

A DOMINICAN MINSTREL

The Late Very Rev. John Antoninus Rochford, O. P., Ex-Prov.

The little town of Alexandria, Virginia, held a place of great importance in Colonial days. Thither the Colonial Governors convened with the British General Braddock in the celebrated Congress of Alexandria, and today Christ Church, where Washington worshipped, is pointed out to visitors. But very few of those who visit this historic town know that it gave to St. Joseph's Province one of its most illustrious sons.

On January 26, 1834, the subject of this appreciation was born. He was educated at Georgetown College, but with all the prospects of a brilliant career before him, he chivalrously turned his back to the world and asked for the white wool of St. Dominic. He was received into the Order, and on December 3, 1854, made his profession. On the feast of St. Dominic, 1856, he was ordained to the holy priesthood by Archbishop Purcell.

Father Rochford possessed administrative talents that could not long remain hidden, and so we find him acting as pastor in London, Canada, during the days of the Civil War. In the year 1870 Bishop Rosecrans, of Columbus, Ohio, appointed him pastor of St. Patrick's Church and Vicar General of the diocese. From 1873 to 1877 Father Rochford was provincial of St. Joseph's Province. Upon the expiration of his term, he was named pastor of St. Dominic's Church, Washington, where he erected the present convent. Subsequently he served as prior of St. Louis Bertrand's, Louisville, Ky., and in 1887 as pastor of St. Antoninus' Church, Newark, N. J., which was organized during his provincialate.

Despite this priestly activity, Father Rochford achieved an enviable reputation as a lecturer and poet. He was not a great poet—he had neither the genius of Tabb nor the finesse of Kilmer but, a lineal descendant of the wandering bards of Innisfail, he had a message of hope to give to his fellow-wayfarers, and in spite of pastoral cares found time to give it voice. Thus he gives us the key-note of his song in "Palma Ascendenti"—an ode reminding one of the "Hound of Heaven":

"The road is dreary, child,
With rocks compiled,
And fiends of darkness flutter round each site;
But climb without affright,

Up to the bright
Empyrean undefiled,
And then from Zion's height,
Amid the light
Invoke the Vast, Unspeakable and Mild. . . .

"Then climb the rugged road
And bear thy load
Up, up, until thou reach untainted air,
Where free from pain and care,
Thy lustrous eyes,
Though tear-stained now and weak,
Will see as sunbeams streak
With gold the orient skies,
Grand vistaes of the soul-land bright and fair.
Ah! then, dear child, be wise
And borrow not a sorrow for the morrow
That ultimately dies. . . .

"Ah! make the ether round the rocky ridges ring
With grand applause
For sacred Christian laws
That only can to mortals freedom bring,
Till every proud, defiant
And sacrilegious tyrant,
Forced by the peoples' cause,
Shall 'neath the Cross of Love-Incarnate fling
Ambition's blood-stained gowns,
Swords, sceptres, guns and crowns;
For then shall tribe and nation
Amid the vanquished hosts of tyrants kindly pause
To hail in adoration,
With unique acclamation,
One only, meek and Eucharistic, King."

We would fain quote more, but we wish to give to the readers of Dominicana Father Rochford's translation of the Dies Irae—"the acknowledged masterpiece of Latin poetry, and the most sublime of uninspired hymns":

"Ah! that day, dread day of ire,
That shall wreck the world with fire,
Told by David's, Sibyl's lyre.

"Oh! what trembling and what fearing,
When the Judge in might appearing
Shall to woful man give hearing.

"Trumpets scattering notes of thunder
Shall from graveyards rent asunder,
Force all to His throne of wonder.

"Stunned will death be and Creation,
When arising tribe and nation
Yield to God's adjudication.

"Then shall that great book be open
Whose dark annals will betoken
Why the judgment was bespoken.

"When the Judge, in splendor seated,
Will reveal what was secreted,
Then shall justice be completed.

"Who will then be interceding
Or for wretched me be pleading
Since the just are scarce succeeding?

"King of majesty appalling
Freely the predestined calling,
Save me by Thy love entralling.

"Though I caused Thy way of sorrow,
Let me, Jesus, graces borrow
Ere perdition's coming morrow.

"By Thy weary seeking for me,
By Thy passion to restore me
Be not vain Thy labor o'er me.

"O just Judge! of vengeance dealing
Deign Thy pardon to me kneeling,
Ere that day of minds' revealing.

"Although guilty, I, bemoaning
Sins that flush my cheeks atoning,
Supplicate Thy heart's condoning.

"Who with looks of love hast riven
Mary's heart—the thief forgiven,
Wilt not let me die unshriven.

"Worthless are my prayers and fasting—
Wherefore, Lord, Thy mercy casting,
Save me burning everlasting.

"Place me on Thy right hand praying,
Near the sheep by fountains playing—
Not where goats to doom are straying.

"While the damned to wrath are turning
Headlong, flaming, cursing, burning,
Call me to the Saints' sojourning.

"See my heart with ashes blending,
While I, suppliant, meekly bending,
Pray Thee for a happy ending.

"Oh! that day of bitter weeping,
When from earth's hot ashes creeping
Guilty man shall face the trial—

"Spare, O God! his base denial—
Grant him, Jesus, King of Love,
Never ending rest above.—Amen."

As befitted one whose Father was the Preacher of the Rosary and whose Master was the Lutanist of the Eucharist, Father Rochford's songs were frequently to Mary and the Christ Child on our altars. The following lines from "The Pilgrim's Prayer" reveal his childlike confidence in the Mother of God:

"On thy bosom of love, Mother, rock me!
 Fierce storms are pelting life's shore,
 And hurling harsh thunders which shock me—
 Thy refuge I fondly implore;
 For, jaded, these long years contending
 'Gainst tempests which round my heart sweep
 I'd feel lost in the one now impending,
 If thou didst not rock me to sleep. . . .

"Then rock me to peace sempiternal,
 To the calm where my loved ones repose,
 Aslumbering where winds ever vernal
 Waft love to my Mystical Rose.
 O, be my guide, Star of the Morning,
 And shed brightest hope on the deep,
 While I, in thy beauty's adorning,
 Will rest in thy rocking to sleep."

From a series of sonnets on the Eucharist we choose the following which shows us how the theologian for Archbishop Alemany, O. P., of San Francisco, at the Council of Baltimore, could versify theology:

"How vast Infinitude lies deep concealed
 In finite elements of bread and wine
 Is mystery; yet infallible Truth divine
 This fact unique to wondering man revealed.
 But as the storm-swept oak in yonder field
 Had once subsistence in the acorn's shrine,
 So may the wheat and joy-juice of the vine
 Their substances to God's hypostasis yield.

"For though no eye hath seen the substance pure
 That underlies the accidents of bread
 It is there, sovereign, reigning on secure
 Till Christ, who made the water's cheeks wine-red,
 Shall,—though the subjects undisturbed endure—
 Dethrone it for His Word-made-flesh instead."

And again :

"Near to Thy person, Lord, so well disguised
 That sense can not Thy ravishing grace reveal,
 Both Faith and Love o'erwhelming on me steal
 Sweeter than aught discernment ever prized;
 And though my yearning ardent, unsurmised,
 Envy the forms that jealously conceal
 Thy hypostatic presence, grand and leal,
 To pilgrims foot-sore, hungry and despised;

"'Twere better—though it every sense abase—
 To hide Thy grandeur 'neath these forms uncouth,
 Than Faith or Freedom fail the human race;
 For who 'mid snows of age or fires of youth
 Could see Thy Infinite Beauty face to face
 And be enslaved not to its Charm and Truth?"

Though Father Rochford most frequently made the sonnet the vehicle of his thought, we think that he was more at ease when not "within the sonnet's scanty plot of ground." The following lyric seems to exemplify this:

"Since each bright soul needs have a thorn
 To goad its form external,
 May yours be light, not sharp, but torn
 From that rough crown infernal
 That pricked the head
 Of Him who bled
 To make your future vernal.

"But while this pain may rack your head
 And woe become diurnal,
 Be patient, for the same thorn shed
 The Saviour's blood supernal
 To make you strong,
 To right each wrong,
 And gain sweet home lucernal."

The following rondeau was written in New Haven in 1891. For wealth of imagery we deem it scarcely unworthy of Keats. A single rose in a crystal vase set in the sunlight suggested the theme:

"Charming Rose of cream-tint-hue,
 Thee the odorous winds pursue:
 Wert thou from the stars enchanted
 By some luring hand, and planted
 In this vase of Tyrian blue,
 That untainted, fond and true,
 Thou shouldest o'er me lonely strew,
 Love for which my heart has panted,
 Charming Rose?

"No, alas! thy beauties woo
 Sunbeams chaste and limpid dew;
 Then thy fragranted form, gallanted
 By their sweetness Heaven-granted,
 Thrills my heart, but wounds it, too,
 Charming Rose!"

Father Rochford deeply appreciated the beauties of Nature. For him she was a great moral-teacher. The following extracts

from his "Ode to the Potomac" reveal this Wordsworthian trait and recall to mind Southey's "Lodore":

"Near the summit of the Alleghany,
 Rocky, bosky, mossy, grassy,
 Springs a streamlet from a fountain
 Crystaline, pellucid, glassy,
 Stealing from its rugged braces,
 From its covert, reedy fen,
 Reeling on with rippling graces,
 Through the gorges to the glen,
 Through the old and fairy land,
 Virginia dear, and Maryland,
 Downward going,
 Purely flowing,
 Past the guilty haunts of men. . . .

"But deeper now, as further going,
 Through the mighty Blue Ridge range
 It kisses the Shenandoah flowing,
 Weird and sombre, grand and strange;
 Together, then, commingling water,
 Grand Potomac madly sweeps,
 Widening grandly as each daughter
 On her limpid bosom leaps. . . .

"Then march on, Potomac, down, down with disdain,
 And mingle thy murmurs with roars of the main,
 Till resounding through space, the ether on high
 Will wed thy blue waters to clouds in the sky,
 To cool the parched meadows and moisten the air,
 Till dissolving in rain, will to mountains repair
 To ripple once more on thy breast to the sea,
 Obeying forever wise heaven's decree;
 Then cleansing pollutions of cities and towns,
 Smile, smile at men's pleasures and laugh at his frowns,
 Until wearied at length of the course so oft run
 Thou canst wend thy way kindly through rays of the sun,
 To glitter in spray over Eden's fair bowers,
 And eternally slake the mute lips of its flowers.

"Thus as the Potomac springs,
 And to the mountain clings,
 E'en as it twirls and rolls,
 Wending its rocky way down to its rest;
 So have all human souls,
 Longed for the sea of infinity blest.
 Wearied of groping on,
 Fevered, still hoping on,
 Trembling from childhood to death's dreary age.
 Passing through tangled ways,
 Singing blue jangled lays,
 Having few spangled days,
 Mourning we pass on our hard pilgrimage,
 Leaping o'er stubborn facts,
 Into life's cataracts,

Purling and curling,
Whirling and twirling,
Past sinful compacts
Into the ocean of Hope's heritage.

"Restless mortal, toil on humble,
Struggling for the boundless sea,
Rifting mountains, rocks and ages'
Barriers to eternity.
Time may boom and gorges rumble
Echoes on this craggy shore,
Thou canst earn triumphant wages,
And life's virtues all explore,
Till commingling merry laughter
With the endless ocean's roar,
Thou wilt rest on it hereafter,
Placidly forevermore."

No picture of Father Rochford would be truly limned were the tinge of patriotism that permeated his character omitted. Like the poet-priests of the Southland he loved the Lost Cause, but after Appomattox he labored to remove the vestiges of division. But few know that Father Rochford composed the music for Father Ryan's "Sword of Lee," which was so popular in the South. And when that renowned poet passed away, Father Rochford eulogised him in the following beautiful sonnet:

"Thou, priestly poet of a people's cause,
Wilt chant no more upon the camping ground,
Where armed battalions, chivalrous, world-renowned,
Poured out their blood for Magna Charta's laws.
Though mountains, seas will mourn the direful pause
Of thy weird harp whose chords no longer sound;
Yet will its echoes past, o'er death, rebound
Unto the future's harmonized applause.
Oh! Sacred harpist, in those happy spheres
To which thy soul oft flew o'er misty ocean
To hush the monotone of life's bleak shore
Restrung thy harp decked with a nation's tears,
Now tuned in triumph, joy, poetic motion
To chant eternal truth forevermore."

After his native land, Erin, the Isle of Saints and Scholars, was enshrined in his heart:

"The past, O Justice! rude, intolerant, blind,
While crimsoning deep in blood the road of time,
Hath often heard fair Erin's belfries chime
In unison with the heart-songs of mankind.
And yet though millstones of this era grind
To atoms chains of tyranny and crime,
Bold artful Albion round her form sublime
Forges new bonds her bruised limbs to bind.

Then haste, sweet Justice, vindicate God's own
 Branding this doom on Britain's grasping breast:
 Your vestige on all coasts by blood is known
 And for brave Erin now avenged, caressed
 By exiles homeward marching from each zone
 Make Liberty's plumes her e'erenduring crest."

Father Rochford passed the last years of his life at St. Vincent Ferrer's Priory, New York, and despite severe suffering maintained a heroic spirit of cheerfulness to the end. The soul of this gallant knight of Our Lady found rest at last on October 5, 1896, and its earthly habitat was laid to rest with his brethren in Calvary. Death, which had often been the subject of his meditations and poems, came to him as a friend leading him to his God. Father Rochford had long since, when in the flower of manhood, answered for himself the question: "O! Whither A-Going Am I?"

"But far, far beyond the worm-eaten grave,
 Where death feeds corruption alone,
 My soul not hampered by chains of the slave,
 Will fly to God's flowery zone,
 There to rest by the river of stars above,
 Whose waves, rippling, march through the sky
 To the infinite ocean of mercy and love—
 O! thither a-going am I."

—Bro. Chrysostom Kearns, O. P.

"BLACKFRIARS"—A MONTHLY REVIEW

"Blackfriars" (April and May). 14 shillings per annum.
 Southampton Road, London.

The enthusiastic praise with which discerning readers are welcoming "Blackfriars" is not at all extravagant, for the first two numbers of this new Review are nothing if not excellent. Its aim, as expressed in the very first issue, is to find and tell the truth at any cost, never to compromise in order to live, but, if necessary, to die rather than fail in its one great purpose, Truth,—a sublime as well as an unique ideal in these days of corrupt and disreputable journalism.

The content matter of "Blackfriars" is made up of masterly articles on historical, political, economic, artistic and literary topics that are alive and timely. The potent names present in the table of contents are a strong temptation to read the whole thing through at a sitting. And when we have finished, the thought that cries for utterance is that the editors of "Blackfriars" are in a very fair way towards achieving their exalted ideal.