

FATHER BENEDICT J. O'NEILL, O.CARM.

By the REV. RONALD F. GRAY, O.Carm.

"Thou art a priest forever."

THIS day seems to make of something said over fifty years ago a most disappointing falsehood. In May of 1899, an ordaining Bishop said to a young and zealous Carmelite that now, after the oils of ordination were on his hands, he was a priest of God forever. Today we, the friends and relatives of Father Benedict O'Neill, are here to mark in sorrow the end, the finish of that priestly career; we wonder how anyone could say the priesthood is eternal when today it is so manifestly finite. Today we in this church are attempting to offer a token of respect to a man we all loved and admired; we are kneeling to offer heartfelt prayers for the repose of the soul of Father Benedict, a respected Carmelite and a lovable priest of God.

The earthly life that is terminated today began about seventy-five years ago in Londonderry, Ireland, the birthplace of James O'Neill. Coming to Canada shortly after his birth, James O'Neill became a familiar boyish figure in Niagara Falls, Ontario. His entrance into the Carmelite Order resulted, after many years of study in New Baltimore, Pa., in his ordination to the priesthood. Over fifty years in the priesthood will be finished today when we, his Carmelite brothers, carry Father Benedict, after the solemn blessings of the church have been fulfilled, to his place in Mount Carmel Cemetery, Tenafly.

The days that immediately preceded this day of Solemn Requiem were days of sorrow and trial for Father Benedict. Becoming a burden to himself and others, he remained cheerful, appreciative, and helpful until, worn out with age and work, his heart stopped, and he gave a sigh of relief that this earthly struggle was over.

Though we are in the presence of death, despite our own convictions that life is short, life is terminable, the eternity of the priesthood is nevertheless the one lesson of Father Benedict's life. The eternity of his priesthood is headlined in what he did as a priest and why he did, what he did for man.

No one will ever be able to deny the eternity of absolutions from sin that Father Benedict gave in his fifty years in the confessional. Can we doubt the eternity of the food of eternal life given in wafer form at so many altar rails throughout the country? Can we not now think of those marital unions blessed by Father Benedict that made of husband and wife companions for all eternity? Can we even try to count those anointings for eternal glory that were quickly administered when Father Benedict was called from his bed of rest? What he did as a priest, what he did as a servant of God, will never die, but will go on and bear fruit that will last, if possible, an eternity of eternities!

The words of the ordaining Bishop to young Father O'Neill were not a falsehood but rather a challenge. To keep the priesthood eternal it was necessary to keep eternity in every act of the priesthood. The marks of material achievement that this admired priest of God has to his credit are landmarks to his genius as a builder and planner. But today they are nothing! What is important today is the reason why Father Benedict did what he did. That reason brings the eternity into every act of his priesthood, because everything he did to advance the church was done out of a burning love for God. There is eternity only in the love of God and not in monuments of stone and in shaky pillars of self-glory. The love of God colored his every action and made of finite movements an act of eternal love of God.

If we were to say something, however, of the achievements of Father Benedict, we would say this: If the Catholic Church and the Carmelite Order has any prestige and material advantage in the Northern Valley of New Jersey, it cannot be questioned that in large measure it is due directly to the planning and foresight of this hard working Carmelite. Today we are burying a pioneer, a man to whom our Carmelite Province owes a debt of gratitude beyond measure, a man loved and respected by those in and out of the Faith for his one purpose that the Church should have the best.

So what we are actually seeing today is the most important break in a man's life. We are seeing the end of a holy beginning; likewise we are witnessing the beginning of an endless eternity. The ending of fifty years in the priesthood is only the beginning of eternal life in heaven with the Great High Priest. As Father Benedict is laid to rest this morning, is there not one thing we should do for him? Yes, we should

pray for him! You, his Carmelite brothers, remember him often in your prayers and Masses for the dead. You, his friends in the world, if you would wish to thank Father Benedict for the happiness and consolation he brought to your home, be sure to pray for him and to have the holy sacrifice of the Mass offered for the repose of his soul. People often think priests need not these prayers at their death; often they need them more than the simple lay people. As we prepare for the final blessing of the Church on this departed servant of God, let us assure the eternity of his priesthood by saying: "Eternal rest grant unto him, O Lord!"

Father Benedict and the Carmel of Allentown
By a Member of the Community

One had only to look at kindly Father Benedict in order to smile. And, unfailingly, his ready smile was graciously forthcoming. It seemed that Father Benedict had mastered the grand art of being always cheerful, and really, we found his good humor irresistible. To substantiate this claim, let us relate the following incident. On the Clothing Day of Sister Marie-Cecile, Father Benedict was the master of ceremonies. Garbed in his vesture, he re-entered the Sacristy for some reason or other, and there was met by the photographer who was about to take a picture of the new "bride." Without much ado, Father Benedict broke the majestic stillness with the solemn words: "Don't look so sour." His "golden" advice cleared the atmosphere and the pictures turned out exceptionally fine.

Father Benedict had a good word for everybody. His kindly attitude made him patient and willing to listen to the countless woes of the visitors. His spirit of self-forgetfulness, too, was most edifying and was brightened by his invincible good humor. On one occasion, when several Priest-friends took dinner with Father Benedict, one of the group, rubbing his hands in the chilly atmosphere, remarked inquiringly: "No heat in the house?" Father Benedict's ready wit proved a source of warm elation when he responded: "They don't need heat; it's 'air-conditioned.'"

The merry twinkle of his Irish humor never forsook Father Benedict during his brief but memorable stay at the Carmel of Allentown, where he held the post of Chaplain. He must have made it a life practice to see GOD in everything and in everyone. In this he reminded us again and again of our beloved friend, Father Francis of Assisi, who likewise was endowed by the Almighty with a par-excellent "spiritual" vision. And in this instance we are urged to mention Father Benedict's love and concern for God's little creatures—the birds. The sight and sound of these little creatures, singing aloud a joyous "cantic" to their Adorable Creator, held a special charm for Father Benedict, and surely must have reminded him of the Beauty of God, Who is to be loved and praised in all His works. But Father Benedict's interest did not stop here — (Faith without works is dead.) — he saw to it that the birds of Saint Therese's Valley were provided with bread and cereal each morning, rain or shine. Our Lord Himself proffered the "beverage" to allay their thirst.

One wintry morning, after a heavy snow-fall, the intrepid Father Benedict, with the aid of a worn-out broom, "shovelled" his way through the deep snow, and cleared a spot under the shed for his little friends—the birds. With an official swing "of his arm, he pulled out the "surprise" packages of corn-flakes and bread-crumbs for his "unlettered" flock.

We cherish the memory of our devoted Chaplains, Father Anthony, Father Brocard, and now, Father Benedict, especially since it was his priestly hand that administered Holy Viaticum and Extreme Unction to one of our dear nuns, Sister Gabriel of the Passion, on April 14, 1947, the very morning of her Eternal Nuptials. We are reminded of Father Benedict when we offer this prayer:

"O sweet Jesus, may every good feeling that is fitted for Thy praise, love Thee, admire Thee, delight in Thee. God of my heart, and my portion, Christ Jesus, may my heart faint away in spirit and mayest Thou be my life within me! May the live coal of Thy love grow hot within my spirit, and break forth into a perfect fire; may it burn incessantly on the altar of my heart; may it flow in my innermost being; may it blaze in hidden recesses of my soul; and in the day of my consummation, may I be found consummated with Thee! Amen." — (True Devotion, 67)

Funeral of Father Benedict J. O'Neill, O.Carm.

On October 24, 1949, almost five months after Father Benedict J. O'Neill, O.Carm., had celebrated the Fiftieth Anniversary of his ordination, he was laid to rest in Mount Carmel Cemetery, Tenafly, New Jersey. Father Benedict had been ailing for sometime, and his death on October 20 came as a welcome release from suffering.

Solemn funeral services were held in Saint Cecilia's Church at ten o'clock on Monday morning, October 24. Father Hilary M. Doswald, O.Carm., ex-Prior General, was celebrant of the Solemn Mass of Requiem. He was assisted by Father Dominic E. Lickteig, O.Carm., Pastor of Saint Cecilia's, as Deacon and Father Walter Paynton, O. Carm., as Subdeacon. Father Hubert McCarren was Master of Ceremonies. Three Low Masses were celebrated on the side altars by Father James McGill, O.Carm., of Niagara Falls, Father Victor Schwar, O.Carm., of Pittsburgh, and Father Allen Crowley, O.Carm., of Englewood.

Father Ronald Gray, O.Carm., Prior of Saint Cecilia's, preached an eloquent sermon and gave the last blessing at the grave. Besides the Carmelites of the Northern Valley and from our sister Province of Saint Elias, there were many of the secular clergy and numerous Sisters present.