

undertaking that offered no prospects of success, but she remained faithful ... Having been asked what had moved her to take such an active interest in the mission house, she replied: 'When I saw Rector Janssen for the first time, and heard him speak, I was convinced at once that he was a truly pious priest who had nothing but the honor of God and the welfare of his neighbor at heart; it is not so very difficult to recognize a pious priest. And for this reason I had great confidence that God was with him and that his work would succeed'

(Hermann Fischer, *Arnold Janssen*, transl. Frederick M. Lynk, S.V.D., Mission Press, Techny, Ill. 1925, p. 150).

### OTHER HELPERS

A potter in Steyl must have shared the same confidence as Miss Wolters, as the potter's nephew tells us: "Shortly after the mission seminary was opened Rector Janssen came to our workshop and ordered cups, washbowls and similar items. All had to be made exactly according to his specifications. When I delivered the finished products to the seminary, he said: 'Tell your uncle I do not have any money now. The good Lord will have to provide it.' He said this on many occasions but years later he paid for everything. He was always very grateful because we had waited patiently such a long time to be paid" (Bornemann, *Remembering Arnold Janssen*, Analecta SVD – 42, p.70).

Various services were rendered by the Cleophas family. Once Fr. Arnold "mentioned that he did not have any pillows. The daughter said: 'Just bring us the feathers and you will soon have the pillows.' A few days later he brought the feathers. On another occasion he said: 'I don't have a shirt to wear.' Again the Cleophas girl said that if he would provide the cloth she would make the shirt. A few days later he brought several pieces of cloth to her which someone in Venlo had given him" (see *ibid.*, p. 68).

"When people wanted to give vegetables or some such thing to the Mission House and did not really know where to deliver it, they would take it to Cleophas, who then took care of it further. ... Their brother Henry... fetched the laundry at the beginning of the week and brought it back on Saturdays" (*Memoirs of Brother Martinus Jürgens, History of St. Michael's Mission House*, Steyl, 2011, p. 15).

After Arnold Janssen's first visit to him, Mr. Kreykamp, a tobacco factory owner in Steyl believed:

*If that little man succeeds in doing what he has in mind,  
the work must certainly be the Lord's.*

(Bornemann, *Remembering Arnold Janssen*, p. 65)



## The Arnoldus Family Story

On September 9, 1875, the day after the inauguration of St. Michael's mission house in Steyl, Arnold Janssen told his three fellow residents in the mission house, Reichart, Erlemann and Bro. Juniperus, William Janssen OFM-Cap: "The house is paid for, but we begin our life here with an empty purse"

(Hermann Fischer, *Arnold Janssen*, transl. Frederick M. Lynk SVD, Mission Press Techny, Ill, 1925, p. 147).

Life in the new mission house, therefore, was a life in poverty. Such poverty moved visitors so much that they just had to help as Bro. Martinus Jürgens, one of the first Brothers of the Society of the Divine Word, tells us: "The beginnings of our Mission House in Steyl must have been very poor. The more I asked the old people, the more I began to realize that the people were moved by pity and sympathy to be so helpful. It seems that almost all the families who lived in the neighbourhood – with the exception of some families that were still rich – collaborated in one way or the other with the great work. Our late founder and his first helpers, with their simple and friendly manner, appear to have won the hearts of the homely, trustful people. The great poverty of those beginnings disposed the people to help. Mr Henry Doesborgh remarked: There was no other way; after all, they had nothing" (*Memoirs of Brother Martinus Jürgens*, transl. Jacqueline Mulberge SSpS, *History of St. Michael's Mission House*, Steyl; Steyl, 2011, pp. 12-13). Help also came from outside Steyl; amongst those helpers Miss Helene Wolters holds a very special place.



### HELENE WOLTERS

Arnold Janssen got to know Miss Wolters through Dean Raetson of Venlo. She was the proprietress of a large store. One day "Father Arnold went to the store and asked: 'Do you have any strong gray canvas for straw mattresses? Any checkered cloth for pillow cases? Large woolen blankets?' The shop assistant Miss Boots led him upstairs. He examined each article very closely but made no move to purchase anything. As he was leaving he said: 'I am the rector of the Sisters in Kempen.' Not a single word was said about the mission seminary.

“About four weeks later Miss Wolters received a postcard from Kempen. She was asked to prepare material for 2 straw mattresses and pillow cases; also 2 yellow blankets and 2 quilts. A wagon would come to fetch the things. The card concluded with the words: ‘I have bought a house in Steyl.’ Soon everything was picked up” (see: Bornemann, *Remembering Arnold Janssen*, Analecta SVD – 42, transl. John Vogelsang, Rome 1978, p. 58). This was the beginning of Miss Wolters’ relationship with the new mission house and the Steyl Missions, particularly with China, which lasted until her death in 1914.

At the invitation of Arnold Janssen, Miss Wolters and Miss Boots visited the mission house. Miss Boots remembers: “We rode in a wagon. The poverty of the house appalled us. A crack in one wall was so wide that light from outside fell into the parlor.” “The only other persons in the house besides the rector were Erlemann and Reichart. The latter was told to prepare a good coffee. He soon brought in a plateful of plums, several very thick slices of bread and a large dish of butter. The rector said: ‘In my room are two beautiful gilded cups the Sisters in Kempen gave me as a remembrance; kindly fetch them for the ladies.’ When the water had boiled, Reichart put large spoonfuls of ground coffee in each of the cups and poured hot water over them. ‘Obviously you have never prepared coffee before’, the girl observed. ‘That is true,’ he replied. ‘I’m from Tyrol; there we don’t know what coffee is.’

“Afterwards the rector escorted the two ladies to the third floor where the dormitory was located. Straw mattresses with very simple blankets lay on the floor. Not a chair, not a table to be seen anywhere. In a downstairs room were two chairs and a small table that Erlemann had made.

“When they had left the house the ladies exclaimed: ‘What poverty! Now we know what poverty is!’

“On Miss Wolters’ suggestion many women attended the inauguration ceremony on September 8. The rector conducted them through the house. Its obvious poverty touched their hearts. During the next few days two wagons loaded with all sorts of furniture and food arrived from Venlo” (see *ibid.*, p. 62).

In Venlo Miss Wolters won another business woman as a benefactress – Miss Keybecks. She “owned a large store in Venlo. One afternoon she drove over to Steyl in her buggy and brought with her 40 napkins, about 50 pounds of rice, 25 pounds of barley, some barley flour and also several packages of tea. After that we often had bread and tea at supper. She also brought many handkerchiefs – all of them red – and a coat that had belonged to her deceased brother. Though it did not fit me too well, I always wore that coat much to the amusement of the people. Anyway it gave everyone a chance to see just how poor we actually were” (see *ibid.*, pp. 67-68).

Years after the founding of Steyl, Miss Wolters remembered Fr. Arnold’s

order of straw mattresses and bed sheets: “My maid had to make first one straw mattress, then three more. The order was urgent; the maid had to work far into the night. Fr. Janssen thought that the bed sheets were too large. If they were cut in half one could have two sheets for the price of one. But when the sheets were cut they were so small they failed to cover the mattress. The four corners of each sheet had to be sewed to the mattress” (*ibid.*, p. 67).

All his life long Fr. Arnold was grateful to Miss Wolters. On September 29, 1907 he wrote to her: “32 years have gone by now since the beginning was made. How poor and small everything was then! And now a number of big houses are standing here and around the world many others have already been built, where the priests who were trained and ordained in the meantime are working together with the Brothers and Sisters. It is true, the good Lord has blessed the poor beginning more than we, and particularly I, deserved. ... May God bless you, most esteemed Miss Wolters, and may he give you the grace to become holy and to attain a really good place in heaven” (Archive of the Generalate SVD, No. 51288).

Miss Wolters also became a great benefactress of the mission in China. She donated the Sacred Heart church in Puoly. On March 2, 1889 Bishop Anzer wrote to her: “It pleases me and it will make you happy that today I can inform you, that I have already started to build *your Sacred Heart church* in Puoly, which is my main residence. Therefore it will become my *cathedral* and I hope I can consecrate it on the feast of the Sacred Heart” (Archive of the Generalate SVD, No. 51273).

Heinrich Erlemann, the carpenter in the new mission house and later missionary to China wrote on February 28, 1914 on the occasion of the death of “... dear Miss Wolters who has been a mother to our mission house at a time when we needed help most. ... I have known her for by now thirty-nine years and I thought over and carried out much with her in matters of the mission house as it was being founded ... That the old Bishop Paredis [of Roermond] stood so firmly on the side of Superior Janssen and the mission house, while otherwise in those days almost all the higher and lower clergy of Holland and partly also in Germany behaved in a very reserved manner, is almost completely due to the quiet work of Miss Wolters. She knew how to deal with the influential priests and through them influence the old Bishop. In those days she went around Venlo with two genteel ladies in search of benefactors for the mission house and at that time it was seldom that a steamboat came [to Steyl harbor] which did not bring an abundance of collected gifts free of charge. I myself took delivery of such supplies ...” (Archive of the Generalate SVD, No. 51289).

Because of her support of Steyl Miss Wolters also suffered criticism. Even her own family advised her “not to make such great sacrifices for a strange