



## MILTON, PENNSYLVANIA

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In telling the story of the Society of the Divine Word in the United States, and in particular its foundations in the present Chicago Province, it would be remiss of us not to include something, ever so brief, about the first SVD community and its house in Milton, Pennsylvania.

The arrival of Bro. Wendelin (Joseph Meyer) in Hoboken, New Jersey, on October 15, 1895, is well documented, as is also the arrival of Bro. Homobonus (Joseph Stiller) in July 1896.<sup>1</sup> But Fr. Francis Markert, the first SVD historian in the United States, made a significant observation when he noted that with the arrival of Fr. John Peil, Fr. Joseph Fischer, and Bro. Michael Fecken on September 27, 1897, there was finally an established “viable community” in North America. “These five pioneers,” Markert wrote, “can justly be called the original founders of the SVD in America and, therefore, of Techny as well.”<sup>2</sup> Fr. Peil was appointed first superior in the United States by Fr. Arnold Janssen, the Founder of the SVD.<sup>3</sup>

Fr. Superior Peil wasted no time moving out of Hoboken—across the river from New York City. By October 15, 1897, less than a month after his arrival in the States, he had made the decision to move the community away from the New York–New Jersey area to a small rural town in Pennsylvania. On October 29, Fr. Janssen, after checking with his council, approved that move but made it clear that he considered it provisional and done in too great a haste.

How did the Society end up in Milton, Pennsylvania? Initially it was the work of Bro. Wendelin who had traveled to Philadelphia to sell SVD publications among his many German contacts. On



THE BEGINNING OF THE SOCIETY OF THE DIVINE WORD IN AMERICA  
127 NORTH FRONT STREET, MILTON, PA.

his list were two German-born diocesan priests, the Hammeke brothers, who presumably were among the names and addresses Bro. Wendelin had collected from confreres in Steyl before departing for the United States. It is worth noting that Frs. Theodore and Hubert Hammeke were familiar with the Society in Steyl—even before they met the ubiquitous *Reisebruder* ('traveling Brother' in German), Bro. Wendelin, peddling SVD German publications throughout the country. Both diocesan priests were nephews of Fr. Francis Xavier Nies, who had been martyred in China in 1887. They had a good family connection with Steyl.

While getting to know other German priests in the Philadelphia area, Bro. Wendelin was put in touch with a diocesan priest in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, by the name of Fr. Anthony Kaul. Quickly Bro. Wendelin put his superior, Fr. Peil, in contact with Fr. Kaul, who immediately suggested that a visit be made to the Very Rev. Thomas McGovern, bishop of the Diocese of Harrisburg, to see if there was a chance for the small itinerant community of five SVDs to find a spot where it might settle down and make a foundation in the diocese.

Bishop McGovern and Bro. Wendelin met at Fr. Peil's suggestion. Fr. Peil excused himself from the meeting since he did not know English at that time. Immediately the bishop enthusiastically welcomed the Society and had grand plans for its work and contribution to the local Church. He would assign the SVDs to the parish in Milton, with about 150 Catholics, where he also wanted them to build and run an industrial school for boys on a 200-acre farm outside of town that he would give them. Fr. Peil visited the site and came up with even more plans of his own for the future: a diocesan seminary, a college, an orphanage, and of course, a printing press.

Frs. Peil and Fischer each arrived with their few things in Milton on November 25, 1897. As Brandewie commented in his book, however, "They were followed the next day by the three Brothers and a railroad car full of furniture, books, magazine, and almanacs."<sup>4</sup> When the five arrived, Fr. George J. Breckel, a diocesan priest, was pastor of St. Joseph Parish in Milton, some fifty miles north of Harrisburg.

In 2005 the parish in Milton celebrated its 200th anniversary and included a short paragraph in the commemorative booklet about the arrival of the SVDs. The first sentence reads, "Fr. Breckel opened his rectory to the Society of the Divine Word, providing its first home in the United States."<sup>5</sup> The five SVDs wasted no time, however, in renting their own home, the first house of the Society in the United States.

Curiously, that same bicentennial booklet contains a rare picture of the five members of the SVD community posed on the porch of their house in Milton. Special note might be made of the community's small, unnamed dog resting at the feet of Bro. Wendelin. Of course, on the porch were also stacks of Steyl publications ready to be sold to German immigrants throughout the United States.

It can be stated, therefore, that the first SVD community house in the United States was located at 127 North Front Street in the rural town of Milton, within the Diocese of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania.<sup>6</sup>

Events moved swiftly for the community in Milton and all too swiftly for Fr. Superior General Janssen. When the bishop proposed that the transfer of the farm property and the parish assignment to the SVDs to be "in perpetuity," that was too much for Founder Janssen. The contract was rejected, but the Founder suggested that the men

could take over the parish for one to three years and even start an orphanage in a rented house. That proposal the bishop summarily rejected. So, necessarily, Fr. Peil and community began to look for a new location where a seminary could be established for the training of Americans for overseas mission work, yet another idea of the superior. This one proved, in time, to be a good one.

In addition to the positions of both the bishop and the Founder, there were other good reasons to move on. There were few Catholics and too few Germans in the area of Milton. Many families (including the bishop) were Irish. The future of the Society would be limited by these factors as well as by the truly rural location. In brief, although Fr. Peil was a mover and shaker, filled with many plans and ideas, the stay in Milton proved to be brief. His attention turned to Chicago. It was a large Midwestern city, the German and Catholic population was large, and possibilities for the future expansion of the Society in North America were considerable. Thus, without hesitation, on May 4, 1899, a house was rented in Shermerville, Illinois, for the five missionaries. The community had not stayed one full year in its first foundation in Milton.<sup>7</sup>

Still, one might argue that the first SVD house in America was in fact in the town of Milton. Imagine, if the Society had remained in that location, our priests and Brothers might have been called the Milton Missionaries!<sup>8</sup>

## Notes

1. Ernest Brandewie, *In the Light of the Word: Divine Word Missionaries in North America* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000), 14 et passim. Hereafter noted as EB with page number.

2. Francis Markert, *Fifty Years in America: Society of the Divine Word*, unpublished manuscript, 1959. SVD Archives, Techny, Illinois.

3. Father Janssen was declared a saint on October 5, 2003, by John Paul II.

4. EB, 25.

5. *1805–2005: A History of St. Joseph Church, Milton Pennsylvania*, Xeroxed copy, unpaginated. This booklet and an earlier forty-two-page booklet prepared for the 150th anniversary of the parish, *A Glorious Heritage of One Hundred Fifty Years, 1805–1856*, were given by the parish staff to the scribe on his visit to the parish in Milton. In 2011 the scribe was doing mission appeals in the Diocese of Harrisburg and made it a point to pull off the expressway to visit Milton. Both booklets have been given to the Chicago Province Archives. The staff had no recollection of any SVD visiting the parish perhaps since the time the community left Milton in 1898.

6. Milton is an abbreviation of Milltown, the original name of the town that was known throughout the area for its lumber mill—Straub’s Mill—“which played a large part in the growth and prosperity of the community since settlers from the surrounding countryside flocked to Straub’s Mill to avoid the long trek to the Freeland Mill on Warrior Run” (undated visitors’ map and guide to Milton).

7. EB, 21–36 passim.

8. The archives of the generalate and the Chicago Province hold more than fifty pieces of correspondence between Frs. Peil and Janssen and others about the SVD house in Milton. They have not been transcribed from the old German script or translated into English but might provide another interesting glimpse into both the person of St. Arnold and the meticulous care he gave to the short-lived foundation of the Society in Milton, Pennsylvania.