

First SVD Brothers

“This is the jubilee of your entrance in our house. Now we do not want to overdo the celebrations. But we must make an exception in the case of the first who accompanied me from the start and helped me to build up the brothers’ department of our Society...”

- Arnold Janssen

By Bro. Carlos Ferrada, Assistant General for Brothers’ Formation and Education and Bro. Mark Paglicawan (PHS)

It is fair to recover the history of our first SVD Brothers who accompanied our founder from the beginning. They, men full of faith, trusted on the missionary project of Fr. Arnold and consecrated themselves in our Society.

Normally, the historians pay attention only to the important events and personalities; and disregard the small tales and ordinary people. This is the reason why we do not get much information in the works of our SVD historians like Fisher, Borneman, and Alt about individual brothers. Thus, we are blessed because one of the first brothers, Br. Martinus Jürgen, put in writing his memories. The Memoirs of Br. Martinus is the most important source where we can get to know our first brothers.

Br. MARCOLINUS, HEINRICH ELSKEMPER



Br. Marcolinus, Heinrich Elskemper (1851-1922)

Born: 19.10.1851 Merfeld/ Münster, Germany

Entrance in Steyl: April 25, 1878

Beginning of novitiate: December 8, 1878

First vows: May 23, 1881

Final vows: October 25, 1891

Types of work: Senior of the Brothers, Bakery, and Farm

Died in Steyl, GEW - 16.12.1922

1) First SVD Brother

Heinrich Elskemper, later on Br. Marcolinus is considered the first SVD brother. Josef Alt, in *Journey of Faith*, mentions the admission of Elskemper to the postulancy and novitiate in the Mission House. He writes:

“In the summer of 1878, shortly before the gardener’s helper from Kremsmuenster left Steyl, the two candidates Kreichel and Elskemper made novena ‘that we will

get the necessary number of postulants.’ Even now, they asked for the habit; ‘of course the habit does not make the monk but associating here with the sisters and workers without a habit yet living as a religious is very difficult.’ Starting a religious life without habit was for them unthinkable. Fr. Janssen entered on Elskemper’s application for admission: *Novitiate, 8 December 1878*. The first brothers’ novitiate was opened with two novices. Kreichel received the name of Br. Jacobus and Elskemper, Br. Markolinus. This was, however, the investiture and name-giving ceremony; the novitiate was for the Dominican Third Order. Kreichel eventually left Steyl. Br. Marcolinus remained, made vows in the SVD and is, therefore, considered the first Brother of the Society of the Divine Word.”

Br. Marcolinus was the first postulant who gave his first vows in written form to the founder on 23 May 1881. Just under a year later, he took vows “in an official form” on 30 April 1882 with Br. Bernardus and Br. Martinus. From then on, the three had the title “Brother.” They bound themselves to the Society of the Divine Word for life through the final vows on 25 October 1891.

2) Senior of Brothers

The position of Senior is no longer used in most of our formation houses; therefore, it probably does not say anything to us. But at the time of the foundation of our Society, to be a Senior of formandi was a big responsibility. Our SVD historian, Fr. Fritz Borneman, in *A History of the Divine Word Missionaries*, gives us a good picture of how important was to be a Senior of the brothers. He writes, “In the case of brothers being admitted to final profession, the word and the work of the Senior brother carried more weight than that of their spiritual director.”

Heinrich Elskemper, later on Br. Marcolinus, was the Senior of the postulants. Br. Martinus Jürgen, on this, recalls, “He (Br. Marcolinus) had to allocate the tasks that had to be done. He, himself, took care of the bakery in the same way; just as in those days, every farmer baked his own bread. All the other works were changed almost everyday. The Senior had to assign our work to us. The requests for the different tasks to be carried out went to him. Almost everyday, there was something else. First it was, ‘Today you must help turn the printing press!’ then, ‘Today you can help in the garden.’”

The priests’ shoes were also polished in the bakery in the evenings and those who were free had to help with that. Br. Martinus mentions in his Memoirs, “During the polishing we prayed the rosary. A certain ‘Julius’ had a different opinion. Sometimes, he did not want to hear any more about praying. The Senior (Br. Marcolinus) admonished him with a few respectful words.”

The Senior also had to ensure that the Rule was kept well. Br. Martinus Jürgen writes in his Memoirs, “In those days, we had 10 hours of silence. In honour of the Passion of Christ, we had to keep silence on Fridays until noon. If we, young men, forgot from time to time, the Senior would admonish us, calling out from the bakery, ‘It’s Friday today!’”

Also, through the Memoirs of Br. Martinus, we learned something about how it was during the Brothers’ chapter of faults. He remembered that, even before the novitiate was introduced, our founder

had held a chapter of faults with the brothers. Other prayers were said. Instead of the Confiteor, the Psalm de Profundis was used. The chapter of faults began the custom of asking once a week our Senior, Br. Marcolinus, for a penance for all our faults done in the previous week.

3) Assignments

In the early years of our society, there was a lot of heavy work to be done by the brothers. One of them was fetching lime and coal from the station in Tegelen, which had consequence to their health. Br. Martinus Jürgen, in his Memoirs, gives us details on this:

“The unpleasant part was that wagons almost always arrived for us at the station on feast days that were not celebrated publicly here; and they had to be unloaded on those days if we wanted to avoid paying several guilders storage fee. When unloading coal, we perspired heavily and became pitch black with coal dust, but we could get rid of that with a good wash. With the lime, it was a different matter. Where the lime dust settled on moist places – eyes, mouth, nose – it dissolved and burned the skin. Thus, Br. Marcolinus once came home so burnt in those places that he was hardly recognizable. I drew a lesson from that and later tied a handkerchief over my face for that work, protecting myself in that way from the lime dust.”

Br. Marcolinus took care of the bakery before being transferred to St. Anne’s Farm. Br. Martinus Jürgen remembers that, until 1878, the bread was purchased from outside. Then, the first oven was built into the old stables or barn outbuilding. Jan van Dijk and student Kossmann first heated this new oven and got it ready for baking. The student Kossmann was the first baker. Heinrich Elskemper, Br. Marcolinus, took over from him the following year. According to an old custom, the dough was kneaded with the feet in those days. Br. Marcolinus worked at the bakery until 1882 when the bakery was moved to the new building (the present north wing), below the brothers’ dining room to where the steam cauldrons for the Mission House kitchen are now located. The bakery got its first machine for making black bread. Around that time, the first trained baker, Br. Ceslaus, also came. That meant Br. Marcolinus became free of the responsibility and, later on, went to St. Anne’s farm in Tegelen. There, it is said that Br. Marcolinus paid good attention that the brewery was not too frequently visited by thirsty souls. Moreover, our founder would often retire to St. Anne’s farm to work on the Rule there.

4) Piety

Br. Marcolinus, according to Br. Martinus Jürgen, was very pious. He liked to pray and had a special devotion to the Passion of Christ. He had painted the body on the crucifix in his room with red paint so that it looked as though it had been scourged. He liked to pray the Way of the Cross. In the last weeks before he died, he was seen supporting himself with a chair, praying the Way of the Cross.

5) Generosity with the poor

Another characteristic of Br. Marcolinus was his good heart to the poor. In his Memoirs, Br. Martinus Jürgen recalls that, “At St. Anne’s farm in Tegelen, Br. Marcolinus, who was also the Senior there, was able to do much good for poor people, not merely by giving generously to beggars at the door. He also went out to Tegelen on winter evenings to find the poor and give them what they needed. He did not just give the people food; he also gave them blankets and the like.”

6) Personal Cross

Like Saint Paul, Brother Marcolinus had a chronic illness that accompanied him throughout his life. Br. Martinus Jürgen in his Memoirs recounts that Br. Marcolinus suffered a great deal from headaches.

7) Conclusion

What can SVD missionaries of the 21st century learn from Brother Marcolinus?

Without a doubt, we should be struck by his deep spirituality, which was expressed in multiple ways: in personal and community prayer, in his dedicated and responsible work, in the way how he lived out his religious vows, in the accompaniment of the brothers who were under his responsibility, and in his concern for the poorest. Brother Marcolinus' spirituality was not disembodied, overturned in pure devotions, since it was translated into all aspects of his life, and especially in the fact that he saw the face of Christ in the poorest. The love of Christ urged him to alleviate the miseries and pain that he found around him.

Another important feature of his spirituality was his humility and simplicity. Brother Marcolinus never sought personal glory, or to be more than the others. He was a simple man who did a simple job: bakery and agriculture, but he did it all with joy for the greater glory of God.