Father Seelos in the Rectory of Two Saints

By Sister Ursula Kelly, S.S.N.D.

Once upon a time in the United States, two saints lived in the same rectory in Pittsburgh. The Catholic Church has already canonized the pastor of St. Philomena Parish, Father John Neumann. On April 9, 2000, Pope John Paul II beatified Father Francis Seelos, who was Father Neumann’s assistant.

Francis Xavier Seelos was born to a good Catholic family on Jan. 11, 1819, in the Bavarian village of Fussen. His sister Antonia wrote that at home he was called Xavier. Antonia and Xavier were best friends because they were born two years apart and grew up together. She describes Xavier as the best of the nine children in their family. Even as a young boy, he could not tolerate fighting and shared whatever he had. He also enjoyed playing pranks.

On carnival days, just before Ash Wednesday, the children in Fussen wore masks and paraded through the village, playing tricks on the townspeople. One year, young Xavier slipped into his father’s best coat and hat and joined in the fun. His friends laughed at the sight of the little boy in the big clothes. They laughed so hard that Francis’ father came to investigate and rescued his wedding clothes.

Francis attended six years of grammar school in Fussen. Later he attended St. Stephen’s Academy in Augsburg and the University of Munich. As a teen, he decided he wanted to become a priest. His pastor, Father Heim, was helpful in getting people to help him financially; Francis earned a scholarship, too, to help with the cost.

Three words could describe Father Seelos: cheerful, gentle, and charitable. Francis was a loving person, and he was well loved in return by his family, friends, and all who came under his influence. In 1842, he read a letter pleading for help for German immigrants in the United States. He applied to become a Redemptorist missionary. He was accepted and sent to Baltimore, Md.

While preparing to leave for America in 1843, he realized how painful it would be to say goodbye to his family. So, instead of going home to say farewell, he wrote a touching letter. He told them that he loved them dearly and thanked them for teaching him to love God

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Speaker to Discuss Pittsburgh’s Benedictine Sisters

Kerry Crawford, a member of the Historical Society, will discuss the history of the Benedictine Sisters of Pittsburgh on Sunday, April 14 at 2:30 p.m. in Synod Hall. Kerry is the author of In This Time of Grace, a book based on in-depth interviews she conducted with members of the Benedictine monastic community as part of their 125th anniversary. Her emphasis will be on the Sisters’ coming of age as a community in western Pennsylvania during the 20th century. She will examine questions that many of us have about consecrated life both before and after the Second Vatican Council. Using the sisters’ own comments, Kerry will discuss what initially attracted these women, some barely teenagers themselves, to vowed monastic life, what sustained them, and what gives them hope for the future. The talk is open to the public.
even more. He asked them to pray that he would be able to share his love with the poor Germans so far from home.

At a young age, Francis Xavier Seelos developed a strong devotion to his patron, St. Francis Xavier. Shortly after determining that he wanted to be a priest, he decided that he wished to imitate his namesake by becoming like him, a missionary. However, he was called not to Asia but to a triangular terrain bounded by the Allegheny and Monongahela Rivers, whose waters form the Ohio River. He was called to Pittsburgh, Pa.

In April 1845, a tragic fire had burned a quarter of Pittsburgh. Over 10,000 homes were destroyed. In the aftermath of this disaster, young Father Seelos arrived, on August 25, 1845, to assume his first assignment as a Redemptorist. He would serve St. Philomena Parish in the Bayardstown section of Pittsburgh.

The parish worshiped in a building they called “the Factory Church,” because it had been a factory. The property was located between Liberty and Penn Avenues, with 11th Street as the western boundary and 14th Street as the eastern.

Father Seelos had met his new superior, Father John Neumann, in Baltimore, and he knew Father Joseph Mueller from the Novitiate. Bishop Michael O’Connor referred to them as “the three saints of St. Philomena” because of their priestly zeal.

Within the first 18 months, Father Seelos administered over 200 baptisms, witnessed 35 marriages and preached in three languages each Sunday. His name appears in the baptism and marriage registers of some of the outlying areas such as Greensburg, McKeesport, Pine Creek, Riceville, Sharpsburg and Wexford. He even answered pleas of abandoned German immigrants in management of finances as he was working with a poor immigrant parish.

Bishop O’Connor requested that Father Seelos be appointed a full-time chaplain to the Sisters of Mercy. It was agreed that Father Seelos could accept this responsibility only if he could remain at St. Philomena and be a part of the community’s missionary endeavors. Some of the Sisters of Mercy were asked to offer testimony to the holiness of Father Seelos after his death and spoke in glowing terms about his successes as their chaplain.

In 1847, Father Neumann had a serious bout of illness and was called to rest in Baltimore. The rest was short lived because within six weeks, he was appointed the leader of all the Redemptorists in America.

Though the two saints no longer shared a monastery, their respect and reverence for each other continued. In fact, Father Neumann decided to move the Redemptorist novitiate to the new monastery he had built at St. Philomena and chose Father Seelos to be novice master.

In 1851, at 32 years of age and only ordained for seven years, Father Seelos was chosen as pastor of St. Philomena, one of the largest foundations in America. He proved an excellent administrator and spiritual leader. However, he was faced with the serious problem of many orphaned children who were members of his parish.

What he always referred as one of his most important accomplish-
Fathers Seelos' kindness. Once, while traveling in the mountains, he met a classmate from Germany. The man was suffering from the severe weather and was so poorly dressed that Father Seelos exchanged some of his own clothing with the man, even to his shoes.

Eventually, Father Seelos was promised intercession in the matter of exemption. Though the seminarians had to enroll, not one of them was drafted.

Father Seelos returned to giving missions and retreats in 1863-1866. He was sent to Detroit, where he worked as a parish priest for nine months. He was then summoned to work in New Orleans. While on the train traveling south, he met two School Sisters of Notre Dame. One of the sisters asked Father Seelos how long he would be in New Orleans. His answer caused consternation because he predicted that he would be there about a year, then would die of yellow fever. That was Sept. 26, 1866. He died on Oct. 4, 1867, of yellow fever.

Investigation into the life of Father Seelos began shortly. The people of New Orleans never let memory of him grow dim. Many prayed for his beatification. And in the Church's Jubilee Year 2000, Pope John Paul II proclaimed him blessed.

This article was condensed from Growing in God's Covenant: Catechetical Curriculum Guidelines for the Catholic Elementary Schools of the Diocese of Pittsburgh. The author is Consultant for Elementary School Catechesis in the diocese and a member of the School Sisters of Notre Dame. Sister Ursula's main sources were The Cheerful Ascetic: Documentary Study of the Life, Virtues, and Famed Holiness of Blessed Francis Seelos and the testimonies shared by relatives of Father Seelos during the triduum in Rome after the beatification ceremonies.
Remembering “Iron John”


Reviewed by Anthony P. Joseph

In writing any history of an important personality such as John Cardinal Dearden, authors try to find the appropriate accolades for the person. Pittsburgh Auxiliary Bishop John B. McDowell presents a portrayal of John Dearden, the man, the bishop, and the cardinal, as a servant of God in priestly ministry.

Bishop McDowell tells of Dearden’s family, of his strong parents (his father was a convert). He attended Cathedral Latin School in Cleveland, where as a boy he found the course for his life; he proudly announced to his mother that he wanted to be a priest. He went on to attend St. Mary’s Seminary and the North American College in Rome.

Upon his return to the States, Father Dearden served in a parish. After several years, he was appointed rector at St. Mary’s Seminary, where he earned the nickname “Iron John,” a strict master of academics, discipline, and seminarians.

The Church had more responsibilities ahead for Father Dearden. On March 13, 1948, he was named coadjutor to the Bishop of Pittsburgh, Hugh C. Boyle, with the right of succession. From 1950 on, he was the city’s ordinary.

Bishop Dearden undertook a remarkable education campaign in Pittsburgh; 38 new elementary and secondary schools were built and 38 schools replaced partially or completely.

From Pittsburgh, he went to the Archdiocese of Detroit. There, he faced greater challenges, such as far greater numbers of the faithful, priests, and religious. He eventually found himself in the midst of Vatican II. The archbishop went to Rome and played a special role, earning yet a new nickname “the unobtrusive liberal.” He attempted to renew and to clarify the laws and the ways of the Church to make them more compatible with contemporary Catholic life.

He further carried forth this sense of renewal when in 1966, as president of the first National Conference of Catholic Bishops and the United States Catholic Conference, he issued a “Call to Action.” This same renewal was also the theme of his Archdiocesan Synod 1967-1969.

Further honors would be bestowed upon the archbishop. He was made a Cardinal on April 18, 1969.

Cardinal Dearden, the quiet, soft-spoken priest, died on Aug. 1, 1988. He was a servant of God and an evangelist for the Church and for Christ.

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Memento Morice

Known as “C.D.” because his demanding classes yielded few As and Bs, Dr. Joseph R. Morice nevertheless attracted scores of hopeful learners to his classes. He taught at the university for 42 years and was among Duquesne’s most popular instructors. The popular emeritus professor of history died Oct. 30, 2001, of congestive heart failure. He was 78. Born in Philadelphia, Morice served in the Army during World War II and received three bronze stars for valor. He earned a bachelor’s degree in history from LaSalle College and a master’s from Fordham University. He taught at Duquesne from 1948 until his retirement in 1990, completing another master’s and a doctorate in political science at Pitt along the way. He served as chairman of the history department and was the founder and editor of The Duquesne Review and the university debate team. He was one of the first recipients of Duquesne’s student-nominat-ed Teacher of the Year award. An award is presented in his name annually to Duquesne’s outstanding history student. He is survived by his wife, Josephine, and two daughters, Ann Marie Morice of Scott and Jacqueline Callahan of Avalon, and two grandsons. A Mass of Remembrance was held Jan. 17, 2002, in Duquesne University’s chapel. —Compiled from obituaries in the Duquesne Record and the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette.

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