

## REV. LUKE C. LEININGER, O. Carm. (1873-1930)

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One of the most interesting characters we have had in our American Province was Father Luke Leininger who came from Germany at the age of fifteen years to find both his fortune and his vocation in a maze of peculiar circumstances. He seemed to have been born a pioneer and was forever facing new difficulties. This he did with an adaptability which often proved novel and wonderful. He mastered the English language quickly; lost no time in taking up American life and in being naturalized; learnt music and dancing; had a voice of marvelous range, singing both baritone and tenor with equal ease; joined church choirs, concerts, clubs and minstrels and withal had lurking in him a deep-rooted simple faith. It was often said of him that he would have been good timber for the foreign missions. Strong faith and a ready adaptability just seemed natural to him.

He was born in Muenchweiler, Bavaria, August 30th, 1873, and like several of his brothers came to America where he joined one of them, Jake Leininger, who conducted a meat market in Pittsburgh. His first American experience was to learn butchering and meat cutting. He remained at that trade for thirteen years. Having a very jovial disposition, he took up violin, joined all the men's societies in Trinity Church and became a member of the choir and the men's club. Having become a graceful dancer, it is said that he danced with every girl in the parish. But, he was just as pious. Everybody noticed that, and Father Jerome Reichwein in particular tried to interest him in a vocation and the priesthood if possible. Years were passing along swiftly. He had no inclination towards marriage, but his meager studies seemed to offer an insurmountable barrier against the priesthood and the religious life.

However, St. Cyril's College in Chicago opened about this time, 1900; and a class of Pittsburgh boys were going there to be the first students in the new school. Charlie Leininger, as he was affectionately known to everybody, agreed to go along although he was then twenty-eight years old. He was a handsome, big man with a heavy mustache and was years older than any of the boys, among whom were Father Anthony and Father Urban. The whole thing seemed to be a queer enterprise to everybody except to Charlie himself. Arriving in Chicago he humbly started at the bottom with little boys to whom he was more a father than a classmate although he looked much younger now because of a neat tonsorial operation — the removal of his heavy mustache. Things were crude and poor during the first years of the Chicago College, and Father Luke, being the oldest, put many a day in at hard manual work, such as painting, carpentering, firing furnaces, plastering. He never grumbled although studying was task enough for him at his age. Always happy, always popular, always musical and entertaining, he kept up the spirits of all; and, if he ever had any bitter thoughts in his mind, nobody ever heard of them. Upwards and onwards he went mowing down every difficulty before him and forever maintaining his good-natured disposition, eating praise and blame with the

same spoon.

Having mastered his Latin and other studies, he entered the Novitiate in Pittsburgh with Pat McCann and John Fey on July 16th, 1904. He finished his novitiate in Chicago where he also made his profession on August 20th, 1905. He continued his studies in Chicago in the same studious and helpful fashion with which he had spent his first hard years at school. Being ordained in Chicago on August 3rd, 1908, he sang his First Solemn Holy Mass in Trinity Church, Pittsburgh, where he was royally received by all his old friends.

Not having had the educational advantages of others, he naturally was not meant for school work and was immediately assigned to parish work at St. Boniface Church, Scipio, Kansas, where he remained as pastor for almost twenty years, becoming sort of miracle man among the people. He could be a farmer with a farmer, a priest with a priest, laugh with the laughing and weep with the weeping. He thus gained tremendous popularity and his name to this day is still held in high regard in that district.

From Scipio he was transferred to Cresskill, New Jersey, in 1924 to take over the new and unfinished St. Therese Church together with a large debt. Only a man of his happy disposition and his ability to do hard manual work could have succeeded there. But there he was and there he labored making a host of friends among Catholics, Protestants and Jews alike. He was welcomed in any home and could go out and in as he pleased. Here he labored for nearly six years. He died suddenly before Mass on November 28th, 1930. He had gone to fire the furnace to make sure of the comfort of the people who would be present at Mass. When after some time he did not begin the Mass, a parishioner investigated and found him dead in the boiler room. This occurred on the same day on which Father Ignatius McDonald died. Both he and Father Ignatius were members of the same community residing at Tenafly, the neighboring town.

His passing was deeply felt by everybody. He was everybody's friend in the town where he worked. But sometimes his disposition was misinterpreted — by the clergy too — and regarded as rather commonplace, a bit unpriestly or unwise. It is said even that in the country he over-sympathized with the people to such an extent that, adopting a help-yourself policy, they carried away barn, woods and all. However, the good he did, and the holy impression he left showed that his willingness to err on the side of kindness even to the point of indulgence rather than on the side of severity was justified.

Many stories can be told of him and of his many experiences but his strange intimacy with a Protestant minister was rather unique. As mentioned already, Father Luke was fond of manual work. One day he was quite dirty and dishevelled from working on the lawn of the little church in Cresskill, and he was too late to catch the Erie train back to Tenafly for his dinner. Without hesitation he stopped at the residence of the Methodist Minister and asked him to drive him to Tenafly. The minister did, and both had a good laugh afterwards over this unusual request.

Nobody could refuse him anything. Whatever arguments he used, is not known. But some of his requests were not only unusual but were almost brazen. For instance there was an understanding between him and the owner of the Nyack Bus Company whereby he could flag a bus homeward or up to Cresskill anywhere and anytime, express or no express, and not pay a fare. He had that winning way and would have done an immense amount of good had he been spared longer.

Beginning his studies at the age of twenty-eight, he nevertheless spent twenty-two good years in the priesthood when called so suddenly to his reward. We must marvel that he undertook this vocation at all and that he did so well in the time allowed him. He was a man of rare perseverance and fortitude, a consecrated laborer. It would be a great help to our Order if we had more of his type. He was of that happy disposition that, after he had conquered and doggedly put down a whole list of his own difficulties, he still found time to help, console and encourage others.

There was only one Father Luke, and that was seen clearly at his funeral when the towns of Cresskill and Tenafly were at a standstill and people of all faiths paid final tribute to him. They said it was the greatest funeral ever held in Bergen County. A nephew, Monsignor Dauenhauer, held the funeral; the Archbishop of Newark, Most Rev. Thomas Walsh, pronounced the absolution and preached the sermon and the chancellor of the diocese, the present Bishop McLaughlin of Paterson was present in the Sanctuary together with a large group of religious and secular priests and delegations from the different sisterhoods.

According to the counsel of St. Paul, Father Luke was a man who did not wrangle but was mild towards all men, apt to teach, patient and temperate with them that resisted the truth. Hence, he, too, was loved and respected by all who know him.