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Most Reverend
Denis O'Connor, D.D., C.S.B.

Archbishop of Toronto, Ontario

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Life Work of a Saintly Prelate



By a student of Assumption College,
Sandwich, Ontario, in the old days



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THE following pages make no
pretense of giving anything
like an adequate account of the
life and work of the late Arch-
bishop of Toronto, they are given
to the public solely in the hope of
reminding some one with a more
giftful pen to undertake the task.
—Author.

MEMOIR

— OF THE —

MOST REV. DENIS O'CONNOR, D.D., C.S.B.

Late Archbishop of Toronto, Ontario.

Formerly President of Assumption College, Sandwich.

In St. Mary's Church, Toronto, on the feast of the Immaculate Conception, 1863, Denis O'Connor, a scholastic of St. Basil's community was ordained to the priesthood. He entered St. Michael's College on its opening in 1852, being then in his twelfth year; the succeeding eleven years were spent in that institution and in the Basilian Novitiate in France. But now physicians and friends feared consumption was soon to do its worst. The following seven years he spent in St. Michael's College. Of this latter period his biographer will find little or nothing to relate. After some time his health gradually showed signs of improvement. During the absence of the Superior of the College for the greater part of one year he was requested to attend to the administration of the College, the time of the other Fathers being taken up in the classroom. The efficiency with which he performed this task was evidently an inspiration to his superiors and two years later he was appointed Superior of the new foundation at Sandwich.

The building awaiting this venture had been erected as a College building fifteen or twenty years previous. Unsuccessful attempts to conduct a College there had been made by the Jesuits, by an earlier detachment of Basilians, by the Diocesan clergy and by a staff, of secular teachers. This time it did not fail.

In September 1870 therefore Father O'Connor not yet thirty years of age, accompanied by a staff of four ecclesiastics, himself the only priest, began his career as College president. At this post he remained with absolutely no relaxation for twenty years, when he was made Bishop of London. Those who knew him intimately during those

years in Sandwich could have written in anticipation a fairly safe account of his administration in the episcopacy. His many achievements as Bishop and Archbishop in the eighteen years that followed were nothing more or less than the natural expression of the growth and development of the firm, vigorous principles which determined the policy of Sandwich College.

The success of Sandwich College was phenomenal; the building was twice enlarged into four times the original size, the great burden of the debt was paid off and the number of students registered at the date of his removal had once more filled the house to its utmost capacity.

Large attendance is not necessarily an evidence of success but those who have had to do with College management will be interested in hearing the means by which the attendance at Sandwich was secured. No newspaper, Catholic or otherwise received an advertisement from the College. The prospectus was a leaflet stating fees and the students' requirements in the matter of clothing etc. Drumming on the part of the President or staff was unheard of—was strictly forbidden—and the President was never known to say to a student—for instance on the occasion of leave taking at the end of June, "I suppose we shall see you in September." He trusted to the reputation of the house to supply future students and he trusted still more to a deep rooted Faith that if a religious community were willing to work for God, God could be depended on to supply the material to work upon. Meanwhile Bishops of the neighboring Dioceses and their clergy soon began to appreciate the training which Sandwich College provided and in later years when the students of the College themselves began to be numbered among the clergy, not one of them entertained the idea of a boy in his congregation going to any other institution. Much as they may have felt like protesting, as boys, against the decidedly strict discipline they lived under, they now, for that very reason, felt all the more confident in saying to parents, "Sandwich is the only safe place to send your boy". In this as in everything in later life he insisted that results should be the test.

It is quite possible that a College might secure a large attendance of pupils, enjoy a high reputation among its patrons, command the esteem and affection of present and past pupils when only a modicum of the credit is due to the head. Father O'Connor, however, made Sandwich in the truest and most literal sense. Though supported most years by an able staff the policy pursued was entirely his. The discipline enforced was entirely according to his ideas. The ablest

of the staff saw nothing better to suggest and co-operated enthusiastically in his projects.

A quarter of a century has all but elapsed and all his successors in office have had no higher ambition than to carry out the system established in those days. Several who served under him have been heads of houses since and in every case have been singularly flattered on hearing that the spirit of their institution reminded one of Sandwich. Here is surely the safest measure of successful leadership.

Some idea of Father O'Connor's capacity for work can be had when we remember that to the end he was Superior, Bursar, and Professor of philosophy and expected to exercise a supervision over the parishes of Sandwich and Amberstburg. Twice, for the space of nearly a year each time, he was administrator of the Diocese of London. Even then he was relieved from none of his customary duties. He did all the book-keeping of the institution himself even to the smallest detail; he attended personally to all the correspondence; this latter practice he continued as Bishop and Archbishop. He always found time for the study of Theology and his thoroughness in this and in fact in all studies distinctly ecclesiastic was the surprise throughout the life of the clergy with whom he came into immediate contact. With him there was never any question of vacation, he was always at work. He had no recreations whatever, he never traveled unless where business called him, which, however, was a great deal even in his Sandwich days. It was one of the standing jokes among the students of Philosophy that no matter how many hundreds of miles away was his business, he was always back in time for class. He preached regularly, frequently even, he heard confessions, for six weeks every year he scrupulously gave one hour a day to the young boys who were preparing for First Communion. The clergy and many of the laity in those parts had come to look to him as a man of wide experience, rare good sense, and as a consequence much of his time was taken up in attending to calls and correspondence, which those relations gave rise to. At the same time he was a member of the council of his community and the Bishop's council. Certainly one would say his life was a busy one.

Among the four qualities essentially necessary to a leader of men Cicero gives the first place to Auctoritas. The vigorous personality of Denis O'Connor placed him unconsciously and unintentionally in a position of leadership even in his years of playing marbles. Those around him then as well as to the end of his life instinctively yielded to his opinion and to his decisions. A college boy to whom it would

occur in Sandwich to stand out against an expressed wish of his Superior would be considered adventurous. Still never was there a Superior who seemed to rely less on the consciousness of possessing personal authority. The force on which he relied to secure the admirable discipline which prevailed in Sandwich was system—system in every detail of administration. The founder of the College possessed in the very highest degree the genius of organization. Students, teachers, classes, every line of work, moved like a piece of perfect machinery. The rule was always in force; a very great reason was required to admit of an exception to it. It was the rule provided for all Basilian Colleges; not a jot or tittle was allowed to pass; and there were no additions. But that rule was executed in every detail and always. A visitor to the College building today observes at a glance that the dominant idea throughout the plan is a provision for securing discipline. The hours of class, the time for confession, and extraordinary devotions, opportunities to go to town for necessary purchases etc., were all provided for with the least possible interference with the established order of things.

If Father O'Connor, however, ventured an explanation of the success of the College he would very likely have said, that it was the spirit of work, and meanwhile have reminded his hearers that there was something higher than all these to be reckoned on. Sandwich had, as might be conceived, no inscriptions or mottoes; had such been contemplated we should likely read over every door the same words, "*Querite primum regnum Dei—et omnia haec addeientur vobis*," "Seek ye first the Kingdom of God and His justice, and all things else will be given you". The beautiful idea clothed in these words of Holy Writ, was his lifelong inspiration. The daily routine of the college moved in obedience to it.

The staff was generally composed of Basilian priests and scholastics, and in addition a supplement of ecclesiastics preparing for diocesan work. At times one or more secular priests served temporarily as teachers. All followed the same religious exercises. Meditation at an early hour, spiritual reading, particular examen, evening prayer etc. had their apportioned space in the horarium seven days in the week and three hundred and sixty-five days in the year. For any one to be even late for one of these was an event in the year's annals. Among the students frequent communion was promoted in every way, but always the students were required to assist at a second Mass of thanksgiving. So much attention was given to religious instruction that the highest ambition of the best students was to carry off the

prize for Catechism. Nor was this spirit without very marked results; the proportion of Sandwich students who joined the ranks of the priesthood has always been exceptionally large.

One incident in the latter years of Sandwich serves to illustrate another feature of the serious character of Father O'Connor. The College was surprised one day in the autumn of 1888 by the arrival of the Bishop of the diocese and a large gathering of Detroit and London priests. The occasion was the announcement that the Holy See had conferred the degree of D. D. on the Superior. The day passed by with the usual celebrations. Next morning the older students made their way to the Superior's room to ask for a holiday. Well accustomed to refusals they asserted a right on this occasion because of the new title, "Dr. O'Connor". The answer came, "Boys you may have a holiday today on one condition, that you never again call me Dr. O'Connor." The condition was fulfilled; the title and ring disappeared forever.

London diocese became vacant in 1889. In the year that followed, the one name mentioned by all was that of the Superior of Sandwich and Rome seconded the popular proposal. He was consecrated October 19th, 1890.

It was his unvarying conviction that nine-tenths of a bishop's energy was required to preserve the efficiency of existing institutions and less than one-tenth in founding new institutions. Always conservative in his dispositions he was slow to appreciate the necessity of changes or new organizations. For instance, he never allowed the Knights of Columbus in his diocese from a feeling that there were too many societies already, and one more would only tend to weaken all. New churches and parish schools, however, had every encouragement, but from a long and thorough experience as a business manager he was equally solicitous that all building operations should commence and be carried through on a strictly sound financial basis. The results of his policy in this important matter of administration, were enjoyed by his successors both in London and Toronto. On the other hand the word conservative in its most literal signification would best express his aims and aspirations—to carry out in detail what the authority of the Church had established before him. He would have the Church's laws observed with the fewest possible dispensations therefrom, he would provide a clergy thoroughly trained, he would strive that the laity might be more and more, thoroughly instructed in their religion, he would have greater attention given to carry out the ceremonial of the Church and wherever possible to introduce the proper church music. By insisting that at least half an hour be given daily to Religi-

ous Instruction in all the schools primary and secondary, by a carefully graded program of Religious Instruction uniformly observed throughout the diocese, by semi-annual written examinations conducted with the greatest precision by a competent board; all, clergy, teachers, pupils and parents grew devoted, even enthusiastic, in the study and teaching of the Catechism. It was the invariable custom of the Bishop when expected for Confirmation in a given parish to arrive at least a day ahead of time to allow opportunity for a thorough examination of all the candidates. With his usual unfailing energy, he did all the work himself. To remain four hours continuously in the church interrogating children was a thing of common occurrence.

As a teacher of Catechism he had no superior. The examinations in city churches were attended by the teachers in large numbers and often by the parents; to both the examination was a constant source of inspiration. Naturally the care which he gave to Confirmation, he expected would serve as a model for his priests in preparing children for their First Communion.

Marriages took place always with a Mass, there was practically no exception to this. The people at length found out that it was very rarely that a dispensation from three banns was actually necessary. Funerals in the afternoon were abolished, every Catholic must understand at once that no worldly consideration or convenience should set aside the offering of Holy Mass for the deceased relative.

In the education of his clergy he took the stand that the Sulpician Fathers of Montreal Seminary should always have the last word. No circumstances, no exigencies could ever induce him to ordain a subject before the end of the three and one half years prescribed by that institution. No examination in Montreal Seminary was conducted more systematically or more carefully prepared for, than were the examinations which his priests were required to pass for six years after ordination. A competent board was appointed to the work and until the very end, the bishop never once failed to be present himself. For all his clergy there was a theological conference held at three different centres. No pressure of business even once, in his eighteen years allowed the bishop to absent himself from any of the centres. The matter of the conference was announced several months beforehand and the bishop himself came prepared much in the same spirit as that in which the schoolboy approaches his first public examination.

"It is the first duty of a bishop to preach" and for that reason as bishop of London and afterwards as archbishop of Toronto he preached in season and out of season. The number of Sundays during

the eighteen years of his Episcopacy in which his voice was not heard, was limited only by some physical impossibility; but never outside his own diocese. When not on a confirmation tour or taking part in some function in one of the other churches of the diocese he was always heard in the pulpit of his cathedral. With the same scrupulosity he always attended High Mass and Vespers. Until the last years when his health began to decline he made it possible to open the Forty Hours in all the city churches. Religious communities of his diocese still speak of the time and care he gave to the visitation of religious institutions. Any society of laymen who sought his patronage or requested his presence at a meeting was sure of a favorable reply. When we remember that he attended to all his own correspondence, that no dispensation or extraordinary faculty would be granted without the fullest discussion of the case, that when at home his room was open from early morn till evening to every caller, priest or layman, we find it hard to understand how he accomplished the ever increasing tasks that lay before him.

Even the shortest account of this illustrious prelate could not afford to omit a reference to his policy on the question of mixed marriages. Indeed, the results of his work in this particular point of administration are well worth the study of the theologian, or the pastor occupied in any way with this question. It will be remembered that nine-tenths of the population of the city of Toronto is non-Catholic, that the ordinary Catholic whether in business or social relations made acquaintances very much according to those proportions. Nevertheless it was in this city—known abroad for its Orangeism—that Archbishop O'Connor hoped to abolish mixed marriages. That he practically succeeded in doing so within the space of nine years is surely a matter of comment. He had no greater horror of mixed marriages than the ordinary priest or bishop, but he had a singular conviction that the Church through its clergy and its christian homes had the power to suppress them. He would never allow himself to rest on the assumption that it was useless to refuse such dispensations since a young person in any case would eventually marry the one of her choice.

It was his deeply grounded belief that a Catholic young person was the instrument in God's hands for the conversion of the young man devoted to her; that there was no non-Catholic who with time, and instruction, and example, would not receive the Light, since there is no non-Catholic whom God has not called to the Truth. Therefore upon the young person who had chosen as a partner for life one not

yet of the Fold he imposed the obligation of waiting, and working for his or her conversion. Singularly enough on this work so dear to his heart he wrote no pastorals and preached no sermons. From his point of view the great power in the hands of a Bishop was a pronounced unwillingness to grant a dispensation. His priests understood this and prepared the young and old of their congregations for the contingency; fathers and mothers soon understood it, and took precautions in due time. Company keeping of Catholic young people with non-Catholics became less common. This, however, did not prevent the evil but non-Catholic young people soon learned that there was no hope of the realization of their aspirations until they saw their way into the Catholic Church. The number of converts increased very materially and it is safe to state that at the close of Archbishop O'Connor's administration in more than one third of the Catholic marriages in Toronto one of the parties was a convert. By that time also a dispensation *Mixtae Religionis* was almost unheard of. The plan had succeeded; mixed marriages could be abolished.

Two great objections have commonly been raised to so stringent a policy in a matter in which Faith and conscience enter so intimately, first—would these converts persevere; secondly—would not many be driven to have the marriage ceremony performed outside of the Church. Time has answered the first and every one is edified by the example of those who became Catholics on the occasion of marriage. Some priests of the diocese undertook to inquire into the second, on examining the records in the City Hall it was found that the number of mixed marriages before a non-Catholic minister had gradually decreased, during Archbishop O'Connor's administration. (Marriages before a civil magistrate are not recognized by the laws of Canada.)

But even a life of abstemiousness, of early hours, and regular habits cannot always endure the strain of incessant labor much less the weight of responsibility always keenly felt. At the age of 67 Archbishop O'Connor—never of a vigorous constitution—was worn out. Many had suspected as much but he was not the one to speak of his health under any conditions. In the early part of the year 1908 rumors, which seemed to bear the stamp of authenticity, were abroad to the effect that already twice his resignation had been submitted to the Holy See. Nothing confirmatory appeared until on a certain day in May, the morning mail brought to each priest in the Archdiocese a copy of the following circular:

St. Michael's Palace.

To the Clergy of the Archdiocese,
Rev. and Dear Father:

I received, today, authentic information that I am relieved of the title and duties of Archbishop of Toronto. The relief is welcome, for of late I have felt the burden keenly.

My successor is the Most Rev. Fergus McEvay, hitherto Bishop of London. I feel confident that you will give him a hearty welcome, and honest support in the fulfilment of his duties. He, himself, will announce the date of his taking possession of the See. Until then, I am, by appointment of the Holy Father, Administrator of the Diocese. After that I will go into retirement to prepare for death. Help me by your prayers to make it a happy one. When the end comes, give me the Masses said for those belonging to the Diocese. I have always said them scrupulously, and will continue to do so.

Thanking all, clergy, religious and laity for kindness shown me for more than eight years, I remain Rev. and Dear Father

DENIS O'CONNOR, Administrator.

Toronto, May 22, 1908.

This, the only official communication, gave all the information to be had and expressed all he had to say to his people. The Bishops of the Province did not conceal the fact that they had urged him over and over to remain in his See and ask for an assistant feeling that even as an invalid his influence was too precious for the Church in his own diocese and even abroad to be deprived of. The only answer to their appeals was expressed in some such words as the following: "When a man cannot do his work the only right thing for him is to get out and let some one in who can."

On Sunday June 6th three days before the installation of his successor he administered Confirmation in one of the city churches, whence he was driven directly to the Novitiate-house of his community where he was to spend the remainder of his days.

What may have been his feelings at that hour no one, not even any of his most intimate friends, had ever the least information. That one whose life had been of the busiest for forty years, whose mind was constantly occupied with the discharge of important business, who studied the movements of his time with the closest scrutiny, to whose interest everything in the cause of religion appealed, whose influence was recognized in every sphere, whose power Catholics of

all classes had felt—that he should pass in one hour from all this to a life without duties or pastimes,—in solitude and obscurity, required a heroism which only a life of Faith and long years of spiritual training could provide.

His occupation thereafter was strictly that which he purposed in the circular announcing his retirement “to prepare for death”. The house which he had chosen as his residence afforded him one small room as his study and a still smaller one for a bedroom; his companions were to be a few Novices and their directors. His retirement from the world was absolute, never afterwards attending any public functions whatever, not even visiting his old friends among the clergy nor the houses of his own community. What would seem more extraordinary still, the Archbishop who had kept in closest touch with all public affairs, now takes a resolution to never again read a daily paper, giving as a reason that he should no longer need such information. The hour for spiritual reading always found him on hand and a like regularity guided his days and hours. His old friends among the clergy were always welcome to his room, visitors always finding him cheery and full of interest. He allowed himself the pastime of reading Catholic weeklies, and Magazines but his constant companions especially towards the end were a large Douay Bible and a Rosary.

His successor Archbishop McEvay died after a protracted illness within three years after his appointment leaving the retired Archbishop in seemingly good health. On account of that protracted illness the children of many parishes had their confirmation delayed; the Administrator realizing that it would be still some time before these parishes could be visited requested Archbishop O'Connor to administer Confirmation in those parishes. He complied with the request; but after a couple of such attempts was confined to his bed and the end came two or three weeks later.

In the plat recently taken by the Basilian Community in Mount Hope Cemetery the visitor of this date beholds, side by side, three small marble crosses—not more than fifteen inches in height, with the following inscriptions:

Father Teevey	Michael Perry	Archbishop O'Connor
died	Sacristan	died
May 12th	died	June 30th
1911	March 17th, 1908	1911