

## REV. JOSEPH LOUIS DRESSEL, O. Carm. (1887-1918)

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With fond memories Carmelites recall the late Father Joseph Louis Dressel. His life was one of struggle but leaves perhaps the most touching story on dogged perseverance that will ever enter the history of our Province. Father Joseph was born in Coal-port, Pennsylvania, in the Erie diocese, on April 20, 1887. This mining town is not far from the famous "Horseshoe Curve" in the peaks of the Allegheny Mountains and in the very district in which the famous missionary of Penn's Woods, Prince Gallitzin, labored and battled when "Knownothingism" and the "American Protective Association" were at their height. His people were coal miners and lived in one of the company houses in Coalport. The devotional, little church of the town was erected on props on the side of the hill. Here Joseph was an altar boy and found his first inspiration to become a priest.

The Augustinian Fathers preached a mission in this church in 1902, and Joseph heard of the Augustinian School at Villanova and immediately fell in love with it. He declared his intention to become a priest; and his parents, being thrifty and ready to give their last penny to see him through, sent him to Villanova for his preparatory studies. Here he spent three years zealously when his health failed him. He was advised by the doctors to go home and do physical work to rebuild himself. This he did, but his calling and yearning for the priesthood did not wane. He had determined to make himself physically fit and to go on to the priesthood at any cost.

Accordingly Joseph, following the traditions of the family, went down into the mines and did hard manual work for five years. He regained his health, became robust and strong and then began to figure on how to continue his studies.

In 1911 Carmelite Fathers appeared on the scene. Fathers Basil A. Kahler and Philip A. Best preached a mission in the little, hillside church. He told them his story, and in a short time he was in St. Cyril's College, Chicago, as a postulant. He was of a nervous temperament, brought on evidently by over-anxiety to reach his goal after the set-back he had received. He was timid, bashful and ever distrustful of self. It required much effort on the part of his teachers before he overcame this inferiority complex. However, by persistence he finally gained his self-possession so completely that it was he who delivered the valedictory at the commencement in 1912. He received applause and congratulations from all for his poise and excellent delivery—few suspected the tremendous effort required of him to face an audience.

In 1912 he entered the novitiate and was professed on September 29, 1913. Sent with a class to Rome to take up his higher studies, he gave a wonderful account of himself, becoming very popular among the students who affectionately called him "Doc" Dressel. He was ordained in Rome in the summer of 1917 but remained over for still higher studies. However, owing to World War conditions and the necessity of living on war rations since

1914, his health again began to fail.

The class returned from Rome in August, 1918. He sang a Solemn High Mass in his home church in Coalport on August 15, assisted in Pittsburgh on the First Friday of September and on October 3, 1918, he died a victim of influenza at St. Cyril's College, Chicago, which had been his first and only assignment. After contracting the "flu" his worry was that the Sisters at one of the convents, where the Carmelites were chaplains, would be without Mass or Communion if he did not go. Several of the other Fathers were down with the illness, and no substitute was available. He took the risk; pneumonia developed. For his priestly zeal he gave his life. His death was keenly felt by all. Just released for active service, with the exception of Penance and the Holy Eucharist, he had administered each of the sacraments but once — had assisted at one marriage, had had one baptism and had anointed one person.

On October 6 a Solemn Mass was sung for him at the college. His body was taken back to the little mining town at Coalport and was buried in the family plot after another Requiem. The Prior of the Pittsburgh monastery, Father Anthony Dressel, of the same name but no relative of Father Joseph, preached the sermon at St. Cyril's, Chicago. He not only stressed the rare perseverance and determination of Father Joseph but also pointed out especially that the young priest had gained his point and goal in life. He added, too, that, while there are thousands who have no aim in life whatsoever, there are still heroes and warriors who knock down every barrier and that Father Joseph was one of these.

His good parents were called on to bury their son, who only six weeks before had brought them so much joy. Both were dazed by the sudden blow; and, when they arrived for the Chicago funeral service, they were a sad picture to behold. The sympathy of the crowded church went out to them. When the father, a typical Pennsylvania miner, appeared before the casket in Kentucky jeans, with an open shirt, and nearly collapsed from sorrow and tried to daub his heavy tears away with a red bandana, tears were shed by the entire congregation. Never was there a more heart-broken couple than this father and mother taking their boy back over the Alleghenies for the last time. These parents did not long survive their son. A year later the mother suffered an attack of pneumonia, and she succumbed. The father, taking a severe cold at the grave side, was buried beside his wife a week later. With the exception of a sister, a Mrs. Washington of Cresson, Pennsylvania, the Dressel family died within a year. The death of a beloved son, a priest of God, was too great a shock for these mountain people. In the old days they had fought so valiantly to preserve the faith against the vicious attacks of the American Protective Association and had learned to love, to harbor and to defend the priest even at the cost of their lives.

"Glory to Him Who from the mire  
In patient length of days,  
Elaborated into life  
A people to His praise."