

REV. CYRIL JOHN FEEHAN, O. CARM.

1850-1909

By the REV. STEPHEN J. MCDONALD, O. Carm.

*The Sword*, April 1940

Father Cyril John Feehan, O. Carm., the subject of this sketch, played an important role in the establishment of the Province of the Most Pure Heart of Mary. Because of his gentle and unassuming manner and his mildness of speech and action, even his contemporaries were unaware of his real stature as a man of achievement. His life was set in a period when heroic effort and great accomplishment were commonplace, and, for that reason, few written records were left concerning them. This fact does great credit to the humility and unselfishness of the heroic workmen; but unwittingly they were unjust to posterity who need the light issuing from past efforts, whether failures or successes, to light them in solving instant problems.

The Province's Necrology list is usually found in our communities. That is creditable. But we are often embarrassed when it is discovered that said meagre list is the only official record we have of deceased Brethren. Msgr. Peter Guilday, who is doing heroic work in the matter of uncovering long buried data of Catholic interest in American history, has often complained that the religious institutes have been neglectful of the records of their members and their foundations. One reason why secular historians are silent about Catholic influences in early American history is that the sources of such information are lost or are not easily available. It might be in order, therefore, that we amplify the lists in our community archives, extending them to all the key dates and primary achievements in the careers of the persons commemorated, and indicating the source whence the full story can be drawn.

The time limit given the writer with the assignment of this historical sketch was too short for the assembling of all data that may be extant in Ireland, Italy and various points in the United States and Canada. It is to be hoped that all of it will be assembled later, that justice may be done this lovable pioneer of our Province, and due credit awarded to that sturdy stock of Catholics in Ireland from which he sprang.

Drawing from the data at hand, manuscript memoranda and parish records, and from the memory of those who knew Father Feehan, I presume to make the following beginning **of a** historical sketch, trusting that further research will enable historians of the future to fill in the details of the portrait and its setting.

John Feehan, who received at his entry into Carmel the name Cyril, was born in the diocese of Ossory, County Kilkenny, Ireland, on March 23, 1850. There are no records at hand of the members of his immediate family. But the exceptional quality of his home atmosphere was abundantly apparent in the refinement of ideals and loftiness of motives that featured his life. Zeal for the glory of God and the spread of the Gospel must have been dominant in his own home and in the homes of his relatives, for we find several cousins

dedicating themselves to the service of the Church and bringing much-needed aid to the missions in America. Father Peter Thomas Meagher, Commissary General of the Carmelites in Kentucky, was a first cousin; also Father Theodore McDonald, O. Carm., with whom he was associated during his long priestly career in America. Bishop James Davis of the diocese of Davenport, Iowa, was a close relative, and he often visited him during his stay in Chicago. Another cousin, Rose Meagher, entered the community of the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth in Kentucky, and later, as Mother Superior, supervised the rapid growth of that institute and the great enlargement of its field of labor. Father Davis, a former Provincial of the Carmelite Province in Ireland, and Father Thomas Feehan of the same Province, were also close relatives.

Young John's apostolic zeal led him to Rome where he was received into the Order of Mount Carmel in the year 1867. He pronounced his simple vows on October 23rd of the following year, 1868. He had been received into the Order by the General, Father Angelo Savini, with the understanding that he would be assigned to the missions of the Order in the New World.

After simple profession he continued his theological studies in the Eternal City, and was ordained there on September 28, 1872.

Two years later we find him busy in the Kentucky Commissariate. During his sojourn of ten years in that state he saw service in Louisville, Paducah, Hickman and Fancy Farm. He was pastor of St. Cecilia's in Louisville for some time until it was handed back to the Bishop in 1876. In that same year, despite his youth and inexperience, he was asked to take over much of the work of his Superior and cousin, Father Peter Thomas Meagher, who had been forced to withdraw from active duty because of illness. When Father Meagher died on August 2, 1880, Father Feehan administered the affairs of the Commissariate temporarily whilst awaiting from Rome the appointment of a new Superior.

The little group of Carmelites in Kentucky had met a full and overflowing measure of hardships. Death had removed two of their key men, Fathers Meagher and Janssen. Others were stricken by malarial fever. Those who were left were too few and too young to carry on alone, and the Commissariate to the north could give no further help. The Roman *Curia*, decided to withdraw the few survivors and send them to the assistance of the Order's communities laboring in Pittsburgh, Niagara Falls and Kansas. The Kentucky missions were accordingly ceded back to the Bishop on August 1, 1881. Father Feehan went to Niagara Falls, or rather, Falls View. The records show that he was active in that community with teaching and with parish work. When the students were transferred to Englewood, he accompanied them. He acted as assistant in St. Cecilia's until 1886. It was at this time too that he began his successful career as a missionary, being associated in this work with Fathers Anastasius Smits, Commissary; Pius Meyer, later General; and Anastasius Kreidt, later Provincial.

When the community at Falls View took over the care of the parish of St. Patrick's in Clifton, now Niagara Falls, Ontario, Father Feehan was appointed

pastor. The territory of the parish was extensive, embracing a large part of Stamford Township. He built a rectory which still serves as the home of the pastor and his assistants. Before the rectory was built he lived in a room in the rear of the small school. When his term as pastor was ended he left the parish well organized so that his successor, Father Dominic O'Malley, could proceed with the erection of the Gothic parish church which still stands as a monument to the heroic faith and self-sacrifice of the Catholics of the Niagara Peninsula.

In 1890 he was appointed Prior and pastor in St. Cecilia's Englewood, N. J., taking the place of Father Theodore McDonald. The latter had been selected to supervise the building program in New Baltimore, Pa. This program had been adopted to meet the change in conditions occasioned by the building of the South Penn Railroad. Father "Mac" returned to the pastorate of St. Cecilia's in 1894 when work on the South Penn had been abandoned, and Father Feehan returned to Niagara Falls.

Unquestionably Father Feehan's best claim to the undying memory of his confreres in Carmel is the fact that it was he who received the invitation from the Most Rev. Patrick A. Feehan, to establish a school in the archiepiscopal city of Chicago. It was rumored at the time that he was a relative of the Archbishop. Whether he was or not has never been definitely ascertained from the records. Acting on this invitation, and with approval from the Provincial, Father Feehan went immediately to the great mid-west city for an interview with His Grace. Pursuant to instructions from the Chancery to choose a site on the South Side, he purchased the Marshall homestead at 5335 Jefferson Avenue in the Hyde Park section. During this preliminary sojourn in the city he was a guest in the home of Mr. John Sexton, founder of the present firm of John Sexton and Company. Mr. Sexton had lived at Niagara Falls, Ontario, during the pastorate of Father Feehan in St. Patrick's. In that city too he had received his first training as a purveyor of foodstuffs in the little Mahoney store on Morrison Street.

The Provincial Chapter of 1900 confirmed all that had been done in the new field, and authorized Father Feehan to continue his work there, with the rank of Provincial Visitor. Immediately after the Chapter he set out for Chicago, accompanied by Father Cyril C. Kehoe and the present writer. Another Carmelite companion was Father Louis Guenther who was returning from the Chapter. Father Guenther remained a few days as the first guest of the new community before proceeding to his parish, St. Joseph's, in Leavenworth, Kansas. The little band of enthusiastic but puzzled pioneers took formal possession of the home at Fifty-fourth Street and Jefferson Avenue. The house furnishings had not yet been delivered; and that added considerably to the discomforts of their first few days in the strange city. But Father Feehan's ready wit and infectious good humor compensated in good part even for the missing chairs, tables, dishes, pillows and blankets.

Very few students came during the first years of the new foundation, and the income was negligible. But the new community's most urgent want was not academic or economic. They needed most to fit themselves into the pattern of diocesan life, and to win from the Archbishop and his priests their recog-

nition and good will. This was a major task. Archbishop Feehan died in 1902, leaving the little band to make all necessary adjustments unaided. Father Feehan's character and manner lent themselves admirably to this work. There were times when criticism and opposition were outspoken and vigorous; yet he never suffered them to draw from his lips a harsh answer or a bitter complaint. He was almost unaided in this campaign for recognition; for though his community associates were wholeheartedly loyal, and were possessed of abundance of zeal, enthusiasm and energy, these excellent virtues had not yet been matured in the school of experience, nor capped with prudence. Father Feehan's technique in winning a constituency for Carmel in Chicago was not that of the fawning flatterer nor of the wily politician. His inborn honesty precluded both. He approached his problem with the conviction that Carmel had a distinctive element of true value to contribute to the Catholic life of Chicago, and he asked only the favor of a trial.

The story of the rich quality of Carmel's service to the clergy and laity of the Archdiocese and of the signal growth of the community there has been told in detail in other historical sketches that have already appeared in *THE SWORD*. But that story can never be justly appraised unless it is put in a setting of Father Feehan's pioneer struggles and discouragements, and warmed with the glow of his smile and his singularly happy temperament.

Father Feehan was the first pastor of St. Cyril's. He held that office till his death in the Alexian Brothers Hospital, after a lingering illness, on October 12, 1909. The solemn funeral Mass was celebrated in St. Cyril's. The church was filled to overflowing with his friends of the clergy and laity. Father Timothy Sullivan, pastor of St. Bride's, preached an eloquent sermon in which he outlined his dead friend's virtues and services. Then, in accordance with a request he had made, the remains were taken to Englewood, N. J., for interment. Father Anastasius J. Kreidt, Superior of St. Cyril's, accompanied the body. After solemn services in St. Cecilia's, Englewood, the burial took place in Mount Carmel Cemetery. His grave is near that of his cousin and fellow-laborer in the American Carmel, Father Theodore J. McDonald.

The Province of the Most Pure Heart of Mary is the richer for having had Father Feehan on its membership rolls. He contributed largely to its physical and spiritual well-being—the first by his business acumen, courageous leadership and diplomacy, the second by his apt counsel and edifying example. Mention has already been made of his gentleness. It was ever in evidence. Yet it was not born of timidity, for he was fearless, and could meet a show of violent and aggressive bluster with an effortless and unfeigned smile. This gentleness was, indeed, a natural trait of his well-poised character; but early in life he had supernaturalized it and matured it with Christian motivation and self-restraint. When the occasion called for firmness or even severity, he could reveal these facets of his character with promptness and decision. However, the display of sternness was always marked by the same placidity and composure that ordinarily accompanied his words of commendation and praise. Never was he surprised into abandoning his role of the cultured gentleman.

His tried abilities were many and varied, and his adaptabilities were seemingly without limit. When called upon he adjusted himself perfectly in the roles of parish priest, missionary, lecturer, diplomat, financier and builder. Because of his rare gifts of mind he seemed best fitted for an academic career; but little leisure was granted him in his busy life to cultivate such inclinations. His American sojourn began during the crucial reconstruction period that followed after the Civil War. Kentucky, which was the scene of his work during the first decade of his American career, had been profoundly affected by the internecine strife and by the abolition of slavery. The state had never formally seceded, but it could not escape the violent upheaval in economic and civil life. Such an atmosphere left no leisure for scholarly pursuits. It called for men of great physical energy coupled with high idealism; for it was necessary not only to administer to the physical wants of the victims of the battles and famine, but principally to re-awaken hope and courage in hearts that had been devastated by war's poignant horrors.

He was possessed of a natural gift of oratory. Indeed his strength and skill in the pulpit were the keys to much of his success in parochial administration and in conducting parish missions. His statements were brief in form, almost epigrammatic. This concise brevity is evident even in a book of announcements used by him in St. Cyril's from 1903 to 1906, which I have at hand. It presents a record of routine parish matters. Yet is eloquent of his concise manner of thought and of the relative importance he set upon the various parish activities. Briefest of all are the rare announcements of collections. Yet in its few lines it holds abundant evidence of the writer's administrative ability and of his meticulous fidelity to every pastoral duty.

Needless to say, evaluating a man by his external achievements is a superficial way of arriving at his real worth. Father Feehan's true value lay not in buildings erected or in sermons preached, but in the hidden reservoirs of his soul. Peering, therefore, into the background of his tireless effort and eminent achievement we discover an all-dominant faith in God. This burgeoned into love and zeal for souls, for the Church and for Carmel. It is in that faith one must seek for the explanation of his self-sacrificing devotion to duty, even when the task was repugnant and the effort seemed futile. It was the secret of his persevering loyalty even when the cause seemed lost. In his sermons he taught that into every life there must come an Agony in the Garden, a Way of the Cross, and a Crucifixion. These, he said, were occasions not to be feared but to be deeply appreciated, for they stripped religion and life in general bare of sentimental and make-believe values and brought men face to face with realities. In his gentle but determined way he cautioned Christians against fleeing from their Calvaries at the first prick of the nails and at the first sight of the flowing blood. Such was his own philosophy of life.