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A Meditation on the Light to Whom We Witness

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“Witnessing to the Light: From Everywhere for Everyone.” Our first reflection on this week of retreat will be on the Light to Whom we witness. This Light provides the foundation for all we are and do as Divine Word Missionaries. It is a rich, multi-faceted and multi-valent image, and so needs careful and reverent reflection. Because of this our reflection this morning will not be simply a communication of a lot of data or information. It will be a prayerful consideration that will take us deep into the reality of the mission of God in which the church and therefore we SVDs and members of the Arnoldus Family participate—by God’s amazing grace.

The Triune God of light

The Light to which we witness is the Light which is the Triune God.

The “Dark Light” of the Father

This Light is first of all the “dark light”¹ of Holy Mystery, what traditional theology has called the Father. “God is light,” we read in the first letter of John, “and in [God] there is no darkness” (1Jn 1:5), but this divine light is the blinding, “unapproachable” (1Tim 6:16) light of Mystery. As a beautiful, nineteenth century English hymn expresses it:

¹ The inspiration for this phrase is from Elizabeth A. Johnson, the title of Part IV of *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 189.

Great Father of glory, pure Father of light
Thine angels adore thee, all veiling their sight.
All laud we world ruler, O help us to see
'tis only the splendor of light hideth thee.

Immortal, invisible, God only wise
In light inaccessible, hid from our eyes.
Most blessed, most glorious, the ancient of days
Almighty, victorious, thy great name we praise.²

The dark light of Mystery, however, is only unapproachable in that we can never fully see, never fully grasp the divine luminosity, the divine beauty. Bernard of Cluny writes:

Nescio, Nescio
Quae jubilatio
Lux tibi quails

I do not know, I do not know
What jubilation
The kind of light that belongs to you.³

John of the Cross writes lyrically of setting for in the “dark night” in search of God, with no light to guide him except the light “in which my heart was burning.”

That light guided me
More surely than the noonday sun
To the place where he was waiting for me.⁴

The paradox of Mystery is that while God is totally beyond our grasp, God is also nearer to us—in St. Augustine’s words—than we are to ourselves.⁵ Rudolf Otto famously speaks of this paradox as the *Mysterium tremendum et fascinans*. While on the other hand God’s light is too bright, “simultaneously, with the experience of the Holy as beyond and too much, is another sense of fascination, allurements, and seduction, a *being pulled into something very good*

² Walter Chalmers Smith, “Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise,” <https://www.hymnal.net/en/hymn/h/14>, stanzas 4 and 5.

³ Bernard of Cluny, *De Contemptu Mundi*, Liber I, line 271, <https://www.thelatinlibrary.com/bernardcluny1.html>.

⁴ St. John of the Cross, “The Dark Night of the Soul,” <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/157984/the-dark-night-of-the-soul>.

⁵ Augustine, *Confessions*, 3, 6.

and inviting and wonderful.”⁶ Human beings are like moths drawn to a bright light or a flame, but rather than being incinerated by the light’s heat, we are transformed by it into God’s very life, participants in God’s very nature (2Pet 1:4) of light and warmth, graciousness and love. God’s brilliant Light then shines through us into all the world, to and among all peoples, and embraces all of creation. We read in the first letter of Peter: “You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1Pet 2:9).

The Brilliant Light of the Incarnate Word

We know this and witness to this because of the incarnation of the second person of the Trinity, the Son, the Divine Word, Jesus of Nazareth. We profess in the Nicene Creed that he is “God from God, Light from Light, . . . one in being [consubstantial] with the Father.” He is, as we read in the gospel of John, “the light of the world,” and whoever follows him “will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (Jn 8:12, see Jn 9:5).

There is an amazing, close connection between the images of Word, Light, and Life to describe the incarnate Son. We see this connection clearly in the Prologue of John’s gospel—so beloved of Arnold Janssen and members of the Arnoldus Family:

In the beginning was the Word,
And the Word was with God,
And the Word was God.
All things came into being through him,
And without him not one thing came into being.
What came into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.
The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it (Jn 1:1-6)
There was a man sent from God,
Whose name was John.
He came as a witness to testify to the Light,
So that all might believe through him.
He himself was not the Light.
The true Light, which enlightens everyone,
Was coming into the world (Jn 1:6-9).
And the Word became flesh and lived among us,
And we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son

⁶ Richard Rohr, “Great Mystery and Great Intimacy,” Daily Meditation, December 13, 2024, <https://mail.google.com/mail/u/0/#inbox/WhctKLbNGSdXXJPjKCTKCPCsnvrDhgvSHbPDcTIVTbRTGJTXXggJTLWkrLTlHHZkdNQhIVtzG>.

Full of grace and truth (Jn 1:14).
No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son,
Who is close to the Father's heart,
Who has made him known (Jn 1:18).

We see this same connection among Word, Life, and Light in the First Letter of John as well. The Light of the Word allows us to see, and what we see is Life. "what we have looked upon and touched with our hands concerns the Word of life. . . . We have seen it and testified to it and proclaim to you the eternal life that was with the Father and made visible to see. . ." (1 Jn 1:2-3).

Jesus of Nazareth, crucified and raised from the dead, is, in Vatican II's words, the Christ, "the light of nations." As Vatican II continues, the bishops assembled there desired "to bring all humanity that light of Christ, which is resplendent on the face of the church, by proclaiming his Gospel to every creature."⁷

We SVDs and Holy Spirit Sisters, members of the Arnoldus Family, witness to this light, who is "the way, the truth, and the life" (Jn 14:6). We witness to the gospel *about* Jesus and *of* Jesus. We tell the story of this amazing man whose life, ministry, death, and resurrection allow us to see into the deepest Mystery of the Light that is God. And we witness to and proclaim his message of the Reign of God, a reign of "revolutionary intimacy"⁸ between God and humanity, human beings among themselves, and human beings with all of God's creation. The beautiful Preface for the feast of Christ the King speaks of this reign as one that is eternal and universal, a reign of truth and life, of holiness and grace, of justice, love, and peace.

In a stunning passage in his *New Seeds of Contemplation*, the great spiritual writer Thomas Merton describes the light that is Christ in a powerful and beautiful way:

[God's] truth and [God's] love pervade all things as the light and heat of the sun pervade our atmosphere . . . As a magnifying glass concentrates the rays of the sun into a little burning knot of heat that can set fire to a dry leaf or a piece of paper, so the mystery of Christ in the Gospel concentrates the rays of God's light and fire to a point that sets fire to the human spirit.⁹

The church's witness to the Light that is Christ, and our witness as SVDs and members of the Arnoldus Family is one that is confident that "the light of

⁷ Vatican Council II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium* (LG), 1.

⁸ Willie James Jennings, *Acts* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2017), 29.

⁹ Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 2007), 150-

the Word and the Spirit of grace,” can make vanish the darkness of sin and the night of unbelief,” can bring true joy, healing, and meaning to struggling men and women and God’s exquisite yet wounded creation. We pray that the burning heart of Jesus will live in the hearts of all peoples—the flame of that heart is indeed a “light of revelation to the Gentiles” (Lk 2:32).

The Wild and Gentle Light of the Holy Spirit

We witness to that “Spirit of grace” as the Light that can guide our mission and lead women and men to salvation and wholeness. God’s Spirit is the gentle light and enlightenment of Wisdom or the wildness of a flaming fire, stirring women and men to faith and transformation, calling them to give themselves in the work of justice.

US theologian Elizabeth Johnson connects the Spirit to Wisdom, *Sophia*, and while she admits that in the Old Testament “there is no one-on-one correspondence between Wisdom and the Creator Spirit . . . , the similarities of function and relation to divine being are so profound as to allow theology, in the past as now, to adapt wisdom categories for interpretations of the Spirit.”¹⁰ Wisdom is God’s very light:

For she is the breath of the power of God;
a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty . . . ;
For she is a reflection of eternal light;
a flawless mirror of the working of God;
and an image of his goodness (Wisdom 7:25-26)

In the New Testament, the Spirit is imaged as the light and power of fire. John the Baptist proclaims that the one coming after him will baptize “with the Holy Spirit and fire” (Matt 3:11). Burning with the Spirit that always guided him in his mission, Jesus exclaims that “I have come to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled” (Lk 12:49). That fire arrives at Pentecost, when the Spirit comes as a mighty, rushing wind, and settles as tongues of fire upon the surprised disciples (Acts 2:3-4).

Elizabeth Johnson quotes a “poetic oracle” of Hildegard of Bingen, who writes of this same fiery, powerful presence of the Spirit:

I, the highest and fiery power, have kindled every living spark and have beathed out nothing that can die . . . I flame above the beauty of the fields; I shine in the waters; in the sun, the moon and the stars, I burn. And by means

¹⁰ Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 143.

of the airy wind, I stir everything into quickness with a certain invisible life which sustains all . . . I, the fiery power, lie hidden in these things and they blaze from me.¹¹

Church tradition, as well as our own SVD tradition, speaks of the Spirit as light, perhaps much more in the Wisdom tradition of enlightenment and guidance. In the Sequence for the feast of Pentecost we pray:

Veni, Sancte Spiritus,
et emitte caelitus
lucis tuae radium

Holy Spirit come and shine,
On our souls with beams divine,
Issuing from your radiance bright.¹²

The 2009 edition of our SVD *Vademecum* includes a poem-prayer composed by Arnold Janssen, which includes the lines:

L: With your grace,
A: Enlighten us.
.....
L: By your light
A: Direct us.¹³

It also includes two lines in the first of two litanies of the Holy Spirit:

Holy Spirit, Ray of heavenly light,
.....
Holy Spirit, you enlighten and strengthen us,¹⁴

Constitution 105 notes that the Holy Spirit's "light enables us to understand the gospel, to interpret the signs of the times, and thus discern the will of God."¹⁵ Our XIX General Chapter quotes a saying of Arnold Janssen that speaks of the Holy Spirit as light: "Just as sunlight when it shines through falling rain is refracted in the seven beautiful colors of the rainbow, so shines

¹¹ Johnson, *Ask the Beasts*, 138, quoting Hildegard of Bingen, in *Hildegard of Bingen: Mystical Writings*, Fiona Bowie and Oliver Davies (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 91-93.

¹² "Hymn to the Holy Spirit," *Vademecum SVD* (Steyl, Holland: Steyl Press, 1962), 58.

¹³ "St. Arnold's Poem Prayer to the Holy Spirit," *Vademecum SVD* (Rome: SVD Generalate Publications, 2009), 55.

¹⁴ "Litany of the Holy Spirit – I," *Vademecum SVD*, 129.

¹⁵ *The Constitutions of the Society of the Divine Word*, (Rome: SVD Publications, 1983, 2009), 105 (p. 14).

the love of the Holy Spirit in a seven-fold way in the hearts of the saints and gives that special beauty which delights the eyes of a person.”¹⁶

We SVDs and members of the Arnoldus Family witness to the light of the Holy Spirit when we engage in the practice of Prophetic Dialogue—paying attention to our context, gathering in prayerful discernment, listening to one another as we discover the Spirit’s guidance for our mission. Our witness to the Spirit’s light leads us to discover together the best ways that we can be prophetic in our particular cultural, political, and historical contexts. Our witness is never one that is ready made or “one size fits all.” It is rather fresh—deeply faithful to our Christian tradition, deeply faithful to one another, and therefore always creative and innovative.¹⁷ Our witness to the Spirit’s light leads us to proclaim the gospel faithfully and creatively, recognizing how the incarnate Word “plays in ten thousand places, lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his,”¹⁸ and leads us deeper into the Holy Mystery that is the Father.

Seeing the World by the Trinity’s Light

When we see the Light that is our Triune God, Holy Mystery, Incarnate Word, Holy Spirit, we see the Light by which we see light itself, and so see the Light by which we can see the world. As Richard Rohr writes, “Light is not really *what* you see; it is *that by which you see everything else*. . . . like light, you do not see God; but God allows you to see everything else through really good eyes.”¹⁹

When we see the the Light that is God, therefore, we see the world, as it were, through God’s eyes. Jesus, the Light of the world, “has given us an illuminating lens by which to see and measure all things.”²⁰ In his classic book of prayers, Michel Quoist writes that, when we see the world through God’s eyes, we see

¹⁶ *Statement of the 19th General Chapter*, in *Documents of the 19th Chapter SVD 2024* (Rome: SVD Publications, 2024), 21 (p. 21), quoting Arnold Janssen, *Precious is the Life Given for Mission* (2010), 35.

¹⁷ See Stephen Bevans, “‘Your Light Must Shine Before Others’ (Matt 5:16): Faithful and Creative Discipleship in a Wounded World: A Reflection on the 2024 SVD General Chapter Theme,” *Verbum SVD* 64, 2 (2023): 159-76.

¹⁸ Gerard Manley Hopkins, “‘As Kingfishers Catch Fire,’” in *Gerard Maley Hopkins: The Major Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 129.

¹⁹ Richard Rohr, with Mike Morrell, *The Divine Dance: The Trinity and Your Transformation* (New Kensington, PA: Whittaker House, 2016), 96-97.

²⁰ Richard Rohr, “A Free Gospel and Free People,” Richard Rohr’s Daily Meditations, January 1, 2025.

That everything is linked together,
That all is but a single movement of the whole of humanity and
Of the whole universe toward the Trinity . . .
[We] would understand that nothing is secular, neither things nor
People, nor events,
But that, on the contrary, everything has been made sacred in its origin by God.²¹

Or, as the British poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning beautifully expressed it:

Earth's crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God;
But only he who sees takes off his shoes,
The rest sit around it and pluck blackberries.²²

We witness to the Light so that people can see the real world! And when people see the real world, they are experiencing the wholeness that we call salvation. And once they experience that wholeness, they can themselves enter into God's mission of spreading light. As US churchman and spiritual writer, Brian McLaren expresses it beautifully, when people really begin *seeing* the world, they are led "to an active way of being in the world," being themselves salt and light for the world.²³ As Richard Rohr comments, taking an insight from Alcoholics Anonymous, "it's not moving forward by self-promotion, but by attraction. Just set the light on the lampstand and if it's good, and if it's real, and if it's beautiful, people will come."²⁴ Witnessing to the Light is mission, and leads to mission for those whom we help to see the Light!

God's Light among All Peoples

The Light that is our Triune God is present and active among all peoples, and in every particle of creation. As members of the Arnoldus Family we bear witness to this Light, wherever it may be found. This missionary task is expressed clearly and eloquently in our SVD Constitutions 114. Here we read that

²¹ Michel Quoist, *Prayers* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963), 14-15.

²² Elizabeth Barrett Browning, "Aurora Leigh," in D. H. S. Nicholson and A. H. E. Lee, ed. *The Oxford Book of English Mystical Verse* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1917).

²³ Brian McLaren, "What Does It Mean To Be Salt and Light?" Richard Rohr's Daily Meditations, January 1, 2025, <https://cac.org/daily-meditations/2025-daily-meditations-theme-being-salt-and-light/#h-what-does-it-mean-to-be-salt-and-light>.

²⁴ Richard Rohr, Richard Rohr's Daily Meditations, January 4, 2025, <https://cac.org/daily-meditations/a-resistance-position/>.

In God's providential plan all nations are called to salvation. His Word is the light of the world that enlightens everyone (see Jn 1:9). As missionaries of the Divine Word, we must be ready to recognize the rays of this light in the religious traditions and convictions of peoples. In sincere dialogue we bear witness to the fact that the true light has become [flesh] and has come into the world in Jesus of Nazareth. At the same time we will be enriched by other people's religious experience and search for truth.²⁵

This Constitution calls to mind the groundbreaking words of Vatican II's Declaration on Non-Christian Religions, *Nostra Aetate*, that the doctrines of other world religions "often reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all men and women."²⁶ It also calls to mind the beautiful words of Anglican missiologist Max Warren that "our first task in approaching another people, another culture, another religion, is to take off our shoes, for the place we are approaching is holy. Else we may find ourselves treading on men's dreams. More serious still, we may forget that God was here before our arrival."²⁷

But the dialogue that Constitution 114 calls us to as we witness to God's Light outside the boundaries of our church is not limited to dialogue with people of other religions. Constitution 114.1 calls us to witness to the Light in other Christian ecclesial communities and churches. Constitution 114.2 calls us to witness to the Light "found in the expressions of popular religion both in and outside of Christianity." Constitution 114.3 calls us to dialogue "with the advocates of purely humanist or atheist convictions" (the text actually uses the unfelicitous phrase "serious debate"). Finally, Constitution 114.4 calls us to witness to the Light by cooperation "with those of other religions and convictions in facing contemporary problems."²⁸

Conclusion: *Missio Lucis*

The Final Document of the SVD 2024 General Chapter calls us to witness to the gospel as a *Missio Lucis*. Such participation in the mission of the God of Light "embodies openness to and doing the will of God—honesty, compassion, reconciliation, and the pursuit of justice and peace wherever we live and

²⁵ *The Constitutions*, 114 (p. 18). See the *Statement of the 19th General Chapter*, 32 (p. 24), where Constitution 114 is quoted.

²⁶ Vatican Council II, Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, " *Nostra Aetate* (NA), 2.

²⁷ Max Warren, Preface to John V. Taylor, *The Primal Vision* (London: SCM Press, 1963), 10. See the extended footnote on this famous passage in Stephen Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, Revised and Expanded Edition (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 160, note 7.

²⁸ These Constitutions are found in *The Constitutions*, p. 19.

work.”²⁹ The “light of the Word” throws bright light on the “darkness of sin” and the shadow world of injustice, thus revealing the cause of so many of the wounds of our world. That same light throws bright light as well on our own sinfulness and woundedness. And so we are called to witness to that light, but always as wounded healers, and always with mercy and compassion. “Ignited by the light of Christ [we could say here the light of the Triune God] we are prepared to encounter the darkness and not to run away from it.”³⁰

We are warmed, guided, and challenged by the light of the Triune God as we participate in God’s mission of light. We are warmed and nourished by the sacraments of the church, especially the Eucharist, and the challenge of the dismissal to go forth to proclaim the gospel. We are warmed, guided, and challenged by the written Word of God, which is always a lamp to our feet, a light to our path (Ps 119:105). We are warmed, guided, and challenged by our intercultural life together in community, and by the women and men among whom we minister. Last but certainly not least, we are warmed, guided, and challenged by the beauty of the creation and the seemingly endless variety of creatures, all of whom are reflections of the light of our Triune God.

How privileged, how blessed are we to witness to God’s light that we find all around us—from everywhere for everyone!

²⁹ *Statement of the 19th General Chapter*, 23 (p. 22).

³⁰ *Statement of the 19th General Chapter*, 24 (p. 22).