



José Antunes da Silva

EARTH, SEA AND SKY

SAINT JOSEPH FREINADEMETZ

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FORWARD

Upon arriving in the small village of Oies, nestled at the foot of the Dolomites, two buildings stand out in the landscape. The first is the old Freinademetz family home, built in 1739, and the second is the church from the late 1990s, built in honour of the Tyrolean saint. The first is naturally in the Val Badia style, while the second is a replica of the oriental layout of Chinese temples. Between the two, there is a small bridge, a passage between the two worlds of Ujöp, Joseph, in Ladin, the local language.

In 2025, the Society of the Divine Word Missionaries celebrates the 150th anniversary of its foundation, which coincides with the 150th anniversary of Joseph Freinademetz's ordination to the priesthood. It was the foundation of the Mission House at Steyl that served as a bridge for Freinademetz to discover a new world.

In this context, between crossing bridges and discovering a new world, Fr. José Antunes da Silva proposes something more: to contemplate the journey, to observe the earth, the sea and the sky. He presents us the Tyrolean saint, Ujöp de Oies, in such a way that the journey and missionary desire of that young priest fill our eyes and hearts with a mission that transcends borders. It is impossible not to feel invited to make this journey together.

The first is by land, leading us to recognise our own history and vocation, and eventually to venture into the unknown, even if this new world is only a few hours away. The

journey by land requires strength and determination to take the first step and keep going. The author narrates Freinademetz's first exodus from his familiar world in the mountain village Oies to the city of Bressanone as the awakening of a vocation recognised by others and embraced by the young Joseph. It is the moment when his family home becomes too small. As he crosses the mountains, Freinademetz realises that his 'everything' is only a small part. And this notion will not only accompany him throughout his life, but will also enable him to face what is to come.

Faced with the call to mission, there is no possibility of staying put. There is the urge to move forward. Thus, the exhausting journey by land gives way to the unknown and distant sea. José Antunes describes this journey out to sea as the necessary path to reach the destination. This image is rooted in the subconscious of a seafaring people such as the Portuguese, but is also rich in biblical connotations. Freinademetz crosses the sea and sees his homeland receding into the distance. The sea is not the place of the mission, but a necessary stage for it. It is a passage between two worlds.

Heaven is the goal; it is presented here as the new earth. Another biblical image evokes the new earth linked to the new heaven, as in the book of Revelation. For Freinademetz, reaching the mission land does not yet mean fulfilling the mission. He must put both feet firmly on the ground for heaven to become a reality. A new era begins, a time of permanence.

The author presents this missionary journey from the contemplative point of view, weaving together the life of our missionary saint, the history of the Society of the Divine Word, and Holy Scripture. In fact, what is at stake is the person, the context and the content of Freinademetz's missionary work. José Antunes' reinterpretation is both a synthesis and an

invitation to embrace missionary life, both for consecrated persons and for SVD lay partners. The author does not intend to write a historical work, but rather a missionary testimony.

Fr. José Antunes, who has long experience of mission among Christian communities in Ghana, Africa, and with university students in Portugal, as well as in the provincial and general government of the Society of the Divine Word, is the right person to share his contemplative vision of Divine Word missionary life, in which Joseph Freinademetz occupies a prominent place.

The final sentence of Freinademetz's journey challenges us: "I want to remain among the Chinese." He had then completed 56 years of life and journey between the land, the sea and the sky. He felt certain that his chosen path was right and desired to continue in mission. This is the challenge that each Divine Word missionary faces: to reach this point where "I want to remain in mission"; to remain in a state of mission, regardless of where we are. Remaining in mission is the grace that Freinademetz achieved. With the author I too believe that this grace is meant for all of us. May the life journey presented in this book inspire us as missionaries in this year of the 150th Jubilee of the Society of the Divine Word and likewise the beginning of the priestly ministry of St. Joseph Freinademetz, the happy missionary.

Anselmo R. Ribeiro, SVD

Superior General

INTRODUCTION

On 20 April 1879, the first Divine Word Missionary priests, John Baptist Anzer and Joseph Freinademetz, arrived in Hong Kong. China was the first mission entrusted by the Church to the Mission House founded in 1875 in Steyl, the Netherlands, by Arnold Janssen, a German priest. In the following years, other missionaries from Steyl – priests, brothers and sisters – left for China, following in the footsteps of those two pioneers. Joseph Freinademetz never returned to Europe, remaining in China until his death in 1908, dedicating his life to the service of proclaiming the Gospel. His total dedication to the mission and his genuine love for the Chinese people are still an inspiration to many Christians today. He is a model missionary for our times because he knew how to cross geographical borders and cultural barriers to be close to different groups and people. It was not long before the Church recognised his virtues and holiness. Pope Paul VI beatified him on 19 October 1975 and John Paul II canonised him on 5 October 2003, adding his name to the canon of saints.

Joseph Freinademetz was ordained a priest in 1875 in his diocese, Brixen, in Tyrol, which at the time was part of the Austrian Empire. From a young age, he felt drawn to missionary life, and as soon as he learned that a German priest, Arnold Janssen, had opened a house in the Netherlands to prepare future missionaries, Joseph contacted him. After a few months in Steyl and only four years after his ordination, he arrived in China full of missionary enthusiasm and apostolic

fervour. Rooted in the culture of his native Tyrol, deeply influenced by Catholic religiosity and trained in the theology of his time, Freinademetz soon realised that he needed to make a long journey of rapprochement and adaptation to the customs and traditions of China in order to understand the Chinese mentality and thus be able to work more effectively in the service of proclaiming the Gospel.

When he left for China in 1879, Freinademetz had a single goal: “to save souls for heaven.” However, shortly after arriving, he realised that he needed time to form an opinion about the Chinese: “For now, I don’t want to say anything about our Chinese, their disposition, character and customs. I have been in China for too short a time to make a judgement.” Two years after his arrival in China, he wrote: “As if awakening from a deep sleep, I suddenly found myself in an entirely new world, and what a world! Everything has changed, and so have I.” On another occasion, in a letter to his friend and benefactor, the weaver Franz Thäler, he wrote with a subtle sense of humour: “It is strange to always walk around with nothing on my head, like a thief. Every eight or fifteen days, it is necessary to shave my head, as you do with your beards, and then make a braid that we call a ponytail. Ah, my dear weaver, if only I could visit you once with my Chinese head: what laughter! But this is how we must allow ourselves to be treated, in order to win them more easily for the Sacred Heart” (23 July 1880).

Over the years, Freinademetz came to understand that in order to proclaim Jesus Christ, it was necessary to undergo a complete metamorphosis, especially an inner one. Commenting on the fact that he now dressed like the Chinese, he wrote: “The most important task is still pending: the transformation of the inner man. The study of the Chinese mentality, customs and traditions, character and attitudes, is not something that can be done in a day or even a year, and it cannot be achieved without

some painful effort.” This painful operation, which he sensed was necessary from his first contacts with the Chinese people, consisted of a long and persistent process of insertion into Chinese culture and mentality, which led him to abandon the European stereotypes and prejudices towards other peoples that were common at that time. Years later, in one of his letters, he confessed: “The Chinese are a wonderful people who possess excellent qualities and virtues... I love China and its people and would gladly die for them a thousand times over... I want to continue to be Chinese in heaven too.”

This book is not just another biography of Saint Joseph Freinademetz. Anyone who wants to learn about his life, apostolic activities, thinking and spirituality will find an excellent source in the biography written by Fritz Bornemann. My goal is very simple: to highlight some characteristics of Joseph Freinademetz’s personality, emphasising the progressive inner transformation that shaped his understanding of a culture different from his own; to highlight the human and spiritual foundations that gave him the strength to face difficulties; and to show the profound reason that gave meaning to his life and his missionary vocation. To achieve this goal, I dare to view his life as a journey between earth and heaven, between his native Tyrol and his beloved China. However, between earth and heaven lies the sea, which he had to cross to reach the mission field. His life was a journey from earth to heaven, a journey of growth in faith, dedication to the mission, and love for the Chinese people.

This proposal – which is certainly debatable – consists of reading the life of Saint Joseph Freinademetz as a succession of passages, a journey that unfolds in several stages. In this sense, we can read his life according to the hermeneutic grid proposed by anthropologists such as Van Gennep and Victor Turner, who interpret human life as a succession of ritual

passages. In his book *Rites of Passage*, Van Gennep states that rites of passage, in the course of a lifetime, are present in all cultures: 'The life of an individual, regardless of the type of society, consists of passing successively from one age to another and from one occupation to another.' Victor Turner, in turn, argues that rites of passage have a tripartite structure: rites of separation, rites of marginalisation and rites of incorporation. The first includes rites that mark the separation of the individual from their previous state, the second covers the period in which the individual, although no longer in their old role, has not yet entered a new existential period or social function. It is through the third set of rites, those of incorporation, that the individual reintegrates into society, assuming a new status and a new function. Examples of rites of passage in some cultures are rites of initiation into adulthood or marriage. In Christianity, for example, the rites of baptism, confirmation and marriage are important milestones in the life of the individual and the Christian community.

Rites of passage are an important element in religious doctrine and practice. Among the most popular rites of passage, present in almost all religions, are pilgrimages. Going on a pilgrimage, for example to a shrine, requires leaving home (separation), walking (being between the past and the future) and arriving (becoming part of a new reality). In this sense, we can compare the life of Saint Joseph Freinademetz to a journey, a pilgrimage. This pilgrimage, which marked him forever, began when he left his beloved native Tyrol, his family, his friends, his language, his culture, his landscapes and his food, and crossed the seas in the name of Christ, knowing almost nothing about what awaited him on the other side of the world. At the end of the journey, China, which at first seemed so mysterious and hostile to him, became the paradise where he wanted to remain forever.

1. THE EARTH

We belong to the land where we were born, and we are influenced by the geography where we took our first steps in life. Even if we are not fully aware of it, it is not the same thing to be born and raised in the green valleys of Minho or the golden plains of Alentejo, in a small village in Beira, or in a metropolis. And when later, for work or life choices, we are far from our homeland, we remain closely connected to that geographical space where we first saw the light of day and the colour of the sky. It always does us good to return to our origins, including the people who live there. In fact, more than geography, we belong to people.

Bernardo Soares, one of Fernando Pessoa's pseudonyms, is a simple bookkeeper's assistant in a commercial office in Rua dos Douradores, in the city of Lisbon. The *Livro do Desassossego* [Book of Disquiet] collects the thoughts, moods and emotions that arise from his daily routine. Despite living in a big city, the space where Bernardo Soares spends his days is small, as he also lives on the same street where he works. That street is his world where he lives, works, dreams and writes. At one point, he states: "This Rua dos Douradores encompasses for me the whole meaning of things". And on another occasion, he writes: "If I had the world in my hand, I would exchange it, I am sure, for a ticket to Rua dos Douradores" because deep down, "I will always belong to Rua dos Douradores, like all of humanity." Rua dos Douradores is the most precious place in

the world for Bernardo Soares, because it is there that he feels at home and everything makes sense to him.

Oies

Joseph Freinademetz was born on 15 April 1852 in Oies, a small village in the parish of San Leonardo di Badia, in the Dolomite Alps in northern Italy. At that time, that region of Tyrol was part of the Austrian Empire. Today, this region is very popular with tourists for mountain sports, both in winter and summer. But in 1852, when Joseph was born, the situation was different. Oies was an isolated place and difficult to access. Joseph's mother tongue was Ladin, a Romance language derived from Latin, like Italian, Spanish, French and Portuguese. In Ladin, his name is Ujöp. In 1879, he left for China as a missionary and never returned to Oies, but Oies never left his heart. A week after arriving in Hong Kong, in a letter to his family, he wrote: "Now here in Hong Kong I no longer find the beautiful Badia, and I will never find it until we walk together in search of our true homeland above the stars. In vain will I look here for my home, Oies, undoubtedly the most beautiful place in the world; in vain will I also look here for my father, my mother, my brothers and sisters and so many good friends, who are beyond the sea" (28 April 1879).

Coming from the valleys of Tyrol where Badiot, a dialect of the Ladin language, is spoken, he soon discovers that he belongs to a minority. From the city of Alexandria, where his ship called, he sent a letter to his parents and friends: "Alexandria, which is perhaps the second biggest city of Egypt, is like a new world for me. There are about 250,000 inhabitants, among whom there are 40,000 Catholics. You see people from all over the world, white, black, brown, and so on. They speak Arabic, perhaps the most difficult language in the world; but

you also hear Italian, German, French, English, except for Badiot, because there is not a single Badiot in Alexandria.” And in a letter to his relatives, he repeats the same idea when he says that in Hong Kong, in the bishop’s house where he is staying, no one speaks Latin: “We have many languages to learn, because here we speak Chinese, Italian, German, Portuguese, French and English, but not Badiot, except that I speak it with myself” (28 April 1879).

His parents were John Matthias Freinademetz and Maria Sottvalgiarai. They had thirteen children, four of whom died as infants. Joseph was the fourth child. The family was pious; traditional religious practices were part and parcel of daily life. The family participated in parish activities. They also went on pilgrimage to Holy Cross, a 15th-century sanctuary much loved by the inhabitants of Val Badia, located at an altitude of two thousand metres. Joseph attended primary school in Badia, getting up early to walk down the mountain to school. He also attended catechism classes in Badia.

The place where we are born and grow up will forever mark our lives, our behaviour, our view of the world and society. It will also mark our religious life, or lack thereof. The anthropological term socialisation or enculturation signifies the process of learning a culture, a way of being and behaving through which an individual becomes a member of a society. This process unfolds primarily through observation and imitation. From an early age, children learn to behave within the boundaries considered acceptable by their culture, for example eating habits, ways of greeting others, dress codes and play. Thus, they internalise the meanings that their society attributes to events and objects in the world around them. Like any other child in Tyrol, Joseph Freinademetz grew up in a cultural and religious environment where family and neighbourhood ties were fundamental to personal and social

life, and where Catholic celebrations shaped the behaviour of its inhabitants.

Freinademetz's human and spiritual roots lie in this place, which he will never forget. In a letter to his parents, brothers and sisters, written in Steyl on 29 August 1878, he writes: "[...] The distance from Oies to where I am now is really great, something I could not have imagined. Since Innsbruck, I have not met anyone I know. I arrived at my destination on Tuesday evening. The journey cost about fifty florins, and my luggage, which also arrived, cost about fifteen florins. The general feeling I experienced on this journey mirrors the advice of a mother: "Be grateful, sons and daughters, because you are from Badia, and if you are not called by the Lord, never leave beautiful Badia". Today, tourists visiting Tyrol are impressed by its beauty: the green forests in summer, the mountains rising up to the sky, the snow that blankets everything in white and silence in winter. The pilgrim visiting Joseph's birth house will surely wonder what powerful reasons led him to leave such a beautiful land blessed by nature.

Joseph left his beloved homeland because he wanted to be a missionary and proclaim the Gospel of Christ to those who did not yet know him. Like Abraham (Genesis 12:1), he felt that God was calling him to a new homeland. From Steyl, where he was preparing to leave on mission, he wrote to his parents: "Pray and thank God every day, at least with an Our Father and a Hail Mary, for He has been kind enough to choose a missionary from our family" (29 October 1878).

In Oies, in his family, at school and in the parish, Joseph received and nurtured the Christian faith and assimilated the traditional Catholic devotions that would mark his entire life. Devotion to the Holy Cross and the Sacred Heart of Jesus occupied a special place in his family's religious practice.

Devotion to the Holy Cross had deep and ancient roots in the religiosity of Tyrol. Devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus was very popular in the 19th century. In 1875, on the 200th anniversary of the apparition of the Sacred Heart of Jesus to St. Margaret Mary Alacoque in Paray-le-Monial, France, Pope Pius IX promulgated the act of consecration of the whole Church to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. It is not surprising that this link between the Heart of Jesus and the Passion of Christ occupies a central place in the spirituality of St. Joseph Freinademetz. Many of his letters open with the expression: “Dearest in the Sacred Heart of Jesus” and end with a reference to the Sacred Heart, for example: “I commend you all to the Sacred Heart of Jesus,” “In the Sacred Heart of Jesus, your friend, Ujöp.” In a letter to his parents and siblings shortly after arriving in China, he wrote: “I will not fail to commend you all, and above all my father and mother, to the Sacred Heart of Jesus and Mary. I am very happy to be in China, and do not worry about me. When you want to see me, enter into the Sacred Heart; there we will meet” (28 April 1879).

Devotion to the Sacred Heart should motivate us to imitate Jesus, who challenges us: “Learn from me, for I am gentle and humble of heart” (Matthew 11:29). Those who knew Freinademetz, in Europe and China, emphasised his kindness and welcoming heart. Devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, which marked him from childhood, certainly contributed to creating in him a heart as gentle and humble as that of our Redeemer.

In 2024, Pope Francis published the encyclical *Dilexit nos* [He loved us] on the human and divine love of the Heart of Jesus. The Pope affirms that the history of Christian spirituality is marked by the union between devotion to the Heart of Jesus and commitment to our brothers and sisters, and that this devotion has a missionary dimension: “Mission, as a radiation

of the love of the heart of Christ, requires missionaries who are themselves in love and who, enthralled by Christ, feel bound to share this love that has changed their lives” (#209). In St. Joseph Freinademetz we also find the realisation of what Pope Francis says about passionate missionaries who dedicate their lives speaking of Christ, “by witness or by word, in such a way that others seek to love him, is the greatest desire of every missionary of souls” (#210).

In the Society of the Divine Word, devotion to the Heart of Jesus has a long tradition and is echoed in the prayer attributed to St. Arnold Janssen, a hallmark of the SVD missionary vocation:

“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 people”.

Brixen

After completing primary school, Joseph continued his education in the town of Brixen (or Bressanone in Italian language). A benefactor, Franz Thäler, a weaver from the nearby village of Sottrù, supported Freinademetz’s education. Thäler accompanied Joseph, then ten years old, to Brixen. The walk took at least eleven hours through valleys and mountains. In the city, Thäler found free accommodation for the boy and, for different days of the week, also free meals in various families and convents. His parents only had to provide his clothing. Joseph would remain grateful to the weaver and his family all his life.

In Brixen, Joseph, whose mother tongue was Ladin and who had attended elementary school in Italian, had to repeat two years of primary school in a German-speaking school

before starting secondary school. At the end of his secondary studies, he decided to enter the diocese's major seminary and study theology. At the seminary, his interest and love for the missions grew. In Brixen there was an association of friends of the missions, inspired by Professor Mitterutzner. In his Freinademetz biography, Fritz Bornemann points out that when Joseph arrived in Brixen, Mitterutzner was already corresponding extensively with missionaries in Egypt and Sudan and regularly published missionary articles in the local press. During Joseph's five years of studies at the secondary school in Brixen, Mitterutzner, in collaboration with the missionaries, published two linguistic works, making him one of the pioneers of African linguistic studies. In the period of sixteen years (1853-1869), 32 priests and lay people left Tyrol for Africa as missionaries, a clear sign of the missionary zeal that permeated the diocese of Brixen.

Joseph adapted easily to life in the seminary and was an exemplary student. In a letter to his friend and benefactor in November 1872, Joseph wrote: "By the grace of God, I am healthy and happy and I like the seminary very much, because we have food and we can study, and that is enough. I also like my room very much, even though it is always cold and there is snow and ice on the window. I fear that the water in the washbasin and even the holy water will freeze, but that does not worry me" (24 November 1872).

The hike from the village of Oies to the city of Brixen, on foot and through the mountains, was Joseph Freinademetz's first journey into the unknown world. He had to cross valleys and mountains and, most importantly, set foot in a city so different from his tiny village. In China he will cross valleys, rivers and mountains, fields and cities to be close to the people to whom God had sent him. Freinademetz would not spare himself to carry out his mission. For him, the most important

thing was to dedicate his life to the proclamation of the Gospel, because “in the end, the obligation of the missionary is only to bear witness to Jesus Christ before the pagans, to sow the good seed and then to give himself completely to the Lord, whether the seed bears fruit or not” (23 July 1880). Although he wanted to save as many souls as possible, Freinademetz said in a letter to his parents that “saving a single soul would be enough to work and work hard all his life” (January 22, 1885).

Saint Martin

Joseph Freinademetz was ordained a priest on 25 July 1875, the feast of St. James the Apostle, in the chapel of the seminary in Brixen. On 5 August, a very rainy day in Vale Badia, he celebrated his first Mass in the parish church of St. Leonard. It was customary to invite a famous preacher for the first Mass to deliver the sermon, so the new priest's first public homily in his home parish was not until a month later. It is noteworthy that this first sermon was delivered on 8 September 1875, the feast of the Nativity of Our Lady, the very same day on which Arnold Janssen founded the Mission House in Steyl! The theme of the homily was inspired by a verse from the Gospel according to Luke: “Many will rejoice at his birth” (Luke 1:14) and certain psalm verses, for instance, “Rejoice in Yahweh, dance before him” (Psalm 68:4), “Blessed are those whose offence is forgiven, whose sin blotted out” (Psalm 32:1). According to Fritz Bornemann, the sermon was not outstanding, because the central ideas were not clearly developed and the examples and comparisons did not illustrate the main theme, but only secondary themes. Not wanting, however, to devalue the effort of the new priest, the biographer comments: “Nevertheless, a beginning had been made.”

After his priestly ordination, Joseph was appointed curate at the parish of Saint Martin, located about twelve kilometres from Saint Leonard, where he worked for about two years (1876-1878). In addition to celebrating the sacraments, visiting the sick and teaching catechism classes, the young priest also was a teacher at the local school, as was customary in that region of the Austrian Empire.

The missionary vocation, which had attracted him for several years, matured during his time in Saint Martin. In January 1878, the diocesan newspaper published an article about the new Mission House at Steyl, Holland, near the German border, which welcomed candidates from Germany, Holland and Austria willing to work in the missions. The article spoke about the founder of the work, Fr. Arnold Janssen, described the opening of the seminary on 8 September 1875, and mentioned the Holy Father's blessing of the project. The text stated that the purpose of the foundation was to promote Catholic missionary activity in non-Christian lands, primarily among the pagan peoples of the Far East. Candidates for the missions could complete their studies at the mission seminary. Priests were also welcome, be it as missionaries or as teachers working in the formation of future missionaries. Joseph Freinademetz saw this as an answer to his musings and contacted Arnold Janssen. After some correspondence and a personal meeting in Brixen (Fr. Arnold he was returning from a trip to Rome), Freinademetz decided to go to Steyl and prepare for the mission in China. But first, he needed to obtain permission from his bishop.

The bishop of Brixen, Vincent Gasser, gave his written permission, saying that however difficult the sacrifice might be because of the shortage of priests in his diocese, he could not refuse to give his consent, as the voice of God seemed to be calling ever more insistently. And in a letter to Arnold Janssen,

the Bishop wrote: “The bishop of Brixen says no, but the Catholic bishop says yes. Take my son Freinademetz and make him a first-class missionary.”

Joseph Freinademetz would always remember his parishioners back home with great affection and gratitude. Answering a letter by a certain Maria on behalf of all his former students in the parish of Saint Martin, Joseph confessed: “It is a joy for me to know that you are still well, that you have not forgotten me after these thirty long years, and that you continue to pray for me together with your children, whom I have not yet had the joy of meeting, but whom I will meet in heaven. I thank God for the great joy you have given me, and I thank you for picking up your pen to share some news with me. I truly feel in my heart the joy of remembering each of my dear students whom I have never forgotten. Greet them all on my behalf and tell them that I pray for each one of them as I promised in my last homily at Saint Martin, when, with tears in my eyes, I said goodbye to each of my little friends who were also in tears” (13 December 1907). A small and beautiful chapel dedicated to St. Joseph Freinademetz commemorates his time in the parish of Saint Martin.

Steyl

During Mass at the parish church of St. Leonard on 18 August 1878, before leaving for Steyl, Joseph Freinademetz explained why he had decided to become a missionary and said that he was leaving calmly and confidently for the place that the Lord had indicated to him: “The merciful God, whose goodness knows no bounds, who chooses the little ones, the weak, and often even the great sinners to be his servants, his instruments, has called me to share in a grace for which I will never be worthy for all eternity. I hear the voice of the Divine Good

Shepherd inviting me to go with him into the desert. I must help him to seek out the sheep that have gone astray. He calls me to go with him in search of our unfortunate brothers and sisters overseas, who know nothing about our heavenly Father, nothing about our beloved Redeemer, nothing about our Blessed Virgin Mary, nothing about the house of our heavenly Father.” In Oies, he said goodbye to his family, neighbours and friends, and took the train to Steyl, where he arrived on 27 August, with a brief stop in Cologne, Germany. In his diary, he wrote: “However, I have seen enough of Cologne; my heart is restless until it rests in the holy places it intends to find. So let’s move on! Kaldenkirchen, the last Prussian station, is behind us; I have arrived in Venlo, the first Dutch station. Another hour and I will arrive at the mission seminary. I approach it praying the *Te Deum*. A holy joy fills my heart, mixed, however, with a kind of anxiety. When will I leave this house again? Where will my path take me? *Qui dedit velle, dabit et perficere* - He who inspired the desire will also grant its fulfilment.”

In a letter to his family written at Steyl, Joseph expresses his love for his native Tyrol, but also makes it clear that the Mission House in Steyl is his new home. He points out that the distance from Oies to his present place is really great, greater than he had imagined, and says that from Innsbruck onwards he did not meet a single person known to him. He describes the house in Steyl as a house of God where the spirit of piety and fear of God reigns. He confesses: “I am very happy to be here and I do not know how to thank the Lord. Here I can learn a lot, first of all how to live as a good Christian, and secondly I am now beginning to learn the Chinese language” (29 August 1878).

The months spent in Steyl were ones of intense preparation for his departure for China, especially on a spiritual level. Another young priest, John Baptist Anzer, would also be

leaving with him. On 28 February 1879, the two missionaries took a vow of obedience, committing themselves to the seminary in Steyl and to the missions for a period of five years. On the first Sunday of March 1879, after the solemn Eucharist, the apostolic nuncio to the Netherlands, Monsignor Capri, presented the missionary cross to the two priests. At the end, all the members of the community, beginning with the rector, Fr. Arnold Janssen, kissed the feet of the two missionaries standing by the altar. This gesture recalled the words of the Prophet Isaiah: “How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of the messenger announcing peace, of the messenger of good news, who proclaims salvation!” (Isaiah 52:7). Joseph then travelled to Tyrol for a final farewell to his family and his homeland.

Remember That We Love You

On 22 July 2022, the musical “Ujöp da Oies” about his life and mission premiered in Oies. The stage and an amphitheatre with a capacity for six hundred spectators were set up next to the family home of the Saint of Oies. Carlo Suani, the author of the text, was inspired by the biography of Joseph Freinademetz and the letters he wrote to his family and friends from China. The composer, Antonio Rossi, managed to convey Freinademetz’s joys and sorrows through music. All the actors – children, young people and adults – were locals and performed their roles professionally. Through music, songs and various scenes, the audience gained a better understanding of the life of this missionary saint, from his childhood in his homeland to his studies at the seminary in Brixen, and his mission in China. The original songs gave a new flavour to his message. In one of the most moving scenes, Freinademetz’s parents and siblings read the first letter he wrote from Hong Kong. The scene ends with

a song entitled *Saluti da casa* (Greetings from home) in which they tell him in Ladin language never to forget that they love him:

«L'amur t'a cherdè ia tla Cina,
dalunc da tüa patria ladina.
Nos düc confidun tl Sigur
y ti un crëta a to gran valur:
t'accompagun cun nosta oraziun
y recordete che i te orun bun,
Ujöp».

‘Love has called you to China / far from your Ladin homeland.
/ We all trust in the Lord / and we trust in your great courage: /
we accompany you with our prayers / and please remember that
we love you, Ujöp’.

2. THE SEA

On his way to China, Joseph passed through Tyrol and arrived in Rome, where he met up with Anzer again. At the port of Ancona, they began the journey that would take them to Hong Kong, with stops in Alexandria, Aden, Ceylon and Singapore, crossing the Mediterranean, the Red Sea, the Indian Ocean and the China Sea. In Alexandria, they took the train to Suez. At this port, they embarked for Ceylon, where they changed boats again.

In many cultures, the sea symbolises the power of chaos and evil, an abyss full of mystery. The sea is also very dangerous, and many lives have been lost in it due to storms and shipwrecks. The first verses of Fernando Pessoa's poem "Mar Português" (Portuguese Sea) aptly convey the dangers that are part of the country's tragic maritime history:

"O salty sea, how much of your salt / Are the tears of Portugal!"¹

In biblical tradition, the sea is a power against which man can do nothing; only God can conquer the sea and all the evil, danger and disorder that it represents: "By his power, he has whipped out the sea," says Job (26:12), "with a threat I can dry the sea," says God through the prophet Isaiah (50:2). Only God is able to open the sea so that Moses and the Israelites can escape Pharaoh's army, crossing on dry land to the promised land (cf. Exodus 14:15-30).

¹ *Ó mar salgado, quanto do teu sal / são lágrimas de Portugal!*

On his way to Rome, the ship on which Paul was travelling was caught in a violent storm and, unable to withstand the wind, drifted for several days until it was shipwrecked on the coast of Malta (cf. Acts of the Apostles 27:14-44). The prophet Jonah, determined to escape the mission God had entrusted to him in Nineveh, took a ship in the opposite direction. However, the Lord sent a fierce wind threatening to break up the ship. The fury of the waves only subsided when, at his request, the sailors threw Jonah into the sea (cf. Jonah 1:1-16).

Job reminds his friends coming to console him that God's wisdom and power are unlimited: "He [God] and no other has stretched out the heavens and trampled on the back of the sea" (Job 9:8). Jesus is the only one who walks on the sea and calms the storms. In Mark's Gospel, we read that Jesus forced his disciples to get into the boat and go ahead of him to the other shore, towards Bethsaida, while he himself dismissed the crowd. "After saying goodbye to them, he went off into the hills to pray. When evening came, the boat was far out on the sea, and he was alone on land. He could see that they were hard pressed in their rowing, for the wind was against them; and about the fourth watch of the night he came towards them, walking on the sea" (Mark 6:46-48). On another occasion, while crossing the Sea of Galilee, Jesus' disciples were surprised by a great storm; the waves were crashing against the boat and it was almost sinking. Jesus was asleep on a cushion. They woke him and said to him, "Master, do you not care? We are lost!" He woke up, rebuked the wind and said to the sea, "Quiet now! Be calm!" The wind died down and there was a great calm (Mark 4:35-39).

In order to move forward in life, to realise our dreams and projects, we often have to face and overcome great obstacles. It

is as if we had to cross a stormy and threatening sea. Joseph Freinademetz was aware that life is a pilgrimage full of obstacles. In his sermon delivered at the church of Saint Martin on All Saints' Day, 1 November 1877, he said: "Dear Christians, what will our feelings be when we are admitted to the communion of saints in Heaven! There will be people from all over the globe: black people from Africa, white people from Tyrol, people of all languages and generations... And we will all recognise each other as if we had always been brothers, coming from an exhausting and dangerous pilgrimage across the sea of this world." The sea, which Joseph crossed from Italy to China, symbolises the world with all the challenges and obstacles we must face and overcome to reach our goal, to discover the deep meaning of our life, that is, our vocation on this earth.

Saying Goodbye and Leaving

Tyrol was the first stage in the long journey to China. In Brixen, Joseph said goodbye to his bishop and his seminary colleagues. In Saint Martin, he said goodbye to the parish priest, parishioners and his students, asked them to pray for him and promised he would not forget them. His former parishioners already knew about his plans because, in August of the previous year, before leaving for Steyl, in his last sermon in the church of Saint Martin, Freinademetz had explained to them why he had decided to become a missionary and how he was ready to obey God's call: "The Divine Good Shepherd in his unfathomable goodness has invited me to go with him into the desert to look for the sheep that have gone astray. What else can I do but kiss his hand in gratitude and joy and in the words of Sacred Scripture say: Behold, I come; and then like Abraham leave my father's house, my homeland and you,

dearly beloved [parishioners], and go to the land the Lord will point out to me..." From Saint Martin, Joseph went to spend a few days in his beloved Badia. In Oies, as he said goodbye to his family, he asked his father for his blessing and then blessed them all. In Brixen, he said goodbye to friends and acquaintances who had come to the railway station for a final farewell. And as he began his train journey to Rome, Freinademetz left his beloved Tyrol forever.

On 12 March 1879, Joseph Freinademetz arrived in Rome where he spent two intense days. In a letter to his parents and siblings, written during his journey across the Mediterranean and sent from Alexandria, Egypt, he recounts his stay in the Eternal City: "Although I was only in Rome for two days, I saw the main sights and, above all, I was able to obtain the Holy Father's blessing for myself, for you and for some friends. I also received permission to celebrate Mass during the sea voyage, something I had greatly desired." In another letter, he mentions that he celebrated Mass in St. Peter's, venerated the relics of some saints, and climbed the Holy Stairs. On their way to the port of Ancona, he and Anzer stopped at the shrine of Loreto. Inside the basilica, pilgrims can visit the remains of the house which, according to tradition, is the House of Nazareth, where Jesus, Mary and Joseph lived. Regarding this visit, Joseph writes: "On Friday, the 14th, we celebrated Holy Mass at Loreto, the first shrine in the world, in that same house where Jesus, Mary and Joseph lived. We saw the table where the Holy Family ate, the chimney and the kitchen where Our Lady prepared the food" (20 March 1879).

On 15 March 1879, the ship left the port of Ancona bound for Alexandria, Egypt. The first stop was in Brindisi, in southern Italy. From there they continued on to Alexandria, where they docked on 20 March. Already on the high seas, far from the Italian coast, Joseph wrote in his diary: "We are no

longer on European soil. An extraordinary thought. Homeland, friends and parents: all left behind! I had already built my happiness in my homeland. In the first steps of my priestly path, only roses grew; a circle of friends and companions surrounded me. But now I have to leave everything behind, I have to start all over again in a new world, make new friends, learn a new language, and start anew in every regard. What have you done? – Or rather, what are you going to do? You are going to save souls for heaven! And my wounded heart has been healed!”

The separation from his parents, loved ones and parishioners was not easy. But Freinademetz was aware and certain of the reasons for this journey that had just begun. There was a greater reason that gave meaning to the pain of departure and separation. What fascinates us about this saint is, on the one hand, his humanity and fragility and, at the same time, the total trust he places in the love of his parents, brothers and sisters, and friends, and in God who called him to be a missionary.

The love, friendship and prayers of his relatives and friends gave him the strength to face the culture shock upon arriving in China and to ease the pain of absence and distance. In many of his letters, he thanks his parents, brothers and friends for the letters they sent him and the news they shared about his family, his former parishioners and life in Tyrol. For example, writing to one of his brothers, he says: “I received your letter with great joy, for it was the first of your life. Write to me sometimes, because although we are separated by seas of thousands and thousands of hours, we are still brothers, and as brothers we hope to love one another” (23 September 1896).

His faith in God, nourished by prayer, was the strength that enabled him to overcome persecution and failure. On one occasion, France went to war with China and, after the peace

treaty was signed, missionaries and Christians suffered some persecution. Joseph wrote to his parents: “The Chinese consider us all French and now have very little fear of us. But our trust is not in the French, but in the Lord, and his help will not fail us, as it has always helped us until now” (28 July 1885).

High Seas

In the letters he wrote during his voyage to China, Joseph recounted some episodes, describing what he saw in the cities where the ship stopped and sometimes talking about his fellow travellers. For most of the journey, the sea was calm, but near Ceylon they were surprised by a storm and, for a few days, Joseph felt seasick due to the strong waves. In addition to Anzer, two Franciscan priests were also on the ship and were able to celebrate Mass in their room. The sea made a vivid impression on him. Writing to his parents and siblings, he said: “I would like to write to you about the wonders of the sea, but there are so many that they cannot be described with a pen. [...] You can see nothing but sky and water and sometimes some mountains and islands, and far away some boats returning from their voyages, certain birds that almost always accompany the boats, and other birds that are travelling to your lands. The other night, a bird landed on my hand and stayed there quietly for a while. I would have liked to give it a letter to take to you, but I don't know if it would reach Oies. Poor little bird, at least say hello to my beautiful Tyrol and my loved ones who live there” (20 March 1879).

It was also during the voyage to China that Joseph and the three other priests had their first contacts with people of other religions and cultures who were travelling on the same ship. The prevailing mentality in Europe during the 19th century was that peoples outside its borders were backward and lived in

ignorance. The differences he saw in the other passengers made a great impression on Joseph Freinademetz and, as a result of his upbringing and culture, some prejudices appear in his letters. In a letter written during the crossing of the Red Sea, he mentions, with some disapproval, the eating habits of some passengers: “There are many Indians, a rather savage people; they eat with their hands, after lunch they wash their bowls with the leftover rice and then throw it into the sea. On the other hand, they seem to me to be good-hearted people, and I feel sorry for them, thinking that they know nothing about our beautiful and holy religion. Among them there are mainly young people, who show good character, if they had the opportunity to be taught. But what can we do; we don't know a word of their language.” And in a letter written during his stopover in Singapore, after mentioning that they eat rice with their hands, he says: “On the other hand, they seem to me to be good people, and if they had the opportunity, they would be better than many Catholics. Sometimes tears come to my eyes when I consider them in their misfortune. Pray for their conversion” (14 April 1879). This first contact with people of other cultures and religions confirmed Joseph's decision to become a missionary: to convert souls to Christ. Joseph found the way they ate and prayed strange; on the other hand, he recognised that, if they were well catechised, they could become good Christians.

Crossing Borders

Joseph Freinademetz's first impressions of passengers belonging to religions and cultures different from his own reveal a certain curiosity and some prejudice. At the same time, his observations also reveal a strong and sincere desire to meet these people and proclaim the good news of Christ to them.

What was initially a culture shock gradually transformed into an attitude of openness to difference, respect for others, and even admiration. The sea also represents this border, this barrier that Joseph had to cross to enter the Chinese world and get to know the mentality and heart of its people.

At the 13th General Chapter of the Society of the Divine Word, held in 1988, the question that concerned its members was formulated in the following terms: How do we understand our mission in the Church and in today's world? At the time, the Congregation, geographically spread over more than fifty countries, sought to situate itself and adapt to quite diverse ethnic, socio-cultural and religious contexts. In the aftermath of the Chapter, the Congregation emphasised the importance of dialogue, inculturation, justice, peace and integrity of creation as priority missionary strategies. However, it was the Chapter document on spirituality that would have the greatest impact on our self-understanding of our missionary identity. The document highlights the key elements of SVD spirituality: the Trinitarian foundation, the Incarnation of the Word, and the action of the Holy Spirit. But the central idea for a correct understanding of the identity and mission of the Divine Word Missionaries was the spirituality of the 'exodus' on a personal, cultural and also geographical level. This exodus or passage – cultural, geographical – was understood in the light of the Passover of the Lord Jesus.

A spirituality of exodus is realised in three challenges where the Divine Word Missionaries are called to imitate the Lord's Passover: when we enter another culture, when we show solidarity with the poor, and when we cultivate dialogue. These would be the frontiers to which the Spirit was calling the Divine Word Missionaries. We live the Paschal mystery when we make the passage to another culture and abandon our prejudices and exaggerated nationalism and rejoice in discovering the

presence of God in the other, in the unknown. It is our duty to promote justice according to the Gospel in solidarity with the poor. This requires a profound experience of God as the source of all compassion and a continual conversion of the heart. With regard to the exodus in dialogue with members of other religions or ideologies, the document states that the Paschal dimension is lived when “we pass over from mutual suspicion to mutual trust.” In all these exoduses, it is necessary to cultivate attitudes of openness, respect, hospitality, and patience.

Missionaries were challenged to pass over “to other cultures so that the borders of racism and prejudice will be erased”; to pass over “to the poor so that class boundaries will disappear”; and to undertake this exodus “in dialogue, so that religious sectarianism will vanish”. In this document, dialogue was defined not only as “speaking”, but above all as “listening”. It also presented some requirements for dialogue, namely an attitude of welcome, in the sense of having time to be with the other; patience, translated into a listening that makes it possible to eliminate misunderstandings; and, finally, an attitude of openness that requires the ability to relativise one's own certainties and be able to learn from others.

The example of Christ, described in the Christological hymn of the Letter to the Philippians, is presented as the way to follow to live a spirituality of exodus: “Make your own the mind of Christ Jesus: Who, being in the form of God, did not count equality with God something to be grasped. But he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, becoming as human beings are; and being in every way like a human being, he was humbler yet, even to accepting death, death on a cross” (Philippians 2:5-8).

These ideas from the 13th General Chapter were later developed in a document entitled “Living the Paschal Mystery in SVD Missionary Spirituality”. One of the chapters is dedicated to Joseph Freinademetz, presenting him as a model to follow in living a spirituality of exodus, especially in crossing borders in solidarity with the poor. His journey to China was highlighted, with all the consequences that this brought for him in terms of learning the Chinese language and customs and the various persecutions he suffered. Freinademetz crossed borders to meet others, to cultivate dialogue and to promote the material and spiritual well-being of the Chinese people. His example shows us that it is not enough to do things for others; the most important thing is to cross borders to be with others. The Brazilian Bishop Dom Hélder Câmara expresses this idea in a beautiful poem-prayer:

Mission is to leave,
to walk, to leave everything behind,
to step outside oneself,
to break the crust of selfishness
that closes us in on ourselves.

It is to stop going round
in circles around ourselves
as if we were the centre
of the world and of life.

It is not to allow ourselves to be blocked
by the problems of the small world
to which we belong:
humanity is greater.

Mission is always to set out,
but not to make kilometres.
It is above all to open oneself to others
as brothers and sisters,
to discover them and encounter them.

And if, in order to encounter and love them,
it is necessary to cross the seas
and fly through the skies,
then mission is to set out
to the ends of the earth.

Hong Kong

Joseph Freinademetz and John Baptist Anzer crossed the seas “to the ends of the earth” and arrived in Hong Kong on 20 April 1879. Since 1842, Hong Kong had been a British colony and a bustling port and commercial city. The two missionaries spent their first few months learning Chinese and familiarising themselves with the pastoral situation under the guidance of Father Luigi Piazzoli, a veteran Italian missionary from PIME (Pontifical Institute for Foreign Missions). In August of the same year, Bishop Giovanni Raimondi sent Joseph to Sai Kung, a fishing village, to continue improving his Chinese and to care for the few Catholics in the region.

During his stay in Sai Kung, Freinademetz studied Chinese from morning to night with a local resident. To break the monotony of his studies, he made frequent trips to Yim Tin Tsai, one of the four small islands in Sai Kung Bay. Yim Tin

means “salt pond,” in reference to the salt flats where salt was extracted. The island had about seventy inhabitants, all Catholics. Joseph would stay there for several days, celebrate the Eucharist and, sometimes, administer the sacrament of baptism or perform a funeral.

Today, no one lives on the island. But the descendants of the former inhabitants return to the island every year on 1 May to celebrate the feast of St. Joseph in the small church, a late 19th-century building that stands on top of the hill. Only ruins remain of the village. There is also a small museum where visitors can see objects related to the activities once carried out on the island, namely agriculture and salt extraction.

The boat that transports tourists takes about twenty minutes to make the crossing. Sometimes there are also pilgrims making the trip, as on the day I visited Yim Tin Tsai; a choir from a Hong Kong parish, accompanied by their parish priest, was heading to the island for a day of reflection and retreat.

All that remains of the house where Freinademetz used to stay and the chapel where he celebrated Mass are the ruins of a few walls that have withstood the weather and human neglect. Where a room once stood, there is now an image of the saint and, next to it, engraved in stone in Chinese and English, the words attributed to him: love is the only language that everyone understands.

Yim Tin Tsai is slowly beginning to rise from the ruins and oblivion. Perhaps, through the preservation of the memory of St Joseph Freinademetz, this small island will become a spiritual centre for those seeking silence, especially in a city as busy as Hong Kong. Walking through the ruins of this village, remembering the footsteps and life of St. Joseph Freinademetz, helps us understand that through friendly presence and respect

for others, it is easier to meet people who speak languages we do not know and have customs very different from ours.

In a letter written on 30 October 1879, he reports: “I had a fever, an illness that almost everyone here catches, and I had to return to Hong Kong to recover. Now I have recovered and hope to return in a few days. Praised be the Sacred Heart of Jesus and the Blessed Virgin. What do we eat at the mission? Do not be alarmed if I tell you that we have no milk or butter, no cheese, rarely a little meat, some chicken. This is our food: in the morning, black coffee without milk and sometimes a little bread; at half past nine, rice with fish; and at half past four, the same thing, and that is all. This is how the Chinese do it, and so does the missionary; I like it this way, except that it is food that gives little strength. The Chinese eat nothing but rice, even on their deathbed; they do not drink water, and if they do, it is hot.”

From May 1880 onwards, Joseph stopped wearing the black European cassock and began to dress like the Chinese. During the following months, he was an itinerant missionary, visiting the few Catholics who lived in the villages of the region. In May 1881, after two years of language learning and cultural and pastoral integration in Hong Kong, Joseph left for Shantung, the region of China that the Holy See had assigned to the missionaries of Steyl and where Father Anzer was already stationed.

The Steyl missionary magazine, *Stadt Gottes*, published Freinademetz’s impressions of those first two years in China. Freinademetz says that, at first, he had a very romantic view of missionary life, but that reality quickly dispelled his poetic vision, giving way to a more prosaic, we might say more realistic, view. He writes: “As if awakening from a deep sleep, I suddenly found myself in an entirely new world, and what a world! Everything had changed, including myself.” The clothes

were completely strange. But it was not enough to dress like the Chinese; that is why he writes: “The main thing still remains to be done: the transformation of the inner man, the study of the Chinese worldview, of customs and practices, of the Chinese character and Chinese psychology. It is not a day's work, nor even a year's; nor can it be accomplished without many painful operations.” Freinademetz acknowledges that “there is a barrier, a wall of separation between us and the Chinese that should not be underestimated: our ignorance or our imperfect and wanting knowledge of the language of the country. (...) The missionary always remains a foreigner. The Chinese are very self-confident and proud of their way of life. They believe they belong to the greatest nation in the world. They do not bow down to foreigners; rather, they despise them. Europeans are simply the long-nosed people, the foreign devils. In the streets, adults laugh at us; children shout after us. Even the dogs seem to take special pleasure in running after and barking at foreigners. All this is doubly true in the case of the missionary.”

Joseph tells his parents and friends about the small steps he is taking in his external transformation: he dresses like the Chinese, has a shaved head but a long braid, and can even eat in the Chinese manner. Describing a funeral he presided over, he says that after the rituals at the cemetery were over, he also stayed for lunch: “I went myself and tried for the first time to eat with two chopsticks instead of a spoon and fork” (3 March 1880). The inner transformation will take longer, but it will make Freinademetz Chinese in heart and soul.

The Sea Was No More

“Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, the first heaven and the first earth had disappeared now, and there was no longer any sea was no more,” writes the author of the Book of

Revelation (21:1). The sea is only a passage, a border, an intermediate stage, which must be crossed in order to reach the desired goal. Joseph Freinademetz was aware that it was necessary to cross this border. Saying goodbye to the community of Steyl, he said: “Seven months ago, it was painful when I left the mountains of my homeland, but here I have found a second homeland that I also love. Now the Lord is calling me to find a third homeland on the other side of the sea. I want to follow his call by saying goodbye to everything that binds me to Europe in order to devote all my strength to the service of God. I hope to meet many of you in the mission. Farewell, until we meet in China!”

Freinademetz was one of the first missionaries to embody Arnold Janssen’s missionary project, leaving everything behind to devote himself to what were then called “the foreign missions.” On 18 February 1879, a few days before embarking for China, he wrote in a letter to his friend and benefactor Franz Thäler: “My only desire is to be able to convert many of our poor brothers and sisters, and for this reason alone I am leaving my dear father, my dear mother, my brothers and sisters, my relatives and friends, among whom you have one of the foremost places, and my dear Saint Martin. O my dear friend, pray with all your good family that I may work hard for His [God's] glory.” On 29 October 1880, in a letter to his parents, brothers and sisters, he wrote: “Let us thank God many times over for calling one of your family to be a missionary in China, and this is an honour that I would not exchange for the golden crown of the Emperor of Austria.”

Joseph Freinademetz did not leave his homeland for the sake of adventure. Faith was the foundation and reason for his journey as a Christian and missionary, knowing that in God he found a safe refuge, as the psalmist says: “Guard me as the pupil of an eye; shelter me in the shadow of your wings” (Psalm

17:8), “Take pity on me, God, take pity, for in you I take refuge, in the shadow of your wings I take refuge until the destruction is past” (Psalm 57:1). To achieve this degree of trust in God, he had to cross the sea, not only the physical sea, but also everything that the sea symbolises: danger, mystery, disorder and chaos.

But the sea is not only dangerous and terrifying; it is also serene and beautiful, as Fernando Pessoa managed to convey in just two verses:

God gave the sea the danger and the abyss,
But precisely in this he mirrored the sky².

The sea has this dual symbolism of terrifying danger and serene beauty. Perhaps without knowing it, but already desiring it, China, where he had just landed after a long journey across the sea, would be for Joseph Freinademetz the antechamber of heaven. In a letter to his sister Teresa, he wrote: “I desire nothing else in this world but to work for the glory of God and the salvation of these poor pagans, and then to join you all in paradise to praise God eternally” (22 December 1879).

² *Deus ao mar o perigo e o abismo deu, / Mas nele é que espelhou o céu.*

3. THE SKY - HEAVEN³

The word sky refers to the space above the earth, where we can gaze up at the stars, watch the clouds move and contemplate the deep blue of the firmament. In many cultures, the sky is also the dwelling place of the gods.

In the Bible, heaven is not only the firmament above the globe, but also represents the dwelling place of God: Heaven is God's throne and the earth is his footstool (Isaiah 66:1). The psalmist uses various ways to express this reality, for example: “Heaven belongs to the Yahweh, but earth he has given to the children of Adam” (Psalm 115:16), “I lift up my eyes to you are enthroned in heaven” (Psalm 123:1).

Through parables, Jesus often speaks of heaven and the kingdom of heaven. Speaking to his disciples and the people, Jesus warns them not to store up treasures on earth, where thieves break in and steal, but in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal, for “wherever your treasure is, there will your heart be too” (Matthew 6:19-21). As the days of his passion draw near, Jesus assures his disciples that there are many dwelling places in his

³ Translator's note: In many European languages (including the languages spoken by Joseph Freinademetz: Ladin, Italian and German), there is only one word signifying both the sky as a physical reality and the religious concept of heaven.

Father's house and that he will prepare a place for them (John 14:2-4). On the cross, he promises paradise to the good thief (Luke 23:40-43).

Heaven is also the goal of humanity's pilgrimage on earth. The author of the Letter to the Hebrews states that "there is no permanent city for us; we are looking for the one which is yet to be (13:14). St. Paul tells us that "our homeland is in heaven" (Philippians 3:20) and "when the tent that houses us on earth is folded up, there is a house for us from God, not made by human hands but everlasting, in the heavens" (2 Corinthians 5:1).

According to the theology of mission prevalent in the 19th century, the primary objective of the Church's missionary activity was to spread the Catholic faith or, in the language of that time, to convert and save the pagans. Joseph Freinademetz is a child of that time and that mentality. In a letter to his friend and benefactor Franz Thäler, a few days before leaving for China, he stated that his only desire was to be able to convert many pagans and that was why he was leaving his parents, relatives and friends. In a letter to his sister Teresa and brother-in-law, he wrote: "I can assure you that I feel good in China, I am happy and I do not regret having come, seeing the needs of these poor people, not only the pagans, but also the Christians who, due to a lack of missionaries, see a priest only once a year" (30 June 1882). Writing to his parents on 28 July 1885, he informed them of the growth of the mission, the large number of baptisms, and said that these were also an advantage for his parents. Then he asks: "Is not freeing so many poor brothers from hell the most beautiful thing in the world? I know well

that I have no merit, but the Lord deigns to use this wretch as his instrument to save others.” For Joseph Freinademetz, it was very clear that his mission in China was to save souls for heaven.

Arnold Janssen founded the house in Steyl to train missionaries interested in proclaiming the word of God, especially among pagans. In the September 1875 issue of the newspaper *Little Messenger of the Sacred Heart of Jesus*, Arnold wrote: “This Mission House is intended for students, priests and candidates for the priesthood who wish to devote themselves to pagan missions in the strict sense of the word.” With the same purpose, but in different language, the SVD Constitutions currently in force state: “As members of the Congregation of the Divine Word, we consider it our duty to proclaim the Word of God to all, to bring new communities into being within the people of God, to foster their growth and to promote communion among them as well as with the whole church. We work first and foremost where the gospel has not been preached at all or only insufficiently and where the local church is not viable on its own” (c. 102). The prologue to the Constitutions states: “In response to the call of the Holy Spirit and the needs of peoples, St. Arnold Janssen founded our Society as a missionary community. We see our special dedication to the Divine Word and his mission expressed in our name. His life is our life, his mission our mission. Guided by the Holy Spirit, we follow him, glorifying the Father and bringing the fullness of life to others. Wherever the church sends us, we are to proclaim the gospel so that all peoples may walk in the way of salvation, freed from the darkness of sin by

the light of the Word and the Spirit of grace. Missionary work is, therefore, the end and aim of our Society. All our activities, diverse though they be, are ultimately intended to help the church fulfill its missionary task.”

China, where Joseph Freinademetz arrived in 1879, was the mission field to which he devoted his entire life and energy. But China was not only the geographical and cultural space where he committed himself to converting souls to heaven; it also became the antechamber of paradise where he wished to remain Chinese among the Chinese.

Shantung

In 1881, the Holy See entrusted the missionaries of Steyl with the territory of South Shantung, which until then had been under the responsibility of the Franciscan missionaries. At that time, it was common practice for certain missionary institutes to obtain ‘mission territories’ for which they were fully responsible and where they were to establish ecclesial structures and exercise their apostolate. This practice of the Church was known as *jus commisionis*. The Chinese territory ceded to the Steyl missionaries covered three prefectures: Yenchowfu, Tsaochowfu and Ichowfu, with a population of about nine million inhabitants and only about two hundred Christians.

In May 1881, Joseph left Hong Kong and headed for Shantung. Before leaving, he made some necessary purchases for the new mission and then booked a ticket on the Ningpo boat, which left for Shanghai on 23 May. The Missionaries of

Milan, whom he called “my brothers,” accompanied him to the pier. Among them was most likely Father Piazzoli, who had been his teacher. After a few days of travelling, he arrived in Shanghai, where he embarked for Cheffo and from there to Tsinanfu, a long and exhausting journey on a Chinese junk across the Yellow River. He arrived on 15 July. “On that day, I reached my long-desired goal,” he would later recall. In Tsinanfu, he devoted himself to learning another version of the Chinese language, because the Hakka Chinese he had learned in Hong Kong was not used in those parts. In January 1882, Father Anzer, who was the superior of the mission, decided to move to the village of Puoli because, of its eight hundred inhabitants, one hundred were Catholics. Puoli would be the first centre of the Divine Word Missionaries in Chinese territory and, over the years, would become a very important place for the Congregation in China.

Freinademetz arrived in Puoli, where his companion and superior of the mission was already staying, a few days before Palm Sunday 1882. Shortly after arriving in Puoli, he confessed to his friend Thäler: “So, dear friend, the good Lord has finally led me to the place where I so desired to be, that is, to be alone among the pagans. My life from now on will be to go from place to place and try to win as many souls as possible” (2 July 1882).

Conditions in Puoli were precarious, but the two missionaries began to work with enthusiasm. In a letter to his sister Teresa and brother-in-law, he recounts the projects they have in mind: “We will soon start a church, because these poor

Christians have none. We use a half-ruined house as a chapel, but it is so small that only the women can fit inside. The men stand in front of the door and listen to Holy Mass there. Soon we will start a home for abandoned children” (30 June 1882).

Over the next two decades, he carried out every mission assigned to him by his superior, Fr. Anzer, who later became vicar apostolic and bishop. Later, he also took on administrative duties as provincial superior and, in the bishop's absence, diocesan administrator and pro-vicar. Joseph Freinademetz remained in Shantung for twenty-seven years, until his death in 1908. His biographer, Fritz Bornemann, devotes hundreds of pages to a detailed description of those years of missionary work in China, during which Joseph travelled, almost always on foot, sometimes by cart, throughout the territory entrusted to the Congregation. Bornemann lists the fruits achieved, the challenges he had to face, the persecutions, the long and recurring journeys across the mission territory to meet the few Catholics scattered throughout this immense region, the celebration of the sacraments, the founding of schools and orphanages, the building of chapels, the formation of catechumens, and the introduction of new missionaries to the Chinese cultural and religious reality.

It is not our intention to dwell in detail on these years of intense apostolic labour. We present only a few characteristics of his life and mission in China that we consider most significant and that can serve as inspiration for Christians of any era.

The Fruits of the Mission

In the letters he wrote to his family and friends and in the reports he sent to Steyl, Joseph Freinademetz gave an account of the progress of the mission. It grew and developed as a result of his work and the work of all the missionaries who had meanwhile arrived at the Divine Word mission in China, including priests, brothers and sisters, not to mention the precious help of benefactors who supported them from Europe with their prayers and material aid. In Shantung and later in other provinces of China, the missionaries from Steyl founded schools where they taught children and young people; they created structures to welcome and educate orphans; they travelled through villages and cities visiting Christians, celebrating the sacraments and teaching catechism to Chinese people who asked for baptism. In this work, they were assisted by local catechists, who had themselves been trained by the missionaries.

In a letter to his parents, written in March 1883, he wrote: “I have just returned from a missionary station about seventy hours away, where we have begun to proclaim the Gospel. I went there in a cart pulled by a cow and a man; you can imagine that such a journey took many days.” Two years later, in a letter to his parents, he said: “We have a beautiful mission here. We are building chapels in many villages, and large sums [of money] pass through our hands, but they are not enough. There are good souls in Europe who give alms more than their means allow. Until now, the Lord has always sent us what we need.” And in May 1889, he informed them of the fruits already

achieved: “This year we have baptised about five hundred new adult Christians and about nine thousand dying babies. In addition, we have about five hundred catechumens, as those who are preparing for baptism are called, because before they receive baptism we wait two or three years to make sure they comply with the rules or not.” In May 1897, in a letter to his brother Louis and sister-in-law Mariana, he wrote: “Despite the great persecution against our poor Christians, we had a great harvest as never before. In a single year, we baptised more than two thousand people, not counting the babies who were baptised in danger of death.” In January 1907, twenty-five years after the inauguration of the Shantung mission, he wrote in a letter to Elizabeth, the daughter of his friend Thäler: “Twenty-five years ago we started with only 158 Christians, today there are about forty thousand baptised and many others are preparing for baptism. The Lord is truly very good; this is a great consolation for us missionaries and for our benefactors in Europe.”

Joseph had left Tyrol for China to convert pagans and save many souls for heaven. Many years of hard and pioneering work in regions where the Gospel was being preached for the first time shaped his character and refined his missionary method. He sought to become like the Chinese, not only outwardly but above all inwardly, welcoming and embracing their culture and ways of being. He, who wanted to convert as many pagans as possible, eventually discovered that we do not convert anyone; only love converts. “People are converted only by the grace of God and by the love we give them,” said Joseph Freinademetz, summarising his way of evangelising. In June

1904, in a letter to Arnold Janssen, he stated: “I am coming more and more to the conviction that virtue and a good docile character are the most essential qualities for effectiveness in the mission.” This is still the best method today for proclaiming the Gospel and encouraging others to draw closer to God and allow themselves to be enveloped by his grace.

The Importance of Prayer

Joseph Freinademetz was a pious man who held prayer in high esteem. From an early age, within his family and parish, he internalised and made his own the traditional prayers and expressions of Catholic piety. As a family, they prayed before and after meals and at midday the Angelus. Josefina, one of his younger sisters, recounted that “We prayed the rosary on our knees in the living room before the Virgin Mary. Each of us prayed the evening prayer in our own bed.” Through prayer, Joseph discovered and consolidated his missionary vocation, and prayer would be the force that accompanied and sustained him throughout his life. He also knew that without prayer, all the missionary’s efforts and projects are in vain. Therefore, in his letters he often asked for prayers for the mission in China and for the Chinese people. Likewise, he always prayed for his family and benefactors who, from afar, accompanied him with their prayers and material help.

When Joseph Freinademetz said goodbye to his parishioners in Saint Martin, he urged them to pray: “Prayer is the key to heaven. Prayer is our staff on life’s pilgrimage. It is the fount of life-giving water; it is the food that imparts strength

to our souls.” And in his letters sent from China, he never tired of asking for prayers. In a letter to his friend Thäler, he made the following request: “Pray always, you and your Francisco [Thäler’s son and Freinademetz’s godson], that the Lord may convert me a little, so that I may convert others” (9 February 1892). In a letter to his sister Maria, he assured her: “I do not let a single day go by without praying for all of you; do the same for me. I commend you all to the Sacred Heart of Jesus.”

Prayer was a mutual commitment for Joseph: he prayed for his family, friends and benefactors and, at the same time, asked them to pray for the missionaries and the people of China. In a letter to his parents, he informed them about his health and asked for prayers: “Know that I am very well, happy and content, that is enough for you. Pray hard and have others pray that we missionaries may fulfil the great obligations of our beautiful state and that the Lord may accompany us everywhere with his help and his holy grace” (8 May 1889). On another occasion, writing to his brother Luís and sister-in-law Mariana, who had recently married, he states: “I will never forget to help you with my prayers, because you are very close to my heart, so that all my brothers and sisters may remain faithful children of our Holy Mother Church, to implore blessings upon your holy marriage and your family. Remember to always give first place to your God in all things, and you will do well in life and after death” (20 May 1897).

The forms of prayer and devotions of Christians have varied throughout history. For example, in the 19th century, devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus was widespread. There

have been, and still are, ecclesial groups and movements that place great emphasis on silence in prayer; others emphasise prayer and prayerful sharing of the Bible, and others prefer a more charismatic style, giving primacy to a spirituality strongly based on praise of the Holy Spirit. However, despite their different expressions and nuances, in prayer we place our lives under God's gaze, to listen to his Word and trust in his grace.

On 11 October 1989, Pope John Paul II visited our seminary in Ledalero, on the island of Flores, Indonesia. In his meeting with the seminarians, he said that the people want to see in priests a living image of the Good Shepherd who gives his life for his sheep. For this to happen, he advised: “In order for this to happen, you must enter into deep personal union with Christ through prayer. This is the most important spiritual advice the Pope wishes to leave with you today: You must pray, for prayer is the indispensable path to union with Christ; it is the priest’s hidden source of strength.” Listening to the Word of God is an important part of the spiritual life, so he reminded them that “In order to be effective ministers of God’s people you must also know and live the Gospel which you preach.” Pope Francis also never tired of reminding us that evangelisation is nourished and sustained by prayer: “Without prolonged moments of adoration, of prayerful encounter with the Word, of sincere conversation with the Lord, our work easily becomes meaningless; we lose energy as a result of weariness and difficulties, and our fervour dies out” (The Joy of the Gospel 262).

St. Thérèse of the Child Jesus said that prayer “is not primarily an activity, but a way of being with God.” Now, we can do this continuously. Joseph Freinademetz was, in this regard, a model of union with God through prayer. People who knew him in Tyrol and China bear witness to his profound piety and sincere devotion. Cardinal Thomas Tien, who came to know him, said that the image of that priest on his knees remained indelibly etched in his memory.

In a book that collects the conferences on the Eucharist that he regularly gave to Chinese seminarians and priests, Freinademetz speaks of the importance of silence after communion, because “deepest silence, more eloquently than the speech of every tongue, extols the dignity and greatness of such a wonderful mystery. This silence is the eloquent expression of humility, reverence and admiration.” And “if the people see the priest absorbed in such silence, they learn to perceive better; the awesome mystery. Silence is a kind of praise, namely the praise of the mind giving reverence to God.”

Leadership

The exercise of authority in the Church is first and foremost a service. Since the early Christian communities, it has always been considered that those who are elected or appointed to a position of leadership are at the service of the community. Inspired by the words of Christ, Christians should exercise leadership positions in an attitude of service. The evangelist Mark recounts that Jesus and the disciples arrived in Capernaum and when they were at home Jesus asked them what

they had been discussing on the way. They ‘remained silent because on the way they had argued with each other about who was the greatest. Sitting down, he called the Twelve and said to them: “If anyone wants to be first, he must make himself last of all and servant of all” (Mark 9:33-35). On another occasion, Jesus called his disciples and said to them: “You know that among the gentiles the rulers lord it over them, and great men make their authority felt. Among you, this is not to happen. No, anyone who wants to become great among you must be your servant, and anyone who wants to be first among you must be your slave, just as the Son of man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:25-28). In exercising leadership, it is important to follow the advice of the author of the first letter of St. Peter: “Like good stewards responsible for all these varied graces of God, put it at the service of others” (1 Peter 4:10). Unfortunately, in the history of the Church there is no shortage of examples of leaders who have abused their position for their own benefit.

This attitude of service is also expected of the leaders of a religious and missionary community such as the Society of the Divine Word, as their Constitutions clearly express that “the meaning of authority lies in service to the community” (c.601). This service requires an attitude of solidarity, respect and love. The SVD General Chapters have developed and enriched the understanding and exercise of leadership as a service. All members of the Congregation, in one way or another, exercise leadership roles in parishes, schools, ecclesial movements, etc. In this regard, the 18th General Chapter of the SVD stated: “We

commit ourselves to forego our own private agendas in order to serve our communities and institutions as leaders” (#37).

Joseph Freinademetz held various leadership positions, both at the level of the Congregation, as provincial superior, and at the level of the local church, as diocesan administrator and pro-vicar. In May 1905, Freinademetz wrote to Father Arnold, Superior General of the Congregation, asking him to send more missionaries to China and requesting that they be zealous and dedicated: “Have pity on us and on the innumerable poor Chinese who can be saved with ease; please send us many, as many as possible, zealous, sacrificing, capable missionaries happy in their work. I have the full conviction that nowhere else can more be achieved than here” (10 May 1905).

On another occasion, he asks the Superior General to send religious who are “worthy, qualified, docile sisters, with a very solid superior.” The first missionary sisters, Servants of the Holy Spirit, founded by Arnold Janssen on 8 December 1889, arrived in China in 1905. Arnold had already sent sisters to Argentina, Togo, New Guinea, the United States and Brazil. Their presence gave new impetus to the mission, as they were able to take on the formation of young Chinese women and catechists and the management of orphanages. “In time,” he wrote, “care of the sick and many other things will be added if it is convenient.”

As provincial superior, Freinademetz is also responsible for the sisters. However, in a letter to Arnold, he explains his difficulties in exercising leadership, as he is aware that he does not have all the skills required to be a leader. Nevertheless, he

always obeys his superiors, even when they demand that he take on greater responsibilities: “your Reverence conferred on me the care of our good Sisters. Although I feel myself very much obligated by the trust shown me, this new responsibility presses me very sorely. Every day I am keenly aware and feel that I lack the spirit of wisdom and understanding which is so necessary for successful government. I also lack the required energy and the gift of speech in order to stand up for what is the necessary good everywhere. In this matter, I have experienced so many bitter experiences as provincial that one becomes disgusted with the post of a superior. Nevertheless, I will exert myself to care for our good Sisters spiritually and materially to the best of my ability until your Reverence makes other arrangements” (1 October 1905).

When Bishop John Baptist Anzer died in 1903, many missionaries considered Joseph Freinademetz to be his successor. However, this did not happen. At that time, Germany was occupying Shantung militarily and did not want a foreign bishop, and since Freinademetz was an Austrian citizen, the German government pressured the Holy See not to appoint him. However, he himself recognised that he was not suited to such an office. In a letter to a Tyrolean priest, he wrote: “Do you really believe that I will become a bishop? You are completely mistaken! You don't put a mitre on a straw head, it wouldn't fit well!” When the news arrived that Father Augustine Henninghaus had been appointed bishop, Joseph wrote to the superior general saying: “*Deo gratias!* The choice was a lucky one. Yes, the luckiest possible. Father Henninghaus is the right man, richly endowed with gifts of mind and heart like probably

no other in South Shantung; thus, the missionaries, almost without exception, are satisfied with the election.” The appointment of the new bishop gave a new and great impetus to the SVD mission in China due to the close collaboration between the two, the bishop and the provincial superior.

In December 1905, he wrote to Father Arnold thanking him for the suggestions and advice he had given him for exercising leadership. However, he confessed: “I myself am aware that in no respect do I measure up to my office; I also lack the required understanding and adequate energy for such a post.” Nevertheless, Joseph Freinademetz was much appreciated by his confreres and the sisters for his gentle manner of leadership. He was a very sensitive man and close to the people. Cardinal Thomas Tien pointed out that he was “totally devoted to others, self-sacrificing and self-forgetful.” Freinademetz was also a zealous missionary. Bishop Henninghaus wrote the following about him: “He possessed that kindness that never tires and wins hearts, that inexhaustible patience and charity that made him forget himself. Christians, especially neophytes and simple people, were as fond of him as children are of their grandparents.” We could say, quoting Pope Francis, that he was a shepherd with the smell of the sheep. Pope Paul VI, in a letter on the occasion of the beatification of Joseph Freinademetz on 19 October 1975, wrote: “His sympathy, capacity for welcome and love without distinction were fundamental. He identified deeply with the Chinese people’s way of life in order to show them the goodness and benevolence of the Saviour and thus lead them all to God.”

Persecutions

On one occasion, when Peter told Jesus that he and the other disciples had left everything to follow him, Jesus replied: “In truth I tell you, there is no one who has left house, brothers, sisters, mother, father, children or land for my sake and for the sake of the gospel who will not receive a hundred times as much houses, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and land - and persecutions too – now in this present time and, in the world to come, eternal life” (Mark 10:29-30).

As his missionary vocation grew, Joseph Freinademetz also became aware that a life dedicated to proclaiming the Gospel is subject to sacrifice and persecution. However, in the midst of persecution, he trusted completely in God. In a letter to his parents, he wrote: “Many times my life has been in danger and the pagans have conspired to kill me, but the Lord has always protected me” (7 February 1884).

In the spring of 1889, Freinademetz learned that a catechumen had been unlawfully convicted for welcoming Christians and foreigners into his home. Joseph went to the mandarin to request his release. The catechumen was released, but the next day a mob broke into the inn where Joseph and a catechist were staying, assaulted, insulted and dragged them through the streets of the city, threatening them with death. When they reached the outskirts of the city, they left them chained to the ground, but after a while, they let them go, barefoot and without hats. Freinademetz reported this incident in a letter to his parents, ending with: “Now this missionary is

healed and happy and thanks the Lord for having deigned to suffer a little for the love of God and the poor Chinese. This story took place on 23 May 1889. And this missionary, who greets you warmly and asks for your prayers, is none other than your son Joseph” (27 June 1889).

Between 1899 and 1901, there was an uprising against foreigners and Christians, known as the Boxer Rebellion. During this revolutionary period, Orthodox, Protestant and Catholic missionaries and their Chinese parishioners were persecuted and massacred, mainly in northern China. In a letter to his brothers, Joseph recounts some of the dramatic situations he experienced. “I took refuge in Puoli, which is our largest Christian community; many Christians also sought protection in Puoli, and there were 1,200 of us in the house. Immediately after my arrival, the Christians confessed and prepared themselves for martyrdom. In a single day, I baptised about 140 new Christians, exposed the Blessed Sacrament and displayed a beautiful image of Our Lady, who, as almost all Christians affirm, wept profusely. Our church in Puoli was surrounded for four days. One day there were about 5,000 men with rifles and other weapons to kill the Christians and destroy the residence. Our poor Christians defended themselves inside, while women and children prayed day and night in the church. It was God who saved us; only one Christian was killed” (6 July 1901).

At all times in his life, Freinademetz gives thanks to God, in good times and in adversity, suffering persecution or reaping the fruits of his apostolic work. Everything he did was for the glory of God, and in everything that happened to him, he gave

thanks to God. At the end of the letter in which he recounts the attack on the mission in Puoli, Joseph wrote: “Those were days of great fear; it seemed impossible to remain alive any longer. Now it is all over. [...] Praise be to God, and may the Lord grant that I may spend the rest of my days solely for his glory and for the salvation of souls! What else is there to live for but this?” Freinademetz considered persecution to be part of the cross that Christians and missionaries must bear. In a letter to his parents, he writes: “Crosses come directly from the hand of God, and we want to bear them not only with resignation, but with joy for the love of the Crucified One and to pay for our sins. To suffer with joy is the most beautiful thing in the world, which even the blessed in paradise envy” (9 February 1891).

All Resources at the Service of the Mission

The resources of the Congregation, both human and material, are at the service of the mission. The SVD Constitutions state that our poverty has a missionary character: “It calls us to generously place time, talents, work and community goods at the service of our missionary tasks. Only to the extent that earthly goods serve the kingdom of God can their use in the Society be justified” (c. 210).

When Jesus sent his disciples to proclaim the Kingdom of God, he asked them not to take many things with them: “Take nothing for the journey: neither staff, nor haversack nor bread, nor money; and do not have a spare tunic” (Luke 9:3). Commenting on this biblical passage, the 18th General Chapter of the SVD, held in 2018, emphasised that “This teaching of

Jesus challenges us to focus and pay attention to how we make use of the resources entrusted to us. The more we experience the love of Christ and the more we are rooted in his Word, the more we should become responsible stewards of God's gifts and blessings. We are invited to continue to be responsible persons in taking care of our temporal goods" (#34).

For Joseph Freinademetz, all available resources were at the service of evangelisation, even though they were insufficient in comparison with the needs on the ground, namely the care of orphans and the poor and the education of children and young people. For example, in a letter to his sister Maria, Joseph mentioned the scarcity of financial resources and made a request: "If we had more money, it would be easy to win more souls for heaven. If you still have a few thousand florins, you would do well to send them to me for my poor Chinese, and you yourself would have a rich treasure in store. If you still have a few thousand guilders, you would do well to send them to me for my poor Chinese, and you yourself would have a rich treasure waiting for you in paradise. At least never forget to give me, together with your whole family, the alms of your prayers" (9 May 1895).

Through the vow of poverty, all goods are at the service of the Reign of God. Joseph understood this, as we can see in a letter to his mother: "All of us [missionaries] in Steyl must take a vow of poverty, which means that everything that is mine is no longer mine, but belongs to the house of Steyl, even everything that is received by inheritance, everything belongs to the house of Steyl; I took this vow six years ago; therefore, I

no longer have the right to dispose of anything, everything I have is not mine, but belongs to the house of Steyl. I am very sorry, my dear mother, that I cannot leave you these three denarii so that you can live a little more comfortably. But what can I do! Sacrifice this little money too, dear Mother, to spread the glory of God among these pagans in China, in order to win a few more souls. In this way, you will also have great merit” (31 July 1892).

During the Boxer Rebellion, foreign missionaries had to abandon their missions and take refuge in the coastal city of Tsingtao. In this period of great social unrest, Freinademetz was concerned that there would be a shortage of resources to care for orphans and the poor. When the mandarin in Puoli ordered the expulsion of Christians, the orphans living there were evacuated to Tsingtao. The suggestion he made to his confreres is significant. Bornemann recounts that Freinademetz was concerned about the situation, especially with regard to the groups of orphans who were on their way to Tsingtao. “They are absolutely destitute,” he wrote to Father Bartels in Tsingtao. “Please have the kindness to do something for them. With conditions as they are we must not hesitate to incur in a few extra expenses in order to save what can still be saved.” During the retreat to the city, many missionaries had taken their horses with them, and it was very expensive to feed them. “I think it would be better to sell the horses,” suggested Freinademetz.

Human resources are also at the service of the mission. Joseph Freinademetz was not a missionary who worked alone. In addition to the other priests of the Congregation, who

focused mainly on pastoral work, it is important to mention the role of the missionary brothers, religious sisters and lay catechists. The brothers, putting into practice what they had learned in Steyl, were skilled builders of churches and schools, and founded printing presses for the dissemination of spiritual, catechetical and devotional literature. The missionary sisters of Steyl, present in China since 1905, played a fundamental role in the areas of education and health. “We have had the Sisters of Steyl among us for two years now, and they are doing a great deal of good,” wrote Freinademetz in a letter to a Mrs. Maria from the parish of Saint Martin (13 December 1907). Catechists played an important role in animating the small Christian communities scattered throughout that vast territory. For this reason, Freinademetz devoted his time and talent to the formation of catechists, both men and women. Under his guidance, once a year, the catechists of a given territory would gather for a few days of ongoing formation, deepening of faith and planning.

Joseph Freinademetz also considered the formation of Chinese priests to be fundamental for the growth of the Church. In a text in preparation for the diocesan synod of South Shantung, held in August 1892, he wrote: “Chinese priests are not second-class priests. For them as for the European priests there is but one order of precedence — the length of service in the mission. All Church offices and dignities must be open to the Chinese priests in the same way as they are to the European priests without any discrimination.”

Perpetual Vows

The missionary priests of Steyl were bound to the Congregation by a promise of obedience. The general chapter, held between 1884 and 1886, in which Bishop Anzer participated, decided to replace this promise with the three vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, as was already the practice among the missionary brothers. Thus, in February 1885, all the clergy who were in Steyl professed the three vows.

In China, the profession of the clergy took place on 15 August 1886, the feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary. The bishop celebrated a solemn Mass; then, before the Blessed Sacrament exposed on the altar, he presided over the ceremony of the profession of vows. In the small chapel of Puoli, Freinademetz professed poverty, chastity and obedience forever according to the Rule of the Congregation. Regarding this event, he wrote these words in his diary: “Then we pronounced our vows. I, through the grace of God and the permission of my superiors, for life. So Brother Joseph, the die is cast. Pray, work and sacrifice, suffer and endure, the whole of your life for your beloved Chinese; then, when you come to the evening of life and lie on your deathbed, you can sleep surrounded by your dear Chinese. *Adieu!* Farewell forever, dear homeland beyond the sea!”

By committing himself forever to the missionary work of Steyl, Freinademetz was also certain that he would remain in China forever. Years later, when Arnold Janssen wanted him to return to Europe to participate in some activities of the Congregation, he asked to be excused from this duty. “In my

last letter I asked your Reverence to dispense me kindly from an eventual trip to Europe or to allow another confrere take my place. I should like to urgently request again that you kindly consider my entreaty” (14 February 1905). Arnold tried to convince him to change his mind, and out of obedience, Joseph eventually accepted, writing: “As regards my call to the general chapter, let your Reverence do what to him seems correct. It is my duty to obey even if obedience costs sacrifice!” (21 June 1905). However, the Superior General eventually accepted his reasons and Freinademetz remained in China without ever returning to Europe.

Some religious communities tend to overvalue the date of priestly ordination to the detriment of the date of profession of vows. Reasons for this tendency may be, for example, the weight of traditional theology, which for centuries has attributed a special status to clergy in the Church vis-à-vis the laity, or the secondary role given to manual labour, which in the past was the main characteristic of religious brothers. This tendency is a subtle way of emphasising the priestly function of religious priests to the detriment of their prophetic function.

The Constitutions of the Society of the Divine Word emphasise the importance of the profession of vows by stating: “The Incarnate Divine Word in his redeeming love is the source and model of our apostolic holiness. By taking simple public vows of consecrated chastity, evangelical poverty and apostolic obedience, we respond to his call and follow him along the way of the evangelical counsels. Through these vows our commitment to the Lord, to the members of our Society and the

church becomes stronger. They provide us with greater stability and freedom for our missionary tasks. By this new consecration the holiness received in baptism is fostered in a special way through a life of missionary service” (c. 201). Joseph Freinademetz was a zealous missionary and an exemplary religious, passionate about the Gospel and in solidarity with the people. His dedication to the mission continues to be a source of inspiration for those who want to follow Jesus Christ through the evangelical counsels.

Model of Evangelical Inculturation

Pope John Paul II, in his encyclical *Redemptoris missio* (1990) on the permanent validity of the missionary mandate, affirmed that inculturation allows the missionary to become ever closer to the people he evangelises, becoming more sensitive to their values and respectful of their forms of cultural expression. In his opinion, missionaries must insert themselves into the socio-cultural world of those to whom they are sent. This insertion does not mean having to renounce one’s own cultural identity, “but of understanding, appreciating, fostering and evangelizing the culture of the environment in which they are working, and therefore of equipping themselves to communicate effectively with it, adopting a manner of living which is a sign of gospel witness and of solidarity with the people” (RM 53).

John Paul II mentions two aspects that should characterise the missionary's lifestyle: evangelical witness and solidarity with the people. Joseph Freinademetz took on this lifestyle, imitating Jesus in his dedication to proclaiming the Kingdom, as he writes in a letter to his family: "I am not here on a whim or to earn gold and silver, but to win souls bought with God's most precious blood" (28 April 1879). And it is with joy that he shares his life with the people, as he declares in a letter to his godson Francisco: "I am very happy to live and die among my poor Chinese" (28 May 1902).

According to the Second Vatican Council, the word "culture" generally indicates "everything whereby man develops and perfects his many bodily and spiritual qualities; he strives by his knowledge and his labour, to bring the world itself under his control. He renders social life more human, both in the family and the civic community, through improvement of customs and institutions. Throughout the course of time, he expresses, communicates and conserves in his works great spiritual experiences and desires that they might be of advantage to the progress of many, even of the whole human family" (*Gaudium et spes* 53). Different cultures give rise to different lifestyles and different value systems. The differences between cultures are real and manifest the artistic and intellectual richness of humanity. Through intercultural exchange, we can discover new horizons and create new dynamics in the relationship between people and groups and, based on everyone's experiences, promote positive changes that benefit all.

Welcoming others in their difference and richness requires a continuous process of dialogue. This translates into an attitude of openness characterised by listening that knows how to welcome others and what they have to offer and say to us. This openness to others implies respect for their convictions, history and existential journeys, namely their search for God, the rituals and doctrines through which they live and express their beliefs. Welcoming others in their differences also requires cultivating a prophetic attitude, in the sense of discerning both what is positive and negative in our culture and in the culture of others, and acting accordingly.

At the time when Joseph Freinademetz lived, theology did not speak of inculturation or intercultural mission. Nevertheless, we can glimpse in him some elements that will constitute the core of mission understood as inculturation of the faith. Freinademetz was the president of the preparatory commission for the diocesan synod of South Shantung. He argued that the synod should discuss issues important to missionary practice. Among these was the attitude to be taken towards Chinese customs and traditions. Freinademetz argued that missionaries should “beware not to disturb the customs of the people of this country as long as those customs are not superstitious. Rather to the best of your ability adapt yourself to those customs and thus gain universal respect for yourself. What is more foolish than to try to import into China the customs of France, Germany and Italy. Import not the customs from abroad, but our Faith which does not despise the customs

or traditions of any nation so long as they are not evil. Rather it knows how to treasure them. Praise whatever is praiseworthy.”

His life reminds us that mission is carried out in closeness and dialogue with people, and this attitude facilitates the proclamation of the Gospel and its acceptance by listeners. In this process, Freinademetz is a remarkable example, as John Paul II said in his homily at his canonisation on 5 October 2003: “With the tenacity typical of mountain people, this generous ‘witness of love’ made a gift of himself to the Chinese peoples of southern Shandong. For love and with love he embraced their living conditions, in accordance with his own advice to his missionaries: ‘Missionary work is useless if one does not love and is not loved’. An exemplary model of Gospel inculturation, this Saint imitated Jesus, who saved men and women by sharing their existence to the very end.” In this process, the first step was to learn Chinese, dress like the Chinese and eat like the Chinese. But the most important step was his inner transformation, a difficult and lengthy process. Over the years, Freinademetz adapted to Chinese culture and mentality to the point where he felt at home among the people and considered China his second homeland. Therefore, he was able to write to his parents, saying: “For my part, I wish to live and die in China, if it pleases God” (19 October 1888), and in another letter he told them: “Know that I am very well, happy and content, this is enough for you” (8 May 1889).

I Want to Remain Chinese in Heaven

A few years ago, in an interview, Portuguese writer Rentes de Carvalho mused that “today, travel is about people.” Indeed, it is meeting people that makes travelling rich and interesting. When we leave the comfort of tourist circuits and meet people where they live, work, practise their religion or have fun, we can learn more about other cultures and religions, question our prejudices, broaden our horizons and learn new things.

José Freinademetz travelled to China because of the people, and that made all the difference. He never forgot or ceased to love his Tyrolean roots and his family and cultural origins, but through his long contact with the Chinese, he acquired a new vision of the world and of himself, to the point of wanting to remain Chinese even in paradise.

Some theologians, such as Jacques Dupuis, use the expression “dual belonging” as a hypothesis to better root the Gospel in different cultures and cultivate dialogue between religions. While dual belonging seems difficult at the level of religion, at the level of culture this possibility does exist. In this field, the example of Joseph Freinademetz is paradigmatic: he became Chinese at heart without ceasing to be Tyrolean. The difficulties he had to face, the prejudices he had to deconstruct, and the arduous inner journey he had to undertake to get to know the other – culturally speaking – in his difference, can today inspire paths of dialogue, mutual respect, collaboration, and spiritual transformation between people and groups of different cultures and religions.

In the year he took his vows, Joseph wrote to his family saying: “I assure you that I love China and the Chinese and am ready to die a thousand times for them. It is always possible that my superior in Steyl will call me back there, as I mentioned earlier. I replied that I will obey until death, but the greatest sacrifice he could ask of me would be to return to Europe. May God’s will be done, not mine. Now that I no longer have such difficulty with the language, and that I also know the Chinese people and customs, I recognise China as my homeland, as my battlefield where I wish to die. I will see you again in heaven with God's help. If I were to return to my home village now, I would be almost a stranger. I have been in China for seven years and, if it is God’s will, I would like to stay for seventy” (22 March 1886).

On another occasion, writing to his sister Maria, who had lost two children to diphtheria, he confessed: “I do not know if I will ever see you again, but I want to live and die with my Chinese people” (16 August 1893). And in a letter to his friend Franz Thäler, he states: “As for me, I have always loved my dear Chinese people and have no other desire than to live and die with them. The number of our converts by the grace of God is constantly increasing, and in the midst of many tribulations we are also rich in consolations. I am now more Chinese than Tyrolean, and I want to remain Chinese in heaven too” (9 February 1892).

CONCLUSION

In some West African countries, it is common to see cars and buses decorated with proverbs inspired by local culture or verses from the Holy Scriptures. In Ghana, for example, these two phrases are frequently seen: *Nyame Gye*, and *Travel and See*. The first means that everything passes away except God; the second is obviously an invitation to travel and discover the world.

Travel opens up new horizons for us, causing us to shift our perspective and question our preconceptions. It makes a difference whether we view the world from the centres of political, economic and ecclesiastical power, or from the peripheries. Pope Francis has challenged Christians to go out on mission to the peripheries, especially the existential ones, to see the world through different eyes. In the encyclical *Fratelli tutti*, he says that “Each of us can learn something from others. No one is useless and no one is expendable. This also means finding ways to include those on the peripheries of life. For they have another way of looking at things; they see aspects of reality that are invisible to the centres of power where weighty decisions are made” (#215).

From a Christian perspective, life is a pilgrimage from earth to heaven across the sea of life. Saint Joseph

Freinademetz can be an inspiration and a source of support in leaving the ground where we feel secure and entering into new existential situations where we can fully develop our talents and gifts—in short, our human and Christian vocation. His life is a shining example of the various stages that missionaries must overcome to bear fruit in the mission. Freinademetz was sent on mission, set out, reached his destination and remained there forever. These are the stages of the mission from the earliest days of the Church.

To be a missionary is to be sent to proclaim the Gospel of the Kingdom, following the example of Jesus. Sent by the Father to be the light of the world, Jesus came not to condemn the world, but to save it (cf. John 12:47), fulfilling the prophecy of Isaiah (cf. Luke 4:17–19): to bring the Good News to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives, to give sight to the blind, to set the oppressed free, and to proclaim a time of the Lord’s favour. Then Jesus sent the disciples out on mission, saying: “Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations; baptize them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teach them to observe all the commands I gave you” (Matthew 28:19–20).

Being sent out naturally requires a second step: setting out. “They set out and went from village to village, proclaiming the good news and healing everywhere” (Luke 9:6). This step is perhaps the most painful, for it requires leaving behind family, friends, the security of those who know the environment in which one lives, the work to which one is accustomed, and one’s professional career. Setting out requires an attitude of

detachment and the freedom to accept challenges and sacrifices, like Abraham, to whom the Lord said: “Leave your country, your kindred and your father’s house for a country which I shall show you’ (Genesis 12:1–2).

The third stage is to reach the destination and remain among the people. Reaching this goal may take years, but the result is undeniably positive, as Joseph Freinademetz acknowledges in a letter to his parents: “Therefore, I inform you once again that I am absolutely well, content, in good health and happy, and that I cannot thank the Lord enough, who made me a missionary in China; I do not wish to be anywhere else” (7 February 1884). China was his new homeland, and he held the Chinese in high esteem and regard. In a letter dated 8 July 1884, of which only a few excerpts survive, he states: “The Chinese are very intelligent, they have great talent, they can speak like scholars, even the peasants; they all know how to perform refined ceremonies and in this respect they surpass the Europeans. They know this themselves, which is why they hate foreigners and are proud; they are truly the first nation in the world, the only thing missing is Christianity”.

Saint Joseph Freinademetz ended his pilgrimage in this world on 28 January 1908, in Taikia, a victim of typhoid fever. On that day, Freinademetz’s missionary journey also came to an end: a journey from “departure” to “remaining”, from his beloved homeland in Tyrol to the antechamber of heaven, in China. This year (2025) marks the 150th anniversary of his ordination to the priesthood, and soon (2029), the 150th anniversary of his departure from Steyl and his arrival in China.

Much has changed in the Church, in China and in the world over these 150 years. Yet we can still learn much from his life and his dedication to proclaiming the Gospel. His passion for the mission, his unshakeable faith in God and his generous dedication to serving the people of China are an inspiration to missionaries of all times.

NOTES ON THE TEXT

This short book is not a biography, but a personal and, as such, highly subjective interpretation of the life of Saint Joseph Freinademetz. Reading a number of important works on the saint from Oies was instrumental in the writing of this little book. These books were used for the Portuguese original version of the book. In Portuguese, there are two good books: Carlos Pape and J. M. Vergara, *José Freinademetz. Um Tirolês que Amou os Chineses*, Fátima, 2000; and José Hipólito Jerónimo, *São José Freinademetz. A Linguagem do Amor*, Lisboa, 2008. The English translation of the excellent biography written in German by Fritz Bornemann, *As Wine Poured Out. Blessed Joseph Freinademetz SVD. Missionary in China 1879–1908*, Rome, 1984, served to confirm or clarify certain dates and events in Freinademetz's life. The Spanish translation of the German original of Sepp Hollweck's book, *El Chino del Tirol*, Estella, 2009, provides some important information about life and culture in Tyrol during Freinademetz's time.

The collection of letters that Freinademetz wrote to family and friends is an inexhaustible treasure trove for gaining a more intimate and familiar understanding of him: Pietro Irsara (ed.), *Lettere di un santo. L'amore per il prossimo, la famiglia e la Badia*. The correspondence between Joseph Freinademetz and Arnold Janssen: Richard Hartwich, *Arnold Janssen and Joseph*

Freinademetz. Correspondence Between Two Saints (1904–1907), Rome, 2008, helps us to understand his role as administrator and provincial superior of the SVD in China.

The lectures Freinademetz gave on the Eucharist in Chinese language are translated into English: Joseph Freinademetz, *The Most Holy Sacrifice of the New Covenant*, translated and edited by Stanley Plutz, Tagaytay, 1980.

The Scripture texts are quoted from The New Jerusalem Bible.

This English translation is a combined effort of artificial and human intelligence. It is certainly not perfect, but given the time and resources available, it is currently the best possible translation. We ask the readers for their understanding. I'm very grateful to Sr. Anna Damas, SSpS, for her commitment to translate this book to English and to Fr. John Szukalski, SVD, for the final editing of the translation.

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