

In memoriam

Father Arnold Heinrich Sprenger, SVD (1929–2015)

Jac Kuepers, SVD

Father Arnold Sprenger was born as the youngest of nine brothers and sisters on December 12, 1929 in Willebadessen in the state of North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany. The family was a deeply Christian family. He grew up on the family farm where he became accustomed to hard work. But he was also an ardent soccer player on the village soccer team and enjoyed contact with his teammates for the rest of his life.



Father Sprenger at a reception in Beijing in 2009.
Photo: Andreas Wistoff.

In 1952, after high school studies, he joined the Divine Word Missionaries (SVD), an international Catholic religious order dedicated to mission work. In the novitiate, when for the first time he read the Gospel of John, he was so impressed that during his whole life this Gospel became the source of his faith. His was a deep childlike faith, which was the foundation of a lifelong dedication to work for Church and society.

Arnold Sprenger pronounced perpetual vows as a member of the Society of the Divine Word, and was ordained a priest in 1958.

He had applied to become a bush missionary in Indonesia, but the Society of the Divine Word had just re-established Fu Jen Catholic University in Taiwan, and he was instead asked to go for further studies in preparation for university ministry in Taiwan. From 1960–1964 he studied in Washington, acquiring an

M.A. Degree in German Literature at Catholic University of America and a Ph.D. Degree in Linguistics at Georgetown University.

After completing his studies, he came to Taiwan and after one year of Chinese he began to teach German language and literature, English language, and later also linguistics at Fu Jen University. He developed his own very successful method of teaching language

through teacher-student class activities that particularly emphasized lively interaction instead of rote learning. As a result, quite extraordinary at the time in Taiwan, first year students could already speak simple, but fluent German.

Father Sprenger was very concerned about the educational system in Taiwan, which was geared toward passing the common entrance examination for the universities through rote learning, instead of helping the students to think and understand. He had written many articles on this subject. Soon he was requested by the Ministry of Education to introduce his method to high school teachers. He was also asked to become a member of the committee for the renewal of English teaching in Taiwan. This involved the preparation of teaching materials for high school students of English.

In the years that followed, besides publishing extensively on language teaching and value education, Father Sprenger addressed many articles on issues of Chinese and Western culture, on mission and religion. He edited Chinese translations of a series of 14 books published by Herder in Germany containing articles and books by well-known German thinkers on present day cultural issues (Sun Zhiwen 孫志文 [ed.], *Dangdai Deguo sichao yicong* 當代德國思潮譯叢, Taipei: Lian Jing Publications 1982).

From 1967 to 1980 he was head of the Graduate Institute of German and Chair of the German Department. In 1980 the Ministry of Education approved Fu Jen's application to officially establish the College of Foreign Languages. Father Sprenger was Dean of the College until 1984.

In 1987, when China was just opening up but still very much off limits for missionaries, Father Sprenger pioneered as one of the first Western missionaries to go to Mainland China. He felt that he had completed his mission in Taiwan: he had introduced his method of teaching, he had set up a College of Foreign Languages, he had shared his ideas about value education, religion and about East-West cultural exchange with people in Taiwan. Now his missionary heart pushed him to go further, to extend his mission to China, which was the first love of the Society of the Divine Word.

The idea was to set up a branch office for Monumenta Serica Institute, of which Father Sprenger had become a member in that year. This branch office would be established at the former Fu Jen University building as a place to contact Chinese scholars who could contribute to Monumenta Serica and for exchanges with Western scholars. This could not be realized. However, he stayed on and had a chance to teach English and Western Civilization at Beijing Normal University and at the Fu Jen Evening School in Beijing till 1991. Several times he was invited to give language workshops for middle school teachers in Beijing. Later he was visiting scholar at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. Before 1989 an important way of meeting intellectuals and publishers was to attend the "salon" meetings that were regularly held in Beijing. Soon Father Sprenger was invited to a salon and could contact people interested in Western culture and philosophy. In this way he fostered good relations with many Chinese scholars and students. One of them was Liu Xiaofeng, the famous scholar of Christian thought, who wrote penetrating studies about Christianity and Chinese culture and translated many Western classical books. Father Sprenger wrote an article on one of his most important works, *Zhengjiu yu xiaoyao* 拯救與逍遙 (*Delivering and Dallying*) and so made him known in the West. In Beijing,

too, he could again publish a series of books by German authors on present day cultural issues (San Lian Publishing House 1991).

Later he was professor of German Language and Western Culture for 10 years at the Beijing Second Foreign Language Institute until his retirement in 2000. From 2000–2003 he was visiting scholar at the Institute of World Religions of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and had a chance to discuss religious topics with scholars of religion.

Besides teaching language, from the beginning Father Sprenger did pastoral work as a priest for foreign communities in Beijing, and every week-end he spent much time at different embassies celebrating the Eucharist for different language groups. In his later period he could officially establish a German Catholic parish at the German Embassy, namely the St. Joseph Freinademetz Parish, which still continues to flourish.

He was also very concerned about Chinese Catholics, especially about members of his own Society from before the revolution. He helped them to reestablish their communities and supported the formation of local vocations. Right after his arrival in Beijing in summer 1987, he came in contact with some elderly sisters, also helping them in the different problems which they faced in the process of rebuilding their communities.

One of his important contributions was that he selected some candidates for theological studies and prepared them to go abroad for studies, esp. in the USA and Germany. Some of these young men have already come back and now serve the Church in China.

In 2005 he received an honorary doctorate of Literature at Fu Jen Catholic University. In December 2008 he celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of his priestly ordination.

In 2009, due to his health failing, Father Sprenger returned to Taiwan. He had worked for 23 years as a pioneer of language teaching in Taiwan, as well as for 23 years in Mainland China as a professor and specialist in cultural exchange.

Father Sprenger spent his last years in the Fu Jen Catholic University SVD community. His health had deteriorated and he could no longer work, but during this time he was nevertheless very much a part of the SVD community. Many alumni, in particular those from his early years at Fu Jen, continued to show gratitude for all he had taught and given them, not only in academics, but in life. The force of his personality and quality of his dedication remained strong until the end. Visitors and old friends gravitated toward him.

Father Arnold Sprenger died on January 2, 2015 at 5 o'clock a.m. in the palliative care unit of Cardinal Tien Hospital in New Taipei City, Xindian District.

Father Sprenger's articles were collected, translated into Chinese and published by Zbigniew Wesolowski 魏思齊 (ed.), *Sun Zhiwen jiaoshou zhuzuo jingxuan ji gan'en zhuanji* 孫志文教授著作精選暨感恩專輯 [Prof. Dr. Arnold Sprenger, SVD: Work Collection and Festschrift]. Tianzhujiao Furen daxue Waiyu xueyuan xueshu shiming congshu xilie 1 天主教輔仁大學外語學院學術使命叢書系列之一. Xinbei shi: Furen daxue chubanshe 2011. 2 Vols. ISBN 978-986-6221-22-4