

REV. PAUL WILLIAM RYAN, O. CARM.

1863-1906

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ON MONDAY, August 14, 1905, there was a solemn funeral Mass in the old frame church that had sheltered St. Cecilia's parishioners for two generations. Englewood was saying a last farewell to its "Grand Old Man," Father Theodore J. McDonald, who had first come to the parish as assistant in the spring of 1877. The panegyric was delivered by the gifted orator, Father Paul William Ryan, O. Carm., who as a boy had received his elementary education in St. Cecilia's parish school. The speaker's rich voice and inspired words blended perfectly with the prayers and music of the Church's majestic liturgy. They awakened echoes in every heart. He called attention to the golden threads of joy and triumph interwoven with those of grief in the Church's burial ritual. Skillfully he unveiled the background of the scene his hearers were witnessing—the resplendent glory of the Risen Saviour, and the unfaltering assurance it gives His every follower that he can be associated with Him eternally in heaven. Finally he told of the necessity of being ever prepared for the last accounting: "Watch and pray, for ye know not the day nor the hour."

One year later, almost to the day, the mortal remains of the talented orator, Father Paul Ryan, lay in state in St. Cecilia's. Mrs. William Grahn was again the choir director as she had been one year before at the obsequies of "Father Mac." The same faithful parishioners were present to share the grief of Father Paul's widowed mother and her remaining sons, Frank and Peter, and their families. Still fresh in their memories was the sermon of the previous year when he had masterfully interpreted religion's message to hearts ravished by the loss of dear ones. Present too were many who had been his classmates in the three-room school of St. Cecilia's parish that had come into being as the offspring of the zealous enterprise of Father A. J. Smits and the Sisters of Charity.

William Ryan, afterwards known as Father Paul, was born in New York City on August 12, 1863, whilst his father, Patrick Ryan, was in service with the Union Army during the Civil War. His mother, Helen Ryan (nee Mortimer) who like her husband had come from Ireland in search of greater freedom and a wider field for their ambitions and resourcefulness, carried on courageously whilst her mate was absent, fighting for the integrity of their adopted country. She drew unselfishly on the reserves of her youthful strength in order that her new-born son might not suffer from any lack of nourishment or wholesome environment during infancy's critical years.

When the family were reunited at the conclusion of the War I they elected to establish their home in Englewood, NJ. a village situated at the base and on the western slopes of the Palisades. Englewood was the most rapidly developing of the many communities that had sprung up within the district formerly known as English Neighborhood. Its civic, social and political center had been the Liberty Pole Tavern at the intersection of present Palisade Avenue and Tenafly Road. This Tavern was the northern terminus of the stage service between Englewood and the Hoboken Ferry. The original of this hostelry served George Washington as headquarters for a few days whilst he was arranging the retreat of his army from the Fort Lee heights, and it was past its doors that the same army fled on its way to New-bridge to escape from the advancing British. In earlier years plans of international import had been drawn up in whispered conferences under its roof. The beauty of New Jersey and New York had graced its dance floors. But in the year that the Ryan family brought their belongings to the town its glory was on the wane. On May 26, 1859 service on the Northern Railroad of New Jersey had been formally inaugurated. Most of the staid Dutch farmers had opposed the coming of the steam trains, holding that the single daily stage (which made the run from Liberty Pole Tavern to Hoboken in three hours.) gave to the district all needed transportation, as it had done in the days of their fathers and grandfathers. But, despite opposition, the tracks had been laid, and

on May 26, 1859 the first train, its engine resplendent in polished brass trimmings and its shrill whistle audible for miles, thundered down the Valley at twenty miles per hour. One train a day in each direction was the initial schedule. It is a far cry from the primitive equipment of that railroad of nearly a century ago to the stream-lined, air-conditioned, elaborately appointed rollingstock of the present. Yet those fussy little wood-burning engines were efficient; they whistled in a new era in Northern New Jersey. The long steel rails, like arteries, brought fresh blood, youth and vigor to the hitherto sequestered valley. Social and political life drifted from the Liberty Pole to the vicinity of the Railroad Station. Streets radiated quickly from the stopping places and were soon dotted with homes of enterprising settlers. The major portion of those of Irish nationality that came to Englewood established their homes in what is now known as the Fourth Ward.¹ So strong were the loves and loyalties they brought with them to their new homes, and so vivid were the memories of their earlier days that a visit among them was like a visit to Ireland itself. Indeed, that section of the town where they lived was nicknamed "The Old Country."²

Into the heart of "The Old Country" Patrick and Helen Ryan brought their young family. They established a store at the corner of Jay and Humphrey Streets to supply their little community with groceries and general merchandise.

A manager of a general store in the "Sixties" was not only a purveyor of foodstuffs and merchandise. He was also a clearing-house for news of neighboring communities and of the wide world; he was a dispenser of legal and medical wisdom, and a counsellor in time of litigation or strife. Patrick and Helen Ryan were fitted by nature and training for these many roles; and because of their unimpeachable integrity and unfeigned local names of Catholic interest were: "Holy Land," for Waldo Place and adjoining streets near St. Cecilia's church; and Deweyville, so named by the Irish group living there after the hero of Manila Bay. Before the district had been drained, it was also known as Manila Bay because it was inundated after each rain. Loyal to the faith of their fathers they commanded the respect of all the fellow townspeople.

William Ryan spent his youth and adolescence in the atmosphere of this home. He carried its loyalties with him into his mature years, refined during his studies under the Brothers of St. Francis College, Brooklyn, and his Carmelite instructors at Niagara Falls, Ontario. It developed in him also a universal sympathy for human sufferings, together with a courage and resourcefulness which aided him in bringing relief. His sympathetic heart was the secret of his success as a missionary.

William had manifested a desire to serve God in the priesthood. His parents and the Brothers of St. Francis College encouraged him in this leaning. But a severe lameness threatened to make impossible the realization of his ambition. In his childhood he had suffered an injury to his left leg which prevented it from developing normally. Even when equipped with a brace and a thick-soled shoe he was noticeably lame. Because of this handicap he was not able to take full part in the customary games of boys. This, however, was not as sore a disappointment for him, as it would have been for most others, for he had a natural inclination towards study and serious reading. Therefore, whilst others were enjoying their games, he was living in his books. Father Theodore McDonald, pastor of St. Cecilia's, who knew the young man's sterling qualities, assured him that the Order of Mount Carmel would accept him as a candidate for the priesthood and, when the time for ordination came, would obtain from Rome the dispensation necessary because of his lameness.

Accordingly William entered the Carmelite novitiate at Niagara Falls in the spring of 1883. He was invested with the Habit of the Order on March 23 of that year and was given the name Paul. He pronounced his simple vows on July 4, 1884. He made his theological studies at Niagara Falls and New Baltimore, Pa., and was ordained to the priesthood in New Baltimore by Bishop Richard Phelan of Pittsburgh on March 13, 1889.

The newly ordained priest celebrated his first solemn Mass in St. Cecilia's, Englewood, on March 17. It was a day of

- triumph for the school and parish as well as for his immediate family. He was the first graduate of the parochial school and
- the first son of the parish to add his sacerdotal blessing to that of the saintly and loved pastor, Father Theodore.

After delivering a few lectures in Englewood and Tenafly, Father Paul was assigned to the Priory of Our Lady of Peace at Falls View, Ontario. There he divided his time between teaching and activities in the parish. As a teacher he excelled particularly in mathematics and English. When the students were transferred to New Baltimore, Pa., in the fall of 1890, he accompanied them. He was to them not only a teacher but also a companion and a confidant whom they could approach without ceremony or fear. He nourished in them an enthusiasm for correct diction and for public speaking. He often held extra-curricular sessions with his classes which the young men willingly attended. In these he introduced them to the masters of English literature, often reading long passages, sometimes entire books, of the classics. Those who were privileged to attend these sessions will ever remember his perfect articulation and his skill in matching his voice to the spirit of the author's words.

St. John's, New Baltimore, and its students were the losers when the needs of the young Province demanded that he be withdrawn from this scholar's paradise in the Alleghenies to assist in the mission field. In the work of conducting parish missions he was a success from the beginning. His charm of manner was an open sesame to the hearts of pastors and people; and his profound zeal for souls which was manifest in all his actions, particularly in his masterful appeals from the pulpit, made conquests of obdurate spirits that had doggedly resisted the efforts of all others. The Chapter of 1903, in recognition of his ability and his fitting qualities of mind and heart, placed all the Province's mission work in his charge. In meeting the demands of his increased responsibilities he applied himself with wonted intensity. Perhaps he went beyond his physical limitations and exhausted his reserves, for his resistance seemed feeble when he was stricken with typhoid-pneumonia. It happened whilst he was a guest in the home of Rev. James J. Deasy, pastor of Gallitzin, Pa. He was there to arrange a schedule of missions for the mountain parishes. In the town named after the saintly prince-missionary of the Alleghenies the angel of death was awaiting him. His Provincial, Father Ambrose, Father Dion Best and Father Berthold Lauzau hastened to his bedside. His mother and brothers, Frank and Peter, came hastily from Englewood. Father McCullough, pastor of Latrobe, also came. These, with the pastor, Father Deasy, recited the prayers for the dying as he breathed his last on Thursday, August 9, 1906. The end of his useful and colorful career had come with dramatic suddenness. It was as if the stage had been set by some inspired impresario. The unexpected ending reminded those who knew him of the crashing climaxes that featured his sermons wherein after leading his hearers to a point of interested expectancy, he suddenly overawed them with bold portrayals in word and gesture. One might suspect he had brought his pulpit technique to his life's closing scenes in the rectory of St. Patrick's, Gallitzin. The entire mountain community was hushed at the news, as were all the neighboring towns in which he had conducted missions. Business was halted whilst men and women talked of it in lowered voices. The communities of his Order were likewise stunned when the telegraph wires brought the sad announcement. A death in the thin ranks of the American Carmel was always an occasion of deep grief. This was doubly true in this case, for it was felt that a giant had fallen.

The remains were brought to Englewood and lay in state in the Priory at 50 Waldo Place. They were transferred to the Church after the late Mass on Sunday, August 12th, the forty-third anniversary of his birth. Monday at 9:30 the Office of the Dead was solemnly chanted by the priests assembled for the obsequies. The Provincial, Father Ambrose Bruder, was celebrant of the solemn Mass, assisted by Fathers Dion Best as deacon and Berthold Lauzau as subdeacon.

Father Joseph L. McCabe, superior of the Carmelite Priory in Twenty-ninth Street, New York, pronounced a feeling and eloquent eulogy of the dead missionary's achievements. Interment was made in Mount Carmel Cemetery, Tenafly. His grave is beside that of his former pastor and sponsor in Carmel, Father Theodore McDonald.

Much might be written of the many facets of the character of Father Paul Ryan. He was possessed of a wholesome Irish sense of humor and of a scintillating wit that carried no sting. His gift of ready repartee brightened every conversation. His mental agility enabled him to shift in a moment from trivial matters to a discussion requiring concentration and deep thought. He was a keen student of human nature and could make a close evaluation of character. Like Father Avertanus Brennan, who was a classmate, he was intolerant of ostentation and Muster.

A favorite saying of his was that men are like to the cards in a pack. The most powerful and valuable cards are the modest and inconspicuous aces. The most troublesome are the deuces. Deuces are always troublesome, particularly when they are wild. In the heat of the game they seem all-important. After the game is over it is seen they are just two-spots. So too, many men, when clothed with political power and social rank, seem giants of intelligence and ability. Only after history has unwrapped their mummies is it revealed that they were just deuces. The memory of these things is pleasant and inspiring. But the most valuable items in the heritage that Carmel drew from his life were his stimulating example of heroic courage and his ideal of the priest. His courage aided him to rise superior to the physical handicap of lameness and to the large group of embarrassments and disappointments that the condition entailed. He did not permit a sense of frustration to depress or embitter his mind; he entered with smiling bravery into every problem that confronted him, asking no odds or special consideration. His ideal of the priest was not worked out in detail, or, at least, it has not come in that form to this writer. But its two outstanding features were scholarship and refinement. He believed there could be no storm-resisting superstructure of spirituality, or of the qualities requisite for leadership, except on the basis of these two. Prayer, he held, could not be developed to any of the higher degrees unless knowledge blazed the trail, and a delicate discernment of values prevented bootless chasing after unsubstantial things. He claimed that the uniformity required by religious Institutes must be primarily of hearts and minds. Uniformity of vesture and observance would be to no purpose if the impulse did not come from within. Religious, like good clocks, must be wound up from the inside.

He himself ever remained a student. He kept himself well-informed regarding the latest in literature and science. He wove this knowledge, together with the news of the day, into his sermons. This was the secret of their freshness, and part of the reason of their appeal. Before going into the pulpit he was wont to read for a time from any book available, preferably one featured by exact and deep reasoning. This was not for factual information but to get his mind attuned for the effort of preaching.

A small stone marks his grave in Mount Carmel Cemetery, like to the stones that bear the names of many of his confreres in Carmel. But his best monument and clearest claim to immortality in the memory of men is the record of his heroic courage that aided him to rise superior to physical afflictions and to establish for his Province new standards of excellence in every field to which he was assigned.

¹ Englewood was divided into four wards on March 12, 1896. Their inner boundaries were Palisade Avenue and the railroad.

² Later, when rough elements appeared in the Ward, a part of it was nicknamed "Texas." Other