

**A Distinguish Son of Huron County
The Rev. Stephen Eckert, O.M.Cap.**

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There is a symbolic parallel between the life of Father Stephen Eckert and the heraldic emblems on the seal adopted by his native County of Huron in 1841. The seal embodies a shield divided into two parts, the upper third showing a plough on a background of gold, and the lower two-thirds a sheaf of golden grain set on a field of blue. The whole is enclosed by a wreath – oak leaves on one side and laurel on the other. The plough, occupying one third of the shield, against the ground of gold, would correspond to the period of preparation in a truly Christian home and at a Catholic College, and the sheaf of golden grain on the remaining two-thirds of the shield would represent the period of his religious life when he gathered in the grain of the harvest. The oak leaves would symbolize his unflinching strength and perseverance, and the laurel leaves the imperishable wreath with which he is crowned.

The parents of Father Stephen, John Eckert and Kunigunda Arnold, were born in Bavaria, Germany, and came to this country in 1858. They were married in St. Joseph's Church, Stratford, on August 8, 1858, and, after working for a few years with farmers in the Stratford district, settled on lot 5, concession 8, of the township of McKillop, parish of St. Columban, known in those days as Irishtown. The church is situated on the Huron Road, Highway No. 8, almost half way between Stratford and Goderich. This historic road had been cut through the forest by John Galt about 1827 to open up the country known as the Huron Tract, a territory of over a million acres owned by the Canada Company of which John Galt was superintendent. It is also interesting to note that as a result of a meeting between John Galt and Bishop Macdonell the Canada Company was formed, and thus a Catholic bishop had a part in the opening up of the Huron Tract.

The first settlers in the parish of St. Columban had arrived about thirty-five years before John Eckert and his wife settled there. They found themselves the only German-speaking Catholics in a parish of about three hundred families. In spite of this, and in spite of living six and a half miles from the church, and in spite of having to walk that distance every Sunday, they never even thought of missing Mass, and only some unavoidable cause kept them away. The only language they knew at the beginning was their native German, so that they suffered from the additional difficulty of not being able to understand the sermons and instructions. To make their Easter duty they had to go to St. Agatha near Kitchener, a distance of forty miles or more.

There were nine children in the Eckert family, five boys and four girls. Conrad, now living in Seaforth, was the eldest. Then in order of age came Elizabeth (Mrs. Bruxer); Barbara (Mrs. George K. Holland) ; Frederick; John (Father Stephen) ; Louise (Mrs. John Murray) ; Anna (Mrs. McMahon) ; Joseph (Rev. Joseph Michael Eckert, O.P.); and Peter. All are living except Elizabeth, Father Stephen and Father Joseph.

John, the subject of this story, was born on April 28, 1869, and was baptized June 2, 1869, in St. Columban Church by the pastor, Rev. James Murphy. He began his schooling at about six years of age in the neighbouring log school, made his First Communion when he was eleven, and later was confirmed by Bishop Walsh of London, later Archbishop of Toronto. His school days were characterized by a love of outdoor sports, and by a love of fair play which on occasion caused him to defend the rights of the weaker pupils by using force against aggressors. This trait of character led him later on to champion the cause of the coloured race amongst whom his greatest work was done.

The home life of the Eckert family might profitably be studied by all who believe that Home Education is of greater importance than School Education. The present day movement for the restoration and organization of Home Education would incorporate all the main principles which governed the home of Father Stephen's boyhood. They may be summarized as follows

1. Complete acceptance of religious truth and effective practice of religious duties.
2. Complete agreement between husband and wife to assure unity in the family.
3. Definite and regular duties to be performed by each member of the family.
4. Generous freedom for the children in an atmosphere of peace, sympathy, and cheerfulness.
5. Reading and study of religious and secular books.
6. Inculcation of social duties through co-operation with religious superiors and officials of the state.
7. Attention to physical and mental health.

As a result of his ideal home training, Father Stephen developed a serene and cheerful outlook on life which he carried with him all through his career. He was influenced too by the pioneer conditions in which he lived. Just ten years before he was born, the village of Seaforth, about ten miles from the Eckert farm, had been given a post-office for the first time. In 1869, the year of his birth, the village was an important station on the Buffalo-Goderich line of the Grand Trunk Railway, and shipped out nearly one million bushels of grain annually. It boasted two flour mills, one packing 150 barrels of flour daily, using a 60 H.P. steam engine to operate 5 run of stones. The other

mill, using 5 run of stones, packed 60 barrels of flour per day. An oatmeal mill, using a 16 H.P. steam engine to operate 3 run of stones, made oat meal, Indian meal, split peas, pot barley, and mill feed. These mills employed about 20 hands the year round. One firm manufactured jewellery and clocks, three firms made churns of three different types, and there was a carriage factory employing 10 men to make carriages, wagons, and velocipedes. There was a foundry and agricultural implement factory, a brick building 140' x 30', 2 storeys high, and employing 10 hands. A planing mill employed 12 hands. There was a cooper shop. There were seven hotels to accommodate numerous travellers. A two-storey brick school, 60' x 30', erected in 1867 at a cost of \$3,500, accommodated 240 pupils who were taught by two teachers.

Such development of small home industries gives some idea of the fruitful countryside which yielded a modest reward to families such as the Eckerts who worked their lands with diligence. When John was ready to go to high school, his parents had the wherewithal for him to continue his schooling. It was at this time that he expressed a desire to become a priest in some religious order, and the parents, following out the principle of allowing their children to make up their own minds, sent him to St. Jerome's College at Kitchener (Berlin in those days). Here he remained for six years, except for the summer months which he spent at home working on the farm.

While at St. Jerome's he made the acquaintance of two members of the Order of the Capuchins who conducted a mission in Kitchener. They established a branch of the Third Order of St. Francis at this time, and John was one of the first to enrol. It was then that he conceived the idea of joining the Capuchins, and in 1890 he went to the Monastery of St. Bonaventure at Detroit to spend a few days in the community to find out for himself something about the life of the friars. As a result of this visit, he resolved to apply for admission. In the spring of 1891 he began his novitiate year, and received the habit on May 21, taking the name of Frater Stephen.

In 1892 he left Detroit for St. Francis' Monastery, Milwaukee, where he made his four years of theology, and was ordained to the priesthood on July 2, 1896. He said his first Mass on July 5th in Milwaukee, and on this joyful day his parents and his brothers Conrad and Michael Joseph attended. Early in September of the same year, on his way to his first appointment to the Monastery of St. Fidelis at New York, he had the opportunity of visiting his family in the old parish of St. Columban. He followed the custom of making a visit to his old home whenever a missionary journey brought him within range.

In the years that followed, Father Stephen's appointments were as follows: Sacred Heart Parish, Yonkers, New York, from 1897 to 1905; Detroit, Michigan, and Fond du Lac, Wisconsin, 1905 to 1906; Our Lady of Angels, New York, 1906 to 1907; St. John the Baptist Church, New York, 1907 to 1909; Our Lady of Angels, New York, 1909 to 1913; and St. Benedict the Moor Mission, Milwaukee, 1913 to his death in 1923. These years were spent

in parish work, the giving of missions and retreats, and mixing with all sorts and conditions of men that he might bring to them the light of Faith.

One who knew him intimately writes as follows of him:

« I first became acquainted with Father Stephen in Yonkers about the year 1902. He was Director of the Third Order and had even then a reputation for sanctity. He had a most winning personality. In appearance he was tall, powerfully built, every inch of him a man. What attracted me most was his commanding appearance and wonderful, penetrating eyes, which seemed to reflect the light of higher things. He reminded me strongly of what I would have imagined St. Paul to have been, judging the Apostle from his writings and descriptions of others. When Father Stephen preached he was so full of God, so fiery and enthusiastic that he could not find utterance for all his thoughts. ... The man's apostolic appearance and life preached louder than his words; in the delivery of his sermons he affected no oratorical flights, being simple and plain, but ardent. Conviction was stamped in his mien, in his enthusiasm, in his words.»

It was while he was at Yonkers that Father Stephen conceived the idea of labouring for the conversion of the colored race. He was thinking particularly of the rich harvest to be gained amongst the large numbers of southern negroes. His ambition in this respect was considerably heightened by a visit to the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament near Philadelphia whose work is with the Indians and Negroes. He suggested to his Community that they should open a mission for the Negroes in the south, but the General of the Order in Rome did not deem the time opportune, and the matter was dropped. While this decision was a disappointment to Father Stephen, and though he placed himself completely in the hands of his superiors, he did not abandon entirely his hope and plan to work for the conversion of the colored race. A slight answer to his hopes in this respect was given him while he was at St. John the Baptist Church, New York, from 1907 to 1909, when he gained several colored families to the Faith. The Visitor General of the Order, on a visit to the parish, was surprised and edified one morning to note a number of colored people at the altar rail when he was distributing Holy Communion.

A few years later, when Father Stephen was stationed at Our Lady of Angels Parish, New York, Bishop O'Gorman of Sierra Leone in Africa came for a visit. Father Stephen made inquiries, and the stories told by the Bishop prompted Father Stephen to reveal his own desires for the conversion of the colored people. The Bishop advised him of the necessity for concentrated and centralized action, and this advice was to be most useful to Father Stephen later on.

In the midst of his parish and missionary labours, Father Stephen did not forget his old home. On a number of occasions he gave missions in the

neighbourhood. One of these was at Hesson. The pastor invited him to conduct a mission at Listowel, a neighbouring town of about two thousand people. The mission was held in the local music hall since there was no Catholic Church in the town. Though there were only twenty Catholics in the town, the attendance grew to seventy-five and then to nearly two hundred. The people were so delighted that they invited him to come back again after he had finished giving a mission in Macton, another neighbouring town. With deep regret he had to refuse because of other commitments.

In December, 1904, Father Stephen had the happiness of assisting at the first Mass of his brother, Rev. Joseph Michael Eckert, O.P. In July, 1908, he was present at the golden wedding of his parents. Late in the year 1911 his father died, and several years later he lost his mother. He had intended to write the life of his parents to pay them the tribute his love for them demanded, but the task was never accomplished. He often mentioned the deep gratitude he felt to them for all they had done for him.

In 1913 Father Stephen received what was to him most joyful news when he was given charge of St. Benedict the Moor Mission for colored Catholics in Milwaukee. Here he laboured with signal success for ten years until his death in 1923. He was the first resident pastor of the mission which had been established in 1886. His introduction to the congregation of colored Catholics was dramatic. The people came expecting to find the new pastor in the celebrant of the Mass, but instead it was the superior of St. Francis Monastery, who told them that he would introduce the new pastor at the end of the Mass. As no altar boy had come to serve, a humble Friar performed this duty in a very devout manner. Imagine the surprise of the congregation when at the end of the Mass, the superior announced that the server of the day was to be their new pastor!

He began at once to visit the homes of his poor people. In two weeks he visited several hundred families. Attendance at Mass increased so that it became necessary to have two Masses on Sundays. The visits also revealed the necessity of establishing a boarding school for children who had no supervision. Within a year the attendance at this school had grown to thirty-six.

It soon became necessary to have a new building. The money for this he begged or obtained in various parishes where he gave missions. He never tired of bringing before clergy and laity the pressing need of doing something for the colored people.

At the request of his superiors he sent them a report on the first six years of his work at the mission. This report, dated August 20, 1919, contains the following high lights: Two hundred and forty-six persons, 192 of them children, were baptized. There were 25 boarders at the school who had been there in preceding years, and would likely remain until graduation. St. Benedict's had become more and more a central mission school from which children went forth to spread the Faith among their race. Nineteen adults had

been received into the Church, but conversion of adults was slow. He was in hopes of raising the \$50,000 for a new building within the next two months.

The question arose as to whether it would not be wise to establish the boarding school in the country. In 1920 the opportunity of trying this plan presented itself when a property twenty-five miles from Milwaukee became available. An agreement was made with the owners for temporary occupation for one year to try out the project. The Dominican Sisters were to be in charge under the direction of Father Stephen, while the mission in the city would be conducted by one of the Capuchin Fathers from St. Francis Monastery.

During the year, Father Stephen, noting the effect on the health and general welfare of the boarding school pupils who had plenty of fresh air and the opportunity of nature study and gardening at first hand, looked about for some generous benefactor who would purchase the property. Unfortunately none could be found. At the end of the year, the superior felt that the unstable postwar conditions made the purchase too hazardous a venture, and decided to abandon the enterprise and move the school back to Milwaukee. This was perhaps Father Stephen's hardest blow, but he submerged his disappointment in cheerful obedience to the will of his superiors.

In 1922 and just before his death in 1923 he had the task of field missionary to plead the cause of the colored and to gain funds for the building program. In January, 1923, the superiors decided to go ahead with the building of the new school, much to the joy of Father Stephen.

His work was now done. On one of his missionary journeys he caught cold which developed into pneumonia, and on February 16, 1923, he died. The funeral was held on February 20, the celebrant of the Mass being his brother, Father Joseph Michael Eckert, O.P. A remarkable coincidence was that an African missionary bishop was present, Most Rev. John Forbes, Bishop of Uganda, Africa, and conducted the Libera after the Mass.

Many remarkable favours have been attributed to the intercession of Father Stephen. Popular devotion to him has manifested itself in a remarkable manner. Requests for his picture and relics have come from India, China, Africa and other countries. The superior of the Mission of St. Benedict the Moor writes as follows in a letter dated Sept. 27, 1941: « While people write to us many miraculous answers to their prayers, we have not been able thus far to obtain any real proof of the supernatural power that brought about these cures. Doctors claim that a number of cures were miraculous, but none of them has thus far given us a documentary statement to the effect. His case rests as it had heretofore. Rome has encouraged us to spread literature and pictures of him in order to bring about a cause of canonization. Heretofore we have failed ».

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