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A Short History of the Mission House in Panningen (Holland) and the Missionaries Who Were Sent from There to the Missions

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It was on 18 October 1880 that the Minor Seminary “St. Vincentius,” which a few years earlier had been opened at Loos in France, was transferred to Wernhoutsburg (Zundert) by Jules Ferry, because of persecution of the Church in France. The intention was that their formation would be completed later in Paris. After several Dutchmen in France had already entered the Congregation, more and more Dutch boys, wanting to become missionaries, asked now to be allowed to enter Wernhoutsburg to do their studies. But these students (the ones chosen by lot for military service) ran into trouble with Dutch legislation, being forced to remain in the country. Therefore a place was sought for them to give them priestly formation within the Netherlands, in Limburg or Brabant. Fr. Willem Meuffels, professor in Wernhoutsburg, went in 1903 with his plans to Bishop Drehmans of Roermond, and it was this bishop who pointed out to him the convent buildings of St. Joseph in Panningen, which the Sisters of the Precious Blood were going to leave. On 25 June, before the notary, Oscar Haffmans, Fr. Jean Gracieux, superior of Wernhoutsburg, signed the deed of purchase, by which it was agreed that the nunnery with its garden would effectively come into the possession of the priests on 15 July.

Although the Dutch candidates were in a majority, both houses remained part of the French Province and were, in their program and operating system, completely modeled after the French way. In France itself the persecution of the Church continued relentlessly in these months. Religious personnel were pushed out of major seminaries, colleges, etc. For this reason, the Superior General had ample choice in providing professors for Panningen. On 15 July the Sisters of the Precious Blood left for Aarle Rixtel and two days later Fr. Henri Romans with two brothers were in Panningen to take possession of the first pieces of furniture and other necessities. A few days later the first superior of the house, Fr. Hubert Meuffels arrived. He would be in charge of the house for 23 years. On 27 September, the house had 32 residents: 8 priests, 9 students, 9 novices and 6 brothers.

For the second time the persecution of the Church in France had an important influence on the development of the recently founded house in Panningen. The situation in France became increasingly difficult and there was the fear that the radical socialist government in France would suppress the Congregations altogether. Where to go with the students and novices of the Motherhouse in Paris? In 1907, the Superior General at that time, Fr. Antoine

Fiat, wrote: “My confidence is not wavering, but Providence requires that we take our precautions. I request, as soon as possible, a meeting with your architect and your contractor and push for an energetic continuation of building, as planned for the rest of the house.” The then-feared banishment fortunately did not take place.

On 23 April the laying of the foundation stone took place. The extension of the building to about double its size continued at a speedy pace. On 24 June 1908, in the new chapel, the first five new priests got ordained. Many would follow and in the course of the years, a total of over 450 young men received the priesthood. About 70% of this number left as missionaries for abroad and the others received an assignment in the Netherlands.

Until 1921 the Motherhouse decided about the destinations of the young priests and appointed them to the numerous missions entrusted to her care. They swarmed out over the whole world: China, Palestine, Syria, Turkey, Ethiopia, Madagascar, Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Central America, North America, Germany, Italy, Portugal, Madeira, Indonesia, France, Congo, Iceland and Curaçao.

The First World War became the cause of the erection of a separate Dutch Province. The Motherhouse in Paris could no longer sustain the financial burden and thought was given to the idea of closing the houses in the Netherlands, unless these were prepared to support themselves. All this resulted in the erection of an independent Dutch Province on 19 March 1921. The first provincial superior was Fr. Henri Romans. From that moment, Wermhoutsburg and Panningen lost their international character.

After 1921 many missionaries went to the regions of our own province: Brazil, China (later Taiwan), Indonesia and Ethiopia. Representatives of these mission areas will be present at the feast of our first centenary.

We celebrate this centenary feast together with the people of Helden, Panningen and the surrounding villages because we owe them a lot. Not only did 37 candidates from these communities enter the Congregation, but also because of the substantial help we received from their inhabitants.

There is much to look back upon in gratitude, although heavy sacrifices also had to be made. In the first years seven young students and a young brother died. Among the priests ordained in Panningen, a good number of missionaries lost their lives, because of accidents, violence or illness, before they were 50 years old. Frans van Meerendonk, 39 years, died in China of smallpox (1913); Emile Roussez, 31 years, typhoid fever in China (1913); Gerard Vester, 32 years, returned mortally ill from China (1918) and two months later his brother Henri

Vester, 26 years, died at sea while traveling to Guatemala (1918); Guillaume Janssen, 33 years, drowned in Bolivia (1918); Antoon Mommers, 29 years, typhus in China (1920); Johann Nass, 30 years, China (1922); Nico Suylen, 47 years, La Paz (1923); Johan Aben, 32 years old, died of yellow fever in Brazil (1923); after a few years of mission life in the Netherlands Jeroen Litjens, 31 years (1924), and Jan Stevens, 37 years (1929), died; Piet Romme, 27 years, dysentery China (1927); Laurens Vonk, 33 years, typhus in China (1930); Cornelis de Wit, 49 years, Ethiopia (1936); Nico de Graaf, 48 years, El Salvador (1933); Johan Lamers, 45 years, China (1934); Kees van Hal, 46 years, malaria Indonesia (1936); Jan Vonken, 45 years, Quito (1936); André Weda, 29 years, typhus Indonesia (1937); Gerard Wouters, 28 years, together with Msgr. Schraven and Brother Geerts, murdered in China (1937); Kees Beekmans, 29 years, typhus Brazil (1941); Willem van Dirven, 47 years, China (1941); Gerard van Ravensteyn, 44 years, fallen in battle on the Java Sea (1942); Nico Dames, 32 years, concentration camp China (1943); Jacques Bruno, 49 years, car accident in Indonesia (1946); Harrie Boots, 30 years, drowned on the eve of his departure for Taiwan (1961); Herman Vonk, 41 years, Congo (1969); Sjaak van Helden, 45 years, Ethiopia (1974); Nico Corveleyn, 46 years, Curaçao (1978); Harrie Krechting, 45 years, Congo (1979); Fons van Bavel, 44 years, Ethiopia (1979); Theo Hunnekens, 43 years, Ethiopia (1987).

A special mention for those who were killed because of violence or murder

- Henri Vester, 26 years old, died while travelling to Guatemala in sight of the shore, probably because of a robbery (1918);
- Gerard Wouters, 28 years old, together with Msgr Frans Schraven, almost 64 years old, and Br. Antoon Geerts, 62 years old, killed by Japanese soldiers in China;
- Gerard van Ravensteijn, 44 years old, died in the battle of the Java Sea against the Japanese in 1942;
- Nico Dames, 32 years old, died in a concentration camp in China (1943);
- Jos Theunissen, 63 years old, murdered in 1950 in China;
- Nico van Kleef, 52 years old, murdered by a Panamanian soldier in 1989.

2003. It has become silent in the Mission House. Where once many young people prepared themselves in silence, or sometimes noisily, for their ideal to go out to work somewhere, now the elderly receive their well-earned rest and nursing care. We ourselves cannot send out any more missionaries, but in satisfaction we can look back upon the young provinces in Indonesia, Brazil and Ethiopia, who now in their own country and in their own way work in the vineyard of the Lord, under the maxim which St. Vincent gave to us: *Evangelizare pauperibus misit me*. He sent me out to bring the joyous message to the poor.

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