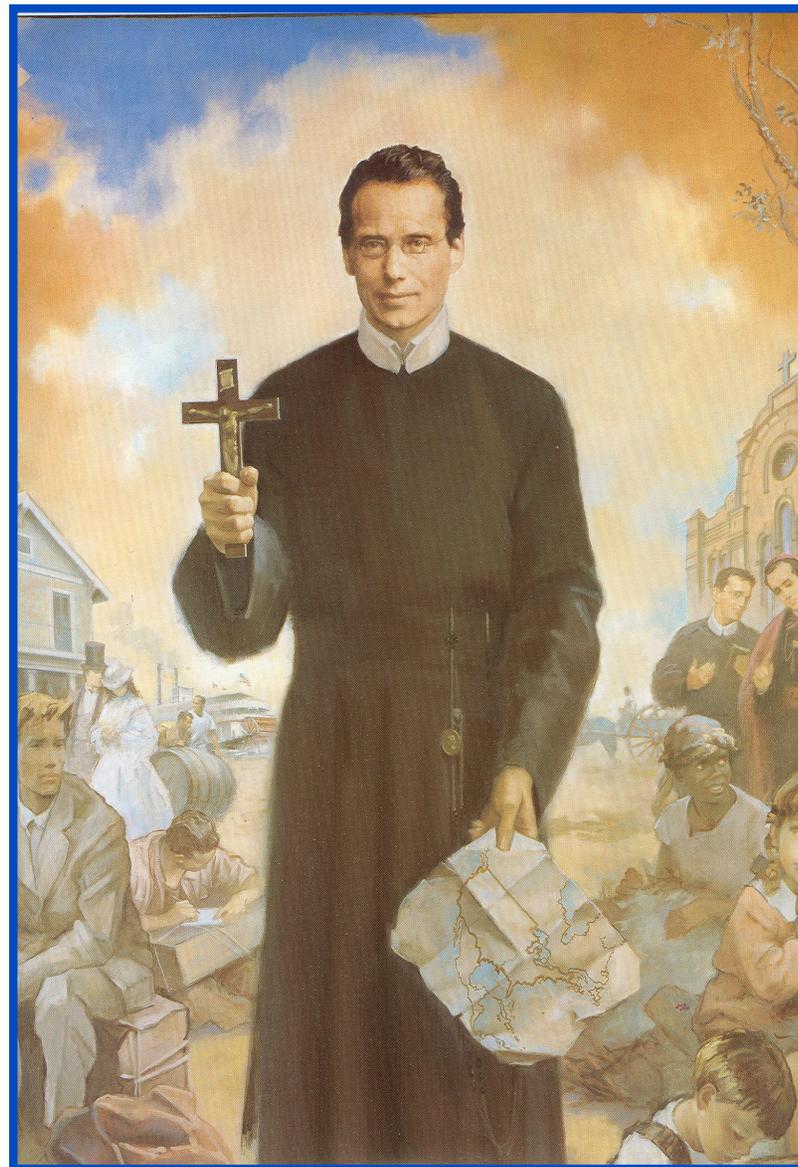


Blessed Francis Xavier Seelos, C.S.S.R.

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***American Wonderworker, The Life and
Miracles of Blessed Francis Xavier Seelos
Feast Day: October 5th - Ordinary Time***



American Wonderworker, The Life and Miracles of Blessed Francis Xavier Seelos

by Brother Andre Marie

October in New Orleans. The Crescent City is getting its first annual breath of relief from the seemingly endless summer. Though the calendar says fall has started, September is still really summer in this city on the Mississippi. It's 1867, and the relief is more welcome this year than most, for the Gulf-coast summer has brought something besides sunny, sweltering days and steamy, sticky nights. This year the mosquitoes, virtually omnipresent at night in the heavy atmosphere, have brought yellow fever to the unfortunates they bite.

A priest walks down the street in the Irish Channel section of the City. His consecrated hands have been administering the last sacraments to the stricken who are dying of the epidemic. Walking to his rectory on Constance Street, he is suddenly crippled with pain. His knee, which in early childhood was opened up by the blow of a hatchet, is the source of his agony. This is the first such flare up since his childhood, for Father Duffy's pious mother had commended her boy to a special patron saint, who cured the lad of his tragic injury.

The recurrence couldn't have come at a worse time: Father Duffy was making rounds, helping to reconcile dying sinners to God, administering the Sacraments of salvation to victims of the terrible pestilence. If he were to die now, his already overworked confreres would never be able to withstand the workload before them, especially since another of their number was just now in the throes of death. No, Father Duffy, with stubborn Irish defiance, would not let the injury keep him from his people who needed him so badly. "Through the merits of a saint I was cured the first time, and through the merits of another saint I will be cured a second time!" he assures himself. But he can't make it to the rectory unaided. One good leg isn't enough to carry the stumbling cleric to his home. Even the buildings he leans on for support are not enough. Finally, a passing wagon brings him to safety. He stumbles into the house. His resolution to be cured by that other saint is now moments away from being fulfilled. He staggers into the room of the dying priest who has been under his charge. Wincing from the shooting pain, Father Duffy makes the Herculean effort to kneel on his good knee. Beside the deathbed of his delirious, feverish subordinate, the desperate man, in the ancient posture of prayer, begs God that, by the merits of Father Seelos, he would again receive a cure. The prayer said, Father Duffy rises up, perfectly sound, and ready to return to his priestly duties. A miracle has happened.

Blessed Francis Xavier Seelos

The priest by whose virtues the miracle was granted would never learn, on this side of eternity, of the miracle he worked for his superior.

Notes:

1. To be precise, *Gymnasium* is secondary school for the liberal arts, as opposed to *Realschule*, which is for the empirical sciences.
2. "When the caravan in which Father Francis [Xavier] was traveling to Portugal was passing close by the Xavier castle in Navarre, the Ambassador, don Pedro, was struck with an awesome reverence for the future missionary, when he calmly declined the dignitary's offer to take the road aside and pay a final farewell to his family. The future apostle merely commented that such an encounter would only add to everyone's sorrow and make his departure more painful. It was enough to know that his family would one day be united in Heaven where there would be no separations." ("Saint Francis Xavier, Apostle of the Orient," by Brother Michael, M.I.C.M., in *From the Housetops* #27 pg. 39. This incident happened just before St. Francis sailed for the Orient, from whence he never returned.)
3. Saint John Neumann, was canonized in 1977 by Pope Paul VI.
4. This is the Order of Sisters founded in 1828 by Mother Mary Elizabeth Lange, an extraordinary free woman of color, originally from San Dominique (now Haiti). Rome has recently approved work to be done at the diocesan level to begin her cause for canonization.
5. This is probably the same Bishop Coxe who, years later, would publicly lock horns with another Redemptorist, Father Michael Mueller, C.S.S.R. Mueller's defense of the doctrine "No salvation outside the Catholic Church" was, in part, a result of a controversy he entered into with Coxe. Fathers Mueller and Seelos were contemporaries and knew each other well. While they had serious disagreements when it came to certain administrative matters in the Congregation, each was aware of the other's sanctity. Several of Mueller's books are still in print.
6. An octave is an eight day observation of a liturgical feast, reserved only for certain high-ranking feasts, like Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost.

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by St. Stanislaus Kostka. His countenance brightened when he heard the song to the Mother of God. Before the end of the hymn, with his eyes anchored to the Crucifix, the little man from Füssen yielded up his soul to God.

His Cause

Father Geisen — the one who summoned the ambulance to the church on a mission — preached the funeral sermon for his dead brother. He did so in English, even though German was the official language of St. Mary's. Since Germans, French, and Americans, both white and Negro were all present, the language most common to all had to be used. The whole congregation was in tears.

At least one cure happened when Father Seelos was laid in state. A woman named Christine Holle, who had been in bed for a month suffering from pains in her hip and abdomen, painfully made her way to St. Mary's. She had heard how beautiful he looked in death and thought the miracle worker could cure her now that he was in heaven. She knelt beside his coffin and touched his hand. Instantly and permanently the pain left her. This was just one more fact which supported the opinion of the hundreds gathered for the funeral that the man laid out before them was a saint.

The secular newspapers in New Orleans wrote of his death, as did Catholic papers in Baltimore. A veritable chorus of praise rose up from all who knew him in Pittsburgh, Detroit, and Baltimore. People came forth with their own memories of wonders wrought by the man they were all certain was a saint.

The year 1998 [when this article was originally written] marks the 131st since the death of the servant of God. The cause for his canonization was started in the early 1900's, but did not go far and eventually died out. In 1966 his cause was re-opened. Pope John Paul II beatified the humble Bavarian on Sunday, April 9, 2000.

If the story we have just related has moved the reader to believe in the eminent sanctity of Father Seelos as much as his life has moved us at Catholicism.org, we commend turning to him in your spiritual and material needs. The reader is asked to report any favors received to the following address: [Father Seelos Center](#) / 2030 Constance Street / New Orleans, LA 70130. The Redemptorist Fathers there collect such accounts and file them for use in his cause with the Congregation of Saints in Rome. In any contact with them, mention should be made of this article.

Who was this Father Seelos and why should Catholics today read about him? He was a miracle worker, a priest *par excellence* of the Most High, and although the Church has not officially declared it yet, we dare to say that he was a saint of God. His life should be read today by Catholics, especially American Catholics, because he sanctified our nation with his presence and gave us a model of piety and religious fervor in our busy modern American society.

New Orleans, the scene of Father Seelos' final combats, and the city honored to have his holy remains in its ground, was not the city of origin of our subject. He was not an American. The priest who died in the cosmopolitan metropolis on the Mississippi was born in a humble stretch of land on the Lech River in Germany's Bavaria: the beautiful and *Catholic* town of Füssen. Füssen is a picturesque little town which lies sixty miles southwest of Munich, the capital of Bavaria. The population at the time of Francis' birth consisted mainly of farmers, stone masons, cloth makers, and wheat mill owners. The heart of the town was Saint Magnus Monastery. Known as St. Mang's to the locals, it was a Benedictine monastic foundation which also provided the parish church. Of the fifteen hundred inhabitants of the town, all but twenty were Catholics.

Francis was born into a good Catholic family. His father, Mang, was a hard-working cloth maker, known to be upright and devout. His mother, Frances, was a humble *Hausfrau*. Not being corrupted by feminism, as many women are today, she did not see being a housewife as something demeaning. It was, more importantly, her way to God. Known to have a simple and unashamed piety, she would habitually erupt into spontaneous prayer while carrying out her every-day chores.

Mang had the virtues of a good Christian man; and Frances, those of a good Christian woman. The masculine and the feminine complemented each other well in this couple. Mang was the authority in the family. He was the disciplinarian, the head. But his wife was the heart. She did all the things proper to a mother and had the unique power of intercession with Mang that a Catholic lady has with her husband. Gentle submissive persuasion can make such a woman appear as a queen, while the ranting of millions of liberated women make them look like as many paupers in ugly rags. And the husband admired the wife. Once when Mang was almost killed by a terrible fever, Frances made a vow on her knees to make a pilgrimage of thanksgiving to the Marian shrine at Einsiedeln, Switzerland, if he were spared death. Mr. Seelos recovered and attributed it to the prayers of his good wife.

Mr. Seelos was strict, but had a big heart. When the town at one time had been given the burden of an infant boy who was not wanted by his unfortunate mother, they had to find someone to adopt the child. Mrs. Seelos was surprised when Mang walked into the house one day, placed the baby on the table and said, "There, we have another child. One more will not make much difference." Dubbed "Prince John," the boy was given the same affectionate love all the Seelos children were shown. And there were Seelos children. Mang and Frances had 12 children in their first twenty years of marriage: Elizabeth, the twins Mariana and Xaveria, Josephine, Ambrose, Francis Xavier, Antonia, Frances, Ulrich, Anna, Adam, and Kunigunda. Mariana, Xaveria, and Ulrich all died in early childhood.

Francis Xavier was born on January 11, 1819. He was baptized the same day, not due to any impending danger of death, but because that was the custom of the time. He was sickly in his youth, but showed signs of intellectual ability and, more importantly, of piety. His mother was an excellent tutor during his early years and formed his mind in both letters and sanctity. Frequently *Frau Seelos would read the lives of the Saints to the youth. On one such occasion, the subject was Saint Francis Xavier, the Jesuit apostle of the Indies and the boy's patron. After hearing the story, Francis declared "I will be a Francis Xavier."*

The Seelos house was a house of religious formation: Morning Mass, the thrice-daily recitation of the Angelus, and family spiritual reading after dinner were part of the daily routine. The rest of the day was filled with work for the parents and older children, and school for the younger ones.

The family was poor but not destitute. In 1830, however, their poverty threatened to reach a frightening low. Mang's trade, clothmaking, was becoming a thing of the past. The industrial revolution, which adversely affected culture in so many ways, was destroying the old trades. The cloth that was produced by men like Mang could not compete with the cheaply made industrially produced goods. This, combined with a month-long recovery process forced by an unfortunate wood chopping accident, meant that the breadwinner of the Seelos home was in desperate straits to provide for the family. Providentially though, the position of sacristan opened up at St. Mang's and Mr. Seelos applied for and got that position. (By a complex set of historical events, the position was actually a state job. Mr. Seelos was in government employ as he took care of the sacristy of the Catholic parish.)

This new position for Mang meant a new home, the Sacristan's house, next to the Church. The relocation was beneficial to the whole family: Mass and the Sacraments were now closer, and the father of the family had the key to the Church, which meant opportunities for visits to the Blessed Sacrament. The prayer life of the Seelos family, already robust and edifying, became more so.

coming down his face. Sadly, he didn't heed the counsel and the prophecy proved true. Years later he was excused from the Congregation.

Others took his counsel better. Brother Lawrence, who spent a great deal of time at the deathbed of Father Seelos, was like a sponge, taking in all the spiritual direction he could. He would often interrupt the dying priest with questions. Once he asked the priest if the angels in heaven rejoiced more on the Feast of the Angels. "That's for sure," came the reply.

He edified the assembled religious around his bed when he said, "I never thought it was so sweet to die in the Congregation. I now begin to know what happiness it is to live and die a Redemptorist. Oh, let us love our vocation and strive to persevere in it. Then all will be right with us." Shortly after that, he begged his brothers' forgiveness for his imperfections and any scandal he had caused them. At the sound of these words, some of them began to sob aloud. One said, "If a saint speaks so, what will become of us poor devils, when we come to die?"

Doctor Dowler, the community physician, was amazed that the priest could hold on to life. In vain did he try to illicit complaints from the patient. Yellow fever made for a miserable death, yet Father Seelos would not make the slightest complaint.

Soon delirium set in. He would begin the words of Mass, "Introibo ad altare Dei." Then he would begin a sermon in German, English, or French. He would ask questions, like "Who will give the priests' retreat this year?" and then wander off to sleep. He made his brothers repress a chuckle when he asked, "Where am I, dead?"

The lay people, who were alarmed at the imminent demise of their precious treasure, were apprised of his condition by the priests. So great was his fame that even the secular daily paper kept track of his decline.

Several times, Brother Louis asked Seelos if he had seen the Blessed Virgin, since it is recorded in the lives of the saints that some had such visits during their last agony. "No" came the first reply on September 29. Asked again on October 2, he answered, "Yes! Once!" On October 4, "Yes! Twice!" This second visit of our Lady seems to have been his last in this life. At 4:30 PM, he was in the throes of death. He had been given the Last Rites and the Papal Blessing, with its plenary indulgence. The priests were holding a crucifix, a picture of our Lady, one of St. Alphonsus, and one of St. Clement Maria Hofbauer alternately up to his face, that he might kiss them as he lay dying. The priests and brothers started singing a hymn to our Lady written

intentions of entering the Church, the man's wife became furious. But true to the word of Father Seelos, her heart softened and she accepted the true Faith. Soon both husband and wife became Catholics.

Another cure involved a three-year-old girl who had a high fever. The family doctor despaired of being able to help the girl, so they took her to Father Seelos, who prayed over her and wrought a total cure.

There was an air of finality about his stay in New Orleans. Not only did he make known to the sisters mentioned above that he would die of yellow fever in New Orleans, but on several occasions while in the Crescent City, he made it known that he would travel no more, but die and be buried at St. Mary's. The occasion of his death, he told the sisters, would be yellow fever, and he proved to be accurate in his prophecy. In September of 1867, a yellow fever epidemic was raging in the city. Bouts of the disease had been affecting New Orleanians for years. In 1847, the Redemptorist priest who led the Congregation to New Orleans was killed by the fever. But in September of 1867, the death toll was heavy. From two deaths per day in August, the victims jumped to sixty-seven daily. The clergy and religious of the city are still remembered for their heroic acts of virtue during the crisis. In fact, because of their exertion, they were themselves dying in great numbers. That month — September — Father Seelos started to show signs of fatigue.

The priests kept a list of their sick calls on a slate in the parlor of the rectory. The Fathers checked off the names on the list as they took care of them. They walked to each sick call, until a generous man provided them with a horse-drawn buggy, which helped them keep up their strength. Soon, though, exhaustion caught up with the priests. They started becoming sick themselves. The upper floor of the rectory became like a hospital, as twelve members of the community fell sick with the fever. Father Seelos was soon in that number, confined to his bed.

As he lay sick, two lay-brothers, Brother Gerard and Brother Lawrence both died on September 27. The situation looked bleak for many of the Redemptorists. The doctor became sure that Father Seelos' condition was now fatal, but he allowed Father Duffy to break the news to his confrere. "The doctor says you are going to heaven," said the Irish priest. "Oh, what pleasant news! How thankful I am!" came the reply.

This dialogue happened on October 1. Father Seelos still had three more days left in his final agony. During his dying days he was a veritable prophet, working miracles, giving seemingly inspired counsel and rebuking at least one priest for his bad behavior.

The priest he rebuked was one Father Jacobs, who had been a student of the dying man in Cumberland. Seelos rebuked him for being more social-minded than a priest should be. He told him that if he didn't change his ways, he would lose his vocation as a Redemptorist. When Jacobs came out of Seelos' room, he was pale, and tears were

Young Xavier (as he was called) went to Füssen's local *Volksschule*, a public school which was, in reality, a Catholic institution. At the age of around eleven or twelve, Francis had to make the same decision all German boys did then: to go on to higher studies or into a trade. For Francis, the thought of higher studies seemed inviting, and his intellect was certainly capable of entering *Gymnasium* (secondary school **1**). Too, he was not in the kind of robust health one should have to enter a trade, in which one relies on his physical strength to work out a living. These considerations aside, the money for more schooling was just not in the family coffers, and Mang feared that Xavier would be deprived of his desire to learn. However, due to the dedication of the young new parish priest at St. Mang's, Father Heim, Francis received a scholarship to the *Gymnasium* at Augsburg, St. Stephens, where he would spend the next eight years studying in an academically intense Catholic environment.

St. Stephen's

For the first time in thirteen years, Francis was away from the security of his home. Augsburg was a big city, fifteen times the size of Füssen and much more important — at least in the way importance is reckoned in most people's minds. At the *Gymnasium*, he was given a classical liberal education. Latin, classical history, geography, French, and Greek were part of the standard studies. Works by Ovid, Homer, Xenophon, Virgil, Sophocles, and Horace were read in their original languages, Greek and Latin. The academic year of 1835 saw a positive change at the *Gymnasium*, when the school came under the control of Benedictine Monks. The Monks augmented the already excellent program at St. Stephen's and added to it a greater dimension of spiritual formation. They were able to keep tighter watch on the young men, while still allowing recreation. In fact, since the religious were able to provide greater supervision, the liberty of the students in certain matters of recreation was extended. All the while, the Benedictines kept close watch that the students were not exposed to moral dangers.

These Monks were exceptional men, very capable of running a school and forming young men. One of them was Father (later Abbot) Boniface Wimmer, who led the Benedictine Order to America and founded St. Vincent's Archabbey in Pennsylvania, forty miles east of Pittsburgh. He came to these shores to tend to the needs of German Catholics, who he heard were in a destitute state in their new home. Overcoming great odds, he established the Order of Saint Benedict in the USA. At his death there were five monasteries and more were planned. As we will see, Wimmer's response to this call was paralleled in the life of our present subject.

During his time at the *Gymnasium*, the piety that Xavier displayed in his very early youth was growing with him. The boy who would “be a Francis Xavier” seemed to be going in the right direction to reach that high goal of sanctity. One of his classmates, Anthony Schirsner, said of him, “The splendid individual characteristics of his father and his mother were harmoniously blended in this child... The deep devotion, the granite-like faith and the purest fear of God stood out and grew in Seelos as a student; in these qualities he far surpassed all his fellow students. At the same time he was so cheerful, so full of life and almost exaggerated gaiety that everybody had to love him. Hypocrisy and sad-faced moodiness were foreign to him. For everyone he had a friendly, upright and kindly manner... The dominant virtue of the man was his singular purity of heart. I am firmly convinced that during the whole time of his studies... in spite of very worldly surroundings... he remained completely innocent.”

The Redemptorist Vocation

Upon the completion of his *Gymnasium* course at St. Stephen’s, Xavier wanted to continue his education. His academic performance was good enough to win him another scholarship, this time to the Royal Ludwig Maximilian University at Munich to study philosophy. The professors he had at the University were top-notch scholars, though the university was criticized for having too secular an outlook. Apparently that didn’t affect Xavier – nor did the heretical leanings of some of the professors. Included on the faculty were John Joseph Ignatius Döllinger, who later apostatized and helped to establish the Old Catholic Church, which rejected the dogma of papal infallibility. When he was teaching Church history to Francis, over thirty years before his formal defection, Döllinger was already showing signs of the intellectual pride which caused his downfall. Also on the faculty was the famous Möhler, the leader of the so-called Romantic school of Tübingen, whose ideas were condemned by Pope St. Pius X. But in spite of these potential bad influences, Francis steered clear of novelty and was known throughout his life to be a staunch defender of orthodoxy.

He did well in his philosophy studies and moved on to the study of theology in his third year. He studied theology as a university student would study any discipline. He was not yet being educated as a seminarian. But in 1842 something extraordinary happened which made him resolve to pursue a priestly vocation. Every Sunday, Francis would tutor his younger brother, Adam, who was studying a trade in Munich. When Adam showed up one Sunday for his regular lessons in reading and writing, he was told, “We will have no writing today. The Blessed Virgin has appeared to me tonight.” Just what words she spoke are not known, but Francis told his younger brother that he was given the vocation to be a missionary.

Francis applied to the Redemptorist Order for admission. He didn’t apply for admission in any German house, but to the American Redemptorists, who were then under the leadership of the energetic Hungarian, Father Alexander Czvitkovics. Father Czvitkovics was busily going about the work of building the Redemptorist Order in America. He traveled back and forth from Europe to America trying to gather up as many vocations and alms as he could to establish the institute. In one Catholic

of the New Orleans community, Father Seelos’ arrival was recorded thus: “Today 8¼ P.M., Rev. Fath. Francis X Seelos, for... years Superior in our Congregation... arrived here as a simple father... With joy he received the command of his Superior and he seems more as a novice than an old Father, so desirous is he of being led rather than leading. His example confounds us and makes us wish we had been better and humbler and more really Redemptorists.” This is reminiscent of an earlier comment made by his provincial, “He is a Redemptorist body and soul.”

The work in New Orleans was parish work. The community of priests served a trilingual parish which had three different church buildings for the three language groups they served: St. Alphonsus’ (English), Notre Dame (French), and St. Mary’s (German). He was assigned to be the prefect of St. Mary’s, which made him responsible for its liturgical services and ordinary pastoral duties. Once at the new assignment, he took to it with his characteristic diligence. Father Neihart, whose vocation was spared in its infancy by Father Seelos’ direction, and who was under Seelos in the mission band, gives a testimony of his old master’s work in New Orleans:

“The amount of daily labor he performed as chief pastor of Saint Mary’s, prefect of the church, prefect of the brothers, spiritual director of the sisters and of thousands of seculars, was truly astonishing. None of us ever saw him idle for a moment. He never went visiting, never sat talking in the parlor, but was always to be found either in his cell writing or praying, or else in the confessional, in the schools, or on sick calls. Indeed, he literally killed himself with labor, mortifications, and exertions. Nevertheless, he was the most cheerful and humorous of the community.”

The reputation he carried with him as a saintly confessor and a miracle worker followed him to his final destination. He was sought after by Germans, French, Creoles, Negroes, and mulattos. The fact that he spoke German, English and French made him an ideal priest for the tri-lingual parish.

In this city, he cured the daughter of a man who was taking instruction from him. The child cried continuously, except when taken to a Catholic Church. Nobody knew that the man was taking instruction to be a Catholic; because his wife was a fanatical anti-Catholic, he kept the fact a secret. When a Catholic friend of the family took the baby to Father Seelos to be cured, he told the woman that he would baptize the baby first. The woman replied that the parents were not Catholic, so the baby should not be baptized. Father Seelos replied that he was instructing the baby’s father, and soon the mother would be a Catholic too, so he went ahead with the baptism, after which he cured the child. When she found out about his

The predominantly foreign band of Redemptorists proved their liberal former confreres wrong. Both the pastor of the parish where the retreat was given and Archbishop McCloskey attested to the auspiciousness of the occasion. The six missionaries had to bring in three other Redemptorist priests to help with the confessions, even though all the priests of the parish and the Archbishop were hearing confessions, too. McCloskey said he had never worked so hard in his life. Similar *tours de force* were reported in other cities.

When Father Seelos was relieved of his duties as superior of the missions, the Redemptorist missionaries were at their height. That year, the provincial had to turn down 25 missions they were invited to give.

For a period of about ten months, he was assigned to a parish in Detroit: St. Mary's. He continued to do some missionary work on and off during that time. This fact — his frequent absence from the parish — makes it all the more significant that when he left Detroit, he was given a hero's farewell. On the occasion, Bishop Lefevre said, "I am sorry that Father Seelos must leave my diocese, for one has only to look at him to know he is a saint."

Father Seelos' departure from Detroit was sad for more than one reason. Not only did the Bishop and the people miss him, but his leaving was occasioned by a tragedy in the Congregation. In Annapolis, four of his confreres, two fraters and two priests, died in a tragic boating accident. In mourning, the busy province had to function without two of its priests, a missionary and a seminary lector. Some personnel shuffling was in order. The priest who was the lector in moral theology at the seminary was replaced by a priest from New Orleans, and the priest in New Orleans was replaced by Father Seelos.

After a ten-day retreat in Chicago, Father Seelos got on a train which brought him to New Orleans on September 26, 1866. Two School Sisters of Notre Dame were on the same train, and the three Religious spent the better part of the trip in holy conversation. The sisters were impressed with their meeting of the Redemptorist, who had always been known for his skill in directing sisters. One thing struck them as strange, however: When the sisters asked Father Seelos how long he was to remain in New Orleans, he told them he would be there only one year and then die of yellow fever.

The Crescent City

When he arrived at his new assignment in New Orleans, it was like a gathering of old friends. Father Alexander, the priest who brought Father Seelos to America, Brother Louis Kenning, who was a novice with him, and Father Duffy, one of his own novices, were all assigned to the same monastery. Of the six lay-brothers and seven priests at the monastery, most of them were under Father Seelos' rule at one time. He finally had his dream fulfilled: For sixteen years he was in various positions of authority in the Congregation; now he was happy to be a subject and not a superior. In the annals

newspaper in Augsburg, he wrote these words: "If German clerics really knew the abandoned spiritual condition of Germans in the United States and the danger they face of losing their souls, many would certainly go to their rescue." Numerous young men responded to the call for vocations, and Francis was among them.

As he waited for word on whether or not he was accepted, Francis was in-between school semesters. The possibility existed that he would not hear from Father Alexander until well after the beginning of the fall semester, 1842. The zealous young man wanted to lose no time, so he enrolled in the seminary of the Diocese of Augsburg, St. Jerome's. In addition to not losing time, Francis' decision to enter St. Jerome's also took care of another problem: his family. The closely knit Seelos family would certainly be upset by the departure of its beloved Xavier. To avoid a prolonged goodbye that could prove painful for the family, Francis resolved to leave for America from St. Jerome's, should he be accepted by Father Alexander into the Redemptorists. Only he and his father knew the plan. All the rest of the family knew was that Francis was going off to Dillingen, where the Augsburg diocesan seminary was, and that he would one day be a priest. They naturally thought that during his school vacations he would come home as he always had, and that upon completion of his course, he would be a parish priest in Augsburg. According to one of his sisters, this plan was executed in imitation of his patron, St. Francis Xavier. **2**

Francis' good-bye to his family was more emotional than usual when he was leaving for the seminary in Dillingen. After he embraced them all, Francis looked at his father, who made a gesture none of the rest of the family understood. He pointed to the sky. Francis knew what it meant — he and his father were only to meet again in heaven.

Things moved fast for Xavier after that. His stay in Dillingen, at St. Jerome's was shorter than expected, lasting less than a month before the letter of acceptance came from America. Saint Cecilia's day, November 22, 1842, was to live in his memory as the day he was accepted into the Redemptorists. True to his resolution, he took the quickest possible route to America he could, stopping for some necessary papers in Augsburg, writing some letters of farewell to his family, and then moving on to the Redemptorist Monastery at Altötting, where he would await departure for America. His family was very affected by the loss, but, as Francis told his brother Adam, "It is God's holy will that I go to the land which I have shown you many times during the summer on the maps when we were alone... I cannot resist the inner call, and I will not oppose it but freely follow it."

On April 20, 1843, the good ship, St. Nicholas, an American three-master weighing eight hundred tons, brought Francis and three Redemptorist companions into New York Harbor. After a brief stay at the Congregation's foundation in Manhattan, St. Nicholas' on second street, the young aspirant arrived at St. James' in Baltimore, where he formally entered the novitiate and took the distinctive habit of a Redemptorist. On May 16, 1844, he took his vows in the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer and after completing his required theology was ordained a priest on December 22 of the same year. With great devotion, he said his first Mass on Christmas day.

In August of 1845, Father Seelos was transferred from St. James' to St. Philomena's in Pittsburgh. He was now in the heat of battle. This is why he came to America, to preach and administer the sacraments to God's people. The industrial city of Pittsburgh had large numbers of German immigrants working in its steel mills and other industrial complexes. The busy factories these men worked in belched so much soot into the Pittsburgh air, that the Sisters who ran the school at St. Philomena's complained that the children's papers became smudged from it.

The workload at St. Philomena's was monstrous. The Redemptorists were extending themselves in all directions during these years to fill the great demand for German speaking priests. This meant that the priests did a lot of traveling to outmissions associated with their parishes. St. Philomena's had such outmissions, and the Fathers there pulled quite a load to say Mass and administer the sacraments at all the churches they ran. These Redemptorists were work horses whose assignments would make a lesser man faint. "No one can form a picture," said Seelos, "about how we are occupied the livelong day without let-up. By the grace of God we can keep it up." This was no exaggeration. In the year 1848, Father Seelos officiated at seventy-four marriages and 203 baptisms in addition to the normal Mass schedule, with sermons. In addition to the duties outlined here, he was made novice master in 1847, a tremendous responsibility.

The man in charge of the work at St. Philomena's when Father Seelos arrived there was Father John Neumann, who eventually became the bishop of Philadelphia. Neumann not only gave great example to the young priest, but took a keen interest in him.

Later, the young assistant would recall his superior: "I was his subject but more like a son who needed help, for I had just left the novitiate and was inexperienced. In every respect he was a remarkable father to me. He introduced me to the practical life; he guided me as my spiritual leader and confessor. He cared for all my needs in body and soul; above all, the example of his virtues is vivid in my memory, his tender modesty, his great humility, and his insuperable patience. Our dwelling was so poor that one night we had to leave our room in a severe storm and seek protection elsewhere, because the water was pouring down on our beds. I say our room because we were in

His preaching was simple but powerful. It was not heady and intellectual, though the former seminary instructor was capable of deep theological argumentation. But these were not theologians he was preaching to; they were every-day Catholics who needed to be instructed on their duties toward God. He sought rather to move the will than to impress the intellect. His appearance in the pulpit, his thin frame and smiling ascetic face, made this task easier. People called him "the saintly-looking Father."

He was known to have success with the most hardened sinners. He would appeal to them with words like these: "O, you sinners who have not courage to confess your sins because they are so numerous or so grievous or so shameful! Oh, come without fear or trembling! I promise to receive you with all mildness; if I do not keep my word, I here publicly give you permission to cast it up to me in the confessional and to charge me with a falsehood!"

With these and like words, he would attract to his confessional some of the "big fish" that would get away from most priests. The people who attended his missions knew the power he had with such men and would coax their friends who were hardened sinners into going to him. One habitual drunkard was brought to Father Seelos at the very end of a mission, as the priests were making ready to leave. Hearing the man's confession with all patience, he fasted the rest of the day, in order to do penance for the man's sins.

The missions they gave were enormously successful. Seelos was primarily responsible for this, but he had good help. Most of the other priests in the band were men Seelos had instructed in seminary, but there were two older priests who were gifted on the missions. One of them, Father Giesen, was a six-foot, three-inch 250-pounds-plus Belgian. Once, in describing the fires of hell, he made such realistic cries and sound effects that a fire engine crew showed up at the Church to put out the fire.

An 1865 mission in New York proved a resounding victory for the band of preachers, and for more than one reason. The Fathers who left the Redemptorists — Hecker, Hewit and the others — to form the Paulists, had been celebrated missionaries; but when they left, they said that their old Congregation would not have any more efficacious missions, since most of the other priests were foreign born and couldn't preach well in English. Since their departure from the Congregation, the Redemptorists had given no missions in New York.

party found out, to their disgust, that the invaders were recreating seminarians. That was too much for one of the scouts, who took aim at one of the seminarians, a Prussian, and attempted to fire his musket three times. Fortunately, though, the gun jammed. It was a good thing too, for not only was the Prussian student spared in this episode; all of the fraters were: A single shot fired was the signal for the rest of the army to come up the hill, guns a' blazing.

Even though he was in a Union state, Father Seelos was sympathetic to the South. Because the Redemptorists had houses on both sides of the Mason-Dixon line, there was a policy of not openly taking sides, so Seelos' views were only made known privately. Quite simply, he believed in the constitutional right of the Southern states to withdraw from the Union.

Another problem related to the war, and this one perhaps the most serious, was the fact that, because of changing draft policies, the Redemptorist priests, brothers, and seminarians were not entirely protected from conscription in the Union army. Some of the Fathers had already been conscripted and had to be bought out of the army. Others were threatened. Seelos and his other confreres in authority shifted around personnel to make drafting them more difficult, but no measure could guarantee their safety. He met with President Lincoln, who received him kindly, but gave him no assurances. Then he met with the secretary of war, Edwin Stanton, whom he found in a very bad mood. Because the Irish Catholics were rioting in the streets in New York as a result of his new draft policies, the last person the Secretary of War wanted to see was a Catholic priest, and he freely made his views known to the Redemptorist. After the meeting, Seelos said, "Should the Church ever decide to celebrate the feast of a rude rascal, Stanton would qualify easily, even with an octave." 6

Thanks in large part to the efforts of the energetic Father Michael Mueller, the problem blew over and the Redemptorists were safe from the draft.

American Missionary

In 1863 Father Seelos was transferred from his office in Cumberland and given an assignment to the mission band of the order. The "home missions," as they were called, were intense preaching campaigns given in the parishes usually for the period of two weeks. He loved the new assignment, except for the fact that he was made superior of the group of missionaries. He would have preferred not to be in a position of authority.

Once on the missions, his principal duties were preaching and hearing confessions. He and the priests in his care — sometimes eight in all — would move in to a parish and say Masses, preach sermons and special conferences, and practice certain devotions with the parishioners. Both in the pulpit and in the confessional, the new missionary proved himself a worthy son of St. Alphonsus de Liguori, who had founded the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer with such mission work in mind.

one and the same room, which was separated only by a curtain. For that reason I could hear him often saying his prayers during the night. He slept so little that I could not understand how he could keep his body and soul together. Because he generally got up before the regular rising time, he prepared the fire, often bringing up coal himself to have the room warm for me when I got up."

Bishop Michael O'Connor, the Bishop of Pittsburgh, called Neumann, Seelos, and a third priest at the parish, Father Joseph Mueller, "the three saints of St. Philomena's."

The third successor of Bishop Neumann as pastor of St. Philomena's was Father Seelos. This happened amid a tremendous re-organization of the Redemptorist Congregation in America. For the first time, the Congregation had a province in America. Under Father Alexander and his immediate successors, the American Redemptorists were a vice-province, and had to take orders and appointments from overseas. Now the head of the American Congregation had the full authority of a Provincial, and reported only to the Superior General in Rome. One of the other changes was that Father Seelos was rector of the house attached to the parish. In this capacity he had three or four priests under his charge at any given time, some of whom were his elders. The parish, the outmissions, an orphanage, and the spiritual direction of some Sisters of Mercy were all part of Father Seelos' duties during these years.

This first assignment of the Bavarian priest was filled with great tests of his virtue. Through it all, the priest was amiable, patient, cheerful and urbane. When a woman came to the good father for confession once, he put off her absolution for a week. The woman told her non-Catholic husband of what had happened, and the man became furious. He prevailed upon the priest to come to the couple's house to tend to his wife, who, he said, had taken very ill. When he arrived, Father Seelos didn't find a sick wife, but a mad husband. In plain language, the man beat the starch out of the cleric, until he was almost unconscious. Some of Seelos' friends heard about the incident and insisted that the man be arrested, but the injured man of God would not hear of it.

His reputation for sanctity increased as talk of miracles was circulating. One story from Pittsburgh is of a particularly miraculous nature. This is how Katherine Roehlinger begins the story of the cure of her daughter's epilepsy:

"We were just six weeks in Pittsburgh when God gave us our first child, a daughter whom we named Philomena... When she was nine months old, my husband and I made a visit to friends. I returned home first and, sitting

down, I removed the warm coverings from the sleeping baby and, holding her on my lap, I watched my beautiful daughter in her sweetness. My heart spilled over with love and gratitude.

“In a little while the baby woke up — but what a change! She began to have fearful convulsions! I cried out with fright, and the lady who lives on the second floor came running to my aid... The next day the attack returned in the presence of my husband. He was dismayed and said, ‘It looks to me like an attack of epilepsy.’ I had never seen anything like it before.”

The young family sought the aid of two doctors, neither of whom could relieve the child’s condition. After three years, they met a German doctor who had a good reputation, but who ended up being a charlatan who took their money for years but could not cure the child. When Philomena was old enough to speak, she would warn her parents of an oncoming attack by shouting, “It’s coming!” Her condition continued until she was nine years old. One attack was so violent that Katherine, who had been Father Seelos’ penitent for years now, resolved to ask Father Seelos to pray for the child to die.

When Father Seelos heard the odd request, he naturally asked the reason. Apprised of the child’s condition, he told Katherine to bring the child to the altar of the Blessed Virgin. The next day, the mother returned with her daughter. At the altar of the Blessed Virgin, Father Seelos blessed the child and said some prayers. He told the child, “Go in peace,” commanding the mother not to tell anyone of what had happened, because it was a work of God. One additional command he gave her: Because of her condition, Philomena had never been in school, her mother home-schooling the child instead. Father Seelos insisted that his young client be sent off to school immediately.

For two months, Katherine Roehlinger put off fulfilling this last command, and at the end of that period the child had another very violent attack. The mother knew it was her lack of faith that was being punished, and she immediately returned to Father Seelos to explain what had happened. Once again, the Redemptorist blessed the child and commanded that she be sent to school. This time the mother obeyed and the sickness never returned. The child was completely cured of epilepsy. Mrs. Roehlinger later said, “I had looked upon Father Seelos as a saintly priest, but until now I did not know that God had given him such great power. After this miracle I began to revere him very deeply.”

Another miracle involved a man who needed crutches to walk. Hearing of the priest’s sanctity, he met with him and asked for a cure. When Father Seelos told the crippled man that he had no such power, the man threw his crutches out the window and said he would not leave until he received a cure. Seelos blessed the man, and he walked away from the rectory unaided.

That was 1860, an election year in which one Abraham Lincoln was chosen to be president of the United States. In December of that year, the State of South Carolina seceded from the Union, soon to be followed by ten other states, forming the Confederate States of America. With war on the horizon, Father Seelos and his subjects found themselves in the unfortunate position of being in a border state. This made for some close calls.

The War

Some of the close calls were caused by the inexperienced and unmilitary infantrymen who were protecting the town of Cumberland. Even the seminarians joked about their crude, unpolished appearance. The seminarians’ humor was also witnessed by the way they reacted to some of the strange situations that occurred during the war years. Once, when rumors were spreading that Virginia Confederates were on the march to invade Cumberland, the whole town was made ready for the strike. The fraters were under orders to be packed and at the ready to leave at once. When the Confederates never showed up and things returned to normal, the seminarians referred to the incident as the “First Destruction of Cumberland.” They invented another wartime buzz-phrase when letters between the seminary in Cumberland and the novitiate in Annapolis were forbidden by Father Mueller: “The Great Letter Blockade.”

Some things weren’t very laughable, though. For instance, ugly rumors were circulated that the Redemptorists were harboring weapons in their convent, presumably to aid the alleged Confederate invasion. When an angry mob wanted to storm the religious house, the nervous Union captain announced that he would make an inspection. Father Van de Braak, the procurator of the house, welcomed him and invited him to inspect every nook and cranny in the place. Satisfied that there wasn’t a Confederate armory in the convent, the captain left. Later, Colonel Lewis Wallace, under whose command the Cumberland infantryman served, wrote a letter of apology to Father Van de Braak, stating that he would consider it an honor to protect the monastery. (Lew Wallace later on achieved literary fame for his *Ben Hur*.)

Another incident, this one more serious, took place when a nervous Northern soldier mistook a ball game the fraters were playing near the Virginia border as an invading Southern army. At a distance the black habits could easily be mistaken for gray, but his imagination really went wild when he saw the ball-playing army led by the Confederate battle flag. “They’re coming! They’re coming! A thousand strong!” went out the cry. The Redemptorist students were oblivious to the ruckus they had caused and kept playing while Union troops were making ready for war. A scouting

and so was condemned to say several prayers. In ten minutes, when Seelos had two or three rosaries to say, he fled from the grinning group lest he be obligated to further penalties.”

It would be a mistake to confuse the gentle cheerfulness of the good Father for laxity in Faith, morals, or religious discipline. As prefect and lector at the seminary, he instilled orthodoxy and docility to the Church’s teachings. When three seminarians were falling into philosophical and theological errors, he tried by every means to rid them of their wrong opinions. Among their errors were the favoring of the false philosophy of Kant and the denial of the bodily Assumption of our Lady (which had not yet been solemnly defined as a dogma, but which was universally believed by the faithful). He informed them of the falsity of their leanings, gave conferences on the dangers of reading bad books, and told them of the necessity of prayer and penance as a means to preserve oneself in the truth. Not moved by his pleas, but only hardened in their pride, the three soon asked to be relieved of their vows as Redemptorists.

In spite of the occasional bad egg, he was very happy with his charges, as is testified in a letter he wrote to his sister: “Thanks be to God, the majority of them are uncommonly zealous and pursue their perfection with all earnestness and perseverance. Yes! Among them are some who allow me to think that they may be honored among the saints. God has prepared them for the conversion of this land.” Aside from showing his opinion of the students, this letter also shows that the reason he valued the formation of priests was the role these men would play in the conversion of America. Seelos, was, above all, a missionary — like St. Francis Xavier.

His virtues were appreciated by his students, his confreres, and some in the hierarchy. In 1860, ill health forced Bishop Michael O’Connor to retire from his see. He submitted to the Holy See in Rome, along with his resignation, three names of recommended successors. The first on the list was Father Francis Xavier Seelos. This Bishop, who had earlier called Fathers Seelos, Neumann, and Joseph Mueller the “the three saints of St. Philomena’s,” was convinced that Seelos was the man to replace him. Noting both the priest’s sanctity and ability to attract all nationalities (a hard thing in those days), His Excellency said, “I have no doubt that his administration will be no less blessed by heaven for his piety which our population of every nationality accepts.” This additional excerpt of the letter gives testimony to the humility of the nominee: “If the Holy Father wishes to select Father Seelos, it will be necessary to place him under obedience to accept it. His humility and his sense of devotion to his religious Order will certainly make him refuse, if he is not obliged to accept.”

For his part, the prefect was not happy with the nomination. “I would rather be bishop of my students than bishop of Pittsburgh,” he said, bringing a cheer from his seminarians. He asked the students to make a novena with him so that he would not get the nomination. To seal his fate, he also wrote to Venerable Pius IX, begging not to be put in this position. His wish was granted; the see went to another priest, a Spanish Vincentian Father.

During his tenure in Pittsburgh, Father Seelos endured several personal hardships. From Bavaria came news of Mang’s death. This was sad for Father Seelos, especially knowing that his mother grieved the loss of her dear husband, but harder still was the loss which preceded his father’s, that of his youngest sister, Kunigunda. She was storing hay in the loft of the family’s attic with her brother Ambrose and her Sister Elizabeth. Suddenly, she lost her balance on the ladder and cried out, “Ambrose! Ambrose! I’m falling! Jesus, Mary and Joseph!” She fell three stories to the hard ground below, smashing her head. Just as she went unconscious, she exclaimed, “Lord, I am not worthy!”

For three hours the darling of the Seelos Family lay bleeding in the family home until she gave up the ghost. The next day, Mang suffered a stroke and shortly afterward Elizabeth became an invalid.

It was two months later, on Ash Wednesday, that Father Seelos heard of the death of his sister, whom he had last seen as a beautiful child of eleven. Upon hearing the news, the usually calm and resigned priest was heard to wail with anguish. The first day of Lent brought more suffering to the ascetic than he had imagined it would.

Baltimore

In 1854, the year Pope Pius IX solemnly defined the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, Father Seelos was transferred from St. Philomena’s to St. Alphonsus’ in Baltimore. He was made pastor of that church, which was the city’s German parish. Apart from the parish church, the priests at St. Alphonsus’ serviced two mission churches, two Catholic centers, and took care of the spiritual needs of the city’s Negro Catholics and the Sisters of Providence, 4 who ran a school for Negro children. They also tended to the Sisters of Charity, the Carmelite Nuns, and The Visitation Sisters. In his new capacity it didn’t take long for Father Seelos to become just as sought after as he had been in Pittsburgh. When he left St. Philomena’s, he was virtually a celebrity. Now the same thing was happening in Baltimore. Just one sign of this popularity was the long confessional lines that formed when Father Seelos was hearing confessions. A Sister of Charity noted that people would wait in line for three hours to go to confession to the holy Redemptorist.

The burning charity of the man radiated to everyone who was blessed enough to know him. One of his letters to his sister, Frances (who was now Sister Damiana of the Sisters of Charity), records the diverse groups of people who were beneficiaries of this charity: “I cannot thank God enough for my vocation. Although from morning till night I am overwhelmed with cares and worries... White and Negro, German and English, confreres and

externs, clerical and lay people, aristocratic women and unworldly nuns, the poor, the sick, ask for my assistance. One wants this, the other that. There is no rest." The work that Father Seelos did among these people had tremendous fruits. Two things are most noteworthy: miracles and conversions.

A Protestant woman from Pennsylvania knocked at the door of the rectory one day and spoke with Father Seelos. She requested that she be made a Catholic right there on the spot, immediately and secretly. Her family was anti-Catholic and would certainly not tolerate her conversion, but she was convinced of the truth of the Faith and knew she had to become a Catholic. Not wanting her family to intervene, she chose this unique approach toward conversion. Father Seelos told her that she would have to receive instruction from one of the priests before she could be received into the Church, but she answered that no such instruction was necessary, since she already knew what she had to know. The good father scrutinized her on her knowledge of the catechism. She answered every question correctly, proving that she was indeed ready to enter the Church. That day, Father Seelos conditionally baptized her, heard her confession, and gave her Holy Communion. She died only a few months after her conversion, but not before she managed to bring one of her family members into the Church.

Another convert proved to be more of a task. When work was being done on the outside of St. Alphonsus', a tragic accident happened, killing one of the workmen. He was not a Catholic. Father Seelos gave financial assistance to the man's widow and their daughter. Won over by the Pastor's kindness and generosity, she soon began instructions to become a Catholic. Her former minister, the Reverend Cleveland Coxe (future Episcopalian Bishop of Western New York 5), would not hear of her conversion. He offered to go to St. Alphonsus' and have an informal debate with the papist priest to show the woman the error of her ways. She and Father Seelos both agreed to this. Seelos prepared himself with the assistance of Father Augustine Hewit, who was a convert from Protestantism.

On the day of the showdown, Coxe came into the rectory and was allowed to state his case. Point by point, our little German refuted his arguments. The discussion was intense. When the veneration of the Mother of God was being debated — and this took a while — the woman interjected, "Mr. Coxe, it would be superfluous for you to continue further. Only now do I clearly see that the Roman Catholic Church is the true Church." Frustrated at his loss, Coxe reverted to typically empty Protestant rhetoric: "You are a follower of Mary; I am a follower of Christ." But all he accomplished was the further pollution of his own soul; Father Seelos won the contest and gained a convert.

Night sick calls were a standard part of the rector's duties. He could have had his assistant priests do this work, but he preferred to do it himself. One such sick call was to the deathbed of a young woman. Only when he was in the second floor of the house did he realize that it was a house of ill repute. Rather than leave the place, he did his priestly duties and prepared the dying prostitute for eternity. He administered

A funny dialogue began as soon as the man of God met the hunter: "If these children are not baptized today, they will never be baptized," said the hunter. "That is all very well, my friend; but if they are baptized as Catholics they have to be brought up as Catholics. Who is going to attend to their religious training?" said the priest; to which the hunter responded, "That wife of mine never had any religion. She can become a Catholic." The wife immediately agreed. When the pastor inquired if the old soldier himself would like to become Catholic, he responded, "I'm too old."

Father Seelos knew that, in these matters, "no" doesn't always mean exactly "no." He was determined to get that soldier and make him a Catholic. Having a keen interest in the liturgical rites of the Church and knowing what effect they can have on the wearied soul of an unbeliever, Father Seelos made the children's baptism a solemn occasion. Tears welled up in the soldier's eyes as his children were regenerated to supernatural life in the ancient and venerable Roman Rite of the Church. Three quarters of his family now Catholic, it didn't take long for the head of the family himself to convert. And his conversion was a sincere one; the Catholics present at his reception into the Church were moved by the devotion with which he made his profession of Faith. This formal Act of Faith, by the way, stated, "I unhesitatingly accept and profess all the doctrines handed down, defined, and explained by the sacred canons and ecumenical councils and especially of this most holy Council of Trent. And at the same time I condemn, reject, and anathematize everything that is contrary to those propositions, and all the heresies without exception that have been condemned, rejected, and anathematized by the Church. I, [name], promise, vow and swear that, with God's help, I shall most constantly hold and profess this true Catholic faith, *outside of which no one can be saved* which I now freely profess and truly hold." (Emphasis ours.)

As prefect of students, the superior had the duty of forming young men into priests. He did so by a careful and firm gentleness which was often mistaken for softness. He preferred to guide the seminarians on the path of perfection by means of kindness than by stern rule, although he was ever solicitous for orthodoxy and good morals.

One example of his benevolent rule was his participation in an innocent diversion some of his seminarians had invented, the "Laughing Society." Redemptorist historian Father Michael Curley best relates the story: "At any time a member could be called upon to crack a joke; no one was permitted to laugh until a consultation was held by the members to judge whether the joke deserved a laugh or a grunt. If a laugh was agreed upon, all had to laugh and stop laughing at a given signal. Father Seelos joined the society one day to find out what it was all about. He could easily laugh at a joke, but unfortunately could not stop laughing at the signaled moment,

Seelos thought that the foundation of the new order was an example of the unhealthy spirit of liberty present in American Catholics.

But the seminarians under Mueller were not Americanists; they were merely American boys with a hearty American zest. The Bavarian Father Seelos, being a more accommodating man, would be able to temper that zest into authentic zeal, whereas the Rhinelander Father Mueller was not, it seems, as adept at handling it. When Father Mueller left the seminary, a touching scene transpired in which he got on his knees and begged the forgiveness of the fraters for any wrongdoing on his part. One of these fraters later said, “[F]or what could we pardon him? He had done us no harm; on the contrary he was all goodness and we should have asked his pardon for being so ungrateful toward him.” Some of the students shed tears at the sight.

All the emotions aside, though, it was probably best that Father Seelos be in the position of seminary rector and prefect of students. He genuinely had the disposition for it. Another plus was that Father Mueller traded places with him, becoming the new Novice Master. It was better to have the rigid man in the novitiate, where a certain drill-sergeant harshness was needed, and the benignant one in the seminary, where the students were all past their novitiate.

Cumberland, MD

When Father Seelos arrived at Cumberland in May of 1857, he had a three-fold assignment: He was the pastor of a parish, a lector (teacher) in theology at the seminary, and the prefect of students. This third post was the most important; it made him the superior of a community of about sixty Redemptorists. For six years he held the post in Cumberland, although toward the end, he was relieved of the duty of prefect of students.

Once in his new location, it didn’t take the superior much time to apply his sanctity and hard working determination to the tasks at hand. Conversions averaged eight per year. This was in a parish of 300 German Catholics, situated in a town of six thousand, more than five sixths of whom were non-Catholic.

A conversion particularly deserving of mention is that of a Protestant family: a German military man who settled in this country, his American wife, and their two children. The immigrant didn’t practice any Protestant religion, even though he had twelve churches in Cumberland in which to do so. He was a rugged hunter who really wasn’t much for religion, even false religion. Grace was operating in him, though, and he wished his children to be baptized. The Protestant ministers he had asked to make the trip to do it never showed themselves. The man then chose to ask Father Seelos, who was only too happy to pay the family a visit.

to her the last sacraments and took leave of the evil place. Unfortunately, an anti-Catholic newspaper got hold of the fact and wrote a blistering article rife with innuendo and base insinuations. When some of his confreres showed Seelos the article, he said only, “Well, I saved a soul.”

If the true religion is proved by miracles — and it is — then the case of the cure of an eleven-year-old Baltimore girl not only teaches us which is the true religion, but gives us an insight into the curious thinking of a Protestant minister. The girl was the daughter of a lapsed Catholic father and a Lutheran mother. She suffered from convulsions for eighteen weeks, the same kind of convulsions that her aunt had died from the year before. When the girl’s mother brought her to a Protestant minister, he prayed for her cure, but none was forthcoming. Seeing that his prayers had not merited a recovery, he counseled the mother to take her child to a Catholic priest! Through the good offices of some neighbors, the sick girl was brought to Father Seelos, who prayed over her for a half an hour. The child quieted down, but was not completely cured. After the period of two novenas (eighteen days), the girl was as well as ever, no more convulsions. It is not recorded if the parents converted, but they did attribute the cure to the intercession of the good Father Seelos.

Another miracle did leave us with the record of a conversion. It is the case of the husband of a Catholic woman to whom Father Seelos brought Holy Communion. The wretch was a non-Catholic who mocked the pious faith of his wife. He had been suffering for more than a year from a suppurating ulcer on his face when Father Seelos came on the sick call. The priest put his hand on the man’s face and prayed. A few days later the ulcer totally disappeared and the man subsequently ceased his mockery and became a Catholic.

Miracles and conversions were signs of the spiritual power that Father Seelos had. These prodigies were the products of his deep spiritual life. He practiced the mortifications which were part of the rule of his Congregation, and added some which were not required. His prayer life was extraordinary, and not limited to what was required of him: Mass, the Divine Office (or Breviary), daily meditation, and the Rosary. He prayed, as St. Paul counseled, “always.” He was often observed walking in the street with great concentration on his face, hands in his pocket fingering his beads. The spirit of prayer and penance penetrated him so much that it spilled into his ordinary speech and written correspondences. The foundation for this rock-solid spiritual life was a deep and true humility, the kind that is common only in the saints. He was heard to comment that his judgment would be particularly harsh, because he had deceived so many people into thinking he was holy. When positions of honor or authority were given him, he became upset, preferring rather to be a “simple

Father.” He followed up on this theme by being perfectly happy when positions of authority were taken away from him. At one point, in an excess of self-abnegation, he even thought it would be appropriate for himself to be demoted to the status of lay brother in the Congregation, having his priestly faculties stripped. Thank God his superiors didn’t agree with him.

Other fruits of the spiritual life of Father Seelos included vocations. Not only did he encourage new vocations; he also helped dissuade novices and seminarians who were thinking of leaving. Included in the vocations he attracted to the Congregation was Ferreol Girardey, whom he later taught in seminary, and who became an exemplary Redemptorist, an accomplished spiritual writer, and the Provincial of the Midwest Province of the Congregation. William Gross was another Seelos vocation. He became the Bishop of Savannah, Georgia, then Archbishop of Portland, Oregon.

Bad Health

In Lent of 1857, while Father Seelos was hearing confessions, he started to feel chilled. His health, which was never robust, was now failing because of his strenuous schedule. After he had finished confessions in the afternoon, as he was ready to go to supper, he started spitting up blood. Two of his confreres, a priest and a brother, became alarmed; but after supper, Seelos went right back to hearing confessions, all the way until ten o’clock, the blood hemorrhaging the whole time. Knowing that the rector would not tend to his health, which was apparently in great danger, the other priest dispatched the lay brother to go to the provincial, Father Ruland. Ruland ordered immediate care. Seelos was forced to go to bed while a doctor was called. The doctor informed them that the good father had burst a blood vessel in his throat. He was now in grave danger of death.

For five weeks he was bed-bound. He continued to spit blood, but eventually began to get better. He was deprived of the opportunity to say Mass during this time, but he was able to spend the whole day in prayer, which formerly he had only dreamed of doing. He wrote to his blood sister, Sister Damiana, “See how fortunate I am. I am in heaven. Happy sickness that gives me this opportunity to regain spiritual strength and fervor.” The sick religious had been praying to our Lady to bring some sort of change about so that he could spend more time in prayer and be in a more contemplative environment. His prayer was heard, for after the sickness was ended, Father Seelos was assigned to a new role in the Province: He was made Novice Master at the Novitiate in Annapolis. When Father Ruland made the change, he stated, “If I leave him working here in Baltimore, I might not be able to control him, and in a short time, he will certainly ruin himself.”

This position was not new to the man of God. He had been Master of Novices for sixteen months during his stay at St. Philomena’s, when St. John Neumann was still his superior. In fact, that earlier duration as Novice Master saw an historical event: the first time in America that native English speaking men professed vows as

Redemptorists. One of them was the Father Duffy mentioned in the beginning of this article. (When Seelos arrived in New Orleans shortly before his death, he joked to Father Duffy, “Now you can have your revenge on me for all the evil I did to you many years ago.” Duffy could only smile at his former superior.)

Regarding his second spell as Master of Novices, the new oasis was not to last long. A crisis broke out in the Congregation’s seminary in Cumberland, Maryland. Father Michael Mueller, who was mentioned earlier, was the rector and prefect of students there. He became the source of severe criticism for his methods of governing. The problem seems to have evolved around a nationalistic gap that had grown between Germans and Americans. By this time, the Redemptorists had many English-speaking novices and professed brothers, or “fraters” as they called them. Germans and Americans didn’t always see eye-to-eye. Behavior was different; temperaments were different; and languages were different. The Germans were all in authority and the Americans were the students and novices. It was noted at least once in the Congregation’s history at that time, that the German Fathers not familiar with the American situation were impressed by the monasteries they had visited, but came away surprised by the frankness (almost boldness) of the American fraters. Father Mueller’s own temperament was apparently *extremely* German, and he seems to have lacked the suavity necessary to strike a compromise between the two national spirits. When news of this problem was sent to the General in Rome, he became greatly alarmed.

The General was alarmed for good reason, too, for one of the problems of the day was the Know-Nothing party and the greater movement of false American nationalism surrounding it. “America for the Americans” and like slogans were the verbal weapons used against all foreigners. Non-Native Americans — the opposite term wasn’t yet applied to the Red Man — were considered an evil influence, especially those who held foreign allegiances, like Catholics who professed loyalty to the Pope of Rome. The Know-Nothing party had been responsible for burning down Catholic churches and tarring and feathering priests. Father Seelos himself had good reason to fear that St. Philomena’s would be vandalized, for one of the leading rabble-rousers had been heard to say that the only problem with that church was that it couldn’t be burned.

While American Catholics were hardly lured in by the extreme bigotry of the Know-Nothing party, they could still be affected by a false sense of nationalism. This came to the fore as the Americanist heresy, whose principal advocates were Redemptorists who left the Congregation to found their own order, the Paulist Fathers. Though their heresy was not manifest at the time of their departure from the Congregation, Father