

Biographical Sketch of Fr. Nicolas Joseph Albert von Diessbach, S.J.

by Venerable Pio Bruno Lanteri, OMV

Father Joseph de Diessbach, patrician of the Canton of Bern, was born of Calvinist parents in Bern (Switzerland) who raised and educated him in the Calvinist sect. He was gifted with great talents and received the very best education. As a young man he grew in the knowledge of the dogma of his sect. He became a captain of an infantry regiment of Bern which belonged to his uncle of the Diessbach name. He had a brother who was a colonel in the Swiss Guard at the service of France. Diessbach liked to read very much. From being a Calvinist he eventually became an unbeliever. He detested priests and religious brothers and just to see them passionately moved him interiorly, saying to himself, "Look at those imposters who deceive the people!" He himself recounted this many times; however he was never a promoter of impiety.

The origin of his conversion began in Nice where his garrison was. The cause of his conversion was the reading of a book (I believe it was *Les egarements de la raison*) which he found in the house of the Spanish Consul S. Pierre where he was much appreciated for his fine qualities but mourned over because of his heresy. A book was cleverly strategically placed for him, because they knew of his great desire to know and read books.

He was a reflective man who didn't decide anything without much reflection. Thus he went to a Jesuit to review his difficulties. This Jesuit counseled him to take a leave of absence for two months and go to Turin where he could make his profession of faith and conversion with less difficulty.

Arriving in Turin at the Jesuit College he was surprised at the excellent manners with which he was received even beginning with the doorkeeper. There he found all of his difficulties answered to his full satisfaction. He, consequently, made his profession ("abiura"), his first confession and received communion and the sacrament of confirmation from the hands of Archbishop la Santa.

Having become Catholic he changed regiments and entered as captain in the regiment of Ziethen, then called Brem, thus Royal Allemand with the uniform of Ziethen. Carl Emmanuel III, the King of Sardinia, saw in him an able general.

He married the daughter of the above mentioned S. Pierre, Consul of Spain, and she died when he was stationed in the garrison of Alexandria.

After his wife died he soon consecrated himself to God in the Society of Jesus, having said that after God he owed his conversion to the House of S. Pierre and after that to the Jesuits; thusly he considered that he had sufficiently expressed his gratitude to all.

Having become a Jesuit and further cultivating his talents he became dear to many people and did great good in the missions in Piedmont and great good in Switzerland, he converted many people, also among the protestants; many impressive conversions. He preached sometimes in several churches in the same day in Italian, French, and German.

He was most learned and up to date on current events observing immediately how they could be related to the glory of God. He had the gift of speech and his conversation was sweet, polite, cordial, reserved and prudent. He knew how to win the hearts of all; thus everyone sought him out and appreciated him. He also took advantage of every occasion to counter some offense against God, and did not rest until he achieved his purpose of exposing these insults for what they were, as in fact often happened.

For many years he had a lame leg so that he could not stand in order to celebrate mass, but nonetheless he never neglected to assist at the Holy Sacrifice and also if any sick person needed him at any hour, even in the middle of the night, he immediately got up to assist them.

He lost no opportunity to employ any means in any occasion to promote the glory of God. He undertook the longest journeys even when in ill health and without money having total confidence in Divine Providence by which he was miraculously assisted.

He found himself one day in an inn in Piedmont wherein the protestant official had stopped the singing of the Litany of Mary simply because it annoyed him. He called for and spoke to the owners and strongly reprimanded them to ask pardon for the scandal they had caused and gave them a severe penance as reparation.

He instructed the princess of Savoy, Carlotta, daughter of King Vittorio, married to the Prince of Saxony in the eighth year of the Revolution, and provided her with a writing against the errors of the protestants; it is not known if this was printed.

He went several times to Paris where he had good relations with the most cultivated and zealous people. His object principally was the conversion of his brother, a colonel in the Swiss Guard, and he did much good there as he, in fact, did wherever he went.

He undertook to instruct in the Catholic faith Elizabeth of Wurtemberg, wife of Francis Archduke of Austria, at that time Emperor. Not only common people but also persons of high status, Prelates, Cardinals, Princes and also Sovereigns were up helped and sustained by his counsel.

He traveled several times to Germany. The first time he went to Vienna passing through Wurtemberg, since he was good friends with Prince Louis, brother of the then Ruler, who himself in turn governed even if for a short time He returned to Piedmont in 1788.

He returned there upon the request of the Archduchess Elizabeth, wife of the Emperor Francis in 1791 but found that she had passed away several days earlier.

He returned a third time in 1798 and there died a holy death on the 22 of December and was buried.

To know good books, especially religious books in all subjects and to find and adopt all means of promoting the reading of them among all classes of persons was, I can say it, his passion, mostly because he remembered the great good that reading a good book had done for him personally. He had vast erudition in this field, with a fine critical sense, and a great memory.