

RETREAT MOVEMENT IN STEYL

- In 1877 started the retreat movement. In 1889 the Third General Chapter – *“the first priority for Europe is holding spiritual exercises in our own houses, if possible”*.
- Tradition in Steyl – every new building was first for retreats before occupied.
- Till the death of Arnold, 63 thousand retreatants came – men, women, lay, religious and clergy.
- Arnold Janssen was looked up by other religious as great promoter of retreat movement and renewal.



Gardens with grottoes were made for the retreatants.

THE BIG RETREATS¹

In summer before the war many retreat courses were given in the Mission House. People liked to come to Steyl. In the first place those who liked to come were people who were particularly active for the missions, e.g. distributing the periodicals or almanac, in other words promoters. The Mission House wanted to show its gratitude to these people and so they could participate free of charge. Others who liked to come were those who had given their children for

missionary service and wanted to see how they were. Many also came because they wanted to renew their spiritual life and make a general confession. Others wanted to gain clarity for their vocation. Some were brought along because they needed to make a good confession. For all of them they were days of regeneration, especially as the kitchen also provided well. For the residents of the House, especially the brothers in the kitchen, they were days of strenuous work. That was especially so during the Easter and Pentecost retreats which were generally very well attended and consequently caused great commotion in the House. The numbers of participants on these two feasts usually rose to around 400. On the days when we prepared, word went out in the morning: all residents of T and L corridors must move out, and the same goes for the residents of dormitories A, B and C, etc. depending on what was needed. Where to? The rooms were mainly assigned for the minor seminarians, the others looked for a place somewhere else. All supplies of straw mattresses, blankets, etc., were brought out into the light of day. Lists were

¹ *History of St. Michael's Mission House, Steyl; Memoirs of Brother Martinus Jurgens, St Michael Mission House, Steyl, 2011, Pgs. 22-26.*

read out to the minor seminarians, telling them where each was to go and how many beds each one was to prepare.

The times when bed sheets, blankets, wash basins, etc. could be fetched were also announced. Then things came alive! Here you saw some with buckets, brooms, etc.; they first had to scrub or sweep. Over there people were lugging straw mattresses; others came along with blankets, in short there was a running about, rushing and goings-on like at the fair. Some were happy that they could finish easily while others had to work hard. But they helped each other fraternally and so everything was in order in time. No one had forgotten themselves, either, and each had found a place to sleep. They settled themselves in the brothers' recreation room, between the desks in the office, in the book binding department, in the printing press, in the paper storeroom, wherever there was a free nook or cranny. Once I heard one minor seminarian ask another: "Where do you sleep?" "In dormitory Q,"¹¹ came the prompt reply. In fact he slept in the hayloft above the cows. I simplified the matter for myself. My bed was rolled up and hidden, I took only a pillow with me, put on an old cassock and lay down without any further ado in the straw in the hayloft. You could wash in the fish pond beside the Good Shepherd. Right, you thought, now everything has been well taken care of. – The type setters had also made sure they did not have to work at Easter or on Pentecost Sunday; they took care to get the name lists of retreatants in good time and on Easter Saturday four of them worked quickly with nonpareil types to set the names. Of course, on Monday there was a lot to be redone because many did not come and just as many others came unannounced. But the main work had been done. – On the day of arrival, the priest who has to take care of the retreatants makes his way to the front door with around 10 willing student helpers, to greet the arrivals and take them to their rooms or cells. The lists of names are ready and a pile of daily schedules, as well. The first troops of 10-20 or 30 men are already arriving. They are taken to the reception room where they give their names; straight away they are given the daily order and their room or cell number. The minor seminarians, who are ready to show the way, take the retreatants to their sleeping quarters and then to the dining room, where the coffee is already waiting to refresh the tired men after their journey. Some had come unannounced. They have to assemble again in the evening and are given the cells of those who did not come. So then everything is taken care of and we are glad that we just managed to accommodate all in the available room. – Then during supper a telegram arrives: "Coming with 20 men. H.B." – Great consternation! Where to put them?! Back and forth goes the discussion. Finally we discover one more room. Carpenters quickly to hand! Emergency cells made with cloth and happily: These, too, have been provided for!

By that time it is quite late; evening prayers are finished. Slowly the stream of men moves through the corridors. There is the fatal crossing. "Where now?" can be clearly read on many faces. Some who have to go to the south wing have strayed into the north wing and vice versa. – "Eleven seven," asks someone. – "Eleven seven? – That can't be right," says the one asked. "Please show me your note." "Two seven, II/7. That is room II/7. Please follow me." And the man is brought to the right place. He had read the Roman numeral II as 11. – Another still wants to go to the farm! But the one asked is confused: To St. Anne's farm? He thinks. By chance a native of

Cologne comes along and helps sort things out. Meanwhile something else has happened in dormitory A. An older, somewhat portly gentleman had struggled his way up the steep staircase and is happy to have reached his cell. He sees something there that looks like a stool and wants to rest a little. "Aha," he sighs and lowers himself on to the apparent stool. But at that it breaks apart and water sprays in all directions. "Oh Lord, now that!" sighs the gentleman in a weary voice. The minor seminarians helping out nearby had heard the misfortune; almost bursting with laughter they quickly rush in, consoling him, saying it's not so bad, they would soon put everything in order. The joke was just too good! Gradually calm returns to the House. The priest who is in charge walks around through the corridors on quiet shoes, list in hand, checking everywhere. The clock strikes 9:30 p.m.

Easter or Pentecost Sunday go smoothly, exactly as given on the retreat order. Seminarians tidy the rooms while another group takes care of the dining room. During breakfast in the morning the groups are assigned that have to wash the dishes in the kitchen after the various meals. Among the retreatants the first talks have not failed to achieve their goal. Mouths are shut, thoughtfully and reflectively, retreat booklet in hand, they move through the corridors. Here and there you see two silently shake hands, greeting each other as friends. Monday is the day for confession. In all the corridors you see groups standing outside the doors where confessions are heard. Once confession is over, things come more alive. They feel freed from a burden. Once the joy of one man was so great that when he left the room after his confession, he began to turn cartwheels. Outside in front of the north gate he was better able to give expression to his joy.

How differently grace often works can be seen from the following, related to me by our late Father Superior General. One gentleman, who found conversion especially difficult, had not been moved by any of the talks. What the talks could not achieve, was to be brought about by our simple evening prayers. We were still using the simple evening prayer composed by the founder, where all the many intentions were responded to again and again by the whole community with a loud "My Jesus, mercy!"; e.g. Prayer leader: "For parents, brothers and sisters!" – All: "My Jesus, mercy!" Prayer leader: "Sweet heart of Mary be my salvation." – "For our friends and benefactors!" – All: "My Jesus, mercy!" etc. This continual "My Jesus, mercy!" softened the gentleman's heart and he was converted. One or the other also took to their heels during the spiritual exercises. But for the majority, one could say for all, since the exceptions were so few, they were days of salvation.

On the last day there was a Communion Mass in the morning at which all received Communion together. With great enthusiasm the communion prayers were prayed in common. At around 10 o'clock solemn Te Deum and benediction, then a hymn to the heavenly Mother, as good children of Mary, faithful unto death. In the dining room the snack for the journey is ready; there is not much time to be lost. A rushing and running about the house; each one gathers his bits and pieces. A handshake: "Adieu, until next year!" and away they go to the tram. The biggest crowd has gone. A number of relatives of brothers or seminarians and also some promoters are

still there. So slowly peace returns to the House. The residents move back to their rooms or cells; everything goes on as normal again. For very many they were days of salvation. May the good God soon bring back such times once more.

Just for the record: each retreatant received a list of participants at that retreat and also a dozen rosaries.

When the war broke out in 1914, the retreats were done for. The border was closed, the men were called to arms. Minds were filled with general anxiety. Prayer hours were arranged and one hoped it would not last too long. But things went downhill more and more for Germany. We will pray that better times may come again.

In addition I must remark that the fire brigade also held patrols at night to prevent any lack of order and many retreatants were not a little shaken, when someone came face to face with polished buttons and batons. And yet it was necessary if only due to the danger of fire, because some found it so difficult not to smoke.