

REV. LOUIS KILIAN GUENTHER, O. CARM.

1837-1904

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FATHER Louis Guenther, one of the most interesting priests of our Province, was born July 1, 1837, in Hoerstein, Bavaria, diocese of Ratisbon. His parents were Sebastian Guenther and Susanna Lutz. He was baptized in Assumption Church, of the same town, on the day of his birth. He made his academic studies with the Jesuits with whom he also lived for seven months. Later on he came to America and settled in Leavenworth. When he decided to become a priest, he applied to Bishop Miede, S. J., to study for the Leavenworth diocese. Leavenworth, however, was only a Vicariate, and there were no funds available to send him to a seminary. Father Kuhls, a secular priest, pastor at St. Joseph's, encouraged him but could not offer him any financial aid. He went to work and soon became a wagon-wright, which trade he plied for several years. He became physically strong, saved his money and all seemed well with him at the outbreak of the Civil War. He was drafted; and, throughout the war, he traveled with the army as a wagon repair man. All this is local tradition. In the War Department records in Washington they have no record of Kilian Guenther either as a soldier or as a pensioner. It is quite possible that he was one of the many civilian artisans who were employed by the Army.

At the close of the war he was teaching in a Leavenworth school. Now in his late twenties, he again approached Bishop Miede. He was sent to St. Vincent's Seminary, Latrobe, Pa., to study for the Leavenworth Vicariate. Here in 1864 he met Father Cyril Knoll and Father Xavier Huber, the Carmelite pioneers just newly arrived from Straubing, Germany. They had come to consult the Venerable Abbot Wimmer about an American foundation.

Kilian Guenther felt himself attracted to them; and, being about to be ordained, he accompanied them to Leavenworth. In the meantime, Bishop Miede had invited them to the Vicariate and gave them St. Joseph's parish, the first Carmelite foundation in America. Bishop Miede ordained Kilian Guenther in 1864 for his Leavenworth Vicariate. A few months later he received permission from his Bishop to become a Carmelite. He was given the name Louis and received the Habit in the Leavenworth community on January 6, 1865. Thus Father Louis became the second Novice in the Province. Father Albert Heiman, the Vicar General of the Vicariate, had joined the Order shortly before.

Immediately after his profession March 19, 1865, Father Louis was sent to St. Boniface Settlement in Scipio as pastor. He was twenty-nine years of age at the time. He remained in that district until February 25, 1883. In 1868 he built the first stone church of St. Patrick's Parish in Emerald, Kansas. This parish was attended from Scipio until Father Louis himself became its first resident pastor (1883-1886). Then he was transferred to New Baltimore as pastor of St. John's until 1888. From 1889 to 1893 he was Prior and pastor of Holy Trinity, Pittsburgh. There the great Gothic church was built under his direction. Shortly before its completion he became seriously ill, and he resigned the pastorate and later was transferred to Leavenworth. His illness gradually became chronic and increasingly more grave. On February 2, 1904, he died at St. Joseph's, Leavenworth. Solemn High Mass was sung there on February 5, 1904, and two sermons were delivered, one in German by Father Alphonse Brandstetter, and one in English by Father Philip Best. Both the Bishop of Leavenworth and the Bishop of Wichita were present in the sanctuary, as were many of the secular clergy. He was buried in Scipio in the St. Boniface Cemetery.

Father Louis' priestly, kindly nature won him many friends among the people. He spent the best years of his priestly life in Kansas. In later life he delighted in recalling the missionary work of his early days, when the Carmelites travelled by horse back—the only mode of travel—through several counties. Scipio served as their missionary headquarters.

No question could ever be raised about Father Louis' sanctity. Occasionally he was inclined to be too self-opinionated, but this was more than over-shadowed by his fatherly kindness. His great faith and piety made him a successful missionary. He was one of the pioneers of the Province. It is possible that his letters were responsible for Father Cyril's locating in Kansas. Certain it is he helped to found many of our present day priories. Father Louis' memory is still cherished in Kansas as his missionary influence was felt throughout the State. In passing it is interesting to note that Father Louis Guenther died as the Angelus was ringing and on the great feast of the Purification. He had spent thirty-nine years in the Order and forty years in the priesthood.