

REV. VINCENT ANTON METZLER, O.CARM.

1875-1940

By the Rev. Stephen J. McDonald, O.Carm.

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AN EDIFYING and very active career came to a peaceful close on August 17, 1940, in the death of Father Vincent Metzler, O. Carm., prior and pastor of Holy Trinity, Pittsburgh, Pa. He died in St. Joseph's Hospital, South Side, after undergoing an operation for an internal cancer. When he was brought to the hospital on Monday, August 5th, the Sisters of St. Joseph provided him with every comfort and aid within the competence of Pittsburgh's leading physicians. But the rugged strength that had carried him agilely day after day for three decades through Pittsburgh's sharply rising and falling thoroughfares was rapidly yielding before the advance of disease. He edified all in his last hours by characteristic thoughtfulness for those who would be affected, and by his calm resignation to God's will. He expired whilst the Sisters united with members of his own community in reciting the prayers for the dying. Blended with the Sisters' prayers for mercy and adding fervor to them was the memory of Father Vincent's lively interest in their work and their institute. This interest had lasted for a third of a century and had found expression in timely and sane counsel in temporal matters as well as spiritual.

The Most Reverend Hilary J. Doswald, General of the Order, was celebrant of the funeral mass on Tuesday, August 20th. Fathers Peter Kramer, O. Carm., of Leonia, N. J., and Sebastian Urnauer, O. Carm., of New Baltimore, Pa., were deacon and subdeacon.¹

Bishop Hugh Boyle of Pittsburgh was present in the sanctuary. Also present were the Very Rev. Provincial, Father Matthew O'Neill, and Carmelites representing a majority of the communities of the Province. The large number of diocesan priests and members of other religious Orders in attendance bore witness to the wide popularity and general esteem in which the dead Carmelite had been held. Interment was made in Mt. Carmel Cemetery, Pittsburgh, in the plot reserved for members of the Carmelite Order. Markers on nearby graves bore names of members who had labored in the Province in its dawning days, some of whom had been assisted by Father Vincent, and whose work he had carried on efficiently after they had been called by the Master.

Father Vincent Metzler, O. Carm., whose baptismal name was Anton, was born December 8, 1875. His parents were Paul and Josepha (nee Witt) Metzler. They lived in Saulgau, a quaint, historically interesting town that nestles among the rolling hills of southern Wurttemberg. Not many miles to the south lies the charming Lake Constance which is formed by the River Rhine when its long, tortuous advance to the western sea is disputed by the Alpine foothills. From Saulgau one can see on a clear day the distant peaks of the Swiss Alps, one of them, Sentis, covered with eternal snows. It is a country of concentrated beauty. Nature was lavish when adorning it. In this environment young Anton lived till his sixteenth year. He had learned to love its wealth of physical beauty even in those tender years; but when he returned to it in maturity, after long residence in distant America, he awoke to the full majesty and spiritual significance of that corner of God's creation. He spoke of its features reverently as one would speak of a great cathedral. In all his travels he carried in his heart the memory and picture of the beautiful scenes. During the critical period of his adolescence he became acquainted also with the history and traditions of his people, learned of the price of pain, social ostracism and blood which his forefathers were forced to pay for the privilege of remaining loyal to the faith during the wild days of the Reformation, and during the unspeakable horrors of the Thirty Years War. He learned the true history of these great crises from ancient monuments and ruins and age-old highways. They spoke to him a story from which they still vibrated. It was a story such as no books of history can carry. The old town wall, now in ruins, and the beautiful Gothic church where he acted as altar boy had their own special records for his memory files. The influence that all this exercised on his boyish mind was plainly discernible in his maturer years. It had ripened in him a quiet but irresistibly aggressive courage which revealed itself in decisive

word and action when it was a matter of preserving the faith in souls beset with dangers. The records and the after-effects of the Kultur-hampf were also very fresh during his boyhood though his homeland had been spared direct attack in this persecution. The immortal Windthorst was still on the scene conjuring up heroism in the souls of all Catholic patriots. He had a number of intimate stories of those days which he often introduced into his sermons with telling effect.

The training young Anton received in his sterling Christian home taught him to appraise duly life's material and spiritual values. This discernment bore early fruit in a desire to dedicate his energies and abilities to the welfare of souls. When, therefore, he learned there was a dearth of priests in far-away America, he readily volunteered to prepare himself for the service. Word had come of the work of the Carmelites in the United States. Father Pius Meyer, the American Provincial of the Order of Mt. Carmel, whose family lived in near-by Riedlingen, had sent word that German-speaking candidates were needed. In a family conference it was agreed that Anton should dedicate himself, if he chose, to the faith-inspired career of the foreign missions. An older brother, Alphonse, a sister, Aloysia, and a younger brother, Paul, remained at home with their father and mother.

Accordingly, in September, 1891, the opening of classes in the Carmelite preparatory school, New Baltimore, Pa., found Anton struggling with the Greek and Latin irregular verbs, and the more irregular English verbs—not to mention the other parts of speech. The matter of adjusting himself in his new environment was not a long or too difficult process. He was shocked at first, as all are shocked who were bred in Europe's atmosphere of formalism and reverence for higher social ranks, at the different manner of life and of thinking of Americans, at their wider liberties and fewer conventional restraints. But he early learned to esteem these features of life in his new homeland, and even to love them; for he could discern under the divergent life-pattern the basic fundamental values that are the common heritage of all human groups, regardless of geographic or ethnologic boundaries.

During that last decade of the nineteenth century (of abiding interest to the historian of American Carmel) he went successfully through all the phases of seminary training, growing normally in wisdom and grace. He took a full share, too, in all the outdoor features of the life of St. John. These included assistance in the administration of the farm, excavating and building of a dam for the St. John's Lagoon (unimaginative plebes called it a fishpond), making bricks for the new seminary addition, and carrying hod for the bricklayers, all day walks over the mountains, off the beaten trails, picnics in the summer near a Juniata swimming-hole, sleigh rides in the winter to a meal of overflowing plenty in the home of a hospitable mountaineer, and training for a position among the reserves of the seminary intramural baseball league. (He took part in the games mostly in an advisory capacity.) He reacted healthfully to all these breaks in the academic and divinity courses, even gleefully to most of them; but, reviewed in retrospect in his maturer years, they took on a mystic glamour, his voice went low and his features softened into a smile as he reminisced. Perhaps there was an occasional tear, and he would not blush to have it recorded; for there was inescapable pathos in such memory dramas, as he noted, here and there, actors that had gone out of his life forever.

Came finally the day of his ordination to the priesthood. Father Theodore McDonald, then prior at Niagara Falls, conducted the pre-ordination retreat, and accompanied the ordinandi to St. Vincent's Abbey, via Pittsburgh. Father Vincent's four Carmelite confreres were Isidor Martin, Benedict James O'Neill, Stephen J. McDonald and Francis Krebs. These, with one Benedictine and five diocesan clerics, were presented to Bishop Phelan on Friday, May 26, 1899. Father Vincent celebrated his first solemn mass in Holy Trinity Church, Pittsburgh, on the following (Trinity) Sunday.

During his early years in the priesthood the young apostle filled assignments in St. Cecilia's, Englewood, N. J., and St. Joseph's, Leavenworth, Kansas. During his sojourn in Leavenworth he was brought to death's door by typhoid fever. A faithful attendant at his bedside during his illness and convalescence was Father Ward, pastor of the Cathedral, and later, bishop of the diocese. The friendship that sprang up between the two endured for life, despite the fact that later assignments placed a thousand miles between them.

In 1903 (if my memorandum is correct) Father Vincent was assigned to the Priory of Holy Trinity in Pittsburgh and was appointed an assistant in the parish during the last three years of the pastorate of Father Ambrose Bruder. Thereafter the great city "at the forks of the Ohio," the city, not of seven, but of seventy hills, remained the chief scene of his priestly labors. He was Prior and pastor of Holy Trinity from 1909 to 1912, and again pastor from 1915 to 1927. The Provincial Chapter of 1927 elected him prior and pastor of St. Boniface's, Scipio, Kansas. He administered those offices for three triennia; but the Chapter of 1936 recalled him to Pittsburgh as prior. He was confirmed in this office in 1939, and in addition was asked to take over again the full care of the parish.

Holy Trinity priory, Pittsburgh, Father Vincent's home for twenty-eight years of his priestly life, is set in the "Hill District." This name had at one time implied advanced social station; but it has long since lost that significance. Those who now live in the district's neglected and uninspiring houses, whose front doors open abruptly on streets of broken nagging and rough cobbles in disarray, would be classed by students of sociology as the underprivileged. When Father Vincent first arrived as an assistant in the parish the German families that had lived close to the church and priory of Holy Trinity were giving way before the new elements, and were seeking a more wholesome environment in other parts of the city, particularly to the east and the south. They still loved the beautiful Gothic church which their faith and sacrifices had erected at the corner of Center Avenue and Crawford Street, and they faithfully returned to it every Sunday. But as the years passed by and the younger members grew to maturity, the visits became less and less frequent. Most of Holy Trinity's new neighbors were wholly detached from any and all forms of refining leadership. The religious movements among them confined their appeal wholly to emotionalism and invoked no restraints on the grosser appetites. Under such conditions the poor social outcasts soon became the victims—sometimes even the allies—of the promoters of commercialized vice.

When the Chapter of 1909 placed him in full charge of the parish he addressed himself with all the vigor and enthusiasm of youth and with true faith-inspired zeal to the two problems of holding the loyalty and support of the parishioners that had moved to the suburbs, and of restraining the political vultures that were fostering the human decay of the Hill District in order to feed upon it. He succeeded in the first, partly by his charm of manner and personality, but chiefly through his tirelessness and zeal in parochial visits. He gave particular attention to the aged and the sick; and it was his fidelity in this feature of his parish work that wove his name into the cherished records of hundreds of Pittsburgh homes. To the old folks who in their new homes were surrounded by English-speaking neighbors his visits were like a letter from the Fatherland; his cheery conversation in their own tongue refreshed their faith and renewed their interest in life. The decimating influenza epidemic of 1918 was a challenge to his energy and resourcefulness. He met the test fearlessly, and his success strengthened his hold upon hearts. He also won during those trying days grateful plaudits from the city administration for his efficient cooperation.

He made use of the parish societies as a means of holding together his scattering flock. He encouraged all of them, but he gave particular attention to the Society of Christian Mothers. Through it he was able to speak directly to the heart of the family. In their monthly meetings he cautioned the mothers against the taint of selfish, hedonistic materialism that was threatening, as statistics revealed, to turn the nation's cities into graveyards. He taught that the home is the first and most vital unit of the Catholic educational system. Primary and

secondary Catholic schools would labor in vain if the home were not coordinated with them.

The second problem was that of saving the Hill District from being made into a sin-culture area for revenue. It presented a far more trying and irksome test of his courage. It brought him face to face with vice in all its hideous repulsiveness. Nevertheless he did not shrink from any repellent task occasioned by it. He had little time or taste for conflicting theories of sociology; his social philosophy was of the dynamic kind, directed by common sense along the lines of the corporal and spiritual works of mercy. Backed by the earnest men and women of the parish and by some of other denominations, he attacked vigorously the spearheads of vice and corrupt politics that had placed the Hill District under heavy tribute; and he coordinated his efforts with the civic, religious and private agencies that aimed at social betterment. He explained his technique by saying it was useless to attack mosquitoes with arguments; the swamps where they breed must be dried up. So too, vice or radicalism cannot be argued out of existence; the swamps of social injustice must first be drained and filled in.

But early in his campaign he found that all the city's vice was not in the slums, and that as vice ascends the social ladder it takes on subtler but more devastating forms. It shocked his guileless young soul to discover that slums flourished principally because opportunism had become the chief motivation source in the political and economic leadership of city and state. There was little to check the greed and rapacity of those in power if they chose to be greedy and rapacious, for Pennsylvania had become, for all practical purposes, a one-party state. The minority group always went through the motions of contesting elections, but its power in the legislature and the courts was negligible. Such a condition breeds corruption. It did not fail to do so in this case. It made possible the exploitation of the poor and defenseless. The last decades of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth were the heyday of that kind of political and social outlawry that, to hide its ugliness, was euphemistically named "rugged individualism." Vast fortunes were being amassed in the leading industries of the state, particularly iron and oil; but mixed with the dollars of the climbing bank accounts were the discontent and disease of the victims of social injustice, the curses they speak and the vices they practice as a temporary escape from their sorry status. He was powerless in the presence of these state-wide conditions; but he was ever ready to cooperate with every movement that promised a correction of the evils.

However, Pittsburgh was not all slums nor all political corruption. By far the major part of the homes of the city were untouched by these elements and rarely adverted to their existence. To the casual visitor Pittsburgh is just a city of steel and smoke—mostly smoke. But to Father Vincent it was always a city of generous, loyal, hospitable, unselfish hearts. He knew those hearts well and he loved them. He loved also the hills and valleys and rivers clutched in a network of bridges that are Pittsburgh, mainly because they were loved by the people he loved.

He loved the city, too, because of the opportunity it afforded him of spiritual growth. It was not merely the theatre of his life's drama; it was the source whence he drew inspiration and spiritual health and the opportunity for the unfolding of his souls latent strength. His affection and devotion embraced men and women of all denominations and of none. He loved and admired the progressiveness that had made the city the capital of a world-wide empire of steel. He was keenly anxious to give wholesome direction and high purpose to his townsmen's desire for better things. The skyscrapers he could see from his windows were to him symbolic of the soul of Pittsburgh. He begged God to bless it and to help him give to it lofty spiritual aim.

On the supernatural side, Father Vincent was a man of deep faith; in the light of that faith he strove to motivate every act as well as his entire career. But he was also possessed of rare natural endowments of mind and heart which aided him much in his spiritual work. A disarming smile and a hearty, unaffected laugh were a minor but not inconsiderable part of his social

equipment. In addition to these his personality had a certain subtle, dynamic element that attracted the friendship of refined and discerning minds. The friends came from many ranks. The list of them would be very long. Bishop Ward has already been mentioned. We shall name only one other—the lovable Father Sigmund Cratz, Provincial of the Capuchins. Theirs was a rare friendship from which each drew inspiration and help. Father Sigmund was preparing to leave Pittsburgh on August 16th to look after some business connected with his office. He phoned Holy Trinity to inform Father Vincent of his plans, and was surprised to learn his friend was seriously ill in St. Joseph's. He hastened immediately to the hospital for what proved to be their last visit on earth. Death was calling both. Though seemingly in perfect health when he said farewell to Father Vincent after imparting his blessing, he himself was taken to St. Francis Hospital six weeks later and was dead within a few days. Almost at the same time the devoted friends exchanged the shadows of earth's valleys for the lights of the Eternal Mountains.

Father Vincent was possessed of a passion for method and thoroughness that is characteristic of his nation — though one might be tempted to doubt the method after seeing his great six-foot desk littered with papers, records and books. However, despite the seeming disorder, he knew where every item was to be found, and he could produce it at a moment's notice. Among the memoranda found on his desk were a few data of personal history that have been embodied in this incomplete and sketchy monograph. It was evidence that when he left for the hospital he knew that his work was done, and that some other pen was to continue the records in the priory chronicle.

Just a stone marker indicates the place where his remains were interred in Mount Carmel Cemetery. But his real monument can be found in the hearts of the thousands of men and women whose contact with him meant for them a new orientation in life, with wider horizons and a purer purpose. These bore fruit in higher religious and civic standards and in worthwhile achievement that will witness for him in time and in eternity. In a thousand homes his picture looks down from the walls on family circles to whose members he brought new hope, courage and benediction. They can still hear the hearty laugh and see the infectious smile before which their cares and worries melted as fogs before the morning sun.

The surviving members of Father Vincent's immediate family are a brother, Alfonse Metzler, and a Sister, Mrs. Elsa Wolf, both living in Germany. His American confreres in Carmel unite with them in grief over the loss of their revered brother. When making memento of him in Mass they will include their brother Paul, and, in a particular way, the loved father and mother who bequeathed to them the priceless heritage of a trial-tested faith.

¹ These three and Father Vincent were members of a group in the Province that had been playfully named "Die Sieben Schwaben," a characterization borrowed from the folk-lore of their native Wurttemberg. Fathers Brocard Koehler, O.Carm., of Scipio, Kansas; Boniface Hund, O.Carm., of Bogota, N. J.; and the late Father Lawrence Diether, former provincial, were the other members of the seven.