

Fr. Joseph KELLER

Pastor of St. Boniface from 1931 to 1933

By Kevin Wester

Joseph Hubert Keller was born on February 1, 1882 in Aachen, Germany. As a young boy he heard the call to priesthood. He did his classical studies in Hanover and Münster, Germany, and entered the seminary in Friborg, Switzerland. Though he was a seminarian, he was not exempt from compulsory subscription for army training in the German army. Like many other German seminarians at the time who wanted to avoid military training, Joseph immigrated to America in 1912 to finish his seminary training in the States and to become a priest in America. He entered Kendrick Seminary in St. Louis, Missouri, which was traditionally a German American seminary.

It was at Kendrick that Joseph met Martin Hellriegel who would play an impactful role in his life. Martin had also emigrated from Germany to America a few years earlier and had mastered the English language, while Joseph had great difficulty with English as well as his studies. Martin reached out to help Joseph make the transition to Kendrick. He introduced Joseph to his friends and the two seminarians became dear friends themselves, despite the fact that their personalities were polar opposite.

While Martin was very reserved and proper, Joseph was very outgoing and more aggressive. Joseph was not afraid to blurt out whatever he was thinking and tease and aggravate people. Martin eventually became Fr. Martin Hellriegel and served as a longtime chaplain for the Sisters of the Most Precious Blood in O'Fallon, Missouri. Joseph, later Fr. Joseph Keller, often visited his good friend in O'Fallon and also came to know the Precious Blood Sisters

Though attending seminary in Missouri, Joseph decided to serve in the young Diocese of

Dallas, Texas, founded 1890, as there was a shortage of priests in the South and there were numerous German American immigrants there in need of ministry. While the Diocese of Dallas was about 108,000 square miles in size and had a population of 1,500,000, the Catholic population was only 15,000. Joseph was ordained at Sacred Heart Cathedral in Dallas on June 22, 1913, by Bishop Joseph Lynch. After serving as assistant pastor at the cathedral for half a year, he spent the following years doing missionary work mostly among Mexican immigrants.



In 1917, Fr. Keller was assigned as the new pastor St. Joseph's Parish in Slaton, Texas. Slaton was established in 1911 as a key point on the Sante Fe Railroad. Overnight the town sprang up out of the Texas prairie and grew rapidly. St. Joseph Parish was founded the same year as the town by the founding pastor Fr. Reisdorff and two Catholic families. Fr. Reisdorff worked out a deal with the main developer of the town that for every Catholic family purchasing a lot, he would get a commission. This would help him to build up

his parish. Numerous German Catholic families started moving into Slaton, yet it still was a majority Protestant/Evangelical town. Fr. Keller was appointed pastor in 1917 to replace the aging Fr. Reisdorff.

Fr. Keller's move to Slaton would forever change his life. It was 1917. Europe was in the midst of World War I. The United States entered the War on April 6, 1917. Fr. Keller was an outspoken, Catholic priest with a thick German accent and an even thicker attitude and personality. Anti-German sentiment abounded throughout the United States and he was stationed in a southern, predominantly Protestant/Evangelical small town. The recipe was disastrous.

The local newspaper *The Slatonite* was owned and published by William Donald, who was strongly nationalistic, anti-German, and negative toward Catholicism. After Fr. Keller read a number of his anti-German editorials, he took on Donald publicly from the pulpit and within small town circles. Fr. Keller even had a large photo of the German Kaiser Wilhelm prominently enshrined in his office to fuel the fire. It hung there until his own parishioners demanded that he remove it as the war between Donald and him boiled over. Donald used the paper to antagonize Fr. Keller and to turn public opinion, including Keller's own parishioners, against him.

Early in 1917, rumors circulated throughout the United States, that the Kaiser, whose politics helped bring about the War, had appointed several hundred Catholic priests in Germany to immigrate to America to do espionage for the Germans. The rumor mill around Slaton gobbled this up, especially with the photo of the Kaiser hanging in the local rectory. *The Slatonite* and public gossip circles fabricated stories that Fr. Keller was one of the Kaiser's foreign spies. More stories soon circulated that Fr. Keller was an adulterer with his housekeeper, that he had impregnated young girls in town, and that he suffered from syphilis. As the "war" continued in Slaton between Donald and his followers and Fr. Keller, St. Joseph's Parish grew more and more divided and disgruntled over their pastor.

Fr. Keller seemed to have tried to quell the drama when he made the patriotic gesture of purchasing War bonds to support the American war effort. But this backfired on him when, a few weeks later at a patriotic rally in Slaton, it was announced that Fr. Keller was the only one in Slaton who had failed to purchase the assigned amount of war bonds. This situation incited members of the community even more.

In 1918, just one year after he arrived at the parish, members of St. Joseph Parish sent a petition to Bishop Lynch calling for the removal of Fr. Keller. The Bishop investigated the situation and while recognizing that Fr. Keller had "odd habits and personality quirks," he found no evidence to support the serious charges made against him. The Bishop rejected the petition and ordered that parishioners to "grant Fr. Keller the proper respect due a priest."

On November 11, 1918, World War I officially concluded but the animosity and personal attacks against Fr. Keller continued, as did his attitude of not giving up the fight. Also, despite the end of the War, anti-German sentiment and paranoia continued throughout the United States and a spirit of vigilante justice took on new life, especially in the South, with the rebirth of the Ku Klux Klan. One historian writes of this era: *The Ku Klux Klan of the twenties [1920s] was an enemy not only of Negroes, but also of Catholics, Jews, radicals, immigrants, bootleggers moral offenders, habitual criminals, modernist theologians, and assorted other types. [Chronicles: Klan visit often occasion for trouble. By Robert Sledge, Lubbock Avalanche-Journal, Lubbock, Texas, January 7, 2017].* The Klan caught on in Slaton in the summer of 1921, at about the same time the organization was sweeping the state of Texas. Its membership came mainly from the middle class, including professionals, merchants and public officials, often the town's movers and shakers.

Despite the situation, the German Catholic families of Slaton, under the forceful leadership of Fr. Keller, built a third and larger church in 1919 costing about \$10,000, and plans were underway to begin a Catholic school and to

bring religious Sisters to Slaton. In 1920, St. Joseph's School staffed by the Sisters of Mercy came to fruition. This, of course, created even more fear and anxiety for members of the Protestant/Evangelical, anti-Catholic population in Slaton who opposed Fr. Keller.

In 1919, Fr. Keller, thinking that the dark years of the war were behind him, applied for United States citizenship in June 1919. He traveled from Slaton to Abilene to process his citizenship papers but was unnerved to find that two residents of Slaton had also journeyed to Abilene to testify against him. Based on their false testimony that Fr. Keller had tried to renew his German citizenship during the War and that he had even attempted to join the German Imperial Navy during the War, his citizenship request was denied.

In 1922, a new round of rumors began to circulate against Fr. Keller. This time, he was accused of breaking the sacred seal of confession. Perhaps this was the straw that broke the camel's back within the community for Fr. Keller's nightmare was about to begin.

On Saturday, March 4, 1922, Fr. Keller heard his weekly Saturday afternoon confessions. His housekeeper, Miss Brosch made supper for him as usual. Her young sister was visiting her at the time. After dinner, Fr. Keller put on his pajamas, his robe and slippers, and as he often did on Saturday night, he sat in his living room chair praying his breviary. At 8:30 PM there was a knock at his front door to which he responded. Six masked men pushed their way into his living room. A single gunshot was fired into the rectory ceiling to let the priest know they meant business. The frightened young housekeeper and her sister were ordered to lock themselves in another room and assured they would not be harmed.

The hooded men seized the startled Fr. Keller and quickly bound him and dragged him away to an awaiting car. They stuff the portly Fr. Keller down into the back seat of the car and sped away into the darkness for rural Slaton. They drove out on a lonely road to a place several miles north of town and stopped. Fr. Keller was taken out of the car and to his horror 15 to 20 other masked men were waiting

for him. He wailed for mercy but his abductors stripped him of his clothing and tied him to a tree. They then began whipping him with a leather belt. After receiving about 20 lashes, one of the abductors poured hot tar over his naked body. Another man produced a pillow and after ripping it open, the group gleefully scattered feathers over his tar-burnt body. As Father Keller lay there in anguish, members of the mob lectured him and berated him for all of his alleged transgressions. They demanded that he leave Slaton by noon the next day and as they departed, they warned him: *What you got today is only a breakfast spell for you. We are 500 red-blooded Americans of Lubbock and Slaton who are watching you.*

It is difficult to imagine that Fr. Keller did not die on the spot from his burns, or a heart attack or shock. But after the vigilantes left, he slowly walked the couple of miles back to the rectory. There was a public fair going on that evening in Slaton, paradoxically sponsored by *The Slatonite* newspaper, which included the raffle of an automobile. Downtown Slaton was filled with people. Eye witnesses reported seeing Fr. Keller trudging through downtown, completely naked but for one of his bedroom slippers, tarred and feathered. Many found it comical and well deserved.

When Fr. Keller arrived at the rectory, the town Constable was interviewing the housekeeper and her sister who had contacted the authorities. The local doctor, Dr. Tucker, was called in to attend to Fr. Keller. With the help of the two young women, Dr. Tucker used turpentine to try to remove the tar and feathers from his severely burned skin. The process was painful and gruesome and took hours. Though the Constable interviewed Fr. Keller to get the facts of the crime, many later wondered if he was not also part of a larger group of conspirators against Fr. Keller. It is believed that Fr. Keller spent the night at Dr. Tucker's home out of fear the attackers would return to the rectory.

Early the next morning, confused and in fear for his life, Fr. Keller put on an old gray suit, threw a few things in a bag, including a box of cigars, put a sandwich in his pocket, and made

his way to the train station in neighboring Posey, Texas. He fled to Amarillo, Texas, and, out of absolute fear of being abducted again, he created the story that he was a traveling cigar salesman and he found a room to take shelter. Soon, shock, fear and infected wounds due to the tar closing the pores on his skin, and a severe fever led him to St. Anthony Hospital in Amarillo.

To the doctors and nurses, he was a mystery because he could not or would not explain what happened, though it was obvious he had been through a horrible ordeal. In his delirium all they could discover was that he was on his way to a place where some Sisters would help him. The hospital cared for him for a period of time and when his physical situation seemed more stable, he was dismissed from the hospital and taken to the train station. Fr. Keller, who at this point was beginning a nervous breakdown, was on his way to his to seek refuge with his longtime friend, Fr. Hellriegel, and the Precious Blood Sisters in O'Fallon, Missouri.

The next part of his saga is best described in a document written about Fr. Keller by Precious Blood Sister Ernestine Schulze:

One evening around 6:30 here at the convent, the front doorbell rang and Sr. Caelestia went to answer it as she was clearing the table in the priests' dining room. There stood a bedraggled man looking like a hobo, unshaven, trying in faltering tones to utter words begging for lodging. Sister insisted to have him enter but his eyes looked so glazed and pleading that she took him into the parlor. Sister had served him [Fr. Keller] meals when he visited here but she did not even recognize him.

Sister went to inform Mother Wilhelmine and Mother came to investigate the situation. She spoke to him very kindly but Father was unable to communicate because he was in shock. Fr. Hellriegel, who had gone somewhere in the house after he left the supper table, was passing the parlor, and at that moment Fr. Keller's tongue loosened and he cried, "Maaarteen!" Mother Wilhelmine relaxed. She thought, "So, he knows Fr. Hellriegel."

It did not take long now until his story began to unravel and after some food was served him, he was taken to the rectory. Sr. Aegidia was summoned to have a room and warm bath ready as well as a good bed. The facts slowly were cleared up. It took a long time, though until the whole story became clear. He spoke with such a stutter and trepidation, as though he feared that what he would reveal would be made public and the KKK would find out his whereabouts.

Back in Slaton, most residents seemed delighted that the hated Fr. Keller had been driven out of their town. By the following day, the story of Fr. Keller being tarred and feathered started to hit local and national newspapers. The afternoon after the incident, a large group of Slaton residents gathered for a mass meeting and wrote a statement regarding the previous evening's events. The statement was read at all the local Protestant churches that evening and was signed by 54 male citizens of Slaton, including seven members of Fr. Keller's parish. The statement read:

...While we deeply regret that such an occurrence was necessary, after repeated efforts had been made to induce said Keller to give up his position as parish priest, yet we express it as our conviction that the occurrence will redound to the best interests of this community, for both Catholics and Protestants. We wish to make clear that in our opinion and judgement, as representative citizens of this community, that the action against said priest is not a particle of evidence or indication that there is any ill feeling at all against any person in this community because he or she may happen to be of German blood or of the Catholic faith; but, on the other hand, with the lone exception of said Keller... We desire, further, most emphatically to say that, since the said Rev. Keller has left Slaton, in accordance with instructions he stated the tar and feather party had given him, that the good people of Slaton will gladly welcome and support his successor as the head of St. Joseph Parish, provided he be a clean Christian gentleman of high and loyal sentiments and ideals, and a loyal American.

Such a man will be an asset to us and not a liability...

The statement from residents of Slaton provoked an angry response from Texas Catholics. Several chapters of the Knights of Columbus sent letters of protest to the city of Slaton. The National Catholic Welfare Council offered a \$2,500 reward for information leading to the arrest and conviction of the persons who tarred and feathered Fr. Keller. Yet none of this shook the culprits from Slaton.

William Donald's editorial in the next edition of *The Slaton* read:

THE TAR AND FEATHER PARTY.

Father Keller was whipped Saturday night and treated to a good coat of tar and feathers and ordered to leave town, which he did. It is stated that the Catholic Priest had been living in adultery, guilty of insulting ladies of the community, and accused of other acts unbecoming a good and loyal American citizen.

It is not known who applied the tar and feathers, but not a single expression of disapproval has been heard so far. Some have expressed regret that they were not invited to the party.

Keller's own congregation had been trying to get rid of him for many months and only last November a long petition was sent to Bishop Lynch at Dallas, signed by a large number of his most influential members praying that he be removed for sufficient cause. Catholics state that they never even received an acknowledgement of this request.

However, the tar and father route seemed to be the most effectual method of getting rid of an undesirable. There are other undesirables in Slaton too, and we shouldn't wonder if some of them should not go the tar and feather route before many weeks pass. A start has been made and it may develop into an epidemic calculated to clean up the old town and community.

Every indication is that the tar and feather party of last Saturday night was composed of some of the best citizens of Lubbock County, men who believe in law and order, and would in no instance resort to this means of punishment if the courts could punish the guilty. One thing

this tar and feather party overlooked was picking up a newspaper man to report the affair. We hope they will be more thoughtful next time. – W. Donald.

While an alleged investigation was begun by the Constable, no arrests were ever made and the crime against Fr. Keller faded away. The Sisters of Mercy serving at St. Joseph's School immediately left the parish out of concern for their personal safety despite being told by the authors of the official Slaton statement that they would not be harmed. The Bishop of Dallas considered putting St. Joseph Parish under interdict but the damage was now done and over. But Fr. Keller's ordeal was far from over.

Precious Blood Sister Ernestine Schulze, wrote: *Everything was done at the convent to put Fr. Keller at ease. The bishop in Texas was secretly informed of everything. Since Fr. Keller went into shock at the mention of his own name, it was at once agreed upon that no one was to call or address him as Father Keller but that he would be known as Father Hubert [his middle name]. All mail that came to the rectory in Texas was put in a larger envelope and taken to the bishop who in turn addressd it to Father Hubert. In that way, his address would not be discovered.*

The healing of mind and body was a painful and drawn out process. Great discomfort of the sores that had to be bathed and attended to daily, and mental and emotional anguish had to be overcome. There were many nights when Fr. Hellriegel sat by his bedside, holding his hand and assuring him that he was dreaming. The old green shutters had to be closed each night all over the house to be sure that not a ray of light from outside was visible. Time and great patience on the part of Fr. Hellreigel, Mother Wilhelmine, Sr. Veneranda and Sr. Aegidia finally helped him regain his composure, and in the end, he again was able to put on a comedy show. Sisters who were in residence here were entertained with his famous SABINCHEN which he played on the old pretend grind-organ for our fun.

What was next for Fr. Keller? He wanted to enter into priestly ministry again but he also

wanted to be as far away from Texas as possible. While recuperating from his breakdown at the Precious Blood Convent, he met Sacred Heart priest Fr. Keifer from Sacred Heart Monastery in Hales Corners, Wisconsin, who was giving a retreat for the Sisters. Fr. Keller took to Fr. Keifer and discovered that Hales Corners, Wisconsin, was far from Texas. Fr. Kieffer assisted Fr. Keller in making contact with Archbishop Messmer of Milwaukee, who welcomed Fr. Keller.

After seven months of mental and physical recuperation with Fr. Hellreigel and the Precious Blood Sisters, Fr. Keller came to the Archdiocese of Milwaukee on October 4, 1922. He was assigned as assistant pastor at the traditionally German St. Joseph's Parish in Milwaukee. Fr. Keller successfully served there until he was assigned as assistant pastor at St. Peter Parish in Beaver Dam on February 2, 1924. On December 23, 1924, he was officially incardinated into the Archdiocese of Milwaukee.

Fr. Keller's next assignment was as pastor of Sr. Francis Xavier Parish in Brighton, Wisconsin, in November 1925, and on **June 15, 1931, he was named pastor of St. Boniface Parish in Germantown.** Finally, on June 23, 1933, Fr. Keller was named pastor of St. Mary's Parish in Lake Church. In spite of the emotional and physical trauma that he experienced in 1924, Fr. Keller seemed to have bounced back into his former outspoken and aggressive self.

Bert Wester (1926-2016), father of the author of this biography, shared that Fr. Keller was his favorite priest during his youth at St. Mary's Parish in Lake Church. Bert shared that everyone in the parish knew the story that Fr. Keller was tarred and feathered down South by the KKK. Bert remembered that when he was a server for Fr. Keller, that as Fr. Keller put on his alb before Mass, he could see the scars from the burns on Fr. Keller's arms. Bert also shared that, as a youngster, he found Fr. Keller very comical with his thick German accent and outspoken personality. He would often say things publicly that were shocking to people.

One remembrance Bert shared occurred the Sunday before Lent began. Traditionally, on the Sunday before Lent, the pastor would read the

Lenten regulations for fasting and abstinence. Fr. Keller apparently had a recent run in with a member of the Krier family from the parish. The Kriers were the owners of the *Krier Preserving Company* and prominent members of the community. As Fr. Keller shared the Lenten regulations from the pulpit, he said: *So you must refrain from eating meat on Fridays. But you are allowed to eat Krier's pork and beans because there ain't much meat in them anyhow.* The people at church gasped at what he said. Bert also told the story that many of the farm families from Lake Church would share meat and farm produce with the parish priest as a sign of friendship and support, as did Bert's father, Aloys Wester, nicknamed "Losey." One day when Aloys was going to confession to Fr. Keller, after absolving him, Fr. Keller said to him through the confessional screen: "Losey, thanks for the delicious ham. But next time, not so much salt." It was a very unconventional way to end confession.

Fr. Keller was embraced by the people of St. Mary's despite his strong personality. During his six years as pastor in Lake Church he made over \$10,000 worth of improvement to St. Mary's buildings and grounds. On June 1, 1938, Fr. Keller celebrated his 25th jubilee of priesthood with a huge celebration at the parish. A morning Mass was celebrated with parishioners, 60 members of the clergy, including his good friend, now Msgr. Hellriegel from Missouri, 10 monsignors, and the Dominican sisters serving at St. Mary's School. Archbishop Stritch of Milwaukee preached at the Mass. The Mass began with a huge procession including the Holy Name Society, altar boys with laurel branches, school children with a school banner, jubilee year graduates from St. Mary's School, 25 little girls with silver sashes, hosts of flower girls and five youngsters from the parish highlighted as bride, Patsy Anzia, bridesmaids Janet Wellenstein and Evelyn Antoine, and page boys Francis Ansay and Daniel Wester.

After the jubilee Mass, a luncheon was served to the clergy and an evening reception followed in St. Mary's Hall with over 250 families from the parish greeting Fr. Keller and a program

celebrating his priesthood. Also, in conjunction with his 25th Jubilee, the parish had had St. Mary's Church repainted and redecorated. Fr. Keller's magnificent 25th Jubilee celebration certainly must have been for him a celebration of his triumph over of all the struggles he had overcome in his life.

In 1939, Fr. Keller's health declined due to continued complications from the burns he had endured in 1924. On October 2, 1939, he was hospitalized at St. Joseph's Hospital in Milwaukee, where he died on December 18, 1939 at the age of 57. Fr. Keller's body was waked in St. Mary's Church in Lake Church overnight from December 20 to the celebration of his Requiem High Mass on December 21. Most appropriately, Fr. Keller had directed that his body be taken "home" to the Precious Blood Convent in O'Fallon, Missouri, where the Sisters had offered him a home in his hour of need. He is buried in the Sisters of the Most Precious Blood Cemetery along with his dear friend, Msgr. Martin Hellriegel, who died in 1981, and the Sisters who showed him such great love and compassion.

About the Author

Kevin Wester was born in Port Washington and grew up in Belgium WI in the heart of Ozaukee County's strong Luxembourg heritage and culture. He is proud of to be 100% Luxembourgish. His grandfather frequently took him to the old family farms and homesteads, cemeteries and churches in the area and told him the stories that went along with each site. Throughout middle school, high school and college and his adult life, Kevin has remained an avid historian and genealogist and has written numerous books/booklets pertain to his Luxembourg ancestors and their parishes in Wisconsin, Minnesota, Iowa and Nebraska. Fr. Keller served at Kevin's hometown parish in Lake Church near the village of Belgium where he grew-up. Kevin was ordained a priest for the Archdiocese of Milwaukee in 1990. He was instrumental in founding the Luxembourg American Cultural Society and Center. After leaving the priesthood in 2006, he was hired as LACS Director of Development and 2010 as the Society's first full-time Executive Director. Currently Kevin helps people attain their Luxembourg Dual Citizenship, and is owner of Luxembourg Adventures. He resides on the east side of Milwaukee.