

VOCATIONS IN THE LIFE OF A HAPPY FOOL

“The Lord orders peace to you: he did all your works” Is 26:12.

Interaction characterizes all life and existence. In human life, interaction is preceded by “being acted upon”. *Acti agimus*: we act after we have been acted upon and primarily that is: being put into existence by the act of procreation. For the believer, at the heart of the event of procreation is the divine act of creation. This creation is the permanent source of all subsequent manifestations of creativity as expressed and lived in various forms of interaction. Hence I am convinced that my origin and life are signed by a divine character by the mere fact that I am born from my parents. The **vocation** to the faith in Jesus Christ gradually has manifested to me that the divine character of my life, in Him, is becoming a true participation in the fullness of divine life.

- (1) The first vocation to interaction I remember is that with the Lord.
- (2) Then I remember numerous instances of interaction with parents, brothers and friends, and the various people who rendered service in our daily existence. My life is characterized by many strong and often growing and deepening **friendships**.
- (3) There follow then the many experiences of interaction and vocation in the context of cultures and religions, of peoples and languages I gradually became acquainted with. I invented the term “inculturation” for these processes. Now I would rather speak of “cultural interaction”.
- (4) Finally, one could also mention the interaction with oneself and one’s memories, in that never concluded attempt to better understand one’s own identity. The following pages could be seen as a part of this search. They have been composed at the request of several persons, who asked to know me better.

One particular form of interaction should still be considered more closely: the interaction provoked by **violence**. I have known this when the German armies entered our officially neutral country, and bombarded also the town I lived in. From age six to eleven I have lived with my fellow countrymen

the often cruel occupation. Several members of the family and friends disappeared in the concentration camps. There were also people we children were forbidden to talk with. I had great fear of the Germans, also because they never talked normally, but could only shout. The liberation by the Allied armies brought great joy. Violence and the liberation from it has been a rhythm I grew accustomed to, also later during the "événements" in Lebanon (1958), and what I could see in Bangladesh (1971) and Ivory Coast (2009).

INTERACTION WITH THE LORD

The first clear memory I have of my younger years, when I was about 3 years old, is being moved to tears whenever I was reminded of the passion of Jesus. That could happen when seeing a crucifix in our house. When at school, we had to go to a monthly Way of the Cross, which I did not like at all, since the boys were making fun of my weeping.

As a little boy I found a way of playing in building, "hermitages" in the garden. (The Dutch word for solitude is "*eenzaamheid*" which comes close to "onesomeness".) Later I used to spend some weeks of the holidays with Trappists, Carthusians or Camaldolese monks. This onesomeness with the Lord, notwithstanding moments of sometimes acute inattention and ambiguity, has remained the fundamental call and mission of my life.

It were mainly two priests, a Carthusian in Pisa, and the priest who for some years was my spiritual guide at the gymnasium, who helped me to discover that I was rather made for an outgoing and communicative style of life. As a matter of fact, I became one of the most popular boys at the gymnasium, yet known also for my piety.

PRIESTHOOD

Several vacations were spent at the parish of "oncle Arthur," son of neighbours in my birthplace, Tilburg. Five parishes in the diocese of Soissons, France, were entrusted to his care. The time spent there made Arij aware of the need for priests in Northern France. He was also impressed by the poverty in which the priests he met there were living. He desired to become one of them.

In the last class at the Gymnasium, the teacher of religion asked what the boys wanted to become, and the answer from Arij was: "Priest in France". The teacher, a young priest, said that one should just desire to become a priest, and leave the rest to God.

BEGINNINGS OF CULTURAL INTERACTION

China During the time at the Gymnasium, journeys with groups of Chinese boys and girls studying in Holland, and talks with a priest of the SAM (Msgr. Lebbe's Society) attracted him to China. Arij read everything he could find in libraries on that great country, much of Confucius, and was impressed by the Tao Te Ch'ing. For some time, he felt also drawn toward friendship with a Chinese girl.

India While sitting in a waiting room of a convent in Tilburg, he saw a missionary periodical (maybe it was of the Mill Hill fathers) with a drawing of an Indian boy on the cover. He simply liked the looks of that boy. From that time on he has had a strong predilection for all that is Indian. During a ski holiday in Switzerland he met a frail Indian Dominican priest, and served daily his Mass. Back in Holland, he even tried to get some information about the Dominicans.

THE SOCIETY OF JESUS

After secondary school, not knowing how and where to become a priest, he began studying philosophy at the University in Nijmegen. There he came across a book by a Dutch Jesuit, Marcel Smits van Waesberghe, titled "The Spirit of Saint Ignatius in his Order," and he was soon clear about it that this was his way. – Till then he had met only two Jesuits, but neither of them greatly attracted him to Jesuit life. It was rather a fellow student at the university, who had just left the Society of Jesus, who showed the Jesuit vocation as attractive. Arij joined the Society of Jesus in 1952.

Russia

During the first year of novitiate, Fr. van Gestel, the then Assistant of Fr. General for the German Assistancy, gave a talk and spoke about the most difficult tasks in the Society. The first was Rome (“you can lose your faith in Rome”). The second was Russia (“you may never get there”). The third was China (“you may never get out of it, and the language is very difficult”). Arij wrote a letter to Fr. General, asking to be sent to Russia (thus becoming one of the *russipeti*), and he wrote again after the first year of philosophy. The answer was always the same: “*praematura esset decisio iam nunc facienda*”. He studied the Russian language, got familiarized with the Byzantine Liturgy, and learned about Russia.

INTERACTION WITH JESUIT COMPANIONS

The years of studying philosophy as a young Jesuit were memorable in several ways. The first was the close contact with some excellent philosophers among our teachers. Then also strong friendships could flourish, which had not been encouraged during the foregoing years of novitiate. And especially the deep change that took place when a group of confreres conceived the plan to bring Arij to a conversion. They used the means of prayer, fasting and telling Arij in clear words that had to change. They convinced me that I was leading a self-sufficient and self-centered life, masked by respectful conformism to the power structures in the Society of Jesus. This conversion has been one of the major changes in his life. He even played a leading role in this *movement*, at the cost also of undergoing a rejection from the part of some of his so much admired professors.

CULTURAL INTERACTION

- Lebanon** After a year of regency at the boarding school “Saint Canisius,” in Holland, he was sent to the **Near East Province**. (There was some problem with the Dutch Provincial, who did not think that, after all, Arij had a “missionary vocation.” But he was sent nevertheless, and this misunderstanding gradually disappeared.) In Lebanon, he loved the people, was loved by them, learned Arabic rather well, and was sent to Egypt after three years.
- Egypt** It was a “wild” time. So many tasks at once: teaching at the **Coptic Seminary**, studying at the State University, where he obtained an M.A. in Social Philosophy, living in a shifting community (four of the six companions left the Society), beginning a **Centre for Social Research** etc. He was much in the South (Garagos), and he travelled up and down the country. He also began to learn more about Islam.
- Rome** In 1961, Fr. Snoeck came to Egypt as a Visitor from Fr. General. He transmitted the call to Rome, for Theology, but also to meet Fr. General Janssens, to find a way to Russia. (In the mean time he had begun the study of Turkish, in order to be ready to go to **Soviet Central Asia**.) When Arij got to Rome, Fr. Janssens had died, and he began the study of theology in an international group, where Intercultural Interaction was simply a means of survival.
- Vietnam** Among his fellow students, strong bonds of friendship with Vietnamese confrères developed. He thought their country would be his future. One of his companions said: “You are an Asian in a Dutch skin.”

Japan Before the 31st General Congregation he met Fr. Pedro Arrupe, then Provincial of Japan. Fr. Arrupe told him that Islamic studies were not a first priority, and that he should **rather study Zen**. He began practicing with the help of a father of the Japanese Province at the Biblicum.

India During the second year of theological studies, he began to experience relations of strong friendship with some Indian companions. He started learning Hindi and Sanskrit, and felt that in that great country would be his future work. The exposure to the vast variety of India and its people had a profound impact on his heart and mind. Moreover, Arij made his **tertianship in India**. This period made him enter into a new orbit. In the Spiritual Exercises (under the direction of Fr. Antony de Mello), there was a true **rebirth**. He learned knowing Jesus in a new way, as **God's Happy Fool**.

During that retreat, and very often after it, he sang the following song:

*You came to gather people in crowds,
But on the cross, you hung alone,
Oh, Happy Fool.*

*I sing your song
and dance your dance,
Oh, Happy Fool.*

*You healed the sick,
and called forth the dead,
but died in darkness
a cruel death,
Oh, Happy Fool.*

*I sing your song . . .
(and this can go on quite some time.)*

I had spent several nights in prayer,
and asked Tony to go on with that,
since I felt there was too much of self in that prayer.
He answered by a little note:

*The Lord is guiding his Happy Fool
so sweetly and gently.*

*If the Lord makes him sleepy, let him sleep.
Otherwise let him offer his person,
that the Lord may make His prayer tonight.*

Gradually I understood that this “**Happy Fool spirituality**” springs from the meeting of deep, inner peace and serenity, joy and even some playfulness, with a strong awareness of the hardships and challenges in own life and that of others. It is the expression of that trustful surrender in a joy “that no one will take away” (Jn 16,22).

JESUIT CURIA (1970 – 2002)

Vatican Once at the Curia, working contacts developed with various dicasteries of the Vatican. After coming to the Gregorian, these contacts have multiplied, in doing various jobs and also in spiritual direction, especially at the **Pontificia Accademia Ecclesiastica**. He has also served as **Consultor for various Vatican commissions and secretariats**, such as those for the non-Christian religions, Ecumenism, Judaism. He was received in audiences by four popes, especially rather frequently by John Paul II.

Zen When he had accepted to go the way indicated by Father Arrupe, there followed several visits to Japan, always with a period of intense **practice in a Zen Monastery**. Without searching it, he every now and then came in contact with persons he could for some time accompany on the way of Zen.

Ecumenism Arij had to organize Congresses for Jesuit Ecumenists in various parts of the world. He was also appointed at the place of Fr. Boyer as President of the **International Ecumenical Movement “Unitas.”**

Gregorian University After four years at the Jesuit Curia, the mission came for the Gregorian University, Faculty of Missiology, where he was already teaching as an invited professor. Main fields of research and teaching were: Islam, Inculturation and Apostolic Spirituality. He founded and became the first director of the “**Centre for Religions and Cultures**”, which was to coordinate his various activities and should somehow amalgamate with the **Faculty of Missiology**, of which he was also the **Dean** for several terms.

Islam Already at the SJ Curia, and also during the first years at the Gregorian, there was the task of being **Fr. General’s Consultant for Islam**. Moreover, at the Gregorian, institutional academic contacts with Islamic universities and scholars around the world were established.

Judaism During his brief spell as Rector of the Gregorian, Fr. C.M.Martini (later Cardinal) formulated an additional task, that of starting a programme of **Judaic Studies**. This led to contacts in Israel, especially in Jerusalem, and also with Jewish institutions and persons in quite a number of countries. The **Programme, named after Cardinal Bea**, became very central in inventing and developing ways to give a central place to these studies at the Gregorian University.

Mediterranean It was also during the rectorship of Fr. Martini that the request came and was strongly favored by the Rector, to collaborate in the **International Jacques Maritain Institute** especially for the **Mediterranean area**. This opened wide new spaces for international academic collaboration and contacts.

The International Federation of Catholic Universities

During several years he was the elected Secretary General of the **International Federation of Catholic Universities (IFFC/FIUC)**. His studies of religions and cultures served well in this task and became enriched in width and depth.

In collaborating in the framework of these various organizations he was involved in organizing and mostly also presiding at quite a number of international assemblies and other meetings around the globe, in places such as: Beirut, Jakarta, Tokyo, Munich, Boston, Delhi, Toronto, Yaoundé, Buenos Aires, to mention just a few. It was a time of wide and intense interaction, both academic and spiritual. Fr. Arrupe, half jokingly, once said to him: “Fr. Arij, if you want to survive in Rome, try each year to be away from here for at least six months and a day.” Arij understood this as another way of saying that “it is proper to our vocation to travel through diverse places”. In **more than 50 countries** he has been lecturing, giving retreats and organizing conferences, with a predilection for India, Japan, Israel, Brazil and Curaçao.

Abidjan When Arij became officially *Emeritus Professor* at the Gregorian, he still had a full teaching program at the university and a dozen of doctoral thesis to direct. Yet he was called for at least six months to the **Jesuit Theologate in Abidjan, Ivory Coast**. These six months became six years: a time rich in brotherly companionship, a strong cooperation in research and studies and an intense fellowship in the deepening of spiritual experience. (2002-2008).

Ankara Because of unforeseen departures in the Jesuit community in Ankara, Arij was requested to help out there for at least one year. His main job has been the ministry in an international parish and a renewed effort in **Turkish studies**.

Lebanon From Ankara, Arij was called to Lebanon in 2011, where he became member of a Jesuit team in a house for spiritual formation. Among the tasks that require his attention can be mentioned:

- Accompanying people in spiritual exercises. Sometimes retreats are for groups, sometimes individually guided.
- Spiritual accompaniment of various persons. Several are far away and the contact is then via internet.
- Guiding retreats in daily life.
- Daily mass in the Latin rite..
- Once a month celebration of the Eucharist for a group of people from the Philippines.
- Assisting a CVX group.
- The sacrament of penance for persons who come to the house, especially priests.
- Some reading and writing on various topics, mainly intercultural and interreligious themes, and Spiritual Exercises.
- Studying the feasibility of various projects, such as: a network for leadership training called "Encuentro", the "Virgines consecratae", cultivating the Latin language in a "Libera Academia Latina", Groupe: "Exercices Yoga pour faciliter la prière du corps".

Recently I received from a friend, who knew of the dreams of my younger years, the invitation to join him in the desert in South California. I answered him that my desire of the wide desert has developed into a beginning awareness of that all-embracing limitless space resplendent with the divine Glory, angels and saints. This always greater glory I see mirrored in the ones I may serve, guide and accompany. I find traces of it in the little personal history that brought me here. And in this here-and-now, I feel at home in my body, enjoy the attention and care of those who are with me, and love this old house and its surroundings, the gardens and the farm, the forests and the fields.