

# Philipp Etter

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## PHILIPP ETTER.

By KEES VAN HOEK.

(The following article is reproduced from the August issue of the "Catholic Times" by courtesy of the Editor.)

The Senior Member of the Swiss Government, Dr. Philipp Etter, is a slender, medium-sized, square-chested man in his early sixties. Meeting him one is at once attracted by the warmth of his dark brown eyes, deeply set in webs of friendly wrinkles which mitigate the severity of the thin, judicially probing mouth.

His fringe of grey hair is clipped so short that it accentuates the span of his head, a dome of glowing ivory. In profile it could have been modelled after the coloured marble busts of the Roman Emperors in the Villa Borghese; yet, imagine him in a cassock and you would have the ruler of a great religious order, spirituality and strength.

He hails from pure peasant stock. In this part of the world — which knows no aristocracy but where every family takes pride in its own tradition — the Eppers can trace their family tree uninterruptedly back to 1500; in fact, but for a few gaps — to nearly seven centuries.

His father ran a small brewery. He was his own brewer, his own cooper — until the competition of the big beer barons put an end to all such village breweries, like the milling trusts gradually caused all the once locally owned village mills to disappear.

Menzingen is one of the most Catholic communities in oldest Switzerland, a simple little village-town set against a lovely hillside. Here Philipp Etter was born, 63 years ago, one of three children. Here he lived a happy youth, went to school and, in the best Swiss tradition, became early proficient as a marksman.

From the village school he went to the Cantonal school in the County capital, Zug, from there to the Benedictine College of Einsiedeln, one of the oldest and finest Catholic schools in the world. It shaped the farmer's son into one of the most cultured humanistic statesmen of our time, who still reads an hour of Greek every morning — in bed before breakfast.

During his first year in Zurich his native town Menzingen allowed him a scholarship for the University. From his earnings as a newspaperman he was soon able to pay himself for his studies.

After his promotion as Doctor of Law he got a good post in Zug on the principal daily of his own canton. Looking back on it, Etter remarked how much more satisfactory journalism is compared to politics. "Every evening I hold the result of my creative labour in my hands — what is there to show now for a long and weary day in a committee room?"

The outbreak of the Great War cut short his journalistic career. Three years he served as a lieutenant. Demobilised, he was offered the post of Examining Judge at the Zug Law Courts. Zug — halfway between Zurich and Lucerne — capital of his native county, was dear to his heart; it is a perfect gem of a typical Swiss town, picturesque with its gabled houses, mosaic tiled church spires and those stunted fountains which are really glorified village pumps.

Politically Switzerland is a federation of 22 cantons, all distinct republics with their own laws and separate government. In Zug Etter rose steadily from member of the cantonal parliament — member of the Cantonal government — finally to head of the Canton.

In 1930 Zug sent him to the Senate of Switzerland in which every canton — from the biggest to the smallest — has only two representatives. And so, in 1934, came the choice of the Conservative-Catholic Party of Switzerland to fill their traditional seat in the Federal Cabinet in Berne.

His father had lived to see him become a member of the Government of his own canton. Etter travelled to Menzingen to tell his aged but mentally still very alert mother, a peasant woman of natural refinement, that at the age of 43 he had reached the highest post which a Swiss burgher can hold.

After his election as Bundesrat, all Menzingen was *en fête* to celebrate its first son ever to reach the highest council of the land. The flags came out, the bands played, a salute of guns was fired, reporters and photographers crowded the humble homestead and under all that excitement the old lady suddenly died three days later.

For twenty years Philipp Etter has been a cabinet minister. Now his Department of the Interior can only loosely be compared with that of the Home Office and Ministry of Education in other countries, as each of the 22 Swiss cantons is really a separate Republic with extensive home rule.

In education his Department is only concerned with the Technical University in Zurich — the only



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state-run University — and with Swiss schools abroad, wherever there are large Swiss communities. He is, in short, in all but name, federal Minister of Culture.

The Federal Government being so effectively decentralised, most of the Swiss government departments are housed in the one old-fashioned, stately cream-coloured and lace-curtained Bundeshaus (Government Buildings) on a quiet chestnut lined avenue in patrician Berne.

The windows of Dr. Etter's room overlook the mosaic of the red-tiled roofs of the old town, the graceful bridge spanning at dizzy height the rapid, crystal-green river Aar, beyond the wooded foothills the view ranges some 25 miles away to the distant horizon of the eternal glaciers and snow-capped peaks of the mighty Bernese Alps which glow from gold and pink, to deep red in the setting sun.

Against one of the windows hangs a stained glass panel of Nikolaus von der Flue, the Swiss patriot whom the present Pope (who knows Switzerland so well from many holidays there, when he was still Nuncio and later Cardinal) proclaimed Saint.

Against the panelled wall near the President's desk I noticed a photograph of his wife of whom one can hardly believe the many times she is already a grandmother. He married, early in his career, the daughter of a well-to-do local farmer whose family considered her choice decidedly below their status — at the time!

They have five boys and five girls. One girl is a nun, one son a priest. Three boys are lawyers, one a forester, two girls are teachers. Their rooms are still kept for them, and for Christmas or Mother's Day

or the parental birthdays, everybody who possibly can, comes home.

President Etter happens to be one of the finest platform speakers in Switzerland. His speeches on momentous occasions have been published as a classic interpretation of the soul of Switzerland. When in his inspired oratory he extolls the home as the nucleus of those larger families — the village, the canton, the State — he speaks straight from the heart.

As the spokesman of the Catholic Conservative Party, his political programme is anchored in guarding the sanctity of family life.

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