

TRACKING DOWN A SAINT

by Father Michael Curley, C.S.S.R.

Editor's note: Father Michael Curley, C.S.S.R. has been working energetically in Brooklyn, N. Y., for several years in researching all of the facts concerning Father Seelos' life. He has written this article to give us an idea of what is involved in "Tracking Down a Saint."

When completed the biography will have about 15 chapters. There will be about 350 to 400 pages of text, plus 100 pages of footnotes, bibliography and index. It will be approximately another year before his book is completed.

Nowadays there are a number of television shows in which the theme is tracking down a criminal. "The District Attorney", "Highway Patrol", "The Untouchables" and many other programs illustrate the process whereby a criminal is tracked down. Recently a reverse assignment was given me: the task of tracking down a saint.

The Catholic Church, in beatifying or in canonizing a person, wishes first to give public testimony of the genuineness of the sanctity of that person; second she proposes him as our intercessor in heaven; and third she proposes him as a model for our imitation. The Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer has three great canonized saints in Alphonsus Liguori, Clement Hofbauer and Gerard Majella. Recently, another Redemptorist, Blessed John Neumann of Philadelphia, was beatified. Eighteen other Redemptorists have been proposed for the honors of the Altar, including venerable Peter Donders, the Apostle of the Lepers in Surinam; Venerable Joseph Passerat, a companion of St. Clement Hofbauer in northern Europe; the Austrian William Janauschek, who died in 1926; and more particularly one other Redemptorist who lived in America, Father Francis Seelos. This priest died of yellow fever in New Orleans in 1867.

Beatification and canonization are strictly judicial processes extending over long years, and done with infinite pains to ascertain the truth about the person proposed for the honors of the Altar. There are usually two general processes. The first is called the Ordinary or Diocesan Process in which witnesses in the various dioceses where a person has lived are summoned and questioned in strict juridical form concerning the life and the works of the individual proposed for canonization. After that Process is complete, the Cause may be advanced. This second stage, called the Apostolic Process, centers in Rome. In this the promoters of an individual's reputation for sanctity and those who are delegated to give the



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counter arguments (the promoters of the Faith or so-called devil's advocates), engage in a long investigation of the subject under discus-

Some sixty years ago the Diocesan process for the canonization of Father Francis Seelos was completed. However, some of the details were missing concerning this great priest's boyhood as were those of his education in the secondary schools and at the university. Because these were necessary, the whole movement for his canonization was stalled. In order to seek the necessary information concerning Father Seelos' boyhood and early life before he came to America, those interested in his canonization asked me to get further information about his early life. Thus it happened that I was sent to "track down a saint."

Specifically, the task before me was to find out about his family, about his early schooling, his years in the preparatory school, in the university and in the seminary. Naturally, before entering on such a quest, all the available material that I could find in America was examined by me including the sermons he wrote and the data about him in the Provincial Archives and in the various centers where he lived, in Baltimore, in Cumberland, in Pittsburgh and in New Orleans. The rest of the investigation had to be done in Europe.

ROME

The first center to be investigated was the Redemptorist Archives at their world headquarters in Rome. Did you ever try to go through a great sheaf of documents to find notices concerning somebody? It takes long and tedious hours, but when it is done new information is gathered. Similarly, the official Archives of Propaganda Fidei were investigated. These yielded some splendid documents concerning the choice of Father Seelos as a candidate for the office of Bishop of Pittsburgh. Actually, he never became the bishop because he did not want to, and because his talents did not run in that direction. What is striking about these letters in Rome, however, is the fact that all of them added up to a great laudatory appraisal of Father Seelos.

FUESSEN

If you want to find out about a man you go to his birthplace. That is why I had to go to the little town of Fuessen in Bavaria, some eighty miles southwest of the city of Munich where Francis Seelos was born in 1819. Pouring over the church records, still preserved in a very orderly manner, it was easy to find out about the family of Father Seelos. His parents had twelve children, three of whom died in early life; three of them became religious, two nuns and Father Seelos a priest; three of them were married and three others preferred to remain single. Baptismal records, marriage records, death records, burial records, all of these gave the historical facts about the family.

There was more than that to be done in the town of Fuessen. One had to go to the school where he studied with great zeal for six years; one had to investigate the homes where he lived. Then, in order to find out about the family's financial status and general reputation, one had to go into the dusty papers in the city Archives. Added to that was an examination of the newspapers of the town to glean any possible information about other events in the family. Fortunately, we were able to find out from these a good description of the death of one of Father Seelos' sisters who fell from the third story of her home and was killed almost instantly. Although the

family had its own home, it was evident that it was heavily mortgaged, and although the father had a trade (making cloth), the income from that trade was steadily declining at the time. In order to gain a livelihood, the father of Father Seelos also became sacristan of the parish church, a position he held very faithfully for over twenty years.

FAMILY TREE

Precisely to find out more about the family, a family tree or history of the whole family was organized. Now this getting up of a family tree was not just an effort to have a Sears-Roebuck catalogue of names. The object behind it was to find out where there might be any possible relatives of this holy man in Germany. Fortunately such a family tree led us to certain persons who still had letters written by Father Seelos. One particular relative of Father Seelos is now the German Ambassador to Brazil, Gerard Seelos. After going to the small town of Marktoberdorf where the Ambassador's sister lives, we were able to obtain a diary written by Father Seelos' father covering many years. This investigation really paid off.

Similarly by going to Fuessen's local school, studying the streets the boy had to pass to go to school, and by finally obtaining the grades he made during his early years, we were able to get a good account of the young man's life.

AUGSBURG

The next problem concerned the youth of Father Seelos. We knew that he had studied for seven years at St. Stephen's Gymnasium, a famous preparatory college in the town of Augsburg. We knew that he had received good grades there, but little more. This is not sufficient for a canonization process. It has to be more specific, more factual, and more exact. On our arrival at this "City of Truce", as it is called, one of the first setbacks appeared to us insurmountable. This particular school had been bombed by American aviators during World War II and the records were destroyed. Here I was, an American, looking for records which American planes had destroyed in battle. All hope was not lost, however, for after a diligent

search the authorities there, good Benedictine Fathers, came up with a series of reports by the Rector of this particular preparatory seminary for all the years that Francis Seelos studied there. From these reports it was possible to learn not only that Francis Seelos was present there but the names of all the students in his class, all the grades he received, even the books he had won as prizes and remarks concerning his health. This was a windfall particularly as the grades were so designated that one could see that Francis Seelos was a top student all during his career there. There are other things to be found in Augsburg; one had to go around town and find out what were the principal buildings at the time of Father Seelos' stay there, how the place looked in that day and the like. What had promised to be a disaster turned out to be a blessing. The complete scholastic record of this young man was there for the years 1832 to 1839; he had even studied outside class hours in order to learn French.

MUNICH

On leaving the preparatory seminary at Augsburg, Francis Seelos went to the University of Munich called Ludwig Maximilian University. The same difficulties confronted us here as had in Augsburg. The University had been bombed during World War II and the records, they claimed, were destroyed. Nevertheless, by persistently requesting information results were obtained. Fortunately Gerard Seelos, the German Ambassador to Brazil was an alumnus of this University, and when the authorities found out that he was coming back from Brazil and that he was interested in the case, they began to hunt with much more zeal than they had previously shown. The result was that they were able to produce printed reports for the years that Francis Seelos had spent studying Philosophy and Theology. Here again was a windfall. Not only could I find out where he lived, what his status was, the subjects he had studied, and his grades from 1839 to 1842, but all the names of the professors who taught him, some of them the most famous in Europe at the time.

DILLINGEN

The trackdown now took us to the seminary at Dillingen where Francis Seelos began to study in November 1842. This place had not been bombed, for the town is very small, but as it turned out, Seelos was in this seminary for only five weeks. Nevertheless, the official records were there to show what subjects the young man studied, who his professors were, and particularly who was over his conduct in the residence hall.

In all these investigations, while the search for data was soul trying, the most difficult thing was to get the information copied exactly or put on micro-film or on photo-copies. It is amazing how many mistakes can be made in such things. One has to go back and plead and spend money, and go back again in order to obtain these things. They were obtained and we have the record of the young man, at least his scholastic record, complete.

Do you know what all of this added up to - the testimony from various sources, accounts from school, letters written by friends, by officials? To one great fact: the boyhood and the youth of Francis Seelos was very well spent in preparation for his missionary career in America. The trackdown was ended.

THE FINAL CHAPTER

of

SEELOS - APOSTLE of KINDNESS

by Luana Jambois

WILL APPEAR

IN THE DECEMBER ISSUE

SECOND CLASS MAIL
Paid at New Orleans, La.

For all the intentions recommended to the prayers of Father Seelos, we ask that you offer the following prayer:

O MY GOD, I TRULY BELIEVE YOU ARE PRESENT WITH ME. I ADORE YOUR LIMITLESS PERFECTIONS. I THANK YOU FOR THE GRACES AND GIFTS YOU GAVE TO FATHER SEELOS. IF IT IS YOUR HOLY WILL PLEASE LET HIM BE DECLARED A SAINT OF THE CHURCH. THROUGH HIS PRAYERS PLEASE GIVE ME THIS FAVOR