

The SVD and Its Mission Towards China

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Beginnings in Steyl

When Father Arnold Janssen (1837-1909), a priest of the Diocese of Münster, Germany, considered a missionary calling in the second half of the 19th century, and the actual response to this call by the German Church, he felt ashamed about how little was being done in Germany to follow the call to spread the Good News, compared with other nations. While other nations like France and Italy already had their own institutes to plan and implement the missionary task of the Church, the Church in Germany had no similar organization. Fr. Arnold felt a responsibility to rectify this situation, and he courageously decided to set up a missionary institute to train personnel, who would be sent out later as missionaries. His intention was to send missionaries especially to China with its huge masses of non-Christian people. He figured that China topped the list of countries which were in urgent need of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. In spite of the many difficulties he faced, Arnold Janssen was not discouraged. Rather, relying on his confidence in God's call and trusting completely in His help, with great persistence, he went on to implement his vision. The first difficulty came from the political situation created by the so called Kulturkampf (a *special conflict between the Prussian state and the Roman Catholic Church 1871-87*), which forbade the establishment of any missionary institute within German borders. Therefore he chose the little village of Steyl on Dutch soil, just beyond the German border as the location for his missionary institute. At that time several people within the church showed great interest in his vision, however, they very much doubted if he was the right person for its implementation. They were rather skeptical about the way he proceeded and even predicted that the whole experiment would end in failure. Then, on the 8th of September 1875 in quite unpretentious

circumstances, Father Arnold with three fellow members inaugurated, under the friendly but doubtful eyes of a great number of clergy and faithful, the foundation of the "Society of the Divine Word Missionaries" (SVD) and their first Mission Seminary.

First Missionary Adventure in China

Ample proof that Father Arnold was on the right track was not long in coming. The reaction from the Catholic population to his mission appeals in his magazine was overwhelmingly generous. Vocations, too, came to Steyl in great numbers. In 1879 he was able to send out his first two missionaries, Fr. Johann Baptist Anzer and Fr. Joseph Freinademetz. He sent them to China, which was Fr. Arnold's first choice for his missionary enterprise. The two missionaries started their life and apostolate among the Chinese, first in Hong Kong. Two years later, they moved from there to mainland China. In the meantime an agreement had been reached between the Congregation of Propaganda in Rome and the SVD Superior General by which the southern part of Shandong Province would be handed over in 1882 to the care of SVD. The northern part of that province would continue to be under the care of the Franciscans. Southern Shandong was a huge area, with a population of 9 million people. Only three villages had Catholics. Their total number came to 195, 158 of whom lived in Puoli where the newly arrived missionaries set up their residence. The two missionaries started their apostolate with great enthusiasm and zeal. One of the two, Fr. Anzer, soon became a bishop; the other one, Fr. Freinademetz, became a saint, having been canonized in 2003. A considerable number of young missionaries from Europe joined the first two SVD missionaries towards the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries. Thus the mission in south Shandong developed rapidly in spite of hardships and failures. The area was later divided up into separate vicariates and dioceses. In 1905 the first group of Missionary Sisters Servants of the Holy Spirit (SSpS), founded by Father Janssen in 1889, arrived in Shandong, and exercised their missionary task by working in schools, hospitals, orphanages and old folks' homes. The SVD also started the formation of indigenous sisters, like the Missionary Sisters Oblates

of the Holy Family (OHF), founded in 1910 by Msgr. Augustin Henninghaus SVD, Bishop of Yanzhou, or later the Sisters of Our Lady of China (OLC), founded in 1941 by Thomas Cardinal Tien SVD. The missionaries also set up a printing press, which published much religious literature. They also founded middle schools and hospitals.

The Congregation was gradually asked by Rome to take over other mission areas too. In 1922, they accepted the offer to widen their missionary involvement by moving farther west, to Gansu Province. A few years later in 1928, the provinces of Xinjiang and Qinghai, as well as the western part of Ningxia Province, where the Scheut Fathers had been working since 1878, were added to the SVD-led Apostolic Vicariate of West Gansu. These were all huge areas which after a period of time were divided up into separate Vicariates and Prefectures. In 1946, Lanzhou became an archdiocese, Xinjiang and Xining remained Apostolic Prefectures. Spread over a wide area, only eight missionaries took care of five mission centers. From 1950 on, there were no further reports from these mission territories. In 1954 the last group of foreign missionaries had to leave the country. Two Chinese priests moved there in 1954 to look after the faithful.

The third mission area in China where the SVD was well represented with a great number of missionaries was the Province of Henan in Central China. At the request of the Congregation of Propaganda, in 1921 SVD took over a part of the southern and eastern Henan Vicariates. They first sent a couple of missionaries to Henan to join the PIME missionaries in their apostolic work. Later they were given the district of Xinyang as their own mission area. In the North, at the request of the Apostolic Vicar of Weihui, and with the agreement of Propaganda, in 1936 the southern part of this vicariate was erected into the separate prefecture of Xinxiang, and put under the pastoral care of SVD, with Msgr. Thomas Megan as Prefect Apostolic. The new prefecture developed rapidly. During the war with Japan however, the American SVD missionaries working side by side with the German missionaries were put into concentration camp. Missionary work continued in the face of many difficulties. This lasted until the German missionaries, 17 priests and 5 brothers, were isolated in concentration camps in 1942.

They were there for the duration of World War II, and only released in 1946. In the same year Xinyang was erected into a diocese. This was also the year that the Chinese hierarchy was established. Out of 138 regional jurisdictions, 20 were erected into archdioceses, 79 to dioceses and the rest remained prefectures. However, as the civil war progressed more and more in favor of the communists, the foreign missionaries and their flocks came gradually under the complete control of the communist forces and began to suffer persecution, imprisonment and deportation. Although some indigenous priests remained behind to look after the faithful, they were too few to fulfill the existing pastoral needs.

From the very beginning of their missionary efforts in China, namely in south Shandong, the SVD placed special emphasis on the formation of indigenous vocations. In 1889, Bishop Johann Baptist Anzer could already ordain his first two Chinese priests. By 1950, 110 local priests had successfully completed their seminary formation in Yanzhou and had been ordained as priests for the diocese. Besides these, eleven more had joined the SVD, after the congregation had started to accept Chinese vocations into their ranks in 1930. In 1934 they also began a novitiate for Chinese Brothers. In all, up to 1949, 11 Chinese priests and 14 brothers had joined the Divine Word congregation. The most outstanding among them was Thomas Cardinal Tien Ken-hsin (Tian Gengxin), who later became Vicar Apostolic of Yanggu, and thereafter of Qingdao, both in Shandong Province. In 1946, he became the first Chinese cardinal and was appointed that same year to be the archbishop of Beijing. From the seminarians in Yanzhou who were evacuated in 1949 to the Philippines, where they completed their seminary education, another 12 were ordained priests.

Involvement in Education

A particular challenge for the SVD was the offer of Pope Pius XI in 1933 to take over the administration of Fu Jen University in Beijing from the American Benedictines. This offer was quite in accordance with the original missionary concept of the founder, Fr. Arnold Janssen. He thought that education and scientific work went hand in hand as being part of the same missionary call. He

considered them a charisma of the Congregation. The development of Fu Jen University depended upon great effort to provide the necessary funds and personnel to have the university reach a standard that could compare favorably with other institutes of higher learning. The university at that time had four faculties: literature (the humanities), natural sciences, social science and education. Following an American concept, besides the faculties of a university, high schools for both boys and girls were set up on the campus of the university. In 1935, Fr. Franz X. Biallas, SVD founded *Monumenta Serica — Journal of Oriental Studies*, and published its first edition that year at Fu Jen University. The so called “*Beijing School of Painting*”, an effort to produce authentic Chinese Christian art, also originated at Fu Jen University. In 1938, at the instigation of the Apostolic Delegate Archbishop Zanin, the *Collegium Sinicum Ecclesiasticum* was established within the university compound. This institute offered Chinese priests the opportunity to enhance their level of education by attending the university. This would provide them with the qualifications to teach in Catholic schools. In 1949, after the communists assumed power in China, all religious organizations, including those of the Catholic Church, were suppressed. The government took over the university in 1950. In 1952, the oppression of religious personnel intensified and all the SVDs employed at the university were expelled. Thereafter the government merged Fu Jen University with Beijing Normal University and with other specialized universities.

Historical Crisis and Search for New Opportunities

Thus, with the change of political power, the missionary involvement of the SVD in Mainland China came to an abrupt end. The Mission Procure changed its location from Shanghai to Hong Kong in order to maintain contact with the confreres remaining on the Mainland. The highest number of foreign SVD missionaries working in China reached its climax in 1941 when 296 priests and 40 brothers were working there. By 1955 the majority of them had returned to their home countries or had been assigned to other SVD mission areas on the five continents. By 1960 only 14 SVD Chinese priests and 10 brothers still lived in mainland China. The

seminarians from south Shandong had moved to the Philippines where they completed their seminary formation, and were ordained to the priesthood. After their ordination they started working among the Chinese Catholic communities in Manila or elsewhere in the country. In 1954, two young Chinese priests took over the parish of St. Jude and the high school adjacent to it. In the course of time, this high school developed into one of the most highly respected Chinese secondary schools in Manila.

Another mission area where the SVD could continue its commitment to China and to the Chinese people after 1949 was Taiwan. In the spring of 1948, the General Administration of the congregation had sent two of its members to Taiwan to inquire about opportunities of sending personnel from mainland China to Taiwan. However, the General Administration in Rome hesitated to take action. They did not consider the prospects for missionary activity in Taiwan to be very promising. They feared that sooner or later Taiwan too would fall prey to the People's Liberation Army. However, an influential group of former China missionaries in Europe and elsewhere lobbied for a new involvement in the China apostolate for the Divine Word Missionaries. Finally all doubts and fears were overcome, and the 8th General Chapter in 1958 made the decision to send missionaries to Taiwan. Three former China missionaries: Fathers Leo Kade, Alois Tauch, and Alois Krieffewirth went to Taiwan to make the first contacts. They visited Msgr. Thomas Niu, the former administrator of the diocese of Yanggu in southern Shandong, who was now Prefect Apostolic of Jiayi, to inquire about the situation in Taiwan, and to sound out the possibilities for work in the Diocese of Jiayi. Bishop Niu was delighted to have SVD join his diocesan priests to do apostolic work in his diocese. In 1960, The Society of Divine Word signed a contract with Bishop Niu, whereby the SVD agreed to take over five rural districts in Jiayi County and one parish in Jiayi City.

Former mainland China missionaries were called back from their new locations in other parts of the world, and due to their experience with the China mission, were reassigned to the new missionary venture in Taiwan. Some of the young Chinese priests ordained in the Philippines also joined them. Now the Congregation has more than 20 members in the south of Taiwan. In the Jiayi

Diocese they are serving in two city parishes and five rural parishes, which have several mission stations. Still further south, in the Gaoxiong Diocese, they are doing pastoral work in several city parishes.

Besides staffing parishes, investment in education was not neglected. "Fu Jen High School", named after the former Fu Jen Middle School in Beijing, with Fr. Zhu Bingwen as its first principal, was established at the edge of Jiayi City, near a newly built SVD mission center. Another apostolate given particular emphasis was a commitment to the underprivileged native population in the central mountain area around Mount Ali. A great number of students from that area, through the support of the Church, moved to the city in order to obtain a better secondary school education. Here they stayed in a hostel administered by qualified educators, and attended classes at Fu Jen High School nearby or at other schools in the city. The purpose was to educate talented leaders for the native minority groups in Taiwan.

The Re-establishment of Fu Jen University

In 1961, Fu Jen Catholic University was re-established in Taiwan under the auspices of the Chinese secular clergy, the Society of the Divine Word and the Society of Jesus. The Chinese Bishops Conference of Taiwan had been working on a plan to do this since 1959, after the Nationalist Government had requested that they re-establish Fu Jen University on Taiwan. The government was even ready to provide the land for the campus. In 1961, the Ministry of the Interior officially gave its approval for the re-opening. The SVD section included the three Colleges of Science and Engineering, Foreign Languages and Human Ecology. The congregation was continuing the tradition of the original Fu Jen University in Beijing, the primary objective of which was to train experts who would be able to contribute to the development of their country. Today Fu Jen University, located 10 km outside Taipei, ranks at the top of Taiwan's private universities. It offers well-developed research programs at the graduate level, together with acclaimed programs in undergraduate education. In 2002 the three sections were integrated into one administrative structure, united

under the basic orientation of transmitting values essential to Christian tradition. The most challenging project in the history of the university, however, lies in the future: the construction of a Faculty of Medicine with a hospital affiliated to that faculty. Another difficulty facing Fu Jen University is the continuous lack of Catholic staff, which would be sufficient to maintain the Catholic orientation of the university. With regards to the SVD involvement with educational work at the university, since its beginning, more than 60 SVD priests and brothers, and about 40 SSPS Sisters have served on the staff as teachers or administrators. Some of them still work at Fujen at the present time.

A New Presence in Mainland China

The Congregation has always kept in precious memory mainland China and the former SVD mission areas there. No effort has been spared to keep contact with the Chinese members of the congregation. With the political and economic opening of China in the 1980s, contact with China has been made easier. Most of the confreres, who had served on the Mainland, or more recently in Taiwan, were desirous of taking up pastoral activities in China again, if they could. In the early 1980s, two professors of the university were released from their duties at Fu Jen University and sent to Beijing, where they tried to set up a branch of *Monumenta Serica* at Beijing Normal University. Finally they ended up teaching language at the *ERWAI* (*Beijing Second Foreign Language University*). One of those two was invited by the German embassy to take responsibility for the pastoral care of the German-speaking community in Beijing. This involved regularly saying Mass for them, and giving religious instruction to their children.

Besides this, another opportunity for sending members of the congregation to China presented itself when the German Government and the Catholic funding agency MISEREOR agreed to provide financial support to the construction of an institute for food processing in Nanchang, the capital of Jiangxi Province. An agreement was reached whereby two German scholars from Fu Jen University would be members of the planning team for the project and would also supervise the development of the project, which was

to be completed within 15 years. Then the institute would be handed over to the administration of the University of Jiangxi. Two SVD members of the faculty of Fu Jen, Prof. Fr. Heinz Hesselfeld from the physics department and Prof. Fr. Karl Specht from the chemistry department were freed from their teaching commitments at Fu Jen, and were sent to take up their new positions in Nanchang. Although it was completely forbidden for foreigners to do any pastoral work or to evangelize among the Chinese, the presence of the two priests spoke for itself, and ample opportunities presented themselves to give guidance to people who were eager to know more about religion or were looking for a proper orientation in life. Naturally some of their students showed great interest in associating themselves with the spirit and charisma of the SVD. Meanwhile most of the first group of priests and brothers in Nanchang have left China. However their dedication to their vocation, their love for China and the guidance they gave to those young people continues to work among them. It has motivated them to organize themselves under the visions of the SVD founder, Saint Arnold Janssen, and of Saint Joseph Freinademetz, one of the first two SVD missionaries to China.

SVD Missionary Activity in Hong Kong and Macau

Another area where SVD started from a small beginning and has gradually grown into a respectable group of more than 20 missionaries is Hong Kong. SVD actually started in Hong Kong in 1879 when their first two China missionaries, Fr. Johann Baptist Anzer and Fr. Joseph Freinademetz stayed in the diocese for a period of two years. Fr. Anzer taught in the seminary and Fr. Freinademetz did pastoral work in the small village of Saikung. Another beginning took place in 1948 when the late Fr. Heinrich Striethorst settled on Tung Shan Terrace in order to take care of the many expelled missionaries who were passing through Hong Kong. In 1965 a Procure was established on Boundary Street in Kowloon, not far from the old airport. Its main purpose was to be of service to the great number of missionaries passing through Hong Kong on their way to other mission areas throughout East Asia. Boundary Street more and more became a multipurpose center. It served as a

listening post to note events and changes in China, and particularly to keep in contact with Chinese SVDs still living in China. From there German missionaries like Fr. Bernhard Schlüter took over the pastoral care of the German-speaking community in Hong Kong. Later, Fr. Helmut Peter, a former missionary in the Philippines, joined the apostolate caring for the pastoral care of the migrant workers from the Philippines. Another SVD Father, Paddy O'Regan from Ireland, taught philosophy at Hong Kong's Holy Spirit Seminary, and also served as chaplain at Kai Tak Airport.

In 1970 the presence of SVD was further strengthened with the founding of Sing Yin Middle School in Lam Tin, with Fr. Patrick Canavan SVD as its first principal. The school proved to be a great success, since it fulfilled an urgent need for secondary school education among the many families moving into the Lam Tin area. With many young seminarians from various SVD Provinces and eight different countries showing interest in a missionary vocation, an Overseas Training Program (OTP) was established in Shatin, New Territories. This program provided proper training to the newcomers, including the ability to use Cantonese as the basic means of communication. Thus SVD became much more integrated into the overall planning of the Hong Kong Diocese, as well as into its pastoral ministry to the local people and the growing number of migrants. In 1994, three parishes in the Hong Kong Diocese were assigned to the care of the Divine Word Missionaries. The majority of its present members in Hong Kong are young missionaries from the Asian provinces of the congregation. In 2007 another SVD community was set up in Macau, with Divine Word Missionaries taking up teaching tasks at the University of St. Joseph and doing pastoral work at Fatima Parish.

Overseas China Apostolate

With the wave of globalization and mobilization in the last few years, the Overseas Chinese Apostolate caught the attention of SVD. In Vienna, Munich and Cologne, former China missionaries have set up Chinese Catholic Communities to give pastoral care to the many students and migrant workers coming from China, Hong Kong or Taiwan. Recently the Provincial of SVD China Province,

Fr. Frank Budenholzer, who resides in Taiwan, has repeatedly been approached with requests to provide personnel for the pastoral care of the continuously growing population of overseas Chinese in various countries. One of these requests came from the Catholic Chinese Community of Melbourne. They have over 600 families and are the only Chinese Catholic Community there. They are desperately in need of a full time chaplain to shepherd the Chinese Catholics now and in the future. Another request came from the Papua New Guinea Province. PNG has great mineral wealth, and China has come to the country with money and expertise to help the people there to exploit those minerals. Thousands of Chinese workers are going to PNG to work on mining projects. These workers have very little interaction with the local PNG population, due to language difficulties. This easily leads to tensions between them and the local people. The SVD has agreed in principle to send a confrere from the China Province to New Guinea to work among the migrant workers, who are mostly from mainland China.

The SVD China Connection in Europe

In Europe, the Institute Monumenta Serica which has already been mentioned above in connection with its foundation in 1935 at Fu Jen University in Beijing, after a long journey through Japan and the USA, has finally taken up permanent residence in St. Augustin near Bonn, Germany. Its main purpose is to continue the publication of *Monumenta Serica – Journal of Oriental Studies*, a scholarly journal with an excellent reputation. The journal is published once a year, with articles in English, German, French and Chinese. They touch upon all aspects of the material and spiritual culture of China. In its treatment of the religious, philosophical and cultural heritage of China, the missionary aspect receives special attention. Besides its publications, including *Monumenta Serica Monograph Series* and *Collectanea Serica*, the Monumenta Serica Institute also organizes expositions and conferences on various topics dealing with China and its history. A library with over 81,000 volumes in Chinese, Japanese and Western Languages is available for research, as well as 350 current magazines, journals and periodicals dealing with a wide field of academic topics are at

the disposal of researchers looking for information about China and its development.

When in the 1980s during the political and economic opening up of China, the need arose to foster communication with China and to promote exchange between the cultures and religions of the West and those of China, the China-Zentrum e.V. (China Centre) was established in 1988. It actually grew out of the Institute Monumenta Serica. The setting up of a separate institution became an urgent need. The particular objectives of the China-Zentrum are: First, collecting information on China, with special emphasis on religions in China, with its own publication in German: *China heute. Informationen über Religion und Christentum im chinesischen Raum* (China Today, An Information Bulletin about Religion and Christianity in the Chinese-Speaking World). Other publications were to be edited in close cooperation with the Institute Monumenta Serica. Second, to foster dialogue and co-operation among peoples in mainland China, the Hong Kong SAR, the Macau SAR, Taiwan and local Churches in those areas. Third, to do research on Christianity and other religious traditions in the Chinese-speaking world. Since August 2011, China-Zentrum has been publishing an online journal under the title: *Religions and Christianity in Today's China* (www.china-zentrum.de).

A number of congregations which had previously worked in China, funding agencies and dioceses sponsor the China-Zentrum e.V. In all there are 27 members on the board of sponsors. The present head of the board of directors is Fr. Eric Englert OSA, President of MISSIO Munich. The executive directors have so far always been members of the SVD. The location of the center is on the campus of the SVD Major Seminary in St. Augustin.

One of the major projects of the China-Zentrum since 1994 is the further formation of Chinese priests, sisters and seminarians. If a diocese or a religious order has a candidate whom it can recommend for further formation in Germany in order to acquire academic degrees, the China-Zentrum will try to make appropriate arrangements for that purpose. After obtaining a licentiate at the Philosophisch – Theologische Hochschule SVD St. Augustin (College of Philosophy and Theology, St. Augustine) which is also recognized by the German Government, the students will return to

China. Recently a number of students, with the recommendation of their dioceses, continue their studies to obtain a doctorate in Theology. SVD provinces in the USA and Poland offer similar formation programs for seminarians and priests from China.

Conclusion

When the Congregation of the Divine Word Missionaries was founded in 1875, its first focus for missionary work was China, with its vast population. Today, after more than 135 years, their missionaries are working in nearly 70 countries on the five continents of the world. However, China has never lost its primary attraction for SVD. With the opening up of China in the 1980s, China has again gained the special attention of the Congregation. But since no foreign missionaries are allowed to work now as missionaries in China, the mission to evangelize within China remains almost completely in the hands of all those brave Chinese Catholics, together with their priests and sisters in consecrated life, who, in the face of many hardships and trials are determined to give witness to Christ and to His love among a huge population of non-Christians. The SVD, directly or indirectly, will still follow its call and charism to continue sharing the Living Word in the most populous country in the world. Particular attention is therefore given to the need to train indigenous Chinese vocations both within the country and abroad. In addition, aware of Chinese presence all over the world, the congregation is also fully committed to support the Chinese Apostolate overseas.