

# Reflections for the Centennial of the Death of St. Joseph Freinademetz SVD

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**“My years are fast declining and moving toward the end with giant steps. This makes one feel deeply sorry for not having put the long series of grace-filled years of one’s life to better use in the vineyard of the Lord; one would at least like to wake up in the eleventh hour and work with full strength as long as the time lasts. Your pious prayers help me.”**

*Joseph Freinademetz to Theodor Buddenbrock, Feb. 1907*

## Introduction

On January 28, 1908, Fr. Joseph Freinademetz died of typhoid fever in Taikia, the Central House of the Divine Word Missionaries in South Shantung. He was worn out and had no strength left in him to battle the contagious disease. Some two days before his death, Fr. Theodore Bucker, in the name of all missionaries, asked him for his blessing and said: “We promise you to continue working in your spirit“. With a faint smile on his face he answered: “You wish to continue working in my spirit? I was far from doing everything well“.

Freinademetz tried to love and serve God and people with his whole heart and his whole soul. He understood his life as worship of God. The brief period of service in his native land, and his many years in China had only one aim: the glory of God. His humble statement at the end of his life “I was far from doing everything well“ certainly expresses his honest opinion of himself. Today we may rightly state: Fr. Freinademetz did not make things easy for himself, but he did them well; he was a good missionary.

The brief reflections which follow are meant to help us in our spiritual preparation for the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death of St. Joseph Freinademetz. May they help us to reflect on our own life and work as Divine Word Missionaries and on our relation with God and with our mission.

*The quotes used in these reflections are mostly taken from:*

- *Augustinus Henninghaus, P. Jos. Freinademetz S.V.D., Sein Leben und Wirken, Zugleich Beiträge zur Geschichte der Mission in Süd-Shantung, Yenchowfu, Verlag der katholischen Missionen 1920, 633.*
- *Fritz Bornemann, Der selige P.J.Freinademetz 1852 – 1908, Ein Steyler China-Missionar, Ein Lebensbild nach zeitgenössischen Quellen, Analecta SVD – 36, Rom 1976. English edition: As Wine Poured out: Blessed Joseph Freinademetz SVD Missionary in China 1879-1908, Rome: Divine Word Missionaries, 1984.*

- *Fritz Bornemann (ed.), Der ehrwürdige Diener Gottes Josef Freinademetz, Berichte aus der China-Mission, Rom 1974 (first published as Analecta SVD 27, 1973).*
- *P. Pietro Irsara SVD (ed.), Lettere di un santo, Giuseppe Freinademetz, L'amore per il prossimo, la famiglia e la Badia (A collection of letters in the original Italian).*

## **Reflection 1**

### **Saying good-bye**

In Summer 1878 it was time for Josef Freinademetz to say good bye: good bye to the familiar surroundings, to parents, relatives and friends, to the flow of life he had grown used to; good bye also to the kind of life for which he had prepared himself for so long: the security and warmth of the parish house, the work as assistant parish priest which he had come to like very much. To say good bye means to go away; it means to leave behind what had been important until now, that which had filled the life of Joseph Freinademetz and given meaning to it. Why does he do this, what moves him? Does he know what he is doing, what he is getting into?

On Sunday, August 11, 1878, he said good bye to the parish of St. Martin in Thurn, where he served as assistant parish priest and elementary school teacher:

“The divine good shepherd in his unfathomable goodness has invited me to go out together with him into the desert in order to help him in his search for the lost sheep. What else should I do but kiss his hand full of joy and gratitude and say with the Scriptures: ‘Behold I come!’ and with Abraham leave my father’s house, native land and you, my dear ones, and go to the land which the Lord will show me.” A week later, in his home parish St. Leonhard, he added: “For me, too, it is difficult - I cannot deny this - to leave my dear parents and so many benefactors and friends. But after all, man is not meant for this world. He has been created for something greater: not to enjoy life, but to work wherever the Lord calls him.”

Joseph Freinademetz did not piously look for self sacrifice; he did not follow the itch for adventure or romantic wanderlust. Joseph Freinademetz felt called, he followed an invitation - and set out on a journey like Abraham long ago. To leave, to say good-bye was difficult for him, but he did not hesitate because he was sure that he was on the way to the land that God would show him, as the Bible says of Abraham. He set out to do the will of God and was thus led to himself, to fulfillment in life.

His inner sentiments are laid bare in a letter which he wrote to Franz Thaler, his friend and benefactor in Sottrù, a small village next to Oies, on February 18, 1879, a few days before the departure ceremony in Steyl:

“... Dear friend, at times I find it hard to live far away from those whom I have loved so much, to leave my native place, which has given me so many friends and joys, and to look for another home where one has to start from the very beginning like a child beginning life anew, where one has to learn new and very

difficult languages and get to know people who have completely different interests and customs ... It is hard to begin such a life after I have been so happy among you Ladins. And I say it to you in all honesty: I would never do this for anything in this world, not even for millions of worlds. But I am very happy and content that I can do this for the good Lord up there, even if I would encounter death a thousand times. And I know his grace will never abandon me. My only desire is to be able to convert many, very many of our poor brothers. Only for this do I leave my dear father, my dear mother, my brothers and sisters, relatives and friends, among whom you occupy one of the very first places, and my beloved St. Martin.”

***For reflection:***

Joseph Freinademetz left his native land, but he did not go in search of another one. He remained “stateless”, and even later in the midst of his Chinese whom he loved so much he felt being a stranger. The reason why he “set out on the journey” was his faith, the faith that gave him assurance that he would find his home in God, that he would be sheltered “in the shadow of his wings” as the Psalmist says. 1 Pet 2:13 states: “Beloved, you are strangers and in exile.” “After all, man is not meant for this world ...” the young Freinademetz told his home parish.

In my life, to which things did I say good bye, from which have I moved away, perhaps in pain? Where do I feel at home and sheltered? Am I on the way, like Abraham and Freinademetz, to the “land” which God wants to show me? Do I inquire about this land, to I look for it? – “By the infinite mercy of God, who chooses the weak as his instruments I hope to share in a grace of which I am not worthy for eternity”, Freinademetz said when bidding good bye to St. Martin.



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### ***Reflection 2: Living with disappointments***

With the Te Deum on his lips and his heart beating for joy, the young missionary Joseph Freinademetz stepped on Chinese soil. But what he experienced and had to face at first were bitter disappointments. He had truly arrived “in a foreign land”. Back home he was highly esteemed and honored as a priest and well accepted as a person. But here people at most curiously stared at his European look and behavior. Nobody asked for him; no one seemed to be interested in knowing why he was there. The loneliness began to affect his mind. Everything contrasted harshly with what he had expected. “What I saw, heard and experienced day after day, was often diametrically opposed to the convictions I held hitherto”, he wrote looking back on those days.

But what was totally incomprehensible to him and what he felt most bitterly was the seeming religious indifference. Nobody seemed to hunger for the bread of truth and grace as he had expected. He found nothing familiar. Being a man of his time and with his European background there was no room in him for understanding the foreign culture and way of life: “One can hardly make ten steps without coming across a lot of devilishly grimacing faces and the most diverse forms of devilry. The air one breathes here is thoroughly pagan; no inspiration coming from the outside; the encouraging word, the inspiring good example is absent. No sound of a church bell, no religious feast, no solemn procession speaks to the heart; in most cases the chapel has the same decoration on Good Friday as on Easter Sunday. Externally there is no difference between Christmas and Ash Wednesday; always and everywhere the same milling mass moving to and fro without beginning or end...”

He himself described those first two years as his „mission novitiate”. They were a tough school for him since the truly existential questions were raised: For what had he left home? Was China indeed the country which – remember Abraham – God wanted to show him?

He must have spent much time brooding, meditating, struggling with himself and praying before he wrote these almost mystical lines: “The quiet solitude and general loneliness speak to the heart of the missionary in a unique manner, and since the more we are alone, the closer God is to us, the missionary does not know whether in such a situation he should cry because of inner hurt or shout for great joy, and so he does both.”

The difficulties at the beginning of his missionary life, however, were not the only ones. Again and again disappointments crossed his path: "In spring 1890, he had an experience which he called the saddest of his missionary life. 200 catechumens (candidates for baptism) fell away, and this because, of all things, their catechist, whom Fr. Freinademetz himself had baptized and employed, seduced them to apostasy and instigated them against Fr. Freinademetz. This was a bitter disappointment, but he knew how to control himself. Pretty soon the catechist made himself impossible and the majority of the catechumens returned."

Towards the end of his life, when physical hardships had become less, persecutions had come to an end, and loneliness was no longer a problem because of the affectionate loyalty of Christians and the arrival of many confreres, and the mission was flourishing so to say, Freinademetz had to fear that the blossoms would wither all too quickly, because with the increasing influx of Europeans their irreligious behavior also made itself felt. He complains about this, writing to his godchild on May 28, 1902: "For the rest, at present we live in peace here in China, and once again many become Christians. The main scourge for us and the poor Chinese are the many Europeans, without faith and totally corrupt, who begin to flood China. Yes, they are Christians but they are worse than the pagans. They have no other thought than to make money and enjoy all worldly pleasures; poor people!"

He defended his Chinese: "The Chinese are not hostile to religion, and if Europe were Christian today as it could and should be, I am convinced the whole of China would convert to Christianity... the wind coming from Europe is very chilly and evil; one must, therefore, fear that the poor Chinese will remain pagans and even become worse than the pagans." Just one month before his death he writes with bitterness: "The bad example of those who come to China ... causes them (the Chinese) to be indifferent to, or even enemies of, Christianity."

*References: Bornemann p.52; Berichte pp.37, 39f., 41; Nova et Vetera (internal SVD publication) p.1091; letter to his godchild Franz Thaler, China, 28. 05. 1902, Lettere p. 86f.; letter to Elisabetta Thaler, Yenfu, 23. 01. 1907, Lettere p. 93; letter to Elisabetta Thaler, 26. 12. 1907, Lettere p. 96;*

### ***For reflection:***

Disappointments and crises are part of our life. They discourage us, block the flow of life and cause certain things to come to a still stand. But that is precisely where their great importance lies. They force us to pause, to reflect and thus turn them into opportunities; they challenge us to consider other ways, to dare making a new start.

God dares to send us crises which cannot simply be brushed off by prayer or pious exercises. Even for the believer crises are challenges which force us to reflect, call forth hitherto hidden capacities in us and thus promote the development of our personality.

Faith does not gloss over problems and difficulties but gives us the strength and courage to see things in their full reality. It is a question of faith whether I accept that God acts differently from what I expect and wish. God often arranges things in such a way that through disappointments, through crises and sufferings, I arrive at a relation with him which would not have been possible for me without them.

Am I capable of seeing that the obstacles on my way can open me to the presence of God which surrounds me everywhere? Can I understand that crises coming from God are always a manifestation of love and can make my life mature and enrich it?

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## **Reflection 3: Attractive kindness**

“His gentle and kind nature radiated a charm which won the hearts of all who came into contact with him”. This is how Bishop Henninghaus characterizes Joseph Freinademetz, and he continues: “Most of the time his eyes shone with such attractive goodness, with such kind serenity that the Chinese easily trusted him and felt at home with him”.

Even if the language and expressions of the early 20th century may sound exaggerated today, there seems to be little doubt that Freinademetz indeed possessed an “untiring goodness and kindness”, was endowed with inexhaustible patience, and radiated a “noble self-forgetful love”.

This kindness did not leave him, according to Henninghaus, “even when reprimanding and imposing punishments”, although he made “no small demands” on confreres and Christians. If on rare occasions he became stern and angry, his words would shake people to the core, Henninghaus quotes Chinese Christians as saying. Evidently he never let himself be carried away to use corporal punishment. “The hand of the priest is meant for blessing and not for beating”, was one of his guiding principles.

The longer Freinademetz lived and labored among the Chinese the greater the understanding he showed for them and their ways, the more the natural disposition of his personality came to the fore. Bishop Henninghaus attributes “this pleasant and serene friendliness” to his natural disposition but also points to a deeper reason: “His happy natural disposition had been refined into the pure gold of superna-tural, noble unselfishness in the school of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and in that school he had acquired that self-control which does not allow itself to be influenced by one’s moods and the weather”.

This does not mean, the Bishop emphasizes, that there were no “days of sorrow” and he believes that Freinademetz often enough experienced times when he could say with the Psalmist: “My drink I mix with tears” (Ps. 102, 10).

He did not make others pay for disappointments, failures and irritations. The bishop finds the basis for this in “the core of his character”, his unselfishness. “To refuse nothing to others, to demand nothing for one self”, was another of his guiding principles, or, as Fr. Johannes Blick SVD quotes him as saying: “The pagans will only be converted by the grace of God and, let us add that, by our love,” for “the language of love is the only foreign language which the pagans

understand". Freinademetz had evidently learned to speak this "foreign language" very well.

*References: Henninghaus pp. 69, 77f., 81, 82, 83; Erinnerungen p. 99;*

***For reflection:***

A fellow student of Freinademetz in Brixen, Fr. Mair, CSsR, described him as follows: "I find no better description of him than this: (he is) the incarnation of the twelve fruits of the Holy Spirit, a personality which radiates the supernatural virtue of serenity. It was the spirit of love, silent joy, inner peace, gentleness, modesty which manifested itself externally".

What impression does such an attitude in life make on me? Would I strive for such virtues?

From daily experience we know how difficult an understanding and patient love of neighbor it can be. Can the example of this saint spur us on and help us to train ourselves in this love and goodness which manifests itself in unselfish service? How do I behave toward someone who keeps aloof from me and doesn't show me any love?





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### **Reflection 4: Prayer: The atmosphere of his life**

Freinademetz worked a lot – and prayed a lot! Very often he remained before the tabernacle till late into the night. There is hardly any letter of his that does not contain the request to remember him, the Chinese entrusted to his care and the whole Mission in prayer, just as he emphasizes and affirms again and again that he never forgets the recipients (of the letters) and frequently recommends them to the Heart of Jesus and the Mother of God.

From Steyl, that is even before leaving his native place never to return, he writes: “You, too, should pray and thank God every day at least by saying an Our Father and a Hail Mary, because he was so gracious to call a missionary from our family”. His vocation had truly been the fruit of his fervent prayer. “Since I have often consulted with the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus in prayer and this thought forcefully enters my mind precisely at the time of prayer, I believe I can truly find in this a hint...”, he wrote in his application to Arnold Janssen.

Before leaving for Steyl, in his farewell sermon in St. Martin, he calls on the faithful: “Pray! Prayer is the key to paradise. Prayer is the staff on our pilgrim way, the source of life giving water, the food which strengthens our soul“. The thought that one day they would meet again in paradise helps him find consolation in view of the definitive separation from parents and home. But the presupposition for this is prayer. While traveling to China, in a letter to his parents from Singapore, he wrote: „Pray for me, and I shall pray for you, that this day may be for all of us a day of joy. Pray also that I may receive the grace to spend my life working hard in the vineyard of the Lord for the salvation of souls.”

In a long report sent to Steyl he describes how much this work in the vineyard of the Lord was joined to prayer: “I was alone in the midst of a totally pagan people ... Deo gratias! ... And now, what shall I do here, what shall I aim at? ... Dear God, do you build, otherwise I shall build in vain; do you fight, do you watch, otherwise I shall fight and watch in vain. The harvest would seem to be plenty, but ... Nevertheless, God wants it! Hence, get going, get to work!”

For Fr. Anton Volkert who had his training as a missionary under Fr. Freinademetz he was “a man of prayer”. “When traveling he sat in the cart praying or reading. At home in the course of the day and frequently until late into the night he was often seen in church, lost in prayer.”

In the opinion of Bishop Henninghaus, too, Fr. Freinademetz was “a man of prayer. Prayer was the atmosphere and the joy of his life. The first place in his prayer life belonged to the two sacred duties of a priest: daily holy mass and the recitation of the breviary. Even on exhausting mission trips he never omitted these two sacred exercises ... Even when pressured by work he tried to pray the breviary at the proper time ... One could see him kneeling before the altar, for a long time and repeatedly in the course of the day, absorbed in silent prayer. It is no exaggeration to say that he dedicated all of his time that was not occupied by other duties to prayer. He had a very special devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. To love and honor the Sacred Heart was for him, as a Tyrolese, a precious heritage. He, too, felt bound by the oath by which his ancestors had consecrated themselves to the Sacred Heart; this corresponded altogether to the inclinations of his own heart. It was, therefore, always his concern to also instill this love and devotion in the hearts of others”.

*Sources: letter to Franz Thaler, Lettere p. 62; letter to his parents and brothers and sisters, Steyl 29.10.1878, Lettere p. 15; Bornemann pp. 36, 40, 148; letter from Singapore, 14. April 1879, Lettere p. 21; Berichte p. 61; Henninghaus p. 83f.*

***For reflection:***

Joseph Freinademetz was convinced of the power of prayer. This made him unafraid. “Even if the whole world collapses, God does not let prayer go unheeded. One thing alone is always necessary: to pray much. A life without prayer is the surest way to hell. Never forget to pray for us and all missionaries”.

- Am I convinced of the power of prayer?
- Could anyone say of me: “He is a man/woman of prayer?”

Freinademetz knew: God does not need our prayer, but we need prayer for our life. Also, he never forgot that our prayer should not only be centered on our own concerns and problems but above all on those of others. Praying in this way we become the voice of the church in the whole world - just like Joseph Freinademetz in China.

- Does my prayer embrace the concerns and problems of others?
- Do I ask God’s help for our confreres, for our missionaries? Do I beg for his blessings on our mission?



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### **Reflection 5: Enthusiastic and untiring**

During the first decades of the Shantung mission, Fr. Freinademetz personally either founded or further developed almost all of the Christian communities. He paid these communities frequent visits. For a long time he did not have any place he could call his home. Wherever a Christian was living, that was 'home' for him. To reach the more remote communities he had to travel hundreds of kilometers. He always carried with him the most necessary things: mass kit, bedding, clothing, etc. A horse or mule served as pack animal, more rarely a cart. A Chinese accompanied him.

As an itinerant missionary he was also preacher. All throughout his life, "wherever he happened to find an opportunity - whether on the road or in country inns - he used to preach to the people who gathered around him or engage in religious conversation with them. Even when exhausted from a long trip, he didn't have the heart to send people away without having had a friendly religious conversation with them". Towards the end of his life, in the fall of 1907, he still made a long roundtrip through the districts of Lini and Tsingtao. This trip was so exhausting for him that he had to stop twice to take a longer period of rest.

He dedicated his foremost attention to the directly spiritual life of the communities. He took the preparation of catechumens for baptism and first Holy Communion most serious. Whenever possible, he gave them courses and talks. In his catecheses and sermons he put the emphasis on religious truths and instruction in prayer.

In spite of his big workload, Fr. Freinademetz found time to send the Bishop written reports about his experiences, translated texts and wrote booklets, among other things, a brief outline of Christian Doctrine, a devotional meditation on the Mass, Rules for leaders of Christian communities, and for the seminarians two treatises in Latin on the Sacrifice of the Mass and on the Breviary.

Finally, Fr. Freinademetz was superior in a variety of functions: rector in Puolichwang, director of the school in Tsining, head teacher of the women catechists, Pro-vicar (assistant vicar), six times administrator of the entire mission, provincial superior. At times he even became treasurer, which he liked least; but also such a task he tried to carry out conscientiously.

In the retreat conferences of 1902, Fr. Freinademetz repeatedly emphasized the sentence of St. Paul from Second Corinthians: "I will most gladly spend and be spent for your sakes" (2 Cor 12,15). Joseph Freinademetz made these words his own. He was always ready to give all, even his life.

*Reference: Henninghaus, p. 186*

***For reflection:***

I try to become aware of myself, of my capacities and talents, my hopes and successes, the goals I have achieved. To which extent do I pay attention to the manifold needs of people?

Jesus wants that we find true life, life in joy and abundance. Am I aware that he is counting on my help in order to bring this about?



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### **Reflection 6: A testimony of gratitude**

Thomas Cardinal Tien, SVD, the first Chinese Cardinal, was a student of Fr. Joseph Freinademetz. In May 1963 he visited Oies. In the parish church of St. Leonhard/Abtei where Joseph Freinademetz had been baptized, celebrated his First Mass, and taken leave of his homeland, he addressed the parish community in German. Here are some of his words:

“...My dear people! It is a great joy for me to be here in your community, and I genuinely feel the need to bring you and your people my own and my people’s gratitude for the holy missionary that you sent to us. Fr. Freinademetz, the servant of God, was the kind of missionary that the Lord God certainly intended. We could not have wished for a better one. That he was a true missionary can be seen in the great suffering he endured just to gain a foothold in my country in order to be able to proclaim the Gospel. My native land has been the homeland of the great Confucius, and precisely because of this the more educated among my people were utterly opposed to any foreign missionary. They did everything possible to prevent foreign missionaries from gaining a foothold in China. From this we can gather that your servant of God, Fr. Freinademetz, must have had to follow the Lord in a veritable ‘Via Crucis’ during his first years in my homeland. But just as our Savior carried his cross, so Joseph Freinademetz heroically bore his: he gladly accepted every ignominy done to him and every difficulty placed in his way, for salvation’s sake and in order to save souls. And the grace of God won out in the end!

“...For a long time already - indeed for years - I have longed to come to this homeland and home village of your holy missionary and now that I have the joy of being here with you, my happiness is complete. My hopes and my longings really have been fulfilled. I simply had to come here to tell you about him. I had the happiness of living with him for almost eight years. He first took me in when I was only a boy in primary school, and later accepted me into the seminary. There I was often allowed to serve his Holy Mass; I had the opportunity again and again to listen to his teaching, something for which I can never thank him enough. He was the quintessential missionary. Not only because he had to bear such a heavy cross and suffering, but also because there in my homeland he became all things to all men and women. Whoever came to him with a happy heart, with that

person he rejoiced. Whoever came to him in suffering, found in him consolation and help. We simply called him “our mother”. He helped us in whatever way he could, and he is still helping us today. It is not only here in your homeland that men and women turn to him for help and protection. You are not the only ones who experience a boost when you pray to him. My people too – our faithful Chinese – still pray to him, and whoever prays to him never remains unheard.

“My dear people! This is the reason why I am experiencing such great joy at being here in his home village, at being able to be present, to pray, and to offer the Holy Sacrifice in this same church in which he grew up and in which he became the missionary that he was in my homeland.”

*Reference: Bornemann p. 805*

***For reflection:***

Cardinal Tien said: “The picture of this priest kneeling before the tabernacle has become an indelible image in my memory.”

- Do I foster personal prayer before the tabernacle?

Cardinal Tien said: “Fr. Freinademetz was simply there for others. We knew that we could come to him at any hour of day or night. We were never a burden to him, never. He was always friendly, he was a saint.”

- Charitable goodness belongs to the very essence of mission. What is my attitude toward those who do not think as I do; who belong to other cultures, or who are poor and marginalized?



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## **Reflection 7: Sickness and recovery**

In February of 1898, Fr. Freinademetz, as representative of the bishop, visited the German colonial troops who had occupied the bay of Kiaochow in November of the previous year. The soldiers were deeply impressed. Captain Dannhauer described the missionary in a Berlin newspaper: "The numerous sufferings and deprivations that he has undergone during the course of nineteen, unbroken years exercising his difficult missionary task in China's hinterlands can be clearly seen on his noble and classically craggy Tyrolean face and physique. But although his neck is bowed, his face and cheeks thin, pale and emaciated, his eyes sunk deep in their sockets, precisely from these eyes, which normally are so filled with friendliness and gentleness, there are flashes of enthusiasm and boundless energy whenever he touches upon his mission during the course of his report."

At that point in time Fr. Freinademetz' health was no longer what it used to be. Years of hard work, worries, dangers and hardships had broken it. In the end his voice gave out. He, who preached so gladly and so fervently, suddenly felt that he was no longer able to speak out loud. A serious illness was affecting his larynx and lungs, he was coughing up blood.

When Bishop Anzer returned from Europe in mid 1898 he ordered his pro-vicar to go to Shang-hai and have himself examined by the doctors there. The findings showed that his lungs had been affected. The doctor prescribed absolute rest, repose and good food. The bishop sent him to Nagasaki in Japan. It was extremely difficult for Freinademetz to leave "his" mission. The clientele of the health resort Unzen, furnished according to European standards, did not correspond to what he was accustomed to. After only a few weeks he was back in China. Although he felt better his illness was not completely healed. For the time being he was forbidden to preach. He placed his life in the hands of the Lord and thanked the Bishop for having "so generously allowed him to take this vacation trip".

Freinademetz did not spare himself and, to some extent, burnt the candle at both ends. Was he right in doing so? On the other hand, as provincial, he paid great attention to the physical and spiritual well-being of his confreres. He expanded

the central house in Taikia and asked the missionaries to use its facilities and opportunities in order to recuperate physically and mentally, make their annual retreat, and spend time together in ongoing pastoral formation and education. He saw to it that the confreres felt at home in the central house.

In spite of his asceticism and unassuming character Fr. Freinademetz obviously enjoyed companionship and jokes. „Fr. Freinademetz belonged neither to the ‚sons of thunder‘ nor to the ‚sour faces‘“, Henninghaus writes and adds: „Wherever he was, a lighthearted mood prevailed most of the time; even as superior he was not one of those whose presence covers the surroundings like a damp cold fog making everyone feel depressed and paralyzed“.

*References: Bornemann p. 273; Henninghaus pp. 394 and 82f.;*

***For reflection:***

Our service in the vineyard of the Lord demands that we look after our health, that we take the time for recollection and reflection so that our spiritual life doesn't get shortchanged. When body and soul are in harmony, we will be happy and at peace.

Am I thankful for my health? Do I recognize it as a great gift of God?

Do I look after my health? Do I go to a doctor promptly when I recognize signs of illness or physical problems?

Do I try to discern the will of God in my old age or in illness and put up with my sufferings while maintaining my good cheer and a sense of submissiveness?





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## **Reflection 8: Nearing the end**

At the beginning of January 1882, the then Vicar Apostolic of Shantung, Msgr. Cosi, had named J. B. Anzer as his Pro-Vicar for South Shantung. Several days later, Anzer traveled to Puoli, where the only Christian community of the new mission territory entrusted to the SVD was to be found.

When the mission in South Shantung celebrated its twenty five years of existence on January 28, 1907, nobody could ever have foreseen that on precisely that same day, one year later, the light of the great missionary would be extinguished – Anzer had already died in 1903.

The mission's jubilee was planned as a very simple celebration to thank God for the protection and blessings of the past twenty five years. At the time of the jubilee, Fr. Freinademetz was staying in Yen-chow-fu. For him the day was not only an occasion to look back but also to look toward the future. On this day he baptized 150 new Christians. He had thoroughly prepared them for the sacrament during an instruction period which had lasted several weeks.

As Bishop Henninghaus writes in his biography, at this time Fr. Freinademetz was already visibly weakened. Sicknesses, troubles and sufferings had “left their imprint on him. His hair was streaked with grey and his friendly features showed deep creases. His voice had lost its earlier bright, metallic tone. Despite all this he stuck fast to his usual ascetical and pious daily habits. His strictness with himself did not let up in the least. His mild, hearty friendliness was always the same, and his ‘first love’, the holy fire of eagerness for souls, burned as brightly as ever in his mature heart as when he was young. This gave him the freshness of youth, boundless energy and an obvious joy in carrying out every task that had been loaded on his shoulders for the good of the mission”.

Half a year after the jubilee celebrations, at the beginning of June 1907, Henninghaus left for his first trip to Europe as bishop. This meant that Fr. Freinademetz had to once again shoulder the burden of leadership in the China mission. It was the sixth time that he served as Administrator of the China mission.

In the middle of August he set out on a visitation of the east which was to keep him away from the central station for more than three months. An accident and stresses and strains caused him much trouble, kidneys and heart acted up, water collected in his badly swollen legs and feet and forced him to interrupt his travels for some days of rest. In December he returned to Yenchowfu. He wanted to prepare himself for the Regional Synod of Bishops in which, in the absence of the Bishop, he was scheduled to take part. But that never happened. In Yenchow-fu typhoid fever was raging; it had already claimed many victims. Joseph himself contracted the fatal disease while spending himself in the care of those who had been stricken by the disease. His weakened body was unable to put up a defense.

*Reference: Henninghaus, p. 619*

***For reflection:***

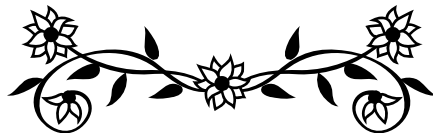
Every human person would like to live long and reach ripe old age. But how are we preparing for our own old age?

Freinademetz asked his superior general several times to relieve him of his office as provincial.

To what extent do we manage to turn over responsibility to younger ones?

Despite sickness, hardships and suffering one could sense in Joseph Freinademetz a certain “youthful freshness, energy and joy in taking on any task that needed to be done”.

How can I learn to be of service to others, even when bodily ailments and limitations begin to make themselves felt?



## **Reflections for the Centennial of the Death of St. Joseph Freinademetz SVD**

**Prepared by Fr. Pietro Irsara, SVD  
Director of the Ancestral Home and Shrine  
of St. J. Freinademetz, at Oies, Badia, Italy**

### **Reflection 9: The deadly epidemic**

At the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century typhoid fever was one of the most dreaded diseases in China. It also claimed victims among men and women missionaries. At the end of 1907 the disease had broken out anew in Yenchowfu where the Mission maintained a big orphanage and girls' home. Fr. Freinademetz arrived in Yenchowfu at the beginning of the December, returning from a visitation trip. He was physically weakened. A confrere noted that he was hardly able to keep himself in the saddle during the trip. Yenchowfu was the bishop's seat. Since Bishop Henninghaus was in Europe from June of that year Freinademetz had to take care of the official business as the representative of the bishop. He had barely arrived when the care for the sick became his main preoccupation. In the words of his first biographer: "Like a good father he was in the midst of his suffering children, trying to console, help and especially prepare the gravely ill for a good death. Every morning he went from room to room to give Holy Communion to each one". The death of the first Superior of the SSpS Sisters was an especially heavy blow for him. "The good Lord has taken her from us and we must accept this heavy blow with resignation to God's will and bear it with courage," he wrote to his Superior General Arnold Janssen. Admittedly, again and again his courage began to fail him. He felt overburdened, was downcast, almost depressed: "One difficulty after the other! Please, return soon... I am often at a loss and at times without joy," he wrote his bishop.

Being in constant contact with the sick he himself got infected. When he traveled to Tsining on January 17 in order to preside over the exams in the catechists' school, he complained of a headache but still wrote an extensive letter - his last one - to his bishop and friend: "Like a cart our Mission moves on as usual in the midst of all sorts of crosses and sorrows (...)." He concludes the letter with a request for a blessing which sounds like a last wish: "May your Excellency please bless your flock again and again and pray for it; may the dear Lord accompany all your steps, make your strenuous labor fruitful for yourself and the South Shantung Mission and soon bring you back safely into our midst."

The letter covers "three and one half pages in quarto" and "is written in his typical clear and flowing handwriting. Not a word in the letter gives a hint that he felt gravely ill or even near the end of his life. Except for the brief personal remark just mentioned he, being faithful and committed to his duties, only reports the happenings and concerns of the Mission." This is how the bishop evaluates the last letter of his representative.

Already on the next day, on January 18, Fr. Freinademetz had to cut short the exams; he felt the typhoid fever in his body. On Sunday, January 19, he still celebrated mass; it was his last mass. In the afternoon he was brought to Taikia, where he had his seat as provincial superior. "This is the last journey," he said when boarding the carriage.

*Sources: Henninghaus p. 628f; Bornemann p. 499, 503;*

***For reflection:***

Fr. Freinademetz evidently felt that his days were numbered, that his life filled with troubles and struggles was coming to an end. This did not prevent him from reporting the difficulties and problems of the Mission to his bishop and sending him his best wishes; he did not say a word about his own health. "That Christ may take shape in us; that is and shall remain my prayer," he had written his bishop at the beginning of the new year on January 1, 1907. The source of his strength was his faith and trust in God's love and help. "If we love our vocation we are not traveling the wrong road," he had told the sisters during their retreat.

Trials and doubts as to whether one is traveling "on the right road," will arise in everybody's life, including my own ... How did I experience that the Lord was at my side and gave me strength and patience to persevere?

Where do I find courage and strength, wisdom and patience, to handle the tasks entrusted to me with trust and a sense of responsibility?

## **Reflections for the Centennial of the Death of St. Joseph Freinademetz SVD**

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### **Reflection 10: “The next move is upward!”**

“There, now I have gotten to the end; the next move is upward!” With these words, as Br. Ulrich Heyen recalls, Fr. Freinademetz, clearly marked by typhoid fever, got down from the carriage that had taken him from Tsining to the provincial house in Taikia. This was on Sunday evening, January 19, 1908.

During the night he ran a high fever which slightly decreased on Monday morning, but he had no illusions and gave his final orders— as provincial he was religious superior and in the absence of the bishop also administrator of the whole Mission. In a document that was to be opened only after his death he named his successor “until other arrangements are made by higher authorities.” “For the rest I die with full confidence in the mercy of the Divine Heart and the intercession of His and my Mother Mary together with that of my patron saint and patron of the dying, St. Joseph,” were the final words of the communication. He signed it “Taikia, 20.1.1908, from my sickbed, Jos. Freinademetz.”

With deep devotion he received the anointing of the sick or the “sacraments of the dying,” as they were then called.

At his request the images of St. Joseph, the Heart of Jesus and the Guardian Angel were hung above his bed from which he was no longer able to get up. In life he had put his trust in them, now at the hour of death he wished to have their image before his eyes. His trembling hands clasped the rosary with the cross, as had always been his custom

The thoughts of the book “Preparation For A Happy Death,” which he asked to be read to him, helped him to overcome the final fear of dying; thus he could say in the end: “If one has done one’s duty and all that was within one’s power, the good God will surely be merciful...” He did his duty till his very last day. With a trembling hand he wrote to Fr. Röser on January 21: “Am writing you from my bed, probably sick with typhoid; last night I had a 39° fever; by now I have perspired some; however, I must be prepared for my last hour! Fiat voluntas Dei Summi Omnipotentis (May the will of God Most High and Almighty be done!)” It is moving that even in this situation he was still concerned about others, and especially of “his” Chinese: “The infirmary of the virgins (these were the young orphan girls who lived in the orphanage in Yenchowfu until they got married) needs a stove,” he instructed Fr. Röser and adds: “When one is sick oneself, one knows well enough what would do one good, and we owe the same to the Chinese. For we came to serve.” – Even on his death bed in his final illness he remains true to his basic attitude and mission. At the end of the letter he remarks: “I pity you that you must always be in the midst of the many people sick with typhoid. May the good Lord keep you and protect you from getting infected. Memento mei, quaeso, (remember me, I beg you) especially if the good God should call me.”

His confreres, especially Br. Ulrich Heyen, who had been with him in many a danger, cared for him with loving attention and did for him what they could do, that which he had done for

them throughout life: Many prayers were said for him, including by Christians from the vicinity.

Every day Fr. Petrus Noyen celebrated Holy Mass in one of the adjacent rooms and gave him Holy Communion. All the time one of the priests or brothers was nearby. One after the other the missionaries came from the outlying stations in the surroundings to spend a few moments with him. In the name of all Fr. Theodor Bückler spoke words of thanks and farewell and asked for his blessing for the priests and the Mission. He assured him: "We promise you to continue working in your spirit." Though near death he did not want to take this lying down: "You wish to continue working in my spirit? I was far from doing everything well".

*Sources: Bornemann pp. 503-506; Henninghaus pp. 630-633;*

***For reflection:***

Joseph Freinademetz lived his personal vocation until his last moment with every fiber of his being. The deepest driving force of his life was love. Serving people he made God's love visible and tangible and thus brought many closer to God, cheered them up and filled them with joy. When the moment came for him to let go of what he had loved so much and what he had built up, he could do so with the confidence that he had not lived in vain.

How do I prepare for death?

The burial gown, they say, has no pockets! I must therefore let go, leave behind, even those things which all throughout life were precious and dear to me. Am I aware of those things – and those persons?

Am I aware that in the end it does not matter what and how much I have achieved but solely whether I have given others love and have thus lived my life as the image of God?

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### **Reflection 11: “Thank the physician!”**

The strength of Joseph Freinademetz was spent, his body worn out; he could no longer fight the typhus. His final agony lasted nine days, from the 19<sup>th</sup> to the 28<sup>th</sup> of January. The pain became unbearable, but neither Chinese medicine nor the skill of an American doctor was able to help him. Br. Ulrich broke out in tears when he woke up in agony after long hours of unconsciousness and mumbled to him: “Thank the physician!” During the last days he frequently lost consciousness, in the intervals he could be heard saying short ejaculatory prayers. His last night turned out to be a night of excruciating suffering, caused by additional bladder problems. An intervention brought temporary relief, until complete exhaustion set in. There was no real agony. Accompanied by the prayer of his confreres Joseph Freinademetz died on Tuesday, January 28, 1908 at about 6:00 p.m. His was, in the truest sense of the word, a return to the Father.

Although his death was not really unexpected, his closest collaborators were deeply affected. “The worst blow that could strike our Mission struck it today,” Fr. Georg Stenz wrote the Superior General in Steyl and reported: “Just now at 18:00 hours our kind pro-vicar died here of typhus (...) In his illness he gave us a heroic example of patience. He did not want to die yet, but he also resigned himself fully to the holy will of God. (...) It is only now that people of South-Shantung will become aware of what he meant for us!”

They were conscious that in Fr. Freinademetz they had lost more than an ordinary person: “A heavy blow not only for the Mission, but also for the whole Society,” Fr. Johannes Düster wrote and added: “Right away people prayed for the deceased but also already to him.” That was probably also what Sr. Blandina, Holy Spirit Missionary Sister, had in mind when she wrote: “Already now one would wish to honor our highly esteemed Fr. Superior Freinademetz as a saint. Our poor orphans have only one consolation left, that we have an exceptionally good intercessor; the future will show this!”

The mourning was particularly deep among the simple Chinese: “Many will moan over the loss of Fu Shenful” was the opinion of a catechist, knowing full well that the deceased had sacrificed himself for “his” Chinese. What moved the Christians was not just what he had done for them, but above all how he had dealt with them. “I feel as if I had lost my father and my mother!” was how someone expressed it.

Superior General Fr. Arnold Janssen tried to console his confreres: “The Lord God has taken from us this second founder of the Mission, this good soul, whose merits for South-Shantung are great and immortal. We may thus hope that his heavenly crown was ready and that the Lord called him in order to give his faithful servant the well earned rest and a beautiful place in His glorious kingdom. The more zealously, unselfishly and sacrificially he worked the more will he now rejoice, but also be active for us as intercessor at the heavenly throne.”

*Sources: Bornemann, pp. 506-508;*

### ***For reflection:***

Fr. Freinademetz did not long for death. Initially he was rather fearful; but then he let himself be sustained by the thoughts of a book, became calm and composed and was thus able to say good-bye, in peace with himself and with God, and to let go in the awareness that he had “fought the good fight, finished the race, and kept the faith” ( 2 Tim 4,7).

For many Christians it was clear: “If he is not in heaven, then no one can ever hope to go to heaven!”

In his native place a prayer card was printed which said: “Died in China with a reputation of holiness ...”

Which impression does the death of this holy man make on me? What can I learn from it for my life – for my death? What do I do against the fear of death? Am I serious enough in asking myself whether I do God’s will, or whether I do that which he is probably expecting of me?

What does “holy” mean to me? – The word has something to do with “whole,” wholeness, health. For me what is a “saintly” life? Can I imagine to live – and to die – in a “saintly” way, i.e. according to the salvation which God offers me?



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### Reflection 12: “Truly a Saint”

Joseph Freinademetz was known and respected in Christian circles in China. The expressions of sympathy and appreciation when the news of his death broke are a clear evidence of this.

*Msgr. Jarlin CM, Apostolic Vicariate of North-Chihli, Peking:*

“We loved and revered your dear deceased. I recall the kind and strong impression he made on me when I saw him in Peking several years ago. His memory has always remained in my heart. It seemed to me as if I had seen a Saint Francis de Sales, so unassuming and kind he appeared to me. Surely the Lord has already received him into paradise. Nevertheless I recommended him to the prayers of all my priests and Christians.”

*Msgr. Ciceri CM from Chinkiang:*

“The news of the loss suffered by your Vicariate on account of the death of Rev. Fr. Freinademetz pained me. I regarded him highly since I knew him personally and I esteemed his virtues very much. He was a truly a saint.”

*Fr. Henri Boucher SJ, Rector of the Jesuits in Zikawei:*

“In the person of Rev. Fr. Freinademetz you have lost an outstanding member of your Society, a priest after the heart of God, a truly apostolic man.”

*Fr. Thomas Ceska, Vincentian from Chihli:*

“As for me, the sad news of the passing of your saintly Superior and Provicar Fr. Joseph Freinademetz has filled me with deep sorrow, particularly since the dear deceased was my compatriot and his virtues were known far beyond the boundaries of your Apostolic Vicariate. Your beloved Mission now has an intercessor close to the throne of God.”

*Thomas Tien SVD, the first Chinese Cardinal, who had been a student of St. Joseph Freinademetz recalled how highly Fr. Freinademetz was regarded by his Chinese countrymen: “All Christians considered Freinademetz a living saint. ‘He is like Kungtse’ (Confucius), the Chinese said: ‘in him everything is good, everything is perfect in him, always friendly, unassuming and humble’. He spoke Chinese well. All those who came in contact with him were deeply impressed by him. An old catechist, who hardly saw anything good in the foreign missionaries and on principle always disagreed with the*

others, was of one mind with them in this: 'Fu Shenfu is a saint. He is different from all the others.' In my time as a seminarian in Yenchowfu I often met Fr. Freinademetz. It was our custom that every Sunday after high mass we would go to him in order to speak with him.

In the church he knelt in the sanctuary, visible to us all. To see him pray was an impressive experience. The image of this priest on his knees has been indelibly etched in my memory... He lived only for others and sacrificed himself for others to the last with utter unselfishness and self-forgetfulness. His piety was attractive and unfeigned."

*Bishop Augustinus Henninghaus, his companion for many years:*

"Throughout his many years as a missionary he never received a public recognition; he never received any tribute from the Chinese, no decoration and no status button, honors with which the Chinese government was rather liberal at that time. (...) Fr. Freinademetz who had shown kindness to so many, to whom thousands felt indebted in gratitude and esteem never received any such tribute. (...) This is nothing short of striking to one who knows the circumstances here and lets one conclude how well Fr. Freinademetz knew how, quite unobtrusively, to steer clear of external tributes. He desired no earthly recognition and reward for himself; he did not want to step out of the ranks of the *milites gregarii* (the ordinary soldiers), but only to fulfill his duty with modesty and fidelity."

*Bishop Henninghaus continues:*

"Dangers, sufferings, worries, toil, difficult hours were not lacking in his life. But even then he always remained the same, because his whole being and striving was rooted in God and directed to God alone. In God he found his foothold and his strength, in him the center and goal of his whole interior and exterior life."

*Sources: Henninghaus pp. 637-639, 641; Jakob Reuter, Der selige Josef Freinademetz, Verlag St.Gabriel, Mödling 1975, p. 55.*

*For personal reflection*

Taking into consideration all I have so far read and heard about Joseph Freinademetz, how would I describe him for myself?

Does my knowledge of him challenge me? Does it affect me?

Freinademetz was considered a "living saint", meaning in him, in his manner of living, people were able to glimpse and perceive God's salvation. Can something like that also be perceived in my life?

Do his personality, his commitment, his piety and - last but not least – his dying exercise an influence on me?

Can I adopt something from his life in my own life?