

BROTHER PETER RECKTENWALD, CSSR

Edited by John Kennington, CSSR

[Editor's Note: I found this thirty-six page, handwritten account about Brother Peter in his file in the Baltimore Province Archives in Brooklyn, New York. The original consists of thirty-six pages written by Henry Schorp, CSSR, professor at Saint Mary's College, North East, PA. Some portions of the original text have been omitted or emended. Brother Peter's religious life is a good example of the heroism and dedication of the hidden lives of our Redemptorist brothers. Like Saint Gerard, they are the hidden cause of the great Redemptorist success stories. May this great spirit fill the hearts and souls of all our Redemptorist confreres.]

ONE OF THE MOST HIGHLY-PRIZED heirlooms of our Congregation is a devotion to Mary, the Mother of Sorrows. Our holy founder, Saint Alphonsus was noted for his tender love for the Dolours of Mary. He always tried to inspire his confreres with sentiments of the filial love which filled his own heart. In return for this homage, Our Blessed Mother Mary has shown her appreciation by watching over our Congregation with a loving eye.

A Redemptorist, who was remarkable for his love for the Mater Dolorosa was Brother Peter Recktenwald. He was born in Bliesen, a small village in Prussia. The day of his birth is noteworthy as it had an influence upon his life work: Saturday, April 10, 1824. It was the day after the feast of Our Sorrowful Mother. From childhood he inherited the strong, simple faith of his peasant parents. Peter's mother died when he was young. Before she expired she said to her son: "Peter, I leave you in the hands

of the Blessed Virgin Mary. You must cling to her. Let the Mother of God be your mother."

In 1846, Peter migrated to America. He crossed France in a large canvas-covered wagon drawn by oxen. At Havre he took passage on the sailing vessel, Bengal, bound for New York, placing his voyage under the protection of Our Lady. His genial personality and ready wit soon made him a favorite among his fellow passengers. Edifying all by his behavior, he was not ashamed to be seen with his rosary in his hands. Becoming friendly with the family of a German peasant, he assisted the mother in the care of her numerous family, helping the young ones to say their prayers and guarding them from falling overboard.

One child of six, more daring than his older brothers and sisters, had to be saved from harm by the vigilant Peter. One day the child had climbed a ladder and was disappearing from view into one of the water casks, when Peter spotted him in time to save him from drowning. The child was called Louis Weingaertner, and he would cross paths later on with his mentor and savior when he entered the Congregation in 1868 as Brother Jerome. He persevered until his death in 1918.

The voyage lasted forty days. Peter's first care on disembarking in New York

was to find a Catholic Church where he might offer thanks for his safe passage. After a few days in the city, he found a job with a German farmer. He liked the work but found out that he would have to travel seventy-two miles to get to the nearest church on Sundays. He discovered this by actually walking that distance his first weekend at the farm. He soon sought work elsewhere. In 1848 he worked for a farmer in the colony of Saint Mary's, Pennsylvania. Here he first became acquainted with the Redemptorist Fathers. He next traveled to Buffalo and shortly afterwards applied for admittance to the Congregation as a Lay Brother. He was accepted and walked the entire distance to Pittsburgh, where the novitiate was then situated.

Some time before meeting the Redemptorists, Peter, in a dream, had seen a strange house, whose interior resembled a prison and was inhabited by men robed in black. A voice seemed to say to him: "Peter, this is the place to which God is calling you to work out your salvation." On arriving in Pittsburgh, seeing the Redemptorist monastery at a distance, he recognized it as the house in his dream. He cried out, "God be praised! That is the house in which I am to do God's holy will."

On March 19, 1849, he received his Redemptorist habit. He put down these principles in his diary: "Know that thou art called to suffer and to labor, not to be idle and talkative" (*Imitation of Christ*, book I, chapter 17). His novice master was Blessed Francis Seelos, whose holy life and virtues were to Peter a spur in urging him onward to perfection. He often went with the fathers on short missions. On several occasions he carried

the pack for Saint John Neumann, when the latter was preaching missions in the vicinity of Pittsburgh.

The time of his probation passed by quickly and he made his Redemptorist vows in 1851. Like his great model, Saint Gerard Majella, Peter was a tailor by trade, and in this capacity rendered good service to the communities in which he was stationed. He tried to imitate Saint Gerard, resolving to keep the Redemptorist Rule most exactly, especially in the least important matters: silence in the refectory, in the kitchen, in the tailor shop. A younger lay brother, who worked under him as tailor, gave this testimony: "I always received the best example from Brother Peter; in particular with regard to the rule of silence. Never, while in the tailor shop, did he speak a word during the time of our Redemptorist small silence. At other times he spoke only when necessary, but his lips were always moving in prayer. He was kind to me and patient with my faults."

After his profession, Brother Peter remained some time at our parish of Saint Philomena's in Pittsburgh, helping in the sacristy. The following year (1852), he was assigned to Monroe, Michigan, where he aided in the construction of some new buildings and in the instruction of the boys in the school. In those days a brother had to be a jack-of-all trades: sacristan in the morning, school teacher after Mass, chef of dinner, perhaps, act as mason or carpenter in the afternoon and finally wind up the day by doing a bit of tailoring.

When the foundation at Monroe was abandoned in 1855, he was sent to the

house of studies at Cumberland, Maryland. Brother Peter traveled there on foot, begging food and lodging from hospitable German farmers along the way. At Cumberland and later on in 1865 at Annapolis, Brother was kept busy making and repairing the habits and clothing of the students. Because of his high regard for the vow of poverty, the material he bought for the habits he made, in the opinion of the students, was better suited for veils than for habits. He was infamous for being the first tailor to attach black cuffs to the bottoms of trousers and overalls of other colors. No article of clothing was so old that he ever refused to patch it. The result was that many a garment became so multicolored as to resemble Joseph's coat of many colors.

At Annapolis, beside his other duties, he had charge of the laundry. All was kept clean and in good order. His assistant was young Brother Jerome, his former six-year-old shipmate of 1846. That brother relates how the older brother scolded him about the vow of poverty when Jerome had been throwing away as useless, socks, shirts, etc. which Brother Peter wanted to burden with yet another patch. On such occasions he would quote the words of Saint Alphonsus: "poor Congregation, when the members shall be ashamed to appear in patched clothing. Furthermore," said Peter, as if to cinch the argument, "who is to see whether or not our undergarments are patched?"

Brother Peter was very fond of the students, and he felt sorry when obliged to leave them. Obedience called him in 1867 to Saint Louis, where a new founda-

tion had been established. Here he was contented, for, as is usually the case with new foundations, he had to endure many privations and had many opportunities to practice poverty. A church had to be built for the parish assigned to the Fathers. It was shortly after the close of the Civil War and good laborers, besides being scarce, demanded high wages. So the community members had to do their share in the manual work at the church site. Very Reverend Louis Dold, the superior, drew up the plans. The lay brothers helped to dig the foundation. Daily, Brother Peter was at the site with pick and shovel, hoisting rocks on his shoulders out of the construction pit. As the building advanced he would be seen carrying the stones for the walls of the historic "Rock Church." After the building was well underway, he was sent to Pittsburgh; and in quick succession to Buffalo, Ilchester, Annapolis, Saint James, Baltimore, and Saratoga. Always ready to lend a helping hand, he acted as sacristan. Not noted for an artistic touch, he did his best at decorating these churches.

Brother Peter spent more than thirty-five years of his religious life in Redemptorist houses of formation: Cumberland, Annapolis, Ilchester, Saratoga, and North East. He was transferred to the preparatory college at North East around 1890. Here he spent the last and best years of his long life, working constantly in his dear tailor shop. With his cheery disposition and willingness to aid all, he soon endeared himself to the fathers, brothers, and students. With over one hundred students, numerous brothers and faculty to mend clothing for, it is amazing that he found

time to make vestments and habits and rosaries. Yet, he never sought a dispensation from any of the exercises prescribed by the Redemptorist Rule.

He really showed great concern for his confreres. One day he noticed the faded condition of one of the father's habits, which was also full of patches. Quietly going to the superior, he asked permission to make a new habit for the professor. The next day after class, the man found a new habit on his bed. When he questioned Brother Peter about it, the tailor feigned his astonishment about the new habit showing up.

When he reached seventy-years of age, Brother's superior noticed that work was beginning to take its toll upon him. So, he ordered him to stop steady work. "Work only when you please, Brother. Continuous work is too great a strain for an old man like yourself." Peter went away contented, but came back a few days later with this scruple: "Well, father, this new arrangement, no steady work, work when I please, am I not doing my own will? It seems to deprive me of the merit of obedience." Father Rector only said, with a smile, "In that case, brother, remember that your will is my will." He accepted the decision of his superior and the scruple vanished. After that, not satisfied with attending to his own duties, he aided the other brothers in the performance of theirs.

One of Brother Peter's best friends was Mr. Messler, a lay professor at the college. One day he said roguishly to the professor, "Aha! I see that you are quite rich, aren't you?" The professor was mystified, thinking that he had perhaps fallen heir to some property of whose

existence he was ignorant. Therefore he said, "You're joking, brother. What do you mean?" Now on this particular occasion, Mr Messler had his youngest boy with him. Pointing to the child, Peter said, "Well, you wouldn't take a million dollars for this little fellow, would you?" A light began to dawn on the professor's face. He replied, "No indeed, not even for two million dollars would I part with him." "Then," said the brother, "see how wealthy you are. You have many children, each worth more than a million dollars." He went away laughing at his own pleasantry.

Other friends of the good brother were some of the hoboes that frequented the vicinity of North East and were steady customers for meals at the college. It often happened that Brother Peter answered the doorbell, and the tramps, shrewd through experience, soon came to recognize his weak point. He used to question them whether they believed in God, said their prayers regularly, or on other religious topics. All of them knew that if they responded in the affirmative, they were sure to receive a good dinner. A few of them even walked away with one of the rosaries he made in his spare time.

On July 16, 1901, occurred a memorable event in the life of Brother Peter, the celebration of the golden jubilee of his profession. As the students had left North East for their annual vacation, the event was celebrated at the novitiate house in Annapolis. The Jubilee Mass was solemnly celebrated by Very Rev. George Dusold, the procurator, who was representing the provincial. Brother Peter's rector, Father John Schneider, preached on the Redemptorist vows

and how well he practised them. At the community dinner, speeches were given in English, German, and French--languages the good brother spoke. He, himself, did not reply to any of them.

In September of the same year, after a conference to the students on devotion to Our Lady as the Sorrowful Mother, nearly every student determined to procure a seven dolor rosary. This meant additional labor for Brother Peter, the rosary-maker, but it was done willingly because of his particular devotion to Our Lady under that title. He made so many rosaries that his superior feared that he was injuring his eyes and ordered him to stop. Shortly after, he became sick. When visited by the superior, he said, "Father, do let me make these rosaries and I will get well again." When, with the permission of his superior, he resumed his rosary making, he recovered his health. He used to say that he owed his vocation to Our Lady of Sorrows.

During the last visit made by Father Licking, the provincial, to North East before the brother's death, Peter called at his room, lugging a heavy box. "Well, Father," he said, "since you are building a new house for our students at Esopus, I am old and can do but little to help you and the students. Here is a small gift for you. This box contains two thousand seven dolor rosaries. Distribute them among our parishes and have them sold for twenty-five cents each, as they are strong and hand made. Thus you will have about five hundred dollars as my donation for the new seminary." Father provincial was moved and edified, accepting the gift with gratitude.

Besides devotion to Our Blessed Lady, Brother Peter made his daily Visit to the Blessed Sacrament with great fervor, receiving Holy Communion as often as he could receive permission from his confessor. He also tried to hear as many Masses as possible, even leaving his work when a server was needed in the chapel. To serve three or four Masses in a morning was nothing unusual for him.

On April 19, 1904, Brother Peter celebrated his eightieth birthday. He became seriously ill the end of May, 1904, and was operated on without any anesthesia. He endured the operation without any murmur or complaint. His doctor, not a Catholic, marveled at such patience in an old man. More than once he expressed his admiration at his patient's heroic virtue, saying that Brother Peter was his ideal of a true Christian, a saint, as he understood it. Before long the brother rallied and was back at work as if nothing had happened. But after a terrible winter, in March, 1905, he suffered from severe pneumonia. A few days after receiving extreme unction, he was up and doing his regular work again.

About this time he gave a striking proof of his love for work, and at the same time, of his spirit of obedience to the doctor's orders. When he felt able to walk again without difficulty, he thought it was time to resume operations in the tailor shop and asked the doctor. Now, his shop was on the floor below his room. The doctor said no as he did not want the patient going up and down stairs. Brother Peter's solution was to ask to have his sewing machine installed in his room. Back in business, he began to mend old vestments. He

also made several new sets, among them a complete set of gold cloth ones for solemn high Masses. This last set was used on the first celebration of newly canonized Redemptorist lay brother, Saint Gerard Majella, on October 16, 1905.

Old age and his recent health problems began to catch up with Peter. It had been his custom to do his spiritual reading in his third-floor room every morning. If a missionary celebrated Mass late, the brother was usually called upon to serve. Down he would go to the chapel and then back up to his room to continue his spiritual reading. Once it happened that he was interrupted three times for these Masses. One day the prefect of the sick found him sitting on the steps going up to his third-floor room. He was quite short of breath. A room was found for him on the first floor, close to the chapel, kitchen, and refectory. But Peter hesitated about moving. The room had been one reserved for guests. "What will we do if a stranger should come, who might need this room?" was his charitable concern, which was overruled by Father Francis Auth, his rector.

He took an interest in everything the missionaries did and, when a mission was in progress, was excited to hear how it was proceeding. His respect for the priesthood went to such a degree that when he was sick and had to be attended by the priest who was prefect of the sick, he would get out of bed quicker so as not to be a burden to the priest.

Brother Peter's active life was drawing to a close. At the beginning of 1906, it

was evident to all that he was failing rapidly. In his latter days another brother would read to him for his spiritual reading. He managed, somehow, to get to chapel and do the stations of the cross two days before he died. He even helped the other brothers wash and dry the dishes on February 2, the Feast of Our Lady's Purification. That evening, he was called to his reward. He was nearly eighty-two years-old, at the time, the oldest professed member of the Baltimore Province.

In spite of an impending blizzard, the following Monday the seminary chapel was filled, not only by priests, brothers, and students, but also by many residents of North East, Catholics and non-Catholics. The Solemn Requiem Mass was celebrated by Father Joseph Shantz, assisted by Fathers Henry Jung and Louis Smith. Father William Brick, prefect of our seminary at Ilchester, was the preacher. With the temperature below zero and the storm raging, only around thirty of the confreres could travel by trolley out to the cemetery on the Buffalo Road where Brother Peter Recktenwald was buried.



Carl Hoegerl, CSSR, archivist of the Baltimore Province, pictured here at the Oconomowoc conference, sent Kennington's article to the