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BROTHER JOHN BAPTIST TITZER, C.S.C.

Founder and first Provincial
Of
Brothers of Holy Cross South-West Province

A study

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BROTHER John Baptist Titzer, CSC—Founder and first Provincial of the Brothers of Holy Cross South-West Province—a study

Brother John Baptist Titzer was the founder and first Provincial of the South-West Province of Brothers in the United States. *Faith* in the Providence of God and *zeal* for the good of the Community were two of his outstanding virtues. He needed many virtues for the daunting task of leading the largest U.S. Province of three (eleven States of the Old South and all States west of the Mississippi River) with the smallest number of Brothers and the fewest financial assets. In the beginning there were only four diocesan and four property schools with 126 teaching Brothers, 55 lay teachers and 4,450 students. At the end of his term there were five additional schools: six diocesan and seven property schools with 178 teaching Brothers, 181 lay teachers and 7,170 students.

The Man

Brother John Baptist was born January 9, 1907 in Evansville, Indiana. Baptized in St. Mary's Church he was named Edward Henry after his father. Orphaned at an early age he was raised by his sister, Mrs Mary Titzer Steinmetz, along with Francis, a brother two years older, and a younger brother, Dan. Francis, who became Brother Stephen Titzer, entered the community as a postulant in Watertown, Wisconsin when Edward was a sophomore in Reitz Memorial High School taught by Holy Cross Brothers. Early signs of leadership were evident in young Edward who became a spirited cheerleader and played clarinet in the band. He graduated President of his Senior Class and a few months later in the summer of 1925 followed his

brother into Holy Cross as a postulant. He made his first vows in 1927 and final vows three years later. After a year as a Notre Dame scholastic he was sent—without a degree—to teach for three years at Holy Cross School, New Orleans. Besides a full schedule of classes, he directed the band and mentored the drama club. He returned to studies at Notre Dame in 1932 and because he was finally professed was named assistant superior of scholastics. He also edited the “Annals of Our Lady of Lourdes”, a small magazine promoting devotion to Mary. For a year he served as director of vocations in Watertown and then went on to teaching assignments in Taunton, Massachusetts and Albany, New York where in Vincentian Institute he was both Superior and Principal. He spent three years in New York City earning a Ph.D. from Fordham University. His doctoral thesis: THEORY and PRACTICE OF DISCIPLINE.

He began his career as a builder in West Haven, Connecticut by founding Notre Dame High School where he served again as both Superior and Principal. In 1950 he was elected to a six-year term as Assistant Provincial of the United States Province of Brothers under the indomitable Brother Ephrem O'Dwyer whose favorite pronouncement was “Ya know!” Trained well by that master builder and defender of the Brothers, Brother John Baptist brought his leadership skills to Austin, Texas in 1956 to found and guide the South-West Province for the next twelve years.

The Leader

Brother Eagan Hunter has ably described John Baptist's leadership style. “First of all he led by doing. He was confident in standing before others to

present his views as well as to assess their needs in order to provide essential leadership. Even though basically an extrovert, he was a highly organized, orderly and structured individual. He was service-oriented being tuned in on the every day needs of others and filled with a desire to be helpful in specific, concrete ways. He was welcoming in his attitude towards the Brothers, parents and friends as well as to strangers and possessed the ability to make one feel at home. He was powerful in his verbal and written skills, direct and to the point both in formal and informal situations. He possessed a keen capacity to analyze, explain and interpret facts which provided him with that critical capacity to focus clearly on problems and issues... Brother was very intuitive which helped him emphasize essential facts and practical information. Being highly motivated, he possessed the ability to "catch " others up in his excitement and enthusiasm for various projects." # 1

"In 1956," Brother John wrote in his 23rd and final Circular Letter, "the General Chapter decreed that the United States Brothers' Province shall be divided into a Midwest Province, and into Eastern and South-Western (sic) Vice-provinces. The date for opening the two Vice-provinces was set for November 1. Accordingly on that date we held our first Provincial council meeting." # 2 The first administrative headquarters was in Sorin Hall at St. Edward's University, Austin, Texas. The entire building was rented from the University for \$5000 a year until a new building could be erected ten years later.

Assisting the new Vice-provincial were Brothers William Mang, Assistant Vice-provincial, Edmund Hunt, Secretary, Chrysostom Schaefer, Steward and

Hilarion Brezik, Councilor. Mang was a master teacher whose constant directive to first-year teachers was, "You gotta have drive!" said with so little emphasis it soothed rather than excited. Edmund Hunt was the scholar-teacher and one of the first Brothers to earn a Ph.D. in the community. Chrysostom was a former banker who always wore white shirts with French cuffs under his black habit. Hilarion was a fine artist who had spent most of his life administering boys' homes. Such was the motley crew assembled to help John Baptist create a new entity for the good of Congregation and Church.

Challenges and Needs

Two challenges faced the new Administration and lingered for the twelve years of John Baptist's tenure: too few men and too little money. The first committees established were for promoting vocations, revising the Directory and celebrating the Holy Cross Centenary—one hundred years after the Constitutions had been approved by the Holy See. The man who would spend 33 of his 48 years of religious life as an administrator set to work at once. He was an inveterate planner who carefully analyzed every situation before making a decision. "Since November 1," he wrote on January 6, 1957 only two months after taking office, "I have stayed close to the Vice Provincial Office getting gradually organized. Much time has been spent with the Vice Provincial Council taking inventory so to speak of our assets and liabilities, of our most immediate and most pressing needs, studying problems and how to solve them. This work will be continued on a more intimate basis during the annual visitations which I propose starting immediately. New Orleans and

Biloxi will be first on the itinerary followed by houses on the west coast in February; and by Texas, St. Joseph Farm, and Santarem (Brazil) in March and April" #3

For two years, the South-West Vice-province functioned with thirteen houses and 194 professed Brothers. When raised to the status of a full Province in 1958, membership had increased by twenty Brothers and two new schools had opened: St. Francis High School in Mountain View, California and Holy Cross High School in San Antonio, Texas. St. Edward's University was at a critical juncture. Accreditation and new facilities were needed for increased enrollment. Brothers had to be borrowed from other provinces to solve the manpower shortage. Assets for the Vice-province were estimated at eight million dollars. There were limited prospects for increased revenues. A per-capital assessment of \$1200 was announced for each Brother. This at first was considered exorbitant but funds were desperately needed for novice formation and teacher training.

In his second Circular Letter John Baptist appealed to the membership for "generosity of spirit which new beginnings engender and demand. A deep unity of purpose must characterize our relationships and mutual understanding. Thus, in order to meet the needs which our building of the Vice-province entails, we must all learn that corporate effort, a pooling of prayers, efforts, resources, is necessary for our mutual good and support." #4 This was considered the surest way to develop the potential of the Vice-province. All would profit from the effort and consolidation so needed for

stability and growth. Members of the newly formed Vice-province agreed with their leader. With faith and generosity they joined him in laying the foundations of what would be a flourishing enterprise of the Congregation.

Vocations

One of the first priorities of the new Vice-provincial was the need to enlist new vocations. John Baptist was convinced that community schools were the major sources of new vocations and that every Brother had to become actively involved in recruiting them. In spite of manpower shortages, he appointed two vocations directors and later added a third in an effort to search out potential candidates. He increased advertising in local and national Catholic publications. Vocations workshops were organized annually and local coordinators were appointed in every school. The results of such efforts were impressive. Twenty six novices entered the community the very first year and reached an all-time high of thirty six in 1961. By 1965 the total membership of the Province was 292 members. In his twelve year term 353 candidates entered the juniorate program and of these 115 became professed Brothers. Unfortunately, during the last years of his Administration, renewal effects of the Second Vatican Council resulted in radical reductions in the number of novices and an alarming number of defections from the Community.

Twenty eight Brazilian novices gave him some encouragement and he continued to hope for not only a few good ones but "more and more good ones." "We cannot lose heart," he wrote in his final Circular Letter. He believed to the end that vocations were still available from the schools; that

different methods of approach and new appeals had to be formulated and renewed efforts at recruitment updated. His plans and hopes in the end proved futile.

Education

Father Moreau had written in his handbook, Christian Education: "Christian educators really need a call from God in order to deal with all that they face in working with young people. How else can teachers possibly work towards building Christian values in the young as well as towards giving them the knowledge they need?" He continued: "To teach with success, teachers must know good methods, be skillful in applying these methods, have clear ideas, be able to define exactly, and possess language that is easily understood and correct. All of these skills are acquired and perfected only through study. I think we must assume that good teachers are not content simply with obtaining a degree or a credential to show their capabilities, but that they also try to increase their knowledge even further by studying as much as they can. In this way teachers are able to meet the qualifications required of them." # 5

Brother John Baptist realized early in this term as Provincial that there were too many non-degreed Brothers teaching in the schools. His 1959 directive stated: "There is no reason why every teacher in the South-West Province should not aspire to further study. Requirements for graduate degrees in our various Province areas are becoming increasingly more insistent; and certainly our general Community needs make them desirable. Not only is a teacher's effectiveness and qualifications enhanced by them, but

his Community potential and usefulness are extended." # 6 He constantly encouraged Brothers to seek summer grants, especially from the National Science Foundation, and other sources. He knew that graduate degrees could lead to better teaching and the number of doctorates, masters and bachelors degrees increased dramatically during his term in office

When John Baptist took office in 1956 there were 129 Brothers with degrees:

11 doctorates

40 masters

78 bachelors.

When he left office in 1968 there were 225 Brothers with degrees:

15 doctorates—an increase of 4

68 masters—an increase of 28

142 bachelors—an increase of 64.

At a rate of 8 a year the number of degrees obtained in 12 years was 96! The result of such graduate studies was better teaching and greater awareness of new trends in methods and content. During the same period the facilities of every school plant in the Province were either improved or expanded under his supervision.

In 1968, even though the United States hierarchy declared itself in favor of retaining its Catholic school system, more and more Catholic elementary and high schools continued to close for lack of religious teachers and funding. St. Edward's High School in Austin closed in 1967, not for financial but for priority reasons. On February 13, 1968 Archbishop Robert E. Lucey of San

Antonio called for the closing of Holy Cross High School. Only the collaboration of parents with Brothers raised the anticipated deficit of \$72,000 to keep the school open for another year and the Archbishop relented. To this day, 50 years later, the school thrives thanks to the support of the Brothers, lay staff and alumni. It has had a dramatic impact on the lives of its graduates, the city of San Antonio and the Church in central Texas.

St. Edward's University

From 1956 until 1968 St. Edward's University underwent radical transformation in no small measure because of John Baptist's strong support. His first concern was accreditation by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. This was obtained in 1958. To expand and strengthen the curriculum, Dominican priests from the Order of Preachers were employed to teach theology and philosophy classes. A vital Latin-American program was introduced. An art department materialized thanks to Brother Hilarion and Walle Conoly. Theatre was born in the basement of Holy Cross hall, thanks to the perseverance of Brother Dunstan Bowles. An inter-disciplinary program for selected students was another innovation. Sisters Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary arrived from Monroe, Michigan to found Maryhill College for women. This separate entity was soon integrated into a coeducational university. In 1956 total student enrollment was a paltry 354. By 1968 it had increased three-fold to 1056. In his yearly visit to province schools, John Baptist constantly encouraged graduating seniors to come to St.

Edward's for higher education and to occupy the many new dormitory rooms. Eight buildings were constructed in twelve years.

Along with significant progress, however, came burdensome problems. Government loans and developmental programs increased yearly indebtedness. Enrollment kept increasing and so did the costs of buildings and board and tuition. Income from tuition, private contributors and fund drives did not cover operating expenses. For years the university slipped deeper and deeper into debt. Competition with secular universities in the area added another dimension to the problems of enrollment and solvency. To find solutions to these challenges the Board of Trustees was revised and expanded. Ownership of the university was transferred from the Brothers to the Board who then took responsibility for setting policies and making decisions independent of the Province. John Baptist reluctantly agreed with this arrangement late his administration but he could see no other solution to the needs and problems of the university.

Mission to Brazil

Brothers had been teaching at Santarem in northern Brazil since 1951, five years before John Baptist assumed leadership of the South-West Province. Santarem, a northern city of 40,000 surrounded by dense jungle, was built on the banks of the Amazon River 400 miles from Belem and the Atlantic coast. "From the beginning," John Baptist wrote, "our objectives in Brazil were directed toward indigenous vocations and a province. To that end we bought a tract of jungle land six miles outside of Santarem....where a

farm was started and a juniorate was opened in 1960; in 1961 we established a school in Campinas, in the south of Brazil." # 7

Campinas, a large metropolitan area in southern Brazil, would provide a financially stable foothold and further opportunities for recruiting native vocations. By 1968 two schools and a farm were operating in Santarem. The school in Campiinas that started with only two Brothers and 24 students had grown into a beautiful 12-unit complex with a nearby juniorate. The student body had swelled from 24 to 483 and for the first time the school was operating without a deficit thus freeing the Province of yearly financial subsidies. Its classrooms offered more than educational opportunities including several apostolic activities that promoted Catholic action.

Brother John Baptist initiated student collections for the missions the very first year of his administration. The purpose was two-fold: to make students aware of mission needs and to allow them opportunity to help the missionaries in a very concrete way. First results of the collections were meager but the second year harvested between \$10,000 and 20,000. In his twelfth and final year of office John Baptist could report: "Over the years the amounts steadily have increased. The peak collection was \$47,385 in 1965-66. All told, students from our Province schools have contributed a grand total of \$314,894. Most of this money has gone to Brazil for both operation and capital improvements, although East Pakistan and other missions share in the allocation each year." # 8 All the more significant is the fact that none of the schools in Brazil had been able to operate without a yearly subsidy from the Provincial Administration.

Four problems constantly faced John Baptist while developing the Brazilian missions: 1) lack of manpower; 2) too many defections of Brothers on the missions; 3) too few volunteers from which to choose for the missions; 4) the language difficulties and studies in Portuguese.

In spite of these challenges Holy Cross today boasts a District of Brazil with Brazilian Irmão Sergio Stolf as District Superior. He leads five finally professed Brothers, thirteen in temporary vows and six novices. John Baptist's dream of a Brazilian Province is slowly becoming a reality.

Accomplishments

Near the end of his administration Brother John Baptist could look back and reflect on the fact he had constantly encouraged his men to strict observance of their religious obligations through legislation, directives, annual visits, superior meetings and circular letters. However, he believed all of his efforts had been mitigated by experimentation sanctioned by the decrees of Vatican II.

His financial goal to make every house self-supporting was only partially realized. He had increased per member assessment from \$1200 to \$1500 yearly with apologies but knew the increased income to the Provincial would build resources for increased financial needs. More and more lay teachers were needed in the schools with living-wage salaries for each. Student enrollment continued to decrease partly because of increased tuition costs. He realized the business of Catholic education was never meant to be a profit-making business but it had to support itself and provide for future needs. It was God's work but it would certainly profit from the advice of professional

fund raisers whom he employed for both the Holy Cross School in New Orleans and St. Edward's University.

In twelve years no less than 26 buildings had been constructed at school plants at a total cost of 14 million dollars with four new schools opened--two with complete plants. Six new faculty residences had been built. St. Edward's University was thriving with 900 students, eight new buildings in twelve years and a strong new Board of Directors in charge. . A beautiful new Provincial House opened in Austin in 1967. Designed by Brother Hilarion it had only one drawback--its flat roof leaked during the first and subsequent rains. Pots and pans had to be employed to keep the drips from ruining the new carpets. How to finance such huge projects? Diocesan funds, loans and Province money.

Problems

As he left office, Brother John Baptist was concerned about the vital religious life of the Brothers given the lack of direction and specifics for reform caused by Vatican II. There were also concerns about morale and stability. Fewer new vocations increased the manpower shortage that had plagued him for twelve years and he lamented the disheartening defections by vowed religions in ever-increasing numbers. Financial problems paled in relation to those statistics and the departing Provincial who had literally worn himself out for the sake of the Community began to implode into failing health soon after leaving office.

For two years after leaving office he supervised student teachers and saw to their certification at St. Edward's University. Then worn out by years of

service he retired to Moreau High School in Hayward, California, the school he had planned, built and cherished. There for more than four years he did menial tasks with the same devotion that characterized his years of high office leadership. While attending Mass on August 9, 1975 he suffered a massive heart attack and died. He was 68 years old.

Notes

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2. Titzer, Brother John Baptist, C.S.C., Circular Letters, 1956-1968, South-West Province Archives, Brothers of Holy Cross, No. 23, June 13, 1968, p. 1
3. Ibid. p. 2
4. Ibid. p. 2
5. Moreau, Blessed Basil Anthony M., Christian Education, The Holy Cross Institute at St. Edward's University, 2006, p. 5
6. Titzer, op. cit., p. 11
7. Ibid. p. 16
8. Ibid. p. 15

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