

The Very Reverend Leo J. Walter, O.Carm.

(March 9, 1888 – October 18, 1951)

ON October the 18th, shortly after midnight, Father Leo Walter, Prior Provincial of the Carmelites, went home to God. Upon receipt of that news, we decided to dedicate our November issue to him. Because our own knowledge of Father Leo's life, particularly its early part, is considerably lacking in details, we have invited one of his closest friends, Father John Haffert, to contribute a biographical sketch of Father Leo for the next issue of *The Sword*. We ask also, in this hurried obituary, that all those who feel that they shared any intimacy with Father Leo, share that same intimacy with us in the pages of this quarterly. The recollections which his fellow Carmelites, especially his former novices, have of him, will make a worthwhile companion-piece to Father Leo's biography.

There are some men who need no obituary. Men who have left behind, in the hearts of their associates, a warmth and virile affection, require no verbal tributes or high sounding epitaphs. So it most certainly is with Father Leo. Unlike Caesar, the good is not interred with his bones. How great that good is only God, on the day of judgment, will reveal.

To some it may seem somewhat morbid and even macabre that the same issue of *The Sword*, which carries his obituary, should also feature an article written by him. Nothing could be more characteristic of the man. He worked for God and the Order up to the very end. His *History of Niagara*, the fourth installment of which appears in this issue, was completed by him before his death. He left little undone. He did not believe in delegating to others what he himself could possibly do.

Father Leo died in Akron, at the local hospital, having just finished a retreat for our novice brothers. His death was as typical of him as his life. Having given the Papal blessing at the close of the retreat, on the night of Wednesday, October the 16th, Father Leo took his recreation with the Community. Recreation was a community exercise which he relished with the same zeal manifest in all the activities of his religious life. He had, that night, his bottle of beer and a cheese sandwich. If this seems a rather trivial matter to drag into an obituary, we excuse ourselves on the grounds that it reflects as much of the man as anything in his life. Well do we recall occasions in our own experience when Father Leo was present at recreation in Carmel Niagara. Someone of the fathers, solicitous for our guest, would offer Father Leo a second bottle of beer. Father's reply was always the same, "Thank you, but I've had my beer...." It was the briefest and most pointed lesson in temperance that could be given.

About eleven o'clock that same evening Father Leo awakened with a severe pain in his chest. Its severity may be gauged by the fact that he called Father Bertrand and asked to be taken to the hospital. Father Leo did not nurse petty ailments; anything grave enough to require hospitalization must have been grave indeed. When Father Bertrand came to take the Provincial to the doctor's, Father Leo was fully dressed, even to his hat, sitting and waiting. The hospital doctor quickly diagnosed the case as coronary and gave medication. Father Leo was put on the stretcher to be moved upstairs. A sudden seizure attacked him and the hospital chaplain was called. The last rites were administered and as the prayers for the dying were being said, Father Leo passed away. Though his death was sudden, he, who lived so much in the presence of God, was ready for it. He would have been the first to say, "That is what we must expect." It would have been as casual as that.

Father Leo has given his last retreat; yet the sermon which was his life will be preached as long

as he is remembered. Father was himself a simple and direct preacher; not given to flowery language or doses of sentiment. He experienced no difficulty in getting to the heart of his matter; fancy phrases were not to be found in his sermons. Perhaps for these reason he enjoyed great success in talking to the young, whether they were high-school boys at Carmel in Chicago or novices in New Baltimore. He delighted in giving retreats and took, we believe, a justifiable pride in his ability to gauge the caliber of his listeners. Though he put little stock in human respect, he was honestly appreciative of sincere compliments, many of which were offered him after his discourses. He took the same delight in praise bestowed upon any of his fellow Carmelites.

It is not for us to catalogue his accomplishments, either as prior, novice-master, or provincial. That will be done by his biographer in the next issue. Yet, we cannot allow this opportunity to pass without bestowing a final word of praise on him. If there was one phase of Carmelite life toward which Father Leo was more devoted than any other, we would say it was the "teaching" phase. Many times he told his associates that upon their teaching of the young depended the success not only of the Order but of the Church as well. This was not an original view with Father Leo; other great educators had expressed the same idea, perhaps in better language. What made it unique with Father was the intensity with which he said it. To him teaching was indeed a noble vocation and not a drudgery to be characterized by the expression, "Friday, thank God." Even when the onerous duties of Provincial, a post which he accepted most unwillingly, kept him from teaching officially, he somehow managed to get back in the classroom, usually during his visit to the houses of study. The greatest praise he could bestow on anyone was to say that he was a good teacher. Truly may that be said of him. He was the finest of teachers.

Obituaries tend to be top-heavy with praise. Father Leo had his faults, a smaller share than most of us; yet even those faults were the result of his own good-intentioned enthusiasm. Though his voice may at times have been irksome to some of the brethren, particularly during the chanting of the Salve Regina at Compline or the hymns at Benediction, since he sang these with a gusto, this mannerism was part of his way of giving to God. Father Leo had little sympathy for those weak-kneed voices which pipe the praise of God but faintly. His own rich and re sounding tones would drown such voices out. Had he been the only one in choir, he would have chanted just as strong.

We recall vividly one of the brethren's discussing Father Leo's simplicity, that he was a man who could be satisfied with little. Then in a kind of generous "dig," this comment was added. "There is only one thing Father Leo wants. He wants to be right." All of us want that, whether we admit it or not. But Father Leo was right. Experience and the test of time will prove how right he was. Remembered in the prayers of his brethren, held dear in their hearts, esteemed in their minds, may his most generous soul rest in peace.