

Celebration of Catholic Pittsburgh

Robert P. Lockwood

Robert P. Lockwood, author, Director for Communications of the Diocese of Pittsburgh, General Manager of the Pittsburgh Catholic and former board member of the Catholic Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania was a honoree speaker at the Catholic Writers Dinner. His most recent books include A Guy's Guide to the Good Life (St. Anthony Messenger Press) and A Faith For Grownups: A Midlife Conversation About What Really Matters (Loyola Press).

I think what we really have here tonight is a reflection – a celebration – not of individual authors, but of Catholic Pittsburgh. I have often said that it is impossible to understand Southwestern Pennsylvania – its history, culture, politics, academics, even its sports, without understanding the essential Catholic nature of its culture. It is there underlying every story and every part of who we are as a people. Maybe what I can do here in a few minutes is to relate just a couple of stories that reflect that truth.

Many of you are no doubt familiar with the Register of Fort Duquesne. Much of it was written by Father Denis Baron, chaplain at the French fort who celebrated what was traditionally seen as the first mass in Pittsburgh on April 17, 1754. The Register is just that – a canonical record of the Sacraments, not unlike the sacramental records every parish is required to keep today.

But in those pages, there are a hundred stories of faith. Take just one: “In the year one thousand seven hundred and fifty-five, on the 18th of September, was baptized with the customary ceremonies of our Holy Mother the Catholic Church, John Daniel Norment, born the same day, the son of John Gasper Norment and Mary Joseph Chainier, his father and mother being united in lawful wedlock.”

And then, just a week later, Father Baron recorded that, “In the year one thousand seven hundred and fifty-five, on the 24th of September, died at Fort Duquesne, under the title of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin at the beautiful river, John Daniel Norment, the son of John Gasper Norment and Mary Joseph Chainier. His remains were interred in the cemetery of the same fort, and with the customary ceremonies, by us, recollect priest, the undersigned

chaplain of the King at the said fort.”

We then have Joe Barker. Anyone with an interest in Pittsburgh history can't help but know about old Joe. From 1845 until his death, Joe Barker was an anti-Catholic polemicist in Pittsburgh. A minor political office holder, Barker gained fame as a street preacher targeting Catholics. Barker's grist was the gamier stuff of Catholic urban legends that had been permeating American culture since the Pilgrims: convent horror tales, the brutality of the Inquisition, and power-mongering clerics. Such anti-Catholic harangues were commonplace in his day.

Bishop Michael O'Connor, Pittsburgh's first bishop, was a favorite target of Barker's rhetoric. Barker called him “Mickey” or “Irish Mickey” and he and his supporters would gather in Market Square. Often, the police were called in to handle the inevitable troubles that would arise from his oratory.

In September of 1849, the mayor had Barker arrested, charging him and his fellow travelers for obstructing traffic and using lewd language. His supporters convinced the majority of the Pittsburgh that citizens that Barker's freedom had been taken away from him by a conniving and corrupt Catholic Church and, most assuredly, a new Inquisition in Pittsburgh was just around the corner.

Convinced that Barker's arrest proved that the Church was dominating politicians, the citizenry of Pittsburgh in 1850 elected Joe Barker mayor while he was still in jail.

In one of his first acts as mayor, Barker ordered the arrest of Bishop O'Connor over faulty plumbing at Mercy Hospital. Barker served as judge of the case

and found the bishop guilty. Refusing the bishop's appeal, he gave him the choice between jail time and a \$20 fine.

Guards were often kept overnight in churches to deter attacks and priests began to avoid wearing their clerical garb in public. Anti-Catholic rallies were often held with the mayor delivering his usual fare. A plot was revealed to the bishop claiming that arson was planned for Catholic churches and Mercy Hospital. On May 6, 1851, Saint Paul Cathedral burned to the ground. Bishop O'Connor believed that nativist arsonists had torched the church, but didn't press the issue out of fear of the riots that could result. The electorate tossed Barker out of office quickly and he died in 1862 when he was decapitated by a train.

A couple of years back, I wrote a column in the Pittsburgh Catholic about a local shop selling nuns' habits for Halloween costumes. I wrote that perhaps it is time to give a little award for mindless acts of anti-Catholicism. "We'd call it the 'Joe Barker Memorial Award,'" I wrote. A few days later, I got a letter in the mail. It was from a professor of law at Duquesne University. He mentioned that he got a chuckle out of my column. The letter was signed by Professor Robert S. Barker, great-great grandson of Joe Barker. Professor Barker is also a prominent member of the Latin Catholic community at Holy Wisdom Parish, and a first cousin to the head of the Department for Canon and Civil Law in the Diocese of Pittsburgh, Father Larry DiNardo. Joe Barker's great-great grandson was a devout Catholic.

A final story: I had been asked to give a talk, and I was taking a quick breather outside the church hall before things got under way. The talk was for a Holy Name celebration in Beaver County, and the parking lot was already packed. A car pulled up while I was getting my thoughts in order, and a lady rolled down the driver's side window. "Is this where they are having bingo?" she asked. "Nope," I said, and worried about a perspective where a crowded church parking lot could only mean bingo.

After my talk, the awards program began. The fellow next to me whispered that it was the key to getting a good crowd – give out a lot of awards because the whole family has to come. Even the kids

and grandkids come back in town to see the Old Man get his recognition. It was fun. The guys would get their picture taken with their award, then pull some notes from their jacket pocket to make sure they thanked everybody who had to be thanked. One fellow had his two typewritten pages, a torn-off note from a newspaper, the program of the event and a napkin with some last minute scribbling. The stuff kept falling off the dais. When he finally started, he forgot about all that and just spoke from the heart about family, faith, and service to the Church.

The guys weren't getting awards for what someone might call the big stuff. No one was recognized for saving lives or running into burning buildings. What most of these guys accomplished were the small things done in love. . And that day, they were in uncomfortable suits and ties, sweating bullets as they tried to say a few words of thanks to an audience that knew everything about them anyway.

They were all about love as Saint Paul described it. A love that "bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things." As I watched the parade of guys yanking nervously at their ties as they struggled through their embarrassed thanks, I realized how blessed I was to be in the company of men like that. Nurtured on a lifetime of the sacraments, they find that grace has become an old friend.

I think about John Daniel Norment, baptized, then dying at the age of six days, and his grieving parents over 250 years ago, part of the roots of our Catholic Church of Pittsburgh. I think of old Joe Barker and what he would think of a great-great grandson who had been raised to be a staunch and devout Catholic, serving a great university. I think of those guys at the Holy Name Society in Beaver County, the ones so nervous that they could barely eat the fancy meal in front of them as they waited to be honored for their faith in action.

I realize that together, all their stories are the mosaic of the Church of Pittsburgh. It is a dream come true for a Catholic writer to find a home here in Pittsburgh. Thank you for honoring me. Thank you for welcoming seven years ago a guy from a different place. But thank you so much more for the inspiration that is the Catholic community of Pittsburgh.