

Henry Erlemann, then one of the first residents of the new mission house as well as carpenter and prospective student of Latin, remembered the occasion thirty-six years later with these words:

“Throughout the ceremony a kind of tension was discernible. It found expression in the questions directed to Rector Janssen and the small handful of residents of the house. One German priest in particular could not refrain from voicing openly in sarcastic terms his doubts and misgivings about the whole enterprise. Still, no one should take offense because doubts were expressed at such a beginning! After all what was there to see? A thin, weak priest who was the superior; a carpenter with a blue apron [Erlemann himself] and an exiled Capuchin Brother [Br. Juniperus], plus a few hired workers to make the preparations, an old crumbling house decked out for the occasion with borrowed furniture, and a banquet table set with borrowed cutlery and chinaware. A ploughed-up potato field had surrendered its potatoes for the banquet table. For the rest, little else. Such was the appearance of the ‘German-Dutch Mission House’ whose solemn inauguration had been announced in the newspapers.

The guests must have thought it a mockery to be invited to such a celebration and were disappointed beyond measure when they saw the reality. Who could blame them? I felt it clearly at the time myself. But I must admit, I did not doubt that the work would prosper. Otherwise I would not have remained, considering the circumstances then and for some time afterwards” (*ibid.*, pp. 82-83).

September 8, was, however, to end on a joyful note. On 5 September, Father Arnold, “at the repeated insistence” of seminarian Reichart had sent the following telegram to Cardinal Franchi, the Prefect of the Propaganda Fide, and had included payment for the reply (cf. Bornemann, *Arnold Janssen*, Manila, 1975, p.72 and Alt, *Journey in Faith*, p.80):

“To Cardinal Franchi in Rome. The seminary for foreign missions which has been erected here for Germany, Austria and the Netherlands with the approval of very many bishops of these countries and which is to be opened on the feast of the Nativity of Mary, requests with deepest humility the papal blessing. Steyl in the Diocese of Roermond in Holland. Janssen, Rector” (*Kleiner Herz-Jesu-Bote* [Little Messenger of the Sacred Heart], vol. 2, 1875, No. 10, p. 75).

On September 8, shortly after six pm, this telegram arrived from Rome: “Janssen, Rector of the Mission Seminary, Kaldenkirchen – With heartfelt love the Supreme Priest (the Pope) imparts his apostolic blessing on the new seminary, the Rector and students. Cardinal Franchi” (*ibid.* and Bornemann, *Arnold Janssen*, transl. John Vogelsang, Manila, p.72).

Fr. Arnold received belated good wishes from the Superior General of the Scheut Missionaries in Belgium: “You have put your hand to the plow. Move bravely forward. Arm yourself with courage to struggle against all difficulties... They are bound to come, but will be the best proof that this is a good thing and comes from God” (*ibid.*).



The Arnoldus Family Story

September 8, 1875

Arnold Janssen remembers:

“September 8, a day so important for the mission house, has begun; it is a day as beautiful and glorious as only autumn days can be. Even though we were up pretty late yesterday evening, nevertheless the day began already rather early today. For there is still a lot to be put in order for the feast. Today the feast of the Nativity of Mary is being celebrated in all churches of the Netherlands. However it is not a holy day of obligation and work is permitted everywhere. So in some places this day passes almost like an ordinary weekday. This time it is different for Steyl. The day is important for the mission house and not less for the village itself. In a big city such an institution would be lost among the multitude of different institutions. In a small place, however, it is different. For such a place attains a new and greater importance through such an institution [as ours]. If the church bells ringing yesterday evening as on the eve of high feasts sounded so solemn to our ears, maybe their sound also filled with joy some of the people of the village, the surrounding area and the whole parish of Tegelen to which Steyl belongs. Since the neighboring parish priests had the kindness to announce in their churches that the inauguration and blessing of the mission house would take place on September 8, that solemn ringing of the church bells may also have been understood wherever it was heard. (*Kleiner Herz-Jesu-Bote* [Little Messenger of the Sacred Heart], vol. 2, No. 10, 1875, p. 74).

The High Mass

The High Mass began at 10 a.m. in the parish church of Steyl which was situated very near to the mission house. “By 10 AM all the places in the little church were occupied, mostly by people from Steyl and Tegelen. There were also - and that the Steyl church had seldom seen -20 guests from more distant places, including a number of visiting clergy and Father Real, the president of the Francis Xavier Association from Aachen [today MISSIO]” (cf. Bornemann, *Arnold Janssen*, transl. John Vogelsang, Arnoldus Press Manila, p. 71).

Msgr. Dr. Ludwig von Essen, the parish priest of Neuwerk/Mönchengladbach, celebrated the Mass with Frs. Beckers from Tegelen and Wolters from nearby Reuver assisting. The church choir “sang a polyphonic Mass” (*ibid.*).

The Homily

Fr. Arnold himself was the preacher. In his homily, which lasted almost for 1½ hours, he said:

“An of its kind unique and rare celebration has today gathered us together in such great numbers around the altar of the Lord. It is the beginning of a holy enterprise, dedicated to God, which, even if it only partly reaches its goals, cannot fail to become a source of salvation and blessing for many thousands of people ...

“What will come of the mission seminary we do not yet know; goals are not always reached. It nevertheless asks for your participation. For it has been founded with the blessing and approval of so many bishops and its purpose is such a noble, great and exalted one. Should I not today direct your eyes to this purpose and explain to you what it is we are striving for? But then I have to tell you about the noble and exalted mission enterprise of the Catholic Church. For the purpose of this house is none other than to help spread the gospel throughout the world, amongst all peoples who still do not know God at all or not in the right way, and to train young men for this and to send out the missionaries after they have completed their training” (Hermann Fischer, *Arnold Janssen*, Steyl 1919, pp. 123-124).

Fr. Arnold then told his listeners that there were 1500 million people living all over the world; and only about 210-220 million of them were Catholic. “Protestants and Greek Orthodox have the same number and the Moslems also have almost the same number. That amounts to a total of 500-600 million, whereas the greater part of the world population, numbering about 800-900 million people, are still pagans who neither know nor adore God as creator of the world” (H. auf der Heide, *Die Missions-gesellschaft von Steyl. Ein Bild der ersten 25 Jahre ihres Bestehens* [The Mission Congregation of Steyl. A picture of its first 25 years of existence], Steyl, 1900, p. 44). Then Fr. Arnold showed that “what had been done and was being done for their salvation, - was all far too little.” Particularly Germany, Austria and the Netherlands had to do more; they did not even possess a single mission house for the training of missionaries.

“These considerations,” he went on, “have moved a German priest to take on himself the task of establishing such an institution. The good God has helped him and, after much effort, we have achieved a modest beginning. God alone knows whether it will be a success. For the present, we thank the Giver of all good things for His assistance. Let us hope that the house will achieve its purpose” (H. Fischer, *Life of Arnold Janssen*, transl. Frederick M. Lynk, Mission Press Techny, Ill, 1925, p. 143-144). “The simplicity of this beginning should not discourage us. The mightiest tree starts as a single seed and the strongest of giants was once a weak, whimpering baby. We know that with our present resources we cannot accomplish our task, but we hope the good God will provide everything we need. And he 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*, Steyler Verlag Nettetal, 2002, p. 80).

Turning to his Dutch listeners Fr. Arnold said: “Everywhere [in the world] the name of Steyl and Tegelen (as well as of nearby Venlo) will be connected with that of the mission house. Furthermore, we are not strangers amongst you. For the mission house

is also for your country and it has been welcomed by your bishops and we hope to be able to accept in our midst very many children of this people as missionaries, teachers of missionaries and mission aspirants” (Kleiner Herz-Jesu.Bote [Little Messenger of the Sacred Heart], vol. 2 1875, No. 10, p. 75)

Further Events

After the High Mass everybody “without being told by anybody, went on their own initiative to the mission house. Since there is a small collection box in its entrance hall they wanted to place their offerings there. Even though they gave mainly copper coins, of which 100 don’t amount to much, it nevertheless showed the friendly participation of the crowd gathered, which is not to be underestimated” (*ibid.*).

“A photographer had come from Kempen for the occasion and took pictures of the seminary, the members of the community and the guests. He had offered his services free of charge, but when the plates were processed, almost none of the exposures turned out well” (Bornemann, *Arnold Janssen*, transl. John Vogelsang, Arnoldus Press Manila, 1975, p. 72).

Then followed a festive meal. “The good people of the village had gladly lent tables, chairs, linens, cutlery, etc. for the occasion” (H. Fischer, *Life of Arnold Janssen*, transl. Frederick M. Lynk, Techny, Ill, 1925, p.144). “Toasts were proposed to the Holy Father, the bishops, and also to the benefactors of the seminary” (Bornemann, *Arnold Janssen*, transl. John Vogelsang, Arnoldus Press Manila, 1975, p. 72).

“At four o’clock a short service was held in the village church” (*ibid.*). Then everybody went to the mission house. Here Dean Raetson of Venlo, representing Bishop Paredis of Roermond, blessed the new mission house. Since a patron had to be chosen, Dr. von Essen, after some objection on the part of Arnold Janssen, “insisted on having the house consecrated to the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary and placed under the protection of the Archangel Michael as principal patron. Secondary patrons are Saints Joseph, Anne and the Three Kings (... as the first fruits of the pagans)” (Alt, *Journey in Faith*, p. 81).

Parish church
of Steyl
until 1929

Mission House

