



Father Henricus (Heinz) MENNENS
(1912 - 2013)

*Died 13 July 2013, in Herent (Belgium)
aged 100, with 79 years of Religious Profession.*

Henricus Matthias Mennens was his official name. He was born in Freisenbruch (Germany) on 2 December 1912, hence his name Heinz. For some time he was the oldest confrere in the congregation. Six months ago we celebrated his 100th birthday. At that time he was still on his feet, literally, but since the beginning of the new year his health started deteriorating. A fortnight ago we had to take him to a carehome for the elderly, Betlehem in Herent where he peacefully passed away in the early afternoon on 13 July.

He went to secondary school in Schimmert (NL) from 1926 till 1932 and subsequently did his noviciate in Meerssen (NL) where he took his first vows on 8 September 1933. In Oirschot (NL) he studied philosophy and theology and was ordained priest on 12 February 1939. The same year (the beginning of the war) he went to Rotselaar to teach till he retired. He was good at languages: Dutch, German, French, English, Latin and Greek. It strikes me that his letter for his noviciate was written in perfect French and that it was signed with 'Henri Mennens'. A year later, for his first vows, his letter was written in Latin starting with the words 'Ego Henricus-Maria Mennens'. And what's more: he died on 13th July, the feast day of St. Henricus.

In a small note written in 1937, I read that Heinz wanted to do missionary work, but that, according to his teachers, he was more suited for teaching considering his talents and weak health. As such Heinz devoted himself completely to developing the intellectual and religious formation of young people. No doubt for years he had strong hopes that at least a few youngsters would join the Montfortian congregation, which actually happened. A true characteristic of Heinz was his flexibility: each time changes took place in the school's schedule, Heinz was willing to fit in. Whatever his superior asked, he did it, no matter the efforts he had to make. This was not always easy because of his taste for accuracy (everything had to be perfect).

We have no idea how many students he taught during his lifetime. He was a very idiosyncratic teacher. Lots of anecdotes could be told! For the celebration of his centennial teachers and tutors had made a very lively evocation of the colourful person Heinz was. As such they expressed their sincere gratitude for all his hard work and activities in the team of fathers and brothers in Rotselaar.

Those 35 years as a teacher and another 5 years as a secretary of the school-principal were a wonderful time for Heinz. The period that followed however appeared to be the most difficult one: he was asked for all sorts of things in totally different areas. First there was the request by Bishop Frehen to become chaplain in Iceland in a community of Sisters. When his superior suggested that he'd better go on trial for two months (the duration of the summer holidays) he refused saying: 'you know perfectly well that I would very much like to work

there for 2 years'. Fortunately he was able to postpone his stay because there was a small problem which had to do with his retirement: in order to receive his full pension he had to teach one more year (till 1974), followed by 5 more years as a secretary. But bishop Frehen insisted and it was not easy for Heinz to make up his mind. Finally he tried to work there for a short period (1980-1981) but he was far from happy.

Next Frans Swerts asked for his help in D'Hoppe. For many years Heinz used to assist the dean in Wolfsburg (Germany); he did this job with a lot of enthusiasm but to become chaplain as he was asked, was a bit too much. He did spend a very short period there though, to offer his service. But he came back to Belgium and he was glad to be able to join the animation team for the Lourdes pilgrimages. In 1989 Cees Klijs had to be replaced in the St.-Francis hospital in Heusden-Zolder; again Heinz was willing to take his place. A year later a new superior had to be appointed for the community in Rotselaar and all eyes were upon Heinz. As a true religious person for whom obedience was very important he could not but accept this mandate. He was 78 by then! The booklet which was made for his installation and which he personally illustrated says it all! Till 2003, his mandate was renewed every time; he was then 91 years old! From then on we read on his personal filing card: 'retired'. At last!

After his retirement as a teacher he often gave a positive response when his superiors made an appeal on him, even though it was rather demanding. He had a good sense of humour and at the same time he had his two feet on the ground, but his motto which I will always remember, was: 'I am the happiest person in the whole world'.

Heinz, thanks a lot for your generosity, your flexibility even when it took some effort. And thank you for your precious honesty.