

FATHER AVERTANUS D. BRENNAN, O. Carm. (1863-1905)

By the rev. Stephen J. McDonald, O. Carm.
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Denis Cornelius Brennan, who on his entry into the Order of Mount Carmel received the name Avertanus, was born in Dunnville, Ontario, Canada, February 6, 1863. The record of his baptism in the parish church bears the date of February 22nd of the same year. His parents were John and Mary (nee Cleary) Brennan. Both father and mother had come to Canada from Ireland. Before coming to the Western World John Brennan had been a soldier in the British Army and had seen active service during the Crimean War.

Early in the boyhood of Denis the family came from Dunnville to Clifton (now Niagara Falls), Ontario. For many years the father conducted a tailoring business in a small shop on Erie Avenue. The children attended the one-room separate school of St. Patrick's parish where James Quillinan, the teacher, rounded out the work of their Christian home. (In Ontario, parochial schools are known as separate schools.)

All the Brennan children, three boys and two girls, early revealed marked musical talent. Fanny, afterwards Mrs. Skinner, served for some years as organist in St. Patrick's. Later she received the appointment as organist in St. Patrick's. Later she received the appointment as organist in the Bishop's Chapel, Delaware Avenue, Buffalo. The Chapel occupied the site of the present cathedral. She helped Denis develop his unusual musical ability.

At the age of fifteen young Denis entered the Carmelite Priory at Falls View, Ontario. On April 2, 1878, he was invested with the Habit of the Order and received the name Avertanus. Father Pius Rudolph Mayer, later Prior General of the Order, was Commissary General at the time of the young man's entry, and he remained his teacher during the major part of his years as a candidate for the priesthood. Avertanus was admitted to Simple Profession on April 18, 1879, and to Solemn Profession on July 16, 1882.

Upon completion of the prescribed courses of studies wherein he gave a good account of himself despite the handicaps and hardships of the Province's pioneer days, he was ordained a priest by Bishop Phelan of Pittsburgh, Pa., on March 13, 1889. Five confreres were ordained with him, Berthold Lauzau, Philip and Dion Best, Paul Ryan and Cyril Kehoe.

Then began the young man's brilliant and fruitful career as a priest. It was all too short, according to man's standards of reckoning, lasting only fourteen years and five months. But the plans and purposes of Providence are not drawn to fit earthly calendars. In Father Avertanus were truly fulfilled the words of Scripture, "Being made perfect in a short space, he fulfilled a long time" (Wisdom, iv, 13).

The first assignment of the newly ordained Carmelite was to St. Cecilia's Priory, Englewood where he remained until August 26, 1893. For a little more

than a year of that time he labored in the mission parish of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, Tenafly, two miles north of Englewood. During the balance of his sojourn in New Jersey he acted as assistant in St. Cecilia's parish, Englewood. During the four years in New Jersey he revealed a true apostolic spirit and a zeal that burned to see each day marked with a new triumph of grace. His tireless labors to translate the Gospel into action brought a revival of faith in the Catholics of the Northern Valley. The memory of him still lives in many households that were favored by his inspiring visits. The choirs, too, of St. Cecilia's and Mount Carmel responded heartily to his training and leadership, and worked eagerly to perfect their share in the splendor of the liturgy of festive occasions.

Among the parish societies, that of the Holy Name received his very special attention. He established the branch in Mount Carmel parish, Tenafly, and throughout the years it has carefully nourished the spirit with which he inspired the charter members.

Because of his wide abilities he would have been welcomed as a member in any community of the new Province. However the Provincial and the Definitory decided that he could serve best and most fruitfully in the house of studies in New Baltimore, Pa. Accordingly he left Englewood on August 26, 1893, to take up his new duties in the historic and picturesque mountain town that nestles in the Alleghenies near the headwaters of the Juniata.

The transfer was an inspired one. The young men who were then in training in that isolated mountain seminary were destined to face the arduous task of adjusting the struggling American Carmelite Province to rapidly changing conditions in the social and economic life of the American people and to new kinds of service required by the Church. Hitherto the cry of the bishops was mainly for priests who could give aid in missionary work and parish administration. These were still in demand; but, in addition, the Church had an ever increasing need of educators and scholars. And, as always, she looked with confidence to the religious Orders to meet this new demand. The new teacher was fully conscious of these changes in social, economic and religious life; and he pointed them out to his classes, inspiring them with an ambition to meet the consequent new demands and conditions. He often spoke longingly of the then recently established Catholic University of Brookland, D. C., and wished that he and his students were within reach of its facilities.

Father Brennan's genius and unusual ability revealed themselves in a special manner in the classroom. He excelled in winning, first the deep interest of his students and then ripening it into enthusiasm. In his classes the textbooks of the classic languages ceased to be dead and disheartening challenges to the student's memory and patience. The reading of them under his guidance became a thrilling adventure as he tore away the screen of years and revealed backgrounds of living political, social and economic problems and wars. His skill made the characters of history step out of the pages and go through their roles anew for his wondering and admiring listeners. The interest he awoke in his students was not a temporary or fleeting one. Those who reacted to his guidance carried away with them into

mature years an eager and abiding love for study and research.

The young seminarians instinctively looked to him for leadership even in their extra-curricular activities. He did not fail them. His presence was always an assurance of a new relish and thrill in such commonplaces as ball-playing, skating, or just hiking. The New Baltimore alumni love to recall his umpiring on Latin-language days, and his humorous resourcefulness in finding Ciceronian equivalents for safe and out, balls and strikes, fair and foul.

Unquestionably he had his likes and dislikes among the diverse characters of the young neophytes; but they were screened under an impenetrable exterior of impartiality. If there was any weakening in his attitude of equal regard for all, it was in favor of his beloved musicians. Music with him was a dominant passion and a favorite mode of religious expression and those who reacted satisfactorily to his coaching in tone and rhythm scored heavily with him and won special nods and smiles. Despite lack of funds, discouragements and other hardships, he organized, equipped and trained a very creditable orchestra.

His talks on matters of spiritual life revealed characteristic qualities of deep understanding and purposiveness. He cautioned against confusing means with ends, intermediate with ultimate values. Irreconcilably intolerant of cant, pedantry and superficial show in spiritual things as well as in scholarship, he pointed the way to the solid parts of genuine spiritual and intellectual growth.

His all-inclusive loyalty to the Order of Mount Carmel was but a phase of his loyalty to Christ and His Church. It suffered no exception. But here too he carefully distinguished between real and apparent values. Boasters always aroused his wrath. He was convinced that one who boasted about his Institute was boasting about himself, or attempting to screen his own deficiencies. He regarded the past glories of Carmel and her outstanding heroes and heroines as grounds for shame and confusion for any Carmelites who were not making an honest effort to produce as great and greater excellencies and achievements in their own day.

His reverence for the Blessed Mother was tender and inspiring. It, too, was integrated with his all-embracing devotion to the Incarnation of which he preached with burning words as the central fact of all history.

He possessed a generous share of the social virtues that make for the perfect community man. His inborn refinement and nobility of mind held the conversation on a high plane during recreation periods, and barred puerilities and trivialities; whilst his ready wit and sparkling repartee begot an atmosphere of good fellowship, informality and ease.

The years of Father Brennan's sojourn in New Baltimore are among the highlights of his career. It is to be regretted that he could not remain with his beloved seminarians until the end of his days. However, the pressing need for priests in other fields of the Province's work finally made necessary

his transfer to Our Lady of Peace Priory, Falls View, Ontario. There he aided in the editorial department of the *Carmelite Review* and conducted missions in many parishes of New York and neighboring states. He also served for a time as pastor in the parish of St. Vincent de Paul, Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario.

In 1900 a new Priory was established in Chicago, at 54th Street and Jefferson Avenue. A school was opened there for secular students, and Father Brennan was called upon to aid in making the new venture a success. He labored with all his wonted zeal and fidelity, and contributed largely to the healthy growth of the enterprise. As usual his success was not confined to the classroom. Because of his experience and mature judgment, he was able to act as stabilizer for the newly-ordained priests who were associated with "him on the staff of the school and as trusted adviser in their problems. So marked, indeed, was his success both in the classroom and as a member of the community that in the Chapter of 1903, celebrated at Niagara Falls, he was elected President of St. Cyril's, as the new foundation in Chicago was first named.

There was abundant evidence to assure the Gremials of the Chapter that their choice of Father Avertanus to guide the new school was a happy one. He was possessed of the requisite intellectual poise and emotional stability. Moreover his genius for attracting others both to himself and to his ideals, and awakening in them deep interest and enthusiasm, gave promise that there was about to be written a new and bright chapter in the annals of Carmel in America.

But Father Avertanus did not live to take over the duties of his new assignment. A serious ailment that had been threatening for a considerable time advanced rapidly into a crisis. He passed to his reward on Monday within the Octave of the Assumption, August 17, 1903.

There was general awareness in the Province that, when Father Avertanus left to bring his personal report to the Master, the loss was greater than that usually occasioned by a visit from the Angel of Death. The rare quality of his talents had been rated high by his contemporaries. Yet, these were too close to be able to appraise him adequately. Seen, however, in the perspective of three decades of years, whose wear and tear and struggles have thinned almost to the disappearing point the ranks of those who labored with him, studied in the verdant memories and clinging affection of those he trained to seek with insatiable appetite after the true and the beautiful, reflected in the minds drilled by him in the technique of scholarly procedure, it is abundantly apparent that in his death the American Carmel lost one who had given her sorely needed service during her formative years and had given her also those vital impulses that have since matured and are now bearing fruit in scholarship, leadership, zeal and service. He was the builder of an era.

Needless to say, all was not clear and unimpeded progress during the career of Father Avertanus. Long before the time of the patient Job and ever since, man's life on earth has been a warfare. Misunderstandings, disillusionments and bitter disappointments are the common lot of all the children of men. A

full and overflowing measure of them fell to the portion of Father Avertanus. But they left no bitterness in his understanding soul. He reacted to them healthily and emerged from his trials with, increased spiritual stature. He checked revengeful impulses and spiritualized them, permitting them to spend their energy in charity and prayer. From each ordeal he arose, not crushed in spirit, but strengthened and refreshed.

The tribute to the memory of Father Avertanus that appeared some years after his death in the pages of the *Analecta Carmelitarum* was penned by the Most Rev. Father General, Hilary J. Doswald. Its splendid classical Latinity is an echo from those historic classrooms in mountain-girt New Baltimore.

His remains lie interred in the Brennan family plot in Fairview Cemetery, Niagara Falls, Ontario. A simple stone marks his grave. But his chief monuments are to be searched for in the fields where he labored, especially in the hearts and careers and achievements of those he trained to run in the paths that lead to the heights in Carmel.