

FATHER ANASTASIUS J, KREIDT, O. CARM.

1854-1921

(By one of Our priests who desires anonymity)

The Sword, January 1938

Father Anastasius Kreidt may be numbered among the pioneer members of the Province. He began his career as a Carmelite only six years after Father Cyril Knoll made his first foundation in America, and was nearing the fifth anniversary of his ordination to the priesthood when the union of our various independent foundations into a single commissariat was effected.

Father Kreidt was born on May 12th, 1854, in the Benedictine parish of St. Mary's in Newark. New Jersey.

When it was learned during his elementary school days that he aspired to the priesthood, one of the Benedictine Fathers gave him private instructions in Latin, and in due time made arrangements to have him matriculate in St. Vincent's Preparatory College, in Latrobe, Pa. The boy of twelve submitted to the arrangements, but felt no attraction to the Benedictine Order. At the beginning of his third year at St. Vincent's he decided that he had no Benedictine vocation, and he returned to his home in Newark.

A few months after his return an incident occurred that determined his whole future. He himself relates the incident with charming simplicity in his personal notes. "On Epiphany day I went to New York to see the Christmas crib in the Franciscan Church on 30th St. I assisted at Vespers. After the *Magnificat* a religious in a white cloak over a brown habit ascended the pulpit. He preached on the Star of the Magi. Among other things he said, pointing toward me: 'Young man! There is the star in your sky calling you to your Lord. Do not turn away your eyes. Look upward and follow.' After the sermon I asked my neighbor in the pew who that was preaching. He said it was a Carmelite Father. I continued, 'What is a Carmelite?' He brusquely answered, 'Go and ask him!' So at the end of Benediction I went to the Franciscan convent next door and asked to see the preacher. A few minutes later he came in, still in his white cloak. I told him I had never seen or heard of the Carmelites. He said: 'You wear the brown scapular, no doubt. Well that is the livery of our Order, the Order of Our Lady of Mt. Carmel. Thus you belong to us already. You have the air of a student. Did you study Latin and Greek?' When I answered that I had, he said, 'Well then, why not join us? Go to Cumberland, Md., where we have a new foundation, and tell them I sent you.' 'But my dear Father' I remonstrated, 'you do not even know my name. How can you invite me to enter your Order?' 'Never mind,' was his response, 'I am sure you are of a good Catholic family and go to Vespers on a holy day. That's enough. Follow your star: And now, goodbye.' He left me astonished and bewildered. When I came home I told my mother of the absurd episode. She smiled and producing a photograph, asked me if that was the man. I said it was. Then she told me that he, Father Francis Xavier Huber, had visited her and had begged for assistance to build a Carmelite house and church in Leavenworth, Kansas, their first foundation; that she had given him a donation and had asked him to say a Mass for *me*. I should take his advice;

that she had dedicated me to the Blessed Virgin before my birth, and that was why St. Benedict did not claim me. I consulted my Benedictine confessor who strongly urged me to apply for admission. I wrote a letter to the Carmelite Superior at Cumberland and showed him all the reasons why I should *not* be accepted. His answer came shortly after, in two lines written in perfect calligraphy: 'My dear Boy, Come and fetch what you possess in books and clothes. Yours in Christ, Fr. Cyril Knoll, O. C. C.' My mother had already packed my trunk, and I left for Cumberland. I arrived there on Feb. 2, the feast of the Purification, in 1870. Fr. Cyril welcomed me. I wondered why he had accepted me. He smilingly referred me to a novice, Fr. Anselm Duell. This good man had known me at St. Vincent's. He had left there before me. When Father Knoll told the Community of my funny application which contained four pages of reasons why I thought I had no vocation, Anselm asked my name. When he was told he at once urged the Prior to accept me, and dwelt especially on my organ-playing as the community needed an organist, and the Prior sent for me."

And so he came to Carmel, by what seemed to him a strangely fortuitous concurrence of circumstances. Three years later he had come to a full realization of the guidance of Divine Providence in his life, and on the feast of the Purification in 1873 he wrote: "Today I thank God sincerely for having almost compelled me to adopt the dress of His Mother and for having given me a definite object in life, the greater glory of His religion. I will henceforth bear this in mind, that God, Who has extraordinarily led me on until now, will not allow me to suffer for want of His assistance. I never before felt the sweet consolation arising from a sincere confidence in Divine Providence ; but now that I am morally certain that it was this Divine Agency that has driven, literally driven me on, almost against my will, I can realize the truth of a common saying of my mother: 'There is no human being, be he ever so bad, but can point to some incident in his life and say, the Finger of God is here.'"

Ten days after his arrival in Cumberland he was invested in the Habit and began his novitiate with Father Norbert Bausch as his novice-master. His novitiate, however, was not to be completed in Cumberland. In the course of the year Father Cyril Knoll was invited to make a new foundation in Paducah, Kentucky. He sent Father Peter Thomas Meagher, a member of the Upper Marlborough foundation but at that time residing in the Cumberland house, to Paducah to inspect the place. Father Meagher reported favorably and offered to take the novitiate to Kentucky, provided Father Benno Janssen would be sent along. This was agreed upon and the novitiate was transferred to Paducah.

On April 9th, 1871, Fr. Anastasius made his simple profession and in the fall of the following year was sent by Father Meagher to Rome. Father Meagher had in the meanwhile been appointed Commissary-General of Paducah, independent of Cumberland, and had claimed as his all the clerics in his community. Thus did Fr. Anastasius find himself cut off from the Cumberland foundation that he had originally joined. But he was glad to cast his lot with Father Meagher whom he had learned greatly to esteem, and to whom he had opened out his soul.

No young man ever came to Rome with a deeper realization of the magnificent cultural and scholastic opportunities before him, than this young man of eighteen years. And he was well equipped by nature and attainments to draw the maximum of benefit from them. Intellectually he was highly gifted; he possessed a well developed and trained appreciation of the beautiful in art; he was blessed with an enthusiastic, buoyant nature that was crowned with a strong personality. We can imagine him as he enters Rome, exclaiming, as he indicates in his personal notes: "*In magno pretio est, esse Romae!*"

Within four months after his arrival he acquired a conversational knowledge of Italian, sufficient to hold long conversations with the professors who taught him. Of these he writes: "We had very good professors. The General himself who was professor of Moral Theology at the *Sapienza*, taught us at home. Father Caruso, an admirable and learned man, our 'Prior, taught Dogma. We had a Jewish Rabbi for Hebrew, who came twice a week. Father Galli taught Philosophy and Church History. In Dogma every Saturday one of the students occupied the *cathedra* and expounded a thesis, while others made objections which he had to answer—all in Latin."

He was very much privileged in his first audience with the Holy Father, Pius IX. He describes it in detail: "Shortly after my arrival a certain Cyril Feehan, who had just been ordained left for Paducah, Ky., to join our men there. He was a cousin of Father Theodore McDonald. Before leaving Rome he had an audience with Pope Pius IX, to which the General also invited me for my introductory visit. The General had been a schoolmate of the Pope in Senigaglia, the birthplace of both of them. They were intimate friends. The Pope, after blessing Father Feehan, looked at me as I was kneeling beside Fr. Feehan, and said: 'Ecco—another Irishman?' 'No, Your Highness, I am an American.' 'Of course,' he said, pinching my nose with his fat pudgy fingers, 'I should have known that. Your black curly haired Irishman here,' pointing at Fr. Feehan, 'is a typical son of Erin, but you are a blond-haired flower from across the sea. I hope that blessed country will produce many more flowers in the new vineyard of Carmel.' In all my life I have never experienced the same emotions of reverential love that I felt before this noble saint. I had many audiences after-ward, and the Pope always remembered me, saying some kind words."

His personal notes during his stay at Rome abound in interesting studies of the art and architecture of the Holy City. But alas! his stay was to be a brief one. The governmental edict of 1870 of further suppression of monasteries was being ruthlessly carried out. On Oct. 30th, 1873, one year after Fr. Kreidt's arrival in Rome, the General received notification of the confiscation of the Transpontina monastery. "This evening" writes our Roman student, "we were informed by the authorities that on the 7th of November the government would take possession of our convent, and on the 13th we must leave. It is with the greatest anxiety that we await the 7th, for then we will know whether or not they will leave sufficient room for all. They will leave a part of the convent, but how much? If they do not leave sufficient room for all, where will we go? I for my part do not care, for I may go to any part of

the world, but there are eleven Spaniards, six of whom cannot return home as they would be forced to become soldiers. We have no large and rich convents. All the convents left are in Holland, in Ireland, and in Bavaria, all of which are poor. These poor lads have no means. The miserable pension is not sufficient to pay board and clothing, much less house-rent. O what misery!" On the previous Sunday he had written: "Our Sundays are no longer sunny days. The joyous countenances which alone were sufficient to show that it was Sunday, are now grown sad and anxious. No more singing, no joyous repartees in the conversational circles, all serious and grave. Everything changed. Daily the lay-brother of the General is moving pictures and other movables from the halls. Today he has taken away that beautiful crucifix on the staircase whose feet we used to kiss in passing. Even our *Saviour* must be *saved* from future insults!"

It was with a heavy heart that he bade farewell to his beloved Rome on Nov. 12th, the day before the occupation of Transpontina by the Roman soldiers. He bitterly laments his misfortune: "They have driven away all my Brethren with me from our convent!" His destination was our convent in Boxmeer, Holland.

He was not however one who lived in the past and failed to recognize present opportunities. In a few weeks we find him completely adjusted to his new environment and determined to make the most of it. "This is just the place for me," he writes. "The observance is strict, almost too strict. We rise at a quarter to four A. M. and spend at least five and a half hours a day in choir, and on Communion days, of which there are three a week, at least six and a half . . . Everything here is common; not a penny is allowed to anyone. Each has the same duties, the same privileges. There is no partiality, no injustice in any, even the slightest affair of duty. Thus I love it . . . The library is very picked. All the authors are first class writers. The different departments are well stocked; there are books in every language. I would be stupid if I did not desire to remain here. How kind good Providence takes care of such a wretched, miserable friar as I am!"

Two years of the three he spent in Holland were years of sickness. There was a serious breakdown in health followed by a long drawn out period of convalescence. Added to this he seemed to have been disowned by his American superior, for no recompense was being made to the Dutch Commissariat for his board and tuition, so that the Commissary General threatened to retain him in Holland indefinitely after his ordination. These trials were accompanied by graces that drew him within himself and brought him to concentrate more completely on his spiritual life. His personal notes during these years often contain spiritual reflections and resolutions and exclamations of the deepest appreciation of his Carmelite vocation.

At the close of his third year in Holland he was ordained to the Priesthood by Bishop Paredis of Roermond, Holland, on November 19th, 1876, in the twenty-second year and sixth month of his age. At the time of his ordination he had already received his obedience from Father General, not to return to America, but to go to our new foundation of St. Leon in Montpellier, France. Even though he was longing to return to America, he rejoiced in the prospect

of spending a year or two in France where he could perfect his knowledge of French. During the two years he resided in Montpellier he mastered not only French but also Spanish, with which he was already familiar. In the course of his six years in Europe he acquired a knowledge of four modern languages in addition to German which he already knew, and a fluency in them that equaled his native tongue.

In December, 1879, we find him back in America as the first resident pastor of our mission in Hickman, Ky. However, the unsettled condition of the Commissariat did not let him remain there very long. Six months later he was recalled to Paducah where he was made procurator of the Community. While he held this office an incident occurred that serves as a partial study of his character. No young religious ever revered his superior more deeply and loved him more sincerely than Fr. Anastasius revered and loved his superior, Father Meagher. It was a filial love, a love of gratitude and of true friendship. He had opened his whole soul to him. Even during the years of his painful situation in Holland when he seemed to have been disowned by Father Meagher, he remained loyal to him in his heart and found ways of excusing his long- silence. And now out of a clear sky, Fr. Meagher coldly accused him and with finality condemned him of dishonesty. The matter was certain; there was no use of trying to prove his -innocence. It was a frightful blow. The darkness and desolation that followed could not be put into words. "It is all over! It is all over!" is his bitter lament. Had he known that the accusation was the result of a mental derangement caused by congestion of the brain from which Father Meagher was then suffering and which a few months later brought about his death, it would have been bearable. Nevertheless in his heart he remained faithful to his friend, and that fidelity held him at Father Meagher's side. It was only after Fr. Meagher's death that he entertained the thought of seeking permission to quit the Paducah Commissariat and join the Niagara Foundation. That staunch fidelity to his friends—and he had many during his life—is one of the outstanding traits of his character.

After the appointment of Father Anastasius J. Smiths as Commissary General of all our American Foundations, Father Kreidt was placed on the missionary band and on September 4th, 1881 he opened his first mission. It was in our Englewood Church. His missionary career began with this mission and continued with a few interruptions until 1906. That first year from September to the close of the year he gave nine missions, four of which were in German.

In the summer of 1887 he was sent to our House of Studies in New Baltimore to teach our students philosophy and moral theology. During this scholastic year he was honored by the Most Reverend Angelus Savini, the Prior General, with the degree of Doctor of Sacred Theology. During the following summer he was appointed prior of New Baltimore, and one year later he was made prior at Niagara Falls, where he remained in office until he was elected Provincial in the Chapter of 1897.

During his priorship at the Falls he launched two projects of a far-reaching importance—the building of the Hospice and the founding of the Carmelite Review. The Hospice was to be a combination monastery and retreat house, each in a separate wing of the building, with a large monastic church in the

middle, separating the two wings. It was a tremendous undertaking, particularly for a Province in its infancy, but there was a kind of necessity for going ahead in view of the purpose that Archbishop Lynch had in bringing the Carmelites to the Falls thirteen years before, a purpose that he clearly sets forth in his Pastoral of April 25, 1876. Since the undertaking could be financed only through free will offerings, Father Kreidt turned to Our Blessed Lady of Mt. Carmel for aid, and founded the Carmelite Review to make Her and Her gracious Gift, the Scapular, better known. The Review soon grew into a very creditable magazine and made many friends for the Carmelites and their work. Soon the prospects of financial aid became bright enough to justify the building of one wing of the proposed edifice, the wing that was for years known as the Hospice. Before ground was broken in May, 1893, six months after the birth of the Review, Father Kreidt had collected ten thousand dollars, one fourth of the cost of the building. Dean Harris, who was a generous contributor to the Hospice fund, writes of Father Kreidt at this time in his history of the Catholic Church in the Niagara Peninsula: "The present superior, the Very Rev. Anastasius J. Kreidt, is a man remarkable for his scholarly attainments, his religious zeal and indomitable energy. Trusting in the Providence of God and in the generosity of the people, he began this great building, confronted with obstacles and difficulties that would have discouraged a less energetic and enterprising man. Overcoming all discouragements he has succeeded beyond the expectations of his friends and will undoubtedly carry his great work to a successful finish. This exceptionally talented and large-hearted priest established a few years ago the Carmelite Review, a well-edited monthly magazine, which has already reached a circulation of four thousand and is slowly and steadily widening its circle of readers."

Unfortunately the Hospice failed in its main purpose. To Father Kreidt's keen disappointment, very few retreatants responded to the announcements of retreats. It was due perhaps to the fact that the Hospice was not opened strictly as a retreat house but also as a guest house for vacationists; perhaps it was due to the fact that lay retreats had not yet become popular.

After he was elected to the Provincialship in 1897 his work was a continuation of what he had begun at the Falls. He founded and edited another magazine, the *Rundschau vom Berge Karmel*, a German magazine similar to the Review. It was a splendid publication but lasted only two years from 1897 to 1899. The time was past when a new German magazine could succeed. Even old German publications were beginning to suspend publication.

His main work as Provincial was the founding of our Chicago convent and school. His purpose in this foundation was to supply, through the high school and college, a constant source of Carmelite vocations for the Province, and to have a standard school in the Province in which to educate our postulants. A number of elements could be enumerated that for a long while frustrated the former of these purposes. It was not until after Father Kreidt's death that it was fully realized.

All during his two terms as Provincial, but particularly during his second

term, he gave missions, which work he continued as head of the missionary band after he was released from the provincialship.

In 1906 he was elected novice-master and at the same time prior of the novitiate house in New Baltimore. The course of asceticism which he introduced into the novitiate and dictated to his novices has been in use in our novitiates for the past thirty years.

The next office and the last that he held was the priorship of St. Cyril's in Chicago, to which he was elected in 1909. His good work in this capacity seems to be totally eclipsed by a series of mistakes that he made that ended disastrously both for himself and for the Community. They were mistakes that resulted from his exceedingly optimistic and trusting nature. He was advised by a "friend" of the Community, a real-estate agent, to make a "very profitable" exchange of some property held by St. Clara's Church. Father Kreidt placed the proposition before the Archbishop who consented to the exchange provided it was done for the profit of St. Cyril's Community and in its name. The exchange was made and proved a frightfully bad deal. It involved the Community deeply in debt and brought a sentence of deposition from office upon Father Kreidt and temporary privation of voice.

It often happens that a great trial, a public humiliation, a deep disgrace, will reveal traits of character and hidden virtues that even intimate friends had not discovered before. In his deep humiliation before his Community of priests and students Father Kreidt gave an example of virtue that far outweighed in value the temporal loss that he had unwittingly occasioned. He received the news of his deposition and punishment with perfect submission. "I deserve it," he wrote, "I have made a mess of things! I hope my removal will compensate for the loss I have caused." There is not one word of resentment at the severe measures taken against him; there is no questioning of the justice of his condemnation; there is only self-accusation and sorrow at the loss he has caused. He might have requested his transfer to another house, but he did not; he cheerfully bore his humiliation before his former Community, not only once but day by day as he took his place in the ranks.

Five months later he was transferred to the Pittsburgh House where he spent the nine remaining years of his life faithfully devoting himself to the tasks assigned to him of assisting the local diocesan clergy in their parochial work, of giving courses of sermons and of conducting, in his leisure time, the Question Box of the Extension Magazine. He died suddenly on September 16, 1921, while visiting his sister in Pleasantville, N. J. He was on his way to the parish church to say Mass when he was stricken with a fatal heart attack.

With the death of Father Kreidt the Province lost one of its outstanding members. He was a man of more than ordinary natural gifts and accomplishments. Intellectually he was extraordinarily versatile, so that, as one of his acquaintances has remarked, it was a liberal education to meet him. As a preacher he ranked among the foremost of the Province. He was not an orator, but a popular speaker who could bring home his message with unction to the simplest and most uneducated of his audience. His sermons

were always carefully prepared with written plan even to the last that he preached. Musically he was highly talented. Along with the technique of the piano and the pipe organ he had mastered the principles of counterpoint, and he had a thorough knowledge of liturgical chant.

But still more worthy of note is his character as a religious and a priest. On the occasion of his silver jubilee of ordination to the priesthood, the preacher, Father Theodore McDonald, adapted the words of Our Lord, "*Ecce vere Israelita*," to Father Kreidt and described him; "Behold the true Carmelite in whom there is no guile!" A true and vivid picture of him! Whatever mistakes he may have made in his efforts to further the interests of the Province, no one could ever doubt his sincere love for the Order and the Province, and his unfaltering loyalty to his Carmelite ideals. There was a deep reverence in his soul for the Order and its traditions. That reverence and love grew in his soul from the first day he received the Habit. Here is a quotation from his personal notes written just before his solemn profession. "I will make it my firm object to offer all I am and have to the Order. I am indeed so strongly tied to the Order that I would be the most unnatural monster under the sun were I to suffer any thought of leaving it to enter my head. There are so many bonds, as vows, ties of affection and gratitude, which latter especially can never be loosened. I love the Order and for it I will use my talents and all my energy. But I must first prepare myself by prayer and study." Especially did he deeply love and revere Our dear Lady of Mt. Carmel and her great Gift, the Scapular. Of all his many sermons on the Blessed Virgin, the most eloquent and most soul-stirring were those on the Scapular and Our Blessed Lady of Mt. Carmel. His confidence in Our Blessed Lady was unlimited. She would not let his missions be a failure. Concerning one mission he wrote:

"Attendance is unusually poor, but Our Blessed Lady won't let the mission be a failure." Before the end of that mission the church was crowded! Our Father of the Province to whom Father Kreidt in his last days opened his soul, writes: "In the darkest days of our Province when many of us entertained little hope, Father Kreidt never despaired of the Province. This was not due to his natural optimism; it was based on his confidence in God and in Our Blessed Lady."

Those who knew Father Kreidt only socially did not suspect the depth and solidity of the piety that he possessed. They knew him as a corpulent, good-natured man who could tell a joke and laugh most heartily at it; who could become deeply interested in any topic of conversation and enter intelligently into it; who could argue warmly and still listen attentively to the arguments of his opponent; who could become oblivious of time when he was at his beloved piano; but they would fail to see the source that was the wellspring of his light-heartedness. It was his piety, hidden, undemonstrative, but still manifest enough to the observant. We have already noted that a characteristic of his spirituality was his unshaken confidence in God and in the Blessed Virgin. Lying at the root of all his spirituality was his humble, filial attitude of deep reverence for God and all that was associated with God. The Blessed Sacrament was especially the object of his priestly devotion. During his invalidism following a stroke some months before his death, he

made this significant remark: "If I am unable to say Mass any longer, I want to die, for I have nothing more to live for!" On the day the stroke overtook him he could not say Mass but he managed to hear Mass. His notes contain the following entry for that day. "Feel like a drunken man. Managed to go to the sacristy to say my Office and attend Mass." During his sickness he daily received Holy Communion, and when he was able he would slip out of bed to receive It kneeling. It would be expected that a priest of his type had acquired the habit of prayer and recollection, but we are particularly edified to hear from a fellow-traveler of Father Kreidt's who shared his sleeping quarters during a journey, that Father Kreidt prayed from the time he rose from bed in the morning until he had finished his toilet. In his personal notes Father Kreidt tells of his yearly retreats and sometimes with great simplicity records his retreat resolutions. He always made his review confessions at these retreats. His notes contain such items as the following: "General confession. Happy as a lark!" "Made review confession to the retreat master. Feel lighter and happier." And these items appear not only in the beginning of his priesthood but also in the closing years of his life.

He possessed a childlike simplicity that was truly without guile. There was no duplicity in him. He was open, candid, straightforward in his dealings with others, and he never came to realize that his own guilelessness was not common to all men. He therefore implicitly trusted all men and respected them. He could see no evil in his fellowman. "At heart he was humble," writes one of the priests of the Province, "and had a deep respect for the humanity for which Christ died, no matter how badly it was housed. I know of no instance of his being rude to the poor, the ignorant, or the helpless." No small praise! To treat the tramp on the street with respect indicates that one does not consider himself superior to the tramp, and postulates humility of heart. As a superior Father Kreidt was easy of access to all his subjects, and the least of the Community could approach him with certainty of a respectful hearing.

God, in His All-wise Providence, ordained that the main undertakings of Father Kreidt should appear during his lifetime to be failures. It was undoubtedly for his immense spiritual advantage, for it perfected the work of his sanctification. The works however were not failures. The Hospice that he erected has grown into the finest monastery building in the Order; the Chicago foundation has become the most prolific source of Carmelite vocations in the Province; the Carmelite Review with its twelve years of successful spreading of devotion to Our Lady of Mt. Carmel, stands as a monument of achievement of the Province in its infancy, and sends forth its message of assurance, and encouragement, and invitation to the Province of today grown larger and more experienced, to avail itself once more of the pages of a periodical for the spreading of devotion to Our Lady of Mt. Carmel! And who shall measure the extent of his success in his priestly work in the many missions he gave, in the hundreds of sermons he preached, in the thousands of confessions he heard, in the innumerable private letters of advice he wrote for the Question Box of the Extension Magazine, and in the edification he gave by his truly priestly life? He had his imperfections as all of us have, — but even the saints were not utterly free from them!