

THE LIFE AND MARTYRDOM OF FATHER LEO HEINRICHS, O.F.M. AT THE FEET OF THE VIRGIN

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On the evening of July 15, 1908, Sicilian immigrant and convicted murderer Giuseppe Alia was summoned from his cell at the Colorado State Penitentiary at Canyon City. As the warden read him the death warrant, Alia responded with the self-pity typical of psychopaths, "All right. I am ready to die now... I do not blame the law, but there is no God, or I would not be here now." ¹

Alia remained quiet and calm until he was led into the execution chamber at 8:30 p.m. As the black cap was being adjusted, however, Alia let out a barrage of Sicilian profanity, saving his foulest statements for the Roman Catholic Church. Offering his best physical resistance, Alia had to be physically carried by corrections officers. Moments before the gallows trap launched him into eternity, Alia was heard to scream, "Death to the priests!" ²

Nearly two decades after Alia's execution, an investigation was opened by the Franciscan Order into the heroic virtues of his victim, Fr. Leo Heinrichs. A Postulator was assigned to look into the circumstances of Father Leo's life and death. After a painstaking investigation, a petition was submitted to the Congregation for Saints' Causes in Rome. Although this writer is unaware of any progress being made since, devotion to Father Leo continues to be spread by members of the Franciscan Third Order. Furthermore, his grave at Holy Sepulcher Cemetery in Totowa, New Jersey, continues to be a destination for pilgrims.

As recent events have shown, it is by no means unlikely that the Catholic Church will again be subjected to violent persecution in the United States. For this reason alone, it would be a major mistake for traditional Catholics to neglect devotion to Fr. Leo Heinrichs. May his prayers and intercession guide us as we face whatever the future may hold.

Life

Joseph Heinrichs was born in the town of Oestrich, in the Archdiocese of Cologne, on August 15, 1867. His parents were Joseph Heinrichs and Agnes Foeres.

According to Fr. Antonius Santarelli, “He spent his childhood in innocence and in due time took up the study of the classics, and was so well trained in the fear of God by his Christian parents that he was to others a continual example of piety and of the practice of religion.

“As he grew in years, he felt in his innermost heart the voice of the Divine call inviting him to the Order of Friars Minor, and he gladly gave heed to the call. Wherefore, in his nineteenth year of age he generously bade farewell to his parents and his native country, and because at that time the Franciscans were exiled from Germany for the reason of the laws of the *Kulturkampf*, he was forced to seek distant shores; he came to America under difficulties but with great enthusiasm.”³

On December 4, 1886, Joseph Heinrichs received the Franciscan habit and the name of Brother Leo, which he had so desperately longed for, at St. Bonaventure’s Friary at Paterson, New Jersey. At the time, the Friary’s Master of Novices was Fr. Denis Schuler, who would one day reach a senior position within the Order of Friars Minor.

According to Father Santarelli, “Under the direction of so great a master, our Servant of God gave himself up entirely to the cultivation of his vocation, and being intent upon the religious exercises he entered upon the way of perfection and walked in it as faithfully as possible. He excelled his fellow novices in devotion, zeal, and ardor, for the glory of God. Having caught the spirit of a true Friar Minor, so that by the favorable vote of all, he at the completion of the year of novitiate, pronounced the simple vows in the year 1887,—and after the lapse of three years from the taking of the simple vows, having always faithfully walked in the ways of the commandments of God, he made the solemn vows to the great happiness of his soul.

“Having finished his studies and being found worthy on account of the religious manner of his life, he was raised to the sacerdotal dignity, which he received with genuine piety and devotion, July 29, 1891.”⁴

According to Deacon William Joyce, “Between 1891 and 1897, Father Leo served as assistant Master of Novices and as an assistant at St. Bonaventure’s. Father Leo also ministered as Spiritual Assistant to the Third Order Franciscans....In 1897, he was named Pastor at Holy Angels Parish in Singac, New Jersey. He was later Pastor at St. Stephen’s in Croghan, New York, and St. Bonaventure’s, Paterson, New Jersey. Father Leo’s parishioners knew him as a compassionate, cheerful priest. During a smallpox epidemic while he was Pastor at Paterson, Father Leo selflessly spent many hours at a nearby ‘pest house’ ministering to the sick and the dying.”⁵

On September 23, 1907, Father Leo arrived at the St. Elizabeth of Hungary Roman Catholic Church in Denver, Colorado. According to Deacon William Joyce, “Soon the poor of Denver learned that they had a friend in the Pastor of St. Elizabeth’s, and every morning a line formed at the Friary gate. No one went away without food and a kind word. Father Leo received permission to return to Germany to visit his family after an absence of over twenty-one years; but he decided to postpone his journey until after June 7, 1908, when he planned to give First Communion to a class of seventy children. Death interrupted Father Leo’s plans.”⁶

Martyr

Giuseppe Alia would later recall that his hatred for the Catholic Church dated from Easter Sunday, 1895. After hearing the parish priest in his native village of Avola denouncing Anarchism from the pulpit, Alia had ceased practicing his religion. When he began preaching militant Atheism, Alia's wife and three children had separated from him. In subsequent statements to the Denver police, Alia repeatedly expressed a belief that the Catholic priesthood was responsible for the breakup of his family.

In 1906, Alia had emigrated to Buenos Aires, Argentina, where he purchased an American-made Bulldog revolver. After a series of quarrels with Argentine Catholics, Alia boarded a ship bound for New York, arriving at Ellis Island on May 22, 1907. Over the months that followed, Alia had drifted from city to city and job to job. At long last, he arrived in Denver, Colorado.

On the morning of Sunday, February 23, 1908, Fr. Leo Heinrichs arranged to offer the 6:00 a.m. Workmen's Mass so that he could attend a meeting later that morning.

Giuseppe Alia later recalled, "On Saturday night I went early to bed, but I got no rest because I thought always of this religious question, and the priests—always the priests, who take money from the poor. Toward morning I dozed a little and then the church bells woke me.

"I got up; dressed myself and put the revolver inside the band of my trousers. The bell was still ringing and I followed the sound. I did not know where the church was only for the bell. I went inside with the rest and I did as they did.

"I opened my mouth as the others did and the priest placed something on my tongue. It burned me and I jumped up, spat it out, and with my left hand drew the revolver so, and when the priest turned toward me I fired and he fell." ⁷

As Father Leo fell, Alia let out "a devilish howl," ⁸ and attempted to flee the church. After a struggle over his revolver, Alia was overpowered on the church steps by Daniel D. Cronin, an off-duty Denver police officer, and taken to the city jail.

Meanwhile, the bullet fired by Alia's revolver had entered the left ventricle of Father Leo's heart. As his life drained away, Father Leo was seen to pick up two of the Eucharistic Hosts which had fallen from the ciborium. When two fellow Franciscans arrived at the scene, Father Leo pointed to the fallen Hosts which he was no longer able to pick up.

Moments later, Fr. Leo Heinrichs died, smiling, at the foot of the Blessed Virgin's altar. It was a firm belief among all those present that he had forgiven his murderer.

Epilogue

The murder of Fr. Leo Heinrichs made headlines throughout the United States. After St. Elizabeth's Church was re-consecrated, thousands of people attended his funeral, including the Governor of Colorado.

The last word is best left to Father Leo himself. Just a few days prior to his murder, Father Leo had said the following words to his parish's Marian Sodality, "Oh, how sweet it is to die at the feet of the Virgin!"⁹

¹ "Father Leo's Murderer Goes Cursing to Death," *Paterson Evening News*, July 16, 1908, p. 1.

² Fr. Antonius M. Santarelli, *The Life of the Servant of God Rev. Fr. Leo Heinrichs, O.F.M.* (New York: Franciscan Press, 1926), p. 25.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁴ Santarelli, *Life of the Servant of God*, p. 6.

⁵ <http://www.franciscan-sfo.org/fe/heinrichs.html>.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ "Priest's Slayer Has Confessed," *Paterson Morning Call*, February 25, 1908, p. 1.

⁸ Santarelli, *Life of the Servant of God*, p. 23.

⁹ Santarelli, *Life of the Servant of God*, p. 25.