

CHAPTER XIV

RT. REV. JOHN O'REILLY, C. M., SECOND PRESIDENT OF NIAGARA

FATHER LYNCH'S successor was a missionary in the most active sense of the word, going abroad even as president of the Seminary almost constantly. Hence it is that comparatively little can be said of his administration in so far as it relates directly to our institution. Even when the first meeting of the Board of Trustees was held, June 27, 1861, shortly after the members became a corporate body, Father O'Reilly was not able to be present on account of mission engagements. Unlike present arrangements, when a band of missionaries is assigned to Niagara, the drafting of members of the faculty in olden times meant the giving of service which was to be credited to the Mother House and not to our institution. Such extraneous work, though most laudable and necessary in those days, naturally prevented a member of the faculty from being properly identified with affairs as they transpired in our little Seminary world. Active supervision at Niagara was exercised to a very large extent by Father Asmuth, who was treasurer under Father O'Reilly's administration.

The presidency of the latter extended over a period of about two years. He came here from our house in St. Louis, Mo., in the month of December, 1859, shortly after our first president had been called to the See of Toronto. His resignation is recorded under date of January 18, 1862, in the minutes of the Board as having been recently tendered. From Niagara he went to New Orleans, but after awhile fell dangerously sick from a cold which he had contracted, and started north in hopes of bettering his condition. His vitality, however, was too far exhausted for recovery. He repaired to the Mulvanphy Hospital, St. Louis, Mo., conducted by the Sisters of Charity, and after a month of suffering he died the death of the just, surrounded by his brother priests and the sisters of Saint Vincent's family, October, 1862, in the 60th year of his age.

It would be a mistake, we feel sure, and it would be a disappointment to our readers, if we were to close the record of Niagara's second president with this strictly pertinent sketch of his relations to our institution. For he was one of the most apostolic men of his time, engaged in extensive missionary work with such historic characters as Father Gallitzin long before he became a Vincentian. History,

indeed, ecclesiastical history, has quite ignored him, although as assistant to the converted Russian prince, he traversed in tireless work the regions now embraced in the diocese of Harrisburg, Altoona, and Pittsburg. The particular fields allotted to Father O'Reilly for gospel culture were the counties of Center, Blair, and Huntington. His zeal as a builder of churches is emphasized by the erection of three substantial edifices to God's worship in the counties committed to his administration.

We sometimes wonder why it is that early missionaries of such caliber as that of Father O'Reilly should be overlooked by writers whose professed aim is to give a true and full account of Catholicity in the localities traversed by their pen. In the present case the personal achievements of Father O'Reilly should have commanded the attention of any writer on ecclesiastical subjects connected with the dioceses just mentioned. The association which he enjoyed with apostolic men who have made the history of our religion what it is throughout Pennsylvania and neighboring States, should have coupled, we imagine, the name of Father John O'Reilly with the exalted pioneers of those days. But history, even Church history, is strangely silent at times, as though the introduction of sidelights would serve to obscure rather than to illustrate with greater emphasis some particular object of exaltation. Even in Saint Mary's College, Emmitsburg, Md., to which institution he had come from his home in County Leitrim, Ireland, about 1820, his associates were John McCloskey and John Hughes, both of whom rendered immortal service to the cause of Catholicity in this country.

Father O'Reilly was ordained to the priesthood in 1826 with Rev. John Hughes, the future Archbishop of New York, probably by Bishop Conwell of Philadelphia, to which diocese both of the newly ordained belonged. He was assigned immediately as assistant to Father Gallitzin, as stated above, and after three years' herculean labor under that saintly but exacting man was transferred by Bishop Francis Kenrick to Pittsburg, where he built the church of Saint Patrick in 1829. Later on he became pastor of Saint Paul's Church in that city, and upon the erection of Pittsburg into a diocese he asked and obtained permission to retire from parochial work, going to Rome, where he applied for admission as a member of Saint Vincent's community. He was received with open arms by our Italian brethren, who were delighted to enroll among them a missionary as seasoned as the apostolic Father O'Reilly, co-laborer with Gallitzin in the Alleghenies.

Invited by Father Timon, first Visitor of the Vincentians in the United States, to return to this country for duty, he landed in New Orleans about 1844, and was assigned to a house of our community then at Assumption, La. In 1845 he was sent to Cape Girardeau as assistant to Rev. Father Penco, C. M., and when about three years later the town of La Salle, Ill., began to grow in importance, owing to the great influx of immigrants brought thither by the extension of the Illinois and Michigan Canal, Father O'Reilly was commissioned by his superiors to organize a parish in that thriving locality. He built a log church as a centralizing point for a parish which in reality extended over a hundred miles of territory, establishing stations to the number of about fifty, all of which were regularly visited by himself and the hardy missionaries associated with him. One of the latter was Father Alizeri, C. M., the erudite professor of theology at Niagara from 1884 to 1893.

During all the time that Father O'Reilly was in charge of La Salle he kept in mind, with a sagacity which missionaries as well as statesmen sometimes possess, the future importance of that growing town and the necessity of providing an adequate house of worship for his parishioners. Principally by begging he and his brethren accumulated sufficient funds to feel secure in laying the foundations of the present imposing church of Saint Patrick in La Salle, 1846. Seven years later it was consecrated to God's service. From La Salle Father O'Reilly was changed, in 1857, to St. Louis, Mo., and when Niagara's first president received the call to Toronto, Father O'Reilly succeeded him, thus becoming our second president.

As we close our account of this great missionary we feel that we have done more than classify him among the founders, preservers, and promoters of "Our Lady of Angels." We helped to rescue from oblivion the name of one who deserves well from the hierarchy, the clergy, and laity of the United States. And even though his extraneous duties as a missionary kept him from that intimate touch with our affairs which is the normal condition of a president at Niagara, the association of such a name as his with our common interests must leave an indelible impress for good upon our history. Contact with such a man could not have failed to inspire his Niagara brethren with that apostolic spirit which, though it find its fullest scope in formal missionary work, can reap the scriptural hundred-fold in class-room, study hall, or campus, wherever obedience assigns the post of duty.

Requiescat in Pace.