

## A ZEALOUS LIFE<sup>1</sup>

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ONE Sunday morning in the year 1863 the congregation of St. Peter's Church in the city of London, Canada, heard their saintly old pastor announce that in his opinion, "a church without a bell is like a mother without a tongue." He went on from there to convince them that St. Peter's needed a bell for the same reason a mother must have a tongue—to call her children. The tower was ready and waiting for "a *good* bell with a big, mellow voice." On a previous Sunday he had declared: "A church without a steeple reminds me of a man without a hat. As no gentleman can be considered dressed, unless he wears a hat, no church can be regarded as complete, except it has a tower." There was no resisting that appeal. In his almost sixty years few had been able to deny any request made by this unusual shepherd of souls. And it was not long before the new spire was equipped with a new bell, blessed by the pastor himself and christened "Patrick Dominic."

This thin, blue-eyed, homely old priest was Matthew Anthony O'Brien, a name which accounts fairly well for half the bell's title. Almost forty years before, he had come to America from Tipperary, where he was born in the spring of 1804. For a quarter of a century now he had been a son of St. Dominic as well as St. Patrick. So the bell was given its second patron. The long years of labor and zeal that had brought him now to Canada as pastor of St. Peter's make as interesting and inspiring a story as any in the history of the Dominican Order in America.

As a young man of twenty-two the good-hearted, pious Matthew made what he later called the greatest sacrifice of his life by parting from his mother and taking ship for the New World. Of his life before that time we know little save that he was the youngest of thirteen children in a family of moderate means, that he received a good rudimentary education, and that the holiness of his later years budded and blossomed early under the loving care of a devout Catholic mother. It is practically

<sup>1</sup> The material for this article is drawn from *An American Apostle* by Victor F. O'Daniel, O.P., S.T.M. (Washington, 1923).

certain that his journey to America was for the purpose of realizing his vocation to the priesthood. After enduring the buffetings of poverty and privation along the Eastern seaboard of the United States, he finally reached the home of some relatives in New Orleans. Thence he made his way northward to Kentucky, where two colleges and a seminary offered some promise of fulfilling his desires. It was more than a year after his landing in America that the weary traveller reached the episcopal city of Bardstown, Kentucky, and presented himself to Bishop Flaget.

Acting on that holy prelate's advice, he entered a newly founded diocesan congregation of teaching brothers, the first of its kind in this country. When the institute was dissolved about a year later, he set out for St. Rose Priory, seventeen miles away, and was accepted by the Dominicans there as a student for the priesthood. But his plans soon received a disappointing setback. Never at any time blessed with really vigorous health, he found the severity of his new life too much for his powers. The less rigorous regime of St. Mary's College, ten miles distant, was recommended to him. There, as professor and student, he made his home for six years. In 1835, his classical studies completed and his health greatly improved, he returned to St. Rose to resume his interrupted efforts to become a Dominican priest.

So it was that one day in the summer of 1836, an ungainly, awkward, lean young Irishman prostrated himself before the Prior of St. Rose and then ascended the steps of the altar to be clothed in the black and white habit of the Order of Preachers. Anthony was the name he took in religion. In spite of hardships, ill health, and sufferings that would have discouraged many another, he persevered, and on September 8, 1837, made his profession. Not long thereafter, he received tonsure and all the Holy Orders but the priesthood from the lately consecrated Bishop Miles of Tennessee, who the year before, as Prior of St. Rose, had given him the habit. Dispensations were granted which permitted him to abbreviate his preparatory studies, and two years later he was ordained to the priesthood.

Then began a life of almost unparalleled pastoral and missionary activity. His appointment as submaster of novices at St. Rose immediately after his ordination and as master of novices the year following did not prevent him from exercising his priestly ministry as much as possible in the large parish of St. Rose and its many mission stations. The young priest was eminently qualified for the responsible position to which he had

been assigned and successful in fulfilling its duties. But he was anxious to devote his life to labors of a more apostolic character. All his priestly days he was to be most keenly interested in the "lost sheep" and the "others not of this fold." His limited share of parochial work was not nearly enough to satisfy his zeal. Accordingly at his own request he was relieved of his duties as novice master and allowed to devote his time completely to the work of a "good shepherd." Not long after this another assignment to the post of novice master took him to a new novitiate at St. Joseph's Priory, Somerset, Ohio. But there again he was freed from this office and for the same reason.

That these changes were well warranted is evident from his instant and continued success as pastor and missionary. It is true that he had, humanly speaking, nothing which would particularly recommend him as a leader of men. Nature had rather handicapped him than otherwise. Of a quiet, retiring disposition, much given to silence and solitude, he was self-effacing almost to excess. It would have required no little imagination to consider him handsome. He was exceptionally careless about the way he wore his shabby clothes. All in all, he was hardly an impressive figure. Yet if it took no extraordinary penetration to see that this "ugly duckling" was a character, it was just as abundantly clear to all that he was a very Christlike character. For grace and charity had almost completely overshadowed his natural drawbacks, or rather enhanced them to such a degree that they attracted rather than repelled. Simple and unassuming as a child, he was the most winning and approachable of men. A kindly pair of blue eyes lighted his plain face with sympathy and interest. A few simple words from him were more fraught with meaning than many a sermon. It was not only the faithful who yielded to his attractions. Non-Catholics without number were drawn to reverence him as they did no other.

Father O'Brien was not the man to spare himself in his labors. If he had not been endowed with remarkable powers of endurance, his apostolic career would certainly have been very brief. The precarious state of his health worried him but little. Moreover, he added to his daily toil in the Lord's vineyard many mortifications. He took very little food and it seemed to some that he never slept. A great many of his night hours were stolen from rest and given to prayer and reading. It was in this way that he prepared himself for his daily service to souls.

In 1844 Father O'Brien became the pastor of St. Patrick's

parish in Junction City, Ohio. Much of his life from this time on was spent in the saddle, as he made his pastoral rounds and travelled from one mission to another. Not only his parishioners but many people all over the state and beyond came to know and revere the zealous Dominican, whose work often took him far beyond the parish boundaries. His parish became the model of the diocese. By 1847 a new and larger church had been built, the parishioners contributing the labor, while Father O'Brien himself raised the necessary funds by his missionary labors in St. Louis, New York, Boston and elsewhere. We have an example of his skill at combining zeal for souls with temporal concerns in his bringing the young Protestant architect of the new St. Patrick's into the Church and into the parish. Other buildings in the vicinity which were under construction at this time were also entrusted to the care of the busy pastor.

These crowded days of intense activity were always days full of prayer. Whenever it was at all possible, he began the day by offering the Holy Sacrifice. On his long journeys his saddle-bags always contained the necessities for Mass. Love of the Holy Eucharist and frequent Communion were among his favorite themes in preaching. As well became an Irishman and a Dominican, he was greatly devoted also to the Rosary. The beads would often be seen slipping through his fingers at odd moments in the midst of his labors.

It would be a very difficult matter to decide whether the holy priest achieved greater triumphs as a missionary or as a pastor. In the pulpit he never rivalled the eloquence of Tom Burke or Lacordaire, but it would be very rash to declare that they were more effective than he. For a preacher whose talents were, naturally speaking, negligible, his power over his audiences was amazing. His listeners themselves were unable to explain it without appealing to the supernatural. A slight lisp, rapid enunciation, a harsh, shrill voice and an awkward appearance could not obscure the message he had to deliver. Because he was too well schooled in silence not to make every word count, he became a master of brevity and conciseness. He made his thoughts memorable by clothing them in simple, pointed sentences which abounded in homely figures and apt comparisons. What was more important, he spoke from a heart that was clearly full of a deep love of God and souls. It was the earnestness and sincerity blazing through the screen of his natural imperfections that won him the hearts of his hearers and brought

large crowds to sit at his feet. It was the same zeal and transparent goodness that in or out of the pulpit attracted young and old, sinners and innocents.

Though it was not Father O'Brien's learning but his holiness which gave him such influence over men, we must not suppose, as some seem to have, that his mental powers were of a low calibre. He was not a scholar and had very little taste for abstractions, but he had a great love of reading and all through his life books were his constant companions. His was a keen, practical mind, sharpened by a goodly share of the hard knocks that breed prudence and good judgment. Moreover, there is a wisdom born of prayer of which he had been granted a copious measure.

Neither his superiors nor his brethren in religion were slow to recognize Father O'Brien's practical talents. In 1850, soon after his return from a short trip to his birthplace in Ireland (an obedience placed upon him for the sake of his health), he was unanimously elected Provincial of St. Joseph's Province. The strange part of it was the fact that before the election his name had not been mentioned. There was considerable surprise even among the electors when they discovered whom they had chosen. Father O'Brien himself had to be persuaded that it was not a joke. The success of his four years of rule was to convince all of the special influence of the Holy Ghost in that election.

Now began one of the most active periods of his incessantly active life. The new Provincial threw himself into his work with greater zeal than ever. The position brought not so much a change in his duties as an addition to those he already had. His many long journeys continued as before; visitations, missions and retreats took him as far south as the Gulf of Mexico and north to the Great Lakes. The construction of several schools and churches came under his care. It was under his rule that the Province made its first foundation in the East, St. Dominic's Church, in the national capital. Though the position gave him more than sufficient outlet for his zeal and energies, yet it must have been with a grateful sigh of relief that he laid down the burdens of office near the end of 1854. Posts of honor had little attraction for him.

Father O'Brien's long and arduous career was a many-sided affair. Yet it was certainly as a confessor that he was really unique. His quaintness and individuality are nowhere more in evidence than in the way he exercised his apostolate of absolving from sin. From the earliest days of his priesthood this

was the work for which he was most gifted. He would hear the confessions of those he met anywhere at all, in stores, hotels, barns, on the roadside, even on horseback. On his travels he was veritably an itinerant *Curé d'Ars*. He must have worn his purple stole almost continuously. At any rate it was never far from his reach. He had his own special methods of urging those he met to make their peace with God on the spot. A tactful question or two opened the way for a final request which seldom received "No" for an answer. He seemed to know when those he met needed the Sacrament. In some sections his reputation grew to the point where people would begin their examination of conscience when they saw the saintly scarecrow approaching. Those who were unwilling to be shriven would take to hiding, because they knew there would be no denying that priestly appeal.

Not long after the end of his term as Provincial Father O'Brien was elected Prior of St. Rose. Almost immediately he began the work of erecting the church that stands there today as a beautiful monument to his zeal. It was dedicated in 1855 and completed and paid for by 1860. By that time he had finished his three years as Prior and had become procurator of the community, the completion of the church being his chief care. That labor of love successfully accomplished, he resigned the post and devoted his entire attention to missionary work.

Late in 1861, a call from the London diocese in Canada for English-speaking priests brought him to St. Peter's parish as pastor. The spire and the bell "Patrick Dominic" were the least of the improvements his coming brought. With him there came peace and devotion to replace dissension and neglect in the parish. It became necessary to enlarge the church for the crowds that now gathered in St. Peter's. Besides fulfilling his ordinary duties as pastor, he laid plans for an orphanage, a hospital, and two schools. Only his transfer to Kentucky in 1863 as Vicar-Provincial of the Fathers within the Confederate lines prevented him from seeing these ventures realized.

Age and toil were now beginning to bow his shoulders and slow his step. His none too robust health had been further impaired in the northern climate. But when he reached Kentucky, which was torn in two parts by the fratricidal conflict, his labors rather increased than slackened. With St. Rose as the centre of operations, he journeyed far and wide through the State as a missionary. This was his work until after the war had ended in 1865.

Wherever Father O'Brien went, non-Catholics as well as



Catholics revered him as a living saint. Converting the former was a work for which he was especially fitted. His simplicity and kindness inspired a confidence which even the most prejudiced could not help but feel. He was particularly interested also in lapsed Catholics, and would find his way to the most remote corners of the backwoods to rescue such souls from their spiritual impoverishment. In fact he knew many of the side-roads and by-paths of Kentucky and Ohio as well as any backwoodsman. He would sum up his philosophy as an apostle by asking: "Where is the sense or the charity in surfeiting some with the good things of life, whilst you permit others to die of starvation?"

Father O'Brien was much too humble and sensible a priest to attribute his astounding success to his own talents. Besides, the hand of God was always too visibly present in his ministry. There were numberless people who had not the slightest doubt of his power to work miracles.<sup>2</sup> They had very solid reason for their conviction. A number of cures which were granted in answer to his prayers have been recorded. He is credited also with multiplying a loaf or two of bread to feed the whole community at St. Joseph's, in Somerset, Ohio. Several witnesses were present when he blessed the scanty supply before it was distributed. On many occasions strange calls brought him to sickbeds with the last Sacraments. One night at St. Rose it was a dog that roused him from sleep and led him across the fields to the side of a dying woman. Another time a strange Negro boy guided him to the cabin of an old colored man close to death, and then disappeared never to be seen again. Prophecy, the reading of hearts, and other works of a supernatural character were attributed to him.

After his death tributes to Father O'Brien's holiness often included the suggestion that his cause be introduced at Rome. Among the clergy as well as the laity were many who considered his virtues to be of the heroic order. Archbishop Ryan of Philadelphia, for example, never ceased to speak of the Dominican as a saint from the day when, as a young priest in St. Louis, he saw Father O'Brien bring about what he considered a miraculous conversion. A woman whose reputation as an exceptionally troublesome bigot was notorious became so meek after a few minutes' talk with the holy priest that only a short time

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<sup>2</sup> In accordance with the decree of Urban VIII we declare that in the use of the term "miracle" or any other word or phrase contained herein, we do not intend to anticipate the judgement of the Church, to which we humbly submit our opinions.

elapsed before she became a sincere Catholic. From a safe distance the future Archbishop had witnessed Father O'Brien's first encounter with her, and had heard the Dominican's own story of the sudden change shortly after it took place.

Not long after the Civil War was over, Father O'Brien went to Louisville to become once more a church-building pastor. He lived at the cathedral with Bishop Lavialle for a year while he organized a new parish and erected a church and school under the patronage of St. Louis Bertrand. But when this task was completed, the Bishop, to whom he had become confessor, adviser, and right-hand man, would not hear of his return to St. Rose. It was not until after the Bishop's death in May, 1867, that he could resume his well-beloved work on the missions.

Father O'Brien had not long to live but there was no perceptible lessening of his labors or his zeal. His preaching was as effective as ever and his confessional was thronged for long hours of the day and night. In 1869, he preached in more than a dozen States the universal jubilee of prayer commanded by Pius IX in preparation for the Vatican Council. But his strength was waning now and at the close of the jubilee, he returned to St. Rose, almost an invalid. Yet it was not by any means a complete retirement. Every opportunity that offered itself made him once more the apostle.

For over a year he lived at St. Rose, preparing for the end which he knew was very near. Early in January, 1871, he set out on a journey of one hundred and eighty miles to Glasgow, Kentucky, to make arrangements for building a church there. A chill taken on the train brought him back to a Louisville hospital before he could reach his destination. The aged priest was too weak and worn to resist the pneumonia which soon developed. A short time after, on January fifteenth, 1871, he peacefully passed away, fortified for his greatest journey with the last Sacraments of the Church.

Sorrowing thousands passed by his coffin as he lay in state at St. Louis Bertrand's Church. On January seventeenth, after a Pontifical Mass of Requiem, a long procession escorted the body to the train which was to bring him for the last time to St. Rose. There, on the morning following, the indefatigable apostle was buried in the community cemetery, in the shadows of the church he had raised up on St. Rose Hill. The rewards of his zealous life were now within his eternal grasp. He had come at last to share with Patrick and Dominic an apostle's rest in the bosom of God.