

FATHER PETER R. KRAMER, O.Carm.
(Sept. 15, 1878-Dec. 23, 1951)

STEPHEN J. McDONALD, O.CARM.

ON Dec. 23, 1951, Father Peter Richard Kramer, O. Carm., Pastor of Saint John's, Leonia, died after a long illness. On June 1st of that same year he had marked the fiftieth anniversary of his ordination to the Priesthood. Being already stricken, he could not take part in the ceremonies of the Mass of thanksgiving; but he greeted his many assembled well-wishers from his sick bed.

Father Peter was born in Riedlingen, Wurttemberg, Germany, September 15, 1878, and received in Baptism the name Richard. It was in that same year that Pope Leo XIII had ascended the papal throne. Bismark was then supreme in Germany and over all continental Europe. Hence, Richard's childhood was set in an atmosphere of militarism that became dominant when the Iron Chancellor had humiliated Austria, and acute when he had united the German states in an attack on France in 1870. To preserve his gains Bismark decided to detach the great power of the Catholic Church from the Holy See and make it an agency of his super-state. That was the purpose of the *Kultur-kampf*. He sought to break down intransigence by expelling Bishops and parish Priests. (The same technique as is being used behind the Iron Curtain today.) In the van of the intransigents were Bishop von Ketteler of Mainz, and Ludwig Wind-thorst, member of the Reichstag, founder and leader of the Center Party. Other contemporaries of these stirring times were Queen Victoria in England and her great Prime Ministers, Gladstone and Disraeli. In Italy kings Victor Emmanuel (d. 1878) and Hubert I, in Austria Emperor Franz Joseph, and in the United States, where reconstruction after the Civil War had been completed, Presidents Hayes, Garfield and Arthur. As may be supposed, the boy was not aware of what critical pages of history were unfolding before his eyes. But in mature years, when history's facts and philosophy had become his favorite field of exploration, he devoted special attention to the era in which Bismark and Leo XIII were dominant. Von Ketteler and Windthorst were outstanding among his heroes; and he used to show how the social principles of the former influenced the *Rerum Novarum* of Leo XIII.

There were five children in the Kramer family, three girls and two boys. The father was a blacksmith, specializing in horseshoeing, but always ready to do those extra-curricular services, such as re-conditioning worn-out tools, or welding broken skates and toys. The mother was a perfect manager of the family and home, and a strict, though kindly disciplinarian, whose single gesture was sufficient to bring instant obedience. But this wholesome family did not hold together till the children were well advanced in their teens. Death took away both father and mother, and the children were distributed to homes of relatives, Richard going to an aunt and uncle in Altheim, not far from Riedlingen.

The Stadtschultheis, or mayor, of Riedlingen was a brother of Father Pius Rudolph Mayer, Carmelite Provincial in America, and later, Prior General of the Order. Through him young-Richard had heard of the work of the Carmelite Order in the United States and Canada, and of their need of candidates for the Priesthood. The idea of a career in glamorous far-away America fascinated him; and knowing that several young men from his part of Germany were already there, he applied for permission to make a trial of his fitness.

Arrived in America in May 1892 he went direct to New Baltimore, Pennsylvania, and was there enrolled in the student body of Saint John's Priory. As he had been assured, he found there a considerable group of students who had come from points near his own home. He and six of

them who survived all the tests and hazards incident to the long preparation for the Priesthood became known as *Die Sieben Schwaben* (a name borrowed from a troupe of singers that had been lost at sea when en-route to America). However, he carried his national loyalties lightly; and though deep, they did not hinder his dynamic personality, garnished with humor and ready sympathy, from piercing through barriers of blood and language, and winning for him popularity with students and teachers.

He completed a year's Novitiate on Dec. 26, 1894, and was permitted to pronounce simple vows. He then checked out of his cell on the Novitiate level, and took over a private room among the Professi, on the second story of Saint John's.

Being unusually alert and observant, he reacted quickly to truth, beauty and goodness wherever found, whether in centers of culture or in hovels. His tastes were international (global is the modern word) in range. They were not fenced in by geographical, political, or social frontiers. His academic record at Saint John's forecast the brilliance of his maturer years.

But his studious habits did not prevent him from taking a full share in the recreational programs of the students of Saint John's, hiking, hunting, mountain climbing, swimming, skating, coasting. His career in baseball was too short for high scoring. As the students trekked through the hills on long walks, he took special interest in Pennsylvania's flora and fauna; and, boy-like, he would look for what might lie hidden under rocks and fallen trees. Once, it is remembered by classmates, this uninhibited appetite for knowledge led him to pry under a large boulder. Dislodging it, he found he had crashed the boudoir of a surprised and angry snake. Young Kramer was surprised too, and so frightened that he remained just whimperingly articulate through the rest of that day's outing. However, he soon recovered self-confidence and resumed his probing habits. Indeed, he continued them throughout life, and when boulders blocked his inquiries, he put them aside with as little ceremony as that which had startled the dozing ophidian of the Alleghenies. The thing he discovered by this method sometimes surprised and shocked him even more than that first fearsome reptile; but the shocks only sharpened his eagerness for deeper delving. However, in his mature years boyhood's impulsive curiosity had burgeoned into an eager search, tempered by prudence, for beauty, truth and goodness. He sought for them in the paintings and statuary of the art galleries, in cathedrals, shrines and monuments, in architecture and the sciences, but especially in the hearts and minds of youth. He was ever on the alert for signs of genius among the Order's neo-sacerdotes, whom he charmed with the wide coverage of his studies, and in the children of his schools whom he loved to quiz and instruct. His studious habits, mental alertness, and academic record were factors that prompted his selection as one of the group to leave for Rome to complete their divinity courses.

Accompanying him in October 1899 were the Fratres Silverius J. Quigley, now Pastor of Saint Anastasia's, Teaneck, N. J., and the late Basil A. Kahler, Aloysius M. Reilly, and Augustine Vander Schans. In Rome they were housed on Scossa Cavalli near Transpontina, and close to the Piazza di San Pietro. When the new College of San Alberto was completed, they were members of the first group that occupied it.

Frazer Peter Kramer was the furthest advanced in his studies, and was the first of the contingent from America to qualify for ordination. As soon as ordained, he was summoned by his Provincial to return and contribute his youth, strength, and qualities of mind and heart to the solution of his Province's problems. It is regrettable he was not permitted to remain for graduate studies; for he had what it takes to scintillate on any level of scholarship. However, he profited richly from the sojourn of two years in the Eternal City. Its traditions extending back through medieval and early Christian years to its kings, consuls and emperors were to him not inert and sterile

records, but living things, vibrant with the heroisms, loves, hates, ambitions, jealousies and patriotisms that motivated statesmen, soldiers and Saints. His creative mind was not content with the bleaching bones of history's dates and facts; he filled them out with flesh and life, and made the Forum to re-echo the oratory of the great masters, and the streets resound anew to the tread of triumphant legions. He re-created the atmosphere and thought-patterns of those ancient days, stored them in his information stock-piles, and in later years would garnish with them his talks, sermons and instructions, to win the attention and admiration of his hearers. The ordination took place on June 1, 1901 in the Church of the Most Holy Savior, more generally known as Saint John Lateran. This Church is the Cathedral of the Holy Father as Bishop of Rome; but as it stands outside the Vatican grounds, it was not visited by the Holy Father during the years he was the 'Prisoner of the Vatican,' from 1870 to 1929. Above its main portal are inscribed the words, "*Omnium Urbis et Orbis Ecclesiarum Mater et Caput*," the Mother and Head of all the Churches of the City (Rome) and of the World. The heads of the Apostles, Peter and Paul, are reputed to be enshrined above the main altar. He prayed for a share of their zeal and fire to take back with him to America, the field of his priestly ministrations.

After ordination he prepared to bid adieu to Rome and Europe. There were some last hikes along historic trails, and a few farewell visits to the Eternal City's storehouses of archaeological and art treasures, as he continued storing up gems of information and inspiration. He spent some time in Riedlingen, his boyhood home, where he discovered (what he could not appreciate in childhood) the town's fascinating geographical setting and historical background. He often spoke of how he reacted with mingled sadness and pride when he realized he was on the ground over which had swept Luther's heresy and the Thirty Years' War, the first confiscating churches, convents and monasteries, the second sweeping them away together with half the population; through all of which heresy, invasion and starvation, his ancestors had clung loyally to the faith. He used to point out it was the same story during the *Kulturkampf* and also during the sad years of the Hitlerian world-blighting lunacies. He proudly pointed out that at the present day his part of Germany remains politically a sound core of sanity and courage whilst Communistic ruthlessness threatens, and the Western Nations, hopelessly disunited religiously, politically and economically, held together only by fear of annihilation and the hope of American dollars, are panicky trying out the UN, NATO, and other man-made substitutes for divine Charity, Providence and Omnipotence.

He arrived back in America in the fall of 1901. It was the America of over half a century ago, isolated from European entanglements and unaware of a coming summons to world leadership. The automobile had just emerged from the cocoon stage, but the horse was still supreme on the highways. The telephone was a luxury; motion pictures were not the daily diet of citizens; radio, radar and television were still undreamed of. The aeroplane had not yet been invented; neither had the phrase, 'global war.' President McKinley had been returned to the White House just a few months before; but in another few months an assassin's bullet was to remove him and inaugurate the colorful era of Teddy Roosevelt. But he paid little heed to political developments at home or abroad, his attention being wholly absorbed in his new priestly functions and duties. But in later years he often studied them in retrospect. When dealing with complexities of the present age, he would sigh for the old nineteenth century simplicity.

His first assignment was to Saint Cecilia's, Englewood, N. J. There he served as an Assistant to the Pastor, Father Theodore McDonald, who by word and example gave him a self-sacrificing, faith-motivated pattern of parish administration. The young Priest never forgot Father Mac's high standards of pastoral administration, and they were undoubtedly a dominant factor in setting a priestly ideal for himself and for the younger men associated with him.

After leaving Englewood, he spent a few terms as a teacher in Saint Cyril's College, Chicago, and Mt. Carmel College, Niagara Falls, Ontario. Teaching appealed to him strongly and he would gladly have made it his life's work. Indeed it was a work for which he was well equipped. However, he had many aptitudes, and the exigencies of his Province required that he be called from the classroom and sent to other fields. Thus for six years, 1912 to 1918, he was Pastor of Saint Joseph's, Leavenworth, Kansas. He was Prior in Holy Trinity, Pittsburgh, 1924 to 1929, resigning there in the last year of a second term, 1929, to take over the Pastorate of Saint John's, Leonia. He was Master of Novices for one term, from 1918 to 1921. Some members of his one class of novices were the Fratres Richard Haag, Michael L. Christie, Joseph Moynihan, Edward Geringer, and Albert H. Dolan. His work in these various assignments was interrupted frequently by calls to assist on the band that conducted parish missions. He shone in this role as he did in all others; his personality, kindness and humor appealed to both Pastors and parishioners. However, though it thrilled him to see the faithful reacting to the appeals of the missionaries, the shifting from place to place did not suit his tastes; for he preferred work that did not take him too far from his study. He felt he could do more effective work if he were able to hold daily converse with his books, and draw thence refreshment and inspiration.

Father Peter's first Pastorate was in Saint Joseph's, Leavenworth, Kansas. That assignment lasted for six years, from 1912 to 1918. The appointment provided severe tests of his resourcefulness, diplomacy and courage; for during most of the six years he was without an Assistant. When, therefore, emergencies arose — as many did arise — that called for quick choice of a course of action, he had to depend on his own unaided wits to avoid missteps and costly blunders, and to restrain himself when tempted to talk out of turn. For instance, some crisis arose from the fact that in Saint Joseph's, though a national parish for the German speaking Catholics of the city, it was necessary to preach in English as often as in German. This in order to keep hold on the younger folks whose thought patterns were cast in English language molds. As he was an interesting speaker, and was possessed of youthful dynamism and an engaging personality, he drew listeners from the neighboring parishes. However his friendliness and ready cooperativeness, plus tactful use of conversational abilities, catalyzed potential rivalries into enduring friendships.

For leisure hours, if they can be thus classified, (perhaps solitary hours would be better) in addition to his reading of wide range he added the hobby of astronomy. However, as he did not believe in sterile and unproductive hobbies, he planned that this too should have a pay-off. He said that during the hot nights of Kansas dry spells, the unusual brilliance of the heavens seemed a compensation for the discomforts of the heat. He decided to learn the language of the stars and to weave their light and music into his meditations and sermons. He noted later he could win immediate attention in the pulpit if he sparked his points with one or more of the fascinating phenomena of the spheres. It also added to his remarkable conversational range which extended from the folksy grass-roots and down-to-earth argot of the agriculturists to the technical precision of professional scholars and military strategists. This last class were his close neighbors at Fort Leavenworth, just outside the city limits.

In the Chapter of 1924 he was chosen as Prior and Pastor of Holy Trinity, Pittsburgh. At the same time he agreed to conduct the Question column for *Extension Magazine*. This last entailed the sending of about fifteen personal replies daily, in addition to the answers that appeared in the magazine. He found the people of Pittsburgh and their bustling city were possessed of those certain intangible appeals that intrigue visitors into prolonging their sojourns. The smog was denser then it is now, but the compensation of cultural facilities and goodly fellowships, clerical and lay, cancelled out the inconveniences of the airborne carbon. He too would have been

content to tarry there indefinitely.

However, obedience called him away five years later when in 1929 he was appointed to the Pastorate of Saint John's, Leonia, N. J. To this new assignment he brought the wisdom, worldly and other-worldly, he had stored up during his quarter-century in the *cura animarum*. He found in Leonia a frail frame church building that had been acquired from the Methodists, and a steadily growing group of Catholics. He was pleased with the quality of Catholicism of the parishioners, and with the town's atmosphere of culture and art. He dedicated all his abilities and skills to the services of his new charges, and to their closer unification and effectiveness. That dedication was the key to twenty-three years of unrelaxing effort for the spiritual and temporal welfare of his parishioners. Out of it grew his carefully thought-out sermons, his faithfulness in attending instruction classes, his care of the sick, his punctuality at Mass, confessions, and at meetings of church organizations; also his easy assurance and faultless address when representing the parish at civic functions. The new combination church and school building erected twelve years ago was the fruiting, not of a wish to build a monument of brick, stone and mortar to his ability and good taste, nor even solely to provide parish members with a sanctuary where they could assist in comfort at Mass and receive the Sacraments. He often said parishes are not composed of buildings, but of people; and it was immaterial, therefore whether the church was Romanesque or Gothic provided the worshipers were Christ like. He wished, therefore, the new building to serve as an atelier where he could mold, in the faithful, full-statured Catholic manhood and womanhood, motivated by that three dimensional faith of which St. Paul wrote — a faith possessed of length, breadth and depth. Within its shelter, also, he purposed to build the young ones into informed, aggressive and creative Catholics, and into citizens equipped for wholesome leadership. That was a long-range objective. Its success has already begun to appear and it will continue to appear in future years. He knew the RQ (religion quotient) of each member of the parish. He had a way of making parish statistics and records sit up and be interesting. To the uninitiated his census cards carried only unattached names; but to him they were living and breathing men, women and children for whose spiritual and temporal welfare he held himself answerable.

He was open handed to the needy, and his benefactions knew no denominational boundaries. He himself was wont to distribute an auto load of Christmas baskets each year, but nobody knew where they were delivered. A non-Catholic family was supplied with coal throughout an entire winter from his charity fund, but the name of the family was never divulged. These are two instances out of a long career that was marked by generous and unheralded aid to victims of ill fortune. The parishioners revered him quite generally, though a few had become disaffected by his natural abruptness of manner and some solecisms that had been left uncorrected during the years he had been isolated, with the companionship of only his books and the stars. Yet, whenever he noted his words had caused pain, he was quick to compensate with a gesture of good will and friendship.

History held first place in his pattern of education, for he believed the sciences and arts were orphaned without it. It served also as his recreation and hobby. Friends used to twit him about his devotion to it; however, they were careful not to draw a devastating backfire, for he was quick at repartee and unsparing. On visits to the Archdiocesan Chancery, the lovable Vicar General McClary would sometimes smilingly interrupt the business discussion with an inquiry about the date of some battle way back in the B. C. chapters of history. He never failed to get the right answer — as, indeed, he knew he would. In his last years Father Peter was a close student of Toynbee's works. He admired deeply the English scholar's method and analysis, though he took exception to many of his theories and deductions.

His devotion to Carmel, and its ideals and objectives, was wholehearted, and unalloyed with self-seeking. This loyalty remained unimpaired through long-enduring tests that arose from misinterpretation of a few brusque mannerisms, and a proneness to acerbity when opposed. He was impatient, and rightly so, with those who labelled as "tradition" mere "assumptions" that lacked history's warrant. He held that Carmel's position of eminence in the Church needs no reinforcing from hyperbola or invention; that such form of support is not loyalty but a dis-service. He deplored the fact that many such nebulous traditions cling like parasites around some of the older religious institutes, subsisting on the life-blood of their hosts, contributing the while nothing but "Sisyphean toil to frustrated annalists." Changing the figure, he would declare that the Orders should be defrosted of such glacier-like accretions that hold their vast potentialities of aggression and creation in frozen embrace, and they be left free to uncover new facets of the Christ-like, and to adjust themselves to meet head-on and without delay all new menaces to religion as they arise from the world's ever-changing social, civic, and economic patterns. He loved the Brown of his Habit, the White of his Mantle, and the precious medieval memories that clustered around his Rite; yet, not so much that he would not readily jettison any feature of apparel or practice if found to declare the Order's readiness for total mobilization when summoned to the aid of the Church and souls. He often quoted Matthew, V, 18: "If thy right eye" ... or "thy right hand" . . . stand in the way of the Kingdom of Heaven, do not spare them. He would add that in appraising values, they must be orderly arranged, each on its own hierarchical level; and first things must be kept first.

In his humility he did not presume to leave a message to his confreres in Carmel—that is, none that I have found framed in written words. However, he left the legacy of his richly active life and achievements, and they are not too hard to decode. There is first the message of his scholarly attainments. He was intellectually restless and untiring, ever pushing on to new heights.

Yet he was largely self-taught in his particular specialties, and held no higher degrees, for he had not been free after ordination to continue studies in the schools. Indeed, he used to say that all creative scholars are self-taught; that colleges give students invaluable lessons in the know-how and supervise the development of their skills; but that real scholarship grows, not from without, but from within. It was his view that it is a continuous vital process that does not age, but changes to greater intensity and clarity with multiplying anniversaries. He would say that if the mind and heart of the graduate are left to idle aimlessly through post graduate years, subsisting on such diet as is provided in the daily press, in pulp magazines, or best sellers, his credits from the schools will not burgeon into wisdom, but will degenerate into mental scar tissue; for ideas are living things, and if left immobile, they will decay, and minds will decay with them. Stagnant minds can neither think well nor pray well. He used to say it takes a creative mind to meditate or contemplate effectively and with profit.

Another counsel implicit in his career is to keep one's information abreast the latest theological, scientific and artistic thought, and to have one's store of knowledge ever mobilized and ready for an unexpected alert. Indeed, in this matter of being always ready, he was outstanding. It is recalled, for instance, that he received a hasty summons one Sunday morning after his Mass to speak at a Communion Breakfast in place of a nationally known editor who had just telephoned that his commitments were hopelessly tangled. Organizing his thoughts in a few minutes, he captured the audience with a timely, wit-strewn discourse, and left the breakfasters rejoicing that the defaulting editor had missed the bus.

As a Pastor his attitudes and objectives set a pattern that could well be adopted as standard. He held that the individual Carmelite Pastor was only the representative of his Order, and that in the last analysis it was the Order that was answerable for the parish's well-being; and therefore that all members of the Order have a share in the parochial responsibility, and the duty to associate themselves with their pastoral representative in active interest and prayer.

His own personal zeal for souls did not halt at denominational or parish lines. He was, indeed, meticulously careful not to trespass on neighboring jurisdictions or denominational prejudices; but his apostolic urges reached out across all boundaries of nations, denominations and even of time. In the spirit of the missionary prayer of Saint Therese, which he loved to quote, his wishes penetrated deep into future years. When instructing converts, his objective was to leave them, not merely Catholics, but apostles of Catholicity, and aggressive champions of the Church.

But the energy reservoir back of his ever progressive scholarship, his eloquence, and his pastoral zeal, was his spiritual life. "There was his strength hid." Those who were most intimate with him say his prayer life was as well-ordered as were the books in his study and the papers on his desk. He had a passionate love for order and thoroughness; and he was wholly intolerant of mental or bodily slovenliness, of half efforts, and of window-dressing spirituality. The neatly arranged volumes in the cases that flanked his desk, breathing culture and good taste bore, convincing witness to the refined culture and good level of his thought life.

The sources of the above information do not exist in print or manuscript. The facts have been assembled from the memory of the writer and the memories of a few who knew Father Peter intimately. The purpose of these paragraphs was, not to praise the late revered Pastor of Saint John's, Leonia (which he would have resented), but to preserve for future sons of Carmel some of the values of an inspirational career. It is hoped that sparks from his faith-motivated life may find lodgment in the soul of every young man of Carmel, lighting a zeal that will carry him to the heights, leaving him intolerant of complacency and mediocrity, and content only with all-out effort in every assignment, whilst eyes are kept focused on highest achievement.