

Importance of Lay Partners in the Life and Mission of the Society

1. Introduction

Since the Vatican II, the lay people have been the focus in the life and mission of the Church. We, the Divine Word Missionaries promoting lay collaboration from the very beginning of our Society by empowering the lay partners in our missionary ventures. The same spirit echoes in the subsequent General Chapters. This concern has become very urgent and essential in today's world due to many socio-economic and cultural reasons. This short reflective article highlights the importance of Lay partnership in mission for the worldwide mission of the Society of the Divine Word.

2. The Importance of Lay Missionaries in the History of the Society

a) St. Arnold and the first co-workers at Steyl

After the purchase of the first house at Steyl on 16 June 1875, Arnold was happy to have a competent carpenter, Heinrich Erlemann who wanted to become a missionary priest.

Many lay men and women from Steyl, Tegelen, Venlo and from nearby Germany helped the new mission house from its beginning. Miss Helen Wolters, the Cleophas siblings, Joseph Stute and Anton Craghs were committed lay persons at the service of the Society. Joseph Statute, as a young man came from Germany to Steyl from January 1876 until 1882; he established and managed the first printing press in Steyl.

b) The Cleophas family:

The Cleophas family from Steyl helped the new mission house in many ways. During the opening Mass of the Mission House on September 8, 1875 in the Steyl Parish Church, Mr Cleophas played the organ and conducted the choir. Lidwina Cleophas saw to it that the lunch was ready on time. At the beginning of each week, their son Henry fetched the laundry from the seminary and at the end of the week brought it back. The family did much for sewing for Arnold Janssen. The two daughters, Anna and Liese, with Minna Van Dijk, attended the May devotion in the Chapel of the mission house and helped with the singing.

c) Miss Helen Wolters:

Miss Helen Wolters was a business woman in Venlo. She belonged to the very first local benefactors of the new mission house. She inspired also others to help in the

mission house. The ladies she brought along for the opening on September 8, 1875 “were so moved by the poverty of the house that in the following days, two carts with all kinds of furniture and goods arrived from Venlo” (*Alt, Journey in faith*, pp 79, 83, 85).

d) *Anton Craghs:*

Anton Craghs came to Steyl from Walbeck near Kevelar, Germany in 1877 together with his ten and half years old son William. He was one of the important personalities and, at the same time, great support in material matters. He understood expertly how to obtain the neighbouring plots of land from the people. Thus, little by little he purchased the garden, the dunes and other bits of land; piece by piece for very little money. He was most successful in begging food for the mission house from farmers on the German side of the border. Since 1880 he distributed the St. Michael’s Almanac throughout Germany – as far as the Austrian border and also within the Netherlands. He worked in the garden, fixed roads, protected the birds in the park and got the first little horse at Steyl. His son William was ordained SVD priest in 1889, his daughter Maria entered the Holy Spirit Sisters in 1894 and received the religious name Sr. Dominica. At the beginning of 1897 he fell ill and died on April 22, 1897 (From Memoirs of Bro. Martinus-Jurgens, Steyl 2011).

3. St. Arnold and the Retreat Movement

St. Arnold was not a naturally a talented preacher or an orator. It was amazing to note by 1909, the participants of the retreats at St. Michael’s Mission house numbered 63,513 in 572 groups while St. Michael’s was housing more than 500 seminarians and brothers at the same time. It was considered to be a flourishing successful retreat movement where priests, lay men and women took part in retreats.

We, SVDs were 17 years ahead of the Jesuits and 16 years ahead of Capuchins. When the Dutch Jesuits wanted to open the retreat house in Venlo in 1908, Bishop Drehmans of Roermond advised them: “Get in touch with the Superior General of Steyl. He did a great work in this field and has a rich experience and he can help you”. (*Arnoldus Spirituality in our Reality* by Ittoop Pannikulam, SVD) This retreat ministry for the laity won many friends and benefactors for the new missionary congregation. The lay collaboration became great support for the pioneering missionary enterprise.

4. The Apostleship of Prayer Movement

Even before founding the SVD Congregation in 1875, St. Arnold got involved as a promoter of Apostleship of Prayer in his diocese of Muenster around 1865. He travelled extensively in Germany to promote this movement. The effect of this movement on Fr. Arnold is noteworthy; according to Hermann Fischer SVD: “There can be no doubt that, besides the grace of God, the introduction of Arnold Janssen to the Apostolate of Prayer and its spirit was responsible for his wide outlook. His strong minded and generous surrender to the “Will of Jesus”, as he put it, and his espousal [support] of the spread of the kingdom of God on earth, the winning back of separated Christians, and the salvation of the non – Christians – all of these – laid the foundation of the Steyl mission work. The last forty years of his life arose out of the fire of this apostolic love.” (*You are the temple of the Holy Spirit*, p. 12).

5. St. Arnold and the Press Apostleship

Arnold was a visionary and he wanted to promote the idea of the world wide mission. In 1874 at Kempen, he published the first copy of the ***Little Messenger of the Sacred Heart***. By this he was able to inform the readers about his idea of mission and also he attracted many vocations to the three missionary congregations. Blessed Maria Helena came to know about St. Michael's at Steyl by this magazine. Upon the suggestion of the Dutch publisher Henri Bogaerts, Fr. Arnold, on 6th January 1878, started ***Die Heilige Stadt Gottes***, a catholic family magazine. It was a Weekly with eight pages and it became popular in Germany and the neighbouring countries. In 1880, St. Michael's Almanac was printed in German and Dutch. Dr. Kolbe, a layman, was the first editor and in 1900 there were 500,000 readers. By 1909, our press at Steyl, quite modern and famous, printed out 220,000. ***Stadt Gottes*** and 690,000 Michael's calendars. Arnold used the print media to communicate the great missionary dream and many lay collaborators joined his great ventures by printing, distributing and collecting the subscriptions for the mission magazines. His readers became his collaborators and he had won the hearts of many lay people.

6. Lay partners and the SVD General Chapters

The First General Chapter of the Society held at Steyl (1884 – 1886), discussed the essential features of starting an Institute of Secular Cooperators to help the missions on January 27, 28 and 30, 1885. Some pious people living in the world wished to join us in our Spiritual endeavours. It was resolved to offer them the possibility by establishing an institute of Secular Cooperates as mission helpers. It was resolved to grant them a share in all the good works and prayers of the Society. Mission helpers had to be willing to lead a good Christian life, to join "Spirituality in the endeavours of the Society of the Divine Word". Only the Superior General and those he delegates have the right to accept someone as mission helpers, who thus shares in the good works of the society.

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

In August 1986, in preparation for the 13th General Chapter of 1988, a whole issue of "***Witnessing to the Word***" No. 10 was brought out on the topic of "The mission of the Laity – and SVD commitment". Since 1988 the official position of the Society regarding this question of Lay Collaboration has been left the matter to the initiative of the province/ regions due to the great variety of the forms and ways of collaboration from a diversity of concrete situation.

From the above direction of the General Chapter, it is clear that we are called to explore the lay expression of the charism of the founder in our own provinces and regions. In

recent times, the 16th General Chapter of 2006 passed two recommendations regarding, “Lay Participation / Collaboration”:

- That we Divine Word Missionaries support and strengthen already existing project of collaboration with the laity in the different provinces/region, zones/ subzones and promote such project where they do not exist.
- That the Society promote where possible the participation of laity in relevant sessions within our Provincial Assemblies and Chapter in line with the statutes for Chapters, our initial and ongoing formation, administration and missionary work *ad gentes*.

The second recommendation was reiterated again in the 17th General Chapter, 2012. We can actualise this SVD lay collaboration by prayer, partnership in mission and partnership in prayer.

The 17th General Chapter of the Society in 2012 has made concrete recommendations. The provinces, regions and missions are permitted to give official recognition to lay associate groups. These recognized groups will become part of the Arnoldus Family in the broader sense. Recognition will be given according to the stipulated criteria. The principal orientation of the group is the missionary charism of St. Arnold Janssen and the founding generation. There should be statutes written and approved by the Provincial (region / mission) Superior with the consent of his council.

7. Conclusion

The Society of the Divine Word is intimately connected to lay partnership in mission from its very inception. Though this spirit is still alive, somewhere on the journey, it lost its focus and priority. But today with the changing times this vision of lay collaboration has been rediscovered. In several parts of the world, officially religious men and women and priests are not permitted to work. Here, the Lay Partners can be of much help in mission. Moreover, the religious vocation to the Society is declining, in this context to continue the missionary work and vision of St. Arnold, we need more lay volunteers to continue his work. It is hoped that every province, region and mission take this emerging situation seriously and take steps to officially organize, animate and recognize the Lay Partners as our SVD Collaborators in today’s world. May St. Arnold intercede for this in this venture!

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