

For your reflection

Words from Arnold Janssen's last letter to Fr. Degenhardt in Chile (Nov. 18, 1908), but important for all members of the Arnoldus Family:

I ask you "to give my most sincere greetings to all the priests and brothers in La Serena; there is one word which I would like to inscribe deep in the hearts of all my dear children: in all your works seek only God; at the same time let no one surpass you in your service of and zeal for the veneration and propagation of the divine interests. ...

Since our Society has chosen the veneration of God the Holy Spirit as its goal, so shall this be and remain its goal, and may there never be any deviation from it. This is my will, which I once more wish to emphasize; may there never be a confrere who does not fulfill this. That would be to the great detriment of the Society and must never ever happen (Alt, Briefe nach Südamerika (Letters to South America), vol. IV, p.460).

From the farewell letters to the Superiors

To Fr. Limbrock, Prefect Apostolic in Papua New Guinea (November 15): "...You will probably want to know more details about the progress of my illness. On the Friday before All Saints my hand was already so weak that I could no longer write. Now I cannot do anything at all with it. Then my eyes became dim and now I can read only with great difficulty. My memory is also slipping badly and it has become most difficult for me to express my thoughts to any extent. But I thank the Lord that I am still at ease and grateful that he has not put some heavier cross on me. Many bishops have sent me notes of sympathy: like Bp. Dingelstadt of Muenster [Fr. Arnold's classmate from high school days], Bp. Drehmann of Roermond and Cardinal Fischer [of Cologne]. ... In conclusion I extend to you all my last priestly and fatherly blessing. I entrust myself urgently to your prayers in life and in death, that the Lord may find in me his faithful servant..." (Alt, Arnold Janssen SVD, Letters to New Guinea and Australia, Analecta – 79, pp. 407-408).

To Fr. Klein, superior in Sydney/Australia (November. 17): "...You can well imagine how much I am thinking of all my good confreres in these days, whom I love as children in the name of the Lord. I wish them all the richest blessings of God's grace for all their toil and troubles and I ask the Lord to bless them and his angels to protect them all the days of their life. In these days of trial, I rejoice in the thought of those good children of mine, whom I dearly love. ...

Remain ever loyal children of the Society which has trained you; keep its rules faithfully, even when you are not being observed, for only obedience and humility are of any value in the eyes of God (ibid., p. 409).

To Fr. Regional Kost in Togo (November 16): "...Tell also all the priests, brothers and sisters under you that I thank them for all their prayers for me, as well as for their love for the Society. May they continue to work faithfully in God's vineyard, for they themselves know only all too well how much still has to happen before Christ's kingdom reigns all over the earth. Hell makes great efforts to ruin the souls; make every effort so that these evil spirits do not surpass you in zealous work. Even if an individual has a job which does not give so much honor, he / she may not lose heart, for everything is necessary and all must work with one heart and mind if the gospel is to bear fruit. Finally I give all of you my priestly and fatherly blessing and ask you urgently to pray for me while I am alive and when I am dead. I will do the same when I am at God's throne where we certainly will see each other again as I hope and wish most ardently. With my most cordial greetings I remain, in the love of the Holy Spirit, your spiritual father in the Lord,

signed Arn. Janssen"

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The Arnoldus Family Story

We are approaching the one hundredth anniversary of the death of St. Arnold Janssen. When he was signing letters on October 30, 1908, "his pen slipped from his fingers" – the first sign of a stroke, the beginning of the end of a missionary life whose motto had been: "May the Heart of Jesus live in the hearts of all people!" In this newsletter we will accompany our sick founder through the month of November 1908. At the time he was living with members of the General Council and sick confreres in "St. Gregory", the former convent of the Holy Spirit Missionary and Adoration Sisters.

November 1 – All Saints Day: Fr. Hermann auf der Heide, one of Fr. Arnold's most trusted confreres and his confessor wrote about this day:

"In the morning of All Saints Day Fr. Superior General came late for morning prayer – something that had never happened before, and at the end of the meditation he left the chapel and came back for Holy Mass..." He was not able to celebrate Holy Mass himself but received Holy Communion later. When Fr. Assistant General Blum took Fr. Arnold back to his room from the chapel, one could see that his right hand was almost paralyzed and his right foot just a bit" (Fritz Bornemann, Nachrichten über Krankheit und Tod unseres Stifters [Concerning the sickness and death of our founder], Verbum Supplementum 10, Rome 1969, p. 52). He kept repeating to Fr. Blum: "I'm worn out. – It's evening" (Alt, Journey in faith, p. 1000).

After lunch Fr. auf der Heide and Fr. Scholl were going for a stroll in the garden when they met Fr. Arnold. Fr. Arnold took Fr. auf der Heide's hand as a support and they walked around for a while. "He was quite cheerful," recalled Fr. auf der Heide, "and he said: 'slowly the end is approaching.' We tried to make him give up such thoughts but he insisted on them and smiled as he said: 'The end is approaching. Night is setting in. It is moving fast! I am finished. Fiat voluntas divina! (May the divine will be done)' (Bornemann, Nachrichten ... (Concerning the sickness...), pp. 52-53).

Due to the poor condition of Fr. Arnold's health, Assistant General Fr. Blum took over the administration of the Society of the Divine Word and the Congregation of the Holy Spirit Missionary and Adoration Sisters. However, "out of consideration for the person of our venerable founder", this was not immediately made public (ibid., p. 34), but only on January 6, 1909.

November 2: Once again Fr. Arnold was not able to celebrate Holy Mass and for several weeks he remained unable to do so; during that time he received Holy Communion daily.

At 10.30 in the evening of this All Souls day, he received the sacrament of anointing of the sick. Fr. auf der Heide writes: “After Fr. Assistant General had anointed him and also given him general absolution, he thanked Fr. Superior General on behalf of everyone for all the good they had received from him. He asked him to give all his spiritual children his priestly and paternal blessing: the priests, brothers and sisters. The sick Fr. General lifted his right hand up high and in a loud and solemn voice he gave the holy blessing” (ibid., p. 53).

November 3: In the morning Fr. Arnold received Holy Viaticum from Fr. Blum. According to the physician, Fr. Arnold had suffered a stroke. Nevertheless, he was not confined to his bed but was able to sit in a chair at his desk. In a letter to the confreres in Europe, Fr. Blum wrote on this day: “So the good father, who has done so much for us, is now almost helpless in his room” (ibid., p. 29).

November 4: General Councilor Fr. Bodems wrote: “Fr. Superior General has lost almost all the vocabulary of the German language. He knows very well if an object is called by its right name or not; he also can repeat every word easily, but on his own he cannot express any thought anymore; therefore he tries to help himself with signs” (ibid., pp. 74-75).

That day Fr. Arnold’s brothers Peter and Gerard came from Goch to visit him and remained until the following day.

November 5: Fr. Arnold’s birthday. He turned 71.

November 6: The Holy Father, Pope Pius X., sent Fr. Arnold his apostolic blessing together with a plenary indulgence.

November 7: Another brother of Fr. Arnold, Capuchin Brother Juniperus Janssen, came to visit and stayed until November 25.

In those days Fr. Arnold’s thoughts were almost continuously directed to God; he often prayed: “The Lord has given, the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord!” “Jesus, for you I live, Jesus for you I die; Jesus, I am yours in life and in death. Amen.” “God have mercy on me poor sinner!” “Let us thank God for everything! We must praise the triune God...” (ibid., p. 53).

November 10: On this day Fr. Assistant Superior General Blum notified the confreres and sisters overseas of Fr. Arnold’s sickness for the first time.

November 12-30: Before his death Fr. Arnold wanted to give all members of the Society a memorial, as an invitation to thank God for his generosity. Thus, as General Councilor Fr. Bodems recalled, on November 12 he began to sign these memorials. Since his right hand was completely paralyzed, he used his left hand – and that meant a tremendous effort. Moreover, his left hand was also slightly paralyzed, nor had he any practice in writing with his left hand. Still he slaved away for hours to sign about 1000 small pictures” (ibid., p. 75). However, as Fr. Goergen recalled, “the more he wrote, the more his hand refused to write. In fact only the professed confreres in Steyl received a memento. I have two of the pictures but only the letter J of the signature is recognizable” (Bornemann, Remembering Arnold Janssen, Analecta SVD – 42, p. 361).

This little episode shows that Fr. Arnold wanted to be active even in his sickness. Fr. auf der Heide wrote: “With the help of one of the priests he went through his archive and put it in order. Furthermore he still dictated about 70 letters; particularly during the first weeks; his secretary, however, often had to guess his thoughts and had to express them more clearly. In that regard Fr. Superior General was in a very poor condition; it was so difficult for him to find the right expressions and names of the priests and brothers. “Help me, please,” he said then; “Tell me his name; make a guess!” Both Fr. Superior General and his secretary truly had to practice patience (Bornemann, Nachrichten über – Concerning the sickness and death..., pp. 54-55).

Fr. Arnold’s secretary, Fr. Stolte, remembered: “For hours I guessed names in order to know what Fr. Superior wanted. He was unable to express himself. However, his mind was still active. He remembered all his concerns. He wanted to greet everybody and bid farewell to all. He gave them his last admonitions. Actually, it was me who wrote the letters and then I read them to Fr. Superior for his approval. He then said: “It’s all right.” These letters were to be sent to the superiors in all those countries where his missionaries were working. **November 18** turned out to be a particularly difficult day for both Fr. Arnold and his secretary, as Fr. Stolte remembered: “I was to write to St. Gabriel’s, since the scholastics had sent him a letter of condolence. We did not understand each other. I asked Fr. Regional Reidick for help. Fr. Superior sent Bro. Damien after me to fetch me; he said to me: “You are too big for your boots”. He scolded me still more, even though he praised the letters I wrote; tears ran down my cheeks. Then Fr. Reidick entered the room and it became clear: he wanted to write to Fathers Gier, Hansen and Lux... After evening meditation Fr. Arnold waited for me in the hallway; he kissed my hand and asked for forgiveness” (ibid., p. 80). Fr. Blum related similarly about Fr. Arnold during that difficult time: “When he realized there was something he had not done well, he began to weep, fell on his knees and asked for forgiveness”. From November 14 on, he went to confession every day (ibid., p. 20).

Fr. Arnold was not only interested in the congregations he had founded, but also in politics, and his secretary had to read the newspaper to him (ibid., p. 80).



Arnold Janssen
after the stroke