



FATHER WILLIAM BEECHAM

Rev. William Beecham, Pastor of St. Peter's, Rome, N.Y., died at his residence in that city on Friday evening the 10th inst. at half-past six o'clock. He was born in Drummond, Queens County, Ireland, Nov. 12th, 1805. His parents were members of the Established Church at the time of his birth. He was baptized a member of the same church Dec. 2nd, 1806, as appears from a Certificate of Baptism given him by the Vicar of Rosenallis in 1836, of which the following is an exact copy: "Baptized William, son of Henry Beecham. I certify that the above is a correct copy from the Parish Registry Book. Signed, George Kemmis, Vicar of the Parish of Rosenallis, Camira Glebe, Rosenallis, August 29th, 1836." His parents and all their children afterwards embraced the Catholic faith. He later entered Carlow College, and pursued his ecclesiastical studies in that institution, of which the famous Dr. Cahill and the great and illustrious Dr. Doyle were professors. He came to America in 1836, and in the same year was ordained priest by Bishop Dubois in St. Patrick's Cathedral, New York. He remained for some time after his ordination with Father Quarter, pastor of St. Mary's, New York, afterward appointed and consecrated first Bishop of Chicago. A curious coincidence, worthy of mention, may be here stated. Of the three Rt. Rev. Bishops who assisted at his funeral one, the present Administrator of the Diocese of Albany, Rt. Rev. Francis McNeirney, D.D., served Father Beecham's first Mass. Little did the young priest within the Sanctuary or the little boy at the foot of the altar dream of the relations that afterward and at the time of Father Beecham's death, existed between the former as a priest and the latter as Bishop-Administrator of the Diocese of Albany. Father Beecham came to Utica, N.Y. in December, 1836, as assistant to Father Walter J. Quarter, at that time the beloved and revered, and now the lamented Pastor of St. John's Church in that city. In about nine months afterwards he was sent to administer to the spiritual wants of the Catholics living in the northern and southern portions of Oneida County, and scattered over the territory now embraced in Lewis, Jefferson, St. Lawrence, Madison, Onondaga, Chenango, and Broome Counties, with permission to make his home in Rome, Carthage, or Ogdensburg. He selected Rome as being easy of access from the different points of his vast mission, and also, no doubt, on account of its close proximity to Utica, where he could avail himself of the wise counsels of a most prudent priest, and where he could go to fortify himself with the Sacraments. A consideration by no means to be overlooked, especially in those days when priests were so few, facilities of travel so miserable, and the dangers of missionary life so numerous. From Rome he traveled over this vast extent of country, baptizing the children of the early emigrants, blessing marriages, anointing the dying, hearing confessions, and administering the Bread of Life day after day, encouraging and exhorting all to repentance and a life of holiness, till from Rome to Rochester, from Binghamton to the Adirondacks, the name of Father Beecham became a household word, at the very mention of which blessings and benedictions without number were

bestowed upon him, as no doubt numerous and fervent prayers will now ascend to God for the repose of his soul. Those early settlers loved him, as a most genial and companionable man, honored and revered him as a most exemplary priest, selected him as arbitrator in their differences, and showed their unbounded confidence in his honor and integrity, in his wisdom and sense of justice, by invariably, and without a murmur, abiding by his decision. In their trials and difficulties, they found in him a kind Father, who sympathized with them, and seemed ever anxious to lighten their burden by pouring into their troubled hearts words of comfort and encouragement. Those early settlers, when they wished to make remittances to Ireland and other parts of Europe, gave him the money, and requested him to secure a draft and forward it to their relatives. So frequently was he called upon to do this that it became necessary, as a matter of convenience, to secure an agency from the Emigrant Association. Thus, he became their agent, and corresponded regularly with their relations at home. And as he passed along through his mission, he not only announced the glad tidings of the Gospel, but also very frequently carried welcome news from the fond friends whom the emigrants had left in the dear old home. Thus, this good priest was more than a father to the early settlers, and we need not wonder that he was their joy and their pride. His goodness to his spiritual children, and his labors for their welfare, both temporal and eternal, did not make him forgetful of other obligations. Over twenty years ago the death of his brother, Mr. Joseph Beecham, and his estimable lady (sister of Bishop Quarter, first Bishop of Chicago), so well and favorably remembered in Rome and other parts of the State, brought upon him the responsibility of caring for, and educating their six orphans, and of economically administering their estate. He was not untrue to the trust committed to his care by the dying wife of his deceased brother. He had the consolation of having his last days made joyous by those same children, and was consoled in his last moments by their tender care and pious attentions, by their sympathy and prayers. He had the satisfaction of knowing they would cherish his memory, pray for the repose of his soul, and ever respect the sacred dignity and character of the priesthood.



He began to build St. Peter's Church in 1838. (*Photo: The church was located at the present site of St. Aloysius Catholic Center, 400 Floyd Ave.*) It is a brick edifice the main part of which is 53 by about 80 feet. I have frequently heard Father Beecham say that the great Archbishop Hughes, speaking to him with the freedom of a brother, told him he must be mad when he undertook to build St. Peter's. And we cannot be much surprised at this when we consider the circumstances. When he took charge of the mission there were not ten Catholic families in what is now the City of

Rome, and even the few that were there were very poor. In such circumstances it was almost impossible to succeed, and no wonder that the Archbishop told him that even if he succeeded in building it would be sold for debts. Still Father Beecham was not discouraged. In 1838 the Black River Canal was opened, and month after month the young priest passed over the entire work soliciting and receiving the generous contributions of the laborers, and he had the consolation in 1840 of seeing his efforts crowned with success in the completion of the church and in the liquidation of nearly all claims against it. We may now build more stately temples, more pretentious edifices to the glory of God, but we must not forget the circumstances – we must remember that in those days the building of St. Peter's was a work of far greater magnitude than the erecting of more expensive and elegant churches in these days. In those days when the warning voice of our Most Holy Father is so often raised in inculcating the necessity of make education “more Christian” no wonder a widespread interest is manifested in the matter of

education – no wonder that Bishops, priests and people are making many sacrifices in order to provide Catholic schools for the young. But in those days when the voice of Christ's Vicar on earth could not be heard so frequently, and on such a variety of subjects of vital importance, when priests were so few, the faithful so dispersed, Catholic schools almost unknown, Father Beecham saw the great necessity of providing a school in which the children of his parish might receive not only a secular education, but also what was of far greater importance, a thorough Catholic training. For over thirty-five of the forty years of his ministry, he has supported a Catholic school, and although at times he was obliged to suspend it for a brief period, like a true pastor and faithful shepherd he never at any time abandoned the project, but at all times made great sacrifices to provide Christian instruction for the young of his flock. Speaking of the great interest taken by him in the matter of education brings to mind an occurrence that took place about two years ago. It is in our opinion the crowning glory of his priesthood. The number of children to be instructed, his growing infirmity, and consequent inability to make any great effort to secure means for the support of the schools, and the example of others in the Archdiocese of New York, caused him to apply for aid to the Board of Education of the City of Rome. The Board, entertaining the most profound respect for his character, the warmest attachment to him personally, and knowing the great sacrifices he had made in the past for the advancement of Christian education, kindly consented to rent the schools and salary the good Sisters who were engaged in instructing the children of the parish. They granted him the privilege of selecting the class books to be used in the schools, and, at his request, even agreed to give teachers' certificates to the Sisters without subjecting them to an examination, though this was a waving on one of their rules, and one, at least in some instances, prejudicial to the success of our Catholic schools. The Board merely required that the Superintendent be permitted to visit the schools. The Right Rev. Administrator, interpreting the words of our Holy Father "make education more Christian," etc., and not less Christian, in their strict and undoubtedly their correct meaning, objected to the arrangement, and said the schools should be conducted as heretofore and the superintendency of the State entirely excluded from them. Father Beecham not only acquiesced in the Bishop's decision, but obeyed him to the letter, and humbly apologized to his Lordship for not consulting him beforehand, saying he would certainly have done so had he considered it necessary or regarded his action with the Board in the least censurable or indiscreet. Father Beecham, up to the time of his death, conducted the schools as directed by his Right Rev. Bishop, provided a lay teacher for the boys, whom the Sisters from this date refused to instruct on account of another rule incorporated into the code of laws that govern their order. This unqualified submission, in his old age, to the will of his Bishop and complete and hearty acquiescence in his decision, although a strict duty, is nevertheless, we repeat, the crowning glory of his priesthood.

As a citizen of Rome, he had, at all times, identified himself with its prosperity and progress, and took an active part in the advancement of its interests. As a priest he grew up with the City and became one of its institutions, so to speak, on account of his long residence in it and his great usefulness as a citizen. All the inhabitants, irrespective of creed or nationality, entertained the highest respect for his character, were very much attached to him personally, approached him with ease and were happy to greet him as he took his daily walks.

He has been very feeble for the last few months. On Wednesday, the 8th inst. he was confined to his room. A funeral came to the church in the afternoon, and as his assistant was absent on a sick call, he arose, went to the church, attended to the funeral, took cold, and returned to his bed never to leave it until death. After receiving all the Sacraments and consolations of religion he

expired in peace at the house already mentioned, while his relatives, a few of his Reverend friends, the Sisters, and some of his faithful flock, knelt by his bedside and offered up their fervent and united prayers to the Throne of God in his behalf. Thus, this good man passed away. Thus expired almost the very last of the forty-eight clergymen who at the time the great Archbishop Hughes was consecrated Bishop of Basileopolis, in partibus, and Coadjutor to the Bishop of New York, composed the priesthood of the Diocese of New York, which then embraced the States of New York, New Jersey, and what are now known as the Dioceses of New York, Albany, Brooklyn, Newark, Buffalo, Rochester, and Ogdensburg. These forty-eight priests composed in what the great Archbishop, in after years, used to call the "Old Guard". That this was true and that Father Beecham was one of their number is clear from the following letter written to him by the Archbishop five years before the death of the latter:

New York, January 15, 1859

Rev. and Dear Sir:

The 7th inst. was the 21st anniversary of my Consecration. Of the forty-eight who were the priests in this Diocese, I can count but eleven that remain. I should have had the pleasure of inviting them to assemble and dine with me on the anniversary itself, had it not fallen on Friday, which, being so near the end of the week, might render it inconvenient for some, at least, to honor me with their presence. I have appointed, however, Wednesday, the 26th inst., in the hope that as one of the Old Guard you will do me the pleasure of meeting the others and dining with me at the Northwest corner of Madison Avenue and thirty-sixth Street. Dinner will be served at 4 o'clock.

Very faithfully,
your obedient servant in Christ,
+ John, Archbishop of New York

P.S. A reply is requested.

This letter proves that the deceased priest was one of The Old Guard, and shows the strong attachment, and warm, unaffected friendship that existed between him and the Archbishop. In another letter, dated January 18, 1839, in which the Archbishop, then Coadjutor of the Bishop of New York, acknowledges the receipt of fifty dollars for seminary purposes, the young priest is complimented for his zeal and the lively interest taken by him in all things appertaining to religion. Other letters written by the distinguished prelates who were his ecclesiastical superiors during the forty years of his ministry, might be quoted to show the great regard and esteem in which they held him, and their high appreciation of his arduous and continuous labors for the advancement of religion, the education of the young, and the salvation of souls. But let us hope he was gone to receive a rich reward. Yes, this good man, this venerable pioneer of Catholicity, this grand old Patriarch of the Faith, has passed away. He has passed away, but he has left after him an enduring monument to perpetuate his name – a monument not carved in stone, or brass, or precious metals, but one of a far higher order the monument of a true Christian character. For nearly forty years he has lived in Rome, and were he permitted at this moment he could point with pride to his past record and unblemished reputation. For nearly forty years he has inculcated temperance in all things by word and example, has honored and upheld the sacred

dignity and character of the priesthood, and has never lowered it in the estimation of others, while his Rev. Brothers of the Clergy remember with pride his proverbial charity.

Is not this a grand record? Is not this a proud monument he has raised to his memory? He has kept the faith, he has run the race, let us hope he has been rewarded with the crown.

THE FUNERAL

The Funeral Services were held in St. Peter's Church on Tuesday morning at 10:30 o'clock. From an early hour the Church was filled with a large throng, some of whom came to view, for the last time, the mortal remains of the deceased priest; while others came to secure a place in the church during the services, knowing well that it would not hold the thousands who would be present at the funeral. Rt. Rev. Edgar P. Wadhams, D.D., said Mass at seven o'clock for the repose of the soul of the deceased. As many of the priests as could be accommodated in like manner said Masses in his behalf. Rt. Rev. Francis McNeirney, D.D., arrived from Utica, on the morning of the funeral, at 9 o'clock. At 10 o'clock the Rt. Rev. Prelates, with the priests, recited the Office of the Dead, after which a High Mass of Requiem was begun with the following Clergymen as officers of the Mass: Rev. P. H. Beecham, Camden, N.Y., as Celebrant; Rev. Thomas Doran, St. Ann's, Albany, Deacon; Rev. Arthur Donnelly, St. Michael's, New York, Sub-deacon; Rev. William Sheehan, St. Patrick's, West Troy, Master of Ceremonies; Rev. James Bloomer, St. Peter's, Rome, and Rev. Thomas O'Connor, St. John's, East Albany, Acolytes. Besides the three Bishops and the Officers of the Mass, the following Priests were present: Revs. Thomas J. Mooney, A. Molloy, Michael Curran, New York; James L. Conron, New Brighton; P. J. Smith, Maurice Sheehan, John P. McInrow, John McDonald, Albany; John J. Swift, William Carroll, Philip Keveney, William Bourke, Troy; Henry B. Finnegan, Schuylerville; J. G. Cully, Schnectady; William B. Hammett, John Heyland, Amsterdam; James O'Sullivan, Salem; Cornelius Fitzpatrick, Fort Edward; Michael O'Driscoll, Catskill; J. J. Moriarty, Chatham; John J. Brennan, New Lebanon; William Connelly, Green Island; Aloysius Murphy, Hunter; Charles Zukee, Canajoharie; James Ludden, Little Falls; William Howard, Ilion; Matthew Devitt, Cooperstown; Henry Hufkins, Newport; P. Caraher, Luke O'Reilly, Utica; James Hourigan, Binghamton; B. F. McLoughlin, Cortland; Edward O'Connor, Clayville; Peter O'Reilly, Clinton; William Fennelly, Oneida; John Ludden, Florence; M. O'Reilly, Pompey Hill; Chas. Reilly, Cazenovia; James O'Reilly, Fayetteville; Anthony Ludden, Hamilton; Thomas Reilly, Waterville; P. Birmingham, Cleveland; James A. O'Hara, D.D., Father Rahilliard (sic), Syracuse; Vincent, O.M.C.; George Brown, Salina; James McGee, Geddes; Francis, Baldwinsville; B. McDonough, Marcellus; E. J. Purcell, Skaneateles; Daniel O'Connell, Oswego; John O'Sullivan, D.D., Camillus; Peter J. Schmidt, Rome; Very Rev. Father Mackey, V. G., Ogdensburg; James Hogan, Watertown; Luke Harney, Port Henry; Eugene Carroll, Port Leyden; John McDonald, Potsdam; James O'Driscoll, Canton; James Sherry, Malone; Tobias M. Glenn, Keesville. At the end of the Mass, Rev. P. Caraher of Utica delivered a brief but very touching discourse, in which he paid a beautiful tribute to the memory of the deceased. Rt. Rev. J. Conroy, D.D., then gave the absolution, after which the congregation, and the thousands who were unable to gain admission to the church during the services, looked for the last time at the peaceful countenance of their deceased pastor and friend. The funeral procession, consisting of the Rev. Clergy, the various societies attached to St. Peter's, and an immense crowd in carriages and on foot, then began to move towards the cemetery. All the stores on the streets through which the procession passed were closed, and seldom, indeed, is so

strong an expression of respect and regret witnessed as was visible through the city. On arriving at the cemetery, the mortal remains of the priest were consigned to their last resting place; and fervent prayers were offered up for the repose of his soul. R.I.P.

NOTES:

The Freeman's Journal was a New York City Catholic Newspaper at that time.

Copied from original in the Thomas O'Connor Collection, Syracuse Diocesan Archives.

Copies of these sheets are to be made for selected dear friends who are so supportive of my efforts, and understand the labor involved.

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George H. Eiffe