

Witnessing to the Light in the Australia Province: From Everywhere for Everyone

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To begin with, I would like to offer a brief historical background of our congregation. While this may seem unnecessary to us the SVDs and SSsP families, I include it for the benefit of those outside the Arnoldus family. The Society of the Divine Word was founded in 1875, and in 2025, we celebrate the 150th anniversary of our congregation. The theme chosen for this sesqui-centennial anniversary is “*Witnessing to the Light: From Everywhere for Everyone*.” This theme draws upon the content that can be found throughout Scripture, Church documents, the SVD constitutions and publications, and, importantly, in the living witness of our confreres in their diverse ministries.

Although the theme has already inspired numerous reflections across the SVD world, this essay takes a different approach. It aims to explore and clarify the key components of the theme: What does it mean to witness to the Light? From where are we sent? To whom and where are we sent? In doing so, I will focus particularly on our context in SVD Australia.

Witnessing to the Light

Jesus the Light

A passage well known to us as Divine Word Missionaries is the Prologue of the Gospel of John. In the Prologue, a clear distinction is drawn between John the Baptist and the Light. It is evident that John was not the Light but came to bear witness to the Light (Jn 1:6-8). Reflecting on the relation between Jesus and the Church, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* affirms: “The

Church has no other light than Christ's; according to a favorite image of the Church Fathers, the Church is like the moon, all its light reflected from the sun."¹ The Church, therefore, is a sacrament that reflects the Light—Christ Himself—to the world.

The Missionary—A Witness Who Knows the Light

The first part of the theme for the SVD's sesquicentennial anniversary is "*Witnessing to the Light*." Like John the Baptist, we have a distinct and defined role in the mission of Jesus. We are called not only to be signs or sacraments of Christ but, more importantly, to be witnesses—those who have encountered the Light personally, the Light who is Jesus: "I am the Light of the world" (Jn 8:12).

When Jesus called his disciples in the Gospel of Mark, their first and foremost task was to be with him, and only later to be sent out (Mk 3:14). This being with him—being rooted in the Light and in his Word—must come before all else. As the saying goes, "You cannot give what you do not have." How can we truly witness to Christ if we have not entered into a personal relationship with Him? This idea is echoed in the First Letter of John, where the author affirms the authenticity of their apostolic witness: "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched, this we proclaim concerning the Word of God."

The witness of the Apostles was clearly rooted in their personal and physical experience of Jesus. Emphasizing the importance of relationship with Christ, the *Constitutions* of our Society affirm:

It is by listening to the word of God and living it that we become co-workers of the Divine Word. The witness of a truly Christian life on the personal and community level is the first step in the realization of our missionary service. People must be able to recognize that we have experienced in our own lives the kingdom that we proclaim to others.²

¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, https://www.vatican.va/content/catechism/en/part_one/section_two/chapter_three/article_9.html.

² SVD Publications, "The Constitutions of the Society of the Divine Word," <https://svdcu-ria.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Constitutions-SVD.pdf>

Although we may not have the same physical encounter with the historical Jesus—the privilege to touch, see, and hear him as the Apostles did—we are nonetheless graced with the means to encounter Him today. We hear Him in the daily reading of Scripture, touch Him in the Eucharist, and see Him in our brothers and sisters, especially those on the margins of society. Without such a real encounter with Christ, we risk bearing witness not to Him, but to ourselves and our hidden egos. Pope Paul VI, in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, makes this point powerfully: “Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses.”³

In our ministries—whether among the Indigenous peoples of Far North Queensland, Emerald, the Northern Territory, Balgo, or in city parishes—people are not primarily seeking eloquent sermons or impressive programs. They long to encounter priests who radiate the light of Christ. That light must dispel the darkness that surrounds our mission contexts: the darkness of clericalism, racism, gender inequality, and other societal injustices. No matter how stirring our homilies or talks may be, they become mere performances—hypocritical even—if our personal and community lives do not reflect the life and light of Jesus. The 150th anniversary of our congregation offers us a timely opportunity to reflect on the state of our own spiritual lives as confreres of the Australia Province. At the heart of this reflection lie essential questions: Do I truly know Jesus? Have I encountered Him personally? Does my missionary impulse flow from a deep, personal conviction rooted in Christ?

From Everywhere

Interculturality

The second part of the sesquicentennial theme—“*from everywhere*”—speaks directly to the global character of our congregation. As of January 2025, the Society of the Divine Word includes 5,641 members from 76 countries. Within the Australia Province alone, we are about 100 members, including students, representing 26 different nationalities, according to the 2025 Directory. We can rightly say that we are, indeed, *from everywhere*.

This phrase highlights the universal and inclusive nature of our missionary vocation. The call to be witnesses to the Light is not confined to any one race, gender, or group. As priests and brothers, we have come from diverse places with a shared purpose: to bear witness to the Light and, together with

³ Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, Apostolic Exhortation, 1975, https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19751208_evangelii-nuntiandi.html.

the people we serve, to discover the Light that has long been present—sometimes for millennia—within their cultures and communities.⁴ Martin Ueffing summarises this point succinctly when he says we are “...missioned not so much to introduce Christ to ‘others’...as if he were a total stranger, but rather to help the ‘others’ find him already present and active in the heart of all people.”⁵ In the Australia Province, approximately 98 percent of confreres in active ministry are from countries outside Australia. This remarkable diversity greatly enriches both our province and the wider local Church.

As Divine Word Missionaries, we believe that interculturality is part of our very DNA. Whether we serve in Australia, Thailand, Myanmar, or New Zealand, we do not simply work in multicultural settings—where cultures exist side by side without significant interaction. Rather, we live *interculturally*: engaging deeply with one another’s cultures and, above all, with the local culture, entering into genuine relationships and dialogue. Archbishop Paulus Budi Kleden, SVD explains that a true intercultural community is the one in which there is equality between its members and there is not either superiority or inferiority among its members. Furthermore, he says an intercultural community respects the individuality of its members without obliterating in collectivism. Community is encouraged over individualism.⁶ Ad-intra, within our SVD communities here in the province, we need to reassess our community dynamics. Are we fostering genuine equality among confreres, particularly between parish priests and associates? Do we encourage healthy individuality or slide into individualism? And are we allowing collectivism to overshadow authentic community life?

It is also worth noting that being *from everywhere* means we bring with us a multitude of cultural perspectives and traditions. This can be both a gift and a challenge. From my own experience in parish ministry as a missionary from outside Australia, I have encountered challenges such as language or accent barriers, reluctance among some parishioners to accept foreign priests, and at times an unspoken tendency to compare us to our “white” Australian predecessors.

Conversely, there is also the tendency of some expatriate confreres and even migrant parishioners wanting to turn local churches into those which they have known from their countries of origin. There are instances where foreign devotional practices, vestments, and religious articles have been introduced to

⁴ SVD Publications, “Documents of the 19th General Chapter 2024,” 2024, <https://svdcu-ria.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/Faithful-to-the-Word-No6.pdf>

⁵ Lazar T. Stanislaus and Martin Ueffing, ed., *Intercultural Living*, Vol. 1 (New Delhi: ISPCK, 2015), 315.

⁶ Lazar and Ueffing, *Intercultural Living*, 27-30.

areas where these traditions hold little or no importance. While the diverse expressions of music, dance, cuisine, and aesthetics from our various cultures can enrich the Australian Church's spiritual life, we must take care not to displace the authentic religious experience of local parishes. Fr. Antonio Pernia, SVD, former Superior General of the Society of the Divine Word, cautioned against the tendency toward imposition in mission and offered our *Anthropos* tradition—an attitude of respect and openness toward other cultures—as a paradigm for evangelization:

Our Anthropos tradition is really a way of doing mission which considers an appreciation of people's culture as a necessary precondition for genuine evangelization. A way of doing mission whereby the gospel message is not simply parachuted from outside, but enters into dialogue with the culture of the people. And so, a way of doing mission whereby the missionary is ready not just to change people but to be changed himself, or as EN (e.g. no. 15) puts it, a way of evangelizing whereby the evangelizer not only evangelizes but allows himself or herself to be evangelized.⁷

As a Province that takes our mission with the indigenous peoples as a priority, how well do we prepare or train our confreres in the indigenous cultures before they are sent there? And how willing and open are our confreres to learn these cultures and their languages when sent among the people? Also, in the Apostolic Letter, *Maximum Illud*, Pope Benedict XV cautioned against this tendency of wanting to superimpose one's national or cultural interests on local churches. True inculturation is not about advancing the homeland of the missionary, but about bearing witness to the Light in ways that genuinely resonate with—and uplift—the faith life of the local Church.⁸

From Everywhere but Working with Others: Mission as Collaboration

The Akan people of Ghana have a proverb: “When two people carry something, it does not feel as heavy.” This wisdom reminds us that no matter how difficult a task may be, collaboration and shared responsibility make it more manageable. In our Province, the geographical scope of our mission is vast, yet our number of priests remains limited. This reality calls for a deepened sense of co-responsibility with the laity. Their active involvement is not optional—it is essential. As the Council Fathers observed, “Their activity is

⁷ Antonio M. Pernia, “Expectations of the Generalate of the Anthropos Institute,” *Verbum SVD* 45, no. 1 (2004): 34.

⁸ Benedict XV, *Maximum Illud*, Apostolic Letter, 1919, https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xv/en/apost_letters/documents/hf_ben-xv_apl_19191130_maximum-illud.html.

so necessary within the Church communities that without it the apostolate of the pastors is often unable to achieve its full effectiveness.”⁹ Likewise, in his Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis exhorts:

In virtue of their baptism, all the members of the People of God have become missionary disciples (cf. *Mt* 28:19). All the baptized, whatever their position in the Church or their level of instruction in the faith, are agents of evangelization, and it would be insufficient to envisage a plan of evangelization to be carried out by professionals while the rest of the faithful would simply be passive recipients.¹⁰

As a congregation, we are blessed to have Lay Partners—also known in some provinces as “Friends of the SVD.” Who are they?

SVD lay partners/associates are partners in continuing God’s mission with the Society of the Divine Word. By their baptism, they are missionary disciples, by sharing Arnoldus Spirituality and the SVD charism, they become significant members of SVD lay partners. They participate in the missionary activities together with the SVD or independently with the guidance of an SVD spiritual animator in carrying out the charism of the Society.¹¹

More than simply participating in our General Chapters in Rome, Province Chapters, and Assemblies, our Lay Partners also share deeply in the Arnoldus Spirituality that animates our missionary vocation. In our Province, this group has been active in Sydney since 2021, though it is not yet present in other dioceses. This reality invites us, as Missionaries of the Divine Word, to ask ourselves honestly: How actively and meaningfully do we involve these Lay Partners in the SVD mission, especially in Sydney where they are currently established?

Is their presence merely a symbolic gesture—to “tick the box” of collaboration—or are we consciously and intentionally integrating them into our apostolates? In our parishes, how do we perceive our pastoral teams—such as the Parish Pastoral Council, Parish Finance Council, Sacramental Program Team, and the Assistant Principals for Religious Education (APREs) in our schools? Do we see them as genuine collaborators in mission, or merely as

⁹ Paul VI, *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity, 1965, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651118_apostolicam-actuositatem_en.html

¹⁰ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, Apostolic Exhortation, 2013, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html#No_to_spiritual_worldliness.

¹¹ SVD Lay Partners, <https://svdcuria.org/svd-lay-partners-page/>.

advisory bodies meant to endorse the vision and direction set solely by the Parish Priest?

Do we allow these lay collaborators to be “creative disciples”—bringing their gifts, insights, and fresh ideas to the table—or do we operate as if the SVD priest has all the answers? *Lumen Gentium* offers clear guidance on this matter:

Pastors...should recognize and promote the dignity and responsibility of the laity in the Church; they should gladly make use of their prudent advice, confidently entrust them with offices in the service of the Church and leave them freedom and room for action, and even encourage them to undertake works on their own initiative. They should consider attentively and with fatherly affection in Christ the initiatives, requests and desires proposed by the laity and, finally, they should respect and recognize that just freedom which belongs to all in the earthly city.¹²

Together with our Lay Partners and collaborators, we are called from diverse walks of life and cultural backgrounds, but united in a single mission: to be witnesses to the Light.

Collaboration and Dialogue Outside Our Pews

In our quest to bring the light to others in our Australian setting, there is a group of people whom we cannot do without and these are those who are not in our churches. The first to consider in this group are those of other Christian denominations as well as other religions. Emphasising the need for collaboration with other churches, the document *Dialogue and Proclamation* says:

The importance of dialogue for integral development, social justice and human liberation needs to be stressed. Local Churches are called upon, as witnesses to Christ, to commit themselves in this respect in an unselfish and impartial manner. There is need to stand up for human rights, proclaim the demands of justice, and denounce injustice not only when their own members are victimized, but independently of the religious allegiance of the victims. There is need also to join together in trying to solve the great problems facing society and the world, as well as in education for justice and peace.¹³

¹² Vatican Council II, “Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*,” 1964, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vatii_const_1964_1121_lumen-gentium_it.html.

¹³ Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue, “Dialogue and Proclamation,” 1991, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/interelg/documents/rc_pc_interelg_doc_19051991_dialogue-and-proclamatio_en.html

During my time in the Townsville Diocese, North Queensland, I was privileged to work with the Townsville Multicultural Support Group (TMSG), a not-for-profit organization that collaborates with the Australian Government's Humanitarian Programme to help families of migrants and refugees to settle in Australia.¹⁴ It is worth knowing that the majority of the people with whom I worked were either of other Christian denominations or religions. I worked with Muslims, Anglicans, Uniting Church pastors and many others. Together, we were engaged in a "dialogue of action, in which Christians and others collaborate for the integral development and liberation of people."¹⁵ We used to organize walks on every Palm Sunday in which we signed petitions for the rights of migrants and refugees. More and more, Australia is becoming multi-religious with the in-flow of migrants and refugees and this presents an area where, as confreres, we can pay critical attention through dialogue of life, action, theological exchange, and religious experience.¹⁶

The second group to consider is those of no religion. According to the 2021 Australian Census, about 38.9 per cent of Australians said they had no religion.¹⁷ And considering the trajectory from the previous years, the number is more likely to rise exponentially in the near future. It must, however, be clarified that those who have no religion might not necessarily be denying God or be unbelievers; rather they have moved away from organised or institutional religion. Those who subscribe to no religion are with us in the different areas of our ministries here in Australia, be it in the Nursing Homes, mission to seafarers and hospital ministries, among others. We can choose to ignore them since they do not share our belief or we can decide to engage, dialogue, and collaborate with them for the common good—and I believe that the latter is the way to go.

The Church, speaking about the need to collaborate with these, but singling out atheists, declares: "While rejecting atheism, root and branch, the Church sincerely professes that all men, believers and unbelievers alike, ought to work for the rightful betterment of this world in which all alike live; such an ideal cannot be realized, however, apart from sincere and prudent dialogue."¹⁸ Calling for dialogue with those of no religion does not mean that the Church or our

¹⁴ <https://www.tmsg.org.au/about-tmsg/>

¹⁵ Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue, "Dialogue and Proclamation."

¹⁶ Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue, "Dialogue and Proclamation."

¹⁷ Markus Mannheim, "Census 2021 Data Shows Australians Are Less Religious and More Culturally Diverse Than Ever," ABC News, June 23, 2025, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-06-28/census-2021-data-shows-a-changed-australia/101177152>.

¹⁸ Vatican Council II, "Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*," 1965, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html

province has relinquished its duty to proclaim the Good News. Proclamation of the Good News still remains central and summit of the church's mission and for that matter our province's. Dialogue and proclamation are intimately related but not interchangeable. In fact, our authentic dialogue with those of no religion presupposes our desire to proclaim Jesus to the world.¹⁹

For Everyone

In Matthew's gospel, initially, Jesus had limited the disciples' mission to the lost sheep of the house of Israel and had forbidden them from going to the Gentiles or Samaritan territories (Mt 10:5). During his post-resurrection commissioning, Jesus sent them out again but this time, the mandate was to go make disciples of all nations (Mt 28:19). In the Acts of the Apostles, he foretold that the disciples would be his witnesses to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). These passages demonstrate a clear shift from a geographically and ethnically limited mission to one that is expansive and all-inclusive. The mission of Jesus, in which believers now participate, transcends specific territories or groups. The mission is to be witnesses to the Light to all people irrespective of their race, gender, or social status. Pope John Paul II many years ago had highlighted this point by saying, because Jesus died for all and salvation is for all, this salvation must be made available for all.²⁰

St. Arnold Janssen from the beginning was clear in his mind that he wanted to start a missionary congregation that transcended the borders of Germany and Holland. His zeal for an international mission was discouraged even by some church leaders. The then Archbishop of Cologne is believed to have remarked after a meeting with Fr. Janssen, "Fr. Janssen was here today and wants to start a house for missionaries. He wants to convert pagans. Here in Cologne, there are enough pagans."²¹ Therefore, it is reasonable to say that our SVD mission from its onset had been for everyone and beyond borders. As Divine Word Missionaries, we prioritize spreading the Gospel in areas where it hasn't been heard, has been insufficiently heard, or where the local church isn't self-sustaining. Our primary mission is to reach all people.²²

¹⁹ Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue, "Dialogue and Proclamation."

²⁰ John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, Encyclical, 1990, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_07121990_redemptoris-missio.html.

²¹ Society of the Divine Word, "Divine Word Missionaries: The Founding Generation," <https://svdcuria.com/public/histtrad/founders/aj/ajen.htm>.

²² SVD Publications, "The Constitutions of the Society of the Divine Word," 2024, <https://svdcuria.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Constitutions-SVD.pdf>.

In the Australian Province, for example, we focus on Indigenous communities such as Palm Island, Santa Teresa, Alice Springs, Tiwi Islands, and Balgo, as well as Indigenous peoples in New Zealand, Thailand, and Myanmar. We also serve migrants, asylum seekers, refugees, the poor, and the marginalized in our mission areas, alongside faith seekers and people of goodwill from diverse backgrounds, spiritualities, and cultures.²³

Our SVD confrere, Christian Tauchner, highlights a “mission temptation” in his article, “Missio Dei-Challenged by Postmodernity.” This temptation arises when confreres limit their engagement by sticking to their own cultures. For instance, in our Australian context, when a Filipino confrere decides to stick to a Filipino community, a Ghanaian SVD to a Ghanaian community, a Vietnamese to a Vietnamese community, a Keralite to Keralites, an Indonesian to Indonesians, etc., there cannot be genuine dialogue with the local culture or even other cultures.²⁴ Interculturality impels us to transcend these comfort zones to engage with others, fostering true cross-cultural understanding and connection.

Moreover, one can sometimes hear some confreres opposing our taking on city parishes, and I believe this posture needs to be reevaluated. Regarding this point, writing about the European context, Tauchner suggests that “in our postmodern setting, among some European societies there is a growing ignorance of elementary religious knowledge,”²⁵ and this is equally true in Sydney, Melbourne, Bangkok, or Auckland. Today’s city dwellers can be as unevangelized as those who live in rural areas, and a city dweller is not beyond being saved. As a result, since our mission is for everyone, we can just as well be in the city parishes of Brisbane, Melbourne, Sydney, New Zealand, and so on, where people need to hear the Good News again.

Our Australia Province’s mission priority aligns with the Church’s mission priority: it is first and foremost to those who haven’t heard the Gospel yet and to those who have not properly heard it—that is, *missio ad gentes*.²⁶ In addition, Pope John Paul II draws our attention to another group of people, stating, “there is an intermediate situation, particularly in countries with ancient Christian roots, and occasionally in the younger Churches as well, where entire groups of the baptized have lost a living sense of the faith, or even no longer consider themselves members of the Church, and live a life far removed from Christ and his Gospel. In this case what is needed is a ‘new evangelization’ or a ‘re-

²³ SVD Australia Province, “Our Vision and Mission,” <https://www.divineword.com.au/our-vision-and-mission>

²⁴ Christian Tauchner, “Missio Dei: Challenged by Postmodernity,” *Verbum SVD* 65, no. 4 (2024): 357, <https://svdcuria.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/Verbum-SVD-65-4.2024.pdf>.

²⁵ Tauchner, “Missio Dei,” 357.

²⁶ *Redemptoris Missio*, 33.

evangelization.”²⁷ This situation is quite evident in almost all our cities and towns in our Australia Province. Our preference for rural areas and the marginalized is supreme and must remain as such, but nowhere does the Church or our SVD charism forbid us from witnessing to the light in the cities too.

Is our mission here in the Province meant to be solely *ad gentes*, as has been previously discussed? Fr. Pernia, while not denying that our mission is primarily *missio ad gentes*, offers a fresh and expanded interpretation of the term “*gentes*” when he says:

The “*gentes*”, therefore, are no longer only those who are out there, those who are outside. Often the “*gentes*” are also here among us and around us. It may be the family that lives next door, the person I sit beside in the bus, the young man who comes to fix my television, the lady in the market I buy vegetables from. Today, then, we speak no longer just of *missio ad gentes* but also of *missio inter gentes*.²⁸

This perspective is deeply enriching, as it avoids drawing a dichotomy between the recipients of the light we bring. With Fr. Pernia’s expanded understanding of the “*gentes*”, we can also say that every moment and encounter in our daily lives—wherever we meet the other—becomes an opportunity to share the light of Christ.

Conclusion

As we celebrate our congregation’s 150th anniversary, it’s vital to remember that we are witnesses of the Light, not the Light itself. Jesus is the true Light, and as a province, we are both bearers and seekers of this Light, who has always been present in the areas where we serve. We must know Him intimately to bring Him to others. Our mission must be undertaken in a spirit of co-responsibility and synodality, as all baptized individuals are called to let their light shine before others. This collaboration and co-responsibility must as well involve those who do not even share our beliefs and doctrines. As confreres of this province, we need to remind ourselves that is not solely the mission of priests, but of Jesus Himself. Ultimately, I suggest that this light should be brought to all people, not just those in our pews or those who share our cultural backgrounds and so our mission here in the Australia Province must be to the *gentes* but more importantly among the *gentes*.

²⁷ *Redemptoris Missio*, 33.

²⁸ SVD Publications, “A Word From Father General: Cross-Cultural Mission Revisited,” 2010, <https://svdcuria.com/members/infonews/newslet/cur/pdf/201n/an1011en.pdf>.