

*GEORGE WALTER KLASINSKI, O.CARM. (1899-1953)*

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THE Editor of THE SWORD asked me to write a biographical sketch of the late Father George Klasinski, whose career of signal service to the Church and Carmel was brought to a premature close in a tragic auto collision on the Lincoln Highway, near Schellsburg, Pa. on Oct. 5, 1953. The following paragraphs are my effort to comply. The data have been assembled from a few meager records, but most from the memories of fellow Carmelites, and Fr. George's brother, Ignatius.

Father George was born in Leavenworth, Kansas, Dec. 12, 1899. He was baptized in St. Joseph's Carmelite parish in that city, receiving the name Walter. His Father was Herman Klasinski, born in the Province of Posen, Germany, Feb. 14, 1865, the son of Robert and Anna (nee Bujarski) Klasinski. Robert and his father, Michael Klasinski, emigrated to America about 1868. The rest of the family followed them two years later. (There were no national quotas in those days.) Herman was then but five years of age. Times were hard when the Klasinskis arrived in America, for it was the Reconstruction era after the Civil War. However, Michael and Robert found employment in the coal mines near Leavenworth. All the members of the family were enrolled in St. Joseph's German parish, Leavenworth, and when the children were old enough, they attended the parochial school.

After several years in the coal mines, Robert, with his son Herman as a partner, opened a grocery store, or rather a country store, wherein a wide variety of merchandise was available, with groceries at the head of the list. Later a meat market was added to the emporium. The firm bore the name: R. Klasinski and Son. Herman was the son.

On Oct. 12, 1887, Herman married Agnes Palecki, who had come from Poland in 1882, in her twentieth year. The marriage ceremony took place at a nuptial Mass in St. Joseph's Church, Fr. Elias Meyer, O.Carm, officiating.

The Klasinski and Palecki families had brought with them from their homelands a well-informed and active faith. As was to be expected, therefore, Herman and Agnes provided for their children a wholesome Catholic home atmosphere, and enrolled them in St. Joseph's parochial school. Both parents spoke Polish and German, but unfortunately, they did not train the children in those languages. The young folks picked up some German in St. Joseph's school, where it was taught until World War I; but they knew little or no Polish. An older brother, Leo, after adoption in the Wichita diocese, was sent to the seminary of Sts. Cyril and Methodius, Orchard Lake, Mich., and there was trained for service in Polish parishes. This training was continued in St. Francis' seminary, Milwaukee where he completed his theological studies and was ordained. But Fr. George lacked this training, for which he often expressed deep regret.

Agnes and Herman were not of the aggressive type; yet they were quietly progressive, and possessed distinct qualities of leadership. Agnes was always in the forefront of

parish affairs. She was a charter member of the St. Joseph's Altar Society, and also of the L.C.B.A. Herman was a trustee of St. Joseph's church for many years, even continuing in that office while cooperating in the establishment of St. Casimir's Polish parish. He remained a member of the advisory board of the latter parish until his death. As the parishes evidenced his deep interest in religion, so also did the fact that he generously surrendered two of his sons for service in the priesthood of the Church—Leo in the diocese of Wichita, and Walter in the Order of Mount Carmel.

I have deemed it not out of order to submit the above facts concerning Fr. George's family background as they reveal the human source of the qualities of earnest faith, zeal and helpfulness that were the coloring of his activities through his all too short career. The data were supplied to me by Fr. George's brother, Mr. Ignatius Klasinski, a business man of Leavenworth, Kans., and by Fr. Sebastian Urnauer, O.Carm., who for several years was pastor of St. Joseph's, and was personally acquainted with all members of the family.

I first met young Walter Klasinski in August, 1917 when he and his fellow postulants came to Englewood, N.J. from Chicago to enter on their year of novitiate. The new candidates were housed temporarily in a building next to the old rectory on Waldo Place; but before the end of the year they were given rooms in the new priory, west of the church, and facing on Demarest Ave. At his clothing in the habit he received the name George. Throughout the novitiate year he kept abreast of his class in studies and observance, and was a general favorite. Whenever any extra-curricular task was added to the regular order of the day, his companions used to say, "Let George do it;" and as George unflinchingly did it without complaining, his stock was usually high.

He pronounced temporary vows on Aug. 21, 1918, and then returned to St. Cyril's, Chicago, for continuation of his studies. Solemn vows followed in 1921, and in that same year he and his classmates left for St. Albert's College in Rome. His sojourn in the Eternal City lasted till his ordination on June 28, 1925. Returning to the United States, he took another year of theology, and then taught for a brief time in Mount Carmel High School. In 1928 he was appointed superior of St. Clara's, Chicago, and the following year was transferred to Holy Trinity, Pittsburgh, to fill out the term of Fr. Peter Kramer, who had been transferred to St. John's, Leonia, N.J. These were *ad interim* appointments, made in between chapters. Nevertheless, as Fr. George was only three years ordained when given the first of these assignments, his superiors must have discerned in him outstanding qualities of good judgment, poise and resourcefulness that won their confidence. He remained prior in Holy Trinity until 1933, having been continued in that office by the chapter of 1930. Then, after a year in Mount Carmel College, Niagara Falls, Ontario, he was appointed rector of the Carmelite House of Studies, now Whitefriars, Washington, D.C., to fill out the term of Fr. John Haffert, who had been called to the office of Master of Novices in the province of St. Elias. Here again Fr. George must have lived up to the expectations of the chapter members for they reappointed him to this position in the three following chapters, 1936, 1939 and 1942.

The eleven years spent in the District of Columbia were the most critical of his career. His position as rector called for mature administrative ability and sound judgment in character appraisal. It also called for refinement and diplomacy, for he was in daily contact with the elite of American Catholic scholarship, and he knew he would be assessed, not on the credits of Carmel's giants of other ages, but on his own personal worth. He felt the weight of his many responsibilities, and, paramount among them, the care of the Order's future priests. He knew Cardinal Mercier's prayer for priests, and he often made it his own — praying that Whitefriars might give to the Church and the Order "priests who are angels of purity, models of humility, seraphs of holy love, heroes of sacrifice, apostles of God's glory, saviors, and sanctifiers of souls." He prayed too that in the appraising and fostering of vocations, God might fill out his limitations from the reservoirs of his own wisdom and omnipotence.

In the chapter of 1945 Fr. George was appointed as pastor of St. Mary's Closter, NJ. Life in the little borough of Closter, with just two companions, the administrators of Cresskill and Norwood, was in sharp contrast with that which had been his in Whitefriars. Yet he threw himself with deep interest and wanted vigor into the care of the small but growing parish. Devotion to the sick, and promptness at Masses and at all parish affairs were features of his administration that were much liked by the parishioners. Added to these, a well-ordered personal life made his sojourn in the Northern Valley an influence for good that scores more effectively than fervid oratory. He once said that as for isolation and privacy, a rectory might just as well be built of glass, for a pastor's goings and comings cannot be screened; they are public property.

A serious physical handicap was phlebitis; this made it imperative that he be ever careful in his activities. It interfered with his work so much that it was probably one of the reasons why in the chapter of 1951, he was willing to be transferred from the pastorate of St. Mary's to the office of procurator in St. John's, New Baltimore, Pa. That was his last assignment. After two and one half happy years in the house of the novitiate, the books were suddenly closed on Mon., Oct. 5, 1953, as he and the master of novices, Fr. Paschal, were on their way to attend the funeral of a neighboring diocesan priest. A dense mountain fog hid from view an on-coming truck. A head-on collision snuffed out the lives of both priests instantly. It was, indeed, shocking news that was wired that morning throughout the province, and to Father Kieffer, Provincial, in Rome where the general chapter was in session. It was the most painful tragedy in the annals of Carmel in America.

When I last met Fr. George — it was about a year ago — he still displayed the same pleasant traits that had impressed me so favorably when he first came to Englewood for his novitiate year.

According to accounts, his willingness to serve had not been decelerated by time; he could still be smilingly alerted by **the** old catch-praise, "Let George do it." The province will long remember his wide range of helpfulness. He will also be long remembered for his gentle and musical voice and the other goodly qualities of his fellowship.

*Requiescat in pace.*