

## REV. PHILIP ALBAN BEST, O. CARM.

1859-1925

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The Sword, July 1940

FATHER Philip Alban Best was one of that historic class of eight who were ordained priests in 1889 for service in the newly established American Carmel. It was a richly and variously gifted class, as a glance through the records of the Province amply reveals. The problems and hardships of the early pioneer years provided each of the members with ample opportunities for the revealing of his latent abilities. Father Philip was outstanding amongst those of high mental endowments. In stature he was the smallest of the group, and he was ever conscious of this fact. This awareness of his diminutive build was responsible for some of his best efforts; for it was quite apparent that he tried to compensate for it by physical agility and mental alertness.

Father Philip's parents were Alban Charles Best and Elizabeth (nee Hill) Best. He was born on Christmas Day, December 25, 1859, in the historic city of Bristol, England. As a city and a port, Bristol has a history that begins long before the days of the Roman occupation. Besides its political background, the city is interesting because of its geological features, because of its thirty-five foot tides, and because of its ancient buildings. Two of these architectural treasures are the Cathedral and St. Mary's Church, both of which date from the fourteenth century.

It was in historic St. Mary's Church, on January 15, 1860, that Alban and Elizabeth Best presented their young son for baptism. They chose for him his father's name, Alban. Saint Alban was the first Christian martyr in Britain, he having suffered death for the faith in the year 303 at a place about one hundred miles east of Bristol. The choice of the name indicates the elder Best's deep attachment to the homeland as well as his regard for family traditions. This loyalty Father Philip inherited and preserved throughout his life though it was never paraded offensively.

Early in Father Philip's youth Alban Sr. took his family to Canada in the hope of finding better economic conditions. Hamilton, Ontario, was chosen as their home in the New World. There Alban Jr. attended school. He also was employed for a time in the office of a Hamilton newspaper. The training he received in the newspaper office proved to be a valuable asset. He spoke of it frequently, sometimes boastfully, when reminiscent of his earlier years.

The Best family became acquainted with the Carmelite Fathers of Falls View, Ontario, through Father Pius Meyer, then superior of the Niagara Falls

community. A novitiate had been established at Falls View, and Father Pius was ever on the lookout for promising young men. He gave missions throughout Ontario and thus gave the clergy and the laity a first-hand knowledge of the Carmelite Order. On the occasion of a mission in Hamilton he became acquainted with the two Best boys, Alban and Frank. He sent them to join his little community at the "View." On April 18, 1879 they were clothed in the Habit of the Order. Alban receive the name Jacobinus at his reception; his brother, Frank, was named Dionysius. The name Jacobinus was later changed to Philip. On May 1st of the following year they pronounced their simple perpetual vows. They then continued their studies at Falls View, with the exception of a short term in Englewood, until 1887. In that year the theologians were transferred to New Baltimore, Pennsylvania. They remained in New Baltimore until their ordination to the priesthood, March 13, 1889. Bishop Phelan of Pittsburgh was the officiating prelate.

After ordination, Father Philip filled various assignments throughout the Commissariate until 1893. In that year the second Provincial of the American Province, the cultured Father Anastasius J. Kreidt, founded the *Carmelite Review*, its first number appearing January 1st. Though Father Kreidt retained supervision of the publication, Father Philip was the acting editor. In this new position he found that his early newspaper training was a valuable asset. He acted as editor of the *Review* for ten years, until 1903, when the monthly was transferred to Chicago. In the mid-western city the management and editorship were entrusted unconditionally to a secular priest, Eneas B. Goodwin, who promptly wrecked it.

During Father Philip's ten years as editor the *Review* had gradually grown in quality and influence, and was becoming a source of considerable revenue. Like most other religious magazines, it had not a money endowment. Its foundations were not in the banks but in the courage, heroism and spirit of sacrifice of its few workers. These virtues had to withstand daily tests of discouragements, disappointments and other forms of headache. Father Philip kept in touch with Catholic writers in various parts of the world, coaxed contributions from their gifted pens, repaying them only with letters of thanks diplomatically and wittily worded.

Had Father Philip been transferred to Chicago when the editorial sanctum was taken from its first home by the side of the Michigan Central tracks at Falls View, Ontario, and set up in what was then known as Star Avenue, all would have been well. But, on this occasion, as on all other occasions when columbine simplicity (unmixed with serpentine astuteness) led us to place unquestioning trust in an extern, the only return we received was costly and painful experience. This time the experience had the added element of

tragedy.

Before many months the complaints became so insistent that Father Goodwill was dismissed as editor and manager. Stephen J. McDonald (the present writer) was asked to carry on in Goodwin's place. The appointment was little more than a rearguard action to cover an embarrassing retreat. The new manager's experience as a publisher had been just nil. However, he needed no baccalaureate in journalism to discover, after a rapid survey, that matters were in a desperate condition. He found letters from subscribers in many parts of the country asking that their names be removed from the mailing list. Carmelite nuns were refusing to let it enter their convents. (It is probable they took offense more from the sensational cover than from the contents.) But the main rub was that not a bill had been paid since the *Review's* advent in Chicago. The total of printing bills alone was in the thousands. Furthermore, postmasters in various cities were protesting against irregularities in the mailing lists. In the federal Post Office in Washington the *Review* had been placed under the heading of "fraudulent publications." (That is probably a general name for violators of postal regulations.) When existing conditions were explained to the Provincial and Definatory, it was decided to suspend the *Review* temporarily. Father Philip might have been able to rescue the monthly if he had been given time and some money; but he was not called. It is likely there were no funds available for further experimentation, and the Definatory was determined to play safe. The "temporary" suspension lasted for thirty-seven years until June, 1940. It is to be earnestly hoped that no present or future superiors in the Province will ever give ear, even for a moment, to the siren song of pressure salesmanship and be lured to entrust a single department of the re-established magazine to anyone except he be of the trustworthy membership of Carmel's own household. We must not risk going through another thirty-seven years without an outlet for the views of our scholars and without the influence and prestige which are derived from a well-edited magazine.

After the suspension of the *Review* Father Philip filled assignments in divers communities of the Province. He was particularly effective in the pulpit. Because of ability as a speaker he was made a member of the mission band. He labored intensely at times at building up his talks, and when delivered they were marked with local coloring, with apt references to current events and, occasionally, with a sprinkling of humor. These qualities of his sermons commanded attention and awakened interest even in the indifferent hearers.

His value and effectiveness were impaired for many years by a nervous temperament which threatened on a few occasions to leave him a mental wreck. But in his maturer years he shook off this infirmity and gave

uninterrupted service that was consistent with his talents. When his brother, Father Dionysius F. Best, was elected Provincial in 1909, Father Philip labored unremittingly to aid him in solving the financial problems of the Province. When Father Dionysius was called by death, April 26, 1914, it was a severe challenge to his strength and courage. They had planned to commemorate the twenty-fifth anniversary of their ordination together in Pittsburgh. However, he continued as he had been doing—sharing in parish work, preaching Lenten courses, and conducting missions—as long as his strength | permitted. He outlived his brother by eleven years. His last assignment was to Holy Trinity Priory, Pittsburgh. His heart began to fail him in the latter months of 1924, and he was removed to St. Francis' Hospital for treatment. He died there on February 5, 1925, four weeks after the death in the same hospital of Father Albert Murphy, who had been associated with him in the Province's pioneer days, and was also a member of the Holy Trinity community.

It may be thought that much of the prominence of Father Philip came to him because of his distinguished brother. This is only partly true; for he had many qualities of his own that commanded attention. He was generous and forgiving in disposition, and ever ready to sacrifice leisure and energy in the interests of charity. He kept abreast of the thought of the day, was always informed about the latest in literature, and could discuss it with illuminating comment, sprinkled with wit. A subtle power of observation enabled him to discern half-hidden features in men and books that were not obvious to others. Another almost uncanny skill he possessed was that of anticipating a companion's thoughts and remarks just as the other was on the threshold of announcing them. This was often annoying, but it was none the less remarkable.

One detail of his technique in sermon preparation deserves mention and is worthy of imitation. He kept a carefully indexed and ever-growing file of clippings and references that could be made instantly available for sermons or instructions. This file was a mine of information on points of history, science and art as well as theology.

Though the busy active program of his early career in the priesthood prevented him from taking any post-graduate courses, his interest in scholarship increased with the years, and he was whole-heartedly in favor of providing the best educational facilities for the young priests of the Province. It was his view that the mastery in mysticism of a John of the Cross, the literary eminence of a Mantuan, the leadership in philosophical thought of a John Baconthorpe, were a rebuke rather than a matter for boasting to any generation of Carmelites that was not striving to foster a general aspiration

to similar or even greater heights. He held too that the best environment for the maturing of such aspirations was that of the great Catholic universities where alone can be made the indispensable contacts with the Church's best scholars. In conformity with this attitude he approved enthusiastically of the report of Fathers S. J. Quigley and S. J. McDonald who had been commissioned by the Definitory to make a survey of available sites near Catholic University in Washington, D. C. suitable for a house of studies. He deplored the fact that the Definitory was dissuaded from acting immediately on the report.<sup>1</sup> He did not live to see the Washington plan materialize. It was in 1927, two years after his death, that the Order purchased the Pfluger estate in the District of Columbia.<sup>2</sup>

However, now that a permanent home for our students has been established in the Capital City, it may be safely assumed that he is smiling his approval from Heaven. He knew that such a move would signalize the opening of a new era in American Carmel, and would push back horizons for wider service and achievement. He was convinced too that the *Carmelitarum pars optima* could best be promoted from our side by enlisting the aid and light of every department of human science.

<sup>1</sup> The present site of Whitefriars Hall was one of those recommended by the committee. They chose Mr. Edward Handiboe to keep the Definitory advised on realty matters in the District; it was he who attended to the details of the transaction when land was purchased seven years later. But in that interval the market value of real estate in Brookland had doubled. and tripled because of the growing demand by religious communities for building room near the University.

<sup>2</sup> The first group of students from the Province to enroll at Catholic University came in 1926. They occupied a small house on Monroe St., N. E., rented from the Claretian Fathers.