

Year of Mother Josepha



Reflection No. 1: On the Theme

All of us, spiritual daughters of Mother Josepha, have various images of her. However, as we reflect more intimately on her life, in preparation for her Beatification, some of these images may be converging. This we have realized as we were reflecting on her life as leadership team.

My Heart is Ready

If there is one phrase that could aptly summarize the life of Mother Josepha Stenmanns, we believe this is it! Towards the end of her life, in one of her letters to Sr. Andrea Hegemann (Steyl, 3 June 1902) she wrote: *If we faithfully fulfill all our duties, we will be ready to appear when God calls. Let us pray daily: My heart is ready, O God, my heart is ready!* (Ps. 57,8). The book written by Sr. Ortrud Stegmaier, SSpS, on the final sickness and death of Mother Josepha carries the title MY HEART IS READY. This disposition in which Mother Josepha was found towards the end of her life, was also that which permeated her life throughout. In that spirit she lived life to the full though it was short (1852-1903).

Every moment of her life was spent in simple and joyful readiness “*to seek only to love God and what he wants, however he wants it and because he wants it.*” M. Josepha’s sole desire in life was to offer herself as a sacrifice for the work of spreading the Faith.

HEART stands for the centre of the person, the deepest core of a person’s being. In fact it symbolizes the person in his/her wholeness, with all his/her love and affection, with all the positive energies and potentials that make a person.

Mother Josepha was a *heart person*. She lived from that centre. Deep in her heart she was united to God. She said, “*A pious raising of the heart to God, there you have the complete art of walking in the presence of God*”. “*Make a tabernacle in your heart where the holy Triune God constantly dwells*”. The awareness of the love and presence of God in the heart-centre was the integrating principle of her life that prompted her to be present to God and to people, to the demands and challenges of daily life with a quality that was unique to her. The books and writings on her abound with examples and stories of her ‘being present’ even from the time she was a little girl and a young woman in her home in Issum, and later, as an SSpS, of her womanly sensitivity. Just to mention a few: Sr. Anna Sicke testified that she possessed “...a peace-loving heart for God and all people”. Sr. Raphaelle Bruns wrote: “Sr. Josepha has the noble heart of a mother”. Today we would say: She revealed the *feminine face of God*.

Her life is a living exhortation to us, inviting us to be *heart persons*, to live and act from that deep centre where God dwells, to feel with the heart of God, to sense from our depths the designs of God for the

world today. Therefore, to be an SSpS, to be her spiritual daughters is more a matter of the heart than of high, sophisticated and efficient organization.

What a beautiful disposition and what a challenging prayer it is to say: *My heart is ready*. It speaks of longing, eagerness, enthusiasm, passion, openness, inner freedom. ... She prayed it and she lived it for one purpose - *to open every heart to love*. For this she offered her life with a wholehearted readiness, without limits and conditions.

Her heart was so caught up by the Spirit that she could say with ease, "*The very breath of the Servant of the Holy Spirit ought to be, Veni Sancte Spiritus!*" Daily we sing in the *Veni Creator* – "Spirit, come! Fill our hearts with your celestial flame, fill our hearts with love."

A heart filled with love is a **ready** heart - open to listen to the groans and pains of our world, eager to reach out and touch, willing to forget self and embrace the other, prepared to take risks and face hardships, able to accept responsibility and to let go of one's own plans in service for the good of others and the mission of the Congregation. The person with a ready heart, ever-attuned to the promptings of the Spirit, goes anywhere she is sent; in whatever way she is called, anytime she is summoned. Every moment is an opportunity to listen, to serve, to love, to reveal the face of God. This wholehearted missionary readiness is an essential characteristic of our calling, to *open every heart to love*.

Let this time of grace, of reflecting on and praying with the inspiration that Mother Josepha is, touch our hearts. Let the love that the Spirit brings, create a more *ready heart* in us that meet every other heart with compassion, tenderness, whether it be inside our communities, our Congregation or outside, in our missionary setting.

A Prayer

Indwelling Spirit,
Open my heart today to your presence.
Let your Breath in me connect me to all beings.

Open my heart to hear you calling my name.
Let your beauty and grace within me come alive
So I can let your beauty and goodness shine out to the world.

Open my heart to your love-energy.
Gift me with a *Ready Heart*,
Open to hear the cries of the world,
The world close at home, and the world afar,
Ready to reach out in kindness, caring, and compassion.

May I be able to *open all hearts to love*
Fulfilling the dream of Mother Josepha

February 2006

Note: The quotes are taken from:

- Rehbein, Franziska Carolina SSpS, *Come Holy Spirit, Breath of a Servant of the Holy Spirit*, Rome, 2002.
- Stegmaier, Ortrud, SSpS, *My Heart is ready, Final sickness and death of Mother Josepha*, Rome, 1997.

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Reflection No. 2: Mother Josepha, Hendrina Stenmanns

A woman of the Lower Rhineland – Rooted in her Home Area

“In terris positus, in caelestibus habitavit” - “Both feet on the ground, heart in heaven!”

(Inscription on a picture of St. Benedict in Kremsmuenster Monastery, Austria)

This statement, actually applied to St. Benedict, aptly characterises our Mother Josepha.

1. “Both feet on the ground”

Growing up in the early years of industrialisation, Hendrina saw poverty spread through broad sectors of the population. Her mother taught her to notice the poor in the village and help out with small gifts. This alert attitude, to have an eye for the hidden needs of others, suited her sympathetic nature and increasingly became one of her basic characteristics. She was already becoming the person described on the memorial plaque on her parental home as “the great benefactress of her home village”.

The eldest of seven, Hendrina soon developed a sense of responsibility and natural motherly concern for her younger brothers and sisters, a trait that continued to develop in the convent. She was a great support for her parents, not only in the household but also in the upbringing of her younger brothers and sisters. In the growing family she soon learned to make good use of time, to plan well, take on small tasks independently and assign them to the younger children as well.

Like any ordinary villager, Hendrina entered the labour force at a young age; by weaving silk she contributed to the upkeep of the large family. In addition she managed quietly and discreetly to help many a shy, needy person in the village from her own savings. Her material help enabled Lambert Welbers, her father’s apprentice, to enter the Mission House in Steyl as a candidate.

Already becoming visible in a small way was the characteristic that blossomed later in Steyl as the number of sisters and amount of work grew: she had an ingenious talent for organisation and improvisation. Everything Hendrina did looked so simple and natural. She was incredibly alert, rapidly grasped a situation and was able to make a quick decision. She made no ado about it. She was simply present, there when needed. And always with a quiet cheerfulness.

Hendrina’s eyes were not only alert to need and suffering in the neighbourhood; she experienced suffering and death in her own family. She was 20 when her sister Gertrude died at the age of six. A year later Heinrich, the eldest of her brothers, died aged 19. She shared the sorrow of her parents.

Hendrina had reached the age when, normally speaking, life decisions are made. She really wanted to enter a convent, to become a Franciscan like her aunt in a neighbouring town. The situation at home, however, as well as the kulturkampf, made that impossible. Instead of complaining, she allowed the suffering to transform her. It did not make her hard but, rather, even more compassionate. It was during this time that she joined the Franciscan movement. It gave her life a deep, spiritual orientation that completely permeated her ordinary daily life.

When she was 26, her mother died. She had promised her mother to put her personal wishes aside and remain with her father and brothers and sister, taking care of them. Karl, the youngest, was just eight years old. Every door was closed to her, her plans and personal wishes thwarted. Not a word of complaint or regret could be detected. She took the situation as it was and accepted it as her task. She was even able to give the situation a positive turn by increasing her ministry to others, to people who had to bear still greater suffering.

Later on, in the convent, she had only one single sentence of gratitude for those and subsequent years: "What great thanks I owe to the Lord for the tremendous grace of my calling to serve him in the Congregation of the Servants of the Holy Spirit. Thanks, profound thanks to the dear, good Lord for such a great grace." At that age she was already an interiorly firm and mature young woman, able to forget herself and to be there to help others in their need.

2. "*Her heart in heaven*"

Hendrina had both feet on the ground, yet permeating and shining through all she did was the love of her heart that was firmly anchored in God. Let us take a look at Hendrina's inner path.

We know that she prepared very seriously and intensively for her first Communion, aided by a small diocesan booklet; she was almost 13 at that time. Probably she wrote her own prayers on the first blank pages of the booklet. God supported her life, she took that almost for granted. At holy Mass and Communion she experienced his confirming presence. Regular, later on daily, attendance at Mass was part of her schedule and rhythm of life. Hendrina knew she was being led by God's bountiful providence. It gave her an inner security and serenity.

An early devotion to the angels is apparent from a small book with Hendrina's name in it, "Devotions in honour of the holy Angels, especially the holy Guardian Angels". She had learned to take the angels into the Eucharistic service, as it were, because later she wrote to Sr. Gonzaga in Argentina: "Make a tabernacle in your heart where the holy Triune God constantly dwells and remind your holy guardian angel to adore him without ceasing."

Another book with her name and with the rather poetic title "Eucharistic Blossoms of Love" testifies to Hendrina's marked Eucharistic orientation at a young age. The book was obviously frequently used, especially the sections on "Celebration of holy Mass", "Silent Mass", "After holy Communion", "Visits to the Most Blessed Sacrament", and so on. It gives eloquent testimony of how she was formed by the Eucharist and silent adoration of the Lord.

As a young woman Hendrina often went to Steyl to visit her protégé Lambert Welbers, but even more for the perpetual adoration in the Mission House at Pentecost. M. Anna, Theresia Sicke, related that Hendrina first visited Steyl in 1879 and that from then on "she came annually for the 40-hour prayer on the holy Feast of Pentecost ... Her recollection and steadfast prayer were amazing." M. Anna spoke of Hendrina's "faithful devotion to the Blessed Sacrament". It was a trait Hendrina shared with her future companion, Helena Stollenwerk.

Hendrina's Eucharistic disposition was known to the curate of Issum, Fr. Veels. In January 1884 he wrote to Arnold Janssen that he could give her "the very best recommendation in every sense. She has always had the wish to enter religious life, ... has for many years gone to confession every week and, although she lives more than 15 minutes walk from the church and has to take care of the household, attends holy Mass every day." Weekly confession naturally included reception of Communion. It was not common for a young woman with the amount of work that Hendrina Stenmanns had to cope with to lead such an intensive spiritual life.

For the little group in Steyl, the germ cell of the future sisters' congregation, the Eucharist was the source of strength for the daily, heavy kitchen work during the years in the Mission House. We could say the maids lived a "Eucharistic cycle": from Mass in the morning, where they frequently received holy Communion, to the noon half hour of prayer, and on to Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament in the evening. The anticipation of these daily 'spiritual supports' permeated and animated their daily life. We will never be able to fathom the effects those years still have for us today.

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Reflection No. 3: Mother Josepha, Hendrina Stenmanns, SSpS, in her Waiting

Many have written a good number of reflections about Mother Josepha, Hendrina Stenmanns. As her African daughters, we would like to add to the work done by others in an African way, whereby she would be addressed directly as our **ancestress**. In our African context, it is not just all the dead who are considered ancestors. One should have lived an exemplary life to earn such a title. Mother Josepha was such a person, so in our reflection about her waiting, we want to do it our way where we **talk to** and not about her, in order to add that personal touch to what we know about her. This is how it goes:

Hendrina Stenmanns, Mother Josepha, SSpS, you were a woman of substance, an icon of Christian maturity expressed clearly in the virtues of **Love, Patience and Perseverance**.

Mother, you developed a special love for God and neighbour even at the early stages of your life. This love led to the deep desire in you to

follow Jesus closely in Religious Missionary life. You were so selfless that you were willing to stop schooling in order to help to take care of your younger siblings. Later when your mother died, you assumed the responsibility of “motherhood” in your family.

O Woman of Great Heart, how could you enter religious life, a life you fervently wanted to live, when you were burdened with so many responsibilities on your shoulders? But somehow, deep within you, you knew that God’s time was the best and therefore waited patiently for that time to mature.

Loving Woman of God, you were very concerned about the welfare of others, even those outside your family. Were you not the one who sponsored Lambert Welbers, your father’s apprentice, to enable him enter the seminary? Indeed, you were a loving helper to the poor and the sick in your village. Really, in your waiting, you did a lot of good deeds, so much so that even though you were young, your advice was always sought in all matters of life.

When at last your hope seemed to be close to its realization, alas the waiting took another turn that demanded from you deep faith and love for God. Waiting became one of your greatest virtues. In fact, it was not easy to be waiting all the time especially when what you desired was very intense.

Your waiting, **Sweet Mother**, was just like that of a farmer who planted her seeds on the field of faith and good-will, waiting for the Lord to bless it with good weather to enable it to germinate and bear fruit. Yes, you accepted to become a maid in Steyl provided that would help your dreams come true. In that waiting, you did not know for how long, but with **patience and selfless humility**, you laboured and served joyfully.

In your long waiting, **Dearest Mama**, you worked in the kitchen and laundry tirelessly but with a joyful heart. Physical fatigue and peace of mind took turns in your life in those days. Yet, in all these, you learned to seek the will of God.

O Gentle Woman of Perseverance, you never gave up, but with a light heart, you waited for the “D” Day to come. It is an indisputable fact that the waiting was long, but it remained meaningful to you. It became a well within you and consequently, a spring. Indeed, as the Scriptures say, “They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength...” The Lord was really your strength.

Thank you, **Dearest Mother**, for bequeathing to us your children, great treasures which are found in the word, **“WAITING”**:

W: Wisdom
A: Alertness
I: Integrity
T: Truthfulness
I: Inspiration
N: Nurture
G: Goodness

Admirable Mother who “nurtured” your children with love; even in your waiting, you **“mothered”** your companions. You were like the *“Mother earth” (Asaase Yaa)*, who nourishes whatever is planted in her to bear good fruits. *“Ayikoo” (well done)!*

Perfect example of Christian Womanhood, teach us how to wait in **Love, Patience and Perseverance.**

The Young Sisters of Ghana