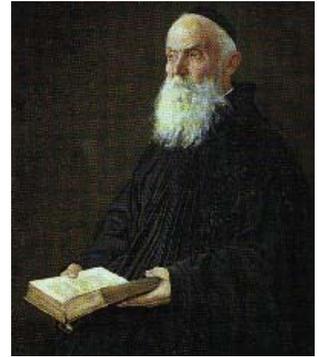


Our Founder
FATHER ANDREAS AMRHEIN, OSB

By

Sister Mary Bellarmine Bernas, OSB

(Summarized from Sustained by God's Faithfulness by Sister Bernita
Walter, OSB)



- To be a monk and a missionary.
- To profess to live according to the Rule of St. Benedict and spend a life in the foreign missions.
- To combine monastic life with apostolic activity.

These were the seemingly contradictory elements of the ideal Benedictine and missionary life that was the persistent and consuming desire of Josef Andreas Amrhein for many years. At a time when monasticism in Europe meant prayer and work exclusively within the monastery and a missionary vocation precluded a monastic base, Amrhein's vision of a monastic life combined with missionary engagement was understandably difficult to accept by his superiors.

Birth and Early education

Josef Amrhein was born on February 4, 1844 at Gunzwil/Beromunster, Canton Lucerne in Switzerland. He was "unusually and richly endowed with intellectual gifts." He was interested in literature, mathematics, the natural sciences and art. From childhood he suffered from poor health and his higher studies had to be postponed because of his physical weakness. He had always loved drawing and so he dabbled in art while he was in Florence (1863), using "his leisure hours to sketch the Tuscan landscape." While in Paris, his interest in art led him to frequent visits to the Louvre Arts Gallery (1865-1866). It was here that he often thought "how beautiful these works of art, how marvelous the creative genius to produce such noble works! Yet, how much greater than any painting is the value and beauty of the human soul, God's creation!"

"Perhaps art was to serve as the start on the way to priesthoods." When he was ten years old his grandfather asked him if he did not want to be a priest. His reply was "I don't want to be a chaplain or a canon. But I would like to be a missionary among the pagans." But his constant exposure to works of art made him reflect: "Even if I had the genius and acclaim of a Rafael of Titian, I would gladly exchange it for the grace of being a simple priest with the power to make even one child, through baptism and Christian education, an image of God and an heir of

heavenly glory. This is the true art, the most profound science: to make immortal souls god-like and pleasing to him.”

“Early in life Josef Amrhein manifested a basic generosity, a joy in giving – not only material but also spiritual gifts.” Perhaps it was also this that led him to consider the priesthood as a way of sharing his own blessings. “We are very ungrateful and utterly lacking in love. We have the light, and yet we let millions of others stumble in the darkness.”

In 1866 he went to Karlsruhe to study painting and literature. While he was there “his priestly vocation became the focus of his thinking.” One Pentecost Sunday, June 9, 1867, Josef Amrhein was awakened by a loud call that clearly said: “Leave everything!” He did not know for sure whether the experience was a mere “dream, hallucination, or just chance”. However, “after this Pentecost experience Amrhein was sure of his priestly calling.”

Preparing for the Priesthood

In 1868 he moved to Tuebingen to study philosophy and theology. He took great interest in the lectures of Professor Carl Josef Hefele in a class on church history and Christian archeology. He was especially impressed by the presentations on religious orders and founders when it was said that the Christianization of Europe was primarily due to the “peaceful, yet enduring and blessed labors of the monks of St. Benedict.”

The following year, on December 29, 1869, Amrhein met for the first time in Tuebingen, Abbot Maurus Wolter who had refounded Beuron Abbey in 1863. “Seeing Wolter in Benedictine habit, the young theology student experienced a renewed interest in the Benedictines.” The following Pentecost (1870) he went for a three-day of retreat in Beuron. He was very impressed by the solemn liturgy of Beuron and before he left the monastery he decided to join the monks. “Without doubt it was chiefly his generous heart, ever ready to follow a call, which prompted Amrhein’s quick decision.”

A Monk at the Beuron Abbey

In July 1870 Amrhein joined the monks of Beuron Abbey as a candidate and in December of the same year, he took the name of Frater Andreas as a novice. “On Christmas in 1871 he professed simple perpetual vows, on July 16, 1872, he was ordained a priest, and on February 2, 1875, he made his solemn profession.”

Writing about Amrhein, Sister Bernita Walter raised two crucial questions:

- “Was he aware that Beuron’s monastic life differed considerably from the kind Boniface and the missionary monks of Germany had lived and which von Hefele’s lectures had conveyed?”
- Had he weighed the fact that his evident vocation to apostolic service would find no proper expression in Beuron?”

Perhaps if Amrhein had pondered these questions and ascertained a more definitive direction of his personal vocation as a monk and missionary before entering Beuron, he might have decided against becoming a monk in Beuron at all. In his autobiographical sketch (1883) Amrhein refers to this seemingly hasty decision as a “mystery of God’s wise, loving providence” which prepared him for the particular foundation that he would eventually make. “I was destined to receive a monastic training which has produced so many holy missionaries who went forth to convert peoples and lands.”

Persistent call to the Missions

While in Beuron Father Andreas was in constant inner conflict, “for the ideal of combining monastic life with apostolic activity beckoned to him with steady and increasing urgency, yet there was no prospect of any kind of apostolic work for him.” Because of this, he wanted to leave before his profession but the abbot dissuaded him. “Abbot Maurus evidently thought Brother Andreas’ monastic calling was genuine, but not his apostolic vocation.”

For many years, Father Andreas’ desire for apostolic service remained unabated. His writings give us an insight into the prayerful discernment process that must have occupied him during those difficult years.

“Since my profession I have repeatedly asked my superiors’ permission to be sent to the foreign missions...

- Were I less determined to do God’s will, even to desist from my most cherished desire for his sake, I might consider this call as a temptation.
- Were I less convinced, despite my submission to God’s will, of my missionary vocation, I might see it as a source of disquiet, as sheer temptation.
- And had I not known and desired mission work as my vocation even before entering monastic life, I might consider it a temptation against stability....”

At the New Foundation in Maredsous

Three months after his ordination, he was sent with some other monks for a new foundation in Maredsous. “Throughout this time his missionary vocation occupied his thoughts, and when Abbot Maurus visited Maredsous near the end of 1876, Amrhein again made his request. Again he was denied the desired “Yes”.

In spite of the absence of any prospect of realizing his missionary vocation during his four years stay at Maredsous, his desire to go to the foreign mission became clearer while fanned by the reports read at table about Benedictines serving in the foreign mission, e.g. the Silvestrines in Ceylon and Dom Salvado’s missionary monks in New Norcia, Australia. He also read the mission accounts from Asia and East Africa, especially about the Holy Ghost Fathers in Bagamoyo (Tanganyika) and of David Livingstone in Zambia. His extensive reading and serious

reflection yielded a more concrete leitmotif of the monastic and missionary community that he was dreaming of.

“In November 1880 Father Amrhein wrote down the fruit of his years of reflection in Maredsous.

- His missionary strategy would not rely on individual missionaries, but center around a monastic community.
- The monastery would be a home for children and would train young natives in workshops directed by the brothers.
- Its lands were not only to sustain the community but also to teach the people agriculture and animal husbandry to make them settle down.
- The beauty of the liturgical celebration was to be a significant attraction in missionary work.

These fundamental principles animated Father Amrhein’s endeavors in succeeding years.”

In 1880, Father Amrhein was sent from Maredsous to the “missions” i.e. to teach at the parish school of Eddington near Birmingham. This was not the kind of mission work that Father Amrhein had in mind. Reminding Abbot Maurus of his promise in 1879 that he could do mission work if he could “prove his obedience through a three-year period, and his health were good and his longing for the missions continued” Father Amrhein obtained permission to spend six months with the Mill Hill Fathers in England in March 1880.

Preparatory Steps towards the Realization of the Ideal

From this time on (1880) until he obtained the permission from Abbot Maurus Wolter to leave Beuron Abbey (1883) so that he could offer himself to the Propaganda Fide, Father Amrhein spent many uncertain and trying months clarifying the ideal in his mind and searching for the means to realize this concretely. His search brought him in contact with several founders of missionary congregations, among them Herbert Vaughan of the St. Joseph Society of Mill Hill, England; Arnold Janssen of the Society of the Divine Word of Steyl, Holland; Dr. Franziskus M. Jordan of the Salvatorians and Abbot Bishop Rudesind Salvado of New Norcia, Australia. Except for Salvado’s foundation, all the others had no monastic orientation. Slowly, but with much difficulty, his concept of a monastic-missionary endeavor began to crystallize.

At Mill Hill

His initial search brought Father Amrhein to Mill Hill, an institute for diocesan missionary priests founded by Herbert Vaughan in 1866. It was here that “he first thought of establishing an institute for lay missionaries with a Benedictine orientation to support missionary priests and considered attaching his foundation to an existing group of missionary priests.” His idea found general acceptance in Mill Hill although some of the superiors questioned its

monastic element. Nevertheless, the Mill Hill Fathers were ready to take him in as a full member of their missionary society. Abbot Maurus, however, asked him to remain a monk of Beuron Abbey and thus he became only an initial member.

In order to gain practical mission experience, Father Amrhein was offered to join the project of the Mill Hill Fathers in Borneo. He left for Germany to prepare for this trip and to improve his health. His physician, however, advised him against the journey because of his health. Further invitations of the Mill Hill Fathers to ask Father Amrhein to be a full member and “cease being a Benedictine monk” prompted him to look elsewhere. He did not want to abandon the Benedictine base of his future foundation and so he decided to get in touch once more with Arnold Janssen in Steyl.

Disturbing Decisions from Beuron

Meanwhile some decisions were made about Father Amrhein at the Beuron Abbey while he was still in Germany. Abbot Maurus ordered him “to return without delay, either to Mill Hill or to one of the monasteries of the Beuronese Congregation.” The rector of Mill Hill was informed that he and Father Andreas could ask for his canonical separation from the Holy See. However, realizing that the trip to Borneo was beyond his physical strength, the abbot was informed that there was no longer any reason for Father Amrhein to join the Mill Hill society. Abbot Maurus then ordered Father Amrhein to return to Maredsous immediately.

Father Amrhein was deeply shaken. “His interior anxiety was greater than ever: for twelve years he had pursued the ideal of missionary work as a Benedictine. Was he to give it up just before reaching his goal? Should he return to Maredsous and renounce all his missionary plans or follow his missionary vocation and leave the Benedictine Order?”

In a letter of February 18, 1883, Father Amrhein implored Abbot Maurus to rescind his decision: “I beg on my knees that you not withdraw your permission!...not take from me the goal of these many years of prayer and longing...just because the first mission institute...which I desired to join demanded that I leave the Order. If another mission institute will accept me without this demand, you need not make me unhappy by withdrawing your permission.”

The following week, Father Amrhein decided to go on a pilgrimage to Rome “as a final resort at the last moment.” On his way to Rome, he received the answer to his request to be allowed to go to Steyl where the rector, Arnold Janssen awaited him.

A Pilgrimage to Rome

Through the help of funds from friends, Father Amrhein went to Rome “to the sacred places of the Eternal City and to the Holy Father in order to begin the work of the missions with the blessing of Peter’s successor.” At the Propaganda Fide he was received by Archbishop Jacobini who advised him to proceed to Steyl to profit from the insights of the flourishing

missionary society. He also met with Dr. Franziskus M. Jordan, the founder of the Salvatorians and with Abbot-Archbishop Salvado who was visiting in Rome. The latter told him that church authorities would grant him the required permission if he were able to show a good beginning and some accomplishments. With this encouraging advice from another Benedictine, Father Amrhein proceeded to Steyl.

With Jansen in Steyl

While still at Maredsous, Father Amrhein kept in touch by letter with Arnold Janssen, the Rector of Steyl. He maintained this correspondence often disclosing to him the result of his prayer and discernment. In 1979, referring to what he had learned about “Salvado’s months of waiting before his abbot had allowed him to leave for the missions”, Father Amrhein wrote to Father Janssen: “How often did his example support me in moments of discouragement and anguish of heart.” And in 1983 he disclosed to him his difficulties while remaining a monk of Beuron and an initial member of Mill Hill and not receiving the necessary support he needed from either of them. Because of this candid relationship with Janssen, it was no surprise that when he had to leave Mill Hill, Father Amrhein turned to Janssen “asking his advice and indicating his wish to attach his institute of brothers to Steyl”

Father Amrhein was fortunate to have found in Rector Arnold Janssen “a wise, holy, and kindly counselor.” His “level-headed, mature, and encouraging influence made Amrhein’s ideas emerge more clearly. His long-cherished dream of an institute for brothers proved a mere preliminary sketch for his real calling: to found a Benedictine congregation for the foreign missions with a strong engagement by lay brothers.”

A Happy Conclusion of the Search

Rector Janssen would have been ready to accept Father Amrhein as a full member but both realized that this was not his vocation. Father Amrhein had arrived at the same insight as Rector Janssen that his vocation was to found another Benedictine congregation. This meeting of minds would finally bring Father Amrhein’s search to a happy conclusion. On August 21, 1883, Rector Janssen wrote “very clearly and forcefully to Archabbot Maurus of his conviction that Amrhein’s missionary call was from God. He told the abbot not to oppose it.” On March 25, 1884 after having obtained permission from Abbot Maurus, Father Amrhein then proceeded to offer himself to the Propaganda Fide.

In November of that year he had a second brief meeting with Abbot Rudesind Salvado from New Norcia while the latter was visiting Brussels. “The experienced missionary was nearly seventy years old. He advised Amrhein urgently to begin his project on a small and modest scale to make it flourish.” God’s providence would then guide Father Amrhein towards the realization of his goal and dispel the uncertainties that had brought him much anxiety.

On November 22, 1883 he left Steyl for Regensburg where he was offered to take over the Reichenbach Abbey, a former Benedictine monastery that was founded in 1118. He had found a place where to start his dream.

The Beginnings at Reichenbach

Making a start at Reichenbach was fraught with difficulties. Reichenbach was a Benedictine abbey that was confiscated by the government and secularized in 1803. It was in terrible disarray after having been abandoned for many years. It needed not just repair but total renovation to be habitable. However, with the help of donated construction materials and the work of capable lay brothers who had come to join Father Amrhein, the much-needed work on the dilapidated buildings started. Fortunately, two priests in Regensburg who were interested in preserving the monastery helped Father Amrhein purchase the land and the building. Now he could proceed to obtain the necessary permit for his foundation.

“In Germany of his day – suffering from the laws of the “Kulturkampf” that were hostile to religious institutes – he was not allowed to found a monastery. Another kind of foundation had to be devised.” And so contrary to his wish of establishing from the very beginning a monastery, a community of monks at prayer and work, Father Amrhein had to settle with what he thought would be allowed – a seminary or a mission house. But even this did not meet the approval of the government. Finally, after fourteen months of writing and rewriting his “modified application” on March 15, 1885, he was told that his application which no longer mentioned a “mission seminary” but “headquarters for a (private) association called ‘Catholic Mission Society for the African Interior’” would not need government approval. Having obtained government clearance to go on with his foundation he then proceeded to follow up his application of March 25, 1884 for ecclesiastical approval.

The Blessing of the Propaganda Fide

On May 4, 1884 Pope Leo XIII confirmed the provisional decision of the Propaganda Fide cardinals to grant Father Amrhein the founding of a mission house. However, Father Amrhein was asked to “prepare more detailed plans for the training of candidates. Also he was to explain whether they would make vows or promises which later, outside Bavaria, could be pronounced as vows.” Father Amrhein lost no time in providing the necessary papers which “detailed his plans for training the candidates, based on long explanations of the Rule of Benedict, drawing on the Benedictine missionaries of the Middle Ages.” Likewise information about Father Amrhein was obtained from Abbot Maurus Wolter by the Propaganda Fide.

The cardinals of the Propaganda Fide once more deliberated on his application and on June 29, 1884, Archbishop Jacobini, the secretary of the Propaganda Fide asked Father Amrhein to meet him at the sacristy of St. Peter’s. Towards noon Archbishop Jacobini informed him that Pope Leo XIII had ratified the cardinals’ approval for founding a mission house in Reichenbach and for the training of candidates.

From this obscure beginning the new missionary Benedictine congregation would slowly grow from its first site in Reichenbach and then to Emming, later called St. Ottilien. The foundation developed into what we know now as the Congregation of the Benedictine Fathers of St. Ottilien.

While still in Reichenbach Father Amrhein would slowly include women in his foundation.

Benedictine Sisters for the Foreign Missions

When Father Amrhein presented his application for ecclesiastical approval he made no mention of plans to include women in his foundation. However, further study of the Anglo-Saxon missions in Germany drew his attention to the medieval Benedictine nuns – Saint Lioba, Thekla and Walburga who in the 8th century accompanied St. Boniface from the British Isles and assisted the monks in their missionary endeavors. He realized the valuable contribution that women monastics could give.

Around this time, there was not only a new awakening of the missionary ideal in Europe but also a new impetus to involve women as missionaries. In 1882 a congregation of sisters was started in Mill Hill, a missionary center that was not unknown to Father Amrhein. Likewise, Rector Arnold Janssen, his spiritual adviser of many years, was also starting a community of women missionaries. Father Amrhein was confirmed in his thoughts on including women in his foundation.

“Wherever a promising mission center of our congregation is founded in a well-populated area for our missionaries to convert boys and men, a convent of missionary sisters should be founded simultaneously or soon thereafter to care for the education of girls and women in Christian living.... These mission helpers...will also care for the sick.... I hope our holy Mother Scholastica will bring about a motherhouse of “Benedictine Sisters for the Foreign Missions.”

These initial thoughts would finally lead to the acceptance of the first four women candidates in Reichenbach on September 24, 1885. This small band of “missionary sisters of Reichenbach” would later develop and expand and move along with the monks to St. Ottilien and later on to Tutzing in Bavaria.

Father Amrhein governed both the men’s and the women’s branches of the Congregation of St. Ottilien until his resignation from office in January 1896.

Eventually, the women’s branch would be officially and canonically separated from the original foundation and form what we now know as the Congregation of the Missionary Benedictine Sisters of Tutzing.

Conclusion

The breakthrough of the Missionary Benedictine charism in the Church under the inspiration of Father Andreas Amrhein spelled out a new spirituality – the synthesis of the monastic principle with missionary activity. The 72nd Chapter of the Rule of St. Benedict talks of the Good Zeal of Monks. One cannot help but think of Father Andreas Amrhein as a personification of that “good zeal that which monks must foster with fervent love.”

If we count the years between his profession in Beuron (July 16, 1872) when he experienced a persistent desire to go to the missions and the time Leo XIII ratified the cardinals’ approval of Father Amrhein’s founding a mission house in Reichenbach (June 29, 1884) – these are barely 12 years. Considering his poor health, the arduous task of clarifying the charism of the congregation at a time when there had been as yet no missionary Benedictine monasteries, securing the necessary approval from ecclesiastical authorities and searching for financial support for his foundation, we can only marvel at the accomplishment of this man. His deep faith and reliance on Divine Providence buoyed him up all the way especially in the midst of contradictions, deprivation and ill health.

Father Andreas Amrhein died on December 29, 1927 in St. Ottilien before he saw the flowering of his foundation.

Epilogue:

The Benedictine Order

The tradition of the Benedictine Order is a 1500-year old heritage. Throughout the centuries its inherent quest for God and an absolute following of Christ has enabled it to open up to new climates and new cultures with freshness and vitality. Its Rule of life, marked by prudence and wisdom, has given its followers stability in the common life of prayer and work. Living under the gaze of God they receive the courage to face the challenges presented by every new age.

AROUND THE YEAR 500

The Holy Father of Monks, St. Benedict, taught the Christian faith to the people in the valley of Subiaco.

AROUND THE YEAR 600

Pope Gregory the Great sent monks from Rome to England to as bearers of the message of Christ.

AROUND THE 8th TO THE 10th CENTURY

Benedictines crossed over from England to the European mainland in order to establish the Church among the German and Slavic nations.

AT THE END OF THE 19th CENTURY

The Benedictine Father Andreas Amrhein, urged by the desire to pass on the gift of faith, founded both Congregation of the Missionary Benedictine Fathers of St. Ottilien and the Missionary Benedictine Sisters of Tutzing.

AT THE BEGINNING OF THE THIRD MILLENIUM

The Missionary Benedictine Sisters of Tutzing work in six continents and twenty countries “to proclaim the Gospel among who do not know Christ or where Christ is not sufficiently known and serve where the Church is in need.” In a life of God-seeking according to the Rule of St. Benedict they help to “awaken the sense of God in our contemporary society and to make others aware of the integral salvation of the world offered by God in Jesus Christ” (Constitutions 1, 5).

That in all things God may be glorified.