

BR. ARNOLD DE GROOT S.D.B.
1924 - 2026

OBITUARY LETTER OF BR. ARNOLD DE GROOT S.D.B.

Hong Kong, October 7, 2026
Memoria of Our Lady of the Rosary

Dear Confreres, The peace of the Lord be with you always!

Two weeks ago, on Wednesday September 23, 2026, noon, in St. Teresa's Hospital, Kowloon, Hong Kong, Br. Arnold de Groot S.D.B., the eldest CIN confrere (perhaps also the eldest EAO confrere) died, just about one month before his 102nd birthday on October 29, 2026. Our General Regulations No. 177 say: "On the death of a confrere the rector is to write his obituary letter without delay. He shall send copies to the general secretariate, to the provinces and communities particularly interested and to formation communities." That is why today I come to you with this simple presentation of our dear Brother's life and work. In doing this, we are fortunate to be able to draw on a detailed interview Br. Arnold gave to the Salesian Dutch Mission Procurator in 2006. Going through what I am writing, you may think that you are listening to Br. Arnold himself speaking.

Arnold de Groot was born in Utrecht on October 29, 1924 as the third child, after two elder sisters, in a poor family. On October 31 he was baptized/ His full baptismal name was: Arnoldus Cornelis Henricus. His father was Cornelius Henricus, his mother van Belkom Josephina. On March 6, 1933 Arnold received the Sacrament of Confirmation. Like St. John Bosco, like Servant of God Don Carlo Braga, like Servant of God Don Gaetano Nicosia before him, Arnold lost his father when he was 2 years old. His youth was dominated by the economic crisis (the Great Depression of 1929-1932) and World War II (1939-1945). In the 1930s, the priesthood and missionary work were in the spotlight in Holland's Catholic education. Ms. Bauhaus, an active Salesian lay mission partner, inspired the children at school. She found a response from Arnold, among others. On June 21, 1938

he was registered as an aspirant for the priesthood by Fr. Heinrich Kremer (†1956), the director of Studiehuis (Study House) Don Bosco in Leusden, which had opened its doors to Salesian aspirants in 1937.

That date and that first meeting remained etched in Arnold's memory: "The feast of Saint Aloysius was celebrated in Leusden on that day." The school year started for him there in September 1938. The aspirants worked hard outside of school hours, during the construction of the study house, in the garden, etc. The boys learned to use their hands outside of class hours with Father Kremer. As director, Father Kremer regularly provided the students, collectively and individually, with tips and texts for their spiritual formation. Arnold took that seriously to heart. The study of the classical languages (Latin and Greek) did not come easy to him. Teachers may also have been a bit too demanding. After a few years, Arnold was told that he did not have sufficient aptitude for those classical languages. He would have to give up training in view of the priesthood. But the director then asked him if he might want to stay with Don Bosco after all. "Yes, of course, I want to stay," had been his spontaneous answer.

At that time, the Study House had already been transferred to Ugchelen due to the German occupation of Leusden. In the school year 1943-44 Arnold and ten others completed the novitiate year. Father van Lent was novice master. One of the fellow novices had been Jan Finkers. In his interview, Arnold, beaming, pointed out to the interviewer that Jan and himself, who were rejected for their language aptitude at the time, in retrospect actually learned to use foreign languages the most. On August 16, 1944, the novices made their first profession, thus becoming S.D.B. (Salesians of Don Bosco, Sons of Don Bosco...) Arnold de Groot professed as a Coadjutor Salesian, i.e. as a lay Salesian, while most others professed as clerics, i.e. as candidates for the Salesian priesthood.

Shortly after the novitiate, he expressed his desire to become proficient in the technical field. He was allowed to register for a study-by-correspondence at the technical institute

PGNA (Energy, Efficiency & Conservation) in Arnhem, Netherlands. Later it was Salesian Provincial Father Annibale Bortoluzzi (†1982) in particular who encouraged him to continue in that direction. When it came to missions, in those years in Holland, people mainly talked about the work in Belgian Congo. That also appealed to Arnold. It must have been during the 1946 Extraordinary Visitation by Father Giacomo Simonetti (†1961) that Arnold submitted an application to be sent to the missions. He had drawn it up in Italian with the help of others. A short time later, Father Godfrey Roozen (†1997) came on leave for the first time. He was a missionary in China. In Ugchelen he asked the students point-blank whether they would like to go to China with him. At least six men reported then. Arnold was the only Coadjutor among them, all the others were clerics. In 1947 five of them left for China by ship (Arnold de Groot, Cornelius Groot, Gerardus Majella Kerklaan †2005, Adriaan Riemslag †1999, Jan Van der Valk †2020). They arrived in Hong Kong on April 26, 1947. Br. Arnold had never heard of the English Crown Colony before. While the clerics went to Shanghai, Arnold was told to remain in Hong Kong and in Hong Kong Br. Arnold got his Chinese name, pronounced Hung Chi Kong in Cantonese and Kong Zhi Gang in Mandarin ("Hung" being the surname and "Chi Kong" the name, meaning, very appropriately, "Strong Will", "Will of Steel").

One of the first things he did in Hong Kong was to renew his temporary vows for another three years, finally making his perpetual profession on 16 August 1950. In Hong Kong, in addition to his daily duties, he continued his studies. From 1947 to 1950 he did his three years of Practical Training in St. Louis School, West Point, Hong Kong, acting as assistant secretary in the Provincial Office, assistant in the boarding section, and teacher in the school. From that time on,PGNA (Energy, Efficiency & Conservation) received homework from the Far East.Br. Arnold followed that electrical engineering course to the end. He then started another correspondence course at ASSO (Arnhemse School voor Schriftelijk Onderwijs) also in Arnhem.

He obtained his Diplomas remotely. Arnold soon, from the Hong Kong Government Education Department, received an appointment as electronical engineering unregistered teacher dated August 27, 1954. Then he had to wait twenty years to be appointed as registered teacher on June 1, 1974. Br. Arnold called himself a "self-taught." Over the years he became increasingly skilled in his field. It can be said that eventually he reached a level of competence equivalent to university level.

From 1954 Br. Arnold was officially a teacher. By now he had learned enough of the Chinese language. From his first arrival in China, he did everything possible to master Cantonese, the Chinese dialect spoken in Hong Kong. He practiced "learn by doing", "work and learn." A few Chinese characters everyday. Always ask the students for correction and explanation. "That language has no mnemonics", he would say. From 1960 to 1962, he was sent to Vietnam to establish a Mechanical and Electrical Workshop in one of our Salesian schools there, in Govap, Saigon. There he had also planned to learn the language in two years. But after two years, his work commitments had become so tight that this plan had become obsolete.

In the 1950s, the Salesian communities in Hong Kong still consisted largely of missionaries. Arnold shared daily life with Italians, Spaniards, Poles, English, Irish, Austrians, etc. Over the years, young Chinese joined the Congregation. A number of missionaries returned to their countries of origin, most of them because of health reasons. Most chose to stay in their mission land until their deaths. Such was the Flemish Father John Timmermans (†1994), who was known for his dedicated work in the Festive Oratory. Br. Arnold sat at his deathbed and read to him the last letters Father John had received from his family. After all, in those years Arnold had become the only Dutch speaker in Salesian Hong Kong. Since then, Br. Arnold shared community life mainly with fellow confreres from China itself.

As a teacher, apart from the three years in St. Louis and the two years in Govap, Vietnam, Br. Arnold always worked in Aberdeen Technical School, Hong Kong. He was a teacher in

many senses. As teacher in the classroom, as head of the electrical engineering workshop, as instructor of the musical band, as gymnastics instructor (taking over from the legendary Br. Ottavio Fantini),and as coach of the unbeatable football club of the school. From the Hong Kong School Sports Association, after submitting to the Examination (Pass with Credit), he was awarded the School Boy Football Referee Certificate on 15th April 1970. For at least 30 years, since 1977 and into the first decade of the new millennium, Br. Arnold de Groot had been head of the Examination Board for Electrical Engineering of the Government Examination Authority. One of the two other members of the board was a former student of his. This former student, in addition to his specialization in technology, was now also a permanent deacon in the Diocese of Hong Kong: Deac. Joseph Sung Wan Lung (†2014). Br. Arnold was proud of him. He said: "These permanent deacons follow a course of study that lasts at least five years, a difficult task for people who choose to do so at a later age."

Br. Arnold de Groot continued to stay in Aberdeen Technical School even after his retirement as a teacher in 1990. He stayed there until 2010. No longer a teacher in the classroom or in the workshop, Br. Arnold continued to take care of boarders. The age of ATS students at that time was always between 13 and 18 years old. Br. Arnold mainly dealt with older boys aged 14 to 17, located as a special group in the separate Todd Wing, familiarly called the To Tak Tai Ha (Virtue Mansion). This arrangement offered the opportunity for an evening word after the evening prayer. He now gave his boys the opportunities for mental and moral growth that he had received in his youth in Leusden. His pedagogy was: "never punish, never hit, always maintain patience." His educational rationale: "always try to convince them of the right path."

In his retirement, he could take time off to also follow up the many past pupils who had graduated from the school. He offered this service in his capacity as Salesian Delegate to the Association of Former Pupils of Aberdeen Technical School in

Hong Kong. Before him, this post had always been assigned to priests. While fulfilling this task, Br. Arnold could experience how much former pupils appreciated the education received in ATS. Not only on the part of the former students living in Hong Kong itself, but also on the part of about 200 past pupils who now lived abroad in the United States and Canada and whoalways stayed in touch with him. They invited him again and again to come and visit them. In the interview, Br. Arnold named the places where people expected him. "It's a long journey", he would say, hinting at his advancing old age. "I'll see how long I can last," he used to say. Past pupils took any propitious occasion to express their gratitude to Br. Arnold. Among his papers, he kept a Happy Birthday card for his 90th Birthday signed by about thirty past pupils.

In the 2006 interview, when asked how he saw his own future, Br. Arnold answered that he had decided to stay in Hong Kong until his death. People sometimes said to him that he had seen that city grow. He then would answer: "No, I have not seen the city grow. I have seen it being built." His decision to stay certainly drew great respect from Superiors and confreres. To be accepted, Br. Arnold knew that one had to speak the Chinese language. After so many years, that no longer cost him any effort.

As far as the future of Don Bosco's work and the Salesian Congregation is concerned, in 2006 Br. Arnold thought that it was now a matter of transferring the schoolsto the management, preferably, of former students. The Salesians should also have to focus on special youth care in Hong Kong. But this would only have a chance of success if this activity were linked to the schools. The coming General Chapter (2008) could be expected to come up with proposals regarding the older confreres. "Until now", he said,"the emphasis has been strongly on education. Fellow Brothers are now being retired at the age of sixty. In Oratories and special youth care there are still rich opportunities for them to commit themselves to the ideals that we have received from Don Bosco." Among the papers that Br. Arnold kept with care, we have found documents relating to the preparation of Provincial

Chapter 2016 which discussed precisely the issues mentioned by Br. Arnold in his 2006 interview. This bears witness to his perseverant attention to the development of the Salesian mission he had come to promote in Hong Kong sixty years before in the far-away 1947.

Then, in 2010, Br. Arnold's life took a turn. The then 86-year old Br. Arnold was taken into his own home by one of his ATS past pupils, Mr. Simon Chan. This came about like this. Mr. Simon in 2010 had lost his father. Considering Br. Arnold as his second father, on one occasion when Br. Arnold needed nursing after a stay in Canossa Hospital, Hong Kong, Simon asked the Salesian Superiors to be allowed to take Br. Arnold into his home for a few weeks. But then the few weeks became 16 years! For 16 years, from 2010 to a few weeks before his death, Mr. Simon, in his own home, close to Canossa Hospital, took filial care of Br. Arnold. On Sundays, Simon would bring him to attend Mass in the chapel of Canossa Hospital. When impeded, the Salesians occasionally would bring him Holy Communion. On Br. Arnold's 100th Birthday, with Mr. Simon the ATS past pupils organized a grand celebration. It was around that time that we, too, began hearing Br. Arnold's frequent expression: "It is time for me to go. I am just waiting for the good Lord to come and take me with him." One of the last words heard from the almost 102-year old Br. Arnold by Mr. Simon Chan, when bringing him to St. Teresa's Hospital for his last hospital stay, were like those pronounced twenty years earlier: "It is a long journey. It is a long journey." As Viaticum on the long journey, the day before his death Holy Mass was celebrated at his bedside and he received Holy Communion with a drop of Precious Blood.

Two weeks ago, on Wednesday September 23, 2026, the long journey has hopefully come to its glorious end, after almost 102 years of Christian life, 82 of Salesian religious life, and 79 of missionary life. The Vigil Requiem Mass on Thursday October 1 (Feast of the Patron of Missions St. Theresa of the Child Jesus) was presided over by Card. Joseph Zen Ze Kiun S.D.B. in the Salesian Parish of St. Anthony's in West Point where, in 1947, Br.

Arnold had begun his Chinese missionary life. A dozen Salesians concelebrated and an assembly, mainly of ATS past pupils, more numerous than expected, took part. The homily was delivered by a past-pupil of Br. Arnold, Provincial Economer Fr. Joseph Ng Chi Yuen. At the end of the Mass, Oscar, the nephew of Br. Arnold who had come from Holland to represent the family at the Funeral, gave expression to his and his family's feelings, entitling them: "Some words from me about my uncle Arnold". Here they are:

"My name is Oscar, I am the son of Arnold's sister and I would like to tell you a little bit of my 'dutch view' of my uncle Arnold or 'Hong Sir' as you all know him here. When I was a young child, Arnold was visiting our family every five years and later on every few years being part of our family. Already then he was more than just an overseas uncle to me. Together with my mother and father we used to visit other family members and various places in the Netherlands, Germany and Belgium and also former ATS students who were staying in Europe.

He was like, in Dutch saying, "my sugar uncle" always giving me China made products. As a kid, it felt like Santa Claus! Seeing him arriving on one of his home comings with a huge package, which I later found out, was a present for me, an electrical race-track. I never thought people could take that as luggage in a plane.

I remember whenever a car stopped in front of our house and the driver was Chinese we knew former students from ATS had arrived! Arnold had told them they would be welcomed at our house which we loved so much. In those years we had so many Chinese visitors, which was very nice, special and fun.

In1980 during one of Arnold'shome visits my father suddenly died from a heart attack at the age of 56 which was a terrible shock. Arnold was such a great comfort for my mum and myself at that time. Much later on, my mother and her partner Wim, invited my uncle Arnold to join their summer holiday traveling around France, Switzerland, Italy, Spain, and Portugal in a caravan. A few years later, my mum and Wim also visited Hong

Kong, where Arnold showed them around, and after that, I made my first visit to him in 1996.

As I've grown older, I got to know all his talents. He could speak Dutch, English, Italian, Cantonese, German, and French! He was the band director, a music teacher, a physical education teacher, an electronics teacher, and even a football coach and referee. He had such an incredible amount of energy that he poured into teaching all his students at Aberdeen Technical School, treating them like family, even more the students who lived in the boarding section.

He was also a wise and respected man, and I admire him for that, too, because I know what it takes to become a teacher, having studied Physical Education myself. I've come to truly appreciate the special person my uncle was.

Over the years Arnold grew a special friendship with Simon Chan being one of the past pupils of ATS. My uncle became a mentor to him. I got to know Simon as well and he became like a brother to me. When my uncle'smobility was deteriorating Simon let Arnold in his home and helped him with his daily activities. I want to thank my Chinese brother Simon for his loving dedication in also taking care of Arnold.

A few last words to Arnold will be in Dutch: Oom Arnold ik wil u heel hartelijk danken voor de speciale banddie wij met elkaar hebben gehad. Later zullen wij elkaar wel weer ontmoeten.

Translated: Uncle Arnold, I want to thank you very much for the special bond we had. We will meet again!"

After this, Oscar represented Simon reading out Simon's own words of farewell to Br. Arnold, saying: "Here are a few words from Simon Chan which I would present to you on his behalf: 'Having you in my home is an honour, Having you in my heart is a blessing, I believe you are now in the loving hands of the Lord. Rest easy and happy. Until we meet again, I Thank You!'."

As Salesians of Don Bosco we are all extremely grateful to Mr. Simon Chan for these words of faith and love and for his 16-

year long filial care of our Brother. Thanks also to Oscar's sharing, who has made us feel "in the family".

The next day, Friday October 2, 2026, Liturgical Memoria of Guardian Angels, the Funeral Mass for the Burial of the mortal remains of Br. Arnold de Groot took place in the same St. Anthony's Church. This Funeral Mass was presided over by CIN Provincial Fr. Domingos Leong Teng Kok, preached by the last Salesian Rector of Br. Arnold, and concelebrated by half-a-dozen Salesian priests, participated again by Br. Arnold de Groot's nephew Oscar, and numerous past pupils. After the Funeral Mass, the mortal remains of Br. Arnold de Groot were buried in St. Michael Catholic Cemetery in Happy Valley, Hong Kong. The burial ended withthe Marian song "Salve Regina" and the hymn to St. John Bosco most popular in Salesian China.

After the Funeral, Mr. Simon Chan was even so kind as to give us, for use in our Braga House for elderly Salesians, the fine hospital bed that he had used to care for Br. Arnold. He also gave us the precious personal documents that Br. Arnold had personally kept until the end of his life. Among them, the 2006 year interview that provided us with most of the material included in this Obituary Letter.

Dear confreres, we are deeply grateful to God and to his parents for having given us Br. Arnold. A few days ago he left us, but only temporarily, as Simon and Oscar have said so well.We recommend him to your fraternal prayers, sure that in the Salesian Garden he is also praying for us.

Please, pray also for us here in Hong Kong as, in Jesus Mary Joseph DonBosco, we are,Yours affectionately,

Fr. Lanfranco M. Fedrigotti, Rector
and all Salesian confreres
of Salesian Missionary House (Salesian House of Studies and Braga House),
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DATA FOR THE NECROLOGY

Br. Arnold de Groot, born in Utrecht (Holland) on 29 October 1924, professed in Ugchelen (Holland) on 16 August 1944, arrived as missionary in Hong Kong on 26 April 1947, educational-pastoral work in St. Louis School (1947-1950), in Aberdeen Trade School (1950-1960), in Govap Technical School (Vietnam, 1960-1962), again in Aberdeen Technical School (1962-2010), died in Hong Kong on 23 September 2026, aged 101 and 11 months, after 82 years of Salesian religious life and 79 years of missionary life.