

## **FATHER CYRIL KNOLL, O.CARM., OUR FIRST COMMISSARY GENERAL**

1864-1881

(By one of our priests who desires anonymity)

From *The Sword*, October 1938

### **Introductory**

This sketch may well begin with an apology. The written data of Father Knoll's life and activities are very few and these very incomplete. The unwritten data are often second-hand because Father Knoll spent the last twenty years of his life in complete retirement at Scipio, so that most of his somewhat younger contemporaries never met him personally and learned to know him merely by hearsay. Hearsay, molded and remolded by every mouth through which it passes, can hardly form the basis of trustworthy history. This untrustworthiness applies, however, not to the salient facts of his life, but rather to the character of the man himself. His character can be delineated only by deductions from his acts and the acts of those with whom he was associated. These deductions the reader may make, if he will and can.

### **The Father of Carmel in America**

That we have no certain knowledge of his personality, his character and gifts is unfortunate, because Father Knoll has justly been called The Father of Carmel in America; he was the first Carmelite to establish the Order permanently in the United States: he was the first to open a novitiate and house of studies; he was the first to rule the several local communities in the capacity of Commissary General. Of the houses he fathered, six are in existence today and form no inconsiderable part of our Province. These, in their historical order are Leavenworth, Scipio, Englewood, New Baltimore, Pittsburgh and Niagara Falls. Moreover, during his administration the Fathers accepted charge of Tenafly and Saint Patrick, Niagara Falls, parishes, which since then have become Carmelite residences.

It is true, as we shall see later, he did not personally initiate all these foundations. Still, he exercised the highest authority in the land when these foundations were made.

### **His Early Life**

Father Cyril Knoll was born in the small town of Schellenberg, Bavaria, on the third and last day of the Battle of Leipzig, October 18th, 1813. Of his family and early life nothing is known at the present time. Nor is it known where he prepared himself for the secular priesthood, which he reached on July 31st, 1838. As a member of the diocesan clergy he received his first and apparently his only appointment at the hands of Bishop von Schwaebel of Ratisbon (Regensburg) to the staff of a preparatory college for boys at Straubing and as chaplain of the Ursuline Sisters in the same city. This appointment may very well be called providential, for it made him a Carmelite, brought him to the United States and thus shaped his entire subsequent life. At Straubing he came, perhaps for the first time, in personal touch with our Order, and because of his acquaintance with the Ursuline Sisters, who had

recently established themselves in Louisville, Ky., his attention was drawn to the New World and eventually brought him to the United States.

In Bavaria, as in most European countries, the Order had fallen: upon evil days. King Maximilian IV, to compensate himself for territorial losses west of the Rhine, at the suggestion of Napoleon, began a wholesale confiscation of church property. The number of churches, monasteries, convents and other Catholic institutions confiscated by this Catholic ruler is hardly credible. Our Fathers lost all but their church and monastery in Straubing, and here, forbidding the further reception of Novices, the government ordered the novitiate closed. Hopefully the civil authorities watched for the end, when death would have removed the last Carmelite. The end never came. Maximilian died and Count von Montgelas, the long-lived anti-Catholic chancellor fell from power and Louis I, the patron of Richard Wagner, the builder of the Walhalla, the Siegeshalle, the basilica of Saint Boniface, etc., ruled the land. Much of the church property was restored, though unfortunately, not that of the Carmelites. However, permission was granted to accept Novices. While this gave new life to the Order in Germany, it did not repair the damage suffered by the community from which, even to this day, it has not recovered.

Father Knoll entered the novitiate at Straubing in June, 1846, was admitted to simple vows in 1847, to solemn vows in 1850 and was, apparently, at once placed in charge of the community. With the exception of a tradition that he established the Carmelites in Budapest, nothing is known of his administration. That, however, it was successful and gained the approval of the Roman Curia may be gathered from the fact that the General of the Order, Jerome Priori, in the year 1856 created Father Knoll Titular Provincial of Scotland and thus granted him a seat in the General Chapter held in that year.

### **Comes to America**

In the year 1864 he asked for and obtained permission to go to the United States and establish the Order there. It may reasonably be asked what induced him to leave the small, struggling community of Straubing, dividing its little strength and, unsupported by a strong home Province, to incur the risk of dissipating his own power in the then wilderness of Kansas. A twofold answer may be given. Apparently he resolved to leave the Old World and seek new fields in the New World, because of the hopeless situation in Bavaria and the glowing reports received from his friends, the Ursuline Sisters of Louisville. In Bavaria many futile attempts had been made to regain possession of the churches and monasteries confiscated in the early part of the century. Without their possession the outlook of the Order seemed to him desperate. On the other hand, Mother Mary de Sales Reitmeier, the foundress and superior of the Louisville community, by describing in her letters the success of her own establishment, may have sown the first seed of the new venture in the mind of Father Knoll. If all failed and if European support were lacking, he could become in America, what he had been in Bavaria, chaplain of the Sisters. "I left my beloved Straubing," he writes, "on the second of May last year (1864). On the seventh day of May I boarded ship in Bremen and on the twenty-second, the Feast of the Blessed Trinity, I landed in New York. I would have liked to stay in New York

for several days to see some of the 249 churches, 21 of which are Catholic, but financial considerations made it necessary to proceed to the goal of our - journey, Louisville on the Ohio River."

Though in the first part of this quotation, he speaks in the singular person, there is no doubt that he was accompanied by Father Xavier Huber. Their arrival in Louisville in June, 1864, was not auspicious. Bishop Martin J. Spalding had just been promoted to the archiepiscopal see of Baltimore, and Louisville had no Bishop until the September of the following year. Strange as it may seem, Father Knoll left Germany and came to the United States without communicating with any American Bishop and assuring himself of any assignment, evidently trusting that his mere arrival and presence would give him and his companion a hospitable reception. He writes: "In Louisville Catholic life and Catholic action are flourishing and I would have liked to settle here." Father Smits, committing to paper what has been generally accepted, says: "On the train from New York to Louisville, they (Fathers Knoll and Huber) met Father Louis Guenther, who, as a secular seminarian, had just finished his studies at Saint Vincent, Pa., for the diocese of Leavenworth and who was on his way to ordination at Leavenworth. They told him of their intentions and thereupon he persuaded them to go with him to Leavenworth, where Bishop Miege, S. J., would most probably give them a good place." While this has been the generally accepted version of the story, it does not harmonize entirely with Father Knoll's own words when he writes: "But this foundation (Louisville) was made impossible by the commission of my Superior General"; nor does it harmonize with: "I had been in correspondence with the Bishop of Kansas, the Most Rev. J. B. Miege." Reconciling the more important points of these several versions, the story may plausibly be told somewhat in the following fashion: Father Knoll came to the United States and Louisville with the hope that the Ursuline Sisters would open to him the gates of the Louisville diocese. On the way he met the seminarian Guenther, who discussing his own diocese, spoke of his Bishop and the opportunities the diocese offered. When Louisville refused to admit him, Father Knoll recalled the words of the seminarian, opened correspondence with Bishop Miege, received a kindly invitation and after a five-day journey, arrived in Leavenworth on October 7th, 1864. He had learned a lesson; it was not well, even in those early days of the American Church, to present oneself to a Bishop without a previous understanding.

### **First American Carmelite Foundation**

Two days after their arrival Saint Joseph's parish was placed in their charge. This was October 9th, 1864, a historic day; the day the Order was established in the United States. Father Knoll writes: "It is intended that this shall be the birthplace and cradle of our Order in America. This, at least, is my intention and my wish, if it be the Lord's. I do not doubt it." Speaking of the parish he says: "We have from 600 to 700 members but should have at least 1500 if all practiced their religion." Having in mind the establishment of the Order as much if not more than the care of the parish, he undertook nearly at once the enlargement of the rectory to serve as a monastery. "We are in Kansas only one year, but there are with us already two priests as worthy Novices and one pious student of theology," Father Knoll writes to

the Archbishop of Munich. One of these two priest Novices was most probably Father Albert Heiman, who at the arrival of the Carmelites was attached to the nearby cathedral. The "pious student of theology" may have been the later Father Norbert Bausch, an uncle of the recently deceased Father Jerome Reichwein, pastor and Prior of New Baltimore and eventually the secular pastor of the Immaculate Conception Church, Johnstown, Pa. The apparent success with priest Novices seems at this time to have taken complete possession of him and made him write to the Archbishop: "If we had the necessary room and income, perhaps all the secular priests of Kansas would have joined us." These are large words indeed, inspired perhaps not so much by objective truth, as by the hope of obtaining "room and income," for we must not forget that the Archbishop was the dispenser of mission funds. It was this preference for priest Novices and his apparent indifference to a novitiate of youth, which robbed him of the confidence of so many of the Fathers and in time led to the several movements to withdraw themselves from his jurisdiction and establish themselves independently of him. While there were, no doubt, other causes for these separatist movements, for instance the financial conditions in Scipio and Leavenworth and the scandals caused by priest Novices in Cumberland, Father Knoll's predilection for priest Novices, in the light of the constitutions and the traditions of the Order, offered a telling argument against his regime. It is not difficult to imagine the impression made on the Roman Curia by letters written by such men as Father Pius Mayer, Father Smits, Father Maher, Father Kreidt, Father Theodore McDonald and others, depicting the conduct of some of these made-over-night Carmelites. Hence it need not surprise that Father Mayer became independent in Canada, Father Smits in New Jersey and Father Maher in Kentucky. Speaking of priest Novices, it may not be amiss to record that of all the very many who entered the novitiate in those days, only three died as Carmelites, Father Albert Heiman, Father Louis Guenther and Father Pius Mayer.

### **Cumberland Foundation**

In the *Catalogus Personarum et Locorum* of our Province the founding of Scipio is placed in the year 1865. This would make Scipio the second Carmelite establishment in the United States. Most probably this is a mistake, due to the nearly forgotten fact that Father Louis Guenther was pastor of Scipio before he was a Carmelite, and hence that Scipio did not become Carmelite at its appointment to the pastorate, but that he brought Scipio with him when he entered the community. Certainly, the words of Father Knoll seem to show that the second foundation was that of Cumberland, for he writes in a letter dated November 22nd, 1866: "Our small number is therefore split between Leavenworth and Cumberland." These words were addressed to Archbishop von Scherr, to whom he reports and whom he thanks for the "280 gold dollars" recently received. In this letter he announces that he had received charge of Saints Peter and Paul parish, Cumberland, Md., and that he had bought from Father Helenprecht, the Provincial of the Redemptorist Fathers, the monastery adjoining the church for 20,000. Here the Redemptorists had conducted a house of studies since 1850 and a novitiate since 1862 and it seemed therefore suitable for Father Knoll's purpose. He was most enthusiastic, for now he was in a position to accept a larger number of Novices, which Father Helenprecht had promised to send him. The building was also large enough to offer facilities for

a regular community life, which in Leavenworth had not been possible. Moreover, there was work for his priest Novices in small missions, both in Maryland and Virginia, which thus gave occupation and income. The Novices came. "This was the unfortunate beginning in Maryland," writes Father Smits. "Many of these candidates, in fact almost all, were of doubtful character, picked up in their missions and also discharged Novices of the Redemptorists." The novitiate was opened with himself as Master of Novices, to be later succeeded by Father Norbert Bausch. Apparently, the only child of this novitiate to complete the course and live to be a Carmelite, was the late Father Bernard Fink.

### **Kentucky and New Baltimore**

In mid-year of 1868 Father Smits arrived in Cumberland and found there Father Peter T. Maher, Father Theodore McDonald and Father Dwyer (later a Dominican), who had recently arrived from Rome. "They were considerably excited over the state of affairs," says Father Smits, with the result that he soon left for New Jersey and Fathers Maher and McDonald, after serving for a short time the parish of Upper Marlboro, Md., and neighboring missions, obtained permission to leave for Kentucky, where the Bishop of Louisville placed them in charge of a parish in Paducah and missions at Fancy Farms and Hickman. In leaving they had taken along the novitiate and its lone Novice, the later Father Kreidt. They had hardly settled in Kentucky when negotiations were opened with Rome and these resulted in the appointment of Father Maher as Commissary General, thus making the new foundations independent of Father Knoll. The latter continued to reside at Cumberland until 1875, in which year he sold the monastery to the Capuchin Fathers and went to Pittsburgh, where he had received the charge of Holy Trinity Parish. It has generally been believed that with the proceeds of the Cumberland house, the houses of Pittsburgh and Leavenworth were built. Before leaving the East and returning to the West, mention may be made that in the year 1870 New Baltimore was accepted. Both Bishop O'Connor and Bishop Domenec had found it difficult to find contented pastors for this isolated parish, despite the fact that the entire population of the district was Catholic.

### **Scipio**

Having gotten ahead of our story to close the history of Cumberland and New Baltimore, we return to Kansas. The former seminarian, Louis Guenther, now a priest, had been appointed pastor of Scipio, Anderson County. Most probably in the early part of the year 1867 he entered the Order. With his coming the pastorate of Scipio was transferred to the Carmelites and thus the second foundation in Kansas came about. The large farm of nearly 600 acres was acquired piecemeal; 160 acres a landgrant to Father Heiman, another 160 acres to one of the Brothers, perhaps Brother Clement Fey, and the rest partly by purchase and partly by gift of generous parishioners. The original log-cabin church was replaced by the present substantial stone structure, placed on higher ground. A fairly large and commodious monastery was constructed at right angles to the church, which, with a connecting link, formed the three sides of a quadrangle. The whole plant was known as "the college," and may still be so designated by the older members of the parish and district. The

priestly activities of the Fathers were not confined to Scipio; they evangelized the whole of Anderson, Franklin, Miami and Coffey Counties. They established as mission churches the present parishes of Emerald, Westphalia, Olathe, Ottawa, Greeley and offered Mass and administered the sacraments and instructed children in private homes throughout that part of Kansas. But the times were bad; the country had not yet recovered from the industrial collapse which followed the Civil War. Father Theodore Roemer, O. M. Cap., who has made a close study of Saints Peter and Paul Parish, Cumberland, and its pastors, writes:

"The big church, built on the donated farm at Scipio, did not attract the Germans as he (Father Knoll) expected and the Carmelites had to bear the heavy expenses alone." Added to the debt of Scipio was that of Leavenworth, where the new church, the present one, had cost much more than had been anticipated. The combined liabilities became unbearable. Father Huber was sent to New York and Brooklyn to collect in parishes of willing pastors. The Ludwigs Missions Verein, which had financed the trip to America and which had several times given aid, was approached with greater urgency. What Father Huber achieved is not known. The Missions Verein, in the course of some years contributed approximately \$7000. But even with this comparatively large contribution, the Fathers were unable to meet their financial obligations. The church property at Leavenworth was sold at public auction. Happily, an Irishman, Owen Duffy was the man's name, bought the church and then patiently waited until the Fathers could pay him.

When mention is made of the Ludwigs Missions Verein, a mission society organized under the auspices of King Louis I to aid the American missions, it may be of interest to note that a princess of this then ruling house of Bavaria donated to Saint Joseph's Church in Leavenworth a gold monstrance, of Gothic design with silver statuettes, which was and most probably is still used in that church on great occasions. There is a vague impression that the chalice is now at Saint Cyril's in Chicago.

### **Niagara Falls; His Death**

In the biography of Father Pius Mayer, published in the April, 1938, issue of the sword, it is recorded that in 1875 Father Knoll established our Fathers at Niagara Falls. Within a little more than one year he lost the actual control of this foundation, and shortly afterward Niagara Falls was made independent of him by a Roman decree. Though the houses of Leavenworth, Cumberland, Scipio, Pittsburgh, New Baltimore, Niagara Falls, Englewood, Paducah, Hickman and Fancy Farms, either directly or indirectly owed their origin to Father Knoll, he could and did write truthfully on January the 20th, 1880, "I have houses only in Pennsylvania and Kansas"; and before the end of that year he could have written, "I have no houses." For after losing Niagara Falls, Englewood and the three houses in Kentucky, he lost Pittsburgh and New Baltimore to the newly created Commissary General, Father Smits, on January the 8th, 1881, and in September of the same year he lost the small remnant of his Commissariate, Leavenworth and Scipio. There was at work, always and in every place, a centrifugal force, which tore from him child after child, and which finally left him a lonely old man in the midst of a

family which he had created but which knew him not. After that he served one term as Prior of Scipio and then retired from active duty. In the account of the celebration of the sixtieth anniversary of his ordination, which was held at Scipio, no mention is made of the presence of the then Provincial nor the presence of any other Carmelite visitor. Toward the end of his very long life, eyesight began to fail him and at the time of his death he was practically blind. He was heard to say: "I thank God; he might have allowed me to become blind years ago." On December 22nd, 1900, he died, was buried on the eve of Christmas and lies in Saint Boniface Cemetery. When the news of his death reached Rome, the American students in residence there wondered who Father Knoll was, and wondered still more why Father Galli, the General, called him "*Pater Carmeli* in America." His Appearance and Character

Father Knoll, as his picture tells, had a fine face, high forehead, beetling eye brows, Roman nose, pointed chin and a weak mouth. He must have been a very good man, a priestly priest and a holy religious. He met with opposition everywhere, at Englewood, Niagara Falls, Kentucky, Cumberland, Pittsburgh, Scipio. His policy was condemned, and all sought to alter it or escape from it. And yet not One word of complaint about him personally has come down to us. Neither his priestly character nor his religious life has ever been impeached. The strange, even unnatural silence that for twenty years kept hid from the younger generation the person and history of Father Knoll may have been due to the stricken consciences of good men, who had been forced to oppose a good man.

### **Bishop Lillis Says the Last Word**

It was in the month of May; it was the year 1906. The genial Bishop of Kansas City, Thomas F. Lillis, then Bishop of Leavenworth, visited Scipio. He had been warned that a group of parishioners intended to lodge complaints against the Fathers. Before this could happen, the Bishop entered the church and addressed the congregation somewhat in this fashion: "An hour ago I took a little walk; I found your cemetery. I also found a row of graves in which Carmelites lie buried. I read their names and the dates of their lives. Then I began to think; I began to remember. It was a holy thinking; it was a sacred remembering. I remembered the coming to Kansas of the Carmelites; I remembered the coming of Father Cyril Knoll to Leavenworth and Scipio; I remembered Father Huber, Father Heiman, Father Guenther, Father Pius Mayer, Father Elias Mayer, Father Brandtstaetter, Father Peters and his brother, Father Duel, Father Walsh; I remembered the Brothers who worked in the fields and lived in cold cells; I remembered Brothers Clement, Peter, Bernard, Bonaventure, Gerard. They came at the end of the Civil War; we all were poor and they the poorest. Going on foot, on horseback, in farm wagons, they went through Anderson, Franklin, Miami and Coffey Counties. They married and buried your grandparents; they baptized, instructed and married your parents; they sowed the seed of faith in the souls of your children and in your own souls. They built this solid church to house your God and a poor monastery to house themselves. They established parishes in Emerald, Westphalia, Garnett, Greeley, Olathe, Ottawa and erected churches with money collected in the East and in Europe. Now, before I shall administer Confirmation, you will kneel with me, to thank God for the coming of the Carmelites to Scipio and Kansas." — No complaints were lodged that day.