

XVIII SVD GENERAL CHAPTER 2018

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DISCERNMENT IN THE FOUNDING GENERATION

OUTLINE

INTRODUCTION

CHAPTER 1: FR. ARNOLD'S BASIC SELF-UNDERSTANDING

CHAPTER 2: DOING THE WILL OF GOD – PRINCIPLES OF DISCERNMENT

I. Introduction

II. Discernment and prayer for the gift of the Holy Spirit

1. In Fr. Arnold's own life
2. Fr. Arnold's admonition for prayer for the gift of the Holy Spirit

III. The honor of God, the benefit of the Society and of the people

1. The principle applied to formation
 - a. Application of this principle in the discernment process of candidates for his foundations
 - b. Application of this principle regarding the missionary training of sisters
2. The principle applied to an apparent conflict situation: welfare of the society / confrere and good of the people (case of Fr. Neuenhofen in Ecuador)
 - a. Attendance of General chapter 1898 – spiritual good of the people
 - b. The spiritual / moral wellbeing of Fr. Neuenhofen – the good of the people

IV. Concrete ways of discerning the will of God (Part I)

1. God's inspiration
2. Evaluation of circumstances
3. Availability of personnel
4. Asking for advice
5. Will of Superior – Will of God

V. Concrete ways of discerning the will of God (Part II)

1. The greatest spiritual profit
2. (For our missionary work) Baptized people have a kind of precedence over non-baptized people
3. Keep independence with regard to rich benefactors
4. Foster a particular nationality, culture etc, but not at the price of the exclusion of others

CHAPTER 3: FR. ARNOLD'S DIFFICULTIES IN MAKING THE RIGHT DISCERNMENT

CHAPTER 4: DISCERNMENT A RISK (Example: Fr. Arnold himself)

CONCLUSION

INTRODUCTION

Today we have come together for the first recollection day of this 2018 General chapter. And I was asked to speak to you about discernment in our founding generation. The way I understand this is to draw you into the discernment process of our founding generation in as much as this is possible. However, I have to narrow the topic down. I will concentrate on our founder, St. Arnold Janssen. And the reason for that is very simple.

He saw himself as the God-chosen founder who had the task to lay the foundation of the SVD and SSpS with its two branches, the active and the contemplative one, and to do it so soundly that future generations could build on it. You will hear me speak mainly about our founder, but the other members of the founding generation are included; that follows from the way in which I collected my material: from letters he wrote to members of the founding generation: letters to superiors and individual members: these are letters published by Fr. Alt and the letters of the correspondence of Mothers Maria and Josepha with Fr. Arnold, published by Sr. Ortrud Stegmaier SSpS. I decided to let him speak as much as possible.

In this short hour of reflection I intend to go about it in this way:

I first invite you to reflect on the man Arnold Janssen - from the point of view of his own self-understanding. For this is the root of his way of doing discernment. After that I will look at the principles which he followed in the discernment process and which flowed out of his basic self-understanding. The principles are like a skeleton which has to receive flesh: that is, the words of Fr. Arnold and some other members of the founding generation which I bring as examples.

CHAPTER 1: FR. ARNOLD'S BASIC SELF-UNDERSTANDING

I want to describe Fr. Arnold's basic self-understanding as consisting of various elements. The first and most fundamental element is Trinitarian.

LOVED BY THE TRINITY – IN LOVE WITH THE TRINITY

The first element of Arnold's self-understanding I see indicated in his words: *The Triune God tells us: Before the foundation of the world I have already chosen you and I loved you with never-ending love.*

Fr. Arnold was a man who knew himself loved by the Holy Triune God.

To this divine love of the Blessed Trinity he answered with his own love for the Blessed Trinity which he expressed in different ways:

* Together with John Baptist Anzer he committed himself to the missionary work of the new mission house in Steyl on June 16, 1876: with the words: *Already truly prostrate before your face, for the increase of your honor and for the greater spread of your kingdom upon earth, in honor of the most Sacred Heart of Jesus and for the salvation of all souls we promise you the following: May the wishes of your most holy Son be mine and I will work as much as I can so that your holy gospel will be spread upon earth – I wish to be a servant of the Divine Word in the service of the King and Queen of the angels. Everything I do is to serve the Divine Word for the spread of his word; my tongue is to serve Your Divine Word.*

** On October 3, 1887 Fr. Arnold dedicated himself to the Holy Spirit in the Vincentian Church in Vienna / Austria. About that dedication / consecration he said: *"I have given myself completely to Him in body and soul as an offering, and I have asked Him for the grace to know the greatness of*

His love, to live and die for Him alone. May He assist me to live in the world free from sin and to act according to the will of God in all perfection!"

These two dedications / consecrations breathe the Ignatian spirit of magnanimity and generosity.

Fr. Arnold now hoped that the members of St. Michael's mission house (and after 1885 the members of the SVD and still later the members of the sisters' congregation) would have that same generous spirit, and so the statutes of 1876 state: Our society is to be "a totally obedient instrument in God's hand." "The society must seek to die to its own will."

Such selfless, generous dedication to the Triune God is for the Desert Father Cassian the requirement for entering the process of discernment: for discernment requires a way of looking at life that is so selfless "that people participate in God's way of looking at things and this way of looking increasingly becomes determinative for their life (in Kees Wajjman, *Spirituality*, p. 496).

Fr. Arnold fulfilled this requirement, because it "became almost natural for him to look upon things and events that entered his life from a supernatural viewpoint and then respond accordingly (Hermann Fischer, *You are the Temple of the Holy Spirit*, p. 14).

And that, in turn, he was able to do because in the words of his secretary Fr. Hilger: "His whole life and labor were prayer. He was habitually in an attitude of prayer" (in Arnold Janssen, *Yesterday and Today*)

An example of this is the Trinitarian quarter hour prayer with which he expressed his Trinitarian love every 15 minutes: "We love you with our whole heart."

And the last, but not least proof of his Trinitarian love and his identification with the Trinity is the name he gave to his congregation: Society of the Divine Word. The Divine Word is not only the book called Bible, but the Incarnate Word of the Father, the Son; the Word of the Son: the gospel; and the Word of the Holy Spirit: the whole Bible, the Word of the Prophets, apostles and priests, inasmuch as they wrote under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

A man knowing himself loved by the Blessed Trinity and in love with the Blessed Trinity – that is the man who entered the process of discernment. And this man knew himself – and that is the second element - as

THE GOD-CALLED FOUNDER

Arnold's first biographer Fr. Hermann Fischer writes: "He lived and worked in the strong conviction of his divine calling" (in Reuter, *ibid.*, p. 36). God had given him the task to lay the foundation on which future generations of missionaries could still build. On May 14, 1902 he wrote to Sr. Walburgis, the first SSpS Superior in Brazil: he expected from her "to be faithful to Sr. Superior General and her successors, to his successors as SVD Superior General, and to him, Fr. Arnold, "who has been given the task by Divine Providence to found the congregation of the Sisters and to introduce them into their training and missionary work."

THE LOVING AND CONCERNED SPIRITUAL FATHER

But he did not only understand himself as founder, he understood himself – and that is the third element - in a much deeper, more personal way: as spiritual father of the priests, brothers and sisters. To newly ordained priests he said: "God, the Lord, has made me the father of this community. My task is to promote the welfare of the Society".

His discernment was always done with a view to the future well-being of his foundations and with a view to the personal well-being of his spiritual sons and daughters - exactly as a father should care for his children.

OPEN TO GOD'S GRADUALLY UNFOLDING PROVIDENCE

And last but not least we have to mention, as a fourth element, that Fr. Arnold was a man of unconditional faith and trust in God's gradually, slowly unfolding guidance. That had an important influence on the time the discernment process could take - a long time. Fr. Arnold described this element in the second issue of his mission magazine "Kleiner-Herz- Jesu Bote" (Little Messenger of the Sacred Heart) with these words: *It belongs necessarily to God's guidance / providence that he reveals to us his intentions only gradually. How else would we learn to walk before him in the light of faith and unconditional trust!* (Little Messenger of the Sacred Heart, February 1874)

After these preliminary remarks we now can try to join him in his and other prominent founding generation members' process of discernment.

CHAPTER 2: DOING THE WILL OF GOD – THE MOST BASIC SPIRITUAL PRINCIPLES of DISCERNMENT

I. Introduction

In this chapter we will look at the foundation of all discernment.

In the statutes of 1876 we read: "Our society is to be "a totally obedient instrument in God's hand." "The society must seek to die to its own will." And then the society will be able to be a "totally obedient instrument in God's hand" and do the will of God. To do the will of God means to fulfil God's commandments, and in the words of Jesus:"

"'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.'" (Mt 22:37-39).

And for Fr. Arnold that meant: The Honor of God, the Benefit of the Society and of the Souls in general.

This he wrote to the sisters on April 5, 1894: "Finally, my dear Daughters, I ask you to pray for me and the many and important matters that are pressing on me, so that I can resolve them in a way that is to God's honor and for the benefit of the Society and of souls in general."

To discern what is truly in God's honor and truly for the benefit of the Society and the people entrusted to us we cannot do with our own wisdom alone. We need the Holy Spirit and his gift of wisdom and that is a gift we have to pray for.

So let us first reflect on Fr. Arnolds thoughts about prayer for the gift of the Holy Spirit.

II. Discernment and prayer for the gift of the Holy Spirit

1. In Fr. Arnold's own life

Fr. Arnold's secretary, Fr. Anthony Hilger, wrote: "As he was dictating letters, his thoughts would sometimes stop flowing. I would see him silently move his lips in prayer for help to find the right words. Often he asked me to kneel down with him and pray the *Veni Sancte Spiritus*, since he was seeking divine aid to determine the proper tone of the letter. After doing so, I noticed that his

dictation proceeded smoothly, in contrast to the laborious way in which he had been formulating his sentences before. ‘You see,’ he would then remark at the end, ‘the Holy Spirit did grant his assistance.’”

2. Fr. Arnold’s admonition for prayer for the gift of the Holy Spirit

* On Nov. 27, 1902, Fr. Arnold wrote to Sr. Superior Leonarda in Techny: “Pray to God the Holy Spirit that he may grant you the spirit of wisdom, to guide the Sisters under you well.

** In Argentina a hot issue was the undertaking of an economic project by the first superior Fr. Becher: to buy land for settlers, the money for which they with the help of good harvests would reimburse. To the visitor Fr. Bodems Fr. Arnold wrote: “At the same time you must pray to the Holy Spirit, to be able to discern with caution and insight what is right and that you also will be able to warn of enterprises which most probably won’t lead to a good end and which only waste good men.”

We pray for the gift of the Holy Spirit to be able to discern how we can best do the will of God - and that includes how we can best love God and give honor to him and love people as ourselves, that means engaging in activities giving benefit to our Society SVD and the people God entrusts to us.

And that now brings us to the following principle of discernment

III. The honor of God, the benefit of the Society and of the people

1. The principle applied to formation

a. Application of this principle in the discernment process of candidates for his foundations

* Fr. Arnold hoped for men to join his new mission seminary in Steyl. So in September 1875 he described the qualities of a candidate for the mission house in his monthly publication “Kleiner Herz-Jesu-Bote” (Little Messenger of the Sacred Heart), helping them to discern if God had called them to the missionary life in the new mission house. In his application the candidate had to declare “*which magazines he had read about the work of missionaries among pagan peoples, since when he had the wish to become a missionary, how often and for how long he had been sick, if he felt able for the sake of God to put up with heat, cold and other sufferings and deprivations, and if he was prepared to submit himself to all the rules of the mission house and to train himself in prayer, in obedience and patience in order to become, with the grace of God, a good missionary [for the people].*”

** The principle: the honor of God, the benefit of the society and the good of souls also underlay the conditions for acceptance as a member of the Sisters, Servants of the Holy Spirit. Here Fr. Arnold laid down very strict criteria – after years of experience in applying them in accepting SVD priesthood and brother candidates.

The criteria were: whether the sisters were: (1) conscientious, especially in silentium, (2) pious, i.e. value prayer and the sacraments, (3) diligent at work, (4) whether they have specific training and if so, for what, (5) whether they easily find fault, criticize, or are moody, or whether they are uncomplicated and modest, (6) whether they show availability and are good-natured, (7) whether they tend towards scrupulosity or melancholy [meaning depression] (Mother Maria Helena Stollenwerk, Groundwork, p. 127, footnote 4).

On May 13, 1902 he wrote to Mother Josepha and her assistant and eventual successor, Sr. Theresia Messner not to be too mild. They should “pray fervently to the Holy Spirit for the light of grace, so that God the Holy Spirit will give the two of you an excellent spiritual eye as a special grace from Him.”

b. Application of this principle regarding the missionary training of sisters

In a letter of April 6, 1894 to Mother Maria, he wrote with regard to the types of work for the sisters in formation, like the choice between folding the printed sheets of the family magazine “Stadt Gottes” – which was the breadwinner for the whole Steyl mission organization - and learning Spanish for missionary work in Latin America: “... the intellectual tasks of the sisters, e.g. learning Spanish and the harmonium, are far more important than manual tasks and I therefore request that the former be given first priority. E.g. folding printed sheets is good *but it is more important that the sisters endeavor to become qualified to serve God in the missions.* Therefore I ask you to give more time for the study of Spanish (p. 260). Here the service of God and people took precedence over the material well-being of the Society.

2. The principle applied to an apparent conflict situation: welfare of the society/confrere and good of the people (case of Fr. Neuenhofen in Ecuador)

This situation arose with regard to the mission of *Fr. Henry Neuenhofen in Ecuador.* The first two SVD missionaries in Ecuador were Fr. Henry Neuenhofen and Fr. Pierlo. Fr. Pierlo soon died.

It was a time when the church workers in that diocese were threatened to such an extent, that even the bishop had left the diocese and lived in a safer part of the country. For some time Fr. Neuenhofen was alone in the diocese and was its administrator. The fact that in spite of all difficulties, Fr. Neuenhofen was persevering with courage showed Fr. Arnold that God wanted Fr. Neuenhofen to be in Ecuador, as Fr. Arnold wrote to him on August 24, 1896.

Nevertheless, there was the special situation of the General Chapter in 1898.

a. Attendance of general chapter – spiritual good of the people

Fr. Neuenhofen was supposed to attend the General Chapter in 1898. Because of the special situation Fr. Arnold wrote to him on Jan. 23, 1897: “*Please, deliberate before God and your conscience if it is His divine will that you come to the chapter or that, in the face of the great need of the immortal souls in your diocese you don’t come.*” Fr. Neuenhofen chose not to attend for the good of the people who in this particular situation took precedence over the good of the SVD.

b. The spiritual /moral wellbeing of Fr. Neuenhofen – the good of the people

Back in Steyl the confreres were not happy about Fr. Neuenhofen remaining alone and not being able to confess his sins. It seems that they could not imagine Fr. Neuenhofen not committing a mortal sin which would make it impossible for him to celebrate Holy Mass and the other sacraments. So on July 18, 1897 Fr. Arnold wrote to Fr. Neuenhofen: *If you are still full of courage and if the dangers in your being alone are not too big for you, then I thank God; but please, speak clearly about your situation at any time. I am very much concerned about the salvation of the people there and even more about your own, for you are a priest; I don’t have obligations towards the people but towards you. Therefore, if you feel that you are in danger in matters of morality, that you are in danger of committing mortal sins, then I allow you to leave and go to North America. If that is not necessary, I wish that you stay where you are. All of this in regard to the extraordinary situation in which you are.*

On January 17, 1898 Fr. Neuenhofen answered: *“Please, your Reverence, trust me! It is the answer to your question. Considering the painful experiences in the past, the terrible situation at present, your question disappointed me ... I do not have any witnesses for the way I live. However, what I have here to go through as a priest who is faithful to his duties, the people over there [in Steyl] have no idea about...”*

On August 9, 1898 Fr. Arnold answered: *“I believe you. I wrote because I was pressed to do so by some people. I myself believed that I must not withdraw you with regard to the many souls for whom you will be the saving angel. And also for the others you are worth so much. ... You have a very important task, even though you only see little success”*.

IV. Concrete ways of discerning the will of God (Part I)

I now will follow a summary of those concrete ways as given by Fr. Jacob Reuter:

Sometimes God lets us see through his inspiration what he wants us to do. But the ordinary way of discovering the will of God is through evaluation of the circumstances, the situation. In order to be able to do that properly it is a sign of true prudence to ask advice from others. God helps us through others to recognize what he wants us to do.

For religious, as we are, the will of the superior is the expression of God’s will.

Yet finally, as Fr. Arnold admits, we cannot recognize God’s will with absolute certainty (Jacob Reuter, *Proclaiming the Word in the Power of the Spirit*, pp. 23-24).

Let us now look at examples which show how Fr. Arnold and members of the founding generation followed these principles in establishing the will of God:

EXAMPLES

1. God’s inspiration

A first criterion for finding the will of God is God’s inspiration regarding what he wants us to do.

To the new priests in St. Gabriel’s Fr. Janssen said, “If we have the desire to do God’s will and we ask him to enlighten us, he will give us a strong inner movement to act in conformity with it.”

To this Fr. Joseph Freinademetz and Mother Maria Helena Stollenwerk would have agreed wholeheartedly.

Fr. Joseph wrote to Fr. Arnold in his letter of application: *Very Reverend Father! Since the thought of dedicating myself to the cause of the missions has pre-occupied my mind for some years, I presume, with the utmost respect, to knock at the door of your house and beg for admission. ... I have often sought counsel in prayer to the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus, and since this desire becomes especially strong during such moments, I take this to be a sign that Our Lord in his infinite mercy has deigned to choose me for this lofty vocation. I beg Your Reverence to grant my request.*

Mother Maria believed she was called for missionary life in the foreign missions, more precisely in China. So she went around looking for a congregation which would send her to the foreign missions, preferably to China. In all those convents she visited she felt sad and discouraged and she knew God did not want her to join those sisters.

But when she came to Steyl, so she wrote: “I was happier than I could ever remember being before; I felt convinced that this was the right place or that at least the purpose and task of this Society concurred with what I believed God desired from me. I could do nothing but thank God and offer myself totally to him in sacrifice” ((Franziska Carolina Rehbein SSpS, *Silent Presence, The Contemplative Heart of the Founding Generation*, Steyl, 2012, p. 33.34).

2. Evaluation of circumstances

The ordinary or the usual way of finding the will of God lies for Fr. Arnold in the evaluation of the circumstances and conditions, that is, the situation.

Let us look at a few examples.

First of all we look at Fr. Arnold's own life when he wanted to find what God's will was for him with regard to the foundation of a German mission house and a Sisters congregation. His discernment process for the mission house went like this:

He reasoned that it was urgent to start a mission house. But who should do it? "The newly ordained priests in Prussia cannot find a place for their pastoral ministry because of the Kulturkampf. They should be given a post in the foreign missions. But who can organize their work? The elderly priests who are pastors should not abandon their posts because by government regulation they cannot have any successor. Newly ordained priests have no experience and are not qualified for it. Well who then can do it? To write for the missions, as I have done, is good but it does not suffice. But something ought to be done about the work that is so necessary. I am convinced that it ought to begin with an apostolic school where Latin and all other objects are taught. Since I have been teaching in a high school for twelve years and taught all subjects, I cannot deny that because of my experience up to now I am in a way prepared for the solution of the problems of this kind. Therefore, recognize God's will and put your hand to the task" (Reuter, *Proclaiming the Word in the power of the Spirit*, p. 24).

This was Fr. Arnold's discernment regarding the foundation of a mission house and the SVD. During her first visit to Steyl on March 18/19 1881, he mentioned to Helena Stollenwerk the following three criteria which would show him God's will regarding the founding of a Sisters congregation: (1) if the foundation of a congregation for missionary sisters was necessary. There was no doubt for him that it was necessary. (2) if there were young women willing to enter such a congregation Here the answer was also yes. (3) If those women had trust and confidence in him, the founder. To this he left the answer open.

Evaluation of circumstances meant also taking into consideration the economic profitability of and availability of manpower, etc., for a new foundation in Australia.

Fr. Superior Klein in Sydney, Australia, planned to buy a farm which was supposed to become the center of the SVD in Australia. Regarding the farming and other ideas Fr. Arnold wrote on Jan. 1st, 1903: "You always enjoyed farming. But you have to ask yourself whether farming where you are now is at all profitable. That is not always the case....".... "If farming is profitable, and the prospect of sufficient Brothers or farm workers, then it is generally good to have an extensive property. A person can then also think about planting forests or fruit bearing trees, which are able to bear fruit with only a little work required. Take, for instance the coconut palm in the tropics. But then you must take care that you have a good market for your product, which implies that you can bring it cheaply to the city or center, where you can have it marketed through others." (From: Arnold Janssen, ed. Jos. Alt, transl. Frank Mihalic and Vincent Ferrer, *Letters to New Guinea and Australia*, p. 137)

3. Availability of personnel

Once he wrote, "The will of God can be recognized generally speaking from the circumstances, for instance, if people are available who can do the work." On another occasion, "What we cannot do, is not God's will."

4. Asking for advice

It is a sign of true prudence to ask advice from others. God helps us through others to recognize what he wants us to do.

EXAMPLES

+ For writing our first complete SVD rule in the Latin language, the September Rule of 1885, Fr. Arnold used at least 9 different sources (Alt, *Journey in Faith*, p. 216).

+ In writing the SSpS rule, Fr. Arnold used many more sources, 17 in all. (ibid., pp. 351f).

+ When Fr. Arnold discerned about accepting work in Argentina for the [German] migrants, he consulted the provincial of the German Jesuits who lived in nearby Exaeten, who had worked in Latin America for 18 years. “From the abundance of his experience he told me about some happenings in those countries. I got an insight into the circumstances there and the need of help from outside” (Alt, *Journey in Faith*, p.551-552).

+ A very good example of Fr. Arnold’s consultation is accepting a mission in a German colony in Africa (the German government wanted German missionaries in its colonies)

Fr. Arnold studied the German colonies in the region south of the Sahara. “That meant I would have to make a thorough study of the travelogues, books and mission reports, lest I venture rashly into unknown waters. So I immediately ordered various books, the most important travelogues, and so forth, and studied them as thoroughly as I could. All but the most necessary work I set aside. There was so much to learn: health conditions, climate, location, ethnic background of the tribes, rainy season, dry season, the possibility of having the entire mission transferred, future plans, etc.” (Bornemann, transl. John Vogelgesang, Arnold Janssen, p. 281) The final outcome of all this discernment and study was the acceptance of the mission in Togo.

+ During the negotiations about settling in Shermerville /Chicago, Fr. Arnold had stopped Fr. Superior Peil because he had heard of a swamp being there. When Fr. Peil informed him that the swamp did not pose any health danger to the confreres, he wrote to him on January 27, 1899: *So you may decide the matter in God’s name. If there is really nothing to this swamp, and if Father Fischer as your adviser agrees with you, you may conclude the deal with the parish priest, Father Thiele. / But the two of you cannot dispense with an on-the-spot inspection of the area as soon as the period of frosts is over, nor with the interrogation of trustworthy people living in the vicinity. At the same time you should also enquire into the prevailing winds, especially how frequent and prolonged they are from the east, the north and the south, the south wind being the one that would blow the swamp air toward you. The wind pattern there will be much the same as in Chicago. You will no doubt be able to find quite accurate information on the matter in a Chicago Directory.*

+ Fr. Arnold was accused of sending only those people to the missions whom nobody wanted at home; at home they wanted to get rid of them. On that he wrote to Fr. Visitor Bodems in Argentina /Brazil: *When selecting the newly ordained priests, I try to recognize which of them the Lord God has called to the mission and which ones not. More often it will be the case that I err in making the judgment. However, I can assure [you] that I do all I can in order not to make an error; and therefore I deliberate a lot, collect a lot of material and ask others for their opinion. In that way I seek to get to know God’s holy will and to follow it, always having in mind His greater honor and the benefit of the missions and the whole society. But I do not follow the principle people wrongly accuse me of.*

5. Will of superior – Will of God

Religious have a special way of finding God's will for them:

Maria Helena Stollenwerk said: *For me the will of superiors is the clearest indication of the holy will of God* (Helena Stollenwerk in a letter to Arnold Janssen, Jan. 8, 1893)

These words will have made Fr. Arnold most happy. For it was his own strong conviction as well, as we will see from the following examples:

EXAMPLES

+ To Fr. Peil in the USA – 24 January 1898

Finally, take care that you do not fall victim to the North American fever of independence. The Lord God withholds a good deal of enlightenment from a religious subordinate, which he gives to his superior instead, and which the superior may impart to him only if the religious trustfully submits to him. For it is God's will that the subjectio regularis be held sacred. So do not abandon yourself too enthusiastically to your own plans, or you will experience unpleasant consequences. Allow yourself to be guided instead by the good Spirit which has always animated you.

+ FOR OUR BETTER UNDERSTANDING

In the statutes of 1876, Fr. Arnold explains more in detail how he understands this statement.

... superiors should not presume that every command they give is the will of God, it is nevertheless God's will that subjects obey. The dear Lord will never allow them to come to harm by following the way of obedience and conformity to the will of their superiors" (transl. John Vogelsang in Bornemann, *Arnold Janssen*, Rome 1975, p. 97).

V. Concrete ways of discerning the will of God (Part II)

In the course of my readings I came across some other principles which guided Fr. Arnold in his discernment process

1. The greatest spiritual profit

+ When Fr. Arnold deliberated whether in China the French protectorate should be given up in favor of the German protectorate for his missionaries he wrote: "I am ready to bear the responsibility for the disadvantages that the acceptance of the German protectorate can bring us; also the personal sacrifice it involves. With regard to the latter, acceptance of the protectorate will be tantamount to the renunciation of other missions in China; and that is a great sacrifice because China is the most fruitful mission in the whole world. Just as a business man looks for financial gain, the missionary must seek spiritual profit. For France will fight tooth and nail to see that no more missions in China are ceded to us" (Alt, *Journey in Faith*, p. 482).

+ We also find this idea of the greatest spiritual profit in Fr. Arnold's deliberations whether the SVD should accept Argentina and the care of mainly German immigrants there as a mission. To Bishop Anzer he wrote: "It seems that activity in far-away China alone would not satisfy the great majority of Catholics and with the growing recognition that more must be done for emigrants and that perhaps in Latin America it is easier to save 10,000 and preserve their faith than 3,000 in China, we cannot turn a blind eye."

But with regard to China this was not the only reason. In the just quoted letter to Bishop Anzer he added the words: "Besides many students have no real love for China or show no talent for the Chinese language or liking for Chinese customs. For this reason we have chosen three priests... for this mission" (Alt, *Journey in Faith*, p. 550)

+ On Jan. 10, 1900 Fr. Arnold wrote to Fr. Superior Tollinger in Brazil about taking over the parish of Rio Negro.

“Taking over a new parish is not like a new foundation but comes pretty close to it. And therefore, like for a new foundation, you have to send us as much information as possible.” For instance there should be mentioned the number of people in the parish, size of the parish, next railway station and distance from it.

“Furthermore, there are countries where the roads in the rainy season are slippery (no solid ground); in addition it is to be feared that snakes will come out of their holes at this time. What kind of extremely great, superhuman demands are made on the priest, when in those times he is called to a sick person? A religious priest believes that under those circumstances he has to do everything possible and go to the extreme. However, a religious congregation cannot be indifferent to the fact, that through such extreme efforts it will soon lose its best people. Since we cannot be everywhere, those places are wanted, where we can do most for the salvation of the immortal souls and where at the same time the religious life can be observed. For that it is necessary that the stations are close to each other or that each station has three priests in residence....”

2. (For our missionary work) Baptized people have a kind of preference over non-baptized people. The spiritual welfare of people, that is their eternal salvation, was of fundamental importance in the discernment process. But now the question arose: does God want us SVD to serve only the salvation of non-baptized people, pagans as they were called in those days, or does he want us also to care about the salvation of those who are already baptized and are in danger of losing their faith?

EXAMPLES

Fr. Arnold expressed his own discernment with regard to this problem in this way:

In no. 37 of his Personal Notes (in German known as his spiritual last will) Fr. Arnold writes in the year 1906: “May, therefore, nobody despise *work in Catholic countries*, particularly in those in which the faith of the people has declined. Here we are dealing with *baptized Christians* who therefore have a kind of preference over others, even though the pagans, because of our constitutions, have the first claim to our help” (Personal Notes. p. 47).

Why do baptized Christians have a preference over others, for instance over the pagans? The answer to this question we find in a letter of Fr. Arnold to Fr. Limbrock in New Guinea:

“From a people to whom the gospel has not yet been preached, the Lord God demands only the observation of the natural moral law. If, however, the gospel has been preached to a people, it will become more culpable once it falls back into paganism. For that reason you have a great duty that there, where you have begun, you continue and complete what you have begun”.

I think it is also this thought that made him discern to send missionaries to Latin America and even to take over a Catholic Teachers’ College in Vienna / Austria.

3. Discernment regarding proper behavior towards rich benefactors

In the context of deliberations regarding the taking over of the parish of Cascatinha in Brazil, Fr. Arnold wrote to Fr. Superior Tollinger on Jan. 10, 1900: “The principle which Fr. Arnold advised him to follow was: you can be on good terms with them, but do not sacrifice your independence” (see letter to Fr. Tollinger of Jan. 10, 1900).

4. Discernment regarding nationality / language in Shermerville (Techny Trade School)

The question was: how much of the German culture and language should be preserved in a country where English is the main medium of communication?

In a letter to Fr. Thiel in Chicago of August 26, 1898 Fr. Arnold wrote: “If you wish that the use of the German language does not wholly cease to exist among children of German parents, then a congregation of German origin would in such a case have something in its favor which an Italian congregation might lack (Salesians of Don Bosco). ... I am naturally averse to any extreme nationalism, but it does seem to me that it must be a challenge to foster our German nature, not exclusively, but sufficiently to ensure that it will be preserved from the danger of decline, and yet at the same time, where possible, to choose such forms as to prevent other nationalities from feeling rejected.”

In a letter of September 6, 1898, Fr. Peil contributed in the following way to this process of discernment. He wrote: “With regard to the nationality question, the view of many reputable German priests seems correct to me; namely, that the German language and culture should be retained as long as possible, though without forcibly opposing the process of Anglicization. In any public establishment here in this country it would be a big mistake not to want to accord the same rights to the English language as to German [...]. In God’s eyes the souls of English speaking people are just as precious as the German ones.”

CHAPTER 3: FR. ARNOLD’S DIFFICULTIES IN MAKING RIGHT DISCERNMENT

Fr. Arnold now lets us share the problems he found sometimes in making the discernment:

It concerned an appointment of SVD superior and parish priest in Desterro, Brazil:

On December 19, 1902 Fr. Arnold wrote to the visitor Fr. Bodems and superior Fr. Tollinger:

“I got the thought that perhaps Fr. Köster should make the beginning in Desterro. The reasons are as follows:

- a. for the beginning in Desterro we need a capable and hardworking man. A less capable and less zealous man could easily act in a clumsy way and in that way spoil many things.
- b. Fr. Köster is perhaps the one who is best suited to become superior later on. If that will be the case, then it is best that he himself make the beginning there. If another was to start there and Fr. Köster would come later as superior, the first one would feel overlooked.
- c. Fr. Willems is hardworking and well behaved, but perhaps not suitable to be the leader in Desterro. If that is the case we must not send him there first; he would find it very difficult if we then sent him a superior under whom he had to work as a subject.
- d. If Fr. Köster is still regional of Espirito Santo he could best have contact with that part of the country from Desterro. Actually, the regional should be in Espirito Santo. But what work should he be given there? If he becomes parish priest he is less independent in relation to the bishop. But we hardly can make Frs. Benzerath or Pfad Regional. Fr. Pfad cannot become regional since he is younger and it would be difficult for Fr. Benzerath to be under him. Fr. Benzerath cannot become Regional because he is not suitable.
- e. If Fr. Köster remains in Juiz he will be in pain if another one is placed above him. Furthermore, there will be too many men in leadership positions in Juiz.

Fr. Arnold simply did not know how to decide, so he finally wrote: “Please, deliberate thoroughly about all this and let me know!”

CHAPTER 4: DISCERNMENT A RISK (Example Fr. Arnold)

Being well aware of the difficulties in making the right discernment Fr. Arnold said: “We decide according to the best of our knowledge and ability, but must realize we can be wrong. Each decision is a venture connected with a risk. If it fails it was not God’s will. If it succeeds, we can recognize God’s will in the success” (Bornemann, *The Piety of Arnold Janssen*, in McHugh, ed., *Arnold Janssen Yesterday and Today*, p.96).

+ The foundation of Steyl was God’s will

In his sermon at the opening of St. Michael’s mission house on September 8, 1875 he said:

Whether anything will come of it is known only to God. .. We hope that the house will attain its purpose. And he [God] may do with us what he wills. If the seminary succeeds, we will thank the grace of God. If nothing comes of it, we will humbly strike our breast and confess that we were not worthy of the grace (Alt, *Journey in Faith*, p. 80).

We know the mission house succeeded; its founding was God’s will.

++ The foundation of a mission house in the German town of Lethmathe was not God’s will

Fr. Arnold had also to experience that we cannot recognize God’s will with absolute certainty, yes, that we can err.

Steyl was in the Netherlands; once the Kulturkampf was over he wanted to build a mission house in Germany; he thought of a place called Lethmathe in Westphalia. He was delighted about the property offered to him by the parish priest: “For it really seems to me that the divine goodness has prepared a nice little place full of love for us there, from whence blessings will pour out on the locality and many pagan countries” (Alt, *Journey in Faith*, p. 455).

However, as it turned out, Fr. Arnold was wrong. The state authorities forbade the foundation in Lethmathe, because it was Protestant territory and only few Catholics were living there. A mission house in Lethmathe was not God’s will, but another place called St. Wendel’s.

CONCLUSION

For the last hour we first looked at the roots of Fr. Arnold’s discernment and then joined Fr. Arnold in his discernment process in various situations / quite different from each other. Fr. Arnold lived in the 19th and briefly in the 20th century, we lived in the 20th and now in the 21st century. Our task is not simply to copy Fr. Arnold. Hopefully he can be an inspiration and challenge. Our challenge with regard to Fr. Arnold’s way of discernment is to do what St. Paul wrote to the Thessalonians: *Test everything, hold fast to what is good* (1 Thess 5:21).

When I read what Pope Francis recently wrote about discernment, then it is not such a bad idea to look at Fr. Arnold’s discernment process: The Pope wrote: “Discernment is a gift of the Holy Spirit. If we ask with confidence that the Holy Spirit grant us this gift, and then seek to develop it through prayer, reflection, reading and good counsel, then surely we will grow in this spiritual endowment.” Furthermore: “In discernment we simply cannot do without the silence of prolonged prayer, which enables us better to perceive God’s language, to interpret the real meaning of the inspirations we believe we have received.” Doesn’t that sound a bit like Fr. Arnold who made his discernment so much in prayer, that we can say with his secretary Fr. Hilger that the outcome of his discernment was the result of his prayer?