seeing the stones in my path not only as impediments, but also as stimuli that can open me up to the omnipresent nearness of God? Can I see that even the moments of crisis can mean a turning to God, and so enrich my life?

³⁶ Cf. Giacomo Reuter, Giuseppe Freinademetz, p. 36

There is one phrase that Joseph used to repeat often: *"The pagans will be converted only by the grace of God, and by our own love"*. In fact, *"the language of love is the only language that all can understand"* (memories p. 99). Freinademetz learned to speak this language of love. How can the example of St. Joseph Freinademetz be of help to us in acquiring this disinterested love and this goodness that is always ready to serve?

Joseph Freinademetz knew full well that it is not God but we who have need of prayer. He never forgot for a moment that our prayer has to contain not only our own preoccupations and problems, but above all the preoccupations and the problems of the others. Praying, we become the voice of the Church throughout the whole world - as Joseph Freinademetz was in China.

- Am I convinced of the power of prayer?
- Do my prayers encompass the problems and the preoccupations of the others?
- Do I pray for the Church, for the spread of the faith?

Do I try to be sensitive in using well my capacities and my talents, my hopes and successes, my goals that I have already achieved? To what extent do I pay attention to the many needs of others?

THE ICON OF ST. JOSEPH FREINADEMETZ

- was 'written' (as the Byzantines say) by Piera Gortan in the year 2005.
- was donated to St. Joseph's birth house by Mrs. Irma Pezzei (Gran iasa) from Col fosco.

The icon of St. Joseph Freinademetz was 'written' in accordance with the canons of the ancient Byzantine iconographic tradition.

The figure and life of the saint were studied with great attention.

The face, which shows great expressiveness, was taken from photographs in which Joseph appears older, and therefore is rich in intensity and compassion.

His right hand is raised in blessing and his left hand holds a scroll bearing one of his sayings in the Ladino language: *"L'lingaz dl amur a l'lingaz su the diuc capesc"* (*"The language of love is the only language that all understand"*)

The 'writing' of this icon was a long and patient work, accompanied by prayer. The result is not just a picture, but an ICON, which is not merely a representative portrait, but is much, much more. An ICON, in fact, reveals to whoever prays before it the very presence of the one who is figured in it, immersed in a divine, golden light.

Translation: David Streit, SVD
January 25, 2008