

## BISHOP SHAHAN—BUILDER AND EDUCATOR

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*CHRYSOSTOM DONNELLY, O.P.*



EARLY on the morning of March ninth of this year death claimed the Most Reverend Thomas J. Shahan, Rector Emeritus of the Catholic University of America. By his death the Catholic University was deprived of one of its oldest and most devoted supporters and the Catholic Church in the United States lost one of her best known and most beloved priests, as well as one of her greatest scholars.

Thomas Joseph Shahan was born in Manchester, N. H., Sept. 11, 1857. His studies for the priesthood were made at Montreal College and at the North American College in Rome. He was ordained in 1882 and after graduate studies at the New Sorbonne and the Institut Catholique in Paris he returned to America and was made Chancellor of the diocese of Hartford. Upon the establishment of the new Catholic University of America in 1888 he determined to prepare himself for teaching therein and toward that end he pursued further studies in Paris, Rome and Germany. In 1891 he took up his duties in the department of history at the University, with which institution he was destined to be affiliated prominently until his death. In 1909 he was installed the fourth Rector of Catholic University, and in 1914 he was consecrated Bishop of Germanicopolis by Cardinal Gibbons in the Baltimore Cathedral. In 1928, after nearly forty years of active work at the University, nineteen years of which he was its Rector, Bishop Shahan resigned his position. This retirement, however, did not mean the end of his labors, for he continued his studies, his writing and occasional preaching until his very death.

In trying to evaluate the life and labors of Bishop Shahan one is struck with amazement and admiration: amazement at the versatility of the man and whole-hearted admiration for the plenitude of his virtues. In the funeral sermon on Bishop Shahan, the Most Reverend John T. McNicholas, Archbishop of Cincinnati, said, "He who speaks a few inadequate words to you

cannot hope to interpret fully the many-sided life of our beloved prelate. He was a prince of nature; a public-spirited citizen who yielded to none in genuine patriotism; a priest and Bishop wholly dedicated to the things of God. He was also a rare scholar, entitled to foremost rank among the learned ecclesiastics of our country, and a writer whose poetic fancy and graceful diction will give him a permanent place in our literature."<sup>1</sup>

Bishop Shahan was true priest and true scholar. He was primarily and fundamentally the priest of God. To this had he dedicated his young life during his seminary days and at his ordination; and throughout the course of his long and useful career, no matter what his duties or distractions, he never for one moment lost sight of nor fell short of his sacred calling.

He possessed to an unusual degree that quality inherent in every true priest—an ardent devotion to the Immaculate Mother of God. With the love of a true son of Mary, Bishop Shahan planned a great national basilica, dedicated to the Virgin Mother. This great church on the University grounds, was to be the University church, as well as the National Shrine of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and it was to be the spiritual center of the University.

The first appeal for the Shrine was made by Msgr. Shahan in 1913, and the following year saw the first issue of the pamphlet, *Salve Regina*, which paper has been of inestimable value in promoting the progress of the work. The proposed Shrine was blessed by Pope Pius X in 1914 and shortly afterward the Holy Father gave Msgr. Shahan a generous donation for it. It is interesting to note that the same abiding interest in the Shrine of our Blessed Lady has been shown by the two succeeding Pontiffs. A beautiful mosaic—an exact reproduction of Murillo's masterpiece, the Immaculate Conception—arrived at the Shrine in 1930, a present from two Popes, the late Benedict XV and the reigning pontiff, Pius XI.

The corner stone of the new Shrine was laid Sept. 23, 1920, by Cardinal Gibbons in the presence of a distinguished assemblage, clerical and lay. The work on the building has advanced steadily and the northern crypt was opened for services in Holy Week of 1926. Consistent progress is being made and some day the Catholics of America will rejoice in the possession of their

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<sup>1</sup> Catholic Educational Review, April, 1932.

first great basilica, the National Shrine of our country's Patroness, the Immaculate Mother of God. Had Bishop Shahan done no other work than the planning and the beginning of this great temple of God, his name would have been imperishably preserved in this noble memorial.

True priest though he was, and while his sacerdotal character was ever foremost, Bishop Shahan was also a scholar of rare attainments. For many years he conducted the classes of History and Canon Law at the University and tributes to his learning and his eminence as a teacher are widespread. To reproduce a tribute of the Rev. William J. Kerby, of the Catholic University: "Bishop Shahan's erudition represented prodigious industry, an amazing memory, constructive imagination and rare powers of assimilation."<sup>2</sup> And to quote again Archbishop McNicholas: "He captivated his students by the seemingly inexhaustible riches of his mind and the beauty of his imagery.—His complete self-forgetfulness and his noble generosity in placing all that he had at the disposition of his students compelled both their admiration and their love."<sup>3</sup>

Bishop Shahan's heart was in his work as scholar and teacher. He loved his work, as his outstanding success as a professor so well testified. Nothing could have pleased him better than to have spent the remainder of his life with his beloved books and classes. But such was not to be. As is so often the case, duty superseded the personal desires of the individual. Bishop Shahan was appointed Rector of the University in 1909, being the first chosen for that office from the University staff. Uncomplainingly he set about his new duties, which were naturally uncongenial to his disposition. His position as head of the University required endless detailed work, which was repugnant to one of his poetic nature. But, ever obedient to duty, he planned, he worked, he prayed, and in the fulness of time his prayers were answered and his hopes realized. They were dark times for the University during Bishop Shahan's early years as Rector; so dark, in fact, that it was seriously doubted if the institution could continue. But with the conviction that the University must carry on and the sublime faith in the goodness and wisdom of Providence which ever characterized him, Bishop Shahan, with his loyal friends and supporters, sustained

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<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*

it through the storms and trials to an era of substantial progress and success. During his nineteen years as Rector the University maintained consistent growth and improvement. New and better buildings, a larger student body, an ever-growing staff of professors and instructors, new departments, new activities: all testified to a healthy expansion and improvement, both internal and external. The Catholic University of America to-day is recognized as one of the leading educational institutions of the United States, and to no one is due more credit for this happy condition than the late Bishop Shahan.

Despite the ever-increasing amount of work done by Bishop Shahan in the performance of his official duties at the University, he found time for extensive work in other fields of Catholic activity. He was a member of the original board of editors of the Catholic Encyclopedia. In 1895 he founded the Catholic University Bulletin and he remained its editor until assuming the office of Rector in 1909. He personally founded several other Catholic publications and he inspired and encouraged the founding of more. He was the author of several books, dealing mainly with the history of his favorite periods—the Patristic era and the Middle Ages, on which periods he was an acknowledged authority. His lectures on these subjects attracted widespread attention. Right Rev. Dr. McCormick of the Catholic University informs us in a recent article that during the years 1896-1904, when Dr. Shahan was lecturing on Roman Law, his knowledge of Roman institutions, literature and history gave such fulness and richness to his lectures that well-known lawyers of Washington, scholars and professors of the University were in regular attendance at them.<sup>4</sup>

To the religious Orders and Congregations located at the University Bishop Shahan was ever a sympathetic friend and supporter. His thorough knowledge of history gave him an appreciation of the accomplishments of these great religious bodies throughout the centuries, and as one of the early members of the Catholic University faculty he appreciated the valuable help given by the Orders and Congregations during the struggling years of the institution. He realized too the strength that inevitably accrues to a university from the friendly, scholastic rivalry among its affiliated religious bodies. This spirit of

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<sup>4</sup> Catholic Educational Review, May 1932.

healthy competition is an invaluable aid in raising ever higher and higher the standard of the University.

The same unflagging, encouraging interest was shown by the Bishop to the religious organizations of women. Among his many noteworthy achievements was his inauguration in 1911 of a summer school for the teaching Sisterhoods. The success of this movement was so great from the outset that its development brought about the Catholic Sisters' College, the first college in this country conducted solely for teaching nuns. The college, which is in session during the entire year, has grown to such proportions as now to have its own campus and group of buildings, adjoining the University, and it offers to teaching sisters all the educational advantages of a great University.

Msgr. McCormick pithily sums up the outstanding services of Bishop Shahan to American education: "It was to the cause of Catholic education, rather than to the Catholic University alone, that Bishop Shahan dedicated the best years and energies of his fruitful life. His were the interests of the churchman as well as the educator, so every worthy educational effort was sure to win his immediate and hearty coöperation. . . . His leadership of the National Catholic Educational Association, of which he was President General for eighteen years, attests the breadth of his educational interests and the intensity of his devotion to them, and the success of this organization, representative of every department of our educational system, in promoting a sense of solidarity, unity of purpose and aims, and loyalty to a common cause, was to him a supreme satisfaction."<sup>5</sup>

We believe that we could conclude this sketch in no more fitting manner than by quoting a tribute paid the Bishop by the Rt. Rev. Msgr. Edward A. Pace, Vice Rector of the Catholic University of America, and for many years one of Bishop Shahan's closest friends and associates. Msgr. Pace writes, "The greater memorial will arise from the hearts of the many who revere him for his gentle considerateness and sympathy which, no less than his learning, showed in his character the fruits of Christian culture and entitled him to leadership in Christian education."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Catholic Educational Review, April 1932.