

To the SVD Pioneers of South Sudan

Dear Fellow SVDs Bernard, Francis and Vincent,

From the epoch-making time the first SVD missionary, Joseph Freinademetz was sent to China your departure for South Sudan, to start another mission, is a landmark in our mission history. You are on the threshold of becoming pioneers, the latest ones in the annals of our past 137 years. Our society having nurtured right from its inception, that family spirit, is with you at this historic moment. You must be complimented for your readiness to volunteer for this new endeavour. We in Kenya being immediate neighbours would deem it our privilege and duty to make you feel at home whenever you think of taking a break.

1. Keep the Flag of Missionary Spirit Flying

Our Father Arnold as it is well known had a passion for mission. It is discernible in the numerous letters he wrote to our missionaries in various countries. In 1889 when a mission was entrusted to the SVD in far away Argentina, the founder, his voice choking, announced, in the Mother House, after Vespers: “God has entrusted to us a new mission Argentina...let us sing a *Veni Creator* in order to call down the blessing of the Holy Spirit on our work in this country.” (Fritz Bornemann, *A History of Divine Word Missionaries*, p. 222.)

Father Arnold was fully relying on the assistance of the Holy Spirit in all his undertakings as he was convinced that mission is the work of the Spirit. We are then called to have the same spirit as well as conviction at this time of embarking on the new mission allowing ourselves to be led from the front. This kind of disposition is quite in keeping with our charism as well as our long-standing tradition.



2. Build on the Charism of Internationality

Thanks to the basic international character of our society when it comes to starting any new mission our congregation gathers confreres from various countries and we are ready to begin without any delay. Our late Fr. Henry Heekeren, was once asked during the meeting of Union of Superiors General in Rome how SVD decides and starts a mission in another country so soon. He explained to them that we draw on our internationality. Yes, it is truly a charism, in fact a privilege to live and work together as brothers hailing from distant lands and cultures.

Let me present a case in point from the Jesuit practice. In 19th century from Belgium both French-speaking and Flemish-speaking Jesuits went to India to start missions. They started two separate

provinces one in Calcutta (now Kolkata) for the French-speaking and other in Ranchi for the Flemish-speaking members. Against that background we can understand what a precious little charism it is to live and work in international and multi-ethnic groups.

Having the charism of internationality is also fraught with its shadow areas. We need to be deeply aware of this fact. Cultural and linguistic differences are realities. Stress and strains can come up while living together. There can always be temptation to slip back into our own cultural/racial/linguistic groups. We will have to always check our tendencies as we have made this option to live in multi-ethnic groups. I realise the richness of our tradition especially when I interact with various other mono-cultural religious/missionary groups. In this respect, by the grace of God, we are ahead of many of them. As you are going to be pioneers, being strangers to one another, this is a gentle reminder that you are going to put into practice something of the ideal of our society.

3. Be Prepared to Face Failures

Starting a mission is no cake walk. Anyone who has pioneered something new will acknowledge this fact of life. At this juncture I would like to encourage you to be students of SVD mission history. That will bring to your awareness that we need not be always successful. We should be ready to taste disappointments. Take one case from Ghana: “In 1948 a local Brothers’ Congregation was founded – but it did not last. In 1950 a minor seminary was opened, but without success. A second minor seminary was opened in 1952, again without success.” (*A History of Divine Word Missionaries*, p. 403).

Let me place before you another case from Chile where SVD made a good start in 1900 by taking up a parish. But soon there were problems. “The initially friendly relationship with the bishop cooled off. The town’s intellectuals couldn’t get along with the clergy. In addition there were differences of opinion and misunderstanding among our men, and all these difficulties were aggravated by the great distance separating them from Buenos Aires and Steyl. After a year’s struggle the experiment failed. The Argentinian provincial sent a visitator who found himself powerless to remedy the situation. The small SVD ship was foundering... in the waters of Valdivia; the crew wasn’t experienced enough to save it. A telegram from Buenos Aires told to leave.” (*A History of Divine Word Missionaries*, p. 248). And they did it just after being there for a year and a half. Mind you this turn of events took place at the life time of Our Founder.

The purpose of placing these couple of facts from our mission history is not to pour cold water on your enthusiasm, but it is meant to be prepared to face eventualities that may be lying ahead. There could be relationship issues within the team; there could be difficulties from the people with whom we work; the local ecclesiastical authorities may shift their stance overnight. May each one of you be mentally prepared to encounter any of these or even other problems that may crop up unexpectedly.

Let me admit before you that I do not have any claim to fame of starting any new mission. But I was sent to start our philosophate in Bhopal (INC) in 1983 and our centre in New Delhi (1991). Thank God, both institutions are not so far closed down. To get things organized was not easy. In the second place I had to struggle for food for a fortnight. My weight went down, but providentially I didn’t fall sick. Now I consider those little sacrifices are required for laying a good foundation for such enterprises. So I would request you to consider the struggles that come on your way will be the nutrients of the new mission you will be mothering.

4. Mission Frontiers are not Eliminated

Ever since 'dialogue' has been introduced into missiological discourse there is an apparent impression that there are no frontiers in the mission field. Let us not labour under such illusions. From a Euro-American perspective what is possibly needed may be that the church functions at a dialogical manner. But even there the way secularization has overtaken human life one wonders if the ecclesiastical thinkers and scholars are on the right course. In my humble opinion it is a frontier confronting the Christianity of the West. If a doctor does not diagnose a sickness and name it properly the treatment would be faulty.

Leave alone what is happening in the developed countries. In Africa, in Asia, missionaries in the field are facing real frontiers. One of our confreres working in Mindoro Island (Philippines) has to cross on foot a geographical frontier of a mountain, halting for the night having a big stone for his bed. On the next day he is able to reach his destination of Mangyan habitat. As you very well know in South Sudan infra-structure development has to go a long way. So be prepared to face physical frontiers.

SVD pioneers in Chad went through a bad patch. Our confrere Achille Mpila recounted his visit to CFC, Nairobi how the first missionaries

getting sick and he gave a moving account of the first death that occurred there. Malaria and other sicknesses are a real frontier not only for the missionaries but also for the people there. It is not a matter of dialogue in this case, but of survival like a soldier on the war front. When the situation is so critical one has to act more than have a dialogue, sitting on an arm chair.

Whether church missiologists admit or not religious fundamentalism is yet another frontier. Statistics of persecution available today confirms that Christians in many parts of the world are on a receiving end, be it Africa or Asia. There should not be any surprise if it spreads to Europe and America. On Christmas of 2011 there was bomb blast at a cathedral in Nigeria. Not at all intending to be a prophet of doom but if one reads history properly there could be a repeat of Constantinople.

There could be many other mission frontiers as we look around. The list could run into pages. We shall not be naïve to say that the most fashionable trend in theology is dialogue. Perhaps it is for academicians. But my submission is for a missionary on the grass-roots frontier is a stark reality. I am afraid the dialogical approach may lead to dissipation of enthusiasm and even lethargy creeping into our dynamism.



5. Possible Missionary Priorities Today

As pioneers it is important to have clear focus on what activities/projects we need to undertake as missionaries. I am sorry to use a cliché, 'reading the signs of our times'. I would like to list three priorities below. These are areas emerging from the mission of Jesus, often not paid serious attention to.

5.1 Feed the Starving

Making a departure from the dialogue approach to mission of dialoguing with the poor starvation should be treated with utmost urgency. After all as Gandhi said for a starving person God comes in the form of food. Although professed to be poor we religious can try to academically circumvent this serious issue by the classical defense mechanism called rationalization. During the ordinary time on 26th Sunday (2010) the Gospel reading was on Rich Man and Lazarus (Lk. 16:19-31). At the beginning of the homily I posed a simple question to the congregation gathered there consisting of sisters and formees: "Who do you think will be more in heaven – rich or poor?". Their faces fell. They knew the answer but hardly anyone had the courage to say it. The Missionaries of Charity (Mother Teresa) having a programme of feeding infants and little children at one of the their convents in Nairobi. The mothers who bring their children pinch from the food that is served for their babies and eat. It is a rare thing to hear. But the fact is that starvation is truly a burning issue. The visuals shown on news bulletins bring to our attention plenty of evidence of people not having daily bread in the mission where we are heading to. Going beyond our discussion on dialogue with the poor let us deal with the issue at a micro level.



5.2 Uplift the Status of Women

Jesus did not leave behind a single written word about his teaching. All what we have in the Gospels is the recollection of his disciples. Even in that scanty form some vital dimensions of his mission are not sufficiently taken note of or highlighted. Isn't true that at the beginning of his life a woman plays a vital role? Isn't true with his resurrection another woman comes to the scene so vividly? One area neglected for centuries is what he did to uplift the dignity and status of women. In the patriarchic society of that time they were discriminated against and had to play second fiddle to men. Of course even today the situation is not much different.

On the basis of my experience of guiding people, quite often women, mother rejecting the female child is a common phenomenon. They develop a negative attitude to themselves and pass it on to the next generation. There is much woundedness in them. Something of it started erupting in recent times as ultra radical feminism. Single motherhood, purchase of sperm and getting inseminated, etc. are some extreme examples of reaction. As missionaries it is availing us an opportunity to heal the inner wounds of women, be it in Sudan or else where.

5.3 Address Grave Eco-Issues

Modern biblical scholarship acknowledges that Gospel of Mark is the first one that was written. The missionary command from Jesus as stated there is to preach the Gospel to the *whole creation* (Mk. 16:15). One wonders why other three evangelists have not mentioned this unique feature. Today humanity is facing a crisis on the environmental front. Hardly was there a mention of this issue some three or four decades ago. There have been high-profile summits held in the past 20 years. But what is missing is concrete action. Of course the great work done by some like Wangari Maathai is commendable. But there is a long way to go.

As missionaries the issue has to first get into our consciousness and then we need to take a very practical approach to this concern. Environmental problems have to be integrated into the understanding of mission. We still do not seem to understand the seriousness of this matter although it is kept as an appendix to Justice and Peace in our discussions on mission. More than specialists, missionaries at the grass-roots will be able to really contribute to this cause. We may not be involved in advocacy. But even planting a single sapling and nurturing it is an action towards preserving the integrity of creation. And that action is truly missionary in character. Having such a clarity of understanding we help people to address this serious issue of ecology staring like a monster on the face of humanity.

Finally the moment has arrived, dear fellow SVDs for you to step into the waters of the mission in South Sudan. You will begin to swim; you may face many hurdles. Nonetheless you are not alone there. Kindly keep in mind our whole international family is with you. Singing of *Veni Creator* every morning is a sign of our humble, simple support and solidarity in all your missionary endeavours. Put your best foot forward. Our Lord's living presence, as promised, is with you.

Anto Poruthu, SVD.

25th Mar. 2012.

The Feast of Annunciation