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.
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 Steubenville, Ohio, and Wheeling, W.Va.

The influence of Father John Neumann cannot be estimated. As Father Seelos watched his superior’s dedication each day, his own love for his priesthood grew. Father Neumann was determined to build a new church to replace the Factory Church. It took some ingenious 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-
ments was the building of a new three-story orphanage for German children on Troy Hill. The orphanage was located on the present site of North Catholic High School. In fact, the red-brick buildings to the west of the stone buildings were part of the orphanage, which opened its doors in the summer of 1852. It was entrusted to the School Sisters of Notre Dame until its closure in 1938.

Father Seelos’ preaching was so eloquent that he was asked to preach a sermon at the laying of the cornerstone for the new cathedral in June 1851.

It is said that people from Pittsburgh and beyond sought him as a confessor. He encouraged people to come to confession with these words: "If you come to confession I promise to treat you kindly and if I don’t do such, you may accuse me publicly of being untruthful." It was rumored that Bishop Michael O’Connor chose this young priest as his spiritual guide.

Several stories circulated about Father 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.

Another time in bitter weather he saw a woman who had no gloves, so he gave her his own.

Such was the Redemptorist’s reputation that Bishop O’Connor nominated him to become the second bishop of Pittsburgh. When Father Seelos learned of this, he wrote to the Pope requesting that his name be removed from consideration because he would be a better Redemptorist missionary than a bishop of Pittsburgh. His request was honored.

From Pittsburgh, Father Seelos was transferred to Cumberland, Md., to work with seminarians. As the Civil War broke out, a serious situation developed. Congress had determined that all males had to be enrolled in the military forces. Then, on March 3, 1863, President Lincoln signed the Conscription Act, which stated that all males between 20 and 45 were liable for military service unless they could pay $300 for a substitute. Since the Redemptorists had a number of seminarians, they could not afford the amount for substitutes.

Father Seelos requested an appointment with President Lincoln. During the visit, Father Seelos explained how the draft law would cause grave problems for Catholics, Protestants, and Jews, since neither the people nor the military would have spiritual leaders if all of the candidates for ministry were taken away from studies. Lincoln seemed to understand.

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.

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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.