

REV. JEROME REICHWEIN, O. CARM.

1860-1936

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FATHER Jerome Joseph Reichwein was the son of Joseph Reichwein and Maria Schneider and was born in Niederzemsheim, Nassau, Germany, on December 7, 1860. He made his elementary studies and part of his secondary studies in the old country. Determined to study for the priesthood, he came to the United States at the age of twenty-two. On the trip over he became acquainted with the Resurrectionist Fathers and possibly this is why he continued his studies at St. Jerome College in Berlin, now Kitchener, Ontario, under the guidance of these Fathers. Not long after the completion of his college courses, he became acquainted with some of the Carmelite Fathers of the Niagara Falls Priory and very shortly after applied for admission. He began the novitiate in the old Niagara house September 26, 1885, where he was professed October 15, 1886, the Very Rev. Anastasius Smits being Novice Master. He was ordained to the priesthood in the old Holy Trinity Church, Pittsburgh, by the late Bishop Richard Phelan, on October 24, 1889.

Father Jerome spent the better part of his priestly life in Holy Trinity Parish, where he became well known. The parishioners there felt that he was part of the parish not only because he had been ordained in that church and had read his first Mass there, but also because of the long years he spent there and his thorough knowledge of the parish. He saw from experience the sickness, the poverty and other ills which are commonly found in big industrial cities like Pittsburgh. He was an untiring worker—kind, sympathetic and generous to everybody. He was especially energetic in the performance of all his priestly duties, never tiring of teaching catechism, hearing confessions, instructing converts and attending the sick, and he was a man who understood human nature well. Therefore he fitted in well with the conditions of the famous Hill District.

In spite of his many activities in the parish he found time for study. He was not a mere book-worm; and, being naturally methodical, he interrelated his readings and studies on certain subjects. He concentrated particularly upon natural history and botany and associated with the latter a study of herbs and their medicinal properties.

He had a quirk of character which at times led him into strange channels. Having a colorful imagination he found it easy to see things in superlatives. Where others need a microscope to see things clearly and distinctly in their proper proportion, Father Jerome needed some sort of reducing glass to shrink things into their proper proportions. An instance of this can be found in his faithfully kept Tagebuch. While such a practice—the keeping of a daily record of events—is commendable, Father Jerome's method recorded principally the faults of others, usually overlooking the good points which more often covered and cancelled the defects. The result was obvious: principally the weaknesses and but few of the virtues of the Order or of the men were recorded. Father Jerome held tenaciously to the principle that by his vocation the priest and religious was supposed to strive after perfection. Therefore he deserved no praise for nor need mention be made of that. Yet were priest or religious to make a blunder, then in Father Jerome's eyes, since that was the very thing that should not happen, the mistake appeared all the more terrible, more appalling, and no punishment could be too severe. Evidently Father Jerome was tempted to forget the old maxim: "To err is human; to forgive, divine." This same Tagebuch, which could have proved highly dangerous in less kindly hands than those of Father Jerome, conveniently disappeared one night, never to be recovered.

The laity and clergy held Father Jerome's knowledge of herbs in high repute. Being an ardent follower of the well-known Father Kneipp, he undoubtedly had many prescriptions which were effective. He was sincere and really believed in the efficacy of the herb mixtures he prescribed. However, he may be accused of being too ardent about them, and thus he had some differences with medical doctors. His final transfer from Pittsburgh to the East was caused by a disagreement with the late Monsignor Martin Ryan concerning these self-same herbs. Yet there were and are hundreds of men and women who solemnly swore that Father Jerome had cured them of serious illnesses, either by his herbs or by his prayers.

Father Jerome's many activities took him into the mission and retreat field. He gave several retreats for cloistered Carmelite nuns and a number for more active communities. His matter was excellent. He had a deep fund of knowledge. However, his instructions sometimes failed because of his delivery, which tended to be very rapid, and, at times, excitable. It is too bad that he could not be persuaded to make a permanent record of his sermons in book form for they undoubtedly were of permanent worth. His mind seemed to retain in card index form all that he had read, recalling in a minute the information you wanted—book, page, author, verse and all.

During the many years spent in Pittsburgh Father Jerome served as assistant at Holy Trinity, as chaplain to the Eudes Institute, the St. Rita Home and to the Rosalia Hospital. From 1891 to 1903 he was pastor of St. Boniface Church in Scipio, Kansas; in 1908 and 1909 he was pastor of St. John's, New Baltimore. He then became pastor of St. Joseph's Church, New Germany, Ontario. He was pastor also of Our Lady of Peace Church in Niagara Falls and of the Immaculate Conception Church in Norwood, New Jersey.

In 1921 he joined the Tenafly community. While there he had the misfortune on two different occasions to fall down stairs, fracturing his knee caps. His faulty vision caused both his falls. He was prejudiced against wearing glasses, and this bias could not be shaken. It was unfortunate that he could not be persuaded to wear glasses as he was a man of unusual physique and of robust health. However, the fracturing of his knees deprived him of his usual exercise, and his health began to decline. Because of his impaired health he was transferred to St. Cecilia's, Englewood, in 1934. Indeed he was a crippled old man. He died January 14, 1936. Funeral services were held in St. Cecilia's, and he was interred in Mount Carmel Cemetery.

Strange, queer and stubborn as he was in many of his views, he was a marvelous priest and an excellent religious. His ardent faith could not be doubted. He may have been criticized for some things he did, yet he was idolized for many others, particularly for his sympathy towards the sick and the poor. If he made mistakes, the prayers of the sick and the poor must have "bailed" him out of Purgatory long ago. We may be pardoned if we mention a rather touching illustration of his kindness towards his parishioners. Once when taking up a house to house collection in his parish a good mother offered him five dollars. Father Jerome returned four dollars to her, saying that one dollar was a sufficient contribution from a family of her size, that her need was greater than that of the church.

No biography of Father Jerome would be complete were it not to mention the number of converts he brought into the Church; more, perhaps, than any other Carmelite in the Province. Wherever he was, he always had some converts to teach. The records of the Pittsburgh parish alone—not to speak of the others—gives astounding proof of this for his name appears almost on every page in the register throughout the many years he spent there.

Father Jerome was a man of somewhat unusual appearance. He not only had a giant frame but he also had an unusually large head. Indeed an ordinary hat would not fit him as he took size nine. Accordingly, he usually wore a ten-gallon sombrero winter and summer. This strange hat may have given him the appearance of a beardless Mennonite but that did not concern him. He was too humble to be concerned about such a thing. He was fully convinced that if one had a healthy body containing an equally healthy soul, that was all that was necessary. While he may have been odd and eccentric about some thing, his prayerfulness and his priestly character far outweighed these odd little twists of character. The words of Dryden fitted him well:

"He was bred apart from worldly noises. To study souls, their cures and diseases." He was both a physician of the soul and of the body. It is likely that the purity of his intentions — more than that, his simplicity — was not fully understood until he was gone. Certainly it must be said of him, as St. Augustine suggests, that Father Jerome was a Christian for his own benefit but he was a priest for the benefit of others. He spent forty-seven fruitful years in the priesthood and a golden fifty years in religious life.