

ARNOLD JANSSEN'S CONCEPT OF RELIGIOUS LIFE

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As we reflect on religious life in the mind of Arnold Janssen, we can raise the question: “Did Father Arnold want to found a religious congregation from the very beginning? Or did the concept of religious life gradually grow in the mind of our founder as he developed his vision for the Mission House?” If the answer to the first question is ‘yes’, then there is no need for further explanation because it would be clear that from the beginning the SVD is a religious congregation. But if the answer is ‘no’, then, we need to explain why Arnold Janssen introduced the three evangelical counsels in the new community in Steyl. According to Peter McHugh SVD, “religious profession was originally not part of life in the mission house. A promise of obedience and priestly celibacy sufficed.”¹ Of course, this makes sense because as a diocesan priest, perhaps he wanted his foundation to follow the same way as he did.

However, ten years later, in the first General Chapter of 1885, he introduced the three vows to the capitulars for the first time. Why did the founder decide to do this? And what motivated him to introduce the three evangelical counsels? Peter McHugh notes that it is because “[Arnold Janssen] saw religious life as responding to God’s first love for us in a threefold way: namely, as total dedication of himself and his powers to God, as the consecrations of his life, and as a full sacrifice to God.”² In a retreat in 1893 he put it this way: “The three counsels form a sacrifice that is as total as is possible in this life. It is a holy sacrifice since it is being offered to please God and to consecrate oneself to him, a true holocaust. But it must be offered on the altar of love. O my God how much you deserve my dedicating all to you! Would that I might thus satisfy my love.”³ From the understanding of religious life as a sacrifice, a true holocaust to please and to glorify God, he also wanted his followers to do the same. Yet, the vows must be offered on the altar of love.

It should be noted that before Arnold Janssen introduced the three vows in the first General Chapter, he had already consecrated himself. Based on his own spirituality, he set religious life in a Trinitarian context and stressed that apostolic dimension: “To whom have I consecrated myself? To the Father to win sons and daughters for him, to the Son to win sisters and brothers in his image, [and] to the Holy Spirit to work for his outpouring on earth.”⁴ Furthermore, the founder also saw religious life as imitating Christ, to glorify the Father and the Son in the Holy Spirit, and to proclaim the Good News to the world. He put it clearly in the Rule 1891 as follows: “The essence of our Rule is the following: through a life of poverty, chastity and obedience our confreres...imitate the life of Christ, glorify the

Father and the Son in the Holy Spirit, and spread the Word of God on earth, especially among the pagans.”⁵

In our time Blessed John Paul II in *Vita Consecrata* also emphasized the Trinitarian dimension of consecrated life. The Pope noted: “The deepest meaning of the evangelical counsels is revealed when they are viewed in relation to the Holy Trinity, the source of holiness. They are in fact an expression of the love of the Son for the Father in the unity of the Holy Spirit. By practicing the evangelical counsels, the consecrated person lives with particular intensity the Trinitarian and Christological dimension which marks the whole of Christian life.”⁶ Therefore, it is no exaggeration to say that Arnold Janssen was one hundred years ahead of his time. This is because from his own life he had already practiced the Trinitarian dimension.

Nevertheless, even though the founder had introduced the three evangelical counsels in the first General Chapter of 1885, the members of the congregations seemed to profess the three vows as private vows and not as public ones. Referring to the 1905 constitution, Fritz Bornemann SVD writes: “the private vows became public vows and thus the SVD became a religious order in the proper sense of the word.”⁷ In other words, since its foundations in 1875, the SVD did not become a religious order in the proper sense until 30 years later. So it seems Arnold Janssen’s concept of religious life did gradually progress as he developed his vision for the Mission House.

In the Founder’s concept of religious life as explained above, three key elements need to be emphasized. The first element is the notion that “the three counsels form a sacrifice.” This sacrifice is not just a simple matter, but it is a holy sacrifice. It is called a holy sacrifice because the person to whom we make our sacrifice is the Holy One, God himself. It is also called a holy sacrifice because it is being offered to please and to glorify God as the core of our human being. St. Ignatius of Loyola says, “Man was created for a certain end. This end is to praise, to reverence, and to serve the Lord his God, and by this means to arrive at eternal salvation.” Through our vows we make a holy sacrifice in order to please and to glorify God. Yet, this holy sacrifice or the three evangelical counsels have to be professed and have to be lived them out of love. That is why Arnold Janssen rightly says, “It must be offered on the altar of love.”

The second element is “the Trinitarian context and apostolic dimension.” As indicated earlier, Arnold Janssen was ahead of his time in integrating the Trinitarian dimension into the religious life. He also wanted to integrate it into the apostolic dimension, that is, to win sons and daughters for the Father, to win sisters and brothers in Christ’s image and to work for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on earth. As we know, the Trinity is the foundation of our Christian life and practices. However, the

mystery of the Trinity still seems abstract and it has not become the central focus of the Christian life. In fact, “the connection between the Trinity and the spiritual life has not always been clear or strongly drawn. The general irrelevance of the doctrine of the Trinity in the West since the 5th century meant that it lost its footing as the central and unifying Christian mystery.”⁸ Bishop Hemmerle of Aachen observed, “the Trinity has not yet even today been accepted by Christianity as God wants it to be.”⁹ In other words, the Trinity lost its central role in the devotional lives of most Christians. It does not surprise us then that Karl Rahner, the great twentieth-century theologian, complained that Christians had become simple monotheists for all practical purposes.¹⁰ Here Arnold Janssen was an exception. Even though the Trinity was far away from Christian life in his time, the saint paid great attention to it. He had a great devotion to the Trinity and then integrated the Trinitarian dimension into the religious life and emphasized its apostolic dimension. This integration is very important for us today, and it challenges us to give a concrete witness in our daily life.

The third element is “imitating Christ.” This element indicates a conviction and reaffirmation of Arnold Janssen’s notion that only through the evangelical counsels can we imitate the life of Christ, glorify the Father and the Son in the Holy Spirit, and spread the Good News to the whole world, especially among peoples who do not know God. This is probably the main reason why he wanted his three congregations to become religious orders. But what does it mean to imitate the life of Christ through the evangelical counsels? To answer this question, we must look at our Constitutions. In the SVD Constitutions of 1983, the capitulars of the 9th General Chapter of 1967/68 and the 11th and 12th Chapters of 1977 and 1982 captured the mind of our Founder’s concept of religious life and describe it beautifully as follows: “The Incarnate Divine Word in his redeeming love is the source and model of our apostolic holiness. By taking simple public vows of consecrated chastity, evangelical poverty and apostolic obedience, we respond to his call and follow him along the way of the evangelical counsels” (Const. 201).

Since the three evangelical counsels are our response to Jesus’ call to follow him, it will be helpful to take a look at each vow. First of all, the SVD Constitutions say, “In a celibate state of life Jesus directed his undivided love to the Father and all people. He calls some persons to celibacy in order to bind them more closely to himself and have them participate in a special way in the work of salvation” (Const. 202). Responding to the Lord’s invitation, we choose the celibate life to live in community. As Jesus directed his undivided love to the Father and all people, we must also follow him in freeing our heart from earthly desires so that we can love Him with our all hearts, souls, and minds. Only the heart detached from earthly love is free for love of God and his people. Therefore, Christ must become the only

object of our longings, desires, and thoughts. Of course, it is possible if we have an intimate relationship with Christ. As Constitution 206 puts it, “A meaningful life in the state of consecrated celibacy pre-supposes personal relationship with Christ, living faith, fraternal sharing in community and selfless dedication to the community of our vocation.”

Secondly, Christ has emptied himself and has chosen poverty to make us rich. He was sent to preach the Good News to the poor and took his stand with them (Const. 207). Imitating the life of Christ in poverty means that we must renounce all earthly goods so that we can fully concentrate ourselves on missionary work. It requires us to deepen its spiritual meaning (depending on God), solidarity with the poor and the oppressed. “It also calls us to generously place time, talents, work and community goods at the service of our missionary tasks” (Const. 210). Moreover, we are also invited to live a simple lifestyle and renounce the right to dispose freely of temporal goods (cf. Const. 213).

Thirdly, Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Word came into the world not to do his own will, but his Father’s will. And to fulfill this will of the Father, he became obedient to his Father unto death on the cross. Imitating the life of Christ in our vow of obedience means that we have to completely renounce our own will and no longer have any desires except to fulfill God’s will. In fact, God always speaks to us in the Holy Scripture and our Constitutions, through the signs of the times and the mouths of our superiors, and also by the gentle loving guidance of the Holy Spirit in the depths of our hearts. Thus we need to listen to this voice and follow the gentle loving guidance of the Holy Spirit. When we follow Jesus in his obedience, poverty and chastity in this way, we become able to glorify the Father and the Son in the Holy Spirit.

In conclusion, although the idea of religious life was not in the mind of Arnold Janssen when he began his first congregation, God who had called him to begin this great foundation continued leading him to establish a religious missionary congregation, that is, to win sons and daughters for the Father, to win brothers and sisters for the Son, and to work for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on earth. This concept gradually grew as he developed his vision for the Mission House. As spiritual sons and daughters of Arnold Janssen, we are called to deepen this concept and put it into practice. In other words, we need to integrate the Trinitarian life and its apostolic dimension in our missionary work.

Notes

¹ Peter McHugh, “Alive in the Spirit - Arnold Jansen’s Spirituality”, *Verbum SVD 44*, 2003, 146.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ From a retreat given by Arnold in 1883. Ibid.

⁵ Ibid, 147.

⁶ *Vita Consecrata*, 21.

⁷ Fritz Bornemann, “Portrait of the Founder -- Different Views”, in: *Analecta SVD – 63/III*, (Rome 1998), 113.

⁸ Catharine Mowry LaCugna, “Trinitarian Spirituality”, in *New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*, Michael Downey (ed.), (The Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota, 1993), 968-969.

⁹ Bishop Hemmerle of Aachen, “Toward a Spirituality of the Founder of the Society of the Divine Word, Arnold Janssen”; *Appendix* in Herman Fischer SVD, *You are the Temple of the Holy Spirit*, Paul La Forge SVD (trans.), (Quezon City, 1999), 186.

¹⁰ Karl Rahner, *The Trinity*, Joseph Donceel (trans.), (New York, Herder and Herder, 1970), 10-11.