



Seelos and Sanctity

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Vice-Postulator

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... The following is a digest of an eyewitness account of the death of Father Seelos, written by Father Benedict Neithart, a Redemptorist priest who was present in the room when he died. Father Neithart wrote this on October 15, 1867, to his friends in the seminary at Annapolis, Maryland, most of whom had known and loved Father Seelos while he was their Prefect of Students. We reproduce it here to commemorate the 97th anniversary of the death of Father Seelos, which occurs on October 4, 1964.....

LAST DAYS of FATHER SEELOS

by Father Benedict Neithart, C.S.S.R.

"A living saint." "Oh, the dear saint! It does my heart good only to look at him!" "The saintly-looking Father." These are just a few of many expressions people used to describe Father Seelos.

But he not merely looked like a saint. He was also one in reality. He had few equals in the Congregation in regard to zeal for souls, devotion to the Congregation, solid piety, humble obedience and enduring meekness. Many have said that Father Seelos had but one fault. He was "too good." But then, if that be a fault, we must charge it also upon St. Francis de Sales, St. Alphonsus and our Blessed Lord Himself.

Father Seelos had long entertained a desire to be sent to the "sunny south." His secret wish was satisfied last Fall. He soon became a favorite of Germans, English, French, Creoles, negroes, mulattoes. All races and classes of society admired and loved Father Seelos.

He was by no means greatly proficient in English, and still less in French. Yet highly educated Creoles and Americans travelled many miles, and stood for hours before his confessional. Whoever went to him once, would never afterwards go to any other director. He could read the secrets of the heart. Several instances have been related to me, by which I became satisfied that this belief was not without foundation.

The amount of daily labor he performed as chief pastor of St. Mary's, Prefect of the Church, Prefect of the Brothers, spiritual director of the sisters, and of thousands of lay people was astonishing. He was always to be found either in his room, writing or praying, or in the confessional, the schools or on sick calls. He was the most cheerful and humorous person in the community. Often he would smile and say "I have now made the rounds of all the houses in our province. Only New Orleans was yet re-

(CONTINUED ON INSIDE PAGE)

In conformity with the decree of Pope Urban VIII all statements contained herein are unreservedly submitted to the judgment of the Holy See and to the decision of the Sacred Congregation of Rites.

IMPRIMATUR † Bishop L. Abel Caillouet, D. D., Sept., 9, 1964 New Orleans, Louisiana

maining. I have come here to pass the rest of my days and find a last resting place in St. Mary's." He would then place his right hand on his breast, saying: "I feel that I have travelled enough. I shall never leave New Orleans."

On the 17th of September, while the community was at table, Father Seelos looked unusually depressed, jaded and pale. All perceived the clearest marks of the yellow fever about his eyes. Father Rector immediately ordered him to bed. The doctor pronounced his fever of a very light and passing nature. After a few days the fever appeared to be completely broken. No one doubted that he would be up and about before others of the community who were also ill.*

Prayers were said by thousands of devoted friends and penitents for his speedy recovery. People, with tears in their eyes, came to the door to ask about Father Seelos and the rest of the sick Fathers and Brothers. Masses without number were said. Everyone in the house vied with one another in the attention they showed him.

*At this time a vicious yellow fever epidemic was raging. Out of 180,000 people in the city of New Orleans, 50,000 people took sick and 5,000 died. The Rector (Superior) of the Community was Father John Duffy, C. SS. R.

The ninth day came, after which yellow fever patients, unless very severely attacked, are generally able to have their linen changed and to sit up. But Father Seelos' prostration seemed unnatural. His sleep was almost continual. While in the act of conversation he frequently dozed away. He took stimulants and some light food, but hourly he became more feeble and listless. When asked whether he suffered anything, he answered "No."

From his inability to pronounce more than two or three syllables at a time, the uncommon prostration which his chest assumed, his short, heavy breathing, it became apparent that his lungs must be affected. The doctor sounded his chest, and found that one of his lungs was entirely gone. He became daily more feeble.

Toward the third week of his illness, his mind began frequently to wander. Once when delirious he inquired: "But Father, who will give the priests' retreat this year?" Father Giesen answered: "Don't worry about that, I'll give it myself." "Yes, yes, you do it, for I am too weak."

While he was delirious, he busied himself hearing confessions. Everyone who came to see him

had to submit to the process of confession. Father Giesen, Father Meredith, Father Rector, Brother Louis and several others were obliged to kneel by his side and make their confession, no matter whether they wanted to or not. He blessed them, questioned them, gave them good advice, a penance and began the formula of absolution. He would then become confused and unable to proceed when he raised his hands at the words "Deinde ego te absolvo." Once he suddenly asked his attendant "When did you go to confession last?" After being told, he continued: "My dear friend, I think it necessary for you to make a general confession." However the poor penitent became released from his difficult position, for the good Father then ceased to question him and closed his eyes quite exhausted. All this was done in delirium, and always in a kind tone and with a smiling face.

To say that he was patient is too tame and inadequate an expression. He was heroic. Besides the difficulty in breathing, he suffered indescribable torments from inability to pass water, and from the black vomit which, during his last days, began to form in his stomach. He never looked at any of us or answered a question without a pleasant smile.

Night and day our devoted Father Rector leaned over his beloved friend and confessor. As often as he gave him Holy Viaticum or prayed with him, or spoke of him, his voice became choked with emotion. From early dawn till late at night, the pious faithful pressed around the altars and the mission-crucifix, weeping and praying that God might yet spare the life of the "beloved saint." On the streets the Fathers were incessantly stopped by weeping faithful who inquired about Father Seelos. At the door there was a continual stream of lamenting inquirers. Even the daily city papers, such as the TIMES, the CRESCENT, and the PICAYUNE, contained, among the local news, daily reports about the health of Father Seelos.

Our dearly beloved Father, who had once been the Prefect of Students or Spiritual Director to most of us, grew hourly more prostrate and feeble. He scarcely ate or drank anything during his last days except by obedience. Whenever that word was mentioned, he made almost superhuman efforts to comply. On the day before his death, Father Rector, in the excess of his grief and mental distraction, commanded him under obedience, to rise and return to health. The dying Father, though apparently unconscious up to that moment, instantly drew up his knees, raised his head, and made a

desperate effort to obey the command. But it was not the will of God. Father Seelos fell back completely exhausted. On witnessing this touching act of obedience, all of us broke into weeping.

Towards the end of the second week, Father Rector, despairing of his recovery, administered to him the Sacraments of Holy Viaticum and Extreme Unction. Death had no horrors for a Redemptorist such as Father Seelos. His only delight was that he had the happiness of having persevered and of dying in the Congregation.

Every night, after twelve o'clock, Father Rector, who would allow this honor to none but himself, brought him and the other sick Holy Communion. The reception of this Sacrament seemed to be his only refreshment and desire. In delirium he was asked by Brother Louis, who would never leave his side, whether he wished for anything to eat. The good Father smiled, as was his invariable custom, and said: "No, dear Brother, I want nothing to eat, but I want Holy Communion."

He complained only when his modesty was offended. In obedience to a command of Father Rector, he was obliged to submit to an operation to relieve pressure on his kidneys. After it was over he murmured to Brother Louis, "Ach Bruder, das war schlimm! An einem Priester so etwas Unkeusches thun!" ("Oh, Brother Louis, that was awful! And to do something so immodest to a priest!")

His breathing became constantly heavier and more suffocating. His pulse ran up to 144 a minute. Four days before his death our pious but somewhat incredulous doctor pronounced his life a continued miracle.

On Wednesday, Oct. 2 at 12:30 A. M., we were all summoned to his bedside. His breathing became slower and slower. Expecting that he would soon breathe his last, we recited for over an hour the prayers for the dying, renewal of the vows, Litanies of Jesus, of the Blessed Virgin, of St. Alphonsus, and many other prayers. He answered them all, though indistinctly. Father Rector requested him once more to bless us and the whole Congregation, especially our American Province. He instantly raised his feeble hand and imparted the desired blessing.

Some time before Brother Louis had made similar requests which were acceded to. The weeping Brother then asked him to bless the Superior General of our Congregation. "No, no!" said Father Seelos, "I can't do that. I am not worthy." "But" continued the Brother, "won't you bless Father Provincial?" "O yes, with all my heart." He then raised his feeble arm again and blessed our dear

Father Provincial.

After all the prayers had been recited by the whole community he seemed to gather wonderful strength. He appeared to be lifted up above himself. "My dear confreres," he said, "I never thought it was so sweet to die in the Congregation. I am now beginning to know what a happiness it is to live and die as a Redemptorist. Oh! Let us all love our vocation and strive to persevere in it. Then all will be right with us. I know that I have not lived as I should. I fear that I have often scandalized you by my faults and imperfections. But now, on my deathbed, I beg your pardon for the scandal I have given you."

Our hearts ached on hearing this humble apology. God knows he never disedified any one of us, but only put us to shame by the brilliant example of his virtues. One Father exclaimed, "If a saint speaks this way, what will become of us poor devils when we die!"

After some time he asked Father Rector, "What day of the week is it?" "It is Wednesday, the day consecrated to St. Joseph who is the special patron of the dying. Pray to him to take you to heaven." "No, no," Father Seelos said, "I don't wish to die today, but on Friday or Saturday." It had always been his desire during life to die on one of these two days, because on the first Jesus died on the cross, and on the second, he hoped to be taken by his Blessed Mother into Heaven. On hearing this we all became convinced that his wish would certainly be realized. We therefore, retired.

On Friday morning, Oct. 4, the feast of St. Francis of Assisi, Father Rector requested the community to make meditation in Father Seelos' room. He seemed to be unconscious, but his face lighted up with a heavenly radiance when he again heard the community prayers. After the meditation, we went about our duties. At all the Masses in our 3 churches we announced that our beloved Father Seelos would probably die during that or the following day. In St. Mary's there was not a single dry eye. Many cried aloud. Everyone remained after Mass, crowding around the altars, praying as though to force our dear Lord to spare the saintly Father's life.

That day Father Seelos tried to repeat the pious aspirations, the renewal of vows, etc., which were spoken into his ears. We could not understand him. At 4:30 P. M. it was evident that his agony was about to begin. His suffering became intense. His breathing became more rapid and painful. His last struggle was long and hard. The prayers for the dying were again recited and short aspirations suggested.

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Our dear dying Father remained conscious to his last breath. His lips continually moved in prayer. His eyes were fixed on the crucifix until they could see no more. A supernatural brightness appeared to illumine his dying countenance. As the moment of his death approached, his joy communicated itself to everyone in the room. We had almost forgotten that we were at the bedside of a dying person. We began to sing his favorite hymns. They were German hymns in honor of the Mother of God -- "MILDE KOENIGIN" and "MUTTER, ICH VERGEHE". While we were singing the hymns his holy soul quietly left his body and hastened to the embrace of its heavenly Bridegroom. The time was ten minutes to six. It was Friday evening, the 4th of October.

In less than two hours the body was robed in the purple priestly vestments and laid out in the church. A storm was raging furiously. Nevertheless, when the bell in the tower was tolled, the faithful began to flock in crowds to the church.

Father Seelos' face had the same saintly expression as in life. The next morning it became very yellow, without ceasing to look lovely. The limbs remained pliable as in life. No marks of corruption were noticed. In ordinary cases the smell became perceptible after a few hours. Most of the faithful remained praying and weeping around the body during the whole night.

At 8 A. M. Saturday, the Solemn Requiem was changed. Father Giessen, a subject and penitent of the deceased, and his longtime companion on missions, delivered a funeral oration. He spoke in English, as the Americans, Irish and Creoles formed the majority of the audience. After the "LIBERA" the whole Congregation pushed toward the corpse to get a last glance at their beloved Father Seelos. We were engaged for about half an hour in touching hundreds of rosaries, books, etc. to the body.

At a little before twelve the remains of our dear Father were lowered into the vault before the altar of St. Alphonsus, at the side of the large mission crucifix with the life-size statue of our Mother of Sorrows beneath it. ** The lamentations of the people reached their climax.

Their love and devotion has not yet abated. One Solemn Requiem Mass after the other is sung at the request of the people. Holy Communions are almost countless. From morning till night no one leaves the church without kneeling at the tomb of dear Father Seelos. He is universally called 'the saintly Father Seelos', 'der heilige Pater Seelos.'

**Father Seelos had preached the sermon when this new statue was erected. In it he said that he wished to be buried beneath this statue of our Lady. In those

OCT. 4th
11:00 A.M.
ST. MARY'S CHURCH

To Be Televised

On Channel 6 WDSU-TV

●
MASS OFFERED FOR ALL
Intentions Recommended To
FATHER SEELOS

and for the
Success of His Cause

●
days the priests were buried in a vault beneath the floor of the church. In time, as with all men, his body decayed.