



In Memoriam

FATHER RODERICK WHEELER, O. F. M.
(1907-1958)

JUST as the January, 1959, number of *THE AMERICAS* was about to go to press, word was received of the unexpected death of Fr. Roderick Wheeler, O. F. M., first Director of the Academy of American Franciscan History, and first Managing Editor of this magazine. On Saturday, December 13, he died of a heart attack brought on by a bronchial ailment, while a patient at St. Francis Hospital in Olean, New York, near St. Bonaventure's University.

Born in Haverhill, Massachusetts, Fr. Roderick entered the Franciscan Order in 1927, made solemn vows in 1931, and was ordained to the priesthood on June 12, 1934. Almost immediately thereafter the young priest was sent to Spain for higher studies in history. By 1936 he had completed all requirements for the doctorate except the writing of the dissertation. At the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War he narrowly escaped death and had to take refuge in the American Embassy in Madrid. He was taken out of Spain on a special train with other Americans, and went to Germany to visit one of his classmates who was studying there. From Germany he travelled on a cargo boat for Lisbon where he began classes leading toward another doctorate in Portuguese studies. After the Spanish Civil War had ended, he returned to Spain long enough to have his dissertation printed and published. Its title was "The Spanish Fur Trade in Florida." He often told how he secured only enough paper to print the necessary number of copies required by the university.

Returning to Portugal, he had not completed his studies at the University of Lisbon when the Second World War broke out and he decided to return to the United States. It took him six months to secure passage for New York on a cargo boat that offered few comforts. Upon arrival in this country he was sent by his religious superiors to St. Bonaventure College (later University) to teach Latin American history.

Three years later a long-time dream of several American Franciscan historians was brought to reality by the Very Reverend Mathias Faust, O. F. M., then Delegate General of the Franciscan Order, when he deputed Fr. Roderick to found an Academy of History in Washington, D. C. This

Academy was to be composed of trained Franciscan historians who would study Franciscan and profane history of Latin America, publish books and a magazine, and form a specialized library of books, photocopies, and microfilm in this field.

Fr. Roderick began his work in Washington in 1943. The following year, in April, the new Academy was inaugurated. In July of the same year the first number of the organ of the Academy, *THE AMERICAS*, was off the press. Fr. Roderick Wheeler was the first Director of the Academy and the first Managing Editor of this magazine. For nine years, until 1953, he remained as Managing Editor, and as Director or Resident Member of the Academy. In the latter year he asked to be returned to his province, because of failing health. From then until his death he taught at St. Bonaventure University. During the past year and a half he was Chairman of the Department of History of that institution. During all this time, Fr. Roderick was gathering material for a definitive history of the Franciscan Order in Latin America, a work he never finished or published.

Such are the facts of Fr. Roderick's life, as I recall them from memory. They certainly give very little idea of the warm, Franciscan personality that was his. Nor do they make clear his tremendous influence in the intellectual world, due to his wide knowledge of things Spanish and Portuguese, and above all, to his teaching, which he continued in summer at St. Bonaventure's even during his years in Washington. He taught literally hundreds of young Franciscan clerics and priests, many of whom learned from him the necessary background to carry out their present missionary and teaching tasks in Puerto Rico, Brazil, and Bolivia. Sisters and lay students, too, in large numbers benefited from his deep knowledge and sympathy for the Spanish and Portuguese way of life impressed upon Latin America so indelibly. He possessed a marvelous gift of enthusiasm for this segment of history which he was able to impart to his students in an eminent degree. All who came in contact with him, Catholics or non-Catholics, were impressed with his Franciscan joy and gentleness.

This Academy feels the loss of Fr. Roderick Wheeler very keenly. He always maintained a live interest in its affairs. Even recently when in failing health he would send indirectly some word of encouragement to the present Academy members.

I am sure that I express the sentiments of all his friends and co-workers, Franciscan or lay, when I say, with all my heart: May God grant him eternal peace in Heaven!

FR. MATHIAS C. KIEMEN, O. F. M.