

The Missionary Congregation of the Servants of the Holy Spirit

The Meaning of S.Sp.S.

The Mission Congregation of the Servants of the Holy Spirit (S.Sp.S.) for short, "Congregatio Missionalis Servarum Spiritus Sancti (C.M.Sp.S.), is consecrated to the Holy Spirit whom the Sisters venerate in a special manner. The dove in the upper part of the Congregation's shield is the symbol of the Holy Spirit. The inscription *Veni Sancti Spiritus* found on the medallion above the profession cross of the Sisters reminds them of their total dedication to the Spirit of love and the Spirit of sanctification under whose aegis they labor. Members of this Congregation were designated Servants by the Founder to stress the spirit of service and serving which in our times has been emphasized by the present Holy Father and Vatican Council II.

Origin and Aim

The mission Congregation of the Servants of the Holy Spirit was established on December 8, 1889 at Steyl, Holland by Father Arnold Janssen, founder of the Society of the Divine Word. The members of this Congregation were to dedicate themselves to build up the Church as the living temple of God and strive to be God's open door to the world. The Pentecostal wind which blew with such potent power in Father Arnold's soul also reached Mother Maria and Mother Josepha, the two co-foundresses, who with singular fidelity and devotion, cooperated with him in the development of a missionary congregation.

Father Arnold Janssen came from a family whose head Gerald Janssen, was influenced by the sublime Gospel passage, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was

God . . . and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us." Thus, the title of the S.V.D. came from the heart of a simple farmer and teamster. Gerald's other spiritual legacy to his son was his exceptional devotion to the Holy Spirit. On the other hand, Father Arnold's mother, Anna, was truly the *mulier fortis* of Proverbs. Affectionately, her children called her their "praying mother."

The parents' spirit of prayer and piety made a deep impression on the children, especially Father Arnold. With dispassionate objectivity, Father Broderick, S.J. could write of Father Arnold regarding his photograph:

Anyone looking at the photograph would not need to be told that he stood in the presence of greatness, but a benign greatness, transfused by some inner radiance. . . . Serenity, perhaps is the word which best describes all the features of this wonderful face, the serenity of a peace bought at the price of terrible suffering.¹

Mother Maria, Helena Stollenwerk, came to Steyl in 1882 to offer her services to the mission cause. Helena was born a Rollesbreich, a small village in the Eifel district of Western Germany not far from Aachen. Her love for the propagation of the faith started in childhood days and was well nurtured in a family milieu of trust in God, piety, and simplicity. Only after long years of waiting did she realize her life-purpose of becoming a missionary Sister. Although she was never able to perform apostolic service in the foreign missions, her desire to become a missionary Sister found fulfillment in prayer and sacrifice. Her duties as co-foundress and as first Superior of the Congregation kept her at the home front. She was an authentic witness to her dictum, "To God, the honor; to my neighbor, the benefit; to myself, the burden." Her natural dignity, childlike simplicity and modesty were an overflow of her deep and sincere gratitude toward God and man, and perfect conformity to the will of God. In compliance with the Founder's wish, she joined the cloistered branch, Sister-Servants of the Holy Spirit of Perpetual Adoration, when it was opened in 1896. It is noteworthy to state that her superiors in the cloistered branch were once her spiritual

¹ James Broderick, S.J., *The Life of Arnold Janssen*, London, Catholic Truth Society, p. 4.

daughters. As a novice, Sister Maria Virgo, she did her part well. At the end of her first year novitiate, she became seriously ill and died on February 3, 1900, "the most noble daughter of our Founder."

The providential plans of God led Mother Josepha, Hendrina Stenmans, to Steyl in 1884. Under the guidance of Father Janssen, she waited and hoped for five years until the foundation of a missionary sisterhood was realized. From the beginning, Mother Josepha was Mother Maria's most faithful helper and supporter. Of her, Mother Maria said, "Sister Josepha and I are of one heart and one soul." In the Holy Spirit they found harmonious balance. Mother Josepha's gifts of grace and nature were manifest in her noble simplicity, sincere deep humility, mild forbearance, tact, great prudence, and a clear sound judgment. She succeeded Mother Maria in governing the Congregation, from 1895 to 1903, her death year.

Spirituality of Father Arnold

The well-spring from which the Founder's spirituality flowed was his intense devotion to the triune God. Firmly rooted in the holy triune God was his deep living faith from which sprung his strong trust and love of God. Special veneration of the Holy Spirit was his distinctive characteristic. His world-wide missionary zeal led him to found this missionary Congregation for

... he recognized the definite importance of the missionary Sister for the spread of the faith as well as for the upbuilding of the Christian family and for the social, economic, and cultural development of the mission territories.²

Another outstanding trait of his spirituality was his great devotion to the Sacred Heart and to the Immaculate Heart. His spirit of ecumenism urged him to work tirelessly and ceaselessly for the reunion of the separated brethren in the Christian faith. A man of vision, he had worked ahead of his time for the interior renewal of the Church in the spirit

² Reverend Mother General Aloysine, S.Sp.S. *Genossenschaftsboise*, July 1967, Rome. Nr. 126

of the Second Vatican Council. The same Council has given new sanction to Father Arnold's preference for the vow of chastity. The German bishops assembled at the Council petitioned for the early beatification of this unpretentious, modest priest who in

God's divine providence... has become the Father of many people. With trust in divine help and in spite of many great difficulties, he glowed, yes, he actually consumed himself in burning love for holy mother, the Church. His interior life was very deeply rooted in the triune God who sent His Son into the world to save all men through the merciful work of redemption.³

Like Father Arnold, Mother Maria and Mother Josepha were charismatically gifted personalities filled with the Holy Spirit. Having imbibed faithfully the spirituality of the Founder, they handed it down to the members of the Congregation. Accordingly the spirit of the Congregation is shown in three general ways:

to love and glorify God, to love our neighbor as ourselves, and to work for the sanctification of our own soul and the perfection of the interior and exterior man.⁴

For a Servant of the Holy Spirit, every moment of the day is a living, "God Holy Spirit, all for love of Thee."

Mission Activity Spreads

Just as the Holy Spirit "broods over the bent world," so did it impel the Congregation to send Sisters for overseas mission work. The first four missionary Sisters were sent to Argentina in 1895. Soon after, more groups were sent out as the mission charism made itself felt all the more. Sisters ready to dedicate their energies and resources to the mission cause went to Africa, 1896; to New Guinea, 1899; and to the United States, 1901. The pioneer group of Sisters sent to the Philippines arrived in

³ *Ibid.*, p. 3

⁴ Mother Ernestina, S.Sp.S., *Address to the Provincial Chapter*, December 28, 1967 -- Jan. 2, 1968; Philippines.

1912. Fittingly did Oliver Barres in his *World Mission Windows* ask: "What would the missions be without women — women who sacrifice their lives as Missionary Sisters?"

Prompted by the Holy Spirit, more houses were opened after 1895 in Germany, Holland, Italy, Austria, Poland, Switzerland, Spain, Czechoslovakia, the United States, Argentina, Brazil, Chile, China, New Guinea, India, Indonesia and Formosa. Certainly the mustard seed has grown into a luxuriant tree. The international character of the Congregation is attested to by its maintenance of training centers in 15 countries. Sacred Heart Convent at Steyl, Holland, still remains the Motherhouse. The Generalate of the Congregation has been residing in Rome since 1937. In 1939, the Congregation had its Golden Jubilee and at the same time received the Holy Father's approval of the Constitution, thereby raising the Congregation to a Pontifical Institute.

The S.Sp.S. in the Philippines

The first group of valiant and self-sacrificing Sisters sent to these "far-off Eden Isles" arrived in 1912. Manila was their first stopover where they enjoyed the hospitality of the Sisters of St. Paul's Hospital. Tayum, Abra was their destination since they came in answer to the urgent request for a Catholic school in a parish administered by Father Luis Beckert, S.V.D. Two S.V.D. priests came earlier to Abra upon the invitation of Monsignor Denis Dougherty, first American bishop of Nueva Segovia. The scarcity of priests and the rise of Aglipayanism prompted him to petition Father Arnold to send missionaries to Abra. Since Father Arnold died on January 15, 1909, it was his successor, Father Nicolas Blum, who sent the first two S.V.D. missionaries to the Philippines, Father Luis Beckert and Father Juan Scheiermann.

On January 16, 1912, the first four Sisters of the Congregation sent to the Philippines reached Tayum. They were Sister Cyrilla, Sister Hieronyma, Sister Cleta, and Sister Cortona. The trip to Tayum included bamboo raft and calesa rides. In June 1912, the Sisters opened a primary school, then called Holy Ghost School. Divine and human resources enabled them to overcome the apathy and even hostility of some

townspeople. Sister Cyrilla became the first Superior of the Congregation in this country. In 1916, Sister Geroldine took charge of the school. In her forty years of office as local regional, and provincial superior Sister Geroldine has been in great measure a unique force in inspiring Rosary Province to rise Phoenix-like in its apostolic ventures and endeavor.

The Christian Witness

"The witness of a truly Christian life is our first apostolic service." Truly applicable to the Sisters is the testimony of Bourne regarding the early intrepid Spanish "misioneros:" "...it was the spirit of kindness, Christian love, and brotherly helpfulness of the missionaries that affected the real conquest of the islands."⁵ The frailties and difficulties that arise from our freckled humanity, although they cannot be ignored, do not however nullify the robustness of the Christian testimony. In the elan of its spiritual heritage and objectives, the Congregation has been a spiritual life-force for numerous families in different segments of the country through its manifold apostolic services. Certain guidelines of the Congregation have benefited many who have come within the ambit of its influence, namely: an impressive spirit of faith, deep reverence for God and man, authentic interiority, apostolic zeal, and simplicity, modesty, unpretentiousness. Likewise the motto of the Congregation, "May the holy trine God live in our hearts," is relevant to the renewal and adaptation urged by the Second Vatican Council. For God would like to fill the hearts of men with his own transcendent holiness by filling them with His Holy Spirit and his own indwelling in order to rebuild this profane world according to Christian principles.⁶

Educational Apostolate

"Education and all that it implies — catechetical work, social action — is our chief apostolate in the Philippines." This statement was issued by the committee on education of the Missionary Sisters.

⁵ Gaylord Bourne, *Historical Introduction*, Blair and Robertson I, p. 37.

⁶ Paul Hinnebusch, O.P. *The Signs of the Times and the Religious Life*, 1967.

Through the channels of education, the Sisters have proclaimed "the mystery of salvation . . . to men," and have helped "to restore all things in Christ." Thousands and thousands of graduates, on the elementary, high school and college level, have had their Christian education in twenty-five schools administered by the Holy Spirit Missionary Sisters. Located in widely separated regions, these centers of learning range from northern Luzon to the Visayan Islands. As mentors, the Sisters try to give their students a well-balanced education. On the college level, stress is placed on the humanistic and scientific disciplines, and personal maturity consistent with the dignity and destiny of the human person. The College of the Holy Spirit in Manila (formerly Holy Ghost College) and the College of the Holy Spirit in Tagbilaran (St. Joseph College) are run by the Sisters of the Congregation. Two other colleges — one in Tarlac, the other in Sorsogon — will be opened this year. In keeping with the missionary character of the Congregation, the students already in the grade school are imbued with love and zeal for the missions.

Social Apostolate

The Congregation in its various houses and in multiple ways bears witness to the kindness and goodness of God by serving "the poor, the down-trodden and the needy." To cite an example, on the premises of the Provincial Motherhouse in Quezon City is located the Holy Spirit Convent Charity Center which was opened in 1957. A free school is maintained in Sampaloc, Manila. In a special manner kindness, love and care are given to the sick through the medical and nursing professions in our Lady of Lourdes Hospital in Sta. Mesa, Manila. More in the spiritual side however, is the Holy Spirit Association, which was started in 1960 at the Provincial Motherhouse, Quezon City. This organization fosters love of God and neighbor, special devotion to the Holy Spirit, vocations to the priesthood, and assistance in the mission activities of the Church — all of which should intensify one's personal sanctification through service.

Response to the Missionary Call

As a "vibrant expression of the Church," religious should and do draw others to the special service of God and neighbor by answering the reli-

gious vocation. Since 1925, Filipino Sisters have joined the Congregation. The Novitiate is at the Provincial Motherhouse, Rosario Heights, Quezon City. In 1950, the first Filipino Sisters received foreign appointments. At present Filipino members of the Congregation are in Africa, Indonesia, New Guinea, India, Formosa, Spain and Argentina.

In brief, this is a summary of the aim, origin characteristics, and apostolate of the Congregation. It is the story of generous souls who have answered God's special call of love, that "the holy triune God may live in the hearts of men."

● **Sister Constancia, S.Sp S.**