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*"Let the holiness of God shine forth" (cf. Mt 5, 16)*

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item 268

## Fr Josef Schwind sac - a Pallottine missionary and source of inspiration

Following my arrival from India for further studies I was introduced to Fr Josef Schwind sac. Originally from Germany he spent many years in Brazil. For the last three he has lived in 'semi-retirement' here in Rome, serving the community and most of all the visitors who come to our church. He is now about to return to South America where he will spend the rest of his life. He is an octogenarian, a spirited missionary, a staunch and faithful Pallottine and above all a great person. That greatness lies in his simplicity and in his ongoing enthusiasm for his ministry – a wonderful example for the young priests from across the world who live here at the International College. So it was a joy to interview him before his departure.



Fr Josef Schwind was born on 20<sup>th</sup> May, 1932 in Franconia, near Frankfurt in Germany, the fifth of six children of Wilhelm and Rosalia Schwind. His parents were poor but deeply religious and the region of his birth was known for its Marian devotions. The lifestyle of his parents no doubt shaped Josef's own future - Wilhelm was a shepherd and Rosalia was an agriculturalist and an expert cultivator. The little boy Josef used to accompany his dad on some occasions and would often give his mother a helping hand in farming the land. He would fulfill the same roles in Brazil, later in life, by shepherding his parishioners as a parish priest (for more than 20 years) and cultivating the hearts of future pastors as a formator (for another 20 years).

Little Josef did not have a simple childhood. The country was controlled by a Nazi regime that considered Catholicism its sworn enemy. To practice his faith was a challenge and a risk. But his parents stood the test bravely and Josef learnt from them. It was in those days that his mother taught him a prayer which he remembers still with child-like enthusiasm: *"O mein Gott, führt mich hin, Wo ich dir am liebsten bin."* (My God, lead me to the place where I will be of best use for you).

Being born into a pious family it was not surprising that young Josef developed a desire to be a missionary priest. Coincidentally two of his maternal aunts were religious sisters, two of his brothers entered a

Benedictine seminary and a sister became a Pallottine Missionary sister! When the opportunity came he chose the Pallottines for they were known both for their missionary work and their love of Mary.

Hardly a year and half had passed in the novitiate when the novice master announced a need for students for the mission in Brazil. Although Josef harboured a strong desire to be a missionary in India, he saw the challenge of Brazil as a God-given opportunity. Without hesitation he made himself available. By then it was 1954 and he was 22 years old. Henceforth Brazil was to become his home country.

He was ordained a priest on 6<sup>th</sup> April, 1957, returning to Germany in November of that same year for holidays. He celebrated the Holy Eucharist in his home parish, a happy celebration for the whole family. It was after the end of Mass that Rosalia revealed to Josef, her newly ordained son, that she had already made a promise to God to offer the child to God's service after its safe delivery. But then, like the Mother of God, she kept everything in her heart. She did not want her will to be done and she searched for the will of God for her son. When she felt the time was appropriate she disclosed this to him, adding that it was the happiest day of her life to participate in the holy Eucharist celebrated by her son.

Josef went on to serve the church and the Society in many capacities – as an associate pastor, a parish priest, a spiritual director for seminarians, rector of the major seminary and director of an orphanage.

For the last three years he has ministered in Rome as the chaplain of the church of San Salvatore in Onda. He considers it a grace to have been near the remains of St Vincent Pallotti, to sit in the confessional where Pallotti sat and to explain about our beloved founder to many who visit the church. He is extremely content and, looking back on his life, he feels that it has always been a continuous 'yes' to the will of God as revealed through the decisions of his superiors. For he recalled very well the dictum of his mother: "The Cross that you choose for yourself will be very heavy to bear."

**"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations." [Jeremiah 1: 5]**

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item 269

## **'Night, the shadow of light, and Life, the shadow of death'**



I saw her lying on her bed (it would probably become her death bed), eyes closed, hands clamped on her chest. There was little one might observe to suggest she was alive – totally calm, seemingly not even breathing. Between myself and her there was a distance, heavy and meaningful.

I was trying to complete distribution of communion to the bedridden and elderly. I had something to finish, something else to commence, a project, and I was worried about how to proceed. I had more worries than anyone could have read on my face. But there

before me was this elderly lady, in whom the same life existed. Except that in her the 'breath of life' was as tranquil as death. In me that 'breath of life' couldn't manage to rest. It was as if, in my case, life couldn't and wouldn't exist apart from me. For her, life had been absorbed.

Her silence and tranquility spoke to me something about life that I had never thought of. I had been running from morning to evening, with no time to 'stand and stare'. I wanted to 'complete' life, to live it 'to the full'. I reflected that maybe she too had raced during life, and that racing had brought her here to a home for the aged on the periphery of Rome. And now today the distance between me and her was just a few meters.

I didn't know what thoughts went through her mind, or what was it that gave her such peace even in life. The simplicity of life was obvious on her face. Past and future were like the banks of a river; she was like the river flowing onwards and never ending, never pausing to gaze at those who sat on her banks. She breathed in as if involuntarily, and breathed out as if hoping that this would be her last. For her the world had become a place where life had to pass through.



I came back to my house and jotted down a few lines in my diary:

*Death is not far away.*

*Life befriends death not once but many times.*

*In fact, the meaning of life is in bringing down the dualism between death and life.*

*Death is that freedom which renders all my affairs the grace to humble itself, so that neither pleasure nor pain shall rob me of my innocence.*

*Real death is not that one moment when every relation ceases to exist, when every reality disappears and when every obligation is disowned – that is just one among the many moments 'in' death.*

*Death as a human reality begins as one is born.*

*The meaning of death is in the commitment to take up pain and pleasure, to hold on when everything seems to crumble down.*

*The 'death moment' is that source of meaning for all the apparent meaninglessness that we face in the world and in life.*

*Our highest joys walk along the edge on the valley of our deepest sorrows. And our excruciating sorrows edge themselves on the valley of joys and profits.*

*Death is that real moment which I can foresee to strike a balance between these two valleys.*

*Both joys and sorrows, and, pain and pleasure disappear alike in that single moment.*

*When pain becomes so real that it blocks my future, then death comes as the consoler; it reveals itself as the end of all pain and yet reminds me that it is the highest pain.*

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**11.09.14**

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