

**Conclusion:**  
***A Bird's Eye View of the General Chapters I–XVII (1884–2012)***

*The Chapters, considered as the highest legislative body of the Society, provide an overview of the most significant milestones in the development of the Society throughout its history.*

The General Chapters, as the highest legislative body of the Society, have a long history concealed behind a bulk of archival sources. They have passed through crucial moments of struggle and efforts, with the clear purpose of redefining and fulfilling the Society's founding charisma as well as meeting the challenges and demands of the changing times. The Chapters were not simply meant to photocopy the past legacy of Fr. Arnold Janssen but to do in his memory what he would do out of fidelity to the Spirit who inspired him. The chapters delivered privileged places for the spiritual renewal of the capitulars who placed themselves under the guidance of the Spirit—the same that inspired their Founder. The chapters were not bereft of the “ecclesiastical dimension,” expressed symbolically in the audiences of the Capitulars with the Holy Father; the first of these was held with Pius XI on 14 October 1932.

The chapters attempted to find for the Society a creative and fruitful presence in the bosom of Church. The Founder's charism does not belong exclusively to the few hundreds or even thousands of members. They are only guardians, not owners. His charism belongs to the entire Church, to the whole people of God. The seventeen chapters covering a long streak of 141-year history can be shortly elucidated by five important aspects such as times, places, numbers, leaders and ideas.

*1. Times*

1.1 Length of the Chapters

At first glance, one can be totally surprised to learn that the first three chapters in the Founder's lifetime dragged out for so long. The first General Chapter (10 Dec. 1884–12 May 1886) lasted 18 months with several interruptions on account of the Founder's travels to Vienna (twice), Paris (once), and finally to Rome for four months. During the second General Chapter (3 Nov. 1890–27 Apr. 1891) with a four-month interval, the deliberations only lasted for 41 days. The third General Chapter (29 Sept. 1897–4 May 1898) lasted seven months with an interruption of five weeks at the turn of the year. This chapter carries a record of 160 sessions over the course of 179 working days. The length of these first three chapters was essentially conditioned by the small

number of participants and the tedious work of composing and revising the Constitutions. The considerable duration of each of the first three General Chapters afforded Fr. Arnold Janssen the necessary and sufficient time to work intensely on the Constitutions and to make the necessary consultations.

The fourth General Chapter (3 Nov. 1909–15 Jan. 1910) was much shorter and lasted only for two and a half months with a one-week Christmas interruption. Its smooth running was largely due to Fr. Nicholas Blum's withdrawal of a proposal for a two-month break that would have been allotted for a closer look and scrutiny of the Constitutions, with the aid of a jurist. Afterwards, all the following General Chapters concluded within two months except for the 9<sup>th</sup> Extraordinary General Chapter, a renewal chapter after Vatican II (8 Nov. 1967–22 Jan. 1968). The 6<sup>th</sup> General Chapter (26 Sept.–14 Oct. 1932) lasted only 19 days with 28 sessions. This was the shortest General Chapter. Overall, the General Chapters held until 1982 were held between the months of September and May. During the 12<sup>th</sup> chapter (4 Oct.–24 Nov. 1982), it was resolved by a vote of 106 to 7 that subsequent chapters would be held during the months of June–July to make possible the usual August–December Tertiate course.

## 1.2 Chapter Intervals/Extraordinary Chapters

The preparatory draft for the first General Chapter stated that a General Chapter was to be held when there were seven clerics in perpetual vows and that the subsequent General Chapters should take place every ten years. During the first General Chapter it was decided that General Chapters were to be convoked every seven years by the Superior General. However, the third General Chapter introduced a 12-year interval rule between General Chapters which then remained until 1967. Despite clear interval rules for General Chapters, there were four extraordinary General Chapters, namely: 1909–1910, 1920 and 1958 because of urgency owing to the deaths of superiors general and 1967–68 due to the renewal asked for by Vatican II (*Ecclesiae Sanctae*, 3) for the purpose of revising the Constitutions.

After the Founder's death, the first (4) extraordinary General Chapter elected Fr. Nikolaus Blum, age 52, as the successor of Fr. Janssen. Fr. Fritz Bornemann noted in his writings that the choice was for someone who was known for his orderliness, punctuality, a quick work tempo and efficiency. The fifth General Chapter held in 1920 also occurred in extraordinary circumstances, the demise of Fr. Blum. On 28 September 1920, the capitulars elected to the helm of the Society a "man of prayer," Fr. Wilhelm Gier, the same age as his predecessor. Similarly, the third

(8) General Chapter in 1958 was brought forward by the death of Fr. Alois Große-Kappenberg. This time the newly elected successor was Fr. Johannes Schütte, the youngest Superior General ever, at forty-five years. Fr. Schütte was also the first Superior General with “hands-on” missionary experience in China and the first Superior General who had not known the Founder personally. Later, there were two other historically significant elections. At the extraordinary General Chapter of 1967 the first non-German, Fr. John Musinsky, was elected as Superior General. The 49-year-old American of Slovak origin presided over the Society insightfully and effectively during the most difficult and delicate post-conciliar time. Then, at the beginning of the second Millennium (26 June 2000), Fr. Antonio Pernia, a Filipino, became the first non-Western Superior General in the Society at the age of 51. His successor, the eleventh Superior General, was a German, Fr. Heinz Kulüke. He was the second provincial of the Philippine Southern Province in a row to be elected to the supreme office in the Society at the last General Chapter on 3 July 2012.

## *2. Places*

### 2.1 Locations

Across the history of the 17 General Chapters, experience values the importance of the *genius loci*. Overall, the General Chapters took place in five different places. Advancing chronologically, the first five chapters from 1884 to 1920 were held in our Mother House in Steyl. But the second General Chapter distinguished itself as a “traveling chapter,” since it opened on 3 November 1890 in the third and newest house of the Society, St. Gabriel, near Vienna. Fr. Johannes Janssen, the rector of St. Gabriel was an important capitular. The final session of the said General Chapter took place in Steyl (19–27 Apr. 1891). The sixth General Chapter initiated the three General Chapters 1932–1958 to be staged at the new Roman College in Rome. The 9<sup>th</sup> General Chapter, the first post-conciliar extraordinary chapter, was held in Nemi, in the beautiful surroundings of the Alban Hills overlooking the volcanic crater of the lake of the same name about 30 km southeast of Rome. As many as eight times, from 1967 to 2012, the General Chapters were hosted in the SVD International Formation Center in Nemi. Only in 2006, the organizers, on account of the 150 announced capitulars, moved the 16<sup>th</sup> General Chapter to the Salesian Center in Via della Pisana 1111 in Rome.

## 2.2 Conditions of Some Locations

During the seventh General Chapter, held in Rome from 22 September 1947 until 21 October 1947, the chapter hall was located in the present library on the ground floor of the Generalate wing, where had been deliberating also the chapters of 1932 and 1958. The living conditions for the 66 capitulars were precarious with respect to several basic things. Accommodating this number of capitulars proved extremely difficult for the Roman College. In short, the place was cramped. Sleeping rooms were set up behind cabinets in the hallway and in the adjoining room. Movable beds were set up in the two sacristies. They were removed during the day. With no more beds available, ten chapter members had to sleep on mattresses on the floor during the cool days of October. At the last General Chapter held in Rome in 1958, the “house master” Fr. Peter Guntern managed this time to accommodate all the 72 capitulars in the college. The newly constructed annex was not yet habitable.

## 3. Numbers

### 3.1 Numbers of Capitulars

Let us have a glimpse at the number of capitulars by dividing all the General Chapters into halves, each half with eight chapters. The first eight General Chapters embrace a period of 74 years of the Society (1884–1958). The total number of capitulars of these first eight General Chapters was 264 members. The distribution of capitulars is as follows: First General Chapter–4; Second General Chapter–5; Third General Chapter–12; Fourth General Chapter–22; Fifth General Chapter–32; Sixth General Chapter–54; Seventh General Chapter–66; and Eight General Chapter–69. The first chapter was made up of only four capitulars: the Founder, Arnold Janssen, and his brother Johannes, Pro-Vicar Johann Anzer and Fr. Hermann Wegener.

### 3.2 Representation of Capitulars

Among the 264 capitulars of the first eight General Chapters, 197 capitulars (74.2%) were Germans whereas 67 capitulars (25.8%) were from other countries of birth. Instead, from the 9<sup>th</sup> General Chapter until the 17<sup>th</sup> General Chapter (1967–2012) among the total number of 1,108 capitulars, 209 capitulars (18.8%) were Germans, whereas 899 capitulars (81.2%) were from other countries of birth. The striking and notable change of representation of the capitulars mirrors the structural changes happening in the Society, mainly by the democratic election

of more delegates and the general increase of members and new provinces, regions and missions. Considering the total of 1,372 capitulars in all the past 17 General Chapters some notable representations by countries of birth are as follows: Germans 409, North Americans 151, Indians 98, Indonesians 77, Dutchmen 82, Poles 65, Filipinos 61.

### 3.3 Capitulars' Number of Participations

The absolute record goes to the former Superior General, Fr. John Musinsky, who attended 7 General Chapters, followed by former Superiors General: Fr. Heinrich Barlage, Heinrich Heekeren and Vice-general Fr. Konrad Keler who attended 6 General Chapters. Following closely, with 5 General Chapters, are Frs. Antonio Pernia, Werner Prawdzik, Robert Pung, Adolf von Spreti and Antoon Verschuur. There are fifteen confreres who participated in four General Chapters and 65 in three General Chapters.

## 4. Leaders

### 4.1 Superior General

One of the culminating and most exciting moments during the chapters were the elections of the new Superior General and his council. The General Chapters spelled out an evolution of a system of leadership in the Society. During the first General Chapter, on 12 March 1885, Fr. Arnold Janssen, at the age of 49, was elected the first Superior General for life. He was the driving force of the Society. At the third General Chapter, as Fr. Blum notably observed, Fr. Arnold Janssen, the oldest capitular (60 years old), for the last time kept the reins of the General Chapter firmly in his hands "with an independence and firmness that no one will ever be able to equal."

The third General Chapter decided that the Superior General should be elected not for life as the Founder proposed but for a term of 12 years. This rule remained in force until 1967 when the 9<sup>th</sup> General Chapter fixed the duration of office of the Superior General at 10 years by a vote of 91 to 12. Thus, Superior General Fr. Schütte, after nine years as Superior General placed his office at the disposal of the 9<sup>th</sup> General Chapter. After experimentation, the 12<sup>th</sup> General Chapter in 1982 restored anew the 12-year term for the Superior General, also that of General Councilors, extending it by six more years. The last reform came about during the 15<sup>th</sup> General Chapter in 2000 which resolved *ad experimentum* a six-year term of office of the Superior General with the possibility of a first re-election by an absolute majority vote, and a sec-

ond and last re-election by a two-thirds majority vote by the third ballot. The 16<sup>th</sup> General Chapter in 2006 adopted it definitively.

#### 4.2 General Councilors

In governing the Society Fr. Arnold Janssen was initially assisted by two councilors (Fr. Johannes Janssen and Fr. Hermann Wegener), and since 1891 by four councilors with the addition of Frs. Johannes Holt-hausen and Nikolaus Blum. Fr. Hermann Wegener was the only one rewarded with the title of general councilor for life. He was general councilor for 35 years (1885–1920).

The composition of the general council remained unchanged until 1967 when the number of councilors was increased to six for a five-year term. According to the statistical data, 72 confreres became general councilors in the Society's history so far, including 27 from Germany, 5 from India and Poland (de facto six from Poland, since there were two Polish councilors in 1948, one died in 1948 before taking office and his replacement, despite trying for two years, could not get permission to leave the country), 4 from the USA, Holland, Argentina and Indonesia, 3 from the Philippines and Brazil, 2 from Switzerland and Congo and 1 from Ireland, Austria, Portugal, Slovakia, Ghana, Chile, Angola, Canada. The youngest general councilor is still Fr. Johannes Janssen who entered the General Council at the age of 32 in 1885, whereas the oldest councilor is Fr. Leopold Pfad who became a councilor at the age of 66, replacing Fr. Franz de Lange in 1939. The first non-German confrere elected to the General Council was the Dutchman Fr. Franz de Lange (1932), followed by the American Fr. Francis Humel and the Pole Fr. Franciszek Herud at the 7<sup>th</sup> General Chapter in 1947.

#### 4.3 Deceased Capitulars

In the history of the SVD's chapters, three members died in the course of their deliberations and one shortly before the chapter. Thus the 13<sup>th</sup> General Chapter on 6 June 1988 started with the funeral mass of Bro. Anthony Thottan and the following burial in Campo Teutonico. The opening of the chapter was postponed from morning to the afternoon. The earliest among the deceased was the Founder's brother Johannes Janssen who died in Steyl on 14 April 1898. It was the first blow to the close circle of Arnold Janssen's intimate collaborators. On that day, Fr. Arnold invited his fellow capitulars to have a few moments of silence and to pray for Fr. Johannes but the sessions went on as usual. At the next chapter, on 13 December 1909 Fr. Joseph Schmid died, the Regional from Brazil who arrived at the chapter with the consent of his doctor. He participated in the chapter until 9 December when he was forced into bed due to an acute

pulmonary hemorrhage. His state worsened suddenly in the morning of 13 December. The last case happened on 16 June 1994 when at the end of the afternoon session Fr. General Heinrich Barlage announced the distressing and tragic news of the unexpected death of the provincial from Spain, Fr. Alberto López, at the age of 47. He died in a Roman hospital due to complications arising from acute inflammation of the pancreas. The chapter recessed for prayer. His body was brought first to Nemi and then to Estella on 20 June. On the following day the funeral took place in the local church, followed by burial in the SVD cemetery.

### *5. Ideas*

The importance of the General Chapters can be measured by the guiding ideas of the different sessions, the debates and the new directions that to this date have influenced the directions, development and good maintenance of the Society. The following is a concise description of the more relevant ideas and issues taken up in each of these 17 General Chapters.

The 1<sup>st</sup> General Chapter (1884–1886) can be called constitutional since it developed a new rule and fixed the fundamental pattern of the SVD spirituality. In this way, it concluded a period of experimentation and gave the young Congregation its basic constitutional imprint. The weightiest decision was made in the first session on 15 December 1884 when the capitulars unanimously agreed on adopting religious vows; otherwise SVDs would have continued as secular priests.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> General Chapter (1890–1891) unanimously decided to establish a missionary congregation of women to be called The Servants of the Holy Spirit and revised the SVD “September Rule” in order to standardize it as a common rule for both clerics and Brothers. The September Rule had been approved earlier on 12 May 1886 and was written in Latin.

The 3<sup>rd</sup> General Chapter (1897–1898), apart from the definitive formulation of the rule, centralized the Society’s administration so that the Superior General would appoint provincials and their councilors and all newly ordained priests were under his complete jurisdiction. All personnel and property of the Society were to be controlled by the Generalate with the Superior General competent to transfer property and confreres from one province to another.

The 4<sup>th</sup> General Chapter (1909–1910), with the death of the Founder, gave the newly orphaned Society his successor in the person of Fr. Nikolaus Blum. He guaranteed the continuation of the work and of the Spirit of the Founder. It also ended a period of experimentation and unrest and gave a feeling of stability by forming the beginnings of a tradition.

The 5<sup>th</sup> General Chapter (1920) focused on the Constitutions, which needed to be adjusted to the new Code of Canon Law, promulgated in 1917. It addressed also the spiritual growth of the Society, undertook an interpretative approach to the Founder's legacy and strove to keep his spirit and the spirit of the Church.

The 6<sup>th</sup> General Chapter (1932) dealt with internal matters of religious life and missionary life, stressing the importance of discipline and simplicity. Moreover it discussed the importance of studies and education in order to meet the needs of our special missionary vocation.

The 7<sup>th</sup> General Chapter (1947) vigorously pursued unity in the Society since many members of the Society came from opposite sides of the past decade's political divisions. It worked to improve its family and missionary spirit. The chapter also directed the General Council to make every effort towards the beatification of Frs. Arnold Janssen and Joseph Freinademetz and to improve communication among confreres by launching the house magazine called *Arnoldus inter se Filii* in both German and English editions.

The 8<sup>th</sup> General Chapter (1958) addressed the tension between the traditional religiously oriented missionary work and the more dynamic approach. This resulted in a revised approach to missionary work which focused on mission as the determining force pervading everything. The Chapter favored a moderate internationalization and declared itself in favor of modern means and methods, but at the same time it stressed the priority of Divine grace which requires a spirit of unity with the whole Church.

The 9<sup>th</sup> General Chapter (1967–1968) occurred in a time of profound changes brought about by Vatican II. The chapter began a long process of renewal that would span four general chapters and which would finally conclude with the 12<sup>th</sup> General Chapter in 1982. The final result of this critical chapter was the publication of the revised Constitutions in 1983. The Chapter encouraged the decentralization of power, systematic planning and the principle of subsidiarity. It also abolished the non-smoking rule and confirmed full membership of Brothers in the Society.

The 10<sup>th</sup> General Chapter (1972) was one of spiritual renewal in a time of turbulence in both the Church and civil society. The chapter concerned itself not so much with the Constitutions, but rather with the renewal and adaptation of the Society. It emphasized that our missionary involvement includes evangelization and human development according to the local and regional situations. Our members should adapt themselves to the local cultures and use the local language. All our activities should present the Society as unmistakably missionary, stress-

ing its oneness. Our formation programs should be directed by teams of well-prepared men.

The 11<sup>th</sup> General Chapter (1977) revised parts 3 and 4 of the Constitutions, that is, the sections on formation and government. The entire chapter came to be called the “Brothers’ chapter” since a separate commission of Brothers addressed the “Brother question” and their formation so strongly. The Chapter entrusted to the Generalate the implementation of six priorities, namely: the formation and promotion of genuine community on the various levels of our SVD family; the exact definition and revival of the specific missionary charism of the Society; a deliberate and greater involvement in the media; solidarity with the poor and oppressed; pastoral care of vocations and formation of prospective members; and the issues of Brothers.

The 12<sup>th</sup> General Chapter (1982) ended the period of renewal called for by Vatican II. The great achievement of this General Chapter was the final revision of the Constitutions, which were finally adopted after a period of *ad experimentum*. The new Constitutions had a different profile than the previous ones. In the spirit of the post-conciliar reform, they have a Trinitarian approach with greater theological, biblical and spiritual emphasis whereas the earlier Constitutions were canonically and legally oriented, with many detailed prescriptions. In the new Constitutions the missionary service is not so much Church-oriented but seeks to bring new communities into being within the people of God. The chapter asked for a more determined commitment to the promotion of justice and peace in solidarity with the poor (preferential Solidarity with the Poor).

The 13<sup>th</sup> General Chapter (1988) summoned confreres to work out more adequate responses to the new situations of our missionary work, ethnic minorities, the poor and marginalized. The key word to describe the new spiritual and missionary model adapted by this chapter was “passing over.” The capitulars produced three major documents: on SVD missionary activity, missionary spirituality and missionary formation. The chapter declared the Bible apostolate as a new priority of the Society and proposed the establishment of the Arnold Janssen Spirituality Center at Steyl.

The 14<sup>th</sup> General Chapter (1994) dealt with mission at the service of communion. It also discussed the issue of the Society as a community. The Chapter heralded the establishment of the so-called zones of Africa-Madagascar, Asia-Pacific, Europe and Pan-America, more or less spontaneously formed from the collaboration of geographically neighboring provinces.

The 15<sup>th</sup> General Chapter (2000) dealt with the call to prophetic dialogue. It presented three key concepts to stimulate our missionary thought and practice: Witness to the Reign of God, Prophetic Dialogue and Characteristic Dimensions. The term Prophetic Dialogue was born in the deliberations of the Chapter and was directed for implementation in four dimensions: with people who have no faith community and with faith-seekers; with people who are poor and marginalized; with people of different cultures; with people of different religious traditions and secular ideologies.

The 16<sup>th</sup> General Chapter (2006) aimed at renewing our religious-missionary life, from the perspective of prophetic dialogue, by focusing on five areas: spirituality, community, leadership, finances and formation. The chapter accepted as its starting point the statement of the 15<sup>th</sup> General Chapter with its focus on our witness to God's Reign.

The 17<sup>th</sup> General Chapter (2012) completed the trilogy of Prophetic Dialogue by focusing on interculturality. This significant chapter worked out an action plan for the congregational directions of the Society for the next six years. There are ten Congregational Directions *ad extra*: Primary and New Evangelization, Ecumenical and Interreligious Dialogue, Promotion of the Culture of Life, Family and Youth, Education and Research, Indigenous and Ethnic Communities, Migration, Reconciliation and Peace Building, Social Justice and Poverty Eradication, Integrity of Creation, and five Congregational Directions *ad intra*: Spirituality, Community, Leadership, Finances, Formation. The Capitulars tasked the Society with developing an intercultural competence: As a community of brothers from different nations and languages, we become a living symbol of the unity and diversity of the Church. The collaboration with the laity was stressed with the first ever participation of lay collaborators from the four zones. The newly opened Ad Gentes Center in Nemi, highlighted by the visit of Pope Benedict XVI to the capitulars, commemorated in a dignified way the Society's contribution to the drafting of the mission decree *Ad Gentes*. It is also a call to the Society to committing to the Second Vatican Council's vision of evangelization, the *raison d'être* of the Society.

This bird's eye view clearly shows that General Chapters are important features and aspects of the governance of our Society. As a Society we have a short and limited capitular experience compared to the older and more traditional Congregations and Religious Orders. However, our historical awareness of the specific contributions and directions resulting from each of our 17 General Chapters are crucial components in understanding who we are as a Society and how we have evolved to what we are today. Hopefully this awareness encourages us to enter into a more insightful and fruitful dialogue with our roots in order to meet successfully the new challenges of our times.