

VERBUM SVD

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- Faithful and Creative Discipleship in a Wounded World. A Reflection on the 2024 SVD General Chapter Theme
- Preferential Option for the Poor: Human Rights and the Ecclesiastical Approach to Sustainable Development Goal 1
- Formation of an Ecological Conscience: A Christian Imperative
- John Prior, SVD, and the Option for the Marginalized in Maumere
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THE LEGACY OF FATHER GEORG KIRCHBERGER, SVD

“A life offered for the mission of God is something of great value.”

The entire missionary life of Father Georg Ludwig Kirchberger, SVD, demonstrated the truth of this statement. The great crowd who attended his funeral and burial at Ledalero on 7th June, 2023, was evidence of this. Also hundreds of graduates of IFTK Institute Ledalero (Ledalero Institute of Philosophy & Creative Technology), his former students, followed the live-stream broadcast of the service. Many expressed their sorrow at his passing via social media. This great acknowledgement of Georg showed just how many people, particularly former students and lay people, had been touched by his goodness and missionary service. Popularly known as Kirch almost all his missionary life right up until he died on 5th June, 2023, Georg was dedicated to the education and formation of missionary candidates at St. Paul's Major Seminary Ledalero, and at IFTK Institute Ledalero.

Since his young days at the St. Gabriel Major Seminary, Mödling, Austria, he had a desire to be a missionary working in a formation house for candidates for the missionary priesthood. At first he studied philosophy because he had great admiration for Father Josef Salmen, his philosophy professor. Father Salmen expanded the horizons of his students, while always assisting them to solve their academic problems. Georg took his studies of philosophy seriously, seeing that this was a requirement for him if he was to become a philosophy professor. At that time, there was a great need in Indonesia, and particularly at Ledalero, for lecturers in numerous fields including exegesis and dogmatic theology, which particularly attracted him. He applied to be sent to Ledalero to teach these subjects. However, as Fr. Heinrich Heekeren, SVD, had been appointed to teach exegesis at Ledalero, he was asked by the SVD Generalate to teach dogmatic theology there.

The presence of both these gifted men as lecturers at the Ledalero Major Seminary gave a renewed spirit to the seminarians, inspiring them to deepen their understanding of theology and Sacred Scripture. Georg and Fr. Heekeren had the ability to relate their subject matter to current affairs. The theology they taught was truly contextual, not just facts that must be understood and learnt by rote. Georg entitled his ecclesiology course “The Open Church” which later morphed into a published book, “God Challenges.” Often discussion points with students during lectures continued outside the lecture hall.

Georg wasn't pedantic. More often than not he helped students to be aware of problems facing the modern society and he endeavored to interpret these theologically. He was very open towards the opinions of his students and because of this they were encouraged to resolve issues and search for answers. Unconsciously, they learnt to theologise and reflect on faith matters in a personal way. He was not just a respected lecturer, but also a discussion colleague. Often out of lecture hall discussions proceeded informally. The familiarity of his relationship with the students caused a representative of the Tertiary Education Board in Surabaya, who came to Ledalero to super-

wise exams, to express his surprise and admiration. He noted that generally in State tertiary institutes, students do not have such a close relationship with the teaching staff.

An actual topic of critical discussion was the practice of ordaining lay family men in Papua. In days gone by, many parishes in Papua were run by married deacons who were effectively parish pastors. There was balanced discussion re this practice, taking into account pastoral aspects, the teaching of the Church re clerics, the relationship between clergy and the laity, and the positives and negatives of different views. Georg researched the practice and presented critical reflections in his lectures which were very interesting for the students.

His students were conscious of the fact that Georg had a high regard for freedom and personal dignity. He never labelled a question as being stupid, and never called a student ignorant. He listened to every question and weighed them seriously. Knowing this, his students had the courage to really think and to hold different opinions from their lecturer's in a democratic spirit. The values of freedom, democracy and respect for human dignity were values that he passed on to his students. This attitude embraced a humility which meant he never put down a student and also gave his students his full attention.

Another of Georg's legacies that will not be forgotten by his students was his compassion. He was well-known for his readiness to assist students who might be on the verge of being failed because they hadn't completed their thesis on time. He would accept students who had been rejected by another lecturer and patiently tutor them until they were able to complete their academic requirements. On the whole, these students have done well in life, and they remain thankful to Georg.

Georg's experience as a seminarian at St. Gabriel's strongly influenced the formation of his own attitude and his method of teaching. His SVD seminary formation took place shortly after the Second Vatican Council had concluded and its teachings were being implemented. The Church was opening to the world and its problems. The Church recognised the truth in different belief systems and cultures beyond the Catholic religion. The priority given to the poor and marginalised was very influential. This was the main reason why Georg called his ecclesiology course "The Open Church."

His own character and the values of his own family strongly influenced his attitude as an SVD religious missionary and professor. It was interesting how his sister wrote in her eulogy that she and Georg never argued, because Georg never caused disharmony between them. She said that he always had a willing ear to hear what his parents and siblings said, and consequently this was the same with everyone.

Georg was not only a hardworking professor who prepared his lectures well and who also did research which he published. He was also a formator at Ledalero, working mainly with the scholastic seminarians. In addition to what has been said above, Georg instilled in the seminarians values of discipline, responsibility, faith, compassion, critical-constructive attitudes, and

giving a good example. The seminarians felt free, but were also responsible for their tasks. Whenever he gave a conference, he always shared a personal experience. In doing so, he encouraged the students to follow this example.

Even though Georg gave virtually his entire life to being a missionary lecturer and a formator of seminarians, he could best be described as a teacher modelled on Jesus himself. Jesus didn't just teach, but more importantly led by example. For instance, the only prayer that Jesus taught was the "Our Father." But he spent a lot of time in prayer. Georg's style was similar: When mentoring the seminarians he didn't lose his temper with them when they did wrong, but rather gave advice and was a role model. His example wasn't just experienced by seminarians but also by the young prefects. Georg truly immersed himself in the life of those with whom he lived, sharing meals, prayer and fun times, which enabled him to be a true mentor for them. He was a teacher with authenticity.

In addition to his primary involvement at the seminary, he also had outside pastoral work, celebrating Mass, anointing the sick and hearing confessions. He did so when he first came to Ledalero, which gave him an insight into the lives of ordinary people, and he became more involved with them as he entered his senior years. He was particularly involved with Nita Parish and with the Watergate Credit Union. This pastoral work was greatly appreciated by many, many people as witnessed by the numbers who attended his funeral and burial, in addition to the alumni of the IFTK Ledalero.

Finally, in summary, it can be said that the life of Father Georg Kirchner as an SVD missionary was of great value to seminarians, students, religious women and men he worked with, and many people throughout Indonesia but particularly in Flores. His death has left a gap in the lives of many, not just because this special man is no longer here, but also because a gifted professor, mentor, pastor, and teacher has gone. Georg has died, but the values that form his legacy will remain alive in the priests, seminarians and lay people who knew him. His book, "God Challenges," will remain a text book for major seminaries, pastoral/catechetical institutes and theological institutes in Indonesia. He will remain alive in the word which he sowed and watered.

Particularly for the communities of the SVD Major Seminary Ledalero and the STFK/IFTK Ledalero Institutes, Georg's death marks the end of a significant period, namely the internationality of the staff at Ledalero. Georg was the last European SVD to work there. When the Ledalero Major Seminary began all the staff were European. Then Indonesian SVDs came, and eventually they took over completely. Now there are no foreign SVDs on the staff, with the result that the model they offered in the past is no longer there. As there are almost no religious vocations in Europe, possibly there might be lay missionaries who could serve here.

Lukas Jua, SVD

Otto Gusti Madung, SVD

IFTK LEDALERO