

The Church in Canada.

Under this heading will be collected and preserved all obtainable data bearing upon the history and growth of the Church in Canada. Contributions are invited from those having in their possession any material that might properly come for publication in this department

FATHER LOUIS DELLA VAGNA, CAPUCHIN.

PASTOR OF ST. MARY'S CHURCH, TORONTO, 1856-1857.
(Condensed from a paper read before the American Catholic Historical Society of Philadelphia, February, 1888.)

III.

Conclusion.

The Stations of the Cross used in the church for many years after Father Louis' death were made by him, so that it is evident he must have possessed some skill as a handicraftsman. From his vow of holy poverty nothing could induce him to swerve. So firmly did he adhere to it that he would only receive contributions in money from his people when commanded to do so, and when speaking to the congregation concerning the customary dues, he would point to the unadorned walls of the church, and, telling them that his vow of poverty prevented him from possessing more than was sufficient for the necessaries of life, would add, "But all that you can spare is required for beautifying the House of the Lord." "The virtue of humility," it is recorded, "he practised in the highest degree of perfection." We have already seen how, when, years before, Bishop de Charbonnel first urged upon him to come to Canada, he disclaimed the possession of any talents likely to be of great service to this country. His whole career was, in fact, one of continuous self-denial. In conversation he never presumed to press his opinions upon others, and he always preferred to defer to the will of another rather than have his own way. "His garments, his plain and simple demeanour, the subdued tone of his actions, the love which he entertained for the company of the poor and simple, were all so many evidences of a humility which was deeply seated within his breast." Nor was the virtue of obedience less firmly engrafted in his soul. In all his actions he bowed to the slightest will of his superiors. I have been informed by a worthy priest who had many opportunities of observing him, that to such an extent did he carry this virtue, that the winter was far advanced before he permitted himself the comfort of a fire in his house, simply because he had not asked or received permission to do so. It was the month of February before he went to Father Soulerin, C.S.B., superior of St. Michael's College and, in the absence of the Bishop, administrator of the diocese, to ask if he might have a fire in his house. Father Soulerin, of course, at once commanded him, under obedience, to do so. But this was not all. All the winter through he went about the streets clothed in his coarse habit, and with nothing on his feet but sandals. It does not require a very protracted experience of a Canadian winter to appreciate the heroic self-abnegation of the man who could submit himself to an ordeal of so trying a nature.

As a preacher, though not what might be called eloquent, he was wonderfully persuasive, and his words went to the hearts of his hearers. The wonderful saintliness of the man became evident as the words flowed from his lips. When speaking of our Lord, or of the Blessed Virgin, or of heaven, the angels, or the saints, he would seem to be consumed with the fire of divine love; his whole body would become animated, and his face become as if in an ecstasy. He was gifted also with a spirit of deep contemplation, and at all times and in all places he wore an abstracted countenance, as if continually wrapt in meditation. He cherished a particular devotion to St. Francis, and, on the occasion of his Feast, which falls in October, he had a grand celebration. He had also a great love for St. Anthony of Padua. But his special characteristic, and that which he possessed in common with the greatest of saints, was love for the Holy Mother of God. In her he had the greatest confidence, and he was accustomed to say that he had never asked anything of her in vain.

From Father Louis' conversation, I am informed by a well-known religious who knew him intimately, it was easy to gather that he had been in close fellowship with very holy persons. There was that about him which betokened a deep insight to the spiritual life; and to his profound human learning he added

that which is of a far higher order, a mind well disciplined in the "Science of the Saints."

In this manner was spent the short year of Father Louis' pastorate of St. Mary's Church. His life was a continual round of labours, often of the most exacting character, and of severe acts of self-mortification. He was never idle, and he was heard once to remark that if he lost a moment of time he would consider himself a thief. His time, he said, was God's, and as such he had no right to squander it. Thoroughly and well did he carry out this, the guiding rule of his life, and when death came to him it found him literally in harness.

On Friday, March 13th, 1857, he celebrated the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, but, feeling unwell from the effects of the dampness of a newly plastered wall in the room in which he rested, he was forced to retire for the day. On the day following (Saturday) he grew worse and towards evening it became evident that his condition was critical. The physician who was called in pronounced his illness to be a severe attack of inflammation of the lungs, brought on, no doubt, by exposure to the severe weather of a Canadian winter. He was immediately removed to St. Michael's Palace, where every possible care and attention was bestowed upon him by the good Sisters of St. Joseph. Notwithstanding their exertions, however, he gradually sank, and on the evening of the 17th of March, the Feast of St. Patrick, the glorious Apostle of Ireland, he calmly resigned his soul into the hands of his Creator. The last rites of the Church had been administered to him by Rev. Father Mulligan, who was the only person present when he expired. He seems to have had a presentiment of his death, and was heard several times to predict it. Shortly before this, a well known physician, a Catholic, had died, and at the requiem mass said for the repose of his soul, a sermon was preached by Rev. Father Lawrence. When Father Lawrence was about to go into the pulpit for this purpose he was accosted by Father Louis, who had been assisting at the service, with these words: "You are going to preach this man's panegyric now. You will preach my funeral sermon shortly, and it will be the next one that you will preach."

On Wednesday his body was laid out and exposed in the cathedral, where his parishioners, and the people at large, were permitted to cast a last look upon him, and to pay that tribute of respect which Catholics never fail to render to the remains of their clergy. St. Michael's Cathedral has been the scene of many remarkable events, but it is quite safe to say the spectacle presented during the two days the body of Father Louis remained within its walls was quite unique in its history. Throughout the whole of Wednesday and Thursday the church was crowded by persons of both sexes and of all ages, who pressed forward with the greatest eagerness that they might touch if only the hem of the holy friar's garment or the bier on which he lay. And so great was the desire of the people to have some memento of one whom they so dearly loved, that, as I am assured by eye-witnesses, the coarse, rough garment in which he was clothed was literally torn from him. Many had the pieces of his habit thus secured made into scapulars with which they were afterward invested, and, it seems natural to infer, which they cherished for many years.

Though Father Louis, when not engaged in the active duties of his pastoral office, lived like a recluse, yet his people had seen enough of him to know that he was an unusually holy man. Notwithstanding all his efforts to conceal from them the rigid austerities which he practiced, they had more than a suspicion of them. But it was not until after his death that they came fully to know and to realize the extent of his mortifications. When preparing his body for burial it was found that he had worn a hair shirt, and in addition to this, there was found about his waist, next to the skin, a girdle made of twisted wire, the wire, every here and there, being bent inwards and cut off as if with a pair of plyers, and the barbs thus formed protruded into his flesh. Of these barbs there were thirty-seven in all, and this instrument of torture must have been his constant and loving companion for many years, as the skin about the holes thus formed had grown quite hard. A lady, to whom I am indebted for many interesting details concerning Father Louis, had this wire girdle in her possession for many years, and prized it highly as a relic, but it was unfortunately lost on occasion of her house being burned down.

After the body had been exposed to the veneration of the people for two days it was temporarily placed in one of the