

Brother Fridolin Ifen, S.V.D.

Brother Fridolin was one of the most talented and gifted of the lay Brothers in the Society of the Divine Word. He served as a painter for some years at Techny with Brother Cornelius and eventually became interested in building religious grottoes. During his long and excellent career as a Divine Word Brother he built many grottoes at the society's mission seminaries throughout the country.

Born April 5, 1868 at Unteraegri, a north central village in the Swiss Alps 15 miles south of Zurich in Switzerland, Anton Iten was the son of Dominic and Helena Iten. He entered the missionary society on May 30, 1892 at the motherhouse in Steyl. Admitted to the novitiate on December 11, 1892, he was professed with first temporal vows on December 8, 1894 received by Blessed Arnold Janssen, founder of the community. His final vows were made at Steyl on November 22, 1903. Assigned to the American province in 1909, Brother Fridolin came to the United States after the death of Blessed Arnold.

Midwestern Grottoes

He was best known at Techny for his series of grottoes and shrines constructed about the grounds of the foreign mission seminary.

Unquestionably the most complex and artistic shrine built at Techny by Brother Fridolin was the Agony in the Garden shrine, a cave-like grotto with 2 exits for visitors to enter and contemplate the vivid scene of our Lord's Agony in the Garden. The statues of Christ and the angel clearly illustrate the sufferings undergone by our Lord for the sins of man. A small circular stairs leading to an upper balcony permits the viewer to look down on the agonizing scene.

The grotto of Gethsemani was built during the summer of 1921 in the Techny park by Brother Fridolin and his helpers. At the entrance of the vaulted cavern is the scene of our Lord's triumphal entry into Jerusalem in huge base relief. At the center of the grotto is the large statuary group of the Lord's agony with the angel appearing before the Lord. The dragon is visible which symbolizes the Savior's victory over sin. The grotto is unique in that there is no other like it to be found as beautiful and well constructed by the talented grotto builder.

Brothers Fridolin and Paul completed the beautiful grotto of the Agony of the Lord in the shady nook by the pond in the seminary park during the summer of 1921. The grotto has 2 distinctive entrances. The statue of the agonizing Jesus in his bloody sweat with an angel holding the chalice is the main attraction in the grotto. Light enters thru properly colored glass panes mounted in the ceiling which gives a realistic appearance. In passing thru the exit of the grotto one sees the risen savior in all his glory.

Drama productions were staged with great popularity on Techny's auditorium stage for many years. Stage scenery painted by Brother Fridolin added to the beauty of the setting for all plays, all of which were painted by the good Brother in 1914 who possessed artistic talents and skill of a professional.

A massive concrete bridge that joins the 2 sections of the Techny pond was built by Brother Fridolin before 1915. He helped install the large statue of the Sacred Heart of Jesus near the bridge in the park facing the mission house. During the last week of October, 1917 Brother Fridolin with the help of Brother Paul erected scaffolding in front of the cow barn and installed base relief figures of a Holstein cow and calf as a fitting ornament for the Techny farm. Brother Fridolin celebrated his silver jubilee at Techny in 1919.

A large life size crucifix was made and installed at the entrance of the chapel at Techny in 1918. The crucifix, located in the long corridor near the chapel, is the handiwork of Brother Fridolin which depicts the agonizing look from the piercing eyes of the dying Savior. Brothers Fridolin and Wendelin, Techny architects, prepared plans and built the ancient Aztec dwelling in the Techny park during the summer of 1920.

The life size statue of Blessed Arnold Janssen, founder of the Society of the Divine Word, was erected in the Techny park in the summer of 1923 by Brothers Fridolin and Paul, both who were experts in masonry work and grotto composition. Father Janssen is represented with a little Chinese boy kneeling before him, upon whose head the saintly priest rests his hand in benediction, for it was for the Chinese that Father Janssen founded the missionary society. An inscription in a frontal panel at the base reads: "Arnold Janssen, Founder of the Society of the Divine Word, 1875." A large shield in front of the monument was designed and made by Brother Wendelin in the fall of 1922. The mosaic structure displays a large cross made of stones in front of the statue.

The shrine of St. Joseph shows the good saint holding the Christ Child and is located near the Techny pond. The good Brother's devotion to the Blessed Mother is evident in the alcove shrine of the Blessed Virgin in reproduction of the apparition at Lourdes in 1858 to St. Bernadette Soubirous. A fountain that issues forth fresh water is self contained within the shrine's precincts which recalls the incident of the miracle at the original French site. The statue of our Lady garbed in blue and white brings to mind the colors worn as asserted by tradition. The beautiful Lourdes grotto was solemnly dedicated in the Techny park in May of 1938; it was designed and built by Brother Fridolin and his helpers.

Oftentimes the seminarians and Brothers walk thru the woods of the mission property during the summer months. As they pass along the pathways they approach a typical outdoor shrine of the Blessed Mother in prayerful mood built in 1918. Each of these shrines stand to the eternal memory of Brother Fridolin for the fine work he did in bringing to mind the religious atmosphere thru mortar and stone. Techny's St. Mary's Cemetery is the setting of statuary of our Lord's death on the cross with his Blessed Mother and St. John standing nearby as told by gospel narration, all built by the esteemed shrine builder.

Winter months were spent at the art studio in Techny where Brothers Fridolin and Paul made statues used in all their grottoes and shrines from coast to coast. In the spring of 1934 Brother Fridolin began work on the Lourdes grotto at St. Paul's Seminary in Epworth, Iowa, located on the summit of a little hill near the Sisters convent.

The 40 foot wall for the new grotto was built in reproduction of the world famous miraculous grotto of Lourdes in France. The scene represents the apparition of the Immaculate Virgin to the poor humble shepherdess, St. Bernadette Soubirous kneeling before the Blessed Mother listening to the identity of the Immaculate Conception. Artificial lighting installed at the grotto gave illumination on the subjects. The grotto engineer, Brother Fridolin, completed the grotto before winter and completed the landscaping the following spring. Plumb trees in the background produced a fragrant garland when in full bloom surrounding the niche containing the statue of Mary Immaculate.

The master grotto builder worked energetically at his 6th grotto at the Iowa seminary. Finishing touches were put on the Agony in the Garden grotto by Brother Fridolin in April, 1935. Several loads of earth were hauled to the scene for the completion of the landscaping of the grotto. Shrubs and bushes were planted in the vicinity of the grotto to add to its beauty.

Stones and rocks from the local community were used in building the Gethsemane grotto. The picturesque statue of the comforting angel was surmounted on a rock above the kneeling figure of the sorrowful savior with the sleeping apostles in the background. The sorrowful mother shrine at the end of the grotto depicted the mother of Jesus holding her deceased son.

The interior of the grotto of the Agony depicts the sorrowful Lord kneeling in prayer before the angel holding the chalice. The sorrowful mother statue is in a section adjoining the Agony scene followed by a crucifixion scene and the holy sepulcher. This grotto is most impressive and inspiring representation of the sorrowful events of our Lord's last days. The exterior of the grotto was terraced, sodded, and bedded with shrubs and bushes giving a picturesque view to all visitors.

Outside the grotto is the crucifixion group of Calvary consisting of the crucified Lord with Mary and John beside him. The Calvary group is the handiwork of Brother Fridolin and his helpers. The shrines were financed by loyal mission-minded people from Dubuque. In 1934 he built and painted several sets of scenery for stage settings that were used for the first time at Christmas and likewise used on many occasions in later years.

Another grotto built by Brother Fridolin at the seminary at East Troy, Wisconsin is the handiwork of the talented grotto builder. At Rome City, Indiana in the Fort Wayne diocese he meticulously constructed a grotto and outdoor stations of the cross for the Sisters of the Precious Blood. Other noteworthy shrines built by Brother Fridolin were at Fort Sheridan and Wilmette, Illinois and Huntington, Indiana.

Grottoes in Eastern States

Brothers Fridolin and Paul made the outdoor pond at Girard in 1920. They laid the concrete base and filled the sides with cement completing the pond. Brother Fridolin came to Girard in November, 1927 and erected an outdoor statue of Blessed Arnold Janssen on a little island in the park pond. The extended arms of the missionary founder's statue are raised in benediction to all who come to Sacred Heart Seminary and depart for the foreign missions. The Girard community was gratefully indebted to Brother Fridolin for his fine work and thankful to the New York family for their generous donation of the statue. Brother Fridolin built an outdoor grotto of Rip Van Winkle in the park in Girard in 1933. The statue of the sleeping Rip was the main attraction of all visitors in the park.

Brother Fridolin came to Miramar in November, 1931 to do artistic work with his paint and brushes. Brothers Fridolin and Kilian built a spacious rock garden in the beautiful park at Miramar in 1932. The rock garden, semicircular in form, faces a pond in the park. The restful nook is the leisurely spot enjoyed by the Brothers during the summer months. Flowers abound in the delightful spot on the mission grounds.

At the entrance of Miramar's Gethsemane grotto is a large white mural representing King David. The grotto was built in the fall of 1933 by the good Brother Fridolin who spent 3 months on the designing and construction of the project assisted by Brother Kilian.

The vaulted interior of the grotto has the holy atmosphere of a sanctuary. From a small balcony the visitor sees the scene of the agony of our Lord in the garden of Gethsemane, so real and lively that it leaves an impression on one's soul never to be effaced. The life size statue of the Lord in kneeling position before the angel with a chalice in its hands portrays the scene of the passion. The angel strengthens Jesus as he kneels in dark desolation abandoned by his disciples and favorite apostles Peter, James and John who are asleep at the far end of the scene.

A red skylight in the grotto produces an effect of the red glare of torches carried by Roman soldiers who accompanied Judas in the betrayal scene. A little side chapel depicts the sorrowful Mother holding her son on her lap and weeping beside the newly hewn grave. All visitors of the grotto receive an inspiration, courage and determination to shoulder their crosses that God sends them.

At St. Francis Xavier Seminary in Miramar Brother built a perfect replica of Rip Van Winkle carved from stone as found in the beautiful rose garden in 1933. At Rip's side was his long pipe and his faithful dog sleeping beside its beloved master.

Brother Fridolin, sculptor and builder of grottoes, witnessed the beatification process of the founder, Blessed Arnold Janssen, whom he knew personally and related incidents of their acquaintances in Steyl held in Techny in 1935.

Brother Fridolin returned to Miramar in the fall of 1935, continued his work of beautification of the park, and built 2 new bridges that connected 2 small ponds with the main pond assisted by Brothers Corsinus, Vincent Gerat and Kilian Mueller. He built a Lourdes grotto near the upper part of the pond facing the water in 1935. The stones were taken from the quarry in the woods. The statues of the Blessed Mother and St. Bernadette were donated by a priest friend of the seminary.

Brothers Fridolin and Paul arrived in Conesus, New York during the summer of 1937 to work on the Rosary grotto of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Completed in 1937, it depicts scenes of the 5 joyful mysteries of the rosary skillfully designed in the grotto. Brother Fridolin put the finishing touches on the beautiful Marian grotto in 1937 depicting the 5 sorrowful mysteries of the rosary. Despite his advanced years, he completed the work of art that would envy many a young sculptor. People came from near and far to Conesus to view the rosary grotto and then proceeded to the Gethsemane grotto.

The agony grotto depicts the sorrowful mysteries of the rosary, the most prominent mystery being the agony of the Lord in the garden where the Lord kneels before the angel holding the chalice. The crucifixion scene is located at the far end of the grotto. The grottoes at Conesus are the handiwork of the venerable and skilled grotto builder for the missionary society, and was assisted by Brother Paul.

The grotto of the Agony completed at St. Michaels in Conesus in late fall of 1938 by Brother Fridolin is located next to a gully beside a running brook and shade trees. The grotto represents the mysteries of the sorrowful Lord depicted in stone and metal. A winding staircase leads to a balcony where one sees a panoramic view of the whole interior of the grotto. The statues are the artistic handiwork of Brother Fridolin, an expert in grotto construction. Near the 2 rosary grottoes in the school park at Conesus, Brother Fridolin began building the Lourdes grotto in a scenic wooded area during the summer 1938

During the early winter months of 1939 Brother Fridolin and his helper, Brother Paul, made the statues for the Grotto of the Agony at St. Michael's Seminary in Conesus. They completed the grotto in 1938 and installed the statues during the summer of 1939.

The vine clad Hemlock Hills of Conesus shed the true wintry look with snow covered external views over the beautiful Rosary grottoes during the winter season of 1940. The solitary snowscape covering the Rosary grottoes have been the main attraction for visitors for many years. They are the work of the talented shrine builder, Brother Fridolin who passed away during the month of the holy Rosary in 1939. The 2 grottoes are gems of his art work that made the humble artist so popular throughout the United States. The grottoes depict colorful scenes of the joyful and sorrowful mysteries of the rosary.

He possessed deep spirituality which led to his building grottoes. He lived at Conesus the last few years of his life. He journeyed to Rochester to meet some friends on October 19, 1939; he suffered a slight stroke at the Rochester station and was taken to the seminary to rest. He was hospitalized at St. Mary's Hospital in Rochester on October 22 where he died 5 days later on October 27, 1939 at the age of 71. He died peacefully in the month of the holy rosary, for he had a special devotion to the Blessed Mother of the Rosary all his life. His many Marian grottoes bear witness as a perpetual memory to the eminent grotto builder.

His long life of 71 years filled with work and prayer were well known to all members of the society. He spent his life building shrines and grottoes at all mission seminaries in the United States. Of the many grottoes built by Brother Fridolin, the beautiful Rosary Grotto at Conesus is one of the nicest that he built. The grotto was nearly completed when he suffered a stroke and was taken to the hospital. All his life he wished to die on a Friday between 2 and 3 p.m. His wish was granted and he died peacefully surrounded by friends, relatives, and members of the religious community.

He had rare artistic talent for the production of statues and outdoor grottoes. In his old age he wore his silvery beard, white hair and all the mild features accompanied with his usual smile gave him a most venerable appearance. His work so varied in nature of artistry found him busily occupied in the paint shop, statuary workshop, or outside building shrines, grottoes, bridges and repair jobs on the buildings and sidewalks. The Techny park abounded in his productions including little dwarfs, rabbits and Rip van Winkle interspaced along the park sidewalks.