



The Late Most Rev. Lewis Theissling, O. P., S. T. M., Master General

## *Father Lewis M. Theissling, O. P.*

By BRO. ATHANASIUS M. McLOUGHLIN, O. P.



O the memory of one who has been a kind father to us, whose hands have ever been spread over us in fatherly blessing, whose name among his desolate children is in benediction, these few lines of loving remembrance are dedicated. The sad news that came flashing across the Atlantic Saturday, May the second, that on that morning in Rome the beloved Master-General of the Dominican Order, Father Lewis Mary Theissling, had breathed his last, brought universal sorrow to the province of St. Joseph, but nowhere is it more keenly felt than in the House of Studies at Washington, among the students who have been the recipients of many kindnesses at the hands of the departed superior.

Father Theissling, the seventy-seventh of those called to head the Order since the days of St. Dominic, was born in the town of Alkmaar in North Holland, January 31st, 1856. His life from the very beginning was destined to be under the influence of the Preaching Brethren for he was baptized by a Dominican priest in the Church of St. Dominic of Alkmaar and his classical education was gained under the tutelage of the Fathers in the college of St. Dominic at Nijmegen, a school famous as the alma mater of many renowned members of the Dominican Order and of the Holland Clergy. Feeling early in life the call to serve God in the religious state he determined to gain admission to the ranks of the Friars with whom from childhood he had been familiar. Accordingly he sought the convent of the Queen of the Rosary, then the principal house of the Dominicans in northern Holland, located in Huizen, and begged to be admitted to the novitiate of the Order. His petition was granted, and on September 24th, 1873, he was clothed with the white habit and began his year of probation, and as his superiors were well satisfied with the vocation of this promising youth he was permitted to make his perpetual profession of the religious life in 1874. Following the usual scholastic itinerary of young Dominicans in the study of philosophy and theology, he was ordained priest on the feast of Our Lady's Assumption, August 15th, 1880, at the age

of twenty-four, and five years later at the completion of an extended course of theology he was made a Lector of Sacred Theology and assigned to teach the Dogmatic branch of this same sacred science in his convent of Huizen. Besides his theological lectures he taught physics and mathematics to the students of the college. In 1887 he was given the chair of Moral theology and fulfilled the duties of this position with satisfaction to all for the next seven years. As the reward of his long career of teaching, he was eventually given the degree of Master of Sacred Theology, a title which the Order reserves for those of its members who have proved themselves of exceptional talent and ability in its scholastic activities.

During his long residence in the convent of Huizen Father Theissling had shown himself so prudent, so zealous, and so trustworthy, that in 1891, when there was question of electing a new prior, the Fathers of the community chose him. At the end of his term, three years later, they wrote in the annals: "Through his ability and zeal much good has come upon us." In 1894 he was called to Nijmegen, his alma mater, as prior of the community there, but had served only two years of his term when the general chapter of the province (1896) elected him Provincial.

The next twelve years, for he was twice re-elected, is a period of progress and activity in the Netherlands Province, and there is no doubt but that to Father Theissling, under God, is due the major portion of the credit. He never lacked the generous cooperation and obedience of his subjects. He was a man fitted by nature and training to command, and he possessed qualities that never failed to draw to him the loyal support of his spiritual children. Among the notable events of this first term as Provincial was the building of a fine seminary in the island of Curacao for the training of priests from the country of Venezuela under the direction of the Fathers of the Holland province. In 1900 he commenced the building of the convent of St. Thomas at Zwolle, Holland. This ancient house of the Order had been since the Reformation in the hands of the heretics and had suffered much under their neglect. In a different part of the city and in a better location Father Theissling began and completed a much larger and more beautiful convent as a Studium Generale for the Dutch Province. It was finished in 1901 and dedicated under the patronage of the Angel of the Schools,

and the glory of the new temple far surpassed the glory of the old. In 1902 the conventual church was finished and consecrated. This group of monastic buildings is reckoned as one of the finest in the possession of the Order.

This laborious undertaking completed, the Provincial set out for South America, a land that has always been the object of his special care. He journeyed through the republics of Chile, Argentina, Peru, Bolivia, and Ecuador, with a view to establishing missions for his province in these regions. In 1904 he acquired the mission field of Porto Rico, and in the same year received into the care of the Dutch province the convent of the Order at Luxembourg. In 1907 after a journey to Petrograd, he returned to the West Indies to oversee the activities of the Dominicans in those parts, and on this journey had the good fortune to secure the services of some of the American Sisters of the Third Order to help in the educational and charitable work of the Fathers, thus opening a vast field to the energies of our self-sacrificing Sisters of St. Dominic. At present two congregations of the Third Order, from Brooklyn and from Albany, conduct hospitals, schools, and colleges, throughout the West Indies.

At the end of his provincialship in 1908 he was called to Rome by Father Cormier, then Master General, and sent as a legate upon official business of the Order to the countries of Russia, Austria-Hungary, Poland, and Dalmatia, and again in 1910 to Budapest as special representative of the Master General to lay the cornerstone of the new Dominican convent in that city. The following year he again crossed the Atlantic to South America, this time as the special canonical Visitor of the Master General to all the provinces of Latin America. In 1912 he was made Visitor for the whole Order, and in this office, his prudence, his justice, his adamant courage, and his indefatigable zeal, rendered it possible to complete the task assigned to him within the space of a few years. It was in this capacity that he came to the United States in 1914, and it was then that he conceived the deep and lasting affection for America and for the Americans that lasted until death. In after years, hearing of the progress and success of the province of St. Joseph, he often wept tears of joy that God had so blessed the Dominican cause in the United States.

Upon the completion of his work as Visitor he returned to Rome to render an account of his stewardship, and then took up his residence at Amsterdam in his native Holland. We can well believe that after so many years of arduous labor he looked forward with joy to the comparative ease of the professorial life, but his respite was short. On the 3rd of August, 1916, he received from the outgoing Master General, Father Cormier, a telegram summoning him to Fribourg, Switzerland, where the 258th Chapter General of the Order had chosen him, on the first ballot, to be the 77th Master General of the Preaching Brethren. The position of head of a religious Order embracing every land and every people was, in those turbulent years, a formidable one but the lines had fallen in goodly places. Father Theissling was a man well fitted by years of experience in office, by knowledge of the world, and by exceptional learning mellowed with deep piety, to direct the Order of St. Dominic. Under the yoke of religious obedience he set out at once for Fribourg and reached there Monday, August 7th. The capitular Fathers and the community assembled in the college to receive the new Master General. Following the ancient ritual of the Order, he took the aspersorium from the hands of the ex-Master General and blessed the assembled brethren. Then, intoning the Magnificat and the Te Deum, they moved in solemn procession into the church, and the Master General, led by the provincials of the two senior provinces, advanced to the altar and knelt in prayer to God to direct him and aid him in the task that had been laid upon him. Then each of the friars came and prostrated himself at the feet of the new superior as a sign of their religious obedience and filial reverence. When the prescribed ceremonies were completed the Chapter immediately resumed its sessions under the leadership of the new head of the Order. The following day the Minister General of the Capuchins who was then in Fribourg, presented himself at the Chapter to greet the new General, as an evidence of the fraternal love that has so long existed between sons of St. Francis and of St. Dominic. He was warmly greeted by the assembled Fathers and received into the midst of the deliberations of session.

At the close of the Chapter Father Theissling betook himself to Rome, and on September 10th the Eternal City saw once more a successor to Blessed Dominic within her walls. As a dutiful son of the Church he presented himself at once to the

Holy Father and Benedict XV received him cordially to private audiences on the 13th and 24th of the month. In October, as one of the first acts of the new regime, Father John McNicholas of the American province, now Bishop of Duluth, was chosen socius for the English language with the title of provincial of Lithuania. In February of 1917 the Master General issued an encyclical letter stating his intention of commencing at once a visitation of the missions of the extreme Orient and of Central and South America, and appointing a vicar to superintend the affairs of the Order in his absence. Accompanied by Father Gabriel Horn of the American province and by a lay brother, he left Rome in March on what was probably the longest journey ever undertaken by any Master General of the Order. He reached New York in April, and on Easter Sunday celebrated Mass in St. Vincent Ferrer's where the solid devotion and piety of the Holy Name men made a deep impression upon him, and he took occasion afterwards in a letter to Father Ignatius Smith, then National Director of the Holy Name Society, to comment upon this remarkable evidence of the fervor of the members of the society. From New York the journey was continued by boat to Cuba where a personal visitation of all the convents and missions of the Order in the island was made. Returning to the United States he crossed the continent into Canada, embarking from Vancouver, and reached Japan in May, a land dyed in Dominican blood, on whose shores so many of his brethren had laid down their lives that Christ might come into the hearts of a pagan race, and, at the places hallowed by the sufferings of the martyrs he knelt and prayed that forth from their trials might come new glory to the Church in Asia, that in death they might still conquer.

From Japan they continued their way to China where the progress of the little party seemed like a triumphal march. At every point acclamations of joy greeted their arrival among the disciples of the Dominican Fathers in the Celestial Kingdom. After a complete visitation of the Chinese missions, a task that occupied many months, the Master-General and his two companions set sail for the Philippines where they were received by the members of the Holy Rosary Province stationed in the Islands. They remained here in order that Father Theissling might preside over the sessions of the chapter of the Fathers that was about to be held, then having completed the visitation

of the convents and missions, crossed the Pacific to the Americas. They reached Guatemala in time to celebrate Mass on Christmas Day, 1917, and had the misfortune to be in that city during the series of devastating earthquakes of that time. They were compelled to spend the whole of one night under the open sky but by the protecting hand of God escaped any personal injury, and were able to proceed without delay to the visitation of the provinces of Central and South America. This required seven months to complete and it was September before the friars reached Spain, where, since the Master General of the Dominicans by an ancient privilege ranks as a Grandee of that country, they were received with all the honors, civil and military, that the King could bestow upon them. They reached Rome that same month, a year and a half after leaving it, and were immediately summoned to private audience with the Holy Father, who questioned them with interest about their journey, expressing his congratulations upon the completion of the long and arduous task, and ended the interview by bestowing upon all three his Apostolic benediction.

The Master General at once set about making preparation for the Chapter of the Order that was to be held in Caria, Spain, in 1920. At this chapter enactments were made for the recodification of the constitutions. In the meantime he busied himself with visitation of the Italian and neighboring provinces. In 1921, the year which marked the celebration of the seventh centenary of the death of St. Dominic, he issued an encyclical which might well have come from the pen of the holy Patriarch himself. It is characterized by zeal for religious observance and by fatherly love for the welfare of his brethren, and takes the form of a commentary upon the last testament of St. Dominic. He points out the necessity of external observance but stresses the need of the life-giving spirit of charity if the religious would become a man after the pattern indicated by the saintly founder. This same year of 1921 witnessed the return of the Dominicans to Oxford after an absence of four hundred years from the University to which they had contributed so greatly and of which they formed an integral part in the olden days. The press of duties at Rome kept the Master General from attending in person, but expressing his sorrow at his inability to be present, he delegated one of the English Fathers to represent him at the laying of the cornerstone of the Dominicans and to deliver the

sermon in his name. It was just seven hundred years since the first great Master General sent out his little band of friars to the far off island of Great Britain to establish his Order among the English.

In 1922 the 260th General Chapter of the Order was held in Rome, and chief among its works was the revision and recodification of the Constitutions. The Breviary composed according to the reform instituted by Pius X was edited in August of this year. On September 24th the Master General celebrated the golden jubilee of his religious profession and, as the chapter was then sitting, the capitular Fathers joined in the happiness of the time, commemorating the occasion by assisting in a body at a reception tendered the venerable jubilarian on the 23rd of the month, at which one of the Fathers delivered a congratulatory address, and a letter from the Holy Father, Pius XI, was read in which the supreme head of the Church expressed his felicitation to the Master General upon the happy event, praised the ardor of his fifty years' labor in the interest of religion, and invoked the blessing of God upon him and upon the Order.

Although his health was greatly impaired by the illness to which he was eventually succumb, Father Theissling assisted at all the sessions of the Chapter, taking an active part in the deliberations of the body, and giving no thought to anything but to spend and be spent in the service of Christ. However, even his strong constitution and indomitable spirit finally had to give way before the inroads of the disease, and despite the fervent prayers of the brethren that God would spare him longer to the Order, it became apparent that his term of earthly life was drawing to a close. Surrounded by his spiritual children, and amid the strains of the *Salve Regina* his soul passed forth to its Maker on the second of May, 1925.

He was a noble character—a man who did not know how to admit defeat when the cause of the Church or of the Order was at stake. Although constantly under the strain of multifarious demands that the responsibilities of his office placed upon him, he was never too busy to listen and approve of any plan that looked to the promotion and extension of the Kingdom of God upon earth. The foreign missions were especially dear to his heart. In him the Church has lost a stalwart defender—in him the Order of St. Dominic has lost a devoted and loyal son.



And so to Father Theissling, rest from his labors! He is gone from among us but going he is not forgotten. As long as the Order which he loved and served endures, so long will his name be breathed to heaven in fervent prayer that his soul may find its rest in peace. As year succeeding year brings round the anniversary of his death, just as the dawn of the new day is climbing up the eastern sky and creeping through the colored windows of the choirs wherein he so often stood among his brethren and chanted the praises and the mercies of the Saviour, the incense of the *De Profundis* will rise for him unto the throne of God, and white-robed priests will lift up the Holy and Unspotted Offering in the sight of the All-Holy on his behalf.

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## PEARLS

*By BRO. GREGORY HEROLD, O. P.*

If then, your heart,  
Holds, like the sea,  
A wealth of pearls,  
My friend, your heart,  
Should, like the sea,  
Yield up its pearls.