

REV. ALPHONSE BRANDSTAETTER, O.CARM.

1844-1916

By the Rev. Anthony C. Dressel, O.Carm.

*The Sword*, January 1941

AMONG the pioneers of the American Province we find the name of Alphonse Brandstaetter, a man of great simplicity and of most exemplary faith. He was born at Geroldsbach, Bavaria, on August 24, 1844, the son of John P. Brandstaetter. He was baptized in St. Andrew's Church in the same quaint, religious town, receiving the name Anthony. Here his earlier years were spent and here he received his primary and secondary education.

At the age of twenty-five he set out to realize his two dominant ambitions—to become a priest and to go to America. He arrived in the United States in 1869 shortly after Father Cyril Knoll and other Bavarian Carmelites established the Commissariate in Leavenworth, Kansas. Having known the Carmelites in Straubing, Anthony presented himself as a candidate for the Carmelite priesthood in Scipio, Kansas, that same year on May 14, 1870. and was ordained to the priesthood in Pittsburgh, Pa., on December 24, 1874, by the Rt. Rev. Domenec, Bishop of Pittsburgh.

After a short stay in Pittsburgh he was transferred to Niagara Falls, Ontario, and given charge of a German mission, New Germany, Ontario. He returned to Pittsburgh as an assistant pastor, and the rest of his priestly career was divided between Pittsburgh and Scipio, Kansas, the better part of which was in Kansas, where he served as pastor, overseer, mayor, landlord of the St. Boniface Settlement. In Pittsburgh he was assistant both in his youthful and declining years.

The main support of the parish in Scipio was a very large farm. Besides his parochial duties, the business of the farm fell to Father Alphonse's lot. Besides the ordinary grain crops there were cattle, sheep and swine and poultry to be cared for. Father Alphonse is said to have built the largest barn in several counties. All this he took care of exactly and painstakingly. Brother Victor Heilmeier was his helper and might be called his Vicar General. However, Tertiaries also helped him, and, besides keeping his books in order, Father Alphonse had to deal with the various temperaments of the helpers. He remained from 1868-1908, in the sparsely settled parish, whose limits were measured by square miles instead of blocks as in our city parishes. By nature he was patient, pious and marvelously resigned. However, there were times when even his patience was tried sorely.

As we have previously stated, when old age had somewhat incapacitated him and made the duties of Scipio too arduous, he was made assistant at Holy Trinity once more. Both in Pittsburgh and in Kansas he was loved by everybody for his priestly ways and genial disposition. A typical Bavarian, he never rushed anything but did all things leisurely and methodically. He was a good singer and a well-liked preacher, but most of all he was popular as a confessor. His kindness in dealing with the poor and his ability to meet each and all with an engaging smile and something pleasing to say won him hosts of friends.

Those who still remember Father Alphonse recall him principally as an old man, lame, but always resigned to God's will, and an example of personal piety. In his later years in Pittsburgh he was highly regarded for the long hours he spent in the confessional. Many marveled at his cheerfulness as he leaned heavily upon his cane, limping either to the church from the monastery or vice versa. He was an excellent community man, very indulgent towards the failings of others and inclined always to seek the brighter side of any happening. Indeed he never felt quite at home, even in his declining years, unless some one was teasing him or telling some "tall story" about him. The colored boy who tried to sell him his last newspaper and called him "Mr. Priest" amused him greatly, and from that day forward he became "Mr. Priest" to the community.

It was always thought that Father Alphonse's lameness came from old age and rheumatism. Despite his age, he undertook all the duties of the assistant pastor even when he had reached the age of seventy-two. He took his regular turn in singing the late High Mass on Sunday and was never absent from the confessional at the regular appointed hours. He limped up and down stairs a dozen times a day to hear the confessions of visiting priests. He asked no indulgence because of age, nor did he expect any. In fact, it was not until a week or so before his death that one of the Fathers who was helping him to prepare for his hospitalization, discovered that Father Alphonse's lameness was not caused by rheumatism. He had been pitifully and painfully crippled for many years. His right leg from the hip down was malformed, practically fleshless—the bones bent and painfully twisted. The doctors at the hospital said that it was a miracle that he had been able to stand, let alone walk and work—he had sung High Mass two days before. When he was asked why he had not made this condition known before, he simply answered:

"Everybody has something. One has this and one has that. May God be praised!" The doctors declared that such a condition must have been extremely painful, yet Father Alphonse kept this bitter suffering as a secret between himself and God; and, had he not been practically helpless when his last illness began, no one would ever have known of it.

Perhaps he was not much for business and many of his methods would now be considered old fashioned, yet his piety, faith and spirit of sacrifice must win our reverence. Father Alphonse never placed knowledge above the love of God. He had injected into his own life the warning of the Little Flower: "When a priest falls it is because the head has been cultivated at the expense of the heart and there is no love."

Father Alphonse died as he had lived, calmly and resigned to God's will. When told he was dying, he replied: "If it is God's will, I am willing." Conscious to the end, he answered all the prayers for the dying and died peacefully on Thanksgiving Day, November 30, 1916, in St. Joseph Hospital, Pittsburgh. His last worry was who would sing the High Mass the following Sunday. After solemn funeral services in Holy Trinity Church he was buried in the Mount Carmel Cemetery in Pittsburgh.