

## AUGUSTINE C. VANDER SCHANS, O.Carm.(1877-1939)

(ANONYMOUS)

From The Sword, October 1939

Giacomo della Porta, or one of the two other architects of San Luigi dei Francesi in Rome, designed the foundations of that church very broad and the walls of the superstructure considerably less broad. Hence, where the two meet, there is formed a fairly wide ledge about three feet above the street level. On this ledge, in the nineties of the last century, a rather forbidding looking old man exposed for sale a score or two of tattered books. The place was well chosen. The street is narrow, shaded and cool; the Gregorian University and the Appollinare, with their great bodies of students, nearby. One day Frater Augustine Vander Schans, accompanied by another student of San Alberto, came by. The latter, interested in books, though despairing of ever buying one, to Frater Augustine's disgust stopped to examine the old man's wares. Unmindful of Frater Augustine's querulously repeated "Come on" and "Let us go," he continued to handle carefully one, two, three unclean books, hoping to find one that would interest his companion and allay his impatience. A thinnish, ragged volume did the trick, for it contained some of the mathematical puzzles of Venerable Bede. Frater Augustine made two propositions: first that they pool their resources and purchase the book, and, secondly, that they forget about Santa Maria degli Angeli, their original goal, and go home. The pool was formed, three soldi in all, just the price at which the old man was willing to let the book go. With the prize stuck under his belt and his companion trailing at his heels, Frater Augustine made for San Alberto, where he spent the rest of the day wallowing in the mental gymnastics of the ancient, English saint.

It may very well be that that day was a turning point in Frater Augustine's life. Very soon there appeared on his desk and on a shelf over it, innumerable geometrical figures, cones, cubes, pyramids, prisms, etc., all made of white, stiff paper and stuck with a bit of glue. Compelled to listen to the learned lectures of the professors, he did so very patiently with a far-away look, nervously fingering a pencil in a restless hand. Class over, he returned to his cubes and cones; and the pencil was free to fill large sheets of paper with circles, triangles and algebraic formulae. These private interests may explain, at least in part, his return to the Province still unordained to the priesthood.

Father Augustine was born in that part of Glen Ridge, N.J., which then, as now, belongs to the parish of the Immaculate Conception, Montclair, N. J. His parents, immigrants from Holland, were typical of their native land, industrious, thrifty, clean and as most Catholics of that country, staunchly religious. The well-known and still well-remembered Father Mendel, pastor in those days, ruled his people and altar boys (among the latter Father Augustine was enrolled) with an iron rod or closed fist. If tradition is not at fault, our future companion in the Order was more than once knocked off the altar steps for presenting the pastor with the wine instead of the water, the cruet instead of the towel. It would be rash to say that such experiences were an inducement to the priesthood in Father Augustine, for he never

belonged to the Church "Militant" in that sense of the word. With his two sisters and brother he attended the local parochial school and then entered St. Francis Xavier High School, New York City, conducted by the Jesuit Fathers. Commuting daily to and fro between home and New York, he had for his companions Michael Reilly, the later Father Aloysius Reilly, O. Carm., and Thomas H. McLaughlin, now bishop of Paterson, with whom, though their paths separated them, he remained on intimate terms of friendship to the end of his life. Already in these early days of his education, his chief interests lay in mathematical studies with a delightfully cheerful neglect of other things. However, leading his class in his favorite study, he graduated not without honor.

In the meantime Father Augustine had become acquainted with the Order. Father Mendel, a native of Tyrol, frequently visited Europe. At least on two occasions of these lengthy absences, a Father of the Order substituted for him at Montclair. It may be that it was Father Ignatius McDonald, who preached a mission in the parish and also had taken Father Mendel's place at least once, who was the point of contact. At any rate, in September of the year 1898 Father Augustine with Father Aloysius Reilly, arrived at New Baltimore and almost immediately entered the novitiate. It was the last novitiate of that period and, perhaps, the smallest. There were no other novices. A year later, after admission to vows, he, with four other students, was sent to Rome to complete his studies for the priesthood. It is not without historical interest to recall that before they embarked in New York the then Provincial Procurator, to help to defray the expenses of the trip for all five boys, robbed Father Augustine of the pocket money, contributed by his parents and friends. Of the Roman period of his life, nothing need be added, except that he was neither better nor worse than the other American students, but that he differed from them widely in the fact, that despite any correction, he retained the good will of all, from the General to the youngest Brother. This may have been due to his utter freedom from all racial and national prejudices. He really did not think that Rome ought to be a New York or the Roman manner the American manner. He returned to the United States in the year 1902, and completed his theological course at Chicago, and was ordained in that city on June 11, 1903.

The thirty-six years of his priesthood formed a most checkered pattern. He was repeatedly stationed at St. Cyril's, Chicago, and at Holy Trinity, Pittsburgh and also at Englewood, N. J., New Baltimore, Pa., and Scipio, Kansas. Immediately after his ordination he was assigned to the teaching staff of St. Cyril College, where for more than ten years he taught higher mathematics, in which field, he was, of course, master. His companions of those early days still recall with no little wonder how at the weekly "school meeting," at which each professor in turn exemplified his method of teaching and revealed to the community his own grasp of the topic, Father Augustine covered one large blackboard, sometimes two, with figures and diagrams in his own neat manner, illustrating some intricate problem in trigonometry or calculus. It is not entirely unfair to suspect that few of his fellow professors were able to follow him in the involved method of progress and solution. Owing to his extreme neatness with pen and pencil and his accuracy with numbers, he was also allotted a class of book-keeping in the High School

department. With his pupils he was more respected than liked, especially in the class of higher mathematics. He was entirely too business-like for the raw youth of Chicago in those less cultured years of the city. Interested in the athletic department of the institution, he usually attended at the football and baseball field, but was rarely if ever seen in familiar conversation with any student.

Father Augustine's activities were not confined to teaching; he also acted for years as daily visiting chaplain of St. Joseph's Home of the Little Sisters of the Poor. Considering him in this capacity, there are two things to be noted. First, he did not realize that to be chaplain of the Little Sisters of the Poor and to serve their inmates of old men and women earns a priest no earthly honors. It did not enter his mind that at such institutions there are no festive occasions where church dignitaries and the wealth of the world are on display or where publicity is gained and flattery reaped. He did not know, nor would he have cared if he had known, that, perhaps, the lowest place in the hierarchy of the priesthood is held by the chaplain of the Little Sisters of the poor.

The second noteworthy mark of Father Augustine, the chaplain of the Little Sisters of the Poor, was that he actually liked its inmates. It is easy, natural and often worthless to like the staff and the worldly-refined inmates of a fashionable Catholic girls' school. To love crippled bodies and deformed minds of poverty-stricken old men and women is quite another matter. It is not rash to say that there was never a chaplain at that institution who was more patient with the foibles and weaknesses of those old people than Father Augustine. Almost daily he had some experience to relate, which to another than himself would have been a source of vexation and disgust, which provided him with kindly amusement and humorous comment. Even the nauseating breath, the deaf ear, the halting tongue, the stupid mind of that confessional did not destroy his liking nor injure his good nature.

After leaving Chicago, Father Augustine was variably employed as chaplain, assistant and, for a short period, pastor of St. Anastasia, Teaneck, N. J. Nearly the entire last third of his priestly life he spent at Holy Trinity Church, Pittsburgh, Pa., where for many years he acted as "doorkeeper" at all novena exercises conducted at that shrine of St. Therese. Here he sat at his little table week after week or during solemn novenas day after day, answering questions, blessing religious articles, receiving Mass intentions, meeting all, rich and poor, kindly, patiently, and, when the occasion arose, with pleasing humor. When the day was over, he brought to the office an itemized statement of Mass intentions, memberships in the Society, donations, etc., in his own peculiarly neat, legible and accurate manner. Of the devotees of the shrine thousands met and loved him, but with none, however, did he contract personal friendship. His friends were those of the monastery, his brethren in the Order.

Eventually he contracted the same disease to which his father had fallen a victim — cancer. Characteristically he faced death bravely, neither deceiving himself nor permitting others to deceive him. To the end he entertained only one desire, namely, with the spiritual help of his brethren, that he obtain the

grace of a holy death. His last Superior, Father Vincent Metzler, administered to him the last rites of the Church, and the Sisters of St. Joseph's Hospital lovingly nursed him to the end which came on March 9, 1939. He lies buried at Mount Carmel Cemetery, Tenafly, N. J. Bishop McLaughlin of Paterson, read the Last Prayers, after assisting at the Solemn Requiem conducted at St. Cecilia, Englewood.

Beside his gifts and attainments in higher mathematics. Father Augustine was possessed of most delightful humor and wit. It was not the gift of telling stories; it consisted rather of the higher and rarer gift of seeing through things and viewing them in their proper proportions and commenting on them amusingly. It was a kindly humor; for, these comments were invariably free of harm or offense. He also had clever and nimble fingers with which he could accomplish nearly every one of the "sailors' knots." With the same agile fingers and a handy tool he served the community in repairing nearly every kind of mechanical device. Tradition has it that his first attempt to repair a watch ended in the return to the trustful owner of the empty case and a heap of wheels, pinions, etc., in a handkerchief accompanied by the words: "Here is your watch; I think everything is there."

The character of Father Augustine's life was such that it brought him on several occasions not only a reprimand but even a penalty. Reprimands and corrections are commonplace in and out of religious life. The humility, however, of Father Augustine on such occasions, his unwillingness to excuse himself and his willingness to accept the punitive words of the Superior, is not commonplace. To his thoughtful brethren they never ceased to be an object of wonder and a source of edification. It may very well be that because of the unusual humility exercised in this matter that God gave him the grace to overcome this one apparent weakness and permitted him to live free from it during the later years of his life. It may not be inapt to say with Father Faber at this point: "Much that is morally unlovely is not sin, certainly not moral sin. And yet it catches the eye, offends our moral sense and is extremely odious in the sight of religion." The same Father Faber, discussing a kindred topic writes: "It is the part of evil that is in us to put the worst construction upon what we see and to make no allowance for the hidden good.... We believe our evil to be common to all and our good peculiar to ourselves.... We also find that our judgments grow milder in proportion to the increase of our own strictness. The judgments of holy men sometimes astonish us by their laxity.... Thus we, may lay it down as a rule, that the severity of our judgments of others, is an infallible index of the lowness of our spiritual state. The more severe we are, the lower we are."

#### PROGRESS IN INDIA

In 1930 Pius XI the Pope of the Missions appointed the Little Flower to be the Patroness of the Nellore diocese, British India. Six years later the Rt. Rev. W. Bouter, bishop of the diocese wrote: The Saint has certainly showered some roses on us, for, in spite of our great financial anxieties the progress of the mission has been remarkable. During the last six years we have gained 11,000 converts, so that we count at present 40,000 Catholics. But there are still six million pagans in the Nellore diocese and these also are called by the good shepherd. (*Submitted by the Rev. Leopold Wysbeck, O. Carm.*)