

# Immersed in the life of the Trinity, transforming the world with compassion

## SVD General Council

### Introduction

When preparing this input, we contacted eight SVD provincials and some other confreres who are in collaboration with you in different areas. A confrere raised a noteworthy observation. We would like to share this with you already at the beginning of this presentation. He writes: "The fact that the two Congregations have the same Founder is not just 'a nice coincidence.' It is instead, something providential, and we are invited by the Lord to continue to allow our shared heritage to flourish for the benefit of God's mission. This is seen in the fact that the General Chapters of each Congregation have articulated our Trinitarian Spirituality. We deem it alive in our charism and commitment to God's mission. It is also spelled out in very similar expressions.

SSPS & SVD Mission Today: We give witness to God's Reign by emphasizing: God's universal inclusiveness and openness to diversity.

SVD through prophetic dialogue with Faith seekers, the Poor and marginalized, People of different cultures, People of different religious traditions and of secular ideologies. Marked by characteristic Dimensions: Bible, Mission Animation, JPIC, Communication

SSPS ... by fostering life-giving Relationships with the Poor and marginalized, People of many cultures, People of other faiths. Marked by integral Dimensions: Trinitarian Spirituality, Community for the mission, Prophetic Mission women, JPIC.

In recent General Chapters, both Congregations have deepened this approach by also stressing two challenges of our times:

- 1) giving witness by living with more awareness of interculturality in our communities,
- 2) attention to creation and ecological issues (the SSPS more than SVD!)"

Realizing this, we can only say: The Holy Spirit is really at work in guiding us.

In this presentation, we will first say a few words on the theme of your Chapter. This will be followed by the sharing of our experiences on the collaboration of the two congregations.

### 1. Immersed in the Life of Trinity

How does it look like to be immersed in the life of the Trinity? In asking this question, two images come to mind. The first is the image of our swimming pool at our *Collegio* in Rome. During

summer in Rome where the temperature reaches up to 35 degrees Celsius, the swimming pool is one of the most frequented places by our confreres. It is impressive to see how some confreres can stay afloat in the pool for many minutes, allowing themselves to be held up by the water. They seem to absorb the water while staring at the blue sky.

The second is the image of *Sakoseng* from the region of Sikka, Flores, Indonesia. *Sakoseng* is the traditional practice of the farmers working together to prepare the soil for planting before the beginning of the rainy season. The members of the group are women and men, young and old. With hoes in their hands, they till the soil in the rhythm of a song they sing together. There is a harmony of movements and melody. The group, as they work, enjoins the members to move and work as a single body. If new members are joining the group, they may need some time to get into the rhythm of the group. After that, they feel part of the whole. It seems there is unique energy flowing from the group to every member. At the same time, the whole group lives because of the participation of every member. The soil is prepared for the new season. There is joy on the faces of the farmers despite feeling tired after working a long day.

These two images express two dimensions of immersion into the life of the Trinity which, at the same time, represents two main aspects of religious missionary life. These are contemplation and action, or some would say: mysticism and politics. The image of people floating on the water in the swimming pool reminds us of the contemplative aspect of our life: the hands of God holding us up. Immersing ourselves in the presence of the Triune God is the experience of being at home with God. It connects us with the origin of our call. It is God Himself who takes the initiative, sustains us during the whole journey of life, and meets us at the end. We need to be aware of the primacy of God in our life and mission. We are in God's hands as we carry out His mission. This gives us a sense of calmness. We realize that we are confronted with so many limitations and weaknesses as individuals and as congregations. At the same time, this also helps us to be more humble. It is not about us, our religion, our Church, our Congregation, and our administration. It is about God, whose glory is always greater than we can ever think or imagine.

The two images also make us aware of the connectedness or interconnectedness with everything in the world and history. This is just like the water in the swimming pool that absorbs us and the singing and working of *Sakoseng* group. Immersion in the life of Trinity connects us with everything that exists and happens. Pope Francis uses the word interconnectedness to point out not only our deep and intense relationship with nature but also with all the human community and history. We are a fragment of the whole.

The immersion in the life of God is not just something to enjoy for oneself for a moment. It is a call to renew oneself and to transform the world. Swimming is a way to refresh oneself to be able to continue the work. The *Sakoseng* group prepares the soil for planting to sustain the life of families. The connectedness with all others inspires and animates us to work for the transformation of the world. God calls us personally. God also calls us into a community as a whole. We are called to work together to make the world a better place for everybody. Community is at the service of mission; and the mission, in turn, enriches and animates a community.

Immersion in the life of the Triune God has three consequences. The first is to deepen spirituality. Keeping in touch with God is the source of inspiration and nourishment in our life and mission. Without being deeply rooted in the spiritual foundation of life and purpose, we will be only limited to function where effectiveness and efficiency in our functioning are of prime importance in all of our experience and mission. The consequence is, once there is a failure or misunderstanding, we will easily give up. The second is community life. Community is only possible if we have something in common, something that binds us, something that we share. The community has a twofold character: it offers us a home and, at the same time it challenges us. A community can only support us to grow if it has these two characters: it makes us feel accepted but it also challenges us to work on ourselves to realize and accept our strengths and weaknesses for the shared mission. The third is the contribution to the transformation of the world. Communities are not just for themselves. They are embedded in the hands and immersed in the life of the Triune God. Communities are missionary in their most profound character: empowered to share in the mission of God: transforming the world in love and compassion. This is realized in the commitment to protect and promote life. The JPIC initiatives are the consequences and fruits of spirituality and community life.

Our congregations, sharing the same heritage of our Founder and the founding generation, have been collaborating, especially in these three areas: spirituality, interculturality, and Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation (JPIC). The more we go back to our roots, the more we become aware of the shared heritage that serves as the fountain of nourishment for our mission today. We glimpse in the history of the relationship between our congregations that there were at times misunderstandings, suspicions, and even cold wars. Some of our provinces are still struggling with the baggage of the past. We, the general administration of our Congregation, always make it a point to encourage confreres in the provinces to seek collaboration with our sisters. We feel that you are the first group with whom we should work together, since we share much in common.

Collaboration is a must for everybody who is immersed in the life of Trinity, since the mystery of the Trinity demonstrates to us that God is a God in *communio*. Collaboration is not just for the sake of doing effective work. Oftentimes, it is more natural and more effective to work alone. Working together can be quite complicated and always carries a risk of failure. This is true when people misunderstand each other and feel offended by each other. After much trying, some of our members have given up the idea of collaboration because they feel tired of it. And yet, cooperation is indispensable in our daily experience, since life is more than just trying to be effective or efficient. Collaboration is a school of humility where we learn to respect and accept each other and acknowledge that we need and depend on each other, and that the *other* always has something to offer and contribute.

## **2. Areas of Collaboration**

### **2.1. Spirituality**

In 2017, a year before the SVD 18<sup>th</sup> General Chapter, many of our confreres were very surprised upon learning about the decision of our two General Councils to suspend the Arnold Janssen Spirituality Team (AJST) in Steyl. For them, it was a strange decision to halt the activities of AJST that significantly focuses on spirituality. The reaction was an indication of the importance our members put on the collaboration of our two congregations in the area of spirituality.

Admittedly, we need to reassess our collaboration in the sphere of spirituality after almost 30 years, considering the need to have joint initiatives to deepen our spirituality. From our side, it is clear that these joint initiatives brought about a lot of improvements in the relationship between the two congregations. Therefore, we want to continue the collaboration in this area. An experienced confrere in accompanying renewal courses says: “When seminars, workshops, retreats, etc., are conducted jointly for both the SVDs and SSpS participants, there is a significant difference than when such events are given separately.” We are happy and thankful that “most of the retreat teams that are established in Nemi for the SVD renewal courses have an SSpS Sister as a team member.”

Collaboration to promote spirituality is not and shall not be only limited to the team in Steyl. In most of our PRMs, Sisters and confreres work in teams to design joint programs to foster our missionary spirituality. In some provinces, common retreats or recollections have been practiced over the years. Many PRMs have even designated teams to oversee the retreats and recollections. Some have centers with useful programs.

However, we SVDs, have more to learn from you. We have the impression that even though we have a good number of spiritual animators, they carry out their responsibilities more at the individual level rather than at the team level. We have to do more to encourage our confreres to do spiritual animation as teams. This might be the reason why, a few years ago, very few confreres responded when asked if they are involved in Arnold Janssen spirituality teams. More significantly, a lesser number of confreres expressed their willingness to take on more responsibilities for spiritual teams beyond the borders of their PRM.

Our missionary spirituality is Trinitarian and incarnational. Our Trinitarian character requires us to work together as teams. Also in the area of spiritual animation, the incarnational character reminds us that spirituality is not something that remains hanging in the clouds. It has a temporal and spatial dimension. Spirituality is developed at a specific time, and there is a great need to contextualize it accordingly. Spirituality needs to be embedded in the local situation. When we say “spatial dimension”, we refer to this place here in Steyl. This is a significant place for our history, identity, and renewal. For our confreres, and we also believe for our Sisters, the time spent in Steyl is one of the highest moments during the renewal course or other courses and workshops. However, our community in Steyl is aging. We see the need to intensify our collaboration with you to look for ways to keep this place alive.

We are happy to learn that the Austrian SSpS Province is ready to work together with our Italian Province to revitalize Oies. This place has a special meaning for us, Sisters, and lay mission partners. Oies is a mission-inspiring pilgrimage center. The center also has a unique linkage with

Mother Theresa Messner, since she was born in South Tyrol. Joseph Freinademetz and Theresa Messner are essential pillars in the history of our Congregations, who heralded and exemplified in their lives what interculturality is all about.

We realize strongly that spiritual animation is what we need to promote among our confreres. Therefore, we, the General Administration, have made spiritual animation one of our three focuses of this *sexenium*, along with formation and collaboration in mission with the SVD lay partners. We observe with gratitude that since the last General Chapter, more and more PRMs are adapting the practice we had during the Chapter to start the day with Bible or Life sharing. During the chapter, participants were skeptical about this. But as the daily life and Bible sharing continued, they realized that it is very instrumental in knowing better each other and it even facilitated the meeting and discussions.

We also encourage the PRMs to have a discernment process before the elections in their PRMs. The election of superiors is a necessary process that marks the future of any PRM. It is observed that during elections of superiors, there are tensions, politics, and the like. To help reduce these unwanted distractions, it is of prime importance to use criteria that help the members select their leaders not on the basis of ethnicity, or friendships, or popularity.

Furthermore, for your information, after our last Chapter, to assist the General Council design programs for the spiritual renewal, we have created the office of spiritual animation. Our coordinator for spiritual animation organizes a spiritual animation video monthly. However, these animation videos should be promoted with more creativity to gain better acceptance and interest of our confreres.

## **2.2. Community: interculturality and more ...**

The second consequence of being immersed in the life of the Trinity and the second area of our collaboration is community. Here we speak explicitly about interculturality. What other congregations are trying to introduce in the last years has always been part and parcel of our identity and reality as congregations founded by Saint Arnold Janssen. As Fr. Antonio Pernia says, interculturality is for us the heritage, commitment, and mission in our world and Church. Indeed, in the meetings of USG, we hear very often people making reference to us as experts in this area.

Although we still have to struggle in living out interculturality in our communities, both congregations seem to be aware of the need to share this charism of interculturality with others. To help the two councils in promoting interculturality we have established the Resource Committee on Interculturality (RCI) with the members from both congregations.

Our courses and workshops designed to enhance our intercultural competence are very enriching. We are also challenged to see more honestly whether and how far we are gender-biased in our ways of thinking, judging, and acting. Today, more than 70% of our confreres are from Asia and Africa, where the cultures favor more the men than women. More than 90% of our members in perpetual vows are priests. It is quite easy for us to fall into the temptation of clericalism. Pope Francis repeatedly says that clericalism is a virus that paralyzes the life of the Church and a contra

witness of religious congregations, where people are called to live in fraternity. Confronting clericalism as a virus among us and exerting genuine efforts to reduce it will contribute to improving the quality of our communities composed of brothers and priests. It also enables our missionary service, where we share responsibility for God's mission with our lay partners. Our joint workshops continue to be a great help in this regard.

One area of interculturality which we need to explore more is the understanding and practice of religious vows. Our cultural backgrounds are important and cannot be denied. And yet, our religious missionary vocation calls us to go beyond the borders of our cultures as stipulated in our constitutions. Sometimes we are in situations where confreres use culture to legitimize practices that are not much in line with the constitutions that unite us. In a cultural context marked by a strong individualism, some confreres fall into the temptation to live their own lives with very limited contact with the community. In a more collective culture, people tend to wait for instructions and directions. There is a lack of initiative and creativity. A more complicated—and oftentimes a source of tensions—is the understanding and practice of the vow of poverty. In some cultural context, members live out this vow by being fully dedicated to the religious community, and by being honest and accountable for the financial resources. In some other cultures, due to the strong relationship with the family, some members feel an obligation to support their families financially when the need arises. To some extent these confreres understand and practice the vow of poverty in different ways. How are we going to deal with these situations?

Community means belongingness which is characterized by certain “family traits”. We have defined Biblical animation, JPIC, communication and mission animation as our characteristic dimensions. Being SVD means being faithful to the Word and putting the Word at the center of our life. By meditating on the Word, we encounter a God who is concerned about the life of people and the integrity of his creation. This God calls us to promote and live the values of JPIC. We do not want to keep this charism for ourselves, but communicate them with others, not only to enrich them but also to animate them to share and take responsibility in participating in the mission of God. However, one of the biggest problems we are facing is the fact that 35% of our members in final vows are working in parish ministry. The breadth and length of our parish involvement challenge us to impart the SVD profile to these numerous parishes administered by our confreres. This challenge also reflects how solid and how conscious our members are in living their identity as religious. We hope that the frequent programs we organize together will help foster this religious awareness and identity.

### **2.3. JPIC: VIVAT and others...**

The third area of our collaboration is in the area of JPIC. Twenty years ago, we started VIVAT as a non-governmental organization (NGO) at the UN. VIVAT is meant to be a tool in doing advocacy to promote and implement our different commitments to JPIC. Addressing issues of human rights, sustainable development and gender equality cannot only be done by dealing with the concrete issues at the grassroots. It is also imperative to change the policies in these issues in different countries. Therefore, VIVAT is a logical and realistic consequence of our JPIC commitment.

Currently, with us there are ten other congregations as members. VIVAT is also undergoing a thorough evaluation. We are happy that, besides the teams in New York and Geneva, we have already national branches or national groups in some countries.

It is obvious that our collaboration in the area of JPIC must continue. In many provinces we have been working together in running the orphanages, tending to the needs of the sick, especially the lepers and people with AIDS, conducting de-addiction programs, organizing courses to empower young girls and accompanying the refugees in the camps. Joint initiatives in this area are very much appreciated by our confreres.

Working jointly to promote policies to counter these issues is a witnessing character that promotes the importance of JPIC. One of the gravest injustices which the world and the Church are facing is gender inequality. Our collaboration demonstrates that we, at least in our intention, want to address this issue. We have to acknowledge once again, that we, the SVDs, still have a long way to go in our conversion—inculcating in us the importance of gender equality.

We want to learn from you on how you deal effectively with the urgent and concrete needs of the people. The decision of your European provincials to respond to the issue of refugees in Europe by starting a community in Greece testifies to your ability to determine what is urgent. And by identifying this as priority, you are courageous in taking concrete steps. Joint projects require the willingness to think across the borders of your own provinces. Our problem as SVDs is that we are oftentimes caught up with narrow provincialism, thinking only within the borders of our own provinces.

## **2.4. Other areas of Collaboration**

### **2.4.1. Formation: initial and on-going formation**

At the Generalate level the two congregations organize every three years a joint renewal course in English or in Spanish and Portuguese. We always get positive evaluation of these courses. The Indo-Leste subzone takes the initiative to organize joint renewal courses, the first part of which is held in Indonesia. We hope we will still continue promoting these courses for our members.

We are well aware that the future of our mission depends very much on how we prepare our young members to respond to missionary challenges. Human maturity, deep spirituality, missionary zeal, intellectual capacity and creativity are important aspects of our religious missionary formation. Besides the missionary dimension, we need to give attention to the religious aspects of the formation because we are religious missionaries. We are blessed that today we still have a good number of young members in the initial formation. According to the recent data, from the 1<sup>st</sup> of January 2020, out of 6016 confreres, 1359 are in initial formation: as novices and members in temporal vows. This requires a big responsibility in designing and implementing good formation programs, preparing and animating formators, building facilities, and finding enough financial resources.

For the initial formation, we always encourage our PRM formators to include Sisters in their formation teams. However, this is still not yet the reality in most of the provinces. A few provinces organize common retreats for our novices. From our part, we see the need to do more in common, for the formation of our young members. We believe and hope that such collaboration in the initial formation would contribute a lot to the growth and maturity of relationship between our members.

We are aware of the crucial contribution of the formators in the process of the formation of our young members. Therefore, we want to continue organizing workshops for our formators and vocation promoters. We thank you for allowing your Sisters to be resource persons in these courses.

#### **2.4.2. Collaboration with the laity**

In our two last General Chapters, we talked a lot about collaboration with the laity. In the 2012 Chapter, we invited for the first time four lay participants to be present with us for several days, mainly for group activities. In the last General Chapter, four lay persons were invited to be with us for the whole Chapter. They were present in all the sessions of the chapter as active observers. We learned that in the preparation of the 2012 General Chapter, the General Council needed two years of discussion before coming to a decision to invite four lay associates to participate in the General Chapter for four days. In the 2018 General Chapter preparation, it took us one day to come to a decision after prayerful discernment to invite four lay persons to participate in the whole Chapter.

We want to continue promoting the collaboration with lay associates to share with them the responsibility for the mission. In a special way, we want to encourage the PRMs to animate our lay partners to organize themselves in groups with statutes which approved by the PRMs leadership teams. In 2012 there was no such group, now there are already 20. We have organized in Nemi one workshop for lay partners in October 2017. Another workshop is slated for September this year. At the zonal and sub-zonal levels, meetings of lay groups are also organized. At present, we want to gain more experiences with lay partners at the PRM and zonal and sub-zonal levels before taking a step further to have a structure at the congregational level. We need to learn from you and your experiences regarding the congregational structure of your lay partners.

In many PRMs, it has been the practice to invite these partners in the provincial assemblies and chapters. The last General Chapter asks the PRMs to start this practice if it is still not yet done, and to continue it if it's already in place. Besides, the chapter also recommends the PRMs to involve the partners in our vocation promotion, mission animation and in the initial and on-going formation programs.

With the recent workshop on spirituality and interculturality, we entered into a new field: our joint collaboration with our lay partners. Together we invited and included our partners in mission in our training programs. It is our hope that this is the first step that would lead us to other steps to

work together in promoting the collaboration of and with our partners in mission. The fourth candle at the tomb of our Founder refers to our lay partners. This is a call to continue to find new ways to bring our partners together.

### **3. The learnings from our collaboration – envisioning the Future**

As your brothers, we have learned a lot from our collaboration. Personally I, Budi, worked closely together with your Sisters in Maumere, Flores, especially in the team of volunteers for humanity (TRUK-F). And I, Raymun, also have closely and concretely experienced many times how committed, consistent, and professional our sisters are in their missionary service. Our presence in Rome and at the Generalate has been for us a blessing and opportunity to experience the collaboration of the two congregations. Our regular Faith-Bible sharing and joint council meetings help a lot in enhancing this collaboration. Our experience during the Chapter is a repetition of what we as the General Council have been experiencing: coming together to share our faith and life based on the Word of God under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. This practice makes us more open and ready to discuss matters that are important in our life and mission. It is very true what a confrere once shared: “we need to know each other better in order to work together more effectively.” What binds us is not only the work. The fruit of the sharing of our common spirituality comes hand in hand with our openness to work together. The practice of the members of our councils of preparing and presenting together talks and inputs for our members or for outsiders is a modelling action.

We have to acknowledge that in many of our PRMs, the spirit of collaboration still has to be developed. Especially from our part, much needs to be done to encourage our confreres to collaborate with you. A confrere writes: “Ideal collaboration is not to invite others to join our activity, but to plan, implement and evaluate together as equal project holder. SVD needs to consider this point more seriously.” One confrere makes the following observation: “If I can use an image of a train, I would say that the train—which figuratively refers to both the Generalates and General Chapters—is running very fast and many cannot catch up with it. This is the reality. And yet, the train has to keep on running anyway, and it is good that it does.”

From those working closely together with you we get a lot of positive comments. This really helps us grow in our life and mission as religious men and missionaries. One confrere writes: “If I share my personal experience, I will say that, to work with sisters, I must make a special effort to understand the sisters not just in the beginning of a certain project, but throughout the process. If I do not have an open attitude, self-discernment and respect, the collaboration becomes less effective. Collaboration needs such an effort. I realize that, often times, I, as a religious man, do not care about equal collaboration with women, which ordinary men do daily in the outside world. The collaboration gives me a great opportunity to grow ‘common sense’ in me.”

Yes, this is an important and crucial process of conversion for most of us, men and priests in consideration of our cultures and the Church. We are edified reading the sharing of a confrere

who has been very much in collaboration with your Sisters in organizing programs. He writes: “I began the course with some stereotype attitudes towards the Sisters. Indeed, I find them to be courteous and professional at all times. In fact, I believe that the feminine presence during the course is a great bonus for our confreres, and helps to bring out the best in them. The intercultural realities of the two genders are a powerful growing point for all concerned.” Referring to the programs offered to other congregations, the confrere continues: “Perhaps we are a little hard on ourselves at times with respect to our evaluation of our professional and personal relationships. There is no doubt that there is a lot of room for improvement; however, in the eyes of many, we share something very valuable and tangible to religious and lay partners who work with us.”

We had a very positive experience having Sr. Miriam Altenhofen as the co-facilitator in our last General Chapter. Positive and encouraging comments were made in the evaluation of the chapter. On our part, we have to follow a way of conversion: from being the ones who plan and decide and invite you to join us, to becoming the ones who are able and ready to plan together with you, to execute and to evaluate our joint programs. “To share ideas, discern, and brainstorm together is a more pro-active way of establishing trust and generating good working relationships for future collaboration.”

Our collaboration does not extinguish the differences which exist among us. We collaborate better, because we are different, and yet we are open to complement each other. About the differences, a former Provincial remembers his conversation with the SSpS Provincial in his country: “Once we shared about our way of dealing with various matters. I shared that we had on the agenda of the SVD provincial council meeting 30 points. We were done in 3 hours, from 9.00 to 12.00, had lunch together and the councilors went home. The SSpS provincial shared that they also had 30 points on their agenda. Their provincial council meeting lasted 3 days!” We have different ways of approaching the reality, of starting a conversation, of coming to a decision, etc. We are also different in our training. Therefore, it is imperative that people whom we assign to be responsible for our crucial common projects need to be mature, personally and emotionally. Quality time spent together facilitates teamwork a lot.

We are convinced that religious or consecrated life is still relevant in the future. The forms might be different, but the world and the Church would be poorer without people who are deeply rooted in their relationship with God and who are close to the people. These are the two main pillars of religious life, in the past, now and in the future: immersing into the life of the Trinity, and being one with the people. Our credibility as religious missionaries remains with our honesty in searching for ways to be connected with God and in our concrete efforts to be in solidarity with those who are last. The most joyful members of our congregations are those who live a healthy and human spirituality, and are close to the people. And we know that being joyful religious is the sure way in which we can convince and attract young people today.

## **Conclusion**

Our future does not lie in structures. It is a question of spirituality and commitment to be with and for the people. We need to learn from each other to grow in this dimension. The concern about our structure cannot make us blind and deaf to the cry of the needy. Our physical structures can take away the joy of being religious missionaries. Our last General Chapter reminds us that a genuine process of renewal and transformation has consequences in our dealing with structures, not only physical structures but also mental structures. These are our ways of thinking and acting which are formed or deformed over the years. They are also encapsulated within us. The cry of the poor asks us to step out from our comfort structures in order to be more attentive and welcoming to the poor. Our collaboration needs to emerge from listening to the Holy Spirit who speaks to us in the cries of the poor, like the woman in Matt 15, 21-28. When we close our eyes and ears from the reality of the poor and the marginalized, and when we gather only to enjoy our being together, then we lose the reason of being missionaries.

In the name of the General Council and all confreres, we would like to thank you for your collaboration with us in the different areas of our religious missionary life and service. We thank you for being an inspiration for us, and for your patience in bearing with our weaknesses. We congratulate you for this Chapter with a very important and inspiring theme. Since February we asked all confreres to pray for you during this chapter. May it become a Kairos, a special time of blessings in discerning the will of God, in growing together as religious women missionaries, immersed in the life of the Trinity – Transforming the world with compassion.