

"IN SEASON, OUT OF SEASON"

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WENTY-FIVE years have passed since that wintry February afternoon when a procession moved slowly through the streets of New York to St. Vincent Ferrer's Church. It was a silent procession; the thousands who stood watching in the gathering darkness were quiet too. This was a time of mourning. The black-and-white robed friars, the diocesan priests, the fifteen hundred Holy Name men—these and the watching thousands had come at the call of death. Father McKenna was dead; the grand old man of the missions would preach no more. Not only in New York, but wherever he had worked, men and women paused to pay tribute to the missionary who labored so long among them.

Father McKenna had earned this tribute; earned it by the simple art of doing his work supremely well. As a young man he had eagerly sought the chance to live for God. Having accepted that yoke, he never once laid it aside. He fell at last in his old age, broken under that weight, and only then was the yoke lifted from him. It was this unvaried fidelity to exhausting work that made Father McKenna loved and respected everywhere.

When Charles McKenna came to America, there was absolutely nothing about him to hint at greatness. He was then sixteen, poor, with no influence, no friends save his own family, in America. He had already made up his mind that he would one day be a Dominican priest. Yet even this seemed almost fantastic. He had practically no idea of what Dominican life is, its requirements, its special work. He had never spoken to, nor so much as seen, a Dominican, and yet he was sure of his vocation. He had little classical education, no definite plans for getting one; yet he was determined to become a Dominican. With this in view he attended public schools for two years. Then, beginning in 1853, he worked as a mill hand and stone cutter for six years to get the money he thought necessary for his studies. Finally in 1859 when he was much beyond the average age of the college man, he began his studies at the Dominican College of Sinsinawa Mound, Wisconsin. His classical studies over, he received the habit at last at St. Joseph's Priory, near Somerset, Ohio, in the April of 1862. The next five and a half years were spent in the quiet, serious business of immediate preparation

for the priesthood. Then, in October of 1867, Charles McKenna, known now as Brother Hyacinth, was ordained a priest. He had been true to himself, to his ideals; he was God's priest in spite of all the early handicaps. For a few years he remained at St. Rose's, Kentucky, where he had finished his studies. He was now approaching thirty-five, yet he knew that he had not begun his real work. Obedience kept him at St. Rose's. His own intense desire was to undertake an apostolic life. To work on the newly-formed mission band, to go wherever he was called, preaching, administering the Sacraments, reaching out day after day to men who needed God—that was what he wanted, had wanted from the first.

In 1870 the change came. In that year Father McKenna was sent to New York and told to get ready for work as a missionary. The very day after his arrival he was hurried to Waterbury, Connecticut, to help on a mission being preached there. That day began a career which is almost unbelievable; a career of active preaching which lasted for forty-four years. The work accomplished in those years cannot accurately be recorded. How many missions Father McKenna preached he never knew exactly; he lost his records. In his old age he himself placed the number at somewhere around seven hundred. Missions in those days often exceeded two or three weeks in duration, a month or longer was common. The work was exhausting. The Missioners' "hours" were from before five o'clock each morning until eleven o'clock or later at night. Incessant traveling, preaching and hearing of confessions ruined the health of some of those early missionaries. Bit by bit prudent regulations were drawn up, but they sometimes came too late. On at least four different occasions Father McKenna was seriously threatened with a break-down; once it seemed that the awful strain of the work might unsettle his mind. At these times, of course, he was relieved of duties for a while and sent on trips. He returned each time completely recovered and eager to resume his labor.

Almost every part of our country heard him preach. He usually worked in the East, yet at times missions took him to the Mid-West, the deep South, and even to the Pacific Coast. Once he accepted invitations to preach in Canada and Nova Scotia. He was everywhere and always the same: eloquent, earnest, profoundly moving. Within a comparatively few years he was the recognized leader among Dominican missionaries.

Father McKenna always bound to himself those among whom he worked. His voice was a great aid in his success. He was certainly one of the great preachers in America. In his manners as

well as in his preaching he was simplicity itself. Yet in appearance he was not especially winning. His large face was severe, stern. He looked old and worn before his time. Despite this he was always kind and joyful by nature. Especially as he grew older, he became more and more mild in his treatment of all men. Wide experience gave him a profound sympathy for even the weakest. He won the confidence even of those who dreaded the prospect of Confession after years away from the Sacraments. His own holiness must have counted much in all this. Among the priests in whose parishes he conducted so many missions, he was loved and revered. His zeal always received at least that recognition.

In 1906 Father McKenna retired from the mission band, but not from preaching. These later years were given over to propagating two devotions which he had always hoped to see firmly planted in this country—the Holy Name Society and the Rosary Confraternity. Though he was now over seventy, he travelled more than ever, preaching everywhere, winning new members, enlarging and perfecting these societies. The habits of a life time could not be broken. Pope Leo XIII had once told him, "You must die in the harness like me," and it seemed he would do just that. As he approached eighty, he still continued, ready for any assignment. But the end of his activity was near. In August of 1914 he went to Hopewell, New Jersey, to conduct a week's retreat for the Holy Name men there. It was destined to be his last apostolic labor. The retreat began on September the first as scheduled, but on the third the aged man suffered a heart attack. He had fallen at last. The long years of toil were over now, over for good. Still he lived on for more than two years unable to do any preaching. Then on February 21, 1917, the end came. Father McKenna was dead.

"The grand old man of the missions" certainly earned the right to be remembered by all who knew of his tremendous work. Among his own Dominican brethren especially, his memory has not died in these twenty-five years,—and that is as it should be. Father McKenna stands as a challenging symbol for Dominican apostolicity in America. From the days when the first Dominicans in our land spent weeks in the saddle tending to the far-scattered Catholic settlements of the new West until today, American Dominicans have always been hard-working apostles. Father McKenna personified and lived that apostolic ideal, and for that he shall be remembered.