

CENTENARY OF ST. JOSEPH'S CHURCH AND CONVENT

One century has gone by since the story of St. Joseph's Church and Convent, Somerset, Ohio, began. It has been an interesting Dominican story all these years, linking together the beginnings of Catholicity in Ohio when it was first fostered by Father Edward Dominic Fenwick, O. P., in the vicinity of Somerset, Ohio, with the later development of the Church in this State by Dominican missionaries and the present thriving activities of the novitiate of the Order of Preachers, now in this convent.

This brief sketch will unfold only the leading features of this century of Dominican labors at St. Joseph's.

In the year 1784 Edward Fenwick, a native of Maryland, bade farewell to his homestead and turned from the scenes of his boyhood to pursue a course of studies in a Dominican College at Bornheim, a village located between Antwerp and Brussels, in Belgium.

It was here that our future Dominican perceived and corresponded with the working of God's grace in his own soul. Tenderly nurtured by the ever-precious blood of Jesus Christ, his college days were passed in preparation for the high vocation which God had destined for him in His Church. The year 1792 found him completing his intellectual contests in the arena of scholastic strife and embarking upon the eventful sea of his sacerdotal life, which lay before him. Consequently, at the closing of this year Edward Fenwick could trace his spiritual ancestors back in unbroken succession to Him who stood in the little supper room at Jerusalem and said: "Do this in commemoration of Me." He was now a priest of Jesus Christ, so impregnated with the things of God that the seemingly insurmountable difficulties of the future were leveled to the dust when his great heart diffused the spirit with which it was imbued.

After his ordination he spent two years in teaching the classics at Bornheim College. But he was not to remain long amid the quiet but strenuous pursuits of his first field of labor. It seemed certain that rougher times were to be his and that his training should be commensurate with his future trials. For just now the French Revolution hurled its poisonous arrows of devastation throughout all France, discharging an exceedingly heavy volley of its venom against the institutions of Catholicism. It

was amid this general disturbance that Father Fenwick's efforts almost received the consecration of exile. But being a true American citizen, he claimed the protection of our beloved country, and promptly did the American Government respond by guiding him to safety under the protecting shadows of the Stars and Stripes.

The time now seemed ripe to Father Fenwick to consecrate the virgin soil of young America by the footsteps of the Friars Preachers. Accordingly, he placed the matter before the proper authorities, and his project received the hearty cooperation of Father Luke Concannen, at that time Socius to the Master General of the Dominicans and afterwards the first Bishop of New York. He also had the pleasure of knowing that Bishop Carroll, the only bishop then in the United States, was anxiously awaiting the completion of his plans. Finally his undertaking received the approbation of the Master General, and on September 10, 1804, Fathers Fenwick, Wilson, Tuite and Angier sailed from London, England, for Norfolk, Va., arriving there in the month of November. Generously placing themselves at the disposal of Bishop Carroll, they were sent to Washington County, Kentucky, where in 1906 St. Rose Convent was built, and thus was sown the seed of Dominicanism in the United States.

It was just at this period that the priestly zeal of Father Fenwick found an outlet in the missions of Ohio. His labors were crowned by the founding and building of St. Joseph's Church and Convent, Somerset. To those judging from worldly standpoints, the attainment of this latter result must have seemed but a phantom of the imagination, for in 1810 the State of Ohio was nothing but a huge forest where dangers were many and inhabitants few.

It was into these inhospitable parts that the spirit of God led our saintly Friar Preacher. Leaving St. Rose, Springfield, Ky., he went in search of those whom he called his "stray sheep." He had inherited from his Holy Father St. Dominic the Apostolic spirit, which was ever enkindling within him a more intense desire to spend himself, so that more souls might be added to the heavenly choir to sing God's praises for all eternity.

Traveling on horseback, he would rove through the thorn-strewn forest, scanning with the keenness of his vision the surrounding country in quest of souls. Many a sunrise did his heart kindle with the hope of gaining souls, and many an evening closed

in the disappointment of that hope. Often did his heart melt within him and his weary limbs seek rest from the dangers of the forest wilds within some cave, which, while uninviting in itself, still served as a protection from the inclemency of the weather.

In the year 1810 there came a change. The unintelligible language of the forest gave place to human voices and the barren waste was supplanted by the activities of home life of three families, those of Jacob Dittoe, John Finck and his son, Joseph Finck. Devoted to their Catholic Faith, these families prayed for a priest. Their most cherished hopes and their fondest wishes were at last realized when the Good Shepherd sent His ambassador, who broke to them the sacred Bread that cometh from heaven. We can only imagine the degree of happiness within the homes of those three pioneer families, as each gave expression to that heartfelt joy occasioned by this God-directed incident. Surely Father Fenwick's bosom must have swelled high with hope and his eyes must have been dimmed with a haze of happy tears, as the different members of these respective families urged him to establish a church. But comprehending the depth and breadth of the situation, knowing the utter lack of money and means for the attainment of the end, Father Fenwick was obliged to defer the granting of their petition until the future would open up new avenues to success.

Time passed on—a time filled with the arduous tasks peculiar to our itinerant missionary. But fancying he saw the unborn children of Ohio extending their hands to him for deliverance from spiritual famine, Father Fenwick returned again in 1814 to his children in the faith to administer to their spiritual wants. After several intermittent visits to his people, the year 1818 was selected by Father Fenwick as the one in which to build a church. Accordingly, three hundred and twenty acres were deeded by Jacob Dittoe and his wife to Father Fenwick on the condition that a church be maintained there, with the promise that some future day would see a convent erected for the fostering of priestly vocations. Thus was founded St. Joseph's Church and Convent. The first structure was of logs, being twenty-two feet long and eighteen feet in width, the earth serving as a floor and two openings in the walls as windows. Humble and poor in its beginning, yet what power and influence it was afterwards to exert! It was this unadorned, unembellished, rude structure that

served as a place of worship for not more than a dozen families. Here they found a common ground where all might meet as brethren and join hands as children of the one household. Father Fenwick and his little flock found the object of their love within that rude log cabin, for there their God came down in the Mass as truly as He comes down in the grandest Mass in the state-liest temple.

Let me ask you again, kind reader, to let memory dwell upon the days of 1818—days so different from our own! Picture St. Joseph's in its infancy, destitute of even the necessities. It was born in poverty, that poverty which is known to the homes of the toiling poor, that poverty which is so slow to lift its hand or to relax its pressure. Surely Father Fenwick's endurance would have failed had he not been supported by heavenly consolations and nurtured by the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ.

"Give us a man, young or old, high or low," says Dean Stanley, "on whom we can thoroughly depend, who will stand firm when others fail; the friend faithful and true, the adviser honest and fearless, the adversary just and chivalrous,—in such a one there is a fragment of the Rock of Ages." Such was Father Edward Dominic Fenwick. But he was more than this. He had given his life over to the Church of God. His life became a portion of the Christ's imperishable history. Though his apostolic life was characterized by absolute poverty and severe privations, though trials rolled over him as the sea waves beat against the rock, still they left him like a rock, unmoved.

Father Fenwick continued to mark his days by frequent visits in search of souls. But soon a thing happened to him which was much against his wishes, namely, his appointment as first Bishop of the new Diocese of Cincinnati in 1821. This new appointment did not minimize his opportunities for laboring assiduously as ever in the Lord's vineyard. Pursuing the same habits of life, our Bishop still made his pastoral excursions in quest of souls. It was in 1832, while on one of these journeys, that the Angel of Death touched him, and he died alone, at Wooster, Ohio. But though he died alone, the faith that was in him whispered the sweet thought that soon he would join his brothers in heaven, where they would be never parted.

As only limited space has been allotted to this sketch, the remainder of this narrative will treat of generalities in connection with St. Joseph's rather than with particular personages. In

the years that followed Father Fenwick's death St. Joseph's destinies were guided by men whose zeal spurred them on to action; for them, to see was to act, to believe was to affirm, to know was to do. Accordingly in the early thirties a brick convent was built, now often referred to as "The Old Convent." As the community grew, "The Old Convent" was supplanted by a larger home, the latter building becoming a college for boys about the year 1849. Two years later a new college building was erected a short distance from where the church now stands. Wider avenues of thought were opening to the young men of Ohio, wherein they might more easily preserve their souls unsullied and at the same time expend their intellectual horizon. The college was opened and the passing years brought more gratifying results to both pupils and faculty, thus giving promise of rich harvests for the future. But the disruption in social life caused by the Civil War made it necessary to close this college in 1862. This event, however, gave wider scope to the zeal of the Fathers as missionaries. The St. Joseph's Convent of today was built in 1880 or 1881 and from its hallowed walls went forth many a stalwart missionary to build churches, to implant the faith,—men whose works have never ceased, the sheaves of whose successive harvests are being continually gathered into the granaries of heaven. Forty years previous to this time, in the year 1839, the whole-hearted cooperation of the parishioners and the Fathers resulted in the erection of a splendid Gothic church, which ever holds a cherished place in the memory of her children and today stands out as an edifice of great architectural beauty.

Following out the traditions and laws of the Order, a regular Studium was established in 1841, with the prescribed course of studies. The first fruits of the new curriculum were embodied in the person of Father James Whalen, who after passing a brilliant examination received the title of Lector of Sacred Theology, which was then for the first time conferred in the United States. His ability as a scholar and his undisputed capabilities in governing afterwards caused him to be consecrated the second Bishop of Nashville, Tenn.

Looking back upon St. Joseph's past, considering its present, and opening its future by the way of prophecy, we recognize in its history the dealings of God with His creature, man. In its infancy, God allowed the pioneer workers at St. Joseph's to share in the mystery of human sorrow. Their patient endurance of

trials, difficulties and failures swept them to greater heights of success, than they ever hoped for in their widest dream. Hence, we, the children of another generation, look back with joyous eyes upon the procession of those first few hundred Catholics of Ohio winding down through the last century, ever increasing in number. This increase in the number of souls naturally demanded a corresponding increase in the priestly ranks. The increment was supplied, with the result that today the territory of 1818 is dotted with a population of about nine hundred thousand Catholics, administered to by an archbishop, three bishops and more than a thousand priests. To attribute this splendid Catholic growth entirely to the sons of St. Dominic would be claiming too much, but recognizing the fact that the birthplace of Catholicity in Ohio was at St. Joseph's, we now justly pay it honor, and willingly lay at the feet of the Dominican Fathers a tribute of admiration.

In the midst of our jubilation, we must pause to pay our heartfelt gratitude to the unswerving devotion of the lay-brothers and Sisters, who have helped so much in bringing about the final results. It would be a useless task to attempt to measure in words the unfaltering devotion of the Sisters in their many duties at St. Joseph's. Their lives have always been examples of every religious virtue and their deeds still shine out with a lustre which no earthly attraction has ever had power to tarnish.

The old population of Ohio has disappeared, and old institutions have been overturned and new ones have been built on the ruins of the old. Still, through all these vicissitudes, St. Joseph's of today is as strong and as virile as at any period of its illustrious history. The priests who received the first nurturings of their vocations at St. Joseph's are still invigorating the Catholic life of Ohio, elevating the aspirations of its youth by their educational systems, sanctifying homes by the tender solicitude of their ministrations, bringing consolations to the faithful and life to the spiritual dead by their indefatigable labors.

We may well rejoice in these Dominican activities of the last century, but let us not do so in any vainglorious spirit. Rather let us recognize in its brilliant past, not the workings of human prudence or human power, but the strong hand of a merciful God; and bowing down our souls in gratitude, let us cry aloud before His altar: "Not to us, O Lord, not to us, but to Thy name, give glory."

—Bro. Aloysius McLaughlin, O. P.