

FATHER ANASTASIUS J. SMITS, O.CARM.

1840-1927

The Sword, July 1938

Father Smits, as he was invariably called, is one of the most interesting characters in the life of our Province. His was a unique personality, with unique gifts, unique virtues and, it may be said, with unique faults. As a man, as a religious, as a priest, as a superior, as a subordinate he was an interesting study, if not an interesting problem, to all who knew him. It would be difficult to conceive, that any one who had ruled him in the community or had been ruled by him, or had made a mission or retreat under his direction, could ever forget his personality, his manner, his speech, or the contents of his teaching. There are in our Province elderly and old men, who still remember and not infrequently discuss a retreat which Father Smits conducted: at New Baltimore forty-five years ago. Countless nuns, who have forgotten the retreats and the retreat masters of thirty and forty intervening years. recall from memory or note, the sayings of Father Smits made at the turn of the century. In the mission field, he made the same lasting impression on his lay hearers. Less than a year ago, enquiries were made about him because of a mission he conducted in Jersey City, N. J., in October of 1889. Hence, even though he did not leave the imprint of his own character on our community, and even though he was not an outstanding promoter of our growth, it were well that the older generation remember and a younger generation learn to know Father Anastasius J. Smits.

Father Smits was born at Sambeek in the diocese of Bois le Duc, Holland, in the year 1840. His birthday, May 24th, was even then the feast of our Lady, Help of Christians. In view of the sad condition of the Church and Order in Holland, he in later years held himself fortunate that he was born on our Lady's feast under that title. The Catholics of Holland were still suffering from the very evil effects of the Batavian Republic established by Napoleon and equally so from the deplorable union of Holland and Belgium forced on both nations by the Congress of Vienna in 1815. There was no ecclesiastical hierarchy; there were few churches and fewer Catholic schools and these small and poor and in constant danger of being closed by a most unfriendly government. Our Order, dispossessed of its monasteries, convents, churches and schools, was threatened with total extinction. At one time it numbered no more than a half dozen Fathers and Brothers, ruled by a Commissary General. However, the Catholics of Holland were fortunate at this time in having for their rulers two most excellent kings, William II and William III, who did all in their power to curb the anti-Catholic policy of the government, which for many years was in the hands of the most bitter enemies of the Church, and which made the Catholic Hollanders share the general enmity of Catholic Belgium, the then political enemy of the nation. It has seemed well to digress for a moment from the life of Father Smits, to recall the conditions of Church and Order in those days, so that, comparing those times with ours, we may rejoice in the present prosperity of the Church in Holland and glory in the altogether unequalled progress of our Dutch Fathers with their numerical strength, their learning and their far flung empires in Java and South America.

Early Life in Europe

Most probably owing to the conditions of the Church in his native land, Father Smits did not attend Catholic schools. The opportunities to do so were rare. However any danger that threatened the faith and piety of the boy and young man were obviated by the truly Christian atmosphere prevalent in the home of his parents. He was twenty years old when he entered the Order at Boxmeer, where he made his noviciate and was admitted to vows on September 25th, 1861. He was now ready for his seminary training, which he began at Boxmeer and completed at Merthyr Tydvil, Wales, in the then diocese of New Port, Menevia, now the archdiocese of Cardiff. Here the Dutch Fathers had taken charge of St. Mary's Church with a small and scattered congregation of coal miners. At the time of his arrival in Wales Father Smits was in deacon's orders and, because of the great need of priests, was nearly immediately raised to the priesthood on November 30th, 1865, by Bishop Thomas J. Brown, O.S.B. Two years later, in 1867, Father Augustine van Uden, the visitor sent from Holland, appointed Father Smits Prior of the little community.

Comes to the United States

Now follows a period of doubt and historical confusion, which, in the absence of data and frank expression, presents a problem which is apparently insoluble. In the early part of the year 1868 Father Smits left Wales, and bringing with him Brother Berthold Landers, came to the United States ostensibly to collect money to build a house at Merthys Tydvil. "I was sent by the Bishop and our General," he writes in later years, not mentioning his immediate superior, the Commissary General of Holland. Again he writes: "After I had been collecting in New York and Brooklyn, I was ordered by the General to go to Cumberland, Md." After spending in Cumberland the smaller part of a year, he suddenly in 1869 appears in Fort Lee, N. J., as Pastor of the Madonna Church, wearing the secular cassock. Let him speak again: "In the mean time, hearing from no superior, Holland considered me transferred to America. The General, as it appeared afterwards, considered me secularized." Again in the evening of his life he writes: "Bishop Bayley of Newark . . . advised me to secularize. Father Messmer, afterwards Archbishop of Milwaukee, urged me in the same way." When Bishop Corrigan, afterwards Archbishop of New York, urged him to be secularized, Father Smits says: "I told him that I could not do so, as I had taken my vows to keep them and not to live in secularization." It seems difficult to reconcile words with facts and facts with words. Apparently he yielded to suggestions of these bishops at least so far as to take what he conceived the first step towards secularization, the laying aside of the habit. However, when speaking of a man as intelligent, as spiritual and strong willed as Father Smits, it would be unfair to be content with external influences. Interior motives there must have been and perhaps can be found to explain his conduct. In this instance a very plausible explanation may take the following form. Father Smits had from his youth witnessed the most unsatisfactory condition of the Order in his native country; as priest and superior he had experienced the discouragement of Wales; he knew of the second

suppression of our Order in Italy and, with all the world, saw a third one threaten; he had read of the destruction of the community in Spain caused by government after government of Christ's enemies; he had seen the unsavory conditions of Cumberland; he had heard, whether correctly or not, of similar conditions in Kansas. In a weak moment he apparently yielded to discouragement and, convinced that the Order offered little opportunity to serve God, planned to enter the ranks of the secular clergy. This explanation would throw some light on Father Smits' strange leaving of Wales, with the intention of collecting funds for a Welsh mission at a time when the Church in the United States largely lived on alms collected in Europe, on his abrupt departure from Cumberland, laying aside the Habit and donning the black cassock. That he did not yield easily is evident from the long period of time during which the internal struggle lasted and from the further fact, that, the moment he saw a ray of hope to establish the Order solidly, he repentantly put off the cassock and happily reached for the Habit, which he had never ceased to love. This ray of hope came with the arrival of Father Theodore McDonald, who after spending some years in the missions of Maryland and Kentucky, had asked for and obtained his transfer to the Irish Province.

As a further explanation of Father Smits' conduct at this time, and as a record of historical events that should be of interest, mention ought to be made of the fact that when Father Smits had arrived in Cumberland, he found there, among other Fathers, Father Peter Thomas Maher and Father Theodore McDonald. "The three of us devised ways and means to get away . . . and obtain a new place to make a new start," Father Smits writes. When he had sought a foundation in vain, first in Chicago and then in New York, he finally was admitted to the Newark diocese, with the understanding that the other two Fathers should join him and the three take charge of Bergen County. However Father Maher and Father McDonald, when on their way to join Father Smits, were kidnapped by Archbishop Bayley, recently transferred from Newark to Baltimore. What happened was this. They had called to pay their respects. He received them most cordially and invited them to be his guests for three or four days. The Archbishop used these three or four days to obtain from General Savini an order by cable that they offer their services to the archdiocese of Baltimore and place themselves at the disposal of the Archbishop. The latter at once assigned to them the charge of several Negro missions in Prince George County. The disappointment of Father Smits can hardly be measured; nor that of the Bishop of Newark. It was at this time that Father Smits was urged to secularize.

Pastor in New Jersey

On May 4th, 1869, Father Smits received his appointment as pastor of Fort Lee and all the territory lying East of the Hackensack River. Besides the mother church at Fort Lee, there were, in this district, missions at Englewood, Tenafly, Carrieville, now called Northvale and a "station" at the home of a Mr. Frank J. Mills, in the present Borough of Haworth, then called "The Old Hook." Left without assistance and unable to care for the entire district, Father Smits requested the bishop to free him from the charge of Tenafly and Carrieville (North-vale). This was done with the appointment of a secular priest who made his residence at Tenafly. In later years, when Father

Smits was no longer alone, and when some disturbances had risen in Tenafly, both this mission and Carrieville (Northvale) were returned to the care of the Carmelite Fathers. Within the first year of his appointment Father Smits transferred his residence from Fort Lee to Englewood, living as a guest in the home of a generous parishioner. Within another year he was relieved from the care of Fort Lee so that he could devote himself entirely to the growing population of Englewood and the missions attached to it. That in the many years of his pastorate, which lasted from 1869 to 1882, Father Smits labored at the spiritual uplift of the people was to be expected from one whose entire outlook on life was spiritual and who was so very spiritual himself. That he labored not in vain, may be taken for granted in view of his personal and intense devotion to prayer, to meditation, in fact, to all exercises and habits of a spiritual character. It could however not be taken for granted that he would labor at the material development of the parish. Yet he built in Englewood a rectory, a school, a convent for the teaching nuns, enlarged the church from a seating capacity of 150 to 500 and established Mount Carmel Cemetery. These buildings served the parish for many years and were still in use within the memory of the present generation.

Appointed Commissary General

"In the Spring of 1881 I received, to my utter surprise, from General Savini an appointment of Commissary General, upon the urgent plea of Father Knoll, over Englewood, Niagara Falls and Pittsburgh." It is most improbable that the phrase "upon the urgent plea of Father Knoll," is correct. Father Smits had from the time of his short stay at Cumberland, both publicly and privately, in America and in Holland, been Father Knoll's most severe critic. Verbally and in writing he had on many occasions denounced the administration of Cumberland and Kansas, and even in his old age, he referred to Cumberland as "that nest." The real course of events seems to have been the following. When upon the request of Father Pius Mayer the first steps had been taken to establish a Commissariate in the East, Father Knoll suggested that the house of Pittsburgh be detached from his jurisdiction and incorporated with Niagara Falls and Englewood. The plea was based upon geographic reasons, though the motive was that the Pittsburgh house, because of the attitude of its Prior, Father John Verheyen, had become financially wholly useless to Father Knoll.

The picture of Carmel in America **on** January 8th, 1881, the day of Father Smits appointment, may be drawn as follows: the Commissariate of Father Smits comprising the houses of Englewood, Niagara Falls and Pittsburgh (the disposition of New Baltimore is unknown to the writer) ; The Commissariate of Father Knoll, comprising the houses of Leavenworth and Scipio; the Commissariate of Kentucky under the acting Commissary General Father Cyril Feehan with houses at Paducah, Hickman and Fancy Farm. Between the two dates, January 8th and September 24th, 1881, Father Cyril Knoll resigned his office and requested that the Kansas houses be subjected to Father Smits. At some time between the same dates, Father Anastasius Kreidt of Hickman, with the approval of some of the Fathers, but unknown to the acting Commissary General, requested General Savini to place the

Kentucky houses under Father Smits. This was done by a letter dated September 24th, 1881. Thus all Carmelites of the United States and Canada were for the first time under one head.

Referring to his appointment, Father Smits writes: "I did by no manner of means relish the appointment, knowing, as I did, the component parts of the whole, and tried everything to keep out of it. But having consulted various religious friends and superiors, all agreed in telling me that I must accept and try to find means to establish unity and discipline, and, if I could not succeed, to report to the Holy See directly." He again writes: "To avoid particulars, I simply say, that I met with great difficulties." These difficulties were found in Kansas, Pittsburgh and Kentucky. In the latter he solved the difficulties by closing the three houses and withdrawing the Fathers. In Pittsburgh he deposed the Prior, Father John Verheyen, who was as little amenable to the new Commissary, as he had' been to the old one. In Kansas however he faced really great difficulties. Abstracting from the financial distress of both Leavenworth and Scipio, he faced what has been called open revolt at the latter house. The story may be told best in the words of a contemporary Father, who was not wholly void of charity. "When Father Smits arrived in Scipio to present his credentials and to visitate the house, Father Anastasius Peters and the community in general refused to acknowledge his authority, and that for two reasons : that their Commissary had resigned without their approval, and that they were on the point of leaving Scipio to make a new foundation at Marienfeld, Texas, for which enterprise, they had obtained the permission of the Commissary and also that of General Savini. Father Smits, holding both arguments without any merit, forbade them to leave. However shortly afterwards they left, taking with them some students, Brothers and, it is said, the cattle, household goods and farm implements. Father Smits rightly discredited their first argument, while in regard to the second he may have been wrong. This seems plausible from the fact that General Savini at once recognized the new foundation by the appointment of a Commissary General to rule Marienfeld and other houses established subsequently." This is the story of the "Exodus" as it was told and interpreted by one of our very grave Fathers now some years dead.

His Administration Summarized; His Resignation

Speaking of his administration, Father Smits says: "I had endeavored for a few years to enforce the good and firm observance and discipline of the *Stricteris Observantiae* of Holland, as I was brought up in Holland. Most priests appeared to be satisfied but a few had their own plans." There can be no doubt that he labored zealously for regular and uniform life in all the houses. That he contributed to this end his own personal example is equally certain. It may however be doubted that his endeavors were always wise. He removed Father Pius from the priorship of Niagara Falls and assumed charge of the Noviciate himself, with the result that the fruitfulness of the latter nearly immediately came to an end. He seems to have had the intention of not making use of the talents and the prestige of Father Pius by placing him into a nearly inactive position at Englewood. However to balance these apparently unwise measures, he appointed Father Theodore McDonald to the

prianship and the pastorate of Englewood and Father Louis Guenther in the same capacities in Scipio, and later, perhaps because he had little choice, Father Pius in charge of house and church at Pittsburgh. Evidently his administration was not successful. He complains that "Fathers Kreidt and Pius joined hands for certain purposes of their own." If these Fathers joined hands for any purpose, it must have been the purpose of promoting the health and growth of the community. It lay not in the character of either the one or the other to conspire for anything else. "I got sick over the trouble and opposition worked by them" Father Smits writes. "I resigned and Father Pius was made my successor. Upon the advice of my physician I went to Europe to Father Kneip for one year." It was a sad ending of five years of sincere struggle. "He takes it very well" wrote one of the Fathers when the news came that he had been replaced by Father Pius.

His Later Life and Death

Father Smits may be pointed out as an illustration of those not infrequent instances of a very good and even saintly religious being chosen to rule others, though not gifted with the talent to rule. After his return from Europe he conducted retreats and missions, was Prior of Englewood and New Baltimore, Master of Novices, resident Chaplain of St. Mary's Academy, Leavenworth, Kansas, the Ursuline Academy, Paola, Kansas, and finally retired to Scipio. He emerged from his solitude only once, in the year 1915, when at the request of the Provincial, the Prior and pastor of St. Cecilia, he came to Englewood to celebrate the Golden Jubilee of his ordination. At last, owing to his great age and physical disabilities, he was forced to place himself under the care of the Sisters of Charity at Providence Hospital, Kansas City, Kansas. Here he died a death as holy as his life had been, on March 2nd, 1927.

Owing to the lack of funds and, perhaps also, of need, little was done in material building during Father Smits' administration as Commissary General. However he added to the addition at the monastery of Niagara Falls and he built what was called the "Ecclesiastical Barn," which was partly barn, bakery and guesthouse. This building, despite its unusual name, given to it probably by the younger members of the community, served its purpose very well until past the turn of the present century.

His Appearance and Habits

Father Smits was slightly above average height, of slender body, with a thin, ascetical face. To the end of his long life, he kept his hair, which was at one time black. He was fastidiously clean and neat in person and surroundings. On his lightly burdened desk, each of his few books had its definite place; so also his one pencil, pen, ruler and inkbottle. If pen and pencil happened not be parallel to each other, he would, in the midst of the most serious conversation, nervously finger them until their place and position satisfied him. As pastor or Prior he insisted on the same methodical neatness and cleanliness in monastery, church and school. Apparently he was a life long abstainer from fermented and distilled drink. In his earlier years he smoked moderately, but in middle life yielded that too, perhaps as much from a

sense of cleanliness as from a motive of self-denial.

His Sermons and Conferences

Besides his native Dutch and the liturgical languages, Father Smits spoke German with the proficiency of a German. He spoke English with the exactitude of an Oriental scholar trained at an English or American university, but with an accent, partly English, partly Dutch, most pleasing to the ear. Endowed with a strong, though somewhat toneless voice, he used it with remarkable intonation, emphasizing word and phrase most impressively. In sermon and conference there was in facial expression and voice a pleading which was well nigh irresistible to the audience. When in the pulpit his words were accompanied by gestures of hands and arms, by the lowering and raising of his shoulders, by rising to his toes and sometimes crouching low. These gestures were altogether unstudied and natural and unmistakably added meaning to his words. When addressing the Novices or other youthful members of the community, he could on occasion leave the chair before the altar, step unto the floor of the chapel and gymnastically illustrate a spiritual point with the earnest-ness of a saint pleading for the salvation of a soul. With a rare gift of observation he gathered these illustrations from daily life, from the foibles and weaknesses of mankind. In his hands the most common and commonplace occurrences became drama and when enacted before an audience became imperishable memory.

His Spirituality Interpreted

Father Smits was undoubtedly the most spiritually minded member of the Province in his time and most probably the most spiritually minded to this date. **His** outlook on life, his motives and purposes, whether wise or otherwise, were wholly spiritual. He might be discussing the most material topic, such as the building of a fence, the buying of a horse, the ploughing of a field, and by an unconscious word or phrase he would reveal the spiritual end of it all. To the end of his long life he preached to the community, not latterly in words but by conduct, that material progress and well-being must have a spiritual foundation. Also to the end of his life he found little if any pleasure in the numerical growth of the Province, in the building of churches and schools, in the preaching of missions and conducting of retreats, since these things, in his opinion, were neither preceded nor accompanied by the spiritual growth of the men who inaugurated and achieved them.

While it may reasonably be presumed that Father Smits left a lasting spiritual impression on some individual souls, it must on the other hand be admitted that he failed to mold the community in a spiritual mold. It may be well to search for the causes of this failure. The answer may be found partly in the fixity of method in pursuing his object. In a sense he was a *doctrinaire*. From his spiritual training in Holland, from his books and the lives of the saints he had erected a spiritual edifice, from which he permitted neither himself nor others to deviate. Because of this fixed and rigid form, his spiritual training seemed at times to degenerate into mere formalism, which, instead of attracting, was apt to repel and arouse an unconscious hostility. It must however not be understood that his spiritual training consisted merely in outward

forms, for these outward forms and habits were intended to sustain and strengthen the inner life. Coupled with this fixity of method, there was naturally a certain distrust in the spiritual methods of others, so that, when forced to be absent from his Novices for a day or two, he preferred to leave them without supervision, rather than place them into the hands of others, even into the hands of the Prior. Co-operation, of the lack of which he was heard to complain not infrequently, was, of course, under these circumstances, impossible. Co-operation to Father Smits meant not a joining of minds to plan for a common end. To him co-operation meant a mere joining of hands to carry out his own directions. This lack of diplomacy showed itself most forcibly in the fact that he could not calmly discuss a disputed point, hear an argument or yield a point. Sincerely, indeed, and solemnly he announced his views and then considered the matter finished. Only a saint can afford to be undiplomatic and Father Smits was, probably, not a saint.

Paradoxical as it may seem, Father Smits' very spirituality made him take a view of the vow of poverty, which may be not wholly correct. He made a nice distinction between poverty and economy. "We have promised God and Our Lady poverty, which means detachment; we have not promised economy, which means spending becomingly," he used to say. As a result he indulged at times in costly spending to the hurt of the community. Father Smits was ever ready to obey a definite command of the superior, with some reservations, however. For instance, when the Chapter had appointed him Master of Novices, he held that the local superior had no right to send him out to conduct missions or give retreats. He obeyed the higher command, the Chapter, and disregarded the lower command, the Prior. Such inflexibility did not make for harmony and good will in the community.

As years crept up on him, he became more impatient with any wrong or conceived wrong and occasionally gave voice to bitter discouragement. A moment later he seemed to regret his lack of confidence and penitently express his trust in God and in our Lady "Who will make everything all right in their good time." He also said: "We must pray now very much; we have for a General just a secular priest who does not understand religious life. But after him there will be another General."

The concluding words of the biographical note printed in the *Analecta* at the time of Father Smits' death, are: "*Pius et activus religiosus vidit adhuc optimum fructum sui laboris. Hoc certe erat praemium in vita, quod Deus nunc multiplicabit in coelo.*" More aptly and with a better understanding of Father Smits' place in the history of our Province, the author might have written: "*Absens nobis subsidium praestabit precibus meritisque suis coram Deo, quod praesens operibus non potebat.*"