

Fall 1985

America's Pioneer in the Lay Apostolate: Father Thomas Augustine Judge, C.M.

David F. O'Connor S.T.

Follow this and additional works at: <https://via.library.depaul.edu/vhj>

Recommended Citation

O'Connor, David F. S.T. (1985) "America's Pioneer in the Lay Apostolate: Father Thomas Augustine Judge, C.M.," *Vincentian Heritage Journal*: Vol. 6 : Iss. 2 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://via.library.depaul.edu/vhj/vol6/iss2/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Vincentian Journals and Publications at Via Sapientiae. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Vincentian Heritage Journal* by an authorized editor of Via Sapientiae. For more information, please contact wsulliv6@depaul.edu, c.mcclure@depaul.edu.

America's Pioneer in the Lay Apostolate*

Fr. Thomas Augustine Judge, C.M.
(1868-1933)

David F. O'Connor, S. T.

FATHER JUDGE was a dedicated missionary a man of faith and action. He disturbed the religiously complacent with his thoughts and plans concerning what more could be done for the Church and souls. So great was his zeal, his prayerfulness, his self-sacrifice and holiness that by word and deed he constantly spurred others on to a similar life. His avowed purpose was to make every Catholic a missionary. But he taught that this vocation from the Holy Spirit could be fulfilled only under the guidance of the Church and that personal holiness should accompany apostolic activity. Fr. Judge encouraged frequent reception of the Sacraments, devotion to the Holy Spirit, and a concern for the spiritual and corporal needs of one's neighbor.

Possessing a burning love for God and an extraordinary generosity, he appealed to these qualities in others and asked them to render a personal service to God. His childlike trust in Divine Providence and obedience to the Will of God was coupled with a mature determination

*This article first appeared^f as Chapter 22 in *Portraits in American Sanctity*, ed. by Joseph N. Tylanda, S.J. and is reprinted with the permission of the Franciscan Herald Press.

to do all possible to lead people to Jesus. His simplicity and detachment attracted countless people closer to God.

The evident holiness of the man did not make him a cold severe rigorist, nor an intellectual given to hair splitting. His was an attractive, magnetic personality exuding and breathing a charming amiability, a humble kindness, a delightful simplicity, and affectionate interest in everyone. He was approachable and inspired confidence. To all his spiritual sons and daughters he was simply: Father.

He pioneered the lay apostolate in the United States with a great foresight which paralleled the insistent call of the Roman Pontiffs to organize apostolic lay people in every parish of the world. He desired to help form an enlightened and dedicated laity who not only knew their faith and lived it, but would be zealous to share it with others. From this work with the lay apostolate there also developed two religious missionary congregations which continue to grow and prosper and thereby multiply and extend the work of this zealous priest.

Thomas A. Judge was born in South Boston, Massachusetts, on August 23, 1868. His parents were Thomas Judge (+1887) and Mary Danahey (+1912), immigrants from Ireland. He was the second son and fifth of their eight children. His parents provided an ideal Catholic home for their children. Thomas' mother was accustomed to attend daily morning Mass and his father led the family rosary every evening. They instilled in their children a great love for the Catholic faith and a warm reverence for the priesthood.

God blessed the family by eventually calling three of the children to the religious life, Thomas and two of his younger sisters. Alice Gertrude entered the Daughters of Charity in 1899 as Sr. Alice, Ann Veronica married Mr. Daniel Ledwidge and bore him five children. When she

was a widow and her children were grown, she entered the Congregation founded by her brother and became Sr. M. Gerard, M.S.B.T. in 1924.

Since there were no parochial schools for the Judge children to attend, Thomas was enrolled in the John A. Andrew Public School in September, 1876. He proved to be a normal, healthy boy and a good son.

As Thomas grew in knowledge and love of his faith and matured into a young man, he gave thought to the possibility of a priestly vocation. However, on May 3, 1887, his father suddenly and unexpectedly died. Thomas found it necessary to help support his family by working at various jobs during the day and finishing his high school education by attending night classes. This seemed to express God's will for him and he temporarily put aside all thought of entering a seminary. Within a few years the family was subsisting prudently under the wise direction of his mother. His brother and two of his sisters were also employed and the family was provided with some stability and security.

In the spring of 1889, the priests of the Congregation of the Mission conducted a parish mission at St. Augustine's, his parish, and Thomas sought their counsel. With their encouragement and the blessing of his mother and family, he decided to enter the Apostolic School of the Congregation of the Mission. Thomas entered the school at St. Vincent's Seminary, Germantown, Pennsylvania, on January 25, 1890. He was then twenty-one years old, a mature, hard-working young man who quickly became impressed by the life of the recently beatified John Gabriel Perboyre. Thomas developed a life-long devotion to this son of St. Vincent de Paul martyred in China and desired to follow him as a missionary to pagan lands.

Thomas entered the Novitiate at Germantown on

January 24, 1893, and professed his four vows of poverty, chastity, obedience and stability in the work of the Congregation on the feast of the Conversion of St. Paul, January 25, 1895. He studied philosophy and theology at St. Vincent's Seminary, Germantown, between 1894 and 1899. At this time he became a daily communicant with the permission of his director, a practice that was not common in those days and one that was open to criticism.

In 1898 his health had been gravely weakened by tuberculosis. When Thomas was ordained a priest by Archbishop Ryan in the chapel of St. Charles Seminary, Overbrook, on Pentecost Sunday, May 27, 1899, it was generally believed that he would soon die.

Immediately after ordination Fr. Judge was sent home to his family to recuperate or die. To the surprise of all, he began to recover to such a degree that at the end of the summer he could be given very limited duties. For the next few years he passed his time in St. Vincent's Church, Germantown, and St. Joseph's Church, Emmitsburg, Maryland. At St. Vincent's parish, he first became aware of the many people whom the priests were unable to reach through their daily pastoral ministrations.

In the summer of 1903, his health had improved sufficiently so that he could be assigned full time to the Mission Band resident there at St. Vincent's. An outstanding preacher and confessor, he inspired people to do more for Christ. The Mission Band preached missions in Maryland, Pennsylvania, New York, and New Jersey. He found many people responding to a call to live a holier life. Some sought him out as a spiritual director and confessor. Despite the rigors of the life, he gave his time for rest and recreation to directing them and to seeking out the poor and the needy.

Fr. Judge's constant exhortations to frequent, even daily, Communion and his preoccupation with the

spiritual needs of individuals did not go uncriticized. This helped occasion his transfer to St. John the Baptist Church, Brooklyn, New York, in 1909. Here he became more convinced of the necessity of a spiritualized laity and their apostolic labors among the thousands not being reached by the Church.

On his parochial visits in this single parish of a city of millions, he saw many growing lax in their faith, immigrant Catholics being seduced by proselytism, children going uninstructed in the fundamentals of their inherited faith, and many people living in invalid marriages. He appealed to the generosity of good, zealous, mature Catholic laywomen. He told them of the good that would go undone, the people that would never be reached unless they did it. He sent them out two by two and guided them, directed them, inspired them. This small group which gathered in Perboyre Chapel in April, 1909 became the nucleus of a lay organization that would call itself the "Missionary Cenacle." He encouraged them to: "Be good, do good, and be a power for good."

In August, 1910, Fr. Judge was assigned to the Mission Band at St. Vincent's Mission House, Springfield, Massachusetts. His preaching activities brought him into many parishes in Massachusetts, Vermont, Rhode Island, Connecticut, New York, Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Ohio. Generous people sought him out for direction after he appealed to them in sermons and in the confessional to interest themselves in the spiritual needs of their neighbors. Teachers, office workers, lawyers, nurses, clerks, and laborers became mission-minded and apostolic. Fr. Judge instructed them that they had a true vocation which was founded on a practical devotion to the Holy Spirit. The response was tremendous.

Unable to remain among them for more than a few

weeks, he took to encouraging them by letters which he wrote at the sacrifice of rest and recreation. He encouraged those already doing an apostolic work to befriend and assist those beginning such a work. A comradeship was developed among them and they were united under their common spiritual director, Fr. Judge. Groups of them developed in various cities and towns. They received the commendations of prelates and pastors. The missionary Cenacle of Brooklyn assumed the duty of fostering a family spirit among the members. In 1912, some of the members, who were predominantly women, desired to dedicate themselves completely to this type of activity. They chose a house in Baltimore and began living a common life. By 1915, there were hundreds of members in the Missionary Cenacle.

In the summer of 1915, Fr. Judge was made Superior of St. Mary's Mission House in Opelika, Alabama. The area given to the priests of the Congregation of the Mission comprised 5,300 square miles with 210,000 people, 120 of whom were Catholics. He was encouraged by the former Superior to start a school, but was unable to obtain any Sisters.

Violence, bigotry and opposition met the work of the priests everywhere they turned. As a last resort he appealed to some of the generous Missionary Cenacle members to come South. In 1916, a small group of men and women came to Alabama. When cruel prejudice stifled the work in Opelika, they moved to another area of the mission territory and opened a school in Phenix City, Alabama. Despite the Ku Klux Klan and threats of violence, the school met with some success. Some of the lay people had decided to remain and give their lives to the apostolate and more came to offer help.

St. Patrick's School at Phenix City met with a good response. The "Catholic ladies," as they were called, were

living a community life and accomplishing much good. During an epidemic of influenza in 1918, they nursed the sick and the dying and won the favor of the townspeople. Fr. Judge encouraged and directed them in their apostolic work.

The men were living and working on a nearby plantation owned by a Catholic. The Bishop of Mobile, the Most Rev. Edward P. Allen, gave the group permission to incorporate civilly so that other property could be bought. This property became known as Holy Trinity, Alabama, and a school was erected, later called St. Joseph's School. The concept of forming a religious missionary congregation was now firmly established in the minds of many of the lay people living under Fr. Judge's direction. On November 22, 1920, the Very Rev. Patrick McHale, C.M., an Assistant to the Superior General of the Congregation of the Mission, wrote Fr. Judge that he was given permission to work exclusively with the growing apostolic organization, remaining directly responsible to his Superior General in France.

The lay apostolate was Fr. Judge's primary interest throughout his priestly life. He desired to inspire every Catholic to be a missionary. However, when the lay associates in the Missionary Cenacle developed their own distinctive customs, practices, and spirit, and some began to live a community life with the intention of becoming religious, Fr. Judge saw this as the working of the Holy Spirit.

Without ever disrupting the original purpose of this lay apostolic group, there developed out of this activity two nascent religious missionary congregations, one for women and the other for men. These in turn had the intention of continuing to foster the lay apostolate as well as directly undertaking missionary activities in the abandoned areas of the United States and preserving the

faith. However, it was never the initial intention of Fr. Judge to found the religious congregations. When things developed in that direction, he complied with what he believed to be the will of God. Yet, he never ceased to be a member of the Congregation of the Mission and loyal son of St. Vincent de Paul.

On January 22, 1921, Bishop Allen gave approbation to the inauguration of the Institutes under the name of the Missionary Servants of the Most Blessed Trinity. St. Joseph's School at Holy Trinity, Alabama, became exclusively a seminary in 1926. A few priests came from other parts of the country to assist Fr. Judge. A residence was purchased near Catholic University of America, Washington, D.C. to provide seminarians with the opportunity for higher studies. Fr. Judge viewed all this as the work of the Providence of God.

Fr. Judge kept ecclesiastical authorities informed of his activities and corresponded with the Apostolic Delegates to the United States, the Most Rev. Giovanni Bonzano and the Most Rev. Pietro Fumasoni-Biondi, when prudence demanded it. He was befriended by Cardinal Dougherty, Archbishop of Philadelphia, and the Most Rev. George J. Caruana, Bishop of Puerto Rico and Apostolic Delegate of the Antilles.

On December 18, 1928, the new Bishop of Mobile, the Most Rev. Thomas J. Toolen, sought the permission of the Sacred Congregation of Religious to canonically establish the priests and brothers as a Religious Community. This was granted on March 20, 1929. On April 29, 1929, the Missionary Servants of the Most Holy Trinity were officially erected by the Bishop.

Under the patronage of Cardinal Dougherty, the Sisters received canonical recognition on February 20, 1932, as the Missionary Servants of the Most Blessed Trinity and Mother Boniface Keasey became the first

Custodian General and is considered to be the Co-Founder of the Sisters' community.



Father Judge & Mother Boniface about 1928.

Both institutes began to expand. The burdens of administration and the spiritual formation of the infant communities fell on Fr. Judge's shoulders. He traveled about to the various localities where the congregations were laboring and always reminded them to give primacy to the spiritual despite the pressing financial and material burdens confronting them. His holy life and example, his inspiring conferences and exhortations helped develop a missionary spirit of the highest order.

On August 14, 1933, Fr. Judge returned from a missionary visit to Puerto Rico. His health the previous two years had brought him endless days and nights of suffering. It helped bring about the final spiritualization of a holy life. His weakened condition made him a mere shadow of himself. The doctors insisted he curtail his labors and enter the hospital. After a brief visit with his spiritual sons and daughters, he offered his last Mass at

Holy Trinity Missionary Cenacle, Silver Spring, Maryland, and entered the old Providence Hospital, Washington, D.C., on August 27, 1933. During the next three months he suffered silently and patiently, apologizing to all for being a burden to them. When visitors questioned him about his illness, he would turn the conversation away from himself and speak of the things of God or the great missionary work still to be done for people. Confinement to bed was an added cross to this zealous priest. His health worsened and he found it impossible to concentrate on his customary long prayers: "I have made a contract with God. All I have to say is: Jesus! I cannot pray as I would like, for I am sick—but Jesus understands."

Physically spent, his alert mind considered further work to be done for the poor and the abandoned. On November 7, on the feast of one of his patrons, Blessed John Gabriel Perboyre, he dictated what proved to be his final letter to his spiritual children, urging them to increase their love of God and devotion to the saints.

On the morning of November 23, 1933, he awoke, smiled and blessed the day as was his custom. Early in the afternoon he took a little something to eat and blessed his medicine. Now a mere shell of a man and completely worn out by his years of uninterrupted missionary labors and poor health, he asked to rest. Several minutes afterwards, at 3:00 in the afternoon, without pain or struggle, he peacefully died as a priest raised his hand in absolution. He was sixty-five years old.

On the following day, Friday, his body was transferred to Philadelphia to Blessed Trinity Missionary Cenacle, the Motherhouse of his spiritual daughters. The rosary was recited continually for the next six days while a constant procession of visitors filed by the coffin. On the sixth day the body of Fr. Judge was taken to St. Vincent's

Seminary, Germantown, where the priests of the Congregation of the Mission recited the Office of the Dead. The Requiem was celebrated by priest members of the Congregation which he founded in the presence of Cardinal Dougherty, bishops and prelates. The final procession was to Holy Sepulchre Cemetery in Philadelphia, where he was buried in a simple grave surrounded by his spiritual daughters who had preceded him in death.

Since that day many years ago, the fame and reputation of Fr. Judge have continued to grow and become widespread. His two religious congregations have grown and received Pontifical recognition from the Holy See in 1958. His concept of the lay apostolate and frequent Communion have now become commonly accepted. The wisdom and foresight of this holy priest have proved to be far in advance of his time.

He was a brilliant preacher and conversationalist, but it was the rock bed of his faith and holiness which moved others and left on them a permanent mark. His ideals were those of a man of faith. He aimed at nothing short of converting the world and used every available means to win souls and make the holy more holy and zealous.

Fr. Judge was a prolific writer and preacher. His love of the faith, his knowledge of Holy Scripture, and his zeal for the spread of the Good News are clearly evident in his sermons and writings. He had a great love for the Church and a fervent filial devotion to the Holy Father. He also had a profound love of the Trinity, especially the Holy Spirit. His two missionary congregations were named in honor of the Triune God and he named institutions and religious houses with Trinitarian symbolism. He preached, "I never can pray any greater blessing than for you to teach some child of the Trinity. Greater and more wonderful is the act of him who traces this cross upon a

little child and teaches its use than he who takes a kingdom with many battles....”

As the years of his life multiplied, the faith of Fr. Judge became more profound and deepened, especially as it was tested by trials, tribulations and sacrificial demands. He always taught obedience to the Church and respect for ecclesiastical authority. He wanted the Missionary Cenacle spirit to be the Catholic spirit. His love for the Church, for the faith, was exemplified in thirty-five years of exhausting missionary labors, the fostering of the lay apostolate and the establishment of two religious missionary congregations. At the end of his life he had worn himself out in the service of God and Church.



I beg our Lord to animate you with His Spirit so that you may unceasingly do works pleasing to His Father and useful to the Church.

St. Vincent de Paul

You must hope from the goodness of God that He will bless your work and give you all the graces you need to carry out His most holy Will since you have been chosen by God for that duty through the dispensation of His Providence.

St. Louise de Marillac