

Br. Baldomir (Franz R.) HERMANN 95 SA NGA USA

* January 12, 1899 Langenfeld, Rhineland

+ January 29, 1994 Sarasota, FL

He had studied mechanical engineering and steel frame construction before he entered the novitiate in Knechtsteden, Germany, in 1920. Professed on July 16, 1921, he completed his technical studies, earning a master's degree, and then learned automobile engineering in a motorcar factory in Dusseldorf.

In 1924 he became one of the three German Fathers and six Brothers who could sail for South Africa to pioneer in the new spiritan mission of Kroonstad, Orange Free State. There he learned stone masonry and brickmaking, and helped build the first churches and other facilities of the new mission. He also became an accomplished photographer.

In 1930 Bp. Joseph Shanahan invited him to come to his Onitsha vicariate, Nigeria, to work in the northern section of his vicariate in an area that could later be entrusted to the German province of the Congregation. He built there its first brick church at Makurdi. Two years later, the new bishop of the Onitsha vicariate, Charles Heerey, retained him to design and build a cathedral in the flourishing mission among the Ibo.

It took 27 months to finish the 1,000 seat Holy Trinity Cathedral. Under his direction the entire town pitched in to do the work: Ibo men and women, the young and the old, carried the sand and gravel from the river, laid the bricks, and did the carpentry work, while he himself fashioned the iron cross and communion rail from steel.

A giant of a man, built proportionately and endowed with great physical strength, he was popular with the workers and became known as Brother Aka-Igwe (Iron Hand). When the church was ready, Bp. Shanahan returned to Onitsha to witness the ceremony. Thereafter, Brother built Christ the King College in Onitsha, Holy Cross Hospital in Emekuku and numerous other facilities throughout the vicariate.

His activities in Nigeria came to a halt when World War Two broke out. Together with some 30 other German Spiritans, he was interned and in 1940 shipped across the Atlantic to a camp in Jamaica. It was only seven years later that he and 18 others were released and allowed to go to the United States—thanks to long and persistent efforts of Fr. George Collins, Provincial Superior in the States.

Brother was then assigned to St. Emma Military Academy for African-American boys in Powhatan, VA, and became dean of its trade school. He served there for eighteen years. In 1963 he was transferred to the Bethel Park, PA collegiate seminary of the Congregation and looked after its maintenance until his retirement at Sarasota, FL, in 1976. He continued there to render all the services he could to the other retirees as long as he could.

In 1985 at the centennial of the Spiritans' arrival among the Ibo in Nigeria, the Church had grown from zero to several million and was fully developed. Famous Brother Iron Hand was called back to take part in the centennial celebrations and, at the archbishop's request, addressed the half million people gathered in the Onitsha stadium. He paid a glowing tribute to the Ibo for their contributions to building their cathedral.

Blessed with an iron constitution, he remained vigorous in his nineties. At the age of 93, his driver's license was renewed for another five years, for the examiner said, "I see no reason not to do it. He is a very careful driver." He had never had an accident in over 70 years.

From mid-1993 on he became visibly weaker. Yet when he was invited to visit the South African Spiritan mission that had grown into two dioceses as the sole surviving pioneer of its early days, he wanted to go. With much hesitation his wish was granted; it seemed that it was inspired by his desire to die in Africa. He died, however, less than one month before his scheduled departure day.

Interment took place in the Spiritan cemetery of St. Mary's, Sharpsburg, PA.

He had become an almost legendary figure in Nigeria and was still revered as one of the founding fathers in South Africa. Yet through it all he had remained a deeply spiritual Brother, and a splendid example of the type of Brothers the German Spiritan province could be proud of.