

REDEMPTORIST

Blessed

FRANCIS XAVIER

SEELOS



Alicia von Stamwitz
and Rev. Carl Hoegerl, C.Ss.R.

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Blessed Francis Xavier Seelos, Redemptorist

*Alicia von Stamwitz
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On April 9, 2000, thousands of the faithful witnessed the beatification of an American Redemptorist at Saint Peter's Basilica in Rome. His Holiness, Pope John Paul II, declared Father Francis Xavier Seelos blessed and a worthy example of holiness for the universal Church. The life of this self-effacing, hard-working priest has not made many headlines in our modern world, but it gives much encouragement to those striving to follow the Lord.

Introduction

In the fall of 1867, a severe outbreak of yellow fever paralyzed New Orleans. One third of the city's 150,000 residents contracted the virus, and five thousand died. Among the sick was a humble immigrant priest—Redemptorist missionary Francis Xavier Seelos. During his three-week illness, the daily newspapers published regular updates on his condition. His death on October 4 was front-page news. The funeral drew poor and rich, black and white, immigrants and Americans. They crowded together in St. Mary's Church and waited for hours to pray before the casket.

Some of Father Seelos' fellow religious were bewildered by the outpouring of affection and respect. They recalled that a short while ago, the Redemptorist Superior General in Rome had abruptly

removed Father Seelos from his important office as director of Redemptorist students. It had been a humiliating dismissal, one that had called into question his competence and example in religious life. They also remembered that at one time or another his peers had complained that he was “wretchedly weak,” “an old mother,” “a blockhead,” and “wanting in wisdom and foresight.”

But to the thousands of people Father Seelos had preached to, prayed for, helped, and befriended, he was a saint.

“My little debts”

Francis Xavier Seelos was born on January 11, 1819, in Füssen, Germany, a picturesque town in the foothills of the Alps. He was the sixth of Mang and Frances Seelos’ nine children. Shortly after Francis’ birth, Mang’s cloth-weaving business began to falter. He was

barely able to provide the essentials for his family, who were quickly outgrowing their home. Francis' mother playfully began calling the children "my little debts." Fortunately, Mang found a new position as church sacristan when Francis was eleven. Mang was guaranteed a steady income and was able to move his family into a spacious house with a lovely garden near the church.

Francis was a good-natured child who benefitted from the love and attention of a close-knit Catholic family. His sister later described their daily routine: "The whole family arose early and went to Mass. After breakfast each one went to his accustomed work and the children went to school. Before meals we recited the Angelus and said our prayers. During the meal the children had to tell what they had learned in school, to which father added a few comments....When supper

was finished, we had spiritual reading, which was always on the life of the saint of the day.”

Young Francis was moved when he heard the dramatic story of his namesake, the missionary priest Francis Xavier. As a boy he spoke excitedly of following in his patron’s footsteps. The parish priest soon took an interest in his bright, conscientious altar server. He made arrangements for Francis to continue his studies at a high school in Augsburg and then at the University of Munich.

By all accounts, Francis was a popular, fun-loving young man. He had a joke for every occasion and was a marvelous storyteller. During his years in Munich, he joined a university fraternity, took fencing and dancing lessons, and enjoyed snuffing tobacco. He had one irritating habit, though. According to his classmates, he always sang at the top of his

lungs. At Mass, he startled worshipers and embarrassed friends by belting out every hymn.

This levity did not interfere with Francis' studies. He knew that he needed to excel academically to be accepted by the Jesuits—a dream he mentioned to more than one friend. But in 1842 he had a change of heart. A compelling appeal by the Redemptorists for missionaries, coupled with a vivid dream in which he saw himself as a priest in America, caused Francis to apply to the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer. A year later he was on his way to America.

Pioneer Priest

Francis and his three Redemptorist companions landed in New York on April 20, 1843. By this time, the Redemptorists had been in America ten years. Fifteen members were ministering in the

eastern states, primarily to poor immigrants.

After his novitiate, Francis was ordained on December 22, 1844, and assigned to St. Philomena's parish in Pittsburgh. The church building was actually a decrepit old factory. A leaky, cramped building nearby served as the rectory. Despite the primitive conditions, Father Seelos thrived under the guidance and care of the rector of the community, Father John Neumann—now known as Saint John Neumann.

With only twenty-one priests to care for 45,000 Catholics in western Pennsylvania, the pastoral needs were overwhelming. Father Seelos immediately began celebrating marriages and baptisms, visiting the sick, hearing confessions, and preaching in three languages—German, French, and English.

Despite his broken, heavily accented

English, people were captivated by his sermons. His message was simple, but his preaching style was unconventional and highly entertaining. Drawing on his storytelling talent, he would often act out Scripture narratives, ad-libbing extended conversations between Jesus, the disciples, and other gospel characters. Inevitably, “Jesus” would veer from his historical lines. He’d make asides to the people, sharing wry observations on the gospel passage or cracking jokes. The people were delighted.

These sermons were by no means as spontaneous as they appeared. Father Seelos spent hours writing his text word for word. Midway through delivering his sermon he would stop, wait for the people to quiet down, then continue in a more serious tone of voice. He would explain the Scriptures and drive home the implications for his listeners. His closing was

like an evangelical minister's altar call. He would extend his arms wide and cry out: "O you sinners who have not courage to confess your sins because they are so numerous or so grievous or so shameful! O 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!"

Confessor and Counselor

Father Seelos' preaching and promise to "receive with all mildness" spurred even timid or guilt-ridden sinners to seek him out. At times the line outside his confessional would snake through the church and out the door—a two- or three-hour wait. His gentle, friendly manner made it easy for penitents to confide in him, and his confidence in God's mercy lifted

their spirits. "It is not your justice but God's mercy which is the motive of your trust," he explained. "No one was ever lost because his sin was too great, but because his trust was too small."

He had harsh words for priests who did not receive penitents with kindness and grace. "The priest who is rough with the people does injury to himself and to others; he sins,...and he scandalizes all who see him and hear him. Thousands reject the Church and the sacraments and perish in eternity solely because they have been badly treated by a priest."

And he had no patience for religious who complained about their communities or blamed their sufferings on others. "It is neither our confreres, nor our sisters in religion, nor even our superiors, who occasion these little sufferings for us," he wrote. "We deceive ourselves and give in to temptation if we consider ourselves

ill-used by our community. The good God always stands in the background. He allows us to suffer how much and for as long as this is good for us.”

Father of the Poor

Between 1847 and 1867, Father Seelos moved from one community to another, serving as pastor, professor, novice master, director of students, mission preacher, and parish priest. While pastor of St. Alphonsus parish in Baltimore, he wrote home to his sister, “I cannot thank God enough for my vocation, although from morning till night I am overwhelmed with cares and worries...White and black, 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. It takes a real effort to snatch a little time for

spiritual reading or a visit to the Blessed Sacrament. Could I write you an account of the experiences of even one day, you would be astonished.”

Though the frustration in this letter is apparent, most people saw him as easygoing and approachable. He made time for the poor and the sick, even when it was most inconvenient. His confreres said that he routinely went to bed fully dressed or slept on a bench near the front door so that he could respond quickly to the inevitable urgent sick call.

The prostitutes in Baltimore could never forget the night that he hurried to one of their houses to comfort a young woman on her deathbed. He stayed with her till the end, knowing full well that his long, late-night visit would spark scurrilous rumors. A few days later, when an anxious friend showed him a newspaper headline insinuating the obvious, he

shrugged his shoulders and said simply, "Well, I saved a soul."

A destitute man remembered the cold winter day that Father Seelos passed him on the street. Father Seelos glanced at the rags tied around the man's feet and stopped short. He sat on the curb, pulled off his boots, and handed them to him with a kind word. Then he continued on his way in stocking feet.

A young mother isolated and exhausted by illness described Father Seelos' visits to her home. After he had said the customary prayers for the sick, he did not hurry off as she expected. Instead, he pulled up a chair to talk with her and keep her company, then he read passages of a book aloud to her. On his way out, he collected the family's soiled clothing and carried it home to the rectory to wash and mend it.

One community member later said, "Although he was the superior and his

attention was much in demand, it was never too much for him to converse about a half-hour with the poor idiot who received his dinner at the monastery. He patiently encouraged the poor man, trying to place himself in his circumstances in order to understand him better.”

Another confrere was not so understanding. He berated Father Seelos one day for “scandalously wasting time” with a poor, eccentric elderly woman he had spent hours consoling. Father Seelos answered, “I do nothing wrong in receiving all kindly, without distinction. It would be wrong to receive some affably and some rudely.”

Trials and Criticisms

Since Father Seelos’ years of ministry encompassed a time of bigotry and Catholic persecution in America, it took more than a little courage for him to venture

out into the streets or countryside to fulfill his pastoral duties. Hostile gangs routinely threatened and heckled Catholics in public; some threw torches at church buildings, setting them on fire.

To reach isolated Catholic families on the outskirts of the diocese, Father Seelos occasionally had to travel up to one hundred miles in miserable weather and over rough terrain. At one time or another he was pelted by rocks, severely beaten, threatened at gunpoint, and nearly thrown overboard while on a ferry.

It is one thing to face the animosity of your enemies; it is quite another to be attacked by your own peers. Despite Father Seelos' efforts to serve his religious community well, a few influential confreres spent unbelievable amounts of time and energy filing official complaints about his personal defects.

When Father Seelos was director of

Redemptorist students, one confrere complained to local and Roman superiors that Father Seelos lacked experience, insight, and firmness as a superior and—the ultimate jab—he could not speak Latin well. He was accused of being a pushover and criticized for allowing the students to play music after night prayers, to swim at a beach, and to put on school plays.

These may not seem like grave matters to us today, but in those days religious formation was highly structured and controlled. His program did not fit the rigid European model of religious formation, which was all that his superiors knew. He did not exactly break the rules, but he willingly bent them to accommodate the needs and culture of this first generation of American students. In short, he was a pioneer in his own congregation, and some of his confreres were not ready for his new methods and ideas.

The barrage of complaints and accusations resulted in his being declared “unfit” to direct the sixty students in religious formation. Although this decision must have shaken him, he did not regret giving up the responsibilities and burdens of leadership. Years before, he had written to his sister that he longed to relinquish his administrative duties—“Martha’s work”—so that he could join Mary, “adoringly sitting at the feet of Jesus.”

Holy Death

Father Seelos’ final assignments included three years as a mission team preacher and one year as a parish priest at St. Mary’s Church in New Orleans. Most of the community members had been Father Seelos’ students. They received their beloved former superior and mentor with joy.

By this time he was widely regarded as a holy man. People continued to be attracted to him, to confide in him, and to call for him when they were sick. Some reported that remarkable conversions and cures followed his visits. Others said simply that they felt more lighthearted or hopeful after spending time in his presence.

Characteristically, Father Seelos' last pastoral act before he was bedridden with yellow fever was to visit another man dying of the disease. Although he was feeling poorly that day, he walked a considerable distance to care for the man and stayed with him until he died. He returned home at three in the afternoon and collapsed into his bed.

At first, Father Seelos' confreres thought that he had a mild case of the fever. But then one of his lungs collapsed, and he weakened and lost his appetite. When he

became delirious, they knew the end was near. He died on October 4, 1867, as his confreres sang one of his favorite hymns in honor of the Blessed Mother.

His Legacy

In the eyes of the world, Father Seelos' life was of little consequence. He held no place of eminence in the American Church, nor did he leave a mark on the theological community. His legacy was more important than these. Father Seelos worked directly with individual people—men and women, young and old, sinners and saints—who were making their way to eternal life through the troubles, difficulties, and temptations of this world. His fame, known fully to God alone, lies in the way in which he brought Jesus to the people and the people to Jesus—on the ordinary, everyday level of life.

God calls each of us, in every walk of

life, to holiness. Father Seelos responded to this call to holiness by faithfully serving his Redemptorist confreres and the Catholic community as a priest of God. He performed his duties and accepted his daily crosses with humility and joy. His example clearly shows that holiness is attained not in doing what the world considers heroic but in being true to the responsibilities of one's state in life. The life of this remarkable man proves beyond doubt that joy and holiness come to those who serve God and neighbor with a full and devoted heart.

The Father Seelos Center in New Orleans has kept Father Seelos' memory alive, spreading the story of his life and encouraging others to turn to him for healing and help. Each year thousands of letters of petition and thanksgiving pour into the center from all parts of the U.S. If you would like more information on Father Seelos or the center, please contact

The Father Seelos Center
2030 Constance Street
New Orleans, LA 70130-5099
Telephone (504) 525-2495

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*B*ountiful God,
in Blessed Francis Xavier Seelos,
you have given your people
a model for those who labor joyfully
in your earthly kingdom.
May his smile dwell on those
who find life burdensome.
In him, our eyes continually behold
the gentleness of Jesus Christ,
our Redeemer.

*D*ivine Physician,
you infused Father Seelos
with the gift of your healing.
By the help of his prayers,
sustain in me the grace to know your will
and the strength to overcome my afflictions.
Amen

Byron Miller, C.Ss.R.
Director, The Father Seelos Center



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