

Theology in Images and the Symbolism of the SSpS Sisters

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Introduction

The world of images that the Founder left us is very considerable and worth studying, no less than his written works (most of which are not yet available outside of the German language). Sister Ortrud Stegmeier, SSpS, a great specialist in the history and spirituality of the Arnoldus Family, said the following in this regard: „Our blessed Father and Founder, Arnold Janssen, thanks to his acute sense of images, symbols and gestures helped us to find a path to follow.” („Zeszyty werbistowskie”, Nr 13, Arnold Janssen, Duchowość, p. 102). It seems to me that in recent decades we have lost this path. The Founder's legacy in many cases was considered a reflection of his time and therefore unoriginal and useless to inspire our spirituality and our missionary service today. As evidence of this is the almost total absence of the images elaborated in the foundational period in our contemporary publications. This whole world of graphic symbolism fell into oblivion and its symbolic and theological value is largely veiled for our generation.

Our article does not aim to analyze the full graphic output of the Founding Generation era. We focus our attention primarily on those images and graphics that can help you understand the symbolism of the historical logo of the SSpS sisters. Through our analysis, we were able to discover three important theological lines: the outpouring of the Spirit from the cross, the hovering of the Spirit, and the Trinitarian aspect that is constantly in the background.

1. The painting "The Heart of Jesus in the clouds".



Our analysis will begin with the image "The Heart of Jesus in the clouds". This image appears for the first time in a brochure prepared by Saint Arnold for the needs of the Apostleship of Prayer for which he was responsible in the diocese of Munster. In one of the copies of this brochure, the following inscription is preserved:

"This Sacred Heart picture was painted by hand by the Reverend Superior of the Society of the Divine Word ... and was the first Sacred Heart picture in the Mission House of Steyl. It was especially venerated by the founder of the Society of the Divine Word, Arnold Janssen. - J. Steger SVD, Steyl, December 14, 1889 testifies to this."

On the other hand, it is known that Arnold Janssen registered this image at the Ministry of Culture on January 24, 1867 and named the painter Franz Commans as its author. However, it seems that there is no contradiction in this, since the content of the painting comes entirely from Saint Arnold and the painter contributed his professional knowledge. It is also possible that Saint Arnold prepared a sketch.

According to the description of Sister Ortrud , “the painting represents the Heart of Jesus that hovers over the waters on the first day of creation. From the wound of the Heart of Jesus, the Creative Spirit, symbolized by six rays, and the Spirit of Pentecost, in the form of flames, pour out to earth” (Zeszyty, p. 102).

Fr. A. Rohner sees in these rays “the light of the Word” and “the Spirit of Grace” of our congregational prayer, which “spill down, where our vision, in the immensity, only sees mountain peaks and reefs battered by the waves of the sea: a suitable image of the barren night of sin and paganism

(in the current version: "of unbelief"), the earth was confusion and chaos, and darkness covered the surface of the ocean". (In: Arnold Janssen Yesterday and Today" p. 267).

2. The title page of the "Little Messenger of the Heart of Jesus".



Seven years after the appearance of the painting "The Heart of Jesus in the Clouds", in January 1874, Saint Arnold began to publish his missionary magazine "The Little Messenger of the Heart of Jesus". On the title page of this publication is the image of Jesus crucified. Water and blood flow from his pierced side. However, they look more like rays of grace, similar to the emanation of spiritual gifts in the aforementioned painting.

This image in the "Little Messenger" seems to illustrate the evangelical texts that speak of the origin of spiritual gifts, and even of the Gift par excellence, that is, of the Holy Spirit.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus announces that the coming of the Holy Spirit will resemble a flow of streams of water and that it will be linked to his glorification.

"On the last day, the most solemn of the feast, Jesus, standing up, exclaimed: 'Whoever thirsts, come to me; and let him who believes in me drink.' As the Scripture says: 'Springs of living water will flow from her womb.' He was referring to the Spirit that those who believed in him should receive. Because the Spirit had not yet been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified" (Jn 7, 37-39).

It must be emphasized that "glorification" in the fourth Gospel means the fulfilment of the mission of the

Word, that is, at the moment of His lifting up on the cross. This, then, is the fulfilment of the words of Jesus about the emanation of the Holy Spirit from the cross. This emanation is suggested in Jn 19, 30: "When he had taken the vinegar, he said: 'It is finished', and bowing his head, he gave up the spirit". The great specialist in the Gospel of John, Raymond E. Brown, comments on this verse as follows:

"The very last words of vs. 30 are so phrased as to suggest another theme in Johannine theology. Although Matthew and Luke also describe Jesus' death in terms of his yielding up his life spirit (see NOTE), John seems to play upon the idea that Jesus handed over the (Holy) Spirit to those at the foot of the cross, in particular, to his mother who symbolizes the Church or new people of God and to the Beloved Disciple who symbolizes the Christian. In 7:39 John affirmed that those who believed in Jesus were to receive the Spirit once Jesus had been glorified, and so it would not be inappropriate that at this climactic moment in the hour of glorification there would be a symbolic reference to the giving of the Spirit." (The Gospel According to John, AYB, vol. 29a, p. 932).

Then comes the crucial moment for the symbolism that we are analyzing. In verses 33-34 we read: "When they came to him, seeing that he was already dead, they did not break his legs, but one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and immediately blood and water flowed out." The ecclesial tradition sees at this moment the symbolism of the sacraments of initiation: Baptism (water) and the Eucharist (blood). And since these sacraments are crucial to the birth of the Church,

ch, it is also said that the Church is born from the open side of the Saviour. And therefore, these are gifts that became available thanks to the sacrifice of Christ that made possible the coming of the Spirit. Raymond E. Brown says: "this symbolic reference is evocative and proleptic" (, that is, it is an anticipation of the actual coming of the Spirit on the evening of the day of the resurrection on the Twelve and on the day of Pentecost on the ecclesial community.

Fr. Brown sees the coming of the Spirit at the moment of the opening of the side this way: „ Jesus truly gave the Spirit who is the source of fait (It is worth noting that this interpretation of the water from Jesus' side seemingly goes back to the 2nd century: Irenaeus, Adv. Haer. IV 14:2, says that in many passages water represents the Spirit of God) (...) One frequent interpretation would see therein a contrast between the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist and the crucifixion. Baptism by the Baptist did not convey the Spirit, for he baptized only in water (1:31); the real begetting by water and Spirit (3:5) was something that would not come until Jesus had been glorified (7:39). The Spirit would not be able to come until Jesus had departed (16:7), that is, until he had shed his blood. In the poetic phrasing of the First Epistle the water had to be mingled with Jesus' blood before the Spirit could give testimony: "not in water only, but in water and blood. And it is the Spirit that testifies to this." Thus, it would seem that in the Gospel picture of a flow of blood and water from the side of Jesus, John is saying that now the Spirit can be given because Jesus is obviously dead and through death has regained the glory that was his before the world existed (17:5). The Spirit is the principle of life that comes from above, and now Jesus is on his way to dwell with the Father on high. The soldier's lance thrust was meant to demonstrate that Jesus was truly dead; but this affirmation of death is paradoxically the beginning of life, for from the dead man there flows living water that will be a source of life for all who believe in him in imitation of the Beloved Disciple. " (The Gospel according to John, p. 950).

3. The scapular, the bas-relief of the Heart of Jesus, the Throne of Grace and the Medallion

The symbolism of the outpouring of the spiritual gifts or of the Holy Spirit at the moment of Jesus' death is preserved in other images that appeared in Steyl and were disseminated in the places served by the congregations founded by Saint Arnold.

- The scapular



Around the year 1890 the Arnoldus Family presented their own scapular. The SVD Constitutions of the year 1891 give the following instruction regarding its use by the confreres:

"Hidden on their breasts, they should carry an image of the Holy Spirit hovering over the Sacred Heart of Jesus" (Rule 5, statute 1).

With this image Saint Arnold continues to promote the idea of the outpouring of spiritual gifts from the open Heart of Jesus.



- The bas-relief of the Heart of Jesus

In 1895 the bas-relief appears with the same symbolism. The first version had the Heart of Jesus, without the image of the entire person of Jesus. It seems that Saint Arnold quite quickly changed his mind and opted for the representation of the bust of Jesus with his heart exposed.



In the image, the symbolism of the outpouring of grace is maintained and this becomes a very particular sign that allows us to recognize the Arnoldian origin of the image.



- The Throne of Grace

Saint Arnold preferred to use this image in the design of the churches that he built. The image represents the Father holding the cross in his hands with the Son sacrificed on it and the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove, soon to come to earth. We can see this image on the door of the tabernacle in the upper church of Steyl, on above the main altar in the church in Nysa (Poland) as well as in the transept of the Basilica of the Holy Spirit in Buenos Aires. (Arnold Janssen influenced the design of all these churches.)



In some publications (e.g. "An heiligen Quellen", Steyl 1947, p. 48) we can find an interesting engraving, which is a kind of "introduction" to the image of "Throne of Grace". The painting shows Jesus praying in Gethsemane. There are an astonishing number of characters on it. These are the angels who show Christ the instruments of the Passion. Above the cross we see the figure of God the Father. The Holy Spirit seems to be in the center of attention. He is not crucified, but waits for his hour to come - the hour of the outpouring of the Spirit.

- The Scapular-medallion

Shortly after the death of Saint Arnold, from the year 1910, the Holy See allowed medallion-shaped scapulars to be used instead of cloth scapulars. The Arnoldus Family also made this change. To a large extent, the symbolism of the bas-relief of the year 1896 is used, that is, with Jesus represented as a person with his heart exposed. The presence of the Holy Spirit can be understood in the pre-pascal sense (as in Lk 4, 18: The Spirit of the Lord is upon me) as well as in the post-pascal sense: on the cross Jesus from the bearer of the Spirit becomes the giver of the same Holy Spirit.



4. The Cross of the Sisters

The cross used by the two congregations of the Sisters Servants of the Holy Spirit deserves special attention. The first cross of the sisters had decorations at each end in the shape of the cloverleaf - a symbol of the Trinity. Above the cross was the image of the Holy Spirit. At the time of the Second Vatican Council it was changed to its current form, maintaining the image of the Spirit, but in a more dynamic way, since the Holy Spirit is really descending at the moment of Christ's death. At first glance it may seem that the conjunction of the symbols of the cross and the Spirit is simply a consequence of the name that the Sisters have, but in light of everything we have said so far, we can affirm that this symbolism is being faithful to the theological thought that is the basis of the charism that Saint Arnold left us.



5. Other images



In publications that come from Steyl, you can find images that express the presence of the Spirit at the moment of Jesus' crucifixion. Some examples are a fragment of the drawing "The tree of life" that represents how the Spirit is the giver of the sacraments from the cross and "The prayer of Jesus in Gethsemane" where the Spirit is represented on the cross, as an integral character of the history of salvation.

The motif of the coming of the Spirit at the moment of the death of Jesus is present in various churches and chapels of our congregations. One of the most expressive images is the mosaic in the convent of the Holy Spirit Adoration Sisters in Nysa (Poland), where the coming of the Spirit with his gifts is expressed with special emphasis.



6. The Spirit Over the Waters



Another field of analysis offers us the traditional logo of the Servants Sisters of the Holy Spirit. Graphically it is quite simple. We see in it the Holy Spirit hovering over the waters and a cross sinking in the waters.

It seems that this image was of great importance to the Founder, because, apart from using it as the logo of the Sisters, he used it to decorate the apse of the church of the Holy Spirit in the SVD seminary of San Gabriel in Mödling, Austria.



It seems, that the theme of the logo has not been researched enough. One source that deserves special attention are two volumes of outlines of St. Arnold's retreats and spiritual conferences that were published in 1974 in the „Analecta” series (numbers 30 and 31). Unfortunately, even today these materials are only available in German. In Spanish, in 2020 a book, prepared under the direction of Sister Anneliese Meis Wörmer SSpS (Chile), was published that presents the teaching of Fr. Arnold about the Holy Spirit (The Dynamism of the Holy Spirit and His Effects on Arnold Janssen According to His Letters, Lectures and Retreats).

In his reflections, Fr. Arnold repeatedly returns to the idea of the hovering Spirit:

- over the waters at creation (Gen 1, 2)
- over Christ in the incarnation (Lk 1, 35)
- over the Church on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2, 3)



St. Arnold also uses this same image in relation to specific people. That is why he speaks again of the Spirit that hovers over Mary in the annunciation, over Jesus in his baptism and in his mission (Lk 3, 22 and 4, 18). Then the Founder personalizes and updates even more the action of the Spirit, saying that it hovers over each Christian at the crucial moments of their spiritual life: baptism, first Communion, confirmation. And in the case of religious life - at the time of perpetual profession.

Also, certain places are the space over which the Spirit hovers. St. Arnold, in the style of his time, sees the world as deprived of the Spirit. „The world is like a river full of dirt” while a monastery or convent is “a garden with angels from heaven” and “the Holy Spirit hovers over it, sending rays of grace” (Analecta 30, p. 86). There is no doubt that Arnold's deepest desire was to make these rays reach all hearts in all corners of the world.



In light of all that has been said, the symbolism of the image of the Spirit hovering over the waters in which the cross stands should not be limited to the Genesis text on the creation of the world, but must also be contemplated in the paschal events. Thus it will more fully agree with the idea of the emanation of the Spirit from the cross.

As for the cross of the Sisters, Saint Arnold says that they carry "the holy image on their breasts, where the Holy Spirit hovers over the cross of Jesus, for the Holy Scripture says that Christ "by the Eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God" (Hbr 9, 14; *Analecta* 30, p. 129). The cross is also a source of spiritual strength for us today, because "the Holy Spirit hovers over him as at the moment of Christ's death, filling him with power" (*Analecta* 30, p. 221).



7. The Steyl Cross

The Trinitarian idea of the sacrifice of the Son by the will of the Father, which consequently makes possible the coming of the Holy Spirit, seems to be present in the stained glass window in the house of the SSpS sisters in Steyl, as well as in a more schematic variant in the logo of the German province of the SSpS Sisters.



STEYLER
MISSIONSSCHWESTERN
Dienerinnen des Heiligen Geistes (SSpS)

We quote a short spiritual reflexion on this image:

In the cross, diverse and colourful.
 All the colours of our lives are at home there.
 You and I we have space in it.
 In the cross is life
 diverse and colourful.
 No black and white painting
 You and I, we have space in it.
 not only with our light and shadow sides,
 but also with the intermediate tones
 with the green of our hope and longing,
 with the blue of our depth and breadth
 with the red of our passion and devotion
 and when we are in this cross,
 then we will also be pulled into the middle there,
 where the cross becomes a spiral and dynamics.

Conclusion: The images of Saint Arnold and our missionary service.

As I finish, I would like to say a few things about some practical consequences of the theological ideas expounded above.



The idea of the emanation of the Spirit from the cross makes us think of the crosses in our world today and of our personal crosses and their relationship with the Holy Spirit. Despite the changes that theology has undergone since the time of St. Arnold, there is one thing that does not change in the Arnoldus Family. It is a strong and defined missionary charism. Although we carry out our service in different fields (formation, administration, education, parishes) we always have before our eyes the obligation to serve the least in our societies, the most disadvantaged and unprotected people: immigrants, poor, excluded, etc. We feel called to go to the periphery, to the crucified of this world. We know this direction as the Lord's favorite and we know that the place of the cross is not only the place where we meet Jesus ("What you did to one of these little brothers of mine you did to me" - cf. Mt 25: 40-45), but also as a place to which the Holy Spirit calls us and where we find the Holy Spirit ("The Spirit of the Lord is upon me to announce the Good News to the poor" - Lk 4: 18).

According to Saint Arnold, the Spirit hovers over us in the important moments of our spiritual life, especially in sacramental moments and in the profession of vows. But nothing makes us doubt that the Holy Spirit is above all the great Animator of our missionary service. Each and every one of the Arnoldus Family can say "the Spirit of the Lord is upon ME". In the Sisters' logo we see the Spirit hovering over the waters, as in the moment before creation. He is the "Great Artist and Craftsman" and from his hand comes the whole created world. The missionary vocation often obliges us to be in frontier situations, where little or nothing has been done. It is there, thanks to our ministry, inspired by the Holy Spirit and carried out with the help of his power, that a new world, a new creation, is to appear.

May the world of images that Saint Arnold left us encourage us to commit ourselves more and better in our missionary service!