

Holly Brother Konrad

(Text von Karl Kleiner, Faltprospekt in verschiedenen Sprachen)

All those, who from religious motives visit Altötting, the famous place of pilgrimage, know of two sanctuaries which are both dear to all. One of them is the holy chapel with the miraculous image of Our Blessed Lady, the other the church of the Capuchin Friars called St. Konrad, (until 1953 known as the church dedicated to St. Anna), with its shrine containing the reliquary of Holy Brother Konrad.

Adjacent to this church is the monastery. Here St. Konrad was in charge of the monastery-gate for 41 years, until his death in 1894. Here he spent his life as a Capuchin monk in prayer, and an untold number of visitors and pilgrims came to know him in his capacity of doorkeeper, as someone, who lived very close to God and was at the same time a true friend of mankind.

Pope John Paul II on his first visit to Germany in 1980 also came to Altötting, and on this occasion he visited the church of St. Konrad in order to pray at the shrine of the Saint.

Who was St. Konrad and what has made him so great in the eyes of God as well as those of mankind?

He was born in 1818 on December 22nd as the eleventh child of a wellknown farmers' family in Parzham in Lower Bavaria. The entry in the baptismal register states: "Johannes Birndorfer". He grew up and attended primary school with very good results, though he had to stay on at the parental farm after the early death of his parents, so as to assist with the work. All those who knew him in the early days have testified later on to his deep religious spirit and his great love of prayer. This testimony corresponded with the actual facts wellknown at the time and was not in any way based on mere pious glorification.

John renounced his rights as heir to the farm in 1849, entering the Capuchin monastery at Altötting. He received the name of "Konrad". After a few years of introduction to the religious life, his superiors entrusted him with the office of gate-keeper to the monastery-gate. Brother Konrad would much rather have preferred a life of quiet and seclusion. But it was God's will that he was to serve as doorkeeper at the threshold, where cloister and world meet.

Above all else it were the pilgrims, who came to him with their many requests and petitions. They instinctively sensed that this doorkeeper lived close to his Lord and Master, and they often asked him for advice and help in their many problems and needs. In those days poverty was not an unknown factor in many of Altötting's families. The children came begging to the monastery-gate, and none of them went off empty-handed.

With all the activities Brother Konrad had to deal with, he always remained united to God in prayer.

He once remarked: "The crucifix is my book."

His piety was of a simple kind and yet one of great depth. A very special affection drew him daily to the miraculous image of Our Blessed Lady, and for several decades he daily served at the altar at the earliest mass.

Brother Konrad, the doorkeeper of the Capuchin-monastery, closed his eyes to the world for the last time on April 21st, 1894. He went home to his master, to him, who was the final fulfilment of his life.

Pope Pius XI beatified him on June 15th, 1930, and Brother Konrad was canonized on May 20th, 1934. The veneration for the holy Brother has since spread throughout the world.

God, you have called St. Konrad
to the service of the pilgrims and the needy.
Make us ready and willing
to meet in patience and kindness all those,
who are waiting for our help.
This we ask of you through Christ, our Lord.

St. Conrad Birndorfer of Parzham 1818-1894

Part One

Mid-America's Patron

St. Conrad of Parzham is known for the warm care he tirelessly provided the steady stream of pilgrims who came to the Capuchin friary during his 40 years as friary porter (or doorkeeper) near the ancient Marian shrine at Altötting, Bavaria.

We Capuchins of Mid-America very appropriately honor him as our heavenly patron. Many of our predecessors, the old friars who labored in Kansas in the late 1800s and early 1900s, knew Conrad personally.

Indeed they were fellow members of his Bavarian Province and, on their way to America, they had passed through the very portals of St. Ann's Friary in Altötting, which Conrad personally tended.

On a pilgrimage to Our Lady's shrine at Altötting in 1891, Charles J. Jaegle, a journalist from Pittsburgh PA, made Bro. Conrad's acquaintance. In the course of one of their conversations at the friary door, Bro. Conrad spoke to Jaegle of the Seraphic Work of Charity which the Capuchins operated at Toner Institute in Pittsburgh and urged him to use the Pittsburgh Observer, which Jaegle had founded, to support this activity.

Jaegle was surprised at Conrad's knowledge of America and the work done there by his confreres and at his inquiring after old friends and the progress of the young Province of St. Augustine—the western half of which was later to be the Mid-American province named after Conrad himself. „Every day,“ Conrad assured Jaegle, „I pray for my brothers in the United States.“

In turn when Conrad died in 1894, his brothers in Kansas noted his passing in their Necrology and prayed for him. Conrad was beatified in 1934, was canonized in 1935, and became patron of the Mid-American province in 1977.

A Pious Farmer



St. Conrad's Birthplace.

Bro. Conrad was born Dec. 22, 1818, at the Venushof in Parzham, a family farm located on what was once the land of the Cistercian Abbey of Fürstenzell near Passau, Bavaria. Johann Evangelist Birndorfer was the second youngest of 12 children, five of whom died in infancy. His parents, Bartholomew Birndorfer and Gertrude Nieder-Mayrinn, had a comfortable home on 500 acres of gently undulating fertile countryside, broken here and there by patches of woodland.

The day of his birth, the future saint was baptized in the parish church of S. Wolfgang in Weng, where his parents had been married 18 years earlier.

Despite the difficult Napoleonic times, the Venushof prospered. There was plenty of work, and life at the Birndorfer household was idyllic and patriarchal. They treated their help very well. The family enjoyed material blessings, too. One witness testified, „None of the Birndorfer boys had to serve in the army. During the winter the Venushof offered hospitality every evening to travelers like tradesmen or people down on their luck.“

At six, Johann was enrolled in the elementary school at Weng, a half hour's walk from his home. He was a good student there; but later when he applied for admission to the Benedictine college at Deggendorf, he was rejected as lacking the scholastic ability needed to take their courses. Later on he confided to the sacristan at St. Wolfgang, a childhood friend of his, „You can be sure that the good Lord did not abandon me. He had a little spot reserved for me.“

The Birndorfer family received the sacraments of the church regularly, and Johann made great strides in practicing his religion. He carried his rosary with him and loved to pray it with his companions. The rosary was a familiar prayer at the Venushof, where the family recited it each Saturday. Every evening they prayed the Angelus. And no matter how bad the weather, Johann never missed Mass, though he sometimes had to wade through pools of water up to his knees.

From early childhood Hänsel developed a taste for silence and solitude and sought out the most unlikely prayer sites, like the barn or out of the way places before an image of the Madonna. He put up pictures of the saints and the suffering Christ in the stable and other sites around the farm. It was not surprising that he was called the „little angel of Venushof.“ He was a gentle, good-natured youngster. Like St. Aloysius Gonzaga, one of his favorites, he was a model for the rest of the young men; and if he were present, they were careful about their language. „Quiet! Here comes Hänsel,“ the servants used to say, „If he doesn't become a saint, no one will.“

Hänsel was fond of fresh air and farm work. In the fields, he acted more like one of the hired hands than the son of the proprietor. He would rather do a job himself than ask someone else to do it. As he worked he used to sing the Ave Maria and other hymns. He always worked bareheaded even under the burning sun, even though his father advised him to wear a hat to avoid sunstroke.

„Young Birndorfer was never cut out to be a farmer,“ a blacksmith's wife once observed. „He was meant for prayers, penance and works of charity.“

Yet he was a hard worker. After his job was done he found relaxation on his knees. He prayed while he raked or pitched hay. While the animals browsed in the fields he could be seen turning the pages of his prayerbook. One time while his wagon was creaking its way down a narrow lane the horses bolted and dumped both hay and driver in the road.

Hänsel had been completely absorbed in his book of devotions. The incident earned him a good deal of teasing and a reprimand. But he got up without a word, righted his wagon, reloaded it and drove off as if nothing had happened.

Though he was successful in managing farm animals, he was not always able to control his fellow humans. Whenever he saw some boys fighting he tried to stop

them. If they paid no attention to him, he left them alone. If he heard blasphemy, he knelt down and prayed.

When Hänsel was 14, his mother died. He often visited the cemetery at Weng to pray over her grave. Two years later he lost his father. This fresh sorrow further stimulated his devotional life. The little altar he kept in his room was the solitary witness of the long nights spent in prayer. Sometimes morning came and his bed had not been slept in. He often left his meals untouched. His sisters took note, and tried to moderate his penances. He smiled but was not going to allow himself to be bossed by women. Only his confessors were able to temper his zeal, especially Fr. Franz Xaver Dullinger to whom young Birndorfer went to confession every week or two.

Johann attended Mass and received Communion as often as possible. He was familiar with all the churches and shrines in the area. On holy days he put on his best clothes and nothing could stop him from going to Griesbach for the first Mass there, then to the solemn high Mass at Weng. In the afternoon he attended vespers at Birnbach. He was accustomed to rising at an early hour, four a.m., in the summer.

Sometimes he found the doors of the churches locked. He was a familiar sight to all the sacristans and the devout old ladies who were up at the crack of dawn. As he waited for the church to open, he prayed at the door.

Once inside he always sat in the first pew to the left, close to the wall. In winter he would find shelter on the church porch which offered some protection against the weather. When Mass was over he was the last one to leave the church. If he thought he was alone he used to rise from his pew and kneel down on the lowest step of the altar. Sometimes he would remain there for hours, as one inquisitive lady observed. On his way home he took the less traveled roads and bypassed six taverns of Birnbach where the jovial Bavarians might crack some earthy jokes about his piety.

As he walked along the road he kept his eyes cast down and greeted passersby with „Praised be Jesus Christ.“ Some people called him a fanatic, but that didn't bother him at all. In many respects he was like other Bavarian Catholics. He said the same prayers and sang the same hymns. The difference was, he never seemed to tire. Other pilgrims were not always eager to march with him. He started out very early to make a pilgrimage to, perhaps, Mariahilfberg in Passau. There was no idle chatter along the way. Either they kept silence or said their prayers. The hours on the road stretched out like the beads of a rosary that was never finished.

At time he would break silence but then only to explain how to meditate on the passion of Christ during the Mass. Fasting was no problem for him. „Why don't you take some breakfast,“ he was asked. He answered: „I don't need any. Prayer is enough for me.“ It was not a very logical answer, but it made sense to him and that was all that mattered. He was a member of a number of prayer groups, youth organizations and confraternities like that of Perpetual Adoration, the Mass guild at Birnbach, the Scapular society at Kösslarn and, of course, the Franciscan Third Order at Altötting.

In those days parish missions were frequently given at Birnbach, Tristern, Klösslarn and Ashbach. Johann made all of them. One that made a deep impression was

preached at the shrine of St. Anna at Ering on the Inn in 1838. After attending it, young Birndorfer became more devout and recollected. He felt a growing attraction toward the religious life but was uncertain which order to join. His confessor, Fr. Dullinger, settled the question for him. „Go to the Capuchins. That's where you belong...“ It was all he needed to hear.

He might have one day become the foreman and eventually the owner of Venushof but he renounced all his interests in the property. He divided his share of the estate among the parish of Weng, which needed money to enlarge the cemetery, the poor, the St. Boniface Society and the new missionary society of St. Ludwig (the Ludwigsverein) at Munich. He assembled the family in front of the little altar in his room. One of those present remembered, „He gave us a beautiful little talk. I shall never forget.“ He wrote these words in his copy of the „Imitation of Christ“: „Hail to Jesus and Mary, the only joy of one who loves God and longs only for Jesus Crucified.“ It was September of 1849.

The Young Capuchin

He was 31 years of age when he went to the door of the Capuchin friary at Altötting. The local superior, Fr. Thomas Hacker, received him as a candidate. After six months he was given the Third Order habit and assigned to help the porter of the friary. Johann had been a secular Franciscan for the past eight years. From that time on he was known as Bro. Conrad in honor of St. Conrad of Piacenza, S.F.O., a 14th century Franciscan hermit and penitent.

Conrad found the life hard at first, as he admitted in a letter to his family, but he soon got used to it. „Our day is divided between prayer and work and I have little time left for anything else. On feast days we are kept very busy at the door. I am very happy and in good health. I don't need anything. The brothers are very kind; we are really concerned for one another. We are never sad, but joyful in the Lord. There are 10 fathers and 11 brothers stationed here. In the beginning I felt ill at ease living in such a large group because of my natural shyness. I soon got to know them all and am getting along much better. I tried to learn all their names. If you work at the door you have to know all the friars. The people want to see sometimes one, sometimes another. Now, thanks be to God, I know them all by name and also where their cells are located.“ It was a little letter written at the beginning of 1850 full of simple joy.

In March of 1851, he had to leave Altötting to go to Burghausen to take care of a sick priest. The parting was painful for him. He writes about it with his usual terseness, „I have to leave this blessed place, I cannot hide the fact that it is costing me a lot to go... Time had passed so quickly that I can hardly believe that I have been here a year and nine months. Many people come here and we have little time to relax. Now obedience calls me elsewhere... Pray that I may become a true son of St. Francis and as such live and die.“

At Burghausen he had to look after old Fr. Sylvester, who was now very close to death, and he shared the cell of the sick priest day and night. Still a letter from Burghausen reveals that he was very content there, whereas at Altötting his duties as

assistant porter had prevented him from sharing fully in the life of the community. Conrad makes reference in the letter to the „evil and dangerous times“ in which they were living, apparently referring to the current atheistic and socialist movements and the rumors of impending war. He writes, „My dear ones, time is always so short. It is a great grace to take care of this sick friar. I must stay with him in his cell. I am glad to do it. I am in excellent health. I am very happy. I perform my religious duties and my work here is not as hard as it was at home. I wish you all the best. We are living in times when every devout soul must shudder. It looks as if the powers of hell were loosed and trying to ruin all that is good and religious. But the Lord is kind and merciful..“

Early in September 1851 the provincial, Fr. Michael Hazelbeck decided to send the young postulant to Laufen. There, on Sept. 17, Bro. Conrad exchanged his Tertiary habit for that of a Capuchin novice. His novice master was Fr. Stanislaus Schüster of Aufhofen. The local superior, Fr. Franz Xavier Kapplmayr of Illmünster (who as provincial minister sent the Bavarian friars to America in 1873) was seven years younger than Bro. Conrad, whose job in the novitiate was to help in the garden and orchard. After a month Conrad suffered from severe constipation complicated by bronchitis and had to take to bed. It marked the onset of a respiratory ailment from which he had to suffer the remainder of his life.

Not much is known about the details of his novitiate days. In one of his letters home, dated February 1852, he gives us some idea of the spiritual climate in which he lived. We find in it ascetic reflections evidently learned from the novice master. He wanted to become a real Capuchin. There were to be no half measures. He states, „It is some time since I last wrote, but I have not forgotten you. I have been somewhat unwell. Twice during Advent I had to spend a few days in bed. I feel better now. Pray that God may grant me good health if it be his will. I am happy in the Lord and have no desire to return to the world. You must realize that I am in the novitiate. Pray for me that I may complete the year successfully and become a good Capuchin not only by wearing the habit but in spirit as well. This is the way to live and die.“

The novitiate year was a demanding one. Later on Bro. Conrad was to tell a young novice, „Our novitiate was much harder. Many a time you had to be satisfied with water and kneel on the floor.“ He loved his vocation as a very special grace. Keeping in mind his natural reticence, every one of his saying as recorded in the process takes on special significance. The sentences are short but rich in thought. „The way one is in the novitiate is the way he will be for the rest of his life.“ „A Capuchin is happy only when he lives according to his rule.“ „Either be a good Capuchin, or none at all.“ „I am not worthy to wear this habit.“

His religious life style, which for all practical purposes started during his 30 years on the family farm, received its finishing touches at Laufen. He emerged from the novitiate a fully matured Capuchin, so that Bro. Primus Häusler, one of the most important witnesses at the process, could testify: „He became a Capuchin with all his body and soul.“

Conrad's life goals were documented in 11 resolutions he made after considerable thought in the novitiate, probably during the retreat before profession. They give us a clear picture of the kind of Capuchin Bro. Conrad intended to be:

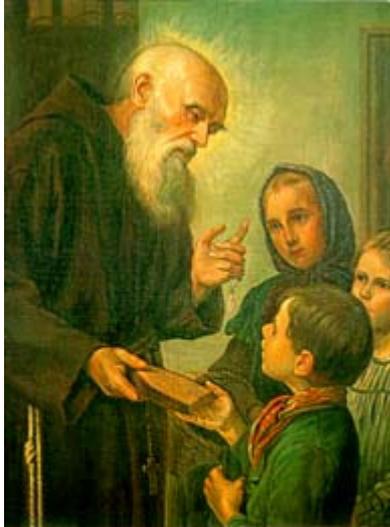
1. I resolve in the first place to remain continually in the presence of God and to ask myself frequently if I would do this or that if my confessor or superior were watching me and especially if God and my guardian angel were present.
2. I resolve to ask myself, whenever I have to encounter crosses of suffering, „Conrad, why have you come here?“
3. I resolve to avoid leaving the friary, as far as possible unless it be out of love for my neighbor, obedience, reasons of health, a pious pilgrimage or some other good cause.
4. I resolve to foster fraternal charity in myself and in others. Therefore I resolve to take care never to say an unkind word. I resolve to bear up patiently with the defects and weaknesses of others, and as far as possible to hide them with the mantle of charity unless I am in duty bound to manifest them to someone who is in a position to correct them.
5. I resolve to observe silence conscientiously. I resolve to speak briefly and so avoid many pitfalls and be better able to converse with God.
6. When at table I resolve to place myself in the presence of God as far as I can, to remain recollected and to pass up my favorite dishes so as to practice a hidden form of mortification. I resolve not to eat between meals unless ordered to do so under obedience.
7. I resolve to answer the first call of the bell unless legitimately hindered.
8. I resolve to avoid, as far as possible, conversing with the opposite sex unless obedience imposes duties on me which make it necessary to speak with women. In that case I resolve to be very reserved and maintain custody of the eyes.
9. I resolve to carry out orders punctually and to the letter. I resolve especially to make every effort to conquer my own will in all things.
10. I resolve to force myself to pay close attention to minor details and as far as possible avoid every imperfection. I resolve to observe the holy rule faithfully and not to depart from it a hairsbreadth, come what may.
11. I resolve to cultivate a deep devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary and strive to imitate her virtues.

His repeated „I resolve“ is like a holy refrain that recalls the protestations of faith, obedience and service found in the testament of St. Francis. These resolutions help us understand many of the events in the life of Bro. Conrad during the long years he was to spend as porter of St. Ann in Altötting, a post he was to fill until his death.

St. Conrad Birndorfer of Parzham 1818-1894

Part Two

The Porter of Altötting



Bro. Conrad distributed food and drink for over 40 years at the friary door at Altoetting, Germany.

Now began the third period of his life, the longest and most significant, which at once revealed and concealed a journey toward perfection taken along the road of the ordinary world of „little things.“

We can well imagine how happy Bro. Conrad was to return to his beloved Madonna of Altötting. The modern pilgrim cannot visit the Gnadenkapelle without envisioning the peaceful image of the saintly porter as an integral part of the scene. The last of his resolutions was to find in this spot the most favorable environment for its implementation.

The ancient shrine of Our Lady of Altötting was, and still is, the focus of the religious feelings and piety of the Bavarian people. Its walls are hung with simple votive offerings given in gratitude for favors received. The image of the Madonna is blackened by the smoke of countless candles and the oxidation of the silver ornaments that cover it. Around it the faithful kneel, sometimes with crosses on their shoulders. We breathe an atmosphere of intense popular devotion.

Bro. Conrad immersed himself quietly in this Marian piety with all the ardor of his Franciscan soul. Day after day he carried out a task that to all outward appearances was not very important, one that would never find a place in the pages of history. It was a job like that of any other porter. After all, a porter is just a porter and that is that, even if he opens and closes the door at St. Ann's for 41 years. How many other porters before him received visitors at the same door? But only Bro. Conrad was given the title of „the holy porter.“

The difference was this: He served for so many years with undeviating fidelity, always calm and patient, always on the job, committed to his humble duties, never bored or fed up with the monotony of his daily schedule. As Pope Pius XI said, „In all this he manifested extraordinary diligence and prudence, wisdom, attention and tact. See what an important function a porter exercises in great palaces and hotels. The porter is everything, knows everything. Everybody turns to the porter with the assurance, even the right, to get a satisfactory answer to questions.“

But Bro. Conrad's first days on the job were not very pleasant. No one would have supposed that a brother just out of the novitiate would be given such a responsible post. Inevitably expressions of jealousy and complaints were heard. Some of the senior brothers gave him a hard time. They resented his presence among them and were even unwilling to let him have a little bedroom. His first guardian, perhaps to try his mettle, treated him rather harshly. „Don't you understand that you remain here on sufferance and you are to eat the food of the friary out of charity?“

In time he won them over. Bro. Conrad was just the man to be porter at Altötting. Soon envy yielded to esteem. Many years later he admitted to a fellow religious, „The beginning was very hard for me.“

His shyness was another cause for suffering. At the door he daily came into contact with both the splendor and misery of the outside world. He was afraid of losing the spirit of prayer and devotion, but never for a moment doubted the genuineness of his vocation. As he wrote to his family, „It was God's will that I gave up everything that I owned and loved. I had to follow my vocation. I could not have done anything else. I am happy not to be in the world.“

All classes of people came to the friary door: the children, the poor, workers, farmers, day laborers, young people, the unemployed, mothers of families, the sick, the hungry, the desperate—the whole gamut of humanity. When the bell rang Bro. Conrad opened the door, smiled and opened his heart in compassion. He gave without stint and without judging anyone. He knew nothing about the laws of economics. He gave because people were poor and stretched out their hands for help. He listened to their laments as he passed out bread or drew a stein of beer or distributed religious articles or gave the farmers medicinal herbs for their livestock. Once a veterinarian accused him of malpractice! He found it easy to identify with the problems of the farmers and other simple folk.

The more than 100,000 pilgrims that came each year to Altötting provided Bro. Conrad with a golden opportunity to live out his own special charism. The words used in the process to characterize his sanctity are quite restrained. He was „an ordinary Capuchin, nothing special about him.“ He was „good, gentle, kind, devout, and made a good impression.“ The brothers who helped him never saw him moody or upset.

But was he always so perfect? Hindsight leads us to put a halo over the memories of the past. We are influenced in our judgments by an individual's reputation for sanctity.

The fact is we come across a few but precious stories of his „holy levity.“ In serving beer to the pilgrims, at least on one occasion, he lost his patience. After all, is it unthinkable that the „holy porter“ should sometimes use strong language or come out with a gruff Bavarian remark? It might even add a special shade to the image of his sanctity and save it from looking like a sentimental painting. How many times did he not have to renew those resolutions he made in the novitiate?

One member of the tribunal asked whether it was very „saintly“ for the Brother to serve a Bavarian girl two steins of beer and thereby risk the danger of getting her tipsy. Cardinal Michael Faulhaber of Munich came to the defense of the porter saying that if the lady in question could get drunk on only two steins she was certainly not a Bavarian farm girl.

The ex-farmer knew his country men – and women – though he was careful not to look a girl in the face. Yet his generosity in dispensing beer almost endangered his cause before the Roman tribunal. Others questioned the propriety of his hearty invitation to, „Come, have another stein.“ But like the gospel cup of cold water, the

stein of beer given by a saint was a gesture of holiness that would not go without its reward.

Timmermans wrote, „There are two facets to the people. Just as a city began with a chapel and was soon followed by an inn, so it is with the soul of the people. At once devout and jovial, in close touch with both the realities and healthy pleasures of life, it has an irresistible attraction to mysticism.“

Bro. Conrad knew how to receive the jetsam and flotsam of humanity that washed up at the door of the friary. He awaited their pleas like a beggar looking for an alms. He knew how to handle all the unreasonable demands of his poor people and his greatest wish was to comply with even their smallest requests. Carrying two pitchers of beer or cauldrons of soup or baskets of bread on his shoulders, or a joint of mutton, or keeping an account of Masses to be said or alms to dispense, straightening out a room, or sweeping the floor or calling a priest to hear a confession – all this seem trifling. But the porter saw beyond the material exterior to the world of the spirit. His external tasks were sublimated by a lively faith that opened his eyes to vaster horizons.

Amid all the hustle and bustle of his work he spoke very little. The people got his message. They understood his gestures, his smile and his patient kindness. That was all the reward he wanted. As he wiped the sweat from his face he said: „One Our Father or a 'Vergelt's Gott' is more precious to me than any food or drink.“

A Hard Day's Work

Everybody came to know the „holy porter,“ strangers as well as the regular customers. They recognized his gestures, remembered his word, basked in his smile and admired his gentle ways. He was as regular as a clock, always at the same place at the same time. When the friars assembled for midnight office they used to find Bro. Conrad already in the choir, kneeling in the last stall with his head bent a little to the side as if he were fighting off drowsiness. He slept very little. One witness recalled that his desperate need for sleep sometimes caused him to nod but he quickly shook himself awake and continued to pray. One day he appeared with a bruise on his forehead. He explained, „I was overcome with sleep in my cell and fell to the ground.“

Very often at night he used to go to the crypt and pray for his departed confreres. The superiors finally forbade him to do this because they felt that he needed his rest. He transferred these prayers to whatever time he might find during the day. He had great devotion to the souls in purgatory and once admonished a novice who was negligent in this matter.

„You pray too little for the souls in purgatory. If you had prayed more for the poor souls they would have reminded you not to leave the loaves in the oven all night. We have taken a vow of poverty. We live off the alms of the people. We must not abuse them.“

Since he spent so many hours of the night awake in any case, he offered to take the place of Bro. Aniano Butz, the sacristan, when the latter fell ill. It meant opening the three doors of the church at four in the morning in winter and half past three in the

summer. He did this for several years. Bro. Aniano was so grateful that one day he hugged Bro. Conrad. Brother pushed him away saying, „Brother, you'll never have any sense!“

More than sentinels wait for the dawn, Bro. Conrad looked forward to the hour of communion. At half-past four in the morning he would wake the priest who was to say the five o'clock Mass in the Gnadenkapelle. He considered himself privileged to serve this Mass after having received communion, as was his custom, in the church of St. Ann. He had such a great longing for the Eucharist that his spiritual director gave him permission to receive daily. He would then serve another Mass in the Gnadenkapelle at 5:30, but on days when the entire community received communion, three times a week at 5:45, he joined his confreres.

His work day at the door began at 6:00. Sometimes he waited to finish his thanksgiving and perform other devotions. He then checked the Mass book, set out religious objects and received the alms of the faithful, even from the bashful farm children who brought gifts of bread and milk.

All they asked in return was to be remembered in his prayers. He also had to prepare the altar and set out the vestments for the conventual Mass and offer visiting priests some breakfast or give an offering to the preachers and confessors who came to help at the shrine. He took in a large number of Mass offerings, sometimes as many as 50,000 marks a year. He had to keep an exact count of them.

As groups of pilgrims began to arrive, the work piled up. The people asked for religious articles, blessed seeds and medicinal herbs. Some came for a blessing and wanted to go to confession. It was up to Bro. Conrad to call the priest. It was customary, too, to treat the pilgrims to bread and beer. One superior frowned on this practice and tried to put an end to it. The people, naturally, did not take kindly to this restriction and the poor porter had to bear the brunt of their complaints.

He always seemed to be busy, but he was never anxious or tense. He went up and down the stairs so many times a day that he might have competed in a marathon race. When the clock struck 11 the poor, the young women and children all came looking for their bowl of soup. The Brother's face beamed with joy. His happiness here on earth was helping the poor. He would go to the kitchen and say to the cook, „Lift up the lid a little so I can take out a few meatballs for the poor.“ Bro. Hartmann Gaisberger, the head cook, sometimes had to restrain him. When he caught him dipping his spoon into all the pots he would say jokingly, „Cover all the pots! Otherwise he will take everything.“ But the Brother replied, „Anything we give to the poor will be repaid generously.“ It was all in the best Capuchin tradition and mirrored the example of the Poverello himself.

And divine providence never let the friars down.

He held his rosary in his hand as he went about his duties. So as to have enough beer to serve his poor and the other people who came, he asked Bro. Deodat Ring, the friary brewmaster, „Make a lot of beer.“ He was never happier than when he had plenty of bread and beer for his poor. He was no respecter of persons. He cheerfully

dished out soup, vegetables and beer, even to some who already had one or two helpings, including a priest who got into line.

Finally the bell would ring for community prayer, and then for dinner. He participated as far as he could. But if the door bell rang, he left his food on the plate and hurried from the refectory. Often he had to come back to a cold meal. After dinner he went to the kitchen and looked around to see if he could salvage anything for the poor. Or he would fetch something he had stashed away in his table drawer and put it into his pocket to give to the poor.

He got a little break from his work from 12:30 to 2:00 p.m. but he did not rest. He took a walk in the garden to ward off drowsiness and then went to pray before the altar in the Gnadenkapelle. Or he would go to the „Alexiuszelle,“ a little space under the stairwell from where he could see the tabernacle in the church. In the afternoon priests often came to confession, or the people to pour out their troubles. He had a place in his heart for all of them.

After school let out at four o'clock the children came running like a flock of hungry sparrows looking for some bread. They were happy to get it from their good friend, Bro. Conrad. He would tell them not to make so much noise and say, „Now you must say a prayer, because we Capuchins receive our bread as a gift from the good Lord.“ The children understood him. They made the sign of the cross and devoutly prayed the Our Father in front of our Lady's statue which stood near the door. When they got their bread they all shouted, „Vergelt's Gott, lieber Bruder Conrad“ (Thanks, dear Bro. Conrad), and off they were on their way home.

After some more visits he might find a chance to read a few lines from the Bible that he kept open on his desk or perhaps a page from the Imitation of Christ or some other pious book like, „Maria, meine Zuflucht und mein Trost,“ by Michael Sintzel or a few passages from Capuchin Fr. Martin von Cochem's „Der grosse Myrrengarten des bitteren Leidens,“ or the „Tugendspiegel“ of his confrere Father Augustine Ilg.

He never wasted a moment. „Time is precious,“ he would say. He used the time for prayer or for reading, for making rosaries or for working in the friary.

The evening meal was served at seven o'clock. There might still be some poor people to be fed. Perhaps they had no money and had to spend the night in some barn. After supper Bro. Conrad went back to the Alexiuszelle or walked back and forth behind the altar. At nine o'clock he locked the friary and the doors of the church. At last he could be alone with God. Sometimes, however, sleep gained the upper hand and a confrere might find him late at night still in the church. He was exhausted. What sustained him in this daily routine for 40 long years?

St. Conrad Birndorfer of Parzham 1818-1894

Part Three

A Sermon Without Words

Conrad of Parzham was short in stature and in his old age was almost completely bald. „He used to walk with his head bent and eyes cast down, but if you looked into his face you saw the light of his spirituality.“

In the words of those who knew him, „I spoke very little with the servant of God. He was very sparing of words.“ „I could only speak of religious matters with him.“ „He showed no interest in the latest news or gossip.“ „He never uttered a superfluous word even when I tried to engage him in conversation.“ „He was a hidden saint. I was impressed by his silence, his continual prayer and his serenity.“

When anyone met him at the door for the first time he might get the impression that the porter was a gruff and moody friar. But first impressions can be misleading. Bro. Quirinius Schwiekl, assistant cabinetmaker at Laufen, was of the opinion that Bro. Conrad might have been considered backward when he applied for admission to the Order because he had so little to say. Some people, too, at first misunderstood his silence and attributed it to a poor education rather than to the requirements of his religious life. It is commonly thought that good rapport with others requires much talking, the ability to sustain a conversation, and never to be at a loss for words. Bro. Conrad was not capable of this. He spoke little, without lacking sensitivity to the feelings of others.

His usual expressions were, „In God's name“ and „As the good Lord wills.“ He took to heart the words of St. Francis that the friars are to speak „with brevity.“ The only exception he might make was when speaking with benefactors or other lay people whom he knew very well. Then he might carry on a little conversation. But if the talk was long drawn out, or touched with current events, he would cut it short with, „This is idle talk... useless words.“ His conversation always reverted to prayer. „Let us pray much; let us pray for one another.“ When some of his friends were disturbed by the anti-Catholic movement known as the Kulturkampf, he said, „The dear Lord knows what is going on. We must pray. The good Lord will take pity. We must not lose patience.“ He encouraged others with words like, „Always have trust and everything will turn out all right. Don't worry; this too will pass away. Continue to pray. It is a cross sent by God which we must carry patiently. If you cannot pray always, keep God in mind.“

He was capable of dealing firmly with the poor and beggars but always in a kind way. He quickly got rid of pietistic ladies. Bro. Primus Häusler, the tailor, said that Conrad actually found it difficult to converse with people but he never complained; he found his support in his faith. „Yes, it really is a cross. I have to bear it. Then it will become easier.“

Bro. Conrad belongs in the ranks of the strong silent men of the Church.

His fifth resolution stated, „I resolve to speak briefly and so avoid many pitfalls and be better able to converse with God.“ In a letter of Oct. 3, 1873, he wrote, „Let us always

endeavor to lead a truly interior life hidden in God. It is such a beautiful experience to converse with the good Lord. If we are truly recollected, nothing can stand in our way, even in the midst of the work our vocation requires of us. We will come to love silence, because whoever talks much will never arrive at a truly interior life.“ One witness describes the brother's love for silence: „His bearing was always recollected. His glance was turned inward, toward God dwelling in his heart, with whom he was always in contact.

Sometimes the children complained to their parents that they could not get Bro. Conrad to talk much. One mother answered, „Take care that you don't offend him. He is a saint and is always in the presence of God.

That is why he does not look up or say much.“ The children watched him closely, trying to discover the secret of his holiness. One of them later said, „We found him reserved like children everywhere they found annoying ways to test him. They managed to find out which fathers were at home and which were away and then one after the other at regular intervals they would ask him to call some priest they knew was absent.

Or they would ring the bell and run away. But they were never able to make the old porter lose his temper. He remained calm no matter how often they called him.

He had a penetrating look. It was commonly believed that he could read minds. Once a novice committed a sin of thought. He recalled, „While I was table I glanced at Bro. Conrad and noticed that he was looking at me with an accusing eye. I was deeply disturbed. But after I confessed my sin, his look was friendly once more.“

A priest recalled, „One day I had the misfortune to commit a mortal sin. I went to Altoetting to go to confession and asked Brother to open the door of the enclosure for me. He received me with unwonted coolness and did not even kneel down to kiss my hand as he always did when greeting a priest. After making my confession I met him again and this time he acted completely different. He was very friendly and kissed my hand. Evidently he could read my soul.

Fr. Julius Voell tells a touching story. „Although Bro. Conrad hardly overlooked anyone in the face he would from time to time glance at some of the young workers who were poor in material things and even more so in spiritual. When he looked at them they would either slink away without waiting to accept anything or else go to the church and remain there in prayer for a long time. One day one of them came to my confessional crying uncontrollably. He was not able to speak. I talked to him very gently and asked, 'My dear boy, what's the matter?' He managed to stammer, 'I'm such a terrible sinner!' I asked, 'What made you come to confession a this time?' I can still remember his reply: 'I asked an old Capuchin brother for a piece if bread and he gave me a look that pierced the very depths of my soul.' The boy then made his confession with a fervor and compunction I have rarely witnessed.“

Conrad's face reflected his continual contemplation of the face of God. He gave the impression that he was continually absorbed in contemplation. When he was not busy he could be seen holding a little wooden cross in his hand and gazing lovingly at it. In the little hideaway in the Alexiuszelle he immersed himself in silent prayer.

Bro. Primus Häusler who for years was his close companion affirmed, „Whenever he came out of that little room he seemed totally transfigured, as if rapt from this world. His look was heavenly.“

He was not a great reader. He had his sister send him just two little books. One of them was the Imitation of Christ. He used to say, „The cross is my book. One look at the cross teaches me what to do on any occasion. It is there that I learn humility and patience to carry my cross, which then becomes light.“ Bro. Primus added, „Bro. Conrad often spoke about the saints and their virtues, especially about the saints and blessed of the Franciscan order. He had a special devotion to our seraphic father St. Francis, Br. Felix of Nicosia and St. Seraphin of Montegranaro whom he took as his models.“

He was also devoted to St. Joseph and St. Anna, likewise to St. John Nepomucene, the martyr of the seal of confession, represented as holding his finger over his mouth. He use to say, „Our holy Father Francis and the saints of our Order were as familiar with God and our Blessed Mother as a child with its father.“ He himself reveals much about his interior life in some letters written in a trembling hand between 1872 and 1873 to an unknown Tertiary. „My way of life consists above all in loving and suffering while contemplating, adoring, and admiring the love of God for us poor creatures. I will unite myself to the love of my God at all times until the end. I am continually united with His love, and nothing stands in my way. While carrying out my many duties I am often so intimately united with Him that I talk with Him as confidently as a child with his father. I tell him all my concerns, my wishes, whatever bothers me, and I beg Him to give me His grace with the greatest confidence, even after committing some imperfections. Then I beg Him with all humility to pardon me because I want to become a good son. I want to love Him with all my heart.

„Let us give ourselves over completely to our dear and good heavenly Father. Let us always love Him, and our hearts will be enlarged. There must be no standing still. Our love must become a flame which destroys within us all that does not unite us intimately with Him.

„I am always happy and content in God. I accept all things, pleasant or unpleasant, gratefully from our dear heavenly Father. He knows what is best for us and so I am always happy in God. I try to love Him very much. There is only one thing that grieves me, and that is that I love Him so little. If I could become a seraph of love I would call on all creatures to help me love my God. I must close now. I could go on and on. Love has no limits. I would have to write much more but I don't have the time. The bell is ringing to call me once more to praise God.“

Here we find capsulated all the wisdom of Bro. Conrad. It was from this supernatural love that he drew the strength to place himself at the service of all as a beast of burden. He was not given to ecstasies, but he was a great mystic. His glance was constantly fixed on the tabernacle. The little window opening on the altar was a telescope which brought eternity within his view. Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament was the very heart of his spiritual life. There he found the balance between the active and the contemplative life which is the very soul of Franciscan mysticism. He prayed constantly from the time he worked on his father's farm.

He considered reading newspapers a waste of time. He could learn what was going on in the world from the people he met at the door of the friary. What he heard there was not the distorted versions given out by the media, but fresh and authentic information, printed in the suffering and wretchedness of the poor. Always to remain in the presence of God was the first of his novitiate resolutions. It was to promote this union with God that he isolated himself from others even though many found his behavior strange. He was happy when he did not have to leave the friary.

„You feel at home here,“ he used to say. When the provincial minister sent him away for a few days for the sake of his health he chose to go to Parzham and stay with his sister where his recollection would not be disturbed.

Bro. Heribert Dummer testified that, „Bro. Conrad prayed incessantly and for that reason was not given to much talk. We were careful not to disturb him without good reason so as not to interrupt his prayers. Once when a brother suggested that he rest longer he replied that if he did this he would not have time to finish his prayers.“

Death Smiles on Him



Bro. Conrad lying in the peace of death.

During his latter years Bro. Conrad became more and more bent over. His stomach gave him considerable trouble. A severe asthmatic condition accompanied by a hacking cough wore him down. But he still carried his heavy pitchers of beer and handed out food to the poor. It must have cost him considerable pain since he asked a friend to go to the pharmacy and get him something for his stomach. This good woman testified, „I begged him to give up

such heavy work. The superiors would have willingly agreed, but he said, 'Oh no, I would never do that. I don't want to'.“

His zeal took on missionary dimensions. He longed to spread the faith among infidels and heretics. He received alms for the missions through the Bonifatiusverein, founded at Altoetting by Fr. Franz Xavier Kapplmayr. He promoted the Seraphic Work of Charity and the union of St. Benedict for the missions. When word came that the general, Fr. Bernard of Andermatt, planned to entrust the mission in Chile to the Bavarian province, he was overjoyed and began to collect funds to support it.

The saintly old brother served Mass for the last time in the Gnadenkappele on Apr. 18, 1894. Then he went to the door as usual. That day there were no fewer than seven pilgrim groups. His legs could no longer hold out. He desperately needed help, but he thought he could carry on after resting a little. After vespers the guardian, Fr. Ludwig Schmidt and some other fathers were at recreation in the refectory. In came Bro. Conrad, deathly pale and dragging his feet. „Fr. Guardian, I can do no more,“ he said.

He was told to go to bed in the Madonna cell, which was larger than the others. He dragged himself to Bro. Primus, the infirmarian. „It's all over,“ he said, „I must lie down; I'm exhausted.“ He went to the cell but asked for nothing. „Quiet, quiet,“ he said, „I must prepare for eternity.“ He lay back on the straw tick with his rosary and little crucifix in his hands. He prayed silently with his eyes closed.

He received the last rites at three in the afternoon of Apr. 19. He expressed thanks. „Are you afraid to die,“ someone asked. „Just as God wills,“ he replied. It was his „fiat.“ A few minutes before he died, a young friar happened to pass along the corridor. He saw the door of the cell open quietly and Bro. Conrad, with a candle in his hand, grope his way. He had heard the door bell ring, and for the last time made a supreme effort to get to his post. Then he collapsed. He was put back in bed and the whole community assembled around him. A few minutes later Bro. Conrad died peacefully at the age of 75. The candle had burned out.

Conrad of Parzham was the first German canonized since the Reformation. Like Therese of Lisieux, who died three years later, he was the saint of little things.

During Pope John Paul II's visit to Altötting on Nov. 18, 1980, he called Conrad the „humble and cheerful porter of St. Ann's friary. Let us observe him kneeling before the little window he opened in the wall to see the altar. Let us too, in our daily lives, break through the wall of the visible world to see the Lord.“

An Altötting photographer, Herr Niggel, took a photograph of Bro. Conrad lying in the peace of death. He appears to be sleeping. It is the only authentic photo we have of him. He died poor. „I have no need of anything,“ he always said. „I have only poverty.“ Through his poverty he enriched many. He was the porter of Divine Providence.

(This account of Conrad's life was excerpted and adapted from the account by Fr. Costanzo Cargnoni, O.F.M.Cap., in The Capuchin Way: Lives of Capuchins, v. 1, pt. 2, North American Capuchin Conference, 1996, pp. 180-206.)