



THE FOUNDING GENERATION AND ECUMENISM

We S.Sp.S have been praying, meditating, reflecting, discussing, and setting vision formulations on the theme of *“Communion with Others”* during the past one year. Now at the close of the year of communion, it is appropriate to introspect, integrate and see how far we have assimilated the theme into our core being *and* how our Founding Generation had fostered the spirit of ecumenism during their time.

According to the Second Vatican Council, Ecumenism is *“the effort made to re-establish unity among various Christian churches to develop closer relationships, co-operation and understanding.”* It is a process of restoration of unity among Christians. We understand that to be in communion with others is to be of one heart, though many faces. It is born out of a quest for unity for which Christ prayed *“that we may all be one,”* (John 17.21) in order to witness to the Good News.

Arnold Janssen and Ecumenism

In our study about the Founding Generation, we can hardly find any direct reference to ecumenical activities for Christian unity as understood today. Arnold Janssen however, prayed for Christian unity and offered masses for this intention at Fulda, the grave of the Apostle of Germany. His printed word and platform added momentum to this effort. He used pamphlets, publications and periodicals to promote interest in the mission. His founding of the three congregations is an expression of that zeal.

St. Arnold Janssen faced challenging situations brought on by *Kulturkampf* with daring response. He crossed the geographical boundary to start our Missionary Congregations. For him, the love of the Triune God was the foundation of everything. His favourite text was, *“God so loved the world that he gave his only Son so that we may have eternal life.”* (Jn 3.16) To know God’s plan, to share his divine life with all humanity, filled with joy and wonder was the source of his apostolic enthusiasm and the depth of his prayer life. He started a prayer campaign beginning in 1865, the Apostleship of Prayer for the mission of the church in German speaking countries. As a pioneer in this prayer apostolate, he assisted the retreat movement in Europe, especially by opening his houses for lay retreatants. His ventures contributed to the mission of the universal church.

Arnold Janssen knew that the mission of the church suffered due to disunity among Christians. He spent ample time promoting Christian unity, which is the core of the mission as reflected in the Triune God. He felt with the church and responded to its needs everywhere. He sent missionaries to Latin America, supported the cause of Black missions in the United States. He learned the importance of giving witness to a divided world and worked towards building unity among people while respecting the plurality of cultures, languages and creative difference. Pluralism is a gift of God. In order to celebrate it we need understanding, respect, love, openness, prayer and meaningful dialogue.

We S.Sp.S are called to live the gift of internationality and interculturality present in our congregation, which has its own challenges. Article 304 of our Constitutions, states:

In the differences of culture, nationality, personality and age, we experience the richness of his gifts in each of us. We appreciate, encourage and help one another, share our joys and sorrows, and show interest in each other's life and work. The presence of the Spirit of Love in our midst is manifested in the mutual trust and loving thoughtfulness that are characteristic of our communities.

Similarly, Article 306 states, "Genuine community living calls us to continual conversion..."

Learning to agree to disagree is a grace, a gift and an art. In all these, our common endeavour is to seek the glory of the Triune God. Unity enlivens and heals, whereas division troubles and hurts. By the grace of the Holy Spirit and through the sacrament of baptism, we walk towards unity. Our search should be to serve the church and the mission of God effectively. We cannot underestimate the role of virtues like humility, faith and prayer. They are essential for communion with others. The stories of our own Founding Generation are a great support and encouragement for growing towards communion with others.

The Document on Ecumenism states, "The change of heart and holiness of life, along with public and private prayer for the unity of all believers, should be regarded as the soul of the whole ecumenical movement, and can rightly call spiritual ecumenism." The purpose of prayer is to transform, strengthen and enable us to embrace what God calls us to do.

St. Joseph Freinademetz and Ecumenism

The key elements that are necessary for communion with others were lived by St. Joseph Freinademetz in his missionary life. He was a great model missionary of prayer. He wrote, "Prayer is our strength, our sword, our consolation and the key to paradise. Woe to you if the well spring of devotion in you runs dry". He exhorted in one of the synod papers, "As a tree needs the earth to give it life and nourishment, so the soul needs prayer". He firmly believed prayer alone could keep the members united.

Joseph Freinademetz learned through experience that the only language understood by people everywhere is the language of love as love builds communion. He loved the people of China so much that he never wanted to return to his home country. He was truly a 'saint of charity'. As the church puts it, Saints are friends of God and so friends of people. It was the loving approach taken by the saint that ironed out the stress and strain that existed between Joseph Freinademetz and Bishop Anzer. He never considered being a missionary as a sacrifice offered to God, but rather a grace that God had given to him. He wanted to live God's love among the people of China and with fellow confreres.

Genuine conversion and renewal of life creates communion with others. Saint Joseph Freinademetz had adapted himself to the Chinese customs and habits, culture and way of thought, character and disposition. However, he learned that what was most significant was conversion of his heart. Finally, he became Fu Shen Fu, the lucky priest of China. He wrote to his sister about his desire to live and die with the Chinese. His love for the people of China was "always ready to make allowances, to trust, to hope, to endure whatever comes." Joseph Freinademetz had down to earth, integrated spirituality.

Dialogue and Communion

Ecumenical Dialogue is another pivotal point for communion. St. Pope Paul VI said. "Dialogue is not simply an exchange of ideas, but an exchange of gifts", Efforts must be made to eliminate words, judgments and actions that do not respond to the condition of unity. PRAYER is the support for dialogue, an essential path towards human self-realization. Thanks to dialogue, greater maturity in prayer is possible and dialogue serves as an examination of conscience in a spirit of conversion. It becomes a "dialogue of conversion" leading to vertical and horizontal dimensions of dialogue.

Dialogue is a means of resolving disagreements that hinder communion. The Spirit of charity and humility must dominate authentic ecumenism that is a gift at the service. The impact of communion is improved collaboration, closeness to one another and therefore to Christ. Our conversations enable us to recognize the need for reconciliation and healing. Pope Francis urges us to encounter Jesus by loving our neighbour. In his encyclical, "*Ut Unum Sint, On Commitment to Ecumenism*," St. John Paul II wrote:

With the grace of the Holy Spirit, the Lord's disciples inspired by love, by the power of truth and by a sincere desire for mutual forgiveness and reconciliation are called to re-examine together their hurts. Fellowship with the Father and Son Jesus Christ means unity of the mind and heart, where powers of evil cannot over power.

Building relationships also requires practical cooperation at all levels: pastoral, cultural, and social, as wells as witnessing to the Gospel message. Ecumenical cooperation is a dynamic road to unity; co-operation becomes a witness and a means of evangelization that benefits all involved. Solidarity in the service of humanity can easily be attained on issues like

freedom, justice, peace and the future of the world. Our united voice has the best chance of being heard.

Blessed Maria and Blessed Josepha and Ecumenism

Mother Maria and Mother Josepha, the first Mothers and Co- Foundress of our Congregation, lived lives of communion with God, with others and with one another. Their relationship to each other remains as a model for future generations. They were light to all people by their living faith in God and active charity.

In 1866, Helena Stollenwerk joined the pious association, The Apostleship of Prayer. She took particular interest in the salvation of abandoned children, especially those in China. Love for God was expressed in her love for mission. Helena was endowed with gifts of love, prayer, humility and goodness. She placed all her trust in the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Her heart burned with zeal for China. Waiting to realize her dream became very hard for her, but she found consolation and strength in prayer.

Helena worked closely with Arnold Janssen, surrendering herself day after day to God in unconditional service. Her motto was, *“To God the honour, to my neighbour the benefit and to myself the burden.”* As a good superior, Mother Maria was always concerned about sisterly love among the sisters and her union with the Eucharistic Lord strengthened her action. Besides, love for the Holy Spirit remained Maria’s guiding force. When she was asked to transfer to the contemplative branch though hard, she accepted it as the will of God. She regarded it as her lot to burn with God’s love, to persevere in prayer and to lead a life that was poor and lowly. She knew that God alone can fill the human heart and cannot be captivated by creatures; where love is lived, there heaven is anticipated. Love was the fulcrum on which her community functioned.

Appreciating the goodness and gifts present in the other brings communion. The mutual appreciation and love between Helena and Josepha were well-known facts. It was their desire to make the road to unity better and smooth. The model life of the first mothers and their initiatives and activities promoted unity. Mother Josepha, a simple and humble woman, chosen by God to be a Co-Foundress of our congregation, along with Arnold Janssen and Mother Maria, would say, “It is the work of God. He has done it all; I am nothing.” Mutual love for one another is an important criteria for genuine devotion to the Spirit and thereby communion with others.

Mother Josepha would say that we are Servants of Infinite Love who bestows his blessings if we live in harmony, united in love. Mothers Josepha and Maria believed that it was God who brought them together to be of one heart and one soul. They and would not be real Servants of the Holy Spirit without genuine sisterly love for each other. Lack of sisterly love would be a great evil for our Congregation.

Conclusion

Today the Founding Generation beckons us to *live communion* and promote unity among the churches through direct and prophetic mission. Mother Josepha wrote, "I desire nothing more than with the grace of God, to be the least and to sacrifice myself for the work of evangelization." Entering into the practice of communion we long to realize through prayer and activities the vision and mission articulated by the saints. "May the darkness of sin and the night of unbelief vanish before the light of the word and the spirit of grace; and may the heart of Jesus live in the hearts of all." *This prayer* sums up the life and spirituality of all of us. Ecumenism is directed precisely at making partial communion grow into full communion in truth and charity.

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FOR REFLECTION:

1. If the Founding Generation were living today, how would they be in the forefront of dialogue with other Christian denominations?
2. What are the key elements of communion with others? What do our Constitutions say?
3. How could we live as disciples of communion personally and as a community? What would be its impact and how does it help our mission to be relevant?