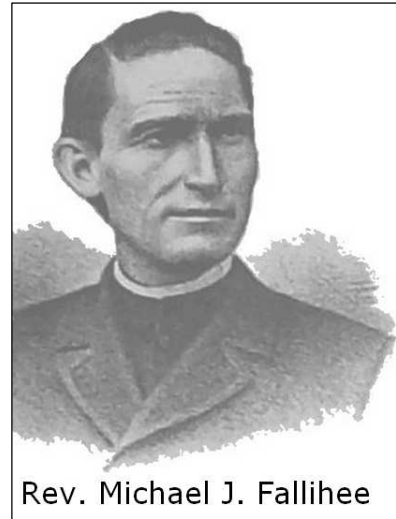


FREELAND'S FIRST PASTOR

A GOOD AND FAITHFUL SERVANT

Reproduction of an article by Peter J. Gallagher
June 1924

Less than ten years ago there traversed these mountains a familiar bent figure, carrying a lantern and an umbrella. The lantern might well symbolize the faith of the old man whose life was never darkened by doubt or disillusion; the umbrella, his watchful care to protect himself not merely from the onslaughts of the weather, but also from the more formidable onslaughts of temptation. No one looking, at our first pastor, Father Fallihee, could surmise the riches of his soul. Like the monks of old, he used to expend his great vitality in digging, building, painting, and remodeling generally his church property. Only those who knew this man intimately could penetrate the disguise of his unpolished exterior and see the saint beneath it.



Rev. Michael J. Fallihee

Father Fallihee loved humanity because he loved God, and also because he found humanity very lovable. He loved the poor, but love was not the only gift he gave them. His purse was always open to them. One woman tells of running down stairs when she heard coal being put into her cellar, to tell the driver there was some mistake. He told her there was no mistake; only her pastor had been mindful of need. Doubtless hundreds could tell a similar story. Rumor, eager for flaws and blind to perfections, made many believe that he would die rich. Only his death could and did prove the injustice of this assumption. The rumor testifies that in giving to the needy, he never let his left hand know what his right hand did. Only in the annals of the poor and in the Book of Life is the record of his kind acts complete.

Certainly, to Father Fallihee there was no tedium in life, for there was no honor without its vivid employment. When not engaged in manual work, he was visiting the parishioners, mainly to determine their spiritual status, and incidentally to learn their needs. His recreations were few and simple. He rarely left the parish. And on the rare occasions when he did, we are told the priests, who loved him for his meekness, his humility, and his other-worldliness, would send word ahead to his next stopping place that he might be sure of a welcome. He took great delight in playing the violin, but in music as in life he totally ignored the sharps and flats. "Pop Goes the Weasel" was his reputed favorite selection. We can imagine the joy with which he would have welcomed the radio, had it reached us a few years sooner. His favorite outdoor sport was horse back riding. On Sundays, he would ride to the outlying mining towns seeking Sunday School truants, thus making of even his recreation a means of bringing souls to God.

Father Fallihee was neither a fluent nor an eloquent talker. Often after a halting, stumbling sermon, he would turn back to the altar, chuckling to himself. Only a truly humble man could thus humorously acknowledge and enjoy his own shortcomings. Latterly he was much given to repetition. One of the nuns asking for a free day, would be answered thus: "Free day Free day: Let's see! Let's see! Free day-- yes, yes to be sure."

There was a pretty playful side to his nature, but he was utterly lacking in softness; he never employed a caressing tone or phrase, and his impersonal Catholic viewpoint never relaxed or slackened or compromised. All this often conveyed to people who did not know him the impression that he was wanting in sympathy and gentleness and the more amiable graces of life. The reverse was the fact. He was a subtle, practical joker. All through his priestly life the numerous phases of daily adventure never missed him. For instance, once when the men were working around the church, he noticed a thirst-workman who had frequently to leave his work to patronize the flask in his coat pocket. Smilingly Father Fallihee suggested that he would save Mlle by putting on his coat. With sincere and natural folk, he was all diversion, simplicity and candor.

Few American priests of his period were saintlier than he. He encircled his fortunate flock with a bulwark of prayer, built of his unwavering faith and home spun piety. After his day's work, he told over and over again an old worn rosary. A man hurrying to the rectory on a sick call tells of seeing bins in through the window absorbed in prayer. It was nearly midnight, but he left his prayer at once and eagerly hurried down the mines to administer the last Sacraments to a dying miner. Father Fallihee was always accessible. The smallest child would not hesitate to ask him to leave his work in the garden to hear confessions. Over his wandering sheep he was especially vigilant. His nightly visits were usually spent urging some well-meaning, but careless parishioner to make his Easter duty.

His temperance societies were the finest in the diocese, numbering as they did nearly five hundred men. As one man says, "Forty years ago there was not a young man in the parish who drank." By word, and more effectively by example, Father Fallihee taught the young people that *"better than Fortune's best, Is mastery in the using. And sweeter than anything sweet, The art to lay it aside."*

It was an easy step from such abstinence and self-control to the cloister and the sanctuary, and, consequently, it is not surprising that Freeland's contribution to the world's priests and nuns is larger than that of count-less other parishes.

The world knew Father Fallihee as a strong, detached, humble, prayerful priest, but those who won into his heart - and it was not hard to reach that big generous heart - knew him as the most unselfish of friends. He had a fascinating faculty, as well as a keen sense of humor. His wonderful eye saw everything, and his great heart had room for everything and for everybody. His conversation normally was composed of equal parts of sage comment and meaningless repetition. His experience was limited, but varied as human nature is. His heart was too full of Heaven to admit the petty things of life; only its biggest things touched him - its pathos, its absurdity, its courage, and its loyalty. He lived and enjoyed life with an unimpaired and childlike zest, and his brave, tender, simple spirit endured to the end.

No greater, better, more lovable or admirable priest has glorified the sanctuary in our generation. To those who knew him intimately the recollection of his rare and childlike nature will always be a comfort and an inspiration.

Were a star quenched on high,
For ages would its light
Still streaming downward from the sky,
Shine on our mortal sigh

Rev. Michael J. Fallihee

1846—1917

PRAYER

Almighty and eternal God: Thou didst raise Thy servant Michael to the dignity of the priesthood, and called him to serve as the first pastor in the town of Freeland. As he labored faithfully for the salvation of Thy people in Freeland, so may he now be counted among the company of the righteous in everlasting bliss. We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, Thy Son, who liveth and reigneth with Thee in the unity of the Holy Spirit. One God forever and ever. Amen

October 20, 1917