

FATHER THEODORE J. McDONALD, O. CARM.

(By one of our priests who desires anonymity)
The Sword, January 1939

About the middle of the last century the Fathers of the Irish Province opened a boys' school at Knocktopher in County Kilkenny. The purpose of this school seems to have been the preparation of boys for college and seminary. God only knows how many priests of the secular and the regular clergy, who labored in Ireland and in the missions of England, the United States and Australia, received the first impulse of the priestly vocation from the Irish Carmelites at Knocktopher. A search into this matter, even at this late day, would be a worthwhile task for the historically minded Fathers of the Irish Province. This school is not without interest to our Province since it gave to us, at least, the following priests: Father Brocard Murphy and his brother, Albert Murphy, Father Peter T. Maher, Father Francis Walsh, Father Cyril Feehan, Father Joseph Walsh, Father Theodore McDonald and perhaps others.

Leaves Ireland for Maryland.

In the early years of this school there were among the students John McDonald, John Feehan and Thomas Maher, all native of the immediate neighborhood. Upon the completion of their course of studies, they asked to be received into the novitiate, but were told that no Novices were needed at the time. In some way this refusal came to the ears of Prior General in Rome, with the result that they were invited by the latter to come to Rome, enter the novitiate there, complete their studies for the priesthood at Transpontina, and, after ordination place themselves at the disposal of the General. The invitation was eagerly accepted and the program carried out. After their ordination, John McDonald, now Theodore J. McDonald and Thomas Maher, now Peter Thomas Maher, were directed by the General to the Carmelite missions in the United States and instructed to place themselves under the obedience of the Commissary General Father Cyril Knoll, at Cumberland, Md. Kentucky to New Jersey. The conditions prevalent at Cumberland were not apt. to make the newcomers happy, and hence, nearly immediately after their arrival, they sought means to withdraw and establish themselves somewhere else, independent, if possible, of Father Knoll. With the coming of Father Smits in 1868 their hopes seemed about to be realized. Bishop Bayley of Newark, New Jersey, installed Father Smits at Fort Lee in charge of Bergen County with the understanding that Father McDonald and Father Maher join him there. Before these two latter could join Father Smits, Bishop Bayley had become Archbishop of Baltimore. He now claimed their services for the archdiocese and had his claim confirmed by General Savini. They were placed in charge of several missions in Prince George County with residence at Upper Marlboro. Thus they had gotten away from Cumberland but not from Father Knoll, who remained the superior. However, a year or two later they achieved their purpose, when joined by Father Benno Jansen, Father Cyril Feehan and perhaps by one or two more, they accepted the administration of three parishes in Kentucky, Paducah,

Hickman and Fancey Farms. Father McDonald, the subject of this sketch, was placed in charge of the latter, his first specific appointment of which we have knowledge. His pastorate was of short duration. He fell a victim to the illness prevalent in his family, melancholia. In the Spring of 1877, when far from well though somewhat improved, intending to return to Ireland, he called on Father Smits at Englewood. Old acquaintanceship was renewed and ended in Father McDonald remaining with Father Smits. However, another year elapsed before he could celebrate Mass in public and another half year before he was able to preach. Upon his recovery, which fortunately was complete and lasting, he was made pastor of Tenafly, with residence however, at Englewood. His second pastorate was as short-lived as his first. Father Smits missed his services at Saint Cecilia greatly and recalled him to assist in the administration of the latter parish.

His First Pastorate in Englewood

With Father Smits as pastor and Father McDonald as assistant pastor, there came three very progressive and happy years for the people of Saint Cecilia. The ascetical and somewhat stern rule of the former was nicely tempered by the kindly and more humane character of the latter. Then as even to the end of his life, Father McDonald found his chief interest in the school, where daily he spent several hours teaching religion in his own kindly yet serious manner, so that he soon became the idol of the children and their parents. When late in the year 1882 Father Smits, now Commissary General, left for Niagara Falls, Father McDonald succeeded him as pastor. This, his first pastorate of Saint Cecilia, and also the longest, lasted eight years. Those were not years of spectacular enterprises; they were years of confirming, solidifying and enlarging the spiritual structure initiated so well by Father Smits. The parish was still small, the parishioners were poor and laboring under a heavy debt. Fortunately the parish buildings, school, convent, rectory with the exception of the church, which Father McDonald enlarged, were for the time sufficient. The outstanding achievement of Father McDonald's first administration was the creation of social consciousness in the soul of every parishioner, so that each one felt himself to be an integral part of the organism. Rarely has a parish felt itself as much a unit as Saint Cecilia in those days, with the pastor as the center from which all activity flowed and to which all activity returned. Most probably Father McDonald achieved this altogether unconsciously and when it had been accomplished, was wholly unaware of his own merit. Hence it need not surprise that when in the year 1890 he was transferred from Englewood to New Baltimore, he could not understand the general and deep regret manifested at his departure.

His Years at New Baltimore

Owing to the delayed Provincial Chapter of 1894, Father McDonald served as Prior and pastor of New Baltimore four years, from 1890 to 1894. These four years were the golden days of New Baltimore. It was then the largest community in the Province, housing both the novitiate and house of studies, with a staff of teachers for the latter. With Father Pius Mayer, the Provincial in residence, Father McDonald as Prior, Father Otto Wiedeman as Master of

Novices, Father Avertanus Brennan and Father Paul Ryan as important members of the staff, there reigned a spirit of solidarity, unity of purpose and kindness, as rare as it was delightful to priest, student and novice. Father McDonald, who from the time of his ordination to the priesthood in Rome, to his arrival in New Baltimore, had been stationed in missions, where the regular life of religious was not possible, knew how to fit himself nicely into the strict observance of New Baltimore. His duties as pastor of the parish never prevented him from being present at the community exercises nor hampered him in giving regular conferences to the community or holding the prescribed "culpa." While the students were, of course, not admitted to the recreation of the priests, they were fully aware of the spirit which prevailed there, a spirit of congeniality, with bursts of merriment and friendly argumentation. Under Father McDonald's fatherly supervision the students worked at times in the garden and on the very primitive farm. With the instinctive cunning of youth, they often took advantage of his interest in the progress of their studies, gathered about him, sitting under a tree or with an umbrella over his white head, and cleverly withdrew his attention from the garden and drew it to their studies of history and Latin, until awakened to the flight of time, irritated rather at his own forgetfulness than at their sloth, he ordered them back to the onions and cabbages. The year 1894 came and with it the Provincial Chapter, which dealt a hard blow to the student body of New Baltimore. Father McDonald was transferred to Englewood to serve again as pastor of Saint Cecilia. He returned to New Baltimore only once, in 1896, to conduct the annual retreat for the community. As if by concerted action, the moment the silence of the retreat had come to an end, the students gathered about him. He knew them all, each one's strength and weakness, praised and blamed and warned with his own characteristically gentle kindness. They assembled a second time to bid him good-bye at the front steps. Many of them never saw him again. The church, the present one, which he built is a wholly inadequate memorial to his presence at New Baltimore.

Englewood Again; the Falls; Death

Father McDonald's second administration (1894-1897) of Saint Cecilia, was a miniature of the first. He again was the center of social spirit, the focus of all eyes and minds, the source of all activity, the inspiration of all piety and love for God. He again spent much time in the school, teaching catechism and again became the idol of the pupils. Again he failed to understand the sorrow of the people when the Chapter of 1897 elected him Prior of Niagara Falls. Here he spent three, apparently uneventful years, and then returned to Englewood as pastor and Prior. Re-elected in 1903 he served until his sudden and untimely death on August 10th, 1905. In the meantime he had become *facile princeps* among the citizens of Englewood, so that it need not surprise that the city went into mourning at his death, that all public buildings displayed the flag at half mast and that all civic and religious bodies, irrespective of affiliation, paid their respects in church and at grave. He lies buried in Mount Carmel Cemetery, where his grave is still visited by mindful parishioners piously to mourn over their departed pastor. Again he left behind him a memorial, wholly inadequate of his works and merits, the present grammar school of Saint Cecilia.

His Appearance and Character

Father McDonald was a handsome man; six feet tall; well built; somewhat inclined to carry weight. Early in life his hair turned grey and then white, which, with a well-modeled face, manly features, ruddy complexion and blue eyes, created a most venerable figure. Claiming no scholarship, he, to the very end of his life, delighted in discussing with the younger priests, philosophical problems, quoting freely from the works of Tongiorgi, the author he had studied in Rome. With the same delight and to end of his long life, he read Julius Caesar, his favorite classic, and with the text before him, constructed with pencil on paper, Caesar's bridge over the Rhine. Father McDonald was a good preacher without being an orator in the strict sense. With a strong and pleasing voice, both at home and on missions, to which he often was called, he pleaded with the people, principally, to leave sin, to use the means of grace and to love our Lady. He spoke clearly and distinctly with open mouth and moving lips and with an unmistakable earnestness and sincerity, free of all human respect. With the same earnestness and sincerity he wrote for *The Carmelite Review* of which he was for some years a monthly contributor.

Father McDonald was a spiritual man with the spirituality of his own race, which can better be seen with the eye than heard with the ear. It was not possible to live in close contact with him, and not discover that there was a spiritual mind which sought no outward manifestation of its spirituality. There was in his soul a nice balance of spiritual treasure and human joy. As a true Carmelite, he was particularly devoted to our Lady, of whom he preached lovingly, but without fanatical exaggeration and whose altar he visited daily to recite the rosary.

It may well be that to this date he is the most beloved member of our Province. This, no doubt, was due to many factors, the most salient of which may be that Father McDonald thought little of himself and much of the Order and that he knew how to hold and defend a contrary opinion without giving offense. This was due, not to diplomacy, for, he was not a diplomat, but to his innate kindness.