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THREE APPRAISALS OF THE SPIRITUALITY AND CHARISM  
OF BLESSED FRANCIS XAVIER SEELOS, CSSR

INTRODUCTION

This article consists of three synthetic descriptions of the spiritual life and charismatic gifts of Blessed Francis Xavier Seelos. It is a reworking of chapter 17 of the *Documentary Study* that is the major part of the *Positio super Virtutibus* presented to the Congregation for the Causes of Saints in the process of his beatification.<sup>1</sup> It is found in volume II, part 2, pp. 1325-1410. Each of the authors of these appraisals had written a biography of Father Seelos and had, therefore, the advantage of a long familiarity with him, enabling them to write of him as a long-experienced personal friend. The three Redemptorist authors are: Fathers Peter Zimmer, Michael J. Curley, and Carl Hoegerl, each of whom will be introduced more fully at the beginning of each appraisal.

APPRAISAL I

PETER ZIMMER, C.S.S.R.

INTRODUCTION

The first appraisal is by Father Peter Zimmer, C.S.S.R. It is taken from his biography of Father Seelos, entitled in the original German *Leben und Wirken des Hochwürdigem P. Franz Xaver Seelos aus der Congregation des Allerheil. Erlösers* (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1887) (*Life and*

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<sup>1</sup> The full title of the entire work is: *Novae Aureliae Beatificationis et Canonizationis Servi Dei Francisci Xaverii Seelos, Sacerdotis Professi Congregationis SS.Mi Redemptoris (1819-1867): Positio super Vita, Virtutibus et Fama Sancitatis*, 2 vols. (Roma: Tipografia Guerra, 1999). Volume 2, in 2 books, has this subtitle: *Documentary Study of the Life, Virtues, and Fame for Holiness of the Servant of God, Francis Xavier Seelos, Professed Priest of the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer* (cited hereafter as *DocStud*).

*Work of Reverend Francis Xavier Seelos, of the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer*). The text is found in chapter 34, pp. 289-318, "Uebersichtliche Darstellung der vorzüglichen Tugenden des Hochw. P. Seelos" ("Summary Description of the Outstanding Virtues of Father Seelos").

Zimmer's biography has a particular value. It is made up, for the most part, of longer or shorter citations from original contemporary documents that have to do with Father Seelos. In addition to this, where Zimmer supplies non-documental material - observations, additional data, reflective commentaries, it must be borne in mind that he himself was a contemporary of Father Seelos and knew him personally, as did others whom Zimmer cites in the course of the book. The preponderance of the material in this biography can be traced back to someone who, at one time or another, had come in contact with him. This gives readers of this biography unusual assurance of the veracity and reliability of the material contained in it.

It will be immediately evident that Zimmer, methodologically, follows a rather traditional schema in his appraisal of the spirituality of Father Seelos. This is to say, also, that his presentation has more the character of a synthesis than does that of Father Curley, which is to follow this one. His assessment of the virtuous life of Father Seelos begins with the theological virtues and then continues with those that are usually looked for as signs of the holiness of a priest who is a member of a religious order. This is followed by a schema that is more original in a presentation such as this: Zimmer points out, in a special section, how Father Seelos possessed in an unusual way the twelve fruits of the Holy Spirit.

Zimmer developed his presentation of the spirituality chiefly through anecdotes from the life of Father Seelos that bring out some particular virtue or characteristic of his inner personality. And, it must be said, his emphases are those that reflect the spiritual concerns of the end of the nineteenth century rather than our own.

He incorporated into his text some of the poems that Father Seelos was wont to write. These poems are not great literature by any means, but they do give expression to the inner sentiments of Father Seelos and so bring us into contact with his spirituality. The poems are given here in their original German, followed by a somewhat literal translation. Father Zimmer, unfortunately, did not arm his text with explanatory footnotes. The annotations found here have been added for the purposes of the article.

TEXT

It is difficult to say in which virtues our departed Father stood out and excelled the most during his lifetime, since there is not a single one that we can name that he did not practice in an outstanding way with great joyfulness and perseverance. His heart was a well-enclosed garden which, under the expert care of a skilled gardener, brought forth the most precious and beautiful flowers and fruit that filled the air with their pleasant perfume and fragrance.

Before all else the three theological virtues shown forth in him, which, so to speak, really were the soul of his virtuous life.

1. First of all, in what concern his faith, we can in all truth say that the *Servant of God really lived out of his faith*, for his entire life was founded on it and went forth from it as from a living wellspring. As a child of truly God-fearing and devout parents, he passed the years of his innocent childhood in an atmosphere of faith. It was thus that he felt the call of God to give himself to the religious state.

To attain this goal, he spent the years of his youth in the study of the various branches of learning and in the practice of the virtues. Then, when divine Providence had opened the way for him into the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer, he joyfully gave up everything in the world that was near and dear to him and entered into the path of the spiritual life with fervent faith and rejoiced as a giant to run his course.

*Faith was the measuring rod* that he strictly adhered to in his external deportment and in his entire manner of thinking and judging. Life on earth was for him a mere time of probation that he had to make use of conscientiously to attain successfully the exalted goal of his pilgrimage. He inculcated this teaching upon the people publicly in the pulpit as well as privately in the confessional and in other dealings with them. In this school he taught in a very special way the confreres of his Congregation who were entrusted to him; in such a way, however, that in applying this teaching he was himself a living example and model. Beautifully he expressed these sentiments of the faith in the following verses.

MEINE GRÖSSTE PLAGE<sup>2</sup>

1. O, wie arm und wie verlassen  
Fühl' ich mich in dieser Welt!  
All ihr Thun und all ihr Lassen  
Meinem Herzen nicht gefällt.  
Nach der Heimat - dort nach oben,  
Diesem Elend ganz enthoben;  
Dort bei Engeln möcht' ich sein,  
Auch so heilig, auch so rein.
2. Könnt' ich doch auch heilig werden,  
Nach und nach, so schön, so neu!  
Alle Kreuze und Beschwerden  
Wollt' ich tragen ohne Scheu.  
Dürft' ich's hoffen, o wie gerne  
Wollt' ich leiden, wenn auch ferne  
Noch vom Ziel, vom Heimatland;  
"Zeitlich" wär ich gern verbannt.
3. Ob gedrückt von grossen Leiden,  
Wär auch alles freudenleer;  
Oder, ob beglückt von Freuden,  
Diese schätzt' ich auch nicht sehr!  
Eltern, Heimat, Blut und Leben,  
Glück und Reichthum möcht' ich geben.  
Alles! Nur so schön, so neu  
Möcht' ich sein und sündenfrei!
4. Kommt mir gar so schön vor's Auge,  
Wie's kein Mensch gesehen hat,  
Was vom Himmel lehrt der Glaube  
Von Jerusalem, der Stadt;  
Wo von Sünde, Kummer, Plage,  
Frei vom Schmerze, frei von Klage,  
Von der Furcht zu fallen frei,  
Alles heilig ist und neu.
5. Doch da fühl' ich gar so drückend  
Eine grosse, schwere Last!  
Alles and're schien erquickend,

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<sup>2</sup> The autograph poem is found in the Redemptorist Archives of the Baltimore Province (hereafter RABP), where the MSS of Seelos are preserved, which location we will presume in further citations of the poems: Seelos MS XIII, pp. 3-4. Zimmer was often not content with the words that Seelos used, so he asked Father Henry Meurer, C.SS.R., to edit them. We give here the original of Seelos.

Diese Bürd' erdrückt mich fast.  
All mein Elend, Fehler, Mängel,  
Leidenschaft mit Wurz und Stengel  
Wuchert frisch und altert nie,  
Bleibt mir nah', wohin ich flieh'.  
6. Gut sein wollen, Tugend lieben  
Und dabei doch jeden Tag  
Meinen lieben Gott betrüben:  
Dies ist meine grösste Plag'!  
Sünden stets auf Sünden haufen,  
Alle Vorsätz', auch die steifen,  
Grad zu brechen; und gemacht,  
Halten sie kaum über Nacht.

*English Translation*

MY GREATEST COMPLAINT

1. O, how poor and how forsaken  
Do I feel myself in this world;  
All its doing and all its not doing  
Do not please my heart.  
For my homeland - there above,  
Completely freed from this misery;  
There with angels would I be,  
Just so holy, just so pure.  
2. If I could only be holy  
By and by, so beautiful, so new!  
Every cross and difficulty,  
I would bear without reserve.  
Might I hope it - O, how gladly  
Would I suffer, even if far away  
Still from the goal, from my homeland;  
"From things of time," I would gladly be banished.  
3. Even if burdened with great sorrow;  
And were everything empty of joy;  
Or, whether fortunate with joy -  
These things I would not value much.  
Parents, home, blood, and life,  
Success, and riches, I would give -  
Everything. Only so beautiful, so new  
I want to be, and so free of sin.  
4. It does come so beautifully to my eye;

As no one has every seen it -  
 What from heaven faith teaches,  
 From Jerusalem, the city.  
 Where freed from sin, care, trials;  
 Free from pain, free from complaint,  
 Free of fear of falling -  
 Everything is holy and new.  
 5. Still here I feel so oppressive  
 A great, heavy burden;  
 Everything else seemed enlivening.  
 This burden almost crushes me;  
 All my misery, mistakes, want,  
 Passion, in root and stem,  
 Rages afresh, and never changes,  
 Stays close to me, flee where I may.  
 6. To desire to be good, to love virtue,  
 And yet, despite this, each day  
 To sadden my beloved God.  
 This is my great complaint!  
 Always to pile sin upon sin;  
 All resolutions, even the strongest,  
 Actually to break; having made them  
 Hardly to keep them overnight.

Because the devout priest was accustomed *to see and to adore the wise Providence of God in all the events of his life*, neither good nor bad fortune could put him out of sorts. Rather he always preserved a never beclouded cheerfulness of disposition. Only one thing could arouse his displeasure: when he heard that something was said or done that was not in harmony with his rule of faith. In such cases his zeal flared up, and he gave animated and strong opposition. The following instance gives evidence of this.

In August 1859, around the feast of the Assumption, the mystery of this feast was the topic of discussion during the evening recreation. Father Seelos was particularly animated as he spoke of the logic of the Catholic belief in the Assumption of Mary into heaven: because she was not touched by original sin and by not the slightest breath of sin; because in everything she was so like her divine Son. Therefore, it was fitting that her body too, like that of her divine Son Jesus, was taken up into heaven shortly after her death. This privilege she merited through her faithful cooperation in the work of salvation.

There was a pause after this explanation and then these words were heard in a mutter from the mouth of one of those present: "But this is absolutely not an article of faith." This aroused the feelings of the prefect of students. "Why," he then shouted to this theologian, "Why did Saint Alphonsus oblige all the fathers and theologians of his Congregation to accept as Catholic truth and to defend it as such the teaching of the Immaculate Conception of Mary long before the definition of the dogma? My dear confreres! If we want to be true Redemptorists, we must accept such Catholic truths beforehand and not merely wait until the Church obliges us to them under pain of excommunication."<sup>3</sup>

In this way, he did not permit even a hint of a doubt about the Catholic tradition in this question. Actually, this theologian was for a rather long time no longer a Redemptorist in his heart, and in a few months after this event was dismissed from the Congregation.<sup>4</sup>

To be truthful, *in matters of faith Father Seelos was incapable of a doubt*, and in all other things he adored the ways of God with a heart filled with faith. For this reason, this noble priest possibly was accused of exaggeration and extravagance. But this has to be understood properly. To begin with, it is clear, this alleged exaggeration and extravagance in Father Seelos never had anything that was harmful in its effects, because it never pushed him to exceed the demands of fraternal charity; nor to overstep the limits of the obedience due to superiors. His faith was exaggerated in regard to the power of God and his saints, in his trust in the efficacy of prayer, in his hatred of Satan and his accomplices and their false doctrines, in his burning zeal for everything that concerned external reverence and adoration of the Most Blessed Sacrament.

But can one ever be too exaggerated in such things? Is not what unbelievers call exaggeration and extremism precisely in the eyes of God and of true Christians a supernatural and more than ordinary degree of zeal in the exercise of virtue and one's duty? Is not this kind of exaggeration that divine foolishness which is proper to the great saints and which their contemporaries also found fault with? Were not those hermits of Palestine and the Thebaid exaggerated when they left their hermitages and appeared suddenly in their penitential garb in the streets of Antioch and Alexandria to defend the belief in the consubstantiality of the Son with the Father against the Arians and, through their words and example,

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<sup>3</sup> *Codex Regularum et Constitutionum CSSR* (Roma, 1896), p. 32, no. 8: Constitution approved in 1749: "[...]et choristae, absoluto studiorum theologorum curriculo, voti religione se obstringent ad doctrinam illam de Beata Virgine sine labe concepta propugnandam."

<sup>4</sup> For details about this, see *DocStud*, II/2: 774-775.

strengthened the wavering believers? Were not the martyrs of the first four centuries also exaggerated when they not only suffered death with unbelievable steadfastness and joyful longing but also presented themselves to the pagan judges, spoke to them, and joyfully offered themselves to endure every kind of suffering? And to come closer to our own times, were not those famous saints of the Middle Ages, a Saint Francis Assisi, a Saint Bernard, and many others also exaggerated when they pushed the practice of evangelical poverty and mortification to such a severe degree that it actually seemed impossible for human endurance? Father Seelos was exaggerated in the manner of these saints, for faith taught him that even in our times the arm of God is not hindered nor shortened.

*This living faith of his showed itself especially when he spoke of the dignity and power of the priesthood.* O how much esteem and reverence was he able to instill in those young Redemptorists who were committed to his care for this exalted state in which a human person is deemed worthy to perform the greatest works of divine power; that is, the work of consecration in the sacrifice of the Mass and the forgiving of sins in the sacrament of penance!

He gave the most *childlike and joyful assent to all the doctrines of the Church*; and he would have considered himself fortunate to be in a position to give his life for any one of them. It is self-evident that the Fathers of the Church stood in high regard with him. Next to Sacred Scripture their words furnished the material for his wonderful conferences that were listened to with an attitude that was nothing less than intense attention. As he himself, in his high regard for the word of God, never failed in preparing carefully by prayer and study when he was to teach or correct others, so he exhorted his students to always prepare themselves well for their apostolic work. Even when he had to speak on a topic that he had already often used, he was accustomed to improve, change, and arrange the previously preached sermon so that it would have more appeal both to himself and to those who would hear it.

Impromptu preaching had little credit with him. He believed that effort and care were due to the word of God and the people who were desirous of help. It was for this reason that he found much fault when the people, hungry for the word of God, were merely given a poorly prepared and roughly delivered scrap.

From his living faith in the mysteries of our holy faith came forth also *that otherworldly presence, reverence, and dignity with which he celebrated Mass.* Everyone considered himself fortunate to be present then, and even his confreres, who as students were still under his direction, were always overjoyed when they were able to serve his Mass. He



seemed to shine as if transfigured. The precious gift of faith made it very sweet and desirous for him to die in the bosom of the Catholic Church and as a Redemptorist. He lived and breathed in faith; he died in faith. And we confidently hope that he already enjoys in full measure the fruits of his efforts for the faith.

2. *Not less did hope shine forth in him*, which sprung from his faith as from its sure root and which he possessed in rich measure. Not in the slightest did he doubt the fatherly care of God, but confidently hoped for the graces necessary for eternal blessedness. This hope of his was especially discernible in his extraordinary devotion to prayer. Entirely forgetting about created things, he placed all his hope in God, and for this reasons his peace of mind was never disturbed. Always of an optimistic frame of mind, he accepted everything from the hands of divine Providence. He was wont to say that the more he was conscious of his own weakness, the more he hoped to obtain greater results from his efforts; and that, on the contrary, when he thought that he had done something good, he knew for certain beforehand that his efforts would be totally fruitless.

And so it happened at times, as he himself admits, that, because of many other preoccupations, he could not prepare himself well for his sermons; for which reason he considered himself ill-suited to proclaim the word of God. However, in such circumstances, he preached, trusted whole-heartedly in God, and, as he found out later, always with great profit for the people. *His strength was his mistrust of self and trust in God.* He followed closely the words of the Rule of his Congregation: "They shall join very great confidence in God to their pure intention, for, if this is wanting, the laborer is, as it were, dumb, weak, powerless, nay even quite useless for his ministry. A missionary without confidence is like a soldier without a shield. [...] If his confidence is very great, then, very great will be the number of souls brought back to virtue; but, if it is little, there will be but a scanty number of conversions."<sup>5</sup>

As the same Rule ordains, he joined to this confidence the conscientious use of his natural talents and study; he did not want to be identified with those who fold their hands on their lap and are not reluctant to tempt God.<sup>6</sup> He gave clear evidence of his trust in God in 1861 during the

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<sup>5</sup> *Constitutions and Rules of the Congregation of Priests under the Title of the Most Holy Redeemer* (English translation: London: St. Mary's, Clapham, 1939), p. 69, no. 44.

<sup>6</sup> *Constitutions and Rules*, p. 70, no. 45: "Nevertheless, they should never separate from that great trust in God the use of the mental gifts and abilities, which the Divine Goodness has bestowed on them. They must not belong to that class of men, who, leading

war, when he wrote: "The war will not do us any harm. I don't have the slightest worry because our loving God is taking care of us."<sup>7</sup> For his physical separation from the members of his family, he consoled himself with the sweet hope of recompense and a meeting in heaven, as he wrote:<sup>8</sup>

1. Wiedersehen hier auf Erden  
Wird wohl nicht beschieden werden;  
Die ich liebe, lieb' ich sehr,  
Lieb' ich täglich mehr und mehr.
2. Lauter Seelen, die da leiden;  
Lauter Seelen, die da meiden  
Was den Aufschwung hindern kann  
Dort hinauf, dort himmelan.
3. Wiedersehen hier auf Erden  
Soll Euch nicht beschieden werden;  
Jenseits in des Himmels Flur  
Wünsch ich sie zu sehen nur.
4. Viele Schwestern, viele Brüder  
Seh' ich dann auf einmal wieder;  
Seh' ich dann für immerdar,  
Liebe lebt dann rein und klar.
5. Armes Herz, drum sei zufrieden,  
Dein Genuss is nicht hienieden;  
Harre, und in Jesu Herz  
Leg die Sehnsucht und den Schmerz!

*English translation*

1. Meeting here on earth will, indeed, not be granted again; those I love, I love very much; I love them daily more and more.
2. All of them, souls who suffer here; all of them, souls who here avoid whatever can hinder the rising up to thee, up to heaven.

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a life of sloth, are not afraid to tempt God."

<sup>7</sup> The letter with this citation has not been found; however, similar sentiments are expressed in a letter to his sister Antonia, October 12, 1862: "Dear Sister, when one hears of such general misery and sees how our loving God protects us as the apple of his eye with such boundless goodness, so that up until now we have had nothing to suffer from the war, shouldn't we be filled with the deepest gratitude toward such loving Providence?" For the letter, see RABP, Seelos Letters, 1862.

<sup>8</sup> *DocStud*, II/2: 975-977, where the poem is found in a letter to his two sisters, Antonia and Josepha, November 19, 1861.

3. Meeting here on earth is not to be granted you; only on the other side, in the fields of heaven, do I want to see you.

4. Then of a sudden, I will see again many sisters, many brothers; I will see them forever. Love will live then pure and clear.

5. Therefore, poor heart, be content; your pleasure is not here below. Persevere and lay your yearning and your sorrow in the heart of Jesus.

3. *He cultivated the love of God to such a degree that he acknowledged no other love but this.* He held it to be the only substantial and true love and considered that which people are accustomed to call love as empty, futile, and lacking any solid foundation. Evidence of how deeply his heart burned with divine love is found in the unction-laden and inspiring conferences that, with holy enthusiasm, he gave to his subjects. Evidence is also to be had from many of the effusion of his heart in poetry; from the loving letters he wrote to confreres and other spiritual people whom he inflamed with the love of God; finally from his many practices of mortification and penance performed with so much joy and magnanimity.

A great mistake would be made were one to assume that his direction of others toward love of God was effeminate and sentimental. Absolutely not! On the contrary, *love impelled him rather to the many rigors of mortification* that we marvel at in him. What he practiced himself that he taught others to do also. He considered every love worthless that was not imbued with blood and had not taken root at the foot of the cross. For this reason he considered sufferings more acceptable than pleasures. Indeed, he maintained that if there were any consolation on this earth it was to be found only in suffering. What wonder then that he was so very successful in encouraging the students so easily and without hesitation toward higher perfection.

WAHRE LIEBE IST NICHT OHNE LEID<sup>9</sup>

1. Das liebende Herz möchte gerne oft klagen,  
Weil häufig gedrückt und geprüft und geschlagen,  
Als wollte da Gott unser Vater nicht sein,  
Und stellte verdriesslich die Liebe nun ein.
2. Wie gerne, ach, möchte man "Mutter" da rufen

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<sup>9</sup> The autograph poem is found in Seelos MS XIV, fols. 39v-41r, as well as in Seelos MS XIII, pp. 13-16, where the title is "*Die Göttliche Liebe Ist Nicht Süßelnd*" ("Divine Love Is Not Sentimental") Zimmer's emendations have been changed to restore the text according to the MSS.

Im Elende ganz auf den untersten Stufen.  
Doch da ist's gerade, als sagte sie: "Nein,  
Auch ich will nun nicht deine Mutter mehr sein."  
3. Da denkt man der glücklichen, goldenen Zeiten  
Wo alles so leicht ging - ohn' Kämpfen und Streiten,  
Als heiter die Sonne am Himmel stets stand -  
Kein Wölklein, kein Sturm, noch ein Wetter im Land.  
4. Gott liebte und koste und wollte uns zeigen  
Wie süß, wenn in Huld Er zu uns sich thät neigen;  
Doch seht, wie sich plötzlich gewendet das Blatt,  
Die Kehrseite sich nun herausgestellt hat.  
5. So trocken im Herzen, wie fühlt man verlassen!  
Wie sieht man bloss Sünden, möcht' selbst sich gern hassen;  
Im innern da tobt's wie auf stürmischem Meer,  
Und Nacht ist's und finster und wüste und leer.  
6. Geheimniss des Lebens - wer kann es erfassen,  
Und wer kann den Wechsel auch tragen gelassen?  
Nur wer da den Himmel als Vaterland kennt,  
Und nach dieser Heimat von Herzen sich sehnt.  
7. Geheimniss des Lebens - wer kann es ergründen,  
Und wer kann im Drucke Zufriedenheit finden?  
Nur der, den belehrt hat ein gütiger Gott,  
Erkennt den Werth nur von Elend und Noth.  
8. Geheimniss des Lebens - wer wird wohl nicht klagen  
In harten, verhängnissvoll bitteren Tagen?  
Nur der, welcher weiss, dass die flüchtige Zeit  
Die Prüfung blos ist für die Ewigkeit.  
9. Geheimniss des Lebens - und mancher möcht' fragen:  
"Warum denn werd' ich grad' gestäupt und geschlagen?"  
Doch still, und kein Wort mehr! denn Er ist's der schlägt,  
Der ewige Liebe im Herz für dich trägt.  
10. O Brüder, ach! lasst doch die Leiden uns lieben  
Die einzig allein in den Tugend uns üben!  
O Leiden, wie macht ihr so engelrein;  
Wie glänzt ihr im Himmel im blendenden Schein!  
11. Voran denn zum Ziele - ist gar so erhaben!  
Nicht jetzt, sondern jenseits soll Ruhe uns laben;  
Im Himmel wird Wonne uns reich aufgetischt,  
Wo Gott selbst die Thränen vom Auge dann wischt.

12. Nur eines ist gross und belohnt uns're Mühen;  
Das Herz für dies eine nur sollte erglühen:  
Im Himmel beim liebenden Vater zu sein,  
An Seele und Leib wie ein Engel so rein.

13. D'rum kommt nur, ihr Kreuze, d'rum kommt nur, ihr Leiden;  
Ich grüss euch von Herzen, umarm' euch mit Freuden  
Und stelle die Thüre des Herzens euch auf;  
Ihr führt mich zum Himmel, dürft selbst nicht hinauf.

14. Nein, dort ist der Zugang euch nimmermehr offen,  
Und dürft euch den Himmel auf ewig nicht hoffen.  
Statt Elend und Mangel gibt's da nur Genuss,  
Statt Leiden und Trübsal der Freuden Erguss.

15. Ein Freudengenuss denn auf ewige Zeiten,  
Ein Wonnengenuss ohne Mühseligkeiten,  
Ein Leben des Lieben ist ganz ohne Scheu;  
Denn nun ist beim Lieben nichts Böses dabei.

Schluss

16. Und ist dann die Seele vom Leibe getrennt,  
Dann hat eure Herrschaft, ihr Leiden, ein End'  
Die Seele, sie eilt ohne Rast, ohne Ruh'  
Dem lieblichsten Lande, der Heimat nur zu,  
Zu Engelein rein  
In den Himmel hinein.

17. Und dort nun, was meint ihr wohl, fanget sie an?  
Sie huldigt dem Herrn und betet Ihn an,  
Und trinket vom Freudenquell, ganz nach Genügen,  
In vollen und immer erquickenden Zügen.

O Wonne-Erguss!

Welch Himmelsgenuss!

18. Und kommt dann der Tag, wo der Leib auch verklärt  
Die Lust bis zur äussersten Fülle vermehrt;  
Dann kann mit der Wonne verglichen nichts werden,  
Denn Aehnliches wird nicht gefunden auf Erden.

O einzige Freud'

Nach irdischem Leid!

19. Gelöst ist das Räthsel, gelöst zum Genügen,  
Auf Leiden hienieder folgt ewiger Frieden.  
Die Heiligen litten auf Erden und schwiegen;  
Sie litten nur kurz, um dann ewig zu lieben.  
Sie duldeten - schwiegen,  
Sie leben und lieben.

*English Translation*

## TRUE LOVE IS NOT WITHOUT SORROW

1. The loving heart is often wont to complain  
Because it is often oppressed, tried, and battered,  
As if God did not want to be our Father  
And curtailed his love in annoyance.
2. Oh, how gladly we would like to call mother,  
In complete misery on the lowest step.  
But then it's just as if she said, "No.  
Neither do I want to be your mother anymore now."
3. At such times one thinks of the happy, golden times  
When everything went so well - without fighting and struggle,  
When the sun was always cheerfully in the heavens,  
No cloud, no tempest, no storm in the land.
4. God loved us and caressed us and wanted to show  
How sweet it was when he did turn graciously to us;  
But look. How quickly the page is turned,  
How different the reverse side has become.
5. So dry in heart, one feels so forsaken!  
One sees only sins; one could almost hate oneself;  
Inside it's seething like on a stormy sea,  
It is night and dark and forlorn and empty.
6. Mystery of life - who can grasp it,  
And who can endure the change calmly?  
Only he who acknowledges heaven as his fatherland  
And who longs in his heart for this homeland.
7. Mystery of life - who can fathom it,  
And who can find contentment in the trouble?  
Only he, whom a kindly God has taught,  
Knows the worth of misery and need.
8. Mystery of life - who will not actually complain  
In these difficult, threateningly bitter days?  
Only he who knows that fleeting time  
Is just a period of trial for eternity.
9. Mystery of life - and someone may ask:  
"Why is it just I who am dirtied with dust and beaten?"  
But be quiet, not another word! For it is he who strikes,  
The one who has everlasting love for you in his heart.
10. O brothers, Oh! Do let us love sufferings  
That only alone give us practice in virtue!  
O sufferings, how you make us pure as angels;

How you shine in heaven with blinding splendor!

11. Then onward to the goal - it is so beautiful!

Not now, but beyond is peace to delight us;

In heaven, joy will be richly served up to us,

Where God himself will wipe the tears from our eyes.

12. Only one thing is great and rewards our efforts;

Our heart should burn for this one thing alone:

To be in heaven with our loving Father,

To be as pure as an angel in soul and body.

13. Therefore, come you crosses, therefore come you pains;

I welcome you from my heart, embrace you with joy,

And open the door of my heart to you;

You will lead me to heaven, though you yourselves are not permitted there.

14. No. Entrance there is never open to you,

And forever you must have no hope for heaven.

Instead of misery and want, there will be delight,

Instead of suffering and trouble, overflowing of joy.

15. An experience of joy, then, for all times,

An enjoyment of happiness without travail,

A life of loving is all without restraint;

For only loving has nothing evil about it.

*Conclusion*

16. And when the soul is separated from the body,

Then, you sorrows, your rule is at an end!

The soul rushes without rest and peace

Toward the beloved land, its homeland,

Toward angels pure

Into heaven.

17. And then, what do you think it does?

It does homage to the Lord and adores him,

And drinks from the fountainhead of joy, just as it desires,

In full and always refreshing drafts.

O enjoyment of joy,

What a heavenly delight!

18. And comes then the day when the body is transfigured,

And joy is increased to its utmost limit;

Then nothing can be compared with the joy,

For nothing like it can be found on this earth.

O singular joy

After earthly sorrow!

19. The riddle is solved, solved to satisfaction,  
 Eternal joys follow upon sorrows here below.  
 The saints suffered upon earth and remained silent;  
 They suffered only a short time in order to love eternally.  
 They were patient, they were silent,  
 They live and love.

*The supernatural fervor that was burning interiorly took shape and form in his external appearance also.* For, whether he was walking or standing, resting or working, talking or singing, exhorting or praying, alone or with others: in every situation and circumstance one saw in him the man of God, the herald of divine love. To have him as one's spiritual director or confessor was considered a very special grace; and those who were directed by him made wonderful progress in the love of God, the most beautiful of all the virtues.

4. *Just as unmistakable were the signs of his tender love for the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Mother of God.* One had only to hear him pronounce the sweet name 'Mother' in the unctuous way so peculiar to him in regard to Mary to become aware of his child-like, warm, and inspired love for her. Who does not remember the great predilection he had for the Rosary and for the feast days of this most blessed and immaculate Virgin? Witnesses of his love for this Queen of Heaven are to be found in some of the poems he composed for the month of May that will be presented in an appendix.<sup>10</sup> With an effusion of joy and exaltation he sang with the students in Cumberland his favorite hymns: "*Mutter Ich vergehe*," "*Milde Königin gedenke*," "*Maria zu lieben*." With a smile still on his face, he sang these hymns in his hour of death, after which he passed on peacefully.<sup>11</sup>

5. *Love of neighbor* shown so early in him that even as a small child he manifested his tender compassion and love for the poorest and neediest and continued this energetically his entire life. If he was a superior, he was magnanimous in his help; if he was a subject he made it a point to humbly ask permission from his superiors to come to the help of those in need.

<sup>10</sup> ZIMMER, *Leben*, pp. 319-374, where a number of poems are found, among which are two to Mary: "*Mai-Mona*" ("Month of May") and "*Der Mai im Thränenthale*" ("May in the Valley of Tears").

<sup>11</sup> *DocStud*, II/2: 1282: Brother Louis Kenning's account of the hymns Father Seelos sang on his deathbed.



What he did himself, he allowed other to do also. He never gave them a refusal to distribute alms to the poor sick, without even asking if they were really in need of them. And wonderful to relate, although he gave out much in this way, and permitted others do so also, the house never suffered any indebtedness. Everything came back again, either through the poor boxes in the church, or through personal donations. It became known that he lifted entire families up out of deprivation and misery.

Just shortly before his death, he saw to it that, with the permission of his superior in New Orleans, some financial support came to a poor fellow countryman in Philadelphia. At the same time, he admonished him to persevere as a good Christian under his cross.<sup>12</sup> To be sure, his kindness was imposed upon and abused by some who were unworthy of it; however, following the example of Jesus Christ and Saint Francis de Sales and Alphonsus Liguori, he preferred to be too generous to those who were unworthy than to incur even once the danger of treating with indifference someone who was really in need.

6. *And how deeply did he not burn at all times with love for his confreres!* This was so universally acknowledged that no one could ever be angry with him. His love was so honorable and impartial that one could say that he had toward each one a very special affection; for even today every priest who had the good fortune to be with him is convinced that he stood on very intimate terms with Father Seelos. So-called particular friendships, however, were entirely alien to him. In this, he followed his divine Master, who loved, and still loves, each soul as intimately as if he became man solely for it in order to die solely for it also.

*He did not exclude from his love the most unattractive of people.* Although as superior he was very busy, still it was not too much for him to spend about a half-hour almost every day with a half-demented person who received his meals in the house. He did this to cheer him up. In doing so, he put himself completely in the situation of this poor individual. He did this throughout a rather long period of time.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> *DocStud*, II/2: 1269-1270: Seelos to Mr. [Ambos], New Orleans, July 1, 1867.

<sup>13</sup> *Wissel Fragments*, 9A. When Father John Berger, C.S.S.R. (1839-1884), began to work on the first biography of Father Seelos (later completed and published by Zimmer), he asked various confreres to send him accounts of their recollections of Father Seelos. Among those who responded was Father Joseph Wissel (1830-1912), a friend and missionary companion of Seelos, whose accounts number 42 and have been gathered into a collection which is given the name "Wissel Fragments." They are preserved in RABP. This particular fragment (9A) is printed in *DocStud*, II/2: 1509, no. 6.

But before all else what did he not do for his subjects and confreres in the community? At recreation he always surpassed the others in joviality. He was not pleased with someone who was not cheerful and did not make his contribution toward a pleasant time at recreation. He used to say that he would rather go a bit too far in talking than to let recreation be devoid of pleasantness. Once he came to recreation and three of the older fathers had the newspapers in their hands and were busy reading. He took the papers out of the hands of each one of them, folded them quietly and laid them on the table. Then he sat down and started a lively discussion. None of those involved made a sad face. He could do this in such a kindly way that no one took offense.<sup>14</sup>

If one of the confreres was sick, especially a member of his community, he was most sympathetic with his sufferings and visited him often and tried to cheer him up.<sup>15</sup>

It happened once on a mission that one of the missionaries was called to a dying woman who was afflicted with smallpox. When after this he caught the same sickness, Father Seelos wrote him a letter of condolence and made the bitterest accusations against himself for letting the priest go there. "It was my duty and responsibility," he said, "to visit that sick person. It would have done me no harm. I've had the smallpox already. Still," he added roguishly, "God in his Providence has allowed it and it is good for you that your pleasant face is spoiled to some degree."<sup>16</sup>

*Father Seelos had no notion of ever indulging in offensive remarks.* Sarcasm was a stranger to him. Who ever heard him criticize someone else, either in his presence or in his absence? He could indeed tease, but how? In such a way that by his affectionate teasing you felt affirmed rather than put down.

*7. The zeal for souls that grew out of his fraternal charity is too generally known for us to have to prove it more extensively.* With burning zeal and youthful enthusiasm, he told the young students about the mission houses of his Congregation that were being founded in distant lands and encouraged them to learn the languages spoken there. By the intense interest that he took in the great work of the missions, he displayed in a shining way how great was his zeal for souls. All his activity and all his striving were directed, as we all know, to save immortal souls. In this, he

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<sup>14</sup> Wissel Fragments, 9B.

<sup>15</sup> Wissel Fragments, 9C.

<sup>16</sup> Wissel Fragments, 18A; printed in *DocStud*, II/2: 1220, no. 4.

fully embodied the spirit of the sainted founder of the Congregation, who wore himself out with his zeal for the salvation of souls.

8. *A yearning desire for heaven* could not be lacking in someone who was fortunate enough to possess the three theological virtues in such a high degree. To convince us of this, let us read the following poem written by Father Seelos.

AN DIE HEIMAT DORT OBEN<sup>17</sup>

O, ein edles Heimweh zieht uns nur nach oben,  
Wo nicht stille Seufzer mehr den Herren loben,  
Wo kein Leid die heisse Thräne fließen macht,  
Nein, wo nur Genuss und Freude uns entgegen lacht.  
O, wie schön und rein  
Wird dann alles sein!  
Dann erst werden wir erkennen,  
Was man Liebe nur darf nennen.  
Wahre Liebe wird nur sein,  
Die durch Leiden wurde rein.

*English Translation*

TO OUR HOME UP ABOVE

O, a noble homesickness pulls us only upward,  
Where no longer quiet sighs praise the Lord;  
Where no song makes the hot tears flow,  
No, where only pleasure and joy laugh to us.  
O, how beautiful and pure  
Will then everything be!  
Then only will we know  
What one alone can call love.  
There will only be true love  
That became pure through suffering.

KANN'S NICHT LEIDEN, WENN MAN DEN VERBANNUNGSORT  
IN EIN PARADIES VERWANDELN WILL<sup>18</sup>

Jenseits in des Himmels schönen Auen,  
Wo die Blüten nie Verwelkung schauen;

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<sup>17</sup> Seelos MS XIII, p. 113, where the autograph poem is entitled "*An Meine Heimat*" ("To My Home"); in Seelos MS XIV, fol. 37v, it is entitled as here.

<sup>18</sup> The autograph of this poem is found in Seelos MS XIV, fols. 48r-49v.

Jenseits, da, wo alles knospet, alles blüht,  
Und in neuer Himmelssonne duftend glüht;  
Jenseits, wo die Lebensfrüchte ewig reifen,  
Und nicht kalte Winde durch entlaubte Aeste Pfeifen;  
Jenseits, wo im Palmenhaine Gottes Kinder spielen,  
Und ihr frohes Herz von reiner Lieb' erglühen fühlen;  
Jenseits, wo ein Liebesstrom das müde Herz erquickt,  
Und in voller Sättigung es ohne End' entzückt;  
Dort, ja dort allein  
Soll mein Genuss einst sein;  
Dort, wo ein Gott uns liebt,  
Nichts uns're Liebe trübt;  
Dort wo die Lieb' so rein  
Und doch so voll wird sein;  
Dort, wo ein Paradies  
Uns zu erzählen weiss  
Alles, was Gott gethan,  
Und was Er machen kann,  
Wenn Er die Tugend lohnt,  
Die dann im Lichte wohnt.  
Sie, die einst schwer bedrückt,  
Fühlt sich nun ganz beglückt.  
Jenseits, in des Lebens freiem Lande,  
Wo gelöst sind alle Erdenbände;  
Da, wo frei ein jedes Gotteskind,  
Alle majorene geworden sind;  
Jenseits will ich schauen und geniessen,  
Jubelnd jene neuen Scenerieen grüssen,  
Die ein Gott nach seines Herzens Lust formirt,  
Und dem frohen Kinde vor die Augen führt!  
Nicht romantish wild,  
Nicht der Sünde Bild!  
Alles gross nach neuen Dimensionen  
In den ewig milden Heimatzonen.  
Doch Verbannung lasst Verbannung sein,  
Denn gezwung'ne Pracht verursacht Pein.  
Eher lasst uns duldsam warten,  
Bis herankommt jene süsse Zeit,  
Wo sich öffnen wird der Himmelsgarten  
Und geöffnet bleibt in Ewigkeit.

*English Translation*

I CAN'T STAND IT WHEN PEOPLE WANT TO CHANGE  
THE PLACE OF EXILE INTO A PARADISE  
Beyond, in the beautiful meadows of heaven,  
Where the flowers never see their wilting;  
Beyond, there where everything is budding, flowering,  
And glows fragrantly in a new sun in the heavens;  
Beyond, where the fruits of life ripen eternally,  
And cold winds do not whistle through leafless branches;  
Beyond, God's children play in groves of palms  
And feel their joyful hearts glow with pure love;  
Beyond, where a stream of love quickens the tired heart  
And enthalls it endlessly with full satisfaction.  
There, yes there alone  
Is my pleasure once to be;  
There, where a God loves us,  
Nothing disturbs our love;  
There where love will be pure  
And yet will be so complete;  
There, where a paradise  
Knows how to tell us  
Everything that God has done,  
And what he can do  
When he rewards virtue,  
That then lives in light.  
She, who was formerly badly depressed,  
Feels herself now completely rewarded.  
Beyond, in the free land of life,  
Where all the bonds of earth are loosened;  
There, there every child of God is free,  
All have reached their majority;  
Beyond, I will see and enjoy  
Joyfully enjoy those new scenes,  
That God has formed in his heart's desire  
And places before the eyes of the happy child!  
Not romantically wild,  
Not an image of sin!  
All things are big in a new dimension  
In the eternal, gentle zones of home.  
But let exile be exile,  
Since forced glory causes torment.

Rather let us wait patiently,  
 Until those sweet times arrive,  
 When the garden of heaven will be opened  
 And will remain open for eternity.

9. But what should we say of the virtues that were conspicuous in him as a religious? *All who knew him attest that he was a perfect religious priest and excelled in the practice of all the necessary virtues.* If those who lived with him in the community searched, could they really recall even one significant infraction of the Rule? Even as superior of the house, he very rarely was absent from the community acts and then only when some urgent necessity demanded it. Very often he was called to the parlor, especially during recreation. There he made short work of it and spent the greater part of the recreation with the community.<sup>19</sup>

10. *Not only did he manifest his love for the Congregation on every occasion* in his speech and in his conferences to the community, *but also gave practical evidence of it.* During his novitiate he had as a fellow novice, a father who had already been a priest in Germany for many years. The idea came to him to return to the world. The young novice Seelos advised him against it as well as he could. But the priest stood by his intention. Then Seelos threw himself on his knees before him and begged him in the name of God not to throw his vocation away. This worked and the priest persevered and did many great things in the Congregation, so much so that he was held in high esteem everywhere.

As rector of Saint Alphonsus in Baltimore, Father Seelos was, so to speak, deluged with work; however, he still managed to find enough time to give Latin classes to young boys who showed signs of having a vocation to the religious life. By doing this he prepared them for entrance into the Congregation; or in general, for the priestly state. Several highly placed priests among the secular and religious clergy began their studies under Father Seelos.<sup>20</sup>

11. *With extreme exactness and strictness did he observe religious poverty* and also inculcated its observance relentlessly upon those entrusted to him. In regard to food, clothing, and living quarters, he limited himself to the barest necessities and was content with the least and the most despicable. Dissatisfaction and complaints on this point annoyed and

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<sup>19</sup> Wissel Fragments, 19.

<sup>20</sup> Wissel Fragments, 25, this and the preceding paragraph.

hurt this poor man of Jesus Christ most painfully. He was never heard to complain that he was missing something necessary. Indeed, the awareness of complete poverty called forth in him especially that amiable cheerfulness that made being in his presence so uplifting and pleasant. Transgressors of religious poverty were for him the enemies of the religious life. "O sweet poverty!" he frequently called out.

12. *He loved and practiced virginal chastity and purity of heart in a truly remarkable way.* Daily he begged for it from God in constant prayer and bodily discipline. He sings about this virtue in these short verses.

UNSCHULD<sup>21</sup>

Glaub' mir, Kind, des Himmels Frieden  
Ist der Unschuld nur beschieden.  
Lebe sittsam, lebe rein,  
Und du wirst stets glücklich sein.  
Glücklich macht dich dein Gewissen;  
Denn es ist ein Ruhekipfen,  
Wenn die Seele nur sittsam, rein,  
Von der Sünd' sucht frei zu sein.

*English Translation*

INNOCENCE  
Believe me, child, the peace of heaven  
Is given only to innocence.  
Live virtuously, live purely,  
And you will always be happy.  
Your conscience makes you happy;  
For it is a pillow for resting upon,  
If only the soul, virtuous, pure,  
Strives to be free of sin.

*The well-founded opinion prevails that he never lost his baptismal innocence.* Those, namely, attest to this to whom, shortly before his death, he laid open his entire life. O, that pure, honest, I want to say, most gracious look! How clearly it showed to everyone his soul shining with virginal chastity! If one were with him, one was secure from the attack of any evil temptation. This is maintained by his former penitents.

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<sup>21</sup> Autograph of this poem is found in Seelos MS XIII, p. 39.

13. As he was most chaste and retiring, so, with persons of the opposite sex, he was most discreet, earnest, modest, and cautious. Although he was called to the parlor very often, it was rarely by young women; and when he was called for by them, he finished the business quickly by speaking with them while standing. If they wanted him to extend his hand, he presented at most his finger tips which he hardly permitted to be touched. Frivolous young women, ingratiating and pretentiously pious faces, did not find a welcome in him.<sup>22</sup>

*He was certainly one of the best spiritual directors there was.* But in this regard he did most of this work in the confessional; or in regard to those absent, in letters. He never aspired to certain, even if excusable, confidences with women. If it actually was not a question of little girls, he always used the polite form of address, never the familiar form.<sup>23</sup>

At the sight of his ever cheerful and beaming face one was automatically reminded of the words of Wisdom: "O how beautiful is the chaste generation with glory: for the memory thereof is immortal: because it is known both with God and with men. When it is present, they imitate it; and they desire it when it hath withdrawn itself, and it triumpheth crowned for ever, winning the reward of undefiled conflicts" (Wis 4:1-2). A single look at this devotee of the angelic virtue inspired one to imitation.

14. *With regard to religious obedience, he was able to attain to great perfection.* Even as a superior he seemed to have not a trace of self-will; that is except when he had to chose between various things. In that case, he unfliningly chose for himself the most uncomfortable, most insignificant, and most difficult. Often he used to say that he was not at all made for giving orders; that it was much easier for him to obey. Often he was heard to say: "If I had someone to lead me, I would be happy to follow, no matter what it was." And he actually did this in many circumstances. As rector in Baltimore, he was requested to discontinue many customs in church services that were brought over from Germany; for example, benediction Masses and other similar things. The order came from the archbishop and was given to Father Seelos by the provincial to be carried out. Immediately, he complied, even though it was hard for him, because of the people who were accustomed to these practices.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Wissel Fragments, 23A; printed in *DocStud*, II/2: 1517, no. 23.

<sup>23</sup> Wissel Fragments, 8.

<sup>24</sup> Wissel Fragments, 20; printed in *DocStud*, II/2: 1515-1516, no. 15.



Whenever he received a letter from the provincial while on the missions, he said an Ave Maria while opening it to submit himself beforehand to its contents.<sup>25</sup>

If special care was not taken on the missions, he was the subject and the others the superiors. As soon as something was to be done, he asked: "How are we going to do this?" And after hearing the opinions of the others, he said so pleasantly: "Yes, indeed, that's it. That's how we'll do it. Now you take the lead and I'll come along right after you."<sup>26</sup>

In 1861, he went on a mission with a father who was significantly younger than himself. Right at the beginning an argument arose between the two over the question of who should be the superior. Father Seelos did not want to have any part of it and the other father did not accept this refusal despite the many reasons brought forth. Finally they came to an agreement that they would divide the superiorship: Father Seelos would be superior in the house and the other father superior in the church.<sup>27</sup>

After the four-year-long burden of being superior was taken from him, he felt like a bird released from a string, cheerful, happy, and care-free. *To obey was for him a necessity and a joy of heart.* For this very reason, it was also a joy for a superior to direct him and give him orders. Yes, *even fighting with death, he gave a stirring example of his heroic obedience* when, at a simple command, he made a superhuman effort to sit up, until the command was recalled.

15. *He devoted himself to humility in the highest degree.* He took little account of himself; and, humiliations, which in regard to this virtue are most important, were not only frequently his portion, but he yearned and longed for them. He frequently said that if it were the will of God, he would desire to serve in the Congregation as a lay brother; and for this reason, he helped the most humble brother in the most menial services cheerfully and with gusto. In his letters he used the most contemptuous expressions about himself; and this to such a degree that his parents and family members were tempted to consider him as prone to making mistakes since he gave them this impression. He humbled himself in every way; when he chanced to speak about himself, he spoke only of his miserableness and proneness to error. His sister Antonia writes that he found fault with himself in every letter, saying that he was full of human weaknesses and was not doing his duties as he should; that they ought to pray

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<sup>25</sup> Wissel Fragments, 27A; printed in *DocStud*, II/2: 1221, no. 5.

<sup>26</sup> Wissel Fragments, 27B; printed in *DocStud*, II/2: 1222, no. 6.

<sup>27</sup> Wissel Fragments, 27C; printed in *DocStud*, II/2: 1222, no. 7. The young father mentioned in this paragraph is no doubt Father Wissel himself.

for him that he might eventually, at long last, fulfill the will of God better and be a better religious than up to that point.<sup>28</sup>

*As the superior he gave his orders in the form of a humble request and gladly took advice from the least of his confreres.* Never was this humble priest more upset and anxious than when he was being considered to be the bishop of Pittsburgh; but also, never did he show greater and more genuine joy than when he found out that he had evaded this danger.

He was heard to say that, if the members of the Congregation ever had to be dispersed by force, or if he should ever be expelled from it through some misdeed of his, he would beg from some bishop the poorest corner of his diocese where no other priest could or would go. There he would work for the most abandoned souls, even if he were to have only an extremely impoverished dwelling and only a miserable piece of bread for his food.<sup>29</sup> This attitude of his was sincere.

If he ever felt that he had offended anyone, he did not consider it beneath his dignity to humbly ask his pardon. Among other things, he believed that he had treated with too little kindness a father who was his subject. He therefore wrote to this confrere, who had in the meantime become a superior himself and was busy in constructing a large church, that he earnestly desired to become a member of his community to be able to make good the alleged unkindness that he had shown him.

16. *Father Seelos's humility was combined with genuine simplicity and uprightness* and with a distinct aversion to every species of vanity in all that had to do with his external appearance. In his speech, in his actions, in his clothing, everything was simple and unadorned as is befitting a religious. Never did he avail himself of little conveniences, which he, without failing against the Rule, could have used. He carried this so far that he was able to shave himself without the use of a mirror. Such an article was not found in his room. He had his hair cut short, not meticulously parted, something he considered effeminate. To please his family, he only once let a small photograph be taken of himself and this in a clerical suit, which he sent them in Germany, for no one else came into possession of his photograph. After his death, this was sent for to Germany and was taken to a photographer who substituted his religious habit.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>28</sup> See the letter of Antonia Seelos to Mr. Ambos as found in *DocStud*, II/2: 1457-1458.

<sup>29</sup> *Wissel Fragments*, 22.

<sup>30</sup> *Wissel Fragments*, 24A; printed in *DocStud*, II/2: 1517-1518, no. 19.

His clothing was so poor and worn that it was still just presentable for the dignity of a priest in dire straits. He seemed to neglect his external appearance almost completely, without, however, in any way failing against cleanliness. And with all this, nonetheless, he possessed such a power of attraction that all were impressed with him, just seeing him for the first time.<sup>31</sup> On one occasion a student came to the parlor of the Redemptorist house in Pittsburgh to speak with the superior. Father Seelos came. The impression that he made upon him at this meeting was never erased and the young man later entered the Congregation himself and encouraged others to do the same.

17. *As one especially devoted to the cross and self-denial, he considered this present life meaningful only in so far as it was richly furnished with crosses.* As the Church makes use of the sign of the cross in all its blessings and services, so Father Seelos considered that life not blessed if the sign of the cross was not painfully impressed upon it everywhere. For this reason, we must not be surprised that he mortified himself in everything so perseveringly and courageously, and endured the bitterest suffering, not only with great patience but actually with joy, until his blessed death.

In one of his first letters from America to his family, we find, among other edifying things, him mentioning that as a novice he had given up the use of tobacco in the form of snuff. He made a sacrifice of its use not only during the novitiate but for his entire life without ever again taking up this habit.<sup>32</sup> Only those who had to break such a habit will understand the value of this sacrifice.

One day when he was asked whether he wanted to return to Europe, if this were allowed him, he answered quickly that he would never think of a return as long as he could still find some cross in America.

18. *With the spirit of mortification, there grew also in him the spirit of prayer.* We can rightly apply to our devout Father what the Church says about Saint Martin and about many other saints, namely, that their hearts never stopped praying. Really, in prayer he was positively tireless. Vocal prayer and meditative and contemplative prayer were for him refreshing nourishment and a blessed consolation. Above all, he was perseveringly

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<sup>31</sup> *Wissel Fragments*, 24B.

<sup>32</sup> *DocStud*, II/1: 418.

devoted to meditation on the bitter sufferings and death of Jesus Christ, which enkindled in him the consuming fire of his love for God.

Actually, it no longer required any effort from him to pray all the time and never to cease. *Prayer was for him a sweet necessity and he could not do without it.*

On sick calls and other necessary exits from the house, he either prayed the Rosary on the way, which he always carried with him, or he busied himself with meditating on spiritual themes. It seemed to him to be too meaningless and Protestant to wander in the streets doing nothing and without praying. He avoided traveling on buses or other means of transportation when no special urgency called for it. "If you go on foot," he used to say, "you can pray more."

He said the prayers prescribed by the Church and by the Rule with nothing but the greatest attention, preciseness, and recollection. His posture was always free and highly devout, his articulation, when he lead the prayers, was clear and precise.

Even on missions, when he was overburdened with other work, he could not bring himself to make use of the usual dispensation from the recitation of the breviary. After the multiple exertions of the day, he was found, often late into the night, in the church with the breviary in one hand holding a light in the other to pray the liturgical hours.

The attitude of his soul, lifted up through communing with God in continual prayer, sometimes revealed itself in striking ways. At the instance of Father Seelos, the Forty Hours Devotion in honor of the Blessed Sacrament was at that time held for the first time in Saint James Church in Baltimore. To him, also fell the honor to celebrate the solemn High Mass, during which the unusual glow of his devotion and love could not but be noticed by anyone who had the good fortune to observe him closely.

*Eye witnesses commonly agree that, at the celebration of the Sacrifice of the Mass, he seemed as if transfigured; for which reason it was considered a special blessing to be present then. Merely by looking at him, one was filled with warm sentiments of devotion, reverence, and joy. His nightly rest was short and mostly on the hard floor. He spent a great part of the night in the church before the Blessed Sacrament, to which he had forever turned and consecrated his whole heart as to his great treasure.*

Let us mention here an incident from the life of Father Seelos which shows clearly how far he had come through his constant watching and praying before the Blessed Sacrament. A father had just given Holy Communion to a sick person when she threw up violently. Following the prescriptions of the Church, the father gathered the emission from the

floor into a vessel and carried it to the Church to preserve it in the tabernacle until the complete dissolution of the sacred species. Father Seelos said that he wanted to consume it, but the other priest advised against this. Whether he did it or not is uncertain. But it is certain that the vessel disappeared from the tabernacle very soon, before the other priest could burn its contents.<sup>33</sup>

In a few words we have now seen what were the essential virtues that this tree, planted by God, brought forth as spiritual fruits. "A good tree cannot bring forth bad fruit." From childhood on, Father Seelos was a noble tree of paradise and, therefore, brought forth only fruits of the Holy Spirit, of which, according to the witness of Saint Paul, there are twelve.<sup>34</sup>

1. In regard to what, in the first place, concerns the *love* that Father Seelos had, everyone knows that his superabundant enthusiasm and effusions of heart, like a marvelous rising and flooding of the sea, were felt by all who had contact with him.

Love for God, for the Mother of God, for the angels, for the saints, for our holy faith, for the Commandments, for his vocation, for the Catholic Church, for the sacraments, for his neighbor, for his confreres; love for everything that reminded him of God; a burning longing for the eternal possession of God, for the most intimate union with all the heavenly saints - this was the consuming and animating fire with which his whole being was permeated.

2. Chaste love begets *untroubled joy*. Who does not know that from his friendly face there streamed forth only serenity and joy? It was the noble joy of his pure conscience that drew all into his presence and enchanted them: joy and gratitude for the glory of God, for the successful results of apostolic labor, for the good that others did, for the hope of salvation for himself and for all; joy over the triumph of holy Church and victory over the powers of hell.

But still more wonderful was his joy in being humbled and despised, which made him like the apostles who were joyful to suffer disdain for the name of Jesus.

We also still remember what great joy the festivities of the Church brought him, which reminded him so vividly of the heavenly Jerusalem.

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<sup>33</sup> Wissel Fragments, 35.

<sup>34</sup> Gal 5:22-23: "But the fruit of the Spirit is charity, joy, peace, patience, benignity, goodness, longanimity, mildness, faith, modesty, continency, chastity."

If those in his charge wanted to do him a real favor they had only to be very observant and strive earnestly for perfection, for this was for him the most acceptable consolation.

3. His interior was, moreover, *a genuine habitation of peace*, for he was versed in the use of victorious weapons against the enemies of God and of his own soul. Just as a skillful gardener with an expert use of knife and spade keeps his beautifully laid-out garden blossoming with beautiful flowers, gives it harmony and order, so our enlightened religious with the application of many-faceted mortifications succeeded in establishing and preserving peaceful rest and harmony in the garden of his soul. Who ever saw him inordinately wrought up or bad-tempered? And with whom did he not live in harmony and peace? Even in his childhood he was the peacemaker among his companions in their little disagreements.

4. Trained early in the school of the Crucified, he could do nothing else but imitate this meek Lamb in every respect. Already in his tender years, when he suffered from constant poor health, *his patience and resignation were a subject of wonderment*. His longing for suffering later on was really insatiable. From this came his strict spirit of mortification. He treated the roughest of people with the greatest kindness and patience; for this reason he was sought out by all as a confessor and spiritual director. The judgment of the people is altogether correct when it thinks that only a meek, gentle, and patient priest is a trustworthy guide on the road to salvation. He loved this virtue so much that during his lifetime he often said that he wanted to be sick for a long time before he died in order to be able to prepare himself better for death. If this petition of his to God was not heard, still he was sick long enough that, to his last breath, he gave many and very moving signs of his perfect patience and resignation.

5. As a spiritual director *he knew how to combine severity with benignity in a masterful way*. For this reason, at the proper time, he could be severe without being rough or repelling. He had learned in the school of Jesus Christ to be kind and understanding with everyone and neither to extinguish the smoldering flax, nor to break the bent reed. As a mild, constant rain penetrates and softens the driest and hardest ground and fosters growth in a wonderful manner, so Father Seelos, in his gentle ways, knew how to soften the hardest sinners and change them into people of good living. From far back in his life, he hated a rough, repellent spirit in a priest.

6. Not less salutary was the effect of his goodness upon the people who came into contact with him in any way. The essence of God is goodness. *This follower of Christ seemed to be goodness itself toward all*. Some went so far as to reckon his goodness as a fault. This was, however, the

only accusation that was made against him. In all this, he sided with our divine Savior and with Saint Francis de Sales, saying that it was better to be too kind rather than too severe with others. He was so genuinely kind with everyone that this quality of his was proverbial.

7. There are, to be sure, some pious souls who are patient, meek, and kind, but only to a certain degree and at certain times; then patience has reached its limit, and as the saying has it, the storm breaks loose. But with Father Seelos, kindness was a permanent quality of his spirit; *he was always the same, because he had attained the virtue of longanimity* as well as equanimity to an unusual degree. He never lost control of himself and of his patience; and he really seemed to share in God's imper-turbable serenity to a more than usual degree. In making a correction, he never gave in to the feelings of the moment, but waited for an opportune time; and in this way, he almost infallibly attained his intended purpose. This longanimity remained a principle of his until the last moment of his life.

8. *He seemed to have been born with meekness.* He had overcome the passion of anger so completely that one could not speak of temper and anger with regard to Father Seelos without having to laugh heartily and to stir up universal laughter among others. Let us consider an example of his meekness.

Once he celebrated Mass in a convent of nuns and was unusually long at the altar. After his thanksgiving he spoke to one of the sisters: "A short time ago I was philosophizing with the students (he was then prefect of students in Cumberland) and today I experienced exactly what I was talking about then. I took, as I thought, the first host out of the container and consecrated it. When I came to breaking it, I found out it was paper! I had to get another host and consecrate a second time. That's what took me so long." He said no more. Still, apparently, the mistake cost him much. To keep the hosts very clean, the sacristan had placed a piece of white paper the size of the hosts over them. This was stopped from then on.<sup>35</sup>

In this way he was accustomed to check all outbursts of anger and resentment and thus imitate the meek and gentle Lamb of God.

9. *His faithfulness was inviolable.* It is sufficient for us to recall that he himself showed himself most exact and prompt in the observance of even the smallest rule of his Congregation and in the conscientious cooperation with the graces God gave him; and he encouraged and directed most zealously those entrusted to him to do the same. It was customary

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<sup>35</sup> *DocStud*, II/1: 565-566.

for him to have everyone value this kind of fidelity to little things. In him our heavenly Father had, in truth, a faithful steward who was always busy to increase the goods of his Master, so that at the hour of his death he was found worthy to be invited into the enjoyment of the eternal blessedness of heaven.

10. *With similar zeal he took care to use prudent moderation over the movements of all his passions:* moderation in the use of food and drink, of recreation and sleep, of pleasure and enjoyment. He was a master of abnegation. No one ever saw him in idle rest or letting himself be mastered by physical tiredness. His spirit had full control over his senses.

11. We, therefore, cannot be amazed that *he practiced continency in everything and never gave his sensual nature full satisfaction.* He even did not approve of the merely sensual contemplation of the beauties of nature. Everything seemed to be of no value to him if it did not tend to the praise and glory of the Creator. This is evident from many of his letters. We can maintain about him what Saint Vincent de Paul said about himself, that nothing pleased him except God.

12. As a last and genuine fruit of Paradise, *virginal chastity attained its fullest maturity and beauty on this healthy and vigorous tree.* Everything in, on, and around him breathed the heavenly fragrance of this virtue, which is also the most glorious predilection of the Queen of Heaven. Everything that he thought or spoke or did or desired was angelic purity and chastity. We know that his mere presence was already sufficient to keep at a distance every suggestion of any impure temptation.

What an excellent tree that produced such fruit for eternal life! After this concise overview of the outstanding virtues of this religious priest who was so pleasing to God, there remains for us only to remark that *he could endure nothing less in religious, especially Redemptorists, than lukewarmness and remissness in striving for perfection.* What he censured in others, he avoided most strictly for himself. He was insatiable in his practice of virtue. For this reason he could publicly express himself thus:

A genuine and honest-to-goodness religious has more need of heroism in striving for perfection than others because he needs greater virtues. For example: holy indifference to living conditions and kind of work; a purity that must be compared to that of the angels; blind obedience without questioning; selflessness that lifts the heart above every thought of reward, gratitude, or ingratitude; no hope or expectation for anything here below. A person concerned about friends, parents, homeland, convenience is not



qualified for this exalted way of life. What a foundation is required for such a building!<sup>36</sup>

We have given the honorable reader the biography of Father Seelos from childhood to the grave as far as this was possible for us, citing facts, sources, and witnesses. From it, it becomes clear to everyone that he buried none of his talents; rather with all of them strove for a rich profit. For this reason we can conclude that, after his life came to an end, he received his share in the consoling invitation that the Master promised the faithful servant: "Come thou good and faithful servant, because you were faithful in little things, I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your Lord!"

## APPRAISAL II

MICHAEL J. CURLEY, C.SS.R.

### INTRODUCTION

The second appraisal is by Father Michael Curley, C.SS.R. (1900-1972). In his biography of Father Seelos, *Cheerful Ascetic: The Life of Francis Xavier Seelos, C.SS.R.* (New Orleans: Redemptorist Fathers, 1969) it forms chapter 13, pp. 264-285, entitled "Personality and Piety of Seelos." The competence of Father Curley to make this appraisal is unimpeachable. In writing the biography, Father Curley had at his disposal nearly all the documents, certainly all those of any significance, that have been found that contain data concerning Father Seelos. His appraisal is based on that fund of documentation. Not to be overlooked, also, is the fact that for several years, while Father Curley was writing the biography, he was in daily contact with this documentation, and we have no reason to doubt that, through it, he was imbued with the personality and spirituality of the one about whom he was writing. He became, so to speak, a daily conversant with Father Seelos and, not to exaggerate, his friend.

Curley's appraisal broadened the scope of the overview of the holiness of Father Seelos to include his personality, character, and temperament. He did not want to give the impression that holiness could be separated from the human endowment of the one he was writing about. So, we see included in his assessment such natural qualities as the health and physical appearance of Father Seelos, his congenital cheerfulness, his

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<sup>36</sup> The source of this citation has not been found.

gift as an interesting conversationalist, his poetic temperament, to mention merely a few.

The headings for various sections are not in the original but have been added for this presentation of the appraisal. The texts translated from German have been taken from the *Documented Study* rather than from the version found in *Cheerful Ascetic*. Father Curley's annotations have been reformulated to take into account the publication of the *Positio super Virtutibus*.

## TEXT

Seelos's life accomplishments lay not in the structures he built nor in the formulation of social plans, nor his scholarship, but rather in his personality and piety. Only by studying these can we gauge the full measure of his life's achievements. First, we must take a close look at his personality.

### 1. *His Mildness of Disposition - His Health*

By nature and grace Francis Xavier Seelos had a mild, gentle character. A study of his bodily health would indicate that this was a natural factor influencing his general conduct. As mentioned before, his health as a child was so delicate that his family believed he would not survive his childhood. This condition kept him from the rougher games of childhood companions, though it did not stop him from taking hikes in the mountains near his home. As a young man he outgrew his earlier weakness, though not entirely. He was sickly at Munich and his stay in the hospital in 1842 was a serious matter, but it was only temporary. Nevertheless, every indication points to the fact that, while he was not often confined to bed, he never enjoyed really rugged health.<sup>37</sup> His first biographer, Father Zimmer, maintained that he had a weak constitution.<sup>38</sup> Though Zimmer was speaking about Seelos's<sup>38</sup> health at the time he was going to New Orleans, other indications before that time show that his health had been weak. He was very sick at one period in Pittsburgh,<sup>39</sup> and the hemor-

<sup>37</sup> CURLEY, *Cheerful Ascetic*, pp. 6, 10, 13, 16, 33.

<sup>38</sup> *Summariium super Virtutibus Heroicis* (Rome, 1997) (cited hereafter as *Summariium*), p. 50: testimony of Peter Zimmer, C.S.S.R. RABP, Berger/Beck Correspondence, 56: Account of Francis Van Emstede, C.S.S.R. He said that at one time Seelos was strictly forbidden to visit the sick because of his own sickness. Cf. *DocStud*, II/1: 123-124 for a description and evaluation of the collection of 67 texts in Berger/Beck Correspondence. The collection is in RABP.

<sup>39</sup> CURLEY, *Cheerful Ascetic*, pp. 86-87.

rhages he suffered in Baltimore almost cost him his life.<sup>40</sup> When a young seminarian, Frater Kuper, arrived in Cumberland in 1859 and embraced Seelos, he was astonished at the skeleton-like figure of the prefect.<sup>41</sup>

Yet two references to Seelos's health indicate that, while he did not have a strong constitution, he was not a weakling. In 1862 Father Wuest said that Father Seelos had a strong constitution,<sup>42</sup> and in 1866 the provincial declared that he had good health,<sup>43</sup> though on the missions in the spring of 1865 Seelos himself feared a recurrence of the throat hemorrhages. All of this shows that Seelos was inclined by nature to take less vigorous physical exercises because of his questionable health. As a general rule, those with weak health do not manifest strong physical traits. This does not always follow, especially when a man has as strong a will as Seelos. Whether because of his health or because of the innate gentleness of his manner, Francis Xavier Seelos was mild in his external deportment.

## 2. His Most Consistent Personality Trait: Cheerfulness

The most consistent trait of his character was his pronounced bent for cheerfulness. He never changed mercurially, but stayed steadily in a state of pleasant geniality. The testimony of witnesses during his whole life stresses this point. His sister, Antonia, noted it when describing his childhood.<sup>44</sup> One of his schoolmates at the *Gymnasium* pointed out, likewise, that graciousness was a lasting trait with the young man from Füssen. Out of this happy spirit came a kindly manner of treating people; even as a child he endeavored to preserve peace among his companions, and as a man his love of peace and his affability continued.<sup>45</sup> Father Joseph Firle said that all who came to him were attracted by his merry manner; his joyful disposition accompanied by a calm serenity inspired all with great reverence and esteem. He was affable without being familiar.<sup>46</sup> Lay people noticed it; one of the witnesses in Baltimore, Joseph Herzog, claimed that Father Seelos was always happy.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>40</sup> CURLEY, *Cheerful Ascetic*, pp. 146-149.

<sup>41</sup> Berger/Beck Correspondence, 22A: Henry Kuper, C.S.S.R., to John Berger, C.S.S.R., Ilchester, Maryland, May 20, 1883.

<sup>42</sup> CURLEY, *Cheerful Ascetic*, p. 225.

<sup>43</sup> AGHR, *Provincia Americana* (hereafter PAM), II, 3: Joseph Helmprecht, C.S.S.R., to Nicholas Mauron, C.S.S.R., Baltimore, February 20, 1866: Visitation Report on the Detroit Community.

<sup>44</sup> *DocStud*, II/2: 1450-1457; 1458-1461; 1470-1477.

<sup>45</sup> *DocStud*, II/2: 1462-1470.

<sup>46</sup> *Summarium*, pp. 62-63: testimony of Joseph Firle, C.S.S.R.

<sup>47</sup> *Summarium*, p. 158: testimony of Mr. Joseph Herzog.

About him was a natural gaiety, a built-in pleasantness. He was mirth-provoking rather than productive of explosive laughter by wise-cracking words or sharp repartee. He could appreciate a joke, and he could tease. Once a Father arrived in Pittsburgh and seemed perplexed when he noticed that his saliva was black the next morning. Seelos, who knew this was caused by Pittsburgh's smoky atmosphere, sidled up to him and said, "What's the matter? Are you suffering from some internal disease?" All the Fathers chuckled. His constant attitude of geniality made all who knew him realize that he was a man who truly wished them well.

### *3. Adversity and Difficulties Did Not Quell His Pleasant Outlook on Things*

Father Girardey maintained that even in the greatest adversities Seelos never lost his cheerfulness. As another witness in Baltimore, Valentine Winheim, said, he was serene when trials came and never seemed despondent; he was never impatient.<sup>48</sup> Father Benedict Neithart, who had spent many years with him, remembered how often as prefect of students Father Seelos inculcated the idea that pleasantness and urbanity are the outcome of virtue. Seelos was accustomed to say:

Rudeness does no good and kindness can do no harm. If a priest is rough with the people he injures himself and others. He sins, at least unknowingly, against charity, patience, poverty, humility, and self-denial. He scandalizes all that witness or hear of his rudeness. He turns souls by the hundreds, not only from himself, but also from God and religion. Thousands have neglected church and sacraments, and have gone to hell simply because they were treated rudely by the priest or confessor.<sup>49</sup>

Because he was gentle and happy with everybody, people were naturally attracted to the ascetic-looking priest, while those particularly who were caught in the ways of sin felt that here was a man who would receive them kindly.

### *4. His Physical Appearance*

He was tall and thin-framed, with a full crop of hair - hair that turned white years before he died. His appearance invited friendliness. One of his students, who later became a secular priest in Europe, said of

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<sup>48</sup> *Summarium*, p. 140: testimony of Ferreol Girardey, C.SS.R.; p. 134: testimony of Mr. Valentine Winheim.

<sup>49</sup> *DocStud*, II/2: p. 1295-1302: Reminiscences of Benedict Neithart, C.SS.R., November 9, 1876. The citation (found on p. 1296) is different here from that in the *Cheerful Ascetic*, because Curley apparently did not have the original English and translated from the Latin found in the *Copia Publica* of the Cause.

him, "The whole external appearance of the man showed him to be a man apart from earthly things and filled with zeal for God's glory. The first time I saw him he left a profound impression on my heart."<sup>50</sup> "His face and his actions manifested a man withdrawn from worldly things," said another. One man summed up Seelos's appearance, saying, "His look was piety; his glance was comfort; his expression, love; charity glistened in his eyes and benevolence played around his venerable aspect."<sup>51</sup>

This attractiveness was all the greater since it was not promoted by those external aids often used by men to capture favorable impressions. Father Seelos did not wear expensive clothes. Though always neat and well-groomed, he wore very old attire and did not seek new apparel.<sup>52</sup>

The room he used was usually one of the least desirable in the house. He had few creature comforts and no surplus articles in it; as a matter of fact, he never used anything but a candle as a light. Even the stove in his room at Cumberland, he did not use, except when the students entered for interviews; he preferred going to the common room to study there, as did the students, though he could have used his own room, a place apart for himself. Naturally as a superior he could have had a laybrother to arrange his room and clean it for him, as his hours of service were many, but he would not have any of this and did both himself.<sup>53</sup>

##### *5. Good Conversationalist without Hurting Anyone in Words*

He was a good conversationalist, and his flow of ideas and words held his listeners' attention. The subjects of his conversation were usually history, botany, astronomy, or an anecdote from the lives of the saints, or a passage from Sacred Scripture. But besides his piety and his profound erudition, he had an abundance of jokes and liked to tell them. When he told a joke, he would look at the person to whom he was telling it and laugh with such cordiality and hilarity that he was like a boy. In his conversation he never blamed anyone. He abhorred a joke that wounded the feelings of another because it violated the virtue of charity. Three topics he never approved of in conversations: to speak of indelicate subjects; to

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<sup>50</sup> CURLEY, *Cheerful Ascetic*, p. 139. His photograph shows the abundance of hair; RABP, Seelos Letters, 1864: Seelos to [Mrs. Wagner], New York, October 18, 1864; *Summarium*, p. 42: testimony of Father Constantine Hergenroether, ex-Redemptorist.

<sup>51</sup> *Summarium*, p. 48: testimony of Peter Zimmer, C.S.S.R.; Berger/Beck Correspondence, 56.

<sup>52</sup> *Summarium*, p. 108: testimony of Benedict Neithart, C.S.S.R.; p. 115: testimony of Mr. Joseph Herzog; p. 90: testimony of Mr. John Letzkus.

<sup>53</sup> *Summarium*, pp. 62-63: testimony of Joseph Firle, C.S.S.R.; pp. 107-109: testimony of Benedict Neithart, C.S.S.R.; pp. 142-143: testimony of Ferreol Girardey, C.S.S.R.; p. 117: testimony of Hubert Bove; C.S.S.R.

hurt the feelings or reputation of others; to be too eager to hear novel opinions which went against the common ideas of the faithful. Not that he was afraid of truth, but the cocksure manner in which some gave avant-garde opinions as truths, not sustained by clear logic, won no applause from Seelos. Some men had more reason in them than faith. While Seelos could appreciate the value of reason, he also had a deep faith. In regard to the latter, his principle seemed to be, to be more ready to believe, rather than doubt, in matters of faith and piety.<sup>54</sup>

*6. He Conducted Spiritual Direction through His Correspondence*

One of the most notable things about him was that he was always busy - praying, teaching, counselling, and studying. The odd moments of time left from his occupations he spent in letter writing to penitents and souls under his direction. More than once, curious confreres wondered about his voluminous correspondence. We have close to two-hundred of his letters. Unfortunately many more have been destroyed or their whereabouts are unknown. The extant letters, some only a few lines in length and others running ten and twenty pages, were for the most part letters of spiritual direction. Apart from those addressed to his family in Europe and some few to his confreres, they did not, as a rule, relate the topics of the day or give descriptive details of his material surroundings.

The chief contents of his spiritual direction to suffering souls were the doctrine of love of the cross, the value of suffering, patience in difficulties, and a childlike simplicity of heart. He also advocated a special love of the Blessed Sacrament, and, when writing on this subject, his language bordered on the ecstatic.<sup>55</sup>

Once when a penitent remarked that spiritual direction by mail must be burdensome, he answered, "I do not regard it as a burden to write to persons who need consolation and wish encouragement on the narrow way."<sup>56</sup>

In writing to a certain Miss Mary, he sometimes betrayed his lack of precise English and for that reason begged pardon. As a rule he was most kind to her and she noted it; but, as he explained, he wrote to her in this fashion because it was the only way he could help her.<sup>57</sup> Previously

<sup>54</sup> *DocStud*, II/2: 1299: Reminiscences of Benedict Neihart, C.S.S.R., November 9, 1876.

<sup>55</sup> ZIMMER, *Leben*, 167-173, 196-197. Seelos's many letters of spiritual direction confirm this appraisal.

<sup>56</sup> *Doc Stud*, II/2: 995-998: Seelos to Miss Mary, Annapolis, Maryland, July 17, 1863.

<sup>57</sup> *DocStud*, II/2: 987-988: Seelos to Miss Mary, Annapolis, September 16, 1862;

he had chided her, and she apparently had been displeased more than once and told him so.<sup>58</sup> Though he was always ready to help confused, and sometimes distressed, souls by writing them, once he became aware that a new provincial, Father Helmprecht, did not wish him to give spiritual direction by mail, he dropped the correspondence immediately.<sup>59</sup>

His letters were generally devoid of comments on the Civil War, though he did say on more than one occasion that the people of Maryland, in contrast to the state government, seemed to favor the South. As far as can be noted, once, and once only, he expressed his own views, but very secretly. He was inclined to favor the South, not that he favored slavery, but he believed on constitutional grounds the Southern states had a right to withdraw from the Union. Moreover, he disliked the principles of the "Black Republicans," who, he declared, cared less for the slaves than the slaveholders. In this his views coincided with those of Bishop Whelan of Wheeling. Seelos feared, moreover, that after winning the war, some fire-eating politicians of the North might go on to persecute the Church. "At the same time," he said, "earthly things are truly quite secondary to me and I leave all to the wise Providence of God. He only knows how to bring good out of evil."<sup>60</sup>

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### *7. Love of Family - His Poetic Bent - His Deep Love of Learning*

He was sensible regarding love of relatives. While he took prompt action without even seeing his mother and father before he left Europe for the last time, he did not by that fact surrender his love for them. Each and every relative was dear to him. He saw nothing wrong in love of relatives, but he did not allow it to interfere with his work as a religious. His letters to his family manifest a deep interest in their concerns, hope for their spiritual advancement, and many, many prayers for them in their difficulties.<sup>61</sup>

Seelos's thoughts had a poetical cast. This may have been why Helmprecht once said that Seelos was sentimental, though one other

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RABP, Seelos Letters, 1865: Seelos to "My Very Dear Child," New York, April 7, 1865. Seelos had even written poetry to Miss Mary to cheer her and encourage her.

<sup>58</sup> *DocStud*, II/2: 783-784: Seelos to Miss Mary, Cumberland, Maryland, August 23, 1857.

<sup>59</sup> RABP, Seelos Letters, 1865: Seelos to Miss Mary, Cumberland, August 2, 1865; *Summarium*, p. 109: testimony of Benedict Neithart, C.S.S.R.

<sup>60</sup> *DocStud*, II/2: 971-973: Seelos to Hermann Hauschel, Cumberland, September 7, 1861; 995-998: Seelos to Miss Mary, Annapolis, July 17, 1863; 1000-1004: Seelos to Sister Romualda Seelos, Annapolis, August 21, 1863.

<sup>61</sup> CURLEY, *Cheerful Ascetic*, pp. 24, 33, 41, 87, 88, 89, 275; ZIMMER, *Leben*, pp. 94-96.

witness who lived with him five years said he was the opposite.<sup>62</sup> His origin in romantic and picturesque Füssen, nestling in the foothills of the Bavarian Alps, easily conditioned him for poetry. It was a land where friends would express their appreciation in a poetic manner. Even as small children, Seelos's younger brothers and sisters looked forward to his poetical messages. He began early to express himself in poetic lines - poems to his guardian angel; poems to express his inmost thoughts on his longing for heaven, others on prayer, and on the virtues of his sister, tragically killed Margaret Kunigunda. Close to a hundred such compositions in German have been preserved. While the style and meter in them are not always most literary, the sentiments they express are genuinely heartwarming. He wrote poetry even when directing souls and sometimes when chiding someone.<sup>63</sup>

Though he does not appear to have read as widely as his friend and contemporary, Bishop John Neumann, he mastered what he did read, usually books on religion and especially asceticism. Scientific books he relished only if they served to confirm revelation. He preferred theology to philosophy, once expressing his preference by saying that theology gave the light of the sun and philosophy the light of the candle. One man remarked that he did not spend much time reading newspapers. But the skimpy news sheets of that day, four or eight pages in all, hardly called for much time in perusal.<sup>64</sup>

### 8. *His Qualities as a Long-time Superior*

Although during sixteen of his twenty-three years in religion he held the office of superior, no one could accuse him of "the insolence of office." More than one said that they could hardly tell that he was the superior when they first met him, for neither in his words nor in his manner of acting did he betray any sense of superiority. Once he gave a Good Shepherd nun his ideas of the qualities a religious superior should have. First, he declared, a superior should herself be permeated with a burning zeal for the Rule, an enlightened zeal; second, she should have a profound

<sup>62</sup> AGHR, PAM. II, 3: Joseph Helmprecht, C.SS.R., to Nicholas Mauron, C.SS.R., Baltimore, February 20, 1866: Visitation Report on the Detroit Community; *Summarium*, p. 62, testimony of Joseph Firlé, C.SS.R.

<sup>63</sup> Seelos MSS XIII and XIV are two autograph collections of poem by Father Seelos; some of these are published in various pages of Zimmer's *Leben. DocStud*, II/1: 507-509: Seelos to "My Dear Friend," Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, February 9, 1854; II/2: 983-985: Seelos to Miss Mary, Annapolis, Maryland, July 17, 1862.

<sup>64</sup> *Summarium*, p. 107: testimony of Benedict Neithart, C.SS.R.; p. 161: testimony of Brother Hermann Graute, C.SS.R. See also RABP, Seelos Visitation Sisters Letters: Seelos to "Dearly Beloved Mother Superior," Cumberland, [July, 1858].



humility, be full of compassion for the weak, ever having before her own eyes her own weakness; third, she should have true charity for all.<sup>65</sup> Father Beck, one of his students, said of him, "His love for his subjects always overshadowed the dignity of his official position. He was more servant and confrere than superior. His commands were given with prudence and meekness and took into account the strength and capabilities of his individual subjects."<sup>66</sup> Seelos once expressed his goal as a superior - to reach that enlightened state where he could make obedience in subjects a pleasant task. For a long time he prayed and studied to gain that happy state where subjects are guided and led in such a manner that they themselves find pleasure only in the strictest regularity.

He was not the martinet type of superior. As he told his students, he well knew that it is wrong to whitewash mistakes. He regarded this as a desertion of truth and want of zeal for the honor and glory of God. On the other hand, he believed that undue severity - what he called a "rough mode of treating poor sinners" - could easily lead to discouragement and provide effects more harmful than the original state. "A sick person requires a great amount of prudence," he said. To cure him, he believed, it was necessary sometimes to conceal the greatness of the evil. He expected to be obeyed, although he did not call for a military or semi-military execution of his commands. In fact, it was his lack of sharpness in giving orders that seemed to indicate to some, particularly to Fathers Ruland, Dielemans, and Van de Braak, that he was weak in command. While he was aware of the complaints, he preferred the kindlier method. A firm supporter of authority, he also believed it should be exercised in a Christ-like manner. He said:

A long experience has taught me the great lesson that God leads men in a human manner by other men whom He has appointed to be in His place and who should be of the same kindness as He Himself was while among men.

Many a soul might be gained to the true faith and for eternal life if sometimes a little more charity, a little more self-denial would be evinced, and if persons would be treated as their personal dispositions and human nature would require it. It is true [that] it requires great virtue and experience to find always the right measure in these things, but we cannot fail much if our intention remains pure.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> RABP, Seelos Letters, undated: Seelos to a Religious Superior, [n.p. n.d.].

<sup>66</sup> RABP, Seelos Accounts: Conference by Bernard Beck, C.S.S.R., on the life and virtues of Father Seelos at Saint Philomena's Church, Pittsburgh, December 27, 1875.

<sup>67</sup> RABP, Seelos Letters, 1865: Seelos to Miss Mary, Chicago, Illinois, July 9, 1865. See also, RABP, Seelos Visitation Sisters Letters, 1858: Seelos to Mother Superior, Cum-

Though Seelos may not have had the right measure on all occasions, generally speaking he did. The bald fact was that he got more done by his method than many another by imperious command.

### *9. His Piety Was Not Austere and Forbidding*

Piety, the firm and sincere affection that prompts one to give God the love due to Him, was a distinguishing mark of Father Seelos. To one nun he confided, "I never knew what it is to love anyone but God." And another nun testified, "He told me simply and confidentially how he felt himself drawn to God.<sup>68</sup> On the great festivals his spirit was in harmony with the Church." He won acclaim for his piety in every place where he labored, an attractive piety well-interwoven with his genial character. A life of complete dedication to God and to the things of God was his aim, but not a fearsome, tense dedication that froze affection in the beholder. His love of God had not insulated him from his fellow man. His was no joyless, bitter holiness. It was relaxed, not grim, always with a firm and steady will to attain sanctity.

### *10. He Was a Man of Solid Faith*

Basic to an understanding of Seelos's piety was his deep faith, which was evident in a hundred different ways and was recognized by many people in many places. His younger sister, Anna, declared that Seelos as a youth was penetrated by a lively faith; he profoundly admired the greatness and omnipotence of God as shown in his creatures and in the wonders of nature. Anthony Schirsner, his fellow student at Augsburg and Munich, likewise declared that Francis clearly outdistanced his comrades in his firm faith.<sup>69</sup> All his tremendous personal exertions for sinners while he was on the home missions did not spring from a natural appeal. His supernatural faith was behind them.

Indeed, as one peruses the life story of Francis Xavier Seelos, his career as a student, priest, and superior, an overwhelming conviction comes that he was a man of solid faith. By faith we mean not only the assent of the mind to all the truths proposed for our belief concerning the Church of Christ but also the ability to live out these convictions in the everyday, humdrum existence among the tedious tasks of life.

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berland, August 12, 1858; ZIMMER, *Leben*, p. 80.

<sup>68</sup> *Summarium*, p. 156: testimony of Sister Mary Bernard, Carmelite; *DocStud*, II/1: 557: Reminiscences of Visitation Sisters.

<sup>69</sup> *Summarium*, pp. 36-37 33: testimony of Sister Romualda]; *DocStud*, II/2: Anton Schirsner to [Bernard Beck, C.S.S.R.], Munich, Germany, January 30, 1877.

*11. At All Times He Gave Total Assent to the Teachings of the Church: Better to Believe Too Much than Not Enough*

No shadow of a doubt existed in the mind of Seelos concerning the truths taught by the Church. He loved them; he defended them; he studied them to gain riches for his own spiritual life. The assent of his mind was not an enforced acceptance demanded by the Church under pain of excommunication. He believed the doctrine of the Assumption of Our Lady as well as the Infallibility of the Pope even before these were declared dogmas of faith. In 1859, as Father Zimmer relates, when one of his students expressed some doubt or hinted at a doubt concerning the Assumption of Our Blessed Lady into heaven, the prefect, who was naturally meek at all times, showed concern and corrected the young man, saying, "This is the common teaching of the Church. Do you have to wait until you are threatened with excommunication to believe it?"<sup>70</sup>

Not only did he readily embrace the official general doctrines of the Church, but he saw with the eyes of belief the inner truths of the spiritual life. He walked in a world of faith. He discerned God's action behind the deeds of men. Because of this perception he was able to avoid pitfalls that disturb many others who look only to secondary causes in events, the part men play in them. The presence of God, the certainty of a life to come, the innate conviction that whatsoever we do to a neighbor we do to Christ, the acceptance of sufferings as a trial by God, the deep assurance that all things work together for good to one who loves God were lived out in the life of this holy man.<sup>71</sup>

*12. His Reverence for the Mass and His Devotion to the Blessed Sacrament*

Specifically, his faith was noted in the way he celebrated the Holy Sacrifice. People of all classes testified that he said Mass in such a devout manner that he seemed to be entirely penetrated and profoundly impressed with the mystery he was celebrating.

<sup>70</sup> ZIMMER, *Leben*, pp. 291-292.

<sup>71</sup> *Summarium*, p. 105: testimony of Benedict Neithart, C.S.S.R.: "*Cito partem supernaturalem in rebus humanis detexit et accepit*"; *DocStud*, II/2: 793-810: Seelos to Sister Damiana and Sister Romualda, Cumberland, August 10, 1858 For the presence of God, cf. *Summarium*, p. 90: testimony of John Letzkus; CURLEY, *Cheerful Ascetic*, p. 90. His many poems on heaven illustrate his belief in heaven as his home; ZIMMER, *Leben*, p. 303; *DocStud*, II/1: 707-709: Seelos to Miss Mary, Baltimore, March 4, 1856; RABP, Seelos Letters, undated: Seelos to Sister Rosalia, [n.p. n.d.]. For acceptance of suffering, see CURLEY, *Cheerful Ascetic*, pp. 130, 275.

Even outside of Mass, when the Blessed Sacrament was exposed on the altar, he appeared as if his mental faculties were absorbed in concentration on his Sacramental God. This was noticed in Pittsburgh, Baltimore, and other places.<sup>72</sup>

### *13. His Ministry of Preaching and Instructing Was Permeated with Faith*

“When preaching or instructing,” said Father Ferreol Girardey, “he spoke as one perfectly persuaded of the truth of what he said.”<sup>73</sup> Once he spoke to his students these words:

Now I ask you, What can console you in times of depression of mind when seeing your own imperfections, when seeing an increase of misery [...] what alone can give you consolation? Nothing but the immediate application of the holy exercise of prayer. This exercise only knows how to cure our daily wounds [...].

A few moments are enough to make an act of self-humiliation, an act of supplication, an act of begging pardon, or of making a new resolution in order to repair the fault, to obtain God’s pardon, new graces, new light and strength [...]. By merely telling him our secrets and faults and infirmities, we are cured whilst speaking.

And again, urging his hearers to listen to the voice of conscience, he said,

Happy souls that listen to this inward voice, to the voice of the Holy Ghost with whom they live in continual union. But just that union with the divine Spirit is a union of continual aspiration and prayers [...].<sup>74</sup>

A spirit of faith shone through his letters. Typical was his letter to Miss Mary in June, 1855:

[...] did you ever reflect: what might be the reason that our blessed Lord compares so often the kingdom of heaven with a nuptial feast, why does he call himself the spouse, why does he call his followers spouses? It is a great mystery, full of consolation for those who are in the present time under many a trial, for those who know themselves not of this world, not partakers of riches and pleasures and honors and all the fruition of that present life; for those who are crucified to the world and, knowing the de-

<sup>72</sup> *Summarium*, p. 47: testimony of Peter Zimmer, C.SS.R.; p. 74: testimony of Leopoldine Gimper; p. 173: testimony of Peter Maus; p. 187: testimony of Elizabeth Arlinghaus; p. 100: testimony of Joseph Wuest, C.SS.R.; CURLEY, *Cheerful Ascetic*, p. 90; *DocStud*, II/1: 564: Reminiscences of Visitation Sisters.

<sup>73</sup> *Summarium*, p. 140.

<sup>74</sup> Seelos MS VI, fols. 28r-v : Sermons and Instructions, Conferences for *Ordinandi*.

ceitfulness of that imposter, aspire to a higher order of things. In the eyes of worldlings we are the greatest fools, not knowing the appreciation of things, though we really are wise and prudent if we persevere.<sup>75</sup>

*14. His Prompt and Careful Obedience Was Based on Faith*

Similarly, his faith was unmistakably evident in the manner in which he received orders from his superiors. Whether he agreed with what was ordered or not, he carried out the wishes of those over him promptly, were it an order from the archbishop forbidding certain liturgical practices dear to the heart of the immigrants, but undesirable in America; or an inconvenient command to leave what he was doing to take up temporarily another task; or returning home without making unnecessary stopovers; or a surprising change of office. The order was obeyed. No wonder he wrote that a wish from his father provincial was an order for him.<sup>76</sup>

Because he was a man of faith, he followed the Redemptorist pattern of life exactly. Father Ruland put the truth succinctly when he said of him, "He is a Redemptorist in body and soul."

*15. His Firm Trust in God Prompted Him to Instill a Similar Trust in Others*

From the lively faith in the heart of Francis Seelos came a firm confidence in God. He never had any doubts that he was going to heaven and that he would enjoy a happy hereafter. The virtue of hope was so ingrained in him that, like his faith, it constantly came out in his sermons and letters.

To those souls tormented by past sins, unnerved by the good they never did, discouraged by their heedlessness of God's warning and neglect of His graces, he pleaded eloquently for trust in God.<sup>77</sup> To his mother, still deep in sorrow seventeen months after Mang Seelos's death, Father Francis wrote words of consolation:

You are already so close to heaven; therefore, accept daily all difficulties and crosses with complete resignation and willingly. "For all things work for the best of those who love God." Yes, it's true, best of mothers, you have already put up with many hard and bitter things. Are you sorry for this? Of

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<sup>75</sup> *DocStud*, II/1: 619-620: Seelos to Miss Mary, Baltimore, June 11, 1855.

<sup>76</sup> ZIMMER, *Leben*, pp. 307, 242-243; RABP, Seelos Letters, 1863: Seelos to Mrs. Sauer, Annapolis, February 20, 1863.

<sup>77</sup> CURLEY, *Cheerful Ascetic*, p. 103. At this point Curley has a quotation from a sermon that is not in the hand of Father Seelos and there is no indication that he is its author. We have therefore thought it wise to omit the quotation here. The German text of the sermon is found in Seelos MS XX (doubtful material): "*Von der Kleinglaubigkeit und von den Vertrauen auf Gott.*"

course not. Our consolation consists precisely in this that we have traveled the same road that our beloved Savior has chosen for himself, the narrow, the steep way of the cross. Especially since we know that every single step is written in the book of life, so that these very sufferings will be our greatest treasure. So, my dearest mother, continue to live unreservedly for heaven and to use all means of grace that are at your disposal.<sup>78</sup>

To the couple who lost a child he wrote beautifully: "For, first of all, you have not lost your daughter, but have won an angel; not given her up but have saved her."<sup>79</sup>

In other ways, too, deep-rooted confidence shone out. Many of the poems he wrote came back time and time again to this theme. In one on "My Home Above" he expressed the idea neatly,<sup>80</sup> and one of his favorite poems was "In God Alone I Seek for Rest,"<sup>81</sup> a manifestation of his hope.

Illustrating how he could inspire others to have confidence in the hope of heaven was the letter he wrote to a nun laboring in an orphanage:

Since at present you are employed in the care of orphans, do not forget that in one sense all of us may be called orphans. This, not so much because we have left our homes and dear parents, but because we are exiled from our true home as long as we live on this earth and are surrounded by so much misery. Yes, we are at present poor orphans and at times this gives us much pain. Yet we must not lose courage for, as the Apostle said, our hope is the plenitude of immortality. We are on the straight and kingly highway which leads directly and surely to our heavenly home. We must be steadfast and walk on courageously, suffering whatever trials and difficulties we meet with on the way. These trials and difficulties at times may look to us as barriers to our progress or we think that they make our road even steeper than it actually is. Think always on the shortness of life and on the eternal happiness which we will enjoy in glory and contentment which now we cannot even imagine.

Then, to encourage the nun, he wrote a short poem, the theme of which was "Heaven, the Land of Love, the Land of Joy." This was man's true home. Enclosing the poem in the letter, he told her to read it from time to time and say a Hail Mary with it.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> *DocStud*, II/1: 616-617: Seelos to his mother, brothers, and sisters, Baltimore, January 29, 1855.

<sup>79</sup> *DocStud*, II/2: 811: Seelos Letters, 1859: Seelos to "Mr. L.," Cumberland, January 7, 1859.

<sup>80</sup> ZIMMER, *Leben*, p. 303.

<sup>81</sup> *DocStud*, II/1: 709: Seelos to Miss Mary, Baltimore, March 4, 1856.

<sup>82</sup> RABP, Seelos Letters, undated: Seelos to Sister M. Rosalia, [n.p.n.d.].

*16. He Had Great Trust in the Power of Prayer*

The virtue of confidence was in his prayers, too. In asking God to cure people of bodily disease and especially of moral defects, Seelos seemed to have no doubt that his prayer would be answered. This was quite apparent on several occasions in Pittsburgh when the people brought their sick children to him. He said a prayer over them before the altar of our Blessed Mother with such calm assurance that the bystanders were struck by it. They were more surprised when those for whom he prayed were cured of their disorders.<sup>83</sup>

*17. Love of Neighbor Was His Most Conspicuous Virtue*

But of all the discernible virtues of Seelos, the most constantly commented upon was his love of his neighbor. He was all heart and kindness to those who came in contact with him, with a love of neighbor that went beyond any nationality or race or status in society. He loved Frenchmen and Americans just as well as the Germans. He gave his all to Negro as well as to white. If he showed preference at all in his affection, it was to the poor and downtrodden.<sup>84</sup> He did a great deal to bridge the ethnic gaps which seemed to exist in his day in the American Catholic Church. While one of the reasons for this success was, of course, his early training in languages, his overflowing spirit of love for his fellow human beings, irrespective of their ethnic backgrounds, mainly accounted for it.

Father Wissel, who lived years with Seelos, said of him:

This charity extended to all, even the poorest. As superior he was very busy, yet it was not too much for him to spend about a half hour every day with a half-demented person who received his meals in the house. He did this to cheer him up. In doing this, he put himself completely in the situation of this poor man. He did this throughout a rather long period of time.<sup>85</sup>

*18. He Was Strict with Himself - Mortification and Self-denial - Some of His Practices of Penance*

Despite his outward gaiety and sanguine manner, Father Seelos was strict with himself. In a letter to his two sisters in 1858, he gave his philosophy of mortification and self-denial, saying:

Now I would like to encourage you with a few words, not merely to persevere in your holy and enviable vocation with the greatest enthusiasm and the greatest joy. For the more zealous we are, the more God and his holy Mother stand by us. Therefore, everything goes easier to the degree

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<sup>83</sup> *Summarium*, p. 88: testimony of Laurence Guckert.

<sup>84</sup> *Summarium*, p. 108: testimony of Benedict Neithart, C.S.S.R.

<sup>85</sup> Wissel Fragments, 9A; printed in *DocStud*, II/2: 1509, no. 6.

that we exert force and embrace with a really joyful and willing heart the cross that God himself places upon us, not the one we have chosen for ourselves.<sup>86</sup>

He did violence to himself in many ways. Perhaps the one act that was most apparent to his confreres was his mortification in the matter of sleep. Father Anwander said he heard that Seelos went to bed late, got up early, and spent many nights on the bare floor without touching the bed.<sup>87</sup> This testimony was confirmed by others. Father Joseph Firle declared that he was often found sleeping on the floor. Among the seminarians it was said he rarely slept in bed.<sup>88</sup> One student made it a point to examine whether Seelos slept in bed. He went to him late in the evening and before meditation next morning and observed that the books were lying on his bed the same way. In the old house in Cumberland, Seelos also had been observed sleeping on the floor, having taken off only his habit.<sup>89</sup> Brother Peter Recktenwald was informed by another laybrother that once when he had to summon Father Seelos for a sick call, he found him sleeping on the floor.<sup>90</sup> As soon as Seelos arrived in Detroit, he asked permission to sleep on the floor. His rector, Father Van Emstede, did not allow this, but gave him permission to place a board in his bed, adding that he should protect himself well against the cold and drafts for the sake of his health.<sup>91</sup> From all the evidence available it is quite clear that during his life he often slept on the floor as an act of mortification.

In other ways he was hard on himself. During his whole life as a Redemptorist he never used tobacco and never looked for delicacies in food or drink.<sup>92</sup> He never used salt or any seasoning in his food. At the meditation of the community he never sat down, but knelt erect, usually

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<sup>86</sup> *DocStud*, II/2: 799: Seelos to Sister Damiana Seelos and Sister Romualda Seelos, Cumberland, August 10, 1858.

<sup>87</sup> Berger/Beck Correspondence, 12A: Thaddeus Anwander, C.S.S.R., to [Joseph Wuest], Rochester, New York, November 8, 1876; printed in *DocStud*, II/1: 429.

<sup>88</sup> *Summarium*, p. 62: testimony of Joseph Firle, C.S.S.R.

<sup>89</sup> Berger/Beck Correspondence, 22A: Henry Kuper, C.S.S.R., to John Berger, C.S.S.R., Ilchester, Maryland, May 20, 1883; printed in *DocStud*, II/2: 845.

<sup>90</sup> *Summarium*, p. 76: testimony of Brother Peter Recktenwald, C.S.S.R.

<sup>91</sup> Berger/Beck Correspondence, 56: Account of Francis Van Emstede, C.S.S.R.; printed in *DocStud*, II/2: 1216.

<sup>92</sup> *Summarium*, p. 161: testimony of Brother Hermann Graute, C.S.S.R.; p. 109: testimony of Benedict Neithart, C.S.S.R.; p. 52: testimony of Peter Zimmer, C.S.S.R.



with his hands folded.<sup>93</sup> He always said Divine Office either kneeling or standing, never sitting.<sup>94</sup>

This manner of praying was not an affected pose. He knelt with faith to show a humble attitude in God's presence. But he did not consider it essential to prayer as he told his students in his sermon on "Body Posture in Prayer." He pointed out what Saint John Chrysostom had said: "Even if you do not bend the knee, nor strike your breast, nor elevate your hands toward heaven, if only you bring to God an inflamed heart, nothing is wanting in your prayer." Typically, Seelos wanted his listeners not to be rude to others by passing judgment on their posture at prayer.<sup>95</sup>

Besides the acts of mortification prescribed for all Redemptorists, he would practice many others, such as going without gloves or a hat in winter.<sup>96</sup>

### *19. Severe Retreat Resolutions, 1848*

While on his retreat in 1848 at Pittsburgh, he formed the following resolutions:

#### External Acts of Penance

1. No breakfast at all on the fast days of the Church, on Saturdays, and on the vigils of the seven feasts of the blessed Mother of God and on all retreat days.

2. Cilicium until after thanksgiving after Mass, three times a week on the arm or leg.

3. Discipline three times a week, during seven Our Fathers and Hail Marys.

4. I ask for permission often to pray five Our Fathers and Hail Marys with arms outstretched, especially during time of laziness and temptation.

5. To sleep on the floor Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. If there should be a day of recreation on the days I have chosen for fasting, I will anticipate the day of fasting.<sup>97</sup>

How conscientiously he lived up to these resolutions we do not know, but they show the trend of his thoughts. He believed in performing

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<sup>93</sup> ZIMMER, *Leben*, p. 143; *Summarium*, p. 161: testimony of Brother Hermann Graute, C.S.S.R.; p. 141: testimony of Ferreol Girardey, C.S.S.R.

<sup>94</sup> *Summarium*, p. 61: testimony of Joseph Firle, C.S.S.R.; p. 48: testimony of Peter Zimmer, C.S.S.R.; p. 140: testimony of Ferreol Girardey, C.S.S.R.

<sup>95</sup> Seelos MS IV, fol. 2r: "*Körpers-haltung beim Gebete*" ("Bodily Posture at Prayer").

<sup>96</sup> *Summarium*, p. 108: testimony of Benedict Neithart, C.S.S.R.

<sup>97</sup> *DocStud*, I I/1: 495: Retreat Notes, 1848. The superior of the community, Father Joseph Müller, in giving his permission, moderated the last resolution to: "Since the cold in winter amply gives the same opportunity for mortification, sleeping on the floor can be put off until the return of warmer weather."

penitential acts, as he said to one of his correspondents who was thinking of entering the religious life.

It is certain - if you have not experienced it yet, you will experience it someday - that on the way of a genuine following of Jesus Christ many obstacles and difficulties beset everyone who seriously enters upon this way and continues on it. O how few walk along it and just for this reason it could seem to us, now and again, that the whole undertaking is an exaggeration; in fact, it is described by corrupt nature as a veritable stupidity. It is just as if someone said to you: "How can you be so stupid! You deny yourself all innocent pleasures about which others make no scruples"; or, "Are you the only one who wants to get to heaven? What a dry and sad life that is," and so forth.

But we must not pay attention to such whisperings of the devil [...].<sup>98</sup>

*20. His Conviction That Trials and Sufferings Are from God, the Physician and Healer of Our Souls*

Concerning self-denial, his ideas were similarly high-minded. In the letter mentioned above to his two sisters in religion, he said:

Dearest Sisters, if only all religious had so much faith, so much courage, so much self-denial that they could see their daily duties, the unexpected commands of their superiors, the various daily unforeseen occurrences, sadness, dejection, wretchedness of every kind, as the cross especially destined for them by God. For exactly in this lies God's deepest wisdom; that he, as the most experienced of physicians, knows how to give every individual according to his passions, circumstances, and conditions that medicine which infallibly will cure each one and will make him grow to that degree of perfection which he should have and should attain according to God's plan.

It is not confreres, nor sisters of the community, not even superiors - when the tempting thought comes that they are ill-intentioned toward us, or that they want to vex and trouble us; it is not confreres, nor sisters of the community, nor superiors but it is always our loving God who stands in the background and lets us suffer and endure only as long as we need it for our sanctification.

Is someone from those around us were actually to treat us with violence, we could still draw from it even the greatest of benefits, because it would be a kind of innocent suffering, a genuine imitation of the innocent, crucified Jesus. Nothing would be sweeter in its fruits; nothing would be more comforting in our misery; nothing would be more meritorious for

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<sup>98</sup> *DocStud*, II/2: 968: Seelos to a Young Woman Considering a Religious Vocation, Cumberland, [1860].

eternal life. We have really committed so many thousands of mistakes for which we have not yet been punished, and for which, perhaps, a terrible Purgatory awaits us. How gladly should we not now and again be willing to suffer something innocently. Is this not so?<sup>99</sup>

*21. The Place of Prayer in His Life - Special Favors*

Father Seelos said he wanted to be a spiritual man. Asking himself how this was possible, he answered, "Therefore, prayer must always be my chief source of strength."<sup>100</sup> His prayer life was carefully cultivated. He anticipated Matins and Lauds daily and told his students that he thought the priest who puts off saying his Office until late at night was not giving it his best attention. Father Zimmer testified that he knew that Seelos was a man of prayer and that he never omitted the regular exercises prescribed by the Rule. The first present at the exercises, Seelos gave example to all his students. Zimmer also declared that Seelos was forever saying the Rosary in such a manner that one would hardly notice his practice.<sup>101</sup> More than one witness declared that in walking through the streets, he always seemed to have his hand in his pocket, presumably saying the Rosary. The presumption might seem without foundation, had not Father Seelos himself inculcated this to his confreres, encouraging them to say a Hail Mary or a part of the rosary while moving from one place to another.<sup>102</sup>

In his correspondence he came back to the subject of prayer time and time again. To his mother, lonely after her husband's death and longing for heaven, he answered: "Yes, my best of mothers, live these last days completely in God, like holy Anna, who day and night did not leave the temple. [...] Prayer is the ultimate medicine that conquers all pain" [...].<sup>103</sup> To a young lady planning to enter religious life he wrote: "Vocation and perseverance in it are special favors from God and can be obtained by prayer only. Therefore, I advise you to pray continuously not only when in church, but also when at home and at your work. But at the sacrifice of the Mass and after Holy Communion prayers are most powerful." Young Neithart declared, too, that Seelos used to say his prayers up to midnight.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> *DocStud*, II/2: 799-800: Seelos to Sister Damiana Seelos and Sister Romualda Seelos, Cumberland, August 10, 1858.

<sup>100</sup> *DocStud*, II/1: 488: Retreat Notes, 1848.

<sup>101</sup> *Summarium*, p. 49: testimony of Peter Zimmer, C.S.S.R.

<sup>102</sup> CURLEY, *Cheerful Ascetic*, p. 91; ZIMMER, *Leben*, 187-188.

<sup>103</sup> *DocStud*, II/1: 213: Seelos to his mother, Baltimore, Maryland, April 2, 1854.

<sup>104</sup> *DocStud*, II/2: 995: Seelos to Mary Kane, Annapolis, May 31, 1863; II/2: 1298: Reminiscences of Benedict Neithart, C.S.S.R., November 9, 1876.

When two nuns traveled with a priest for several days, and one of them says, "The priest seemed always recollected and in prayer," she is pointing out a habit. And that is what Sister Maria Largusa, SSND, said of Father Seelos after the trip from Chicago to New Orleans in 1866.<sup>105</sup>

Another witness gave even more significant testimony of his prayer habits. A young man who was a novice brother in Cumberland declared on oath that he went into the oratory one afternoon when Father Seelos was performing the afternoon spiritual exercises and saw him, in a kneeling position with his arms extended in prayer, and his whole body raised above the ground.<sup>106</sup> One thing is certain. Francis Seelos prayed a great deal. Too many people in too many places affirm this for anyone to doubt it.

### 22. *His Gentle Fortitude - His Detestation of Softness*

One strain in his piety stood out clearly. He pounded time and again at what the Germans called '*Weichlichkeit*.' It may be called in English "softness of character or lackadaisical spirit." Seelos himself best explained it when he told one of his ordination classes:

Here we are dealing with an evil which is very comprehensive in its scope and there is nothing specific about it. For instance, he who wastes his time in play and who desires recreation and enjoyment too eagerly is surely a soft person. Recreation in itself is not softness; neither are eating and drinking to be designated as softness. Softness is a manner of life which is opposed to the performance of a definite, serious work, which meets everything in a careless, superficial manner, which does not know what it means to be faithful, persevering in performance of duties and external obligations without, however, going over into complete lack of discipline. Softness is a mode of life where one endeavors to take all the sweetness of earth without serious thought for the salvation of one's soul.

He declared that this was really a conglomeration of many defects and aberrations, which in themselves might not be called vices. But these, he claimed, when they permeate the life of a Christian, cause it to follow the easy way out and to neglect to work for souls. Softness of character, in his view, was opposed to the spirit of Christ, was not in accordance with the Gospel, and really failed to appreciate it.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> *Summarium*, p. 171: testimony of Sister M. Largusa, SSND.

<sup>106</sup> *Summarium*, p. 120: testimony of Mr. Andrew Franz.

<sup>107</sup> Seelos MS VI, fol. 59v; *Summarium*, p. 146: testimony of Timothy Enright, C.SS.R. 110.

### 23. Even His Critics Were Convinced of His Holiness of Life

It would be entirely idle to deny that Father Seelos, besides being warmly praised, was criticized, not always fairly. Two unusual facts connected with the criticism, however, stand out sharply in his career. The first was that most of his severest critics, while voicing their complaints of his methods, went out of their way to point out his holiness. Father Van de Braak, speaking of possible provincials, reported to Rome, "It is being said that Father Seelos is too good and that he does not have enough courage to refuse what is asked of him even when he wants to refuse."<sup>108</sup> Two years later he also wrote, "Father Seelos is a very pious man. He is humble and affable. I do not think a better man could have been chosen to be superior of Cumberland."<sup>109</sup> Isaac Hecker, who called him "wretchedly weak" in the Rumpler case, in the same letter called him "pious."<sup>110</sup> Father Clarence Walworth, who spoke of Seelos in the Rumpler case as "utterly irresolute, timid, easily imposed upon, and disposed to leave everyone to follow his own way in all things," in the same letter called him "an excellent religious and by no means devoid of good sense and judgment."<sup>111</sup>

Though he still thought Seelos might not be severe enough as novice master, Father Augustine Hewit called him "a saint in spirituality and an angel in sweetness."<sup>112</sup>

### 24. An Unexplained Remark about Him - Was He Ambitious?

The provincial, George Ruland, in 1858 made a strange remark about Seelos, saying, "Formerly I thought him very perfect in his way, but recently an incident gave him an occasion to show that he is somewhat vain and ambitious, which formerly I would never have looked for in him."<sup>113</sup> Ruland did not pinpoint the incident. It may well have been that the provincial believed Seelos was desirous of returning to Baltimore as

<sup>108</sup> AGHR, PAM, I, B: Adrian Van de Braak, C.S.S.R., to Nicholas Mauron, C.S.S.R., Cumberland, July 12, 1855; printed in *DocStud*, II/1: 679.

<sup>109</sup> AGHR, PAM., V, 3: Adrian Van de Braak, C.S.S.R., to Nicholas Mauron, C.S.S.R., Cumberland, August 26, 1857.

<sup>110</sup> AGHR, PAM., I, B: Isaac Hecker, [C.S.S.R.], to Nicholas Mauron, C.S.S.R., Baltimore, June 24, 1855; printed in *DocStud*, II/1: 646.

<sup>111</sup> AGHR, PAM., I, B: Clarence Walworth, [C.S.S.R.], to Nicholas Mauron, C.S.S.R., Baltimore, June 21, 1855; printed in *DocStud*, II/1: 638.

<sup>112</sup> AGHR, PAM, I, B: Augustine Hewit, [C.S.S.R.], to [Edward Douglas, C.S.S.R.], New York, May 16, 1857.

<sup>113</sup> AGHR, PAM, I: George Ruland, C.S.S.R., to Nicholas Mauron, C.S.S.R., Baltimore, November 9, 1858: "*Bemerkungen über die einzelnen Patres*," evidently an enclosure in a letter.

rector of Saint Alphonsus parish, for rumors to that effect were around, and Seelos was aware of them. It may well have been, too, that Ruland was giving credence to unconfirmed tales he had heard, for, as Seelos later said, idly gossiping tongues in Baltimore had caused him vexation. As he put it, "I never met with a greater malice than in Baltimore, only on account of a few persons on whom I really had bestowed a great many favors."<sup>114</sup>

In the absence of more conclusive evidence we cannot be sure of what motives lay behind the cryptic statements of both Ruland and Seelos. The ambition that Ruland thought he saw in Seelos seems strange in view of what Seelos, following Saint Francis de Sales, told a religious superior, "Ask for nothing; refuse nothing."<sup>115</sup> He wrote to a Visitation superioress at this time and, after speaking of the happiness he had experienced in his recently completed annual retreat, he wrote:

I have seen in my life nothing but faults, nothing but miseries, nothing but ingratitude and nothing but sins - so much so, that a great desire forced itself upon me [that] our dearest Lord may put me in the lowest place in my beloved Congregation and make me a lay brother; and, D[ear] M[other], that was no humility but so true and heartfelt, that I would have considered such an accident as one of the greatest favors of Heaven.<sup>116</sup>

That does not sound like ambition; nor does the letter Seelos later wrote to his superior general and to Pope Pius IX, begging not to be named bishop of Pittsburgh, sound like ambition, but rather the very opposite.<sup>117</sup>

Even Father Dielemans, critical as he was of Seelos's methods, did not fail to add that he was not accusing Seelos of a moral fault.<sup>118</sup>

### *25. The Chief Criticism Leveled against Him: He Was Not Strict Enough - a Reasonable Explanation*

The second consideration about the criticisms leveled at him was that practically all of the faultfinders complained that he was too easy with his subjects.

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<sup>114</sup> RABP, Seelos Visitation Sisters Letters, 1859: Seelos to Mother Leonard, Cumberland, April 27, 1859.

<sup>115</sup> RABP, Seelos Visitation Sisters Letters, 1857: Seelos to "Reverend and Dear Mother," Cumberland, June 25, 1857.

<sup>116</sup> RABP, Seelos Visitation Sisters Letters, 1858: Seelos to "Mother Superior," Cumberland, October 27, 1858.

<sup>117</sup> CURLEY, *Cheerful Ascetic*, pp. 198-199.

<sup>118</sup> AGHR, PAM, V, 2: Gerard Dielemans, C.S.S.R., to Nicholas Mauron, C.S.S.R., Annapolis, August 15, 1863; printed in *DocStud*, II/2: 1111.

The available evidence indicates that the provincial, Father Ruland, found Seelos not quite strict enough with some men for his taste. He had said that in 1855.<sup>119</sup> He hinted at it again in 1858, when he was making proposals for the new superiors for the coming triennium. He declared that, all things considered, he wished Seelos to be retained as superior of Cumberland and prefect of students, since he was the best at hand. He added, however, that, if he had another man stricter than Seelos to be superior of Cumberland, he would keep Seelos as prefect of students alone. But no such one was available and Seelos was the best choice for the position of both superior and prefect of students. For the latter post, the provincial declared, Seelos was particularly well-suited.<sup>120</sup>

George Ruland, Van de Braak, and Dielemans were hardworking, methodical men who did much good for the province. In the matter of keeping the Rule they were men cast in a rigid mold. They failed to realize an all-important fact that the Redemptorist Fathers came to America with a Rule measured for conditions in Europe. The Redemptorist apostolate in America in the 1850s presented circumstances that were never envisioned in the Rule they brought with them from overseas. The establishment of large missionary parish centers; the outmission work by individuals in small outlying missions, where they established new parish centers; hiring teachers and buildings for schools; temporarily assisting at neighboring parishes and the like required an adjustment by local Redemptorist superiors which very often took the Redemptorist Fathers away from the community acts in their home base or had them entering into activities quite different from those in Europe.

Every such adjustment, an adjustment forced by the circumstances of the time and place, caused a twinge in the conscience of Seelos's critics, who very often looked on them as a derogation of the common life. A study of the statement of policy Ruland made in various houses bears this out; the provincial was irritatingly insistent on minute observances. So, too, when Seelos was absent, Van de Braak's cautious conduct in not sending young John Berger to the funeral of his uncle, Bishop Neumann, because the provincial did not tell him to do so, shows a lack of common sense. Van de Braak, as acting superior, had the authority to send the young man to the funeral. Similarly, the diatribe of Dielemans against the parishes, when he had no knowledge of their necessity, showed a narrow mind. Equally devoted to observing all the prescriptions of the Rule,

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<sup>119</sup> CURLEY, *Cheerful Ascetic*, pp. 103-105.

<sup>120</sup> AGHR, PAM, I: George Ruland, C.SS.R., to Nicholas Mauron, C.SS.R., Baltimore, September 28, 1858.

Francis Seelos had a wider outlook than these men. He made a distinction between what was desirable under ideal conditions and what was practical in the existing circumstances. It was a question of judgment, which, as Seelos's critics saw it, was a defect. At least Michael Mueller attributed this to the fact that Seelos had not been trained in a regularly constituted house of formation. Not all agreed with this criticism; some regarded it as pharisaical. Father Neithart summed up their opinions in two sentences: "Many have said that F[ather] Seelos was 'too good.' This cannot be denied; but then if that be a fault, we must also charge it upon Francis of Sales, Alphonsus, and our blessed Lord himself."<sup>121</sup> Another Father who had Seelos for two years as local superior and who spent two more years with him on the missions took up this complaint against Seelos. He declared that, when viewed in the right light, Seelos's kindness was no fault because he knew exactly how far he could and should go. This Father said:

He well knew that people blamed him for this quality. Once he complained of this openly, saying he knew how to set up barriers where obligation and duty demanded them. If the sharpest critic were now asked what damage resulted from Francis Seelos's goodness of heart, he could not point out anything. On the contrary, it will be evident that it was this very quality that enabled this Father to effect so much immeasurable good.<sup>122</sup>

### *26. His Patience under Opposition - He Held No Grudges Toward Those Who Were against Him*

Any character portrayal of Francis Seelos would be incomplete without pointing out another special trait, his patience under opposition. He never allowed opposition to provoke him to aggressive hostility. Although he well knew that Michael Mueller and, later, Gerard Dielemans were opposed to his methods, as Father Schauer remarked, he never by word or action showed his displeasure.<sup>123</sup> Nor did he permit the memory of unjust accusations to harden his mind with bitterness. One hunts in vain for any display of resentment in anything he said or did.<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> RABP, Benedict Neithart, C.SS.R., Short Account of the Death of Father Seelos, Written October 15, 1867; printed in *DocStud*, II/2: 1286.

<sup>122</sup> ZIMMER, *Leben*, p. 280.

<sup>123</sup> *Summarium*, p. 126: testimony of Elias Schauer, C.SS.R.

<sup>124</sup> *Summarium*, p. 143: testimony of Ferreol Girardey, C.SS.R.; p. 96: testimony of Henry Meuer, C.SS.R.; p. 102: testimony of Joseph Wuest, C.SS.R.



### APPRAISAL III

CARL HOEGERL, C.S.S.R.

#### INTRODUCTION

The third appraisal is by Father Carl Hoegerl, C.S.S.R., the external collaborator of the Cause for Canonization of Father Seelos. Having had a close relationship with the life and work of Father Seelos for a number of years in preparing the *Positio super Virtutibus Heroicis*, he brings a special competency in presenting a summary appraisal of his spirituality. At the same time, his contribution provides a certain complementarity to the previous two appraisals, those of Father Michael Curley and Father Peter Zimmer, by approaching the holiness of Father Seelos from angles that bring out various important aspects of it not encompassed in their appraisals

The first appraisal of the holiness of Father Seelos, that of Father Peter Zimmer, C.S.S.R., is cast, predominantly but not exclusively, in a mold based upon the schema of virtues hallowed by the usage of tradition for ascertaining the holiness of life of any individual. This methodology has the advantage of assuring that all the essential elements that go to make up Christian holiness are present in the person under consideration. This is important, for it would not be possible to say that an individual were truly holy, with a holiness that was considered heroic, if, for example, there were lacking a profound level of Christian hope; if the individual gave evidence of being quite doubtful of the constant assistance of God's grace and of his own salvation. Some quality, essential to a full and mature Christian life, would be lacking. And the same is to be said about all the other basic Christian virtues.

On the other hand, adhering strictly and exclusively to the schema of the virtues as traditionally presented runs the risk of missing some of those qualities that are most special in the spiritual physiognomy of the person under consideration. Every virtue is practiced in a very individual and concrete circumstance; it is not practiced in general and according to a set mold. Each person comes into the world with a unique temperament and personality, with unique natural gifts of body and mind. The development of this natural endowment is fostered or hindered in the ambient of a unique family constellation, and further development depends to a large extent upon childhood experience, early schooling, and opportuni-

ties for deeper intellectual growth in more advanced centers of learning. Moreover, the life of each holy individual is influenced by the state of the Church in general of that time, as well as by the condition of the Church in his particular part of the world. These are some of the more obvious variables in the life of any person that come into play in his practice of virtue.

A further consideration in appraising the life of any person is the conviction, based on faith, that each individual whose life is observed as being of exceptional holiness has been called by God to do some particular work, to bring to the fore some special quality, to be a reminder of and a model for certain ways of perusing the Christian life. The fulfilling of this calling entails the living out of qualities and modes of the virtues that are special to that individual.

Being aware of some of these considerations, Father Curley, in *Appraisal II*, included in his presentation elements that broaden the scope of information about Father Seelos. He described aspects of his human personality and character and touched upon elements of his natural endowment. In this way he produced a portrait of Seelos that comes closer to the living religious and priest as he was known, admired, and loved by those who were in contact with him and knew him personally. While Father Zimmer in *Appraisal I* gives us a rather synthetic presentation of the holiness of Seelos, Father Curley gives us a more existential experience of Father Seelos as a holy religious and priest.

This *Appraisal III* takes as its point of departure the theological truth that God endows the Church with gifts - charisms - which are given to foster the spiritual well-being and growth of the faithful. These gifts, while given to all, are more conspicuous in certain individuals who have a more prominent role to play in the household of God. They are those whose lives give indications that they practiced the Christian virtues in a degree that can be ascertained as exceptional and heroic.

With an awareness of gifts and charisms, let us state, more precisely the perspective from which we wish to view the spiritual life and work of Father Seelos. Simply stated, we can say that we want to see Father Seelos, and have others see him, as a presence in the Church that fulfills very real and pressing current needs. Coming to appraise his life from this perspective, we are induced to ask a number of questions: What does his holy life have to teach the Church today? Does his spirituality mean anything to the Church of today? Or to put it more theologically: What is the Holy Spirit trying to tell us through the life of this holy person?

This appraisal does not intend to minimize the value of the two previous ones or to supersede them. Its purpose is to complement them

by viewing much of their content from a different point of view and in a different context. The three appraisals fit together and are meant to be considered as a whole, each making its own special contribution to a more comprehensive portrait of the spirituality of Father Seelos.

It is important to keep in mind that in approaching the holiness of Father Seelos, we want to avoid the impression that his holiness was something that he himself fashioned through his own initiative and diligence. Partially, this is true of course, of him as it is of everyone who takes the spiritual life seriously: each one has to exert effort, and persevering effort, in order attain a heroic degree of holiness. However, subsumed in all this, even if not often mentioned explicitly, is the fact that holiness, after all, is really the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of that person. Without such action of the Spirit, we cannot have an individual whose life is based, not on merely natural virtue, but supernatural virtue.

And having said this, we are also saying, of course, that the action of the Holy Spirit is purposeful, giving his gifts not so much for the good of the individual as for the good of the faithful of the Church. The Holy Spirit is always building up the Church through its members, especially those whom he gifts with special graces and charisma.

Let us come then to some practical considerations and give some answers to the question: What are some of the special gifts that the Spirit gave to Father Seelos that enriched the Church in his own lifetime and enriches it today?

## TEXT

## PART I THE CHARISM OF HIS PERSONALITY

*Father Seelos as a Very Happy Holy Man*

The first gift of the Holy Spirit to Father Seelos that we want to single out as remarkable has to do with an impression about holiness that is quite common among ordinary people: holiness and happiness do not go together. Many of the faithful see the holy person as not a happy person. Hagiographical libraries are full of biographies of saints and other holy people who do not seem to be particularly happy. In fact, they give the impression that they are quite unhappy. They are often very solemn, very serious, very burdened with the effort of always being holy and pleasing to God. They have little use for this world and things of this world; they shun the common pleasures of life in which ordinary people find their happiness, because they seem to be considered evil or, at least, to be highly suspect.

Such a perception of the holy person, harmful in itself, has the further effect of producing a negative perception of God. He does not seem to be a kindly father, but rather a hard and severe taskmaster. He is always making demands, is always finding fault, and is never satisfied. Reading the biographies of many holy individuals, one comes away with the conclusion that one cannot be very holy and at the same time be very happy. The effort to please a very demanding God takes all the joy and pleasure out of life.

And this in spite of the fact that being with God, being close to God, serving him totally, putting aside all waywardness and walking on the path of the Lord ought to make one ecstatically happy. The Scriptures, notably the psalms, are filled with expressions of the happiness that should attend anyone who is close to the Lord and does his will in everything. And yet, happy people do not seem to be in the majority in the calendar of the saints. On the contrary, sad saints seem to have taken the field. In their inner lives, of course, there was great joy, who can doubt it, but for some reason it did not seem to be proper to let this joy come forth to the exterior in ordinary contact with other people. Somberness was the order of the day for them, and this is what we usually read about in the majority of biographies. There are exceptions, of course, but we do not think to be far off the mark when we say that such exceptions constitute very much a minority in the roster of those who are conspicuous in the Church for holiness of life.

It is here that Father Seelos has a special charisms from the Holy Spirit for the Church of today, as it was a special gift to the Church of his time. His happiness was universally acclaimed. His joyfulness was remarked by everyone who came in contact with him. His cheerfulness was the object of comment by everyone. His life gives the lie to the assertion, or the perception, that the holy life is the sad life; that to take God seriously means that all the joy of life has to be abandoned; that serving God means resigning oneself to a very unhappy and dismal life. Joyfulness was evident in him even as a child, for his sister testified about him: "In his childhood he was greatly given to prayer and piety, and mother often proposed him to us as an example. But at the same time, he was always of a most joyful and happy disposition."<sup>125</sup>

To this happy disposition, Father Seelos joined the happiness that comes from being close to God. His joyfulness was the outward expression of the inward experience that God was with him and he was with God. He was aware that what he wanted most in life was to love God with all his heart and mind and soul, and to serve him as best he could. This awareness was the source of his joy. He wanted nothing more than to bring others closer to the God to whom he himself was close. This desire of his and his efforts to make it a reality filled him with that happiness that can come only to someone who has set his own life in order and has directed it toward the well-being of others. Human experience tells us that only the selfless can be truly happy and content with themselves. A witness of the Baltimore investigation, Mr. Joseph Herzog, made this observation:

He was, however, more affable and amiable than all the priests I have ever known. He was always happy. The Spirit of Christ seemed to rule and govern his life. As far as I know all were attracted to him. He was a priest whom it was not difficult to love and to think highly of.<sup>126</sup>

Father Seelos was joyful and cheerful in situations that by their difficult nature, would normally elicit unhappiness, sorrow, brooding, resentment, and complaining. This demonstrates that his joy was not merely the expression of his natural temperament, being a happy person by nature, or that he was not intelligent enough to realize that not everything naturally is something to laugh over, Father Zimmer in *Appraisal I* above, describing the signs of the presence of the fruits of the Holy Spirit in the spirituality of Father Seelos, says under the gift of spiritual joy: "But still more wonderful was his joy in being humbled and despised, which

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<sup>125</sup> *Summarium*, p. 36: testimony of Sister Romualda Seelos.

<sup>126</sup> *Summarium*, p. 115.

made him like the apostles who were joyful to suffer disdain for the name of Jesus." And, in his official testimony, Father Zimmer says:

He seemed to feel his removal from office or from place to place, but he fulfilled the orders of his superiors with a happy disposition and without difficulty or delay.

Further on in his deposition, he notes:

He was removed from the office of prefect of students because of accusations that commonly were believed to be groundless. The accusation was that he treated the students with too much kindness and affability. He accepted his dismissal with joy and after that was not disturbed about it at all.<sup>127</sup>

Thus his reaction in adversity was not the normal one, the natural one, the expected one, but one that was totally different because its roots were sunk deep in the action of the Holy Spirit in his soul. His manner of being happy even in times of hardship was noticed by the laity as we know from the testimony of Mr. Valentine Winheim: "He was never despondent, and beset with adversities he was always happy and cheered up others."<sup>128</sup>

With very great reason did Father Michael Curley, who was very conversant with Father Seelos in his writings and those about him, entitled his biography "Cheerful Ascetic." Father Seelos found nothing incompatible between being severe with himself and being happy. The whole purpose of his asceticism and self-discipline was to put under control those elements of his personality, character, disposition, and temperament that hindered him from being his true self, the one God intended him to be, the one that was part of the image God had of him when he gave him existence. To attain such self-mastery, or to be on the way to it, was a source of joy, because it was, in fact, experiencing the action of Jesus upon him and in his life. Every conquest was extending the realm of Jesus over him; he was becoming more and more the Kingdom of God. This was a cause of great joy for him.

We dwell on this point because Seelos, in this matter, is a wonderful example of one for whom the Good News of Jesus was really good news and a source of joy and happiness. If the Good New is really wonderful news, as it truly is, then one of the effects must be to produce happiness in those who hear the Good News and live it. No better apologetic for Jesus and his message to the world can be had than an individual

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<sup>127</sup> *Summarium*, pp. 50, 51-52.

<sup>128</sup> *Summarium*, p. 134.

who radiates the joyfulness that is the very essence of being loved and redeemed and made holy by the Spirit of Jesus. In this regard, Father Joseph Firle, in his deposition, observed:

He treated those who were under his direction with the greatest affability. He made the practice of virtue easy by the joyfulness of his way of acting.<sup>129</sup>

We are firmly convinced that one of the lasting gifts Father Seelos has to offer the world is the joy his life expresses in his striving to love God with all his heart and his neighbor as oneself. A sometimes very sad world needs joyful people; the Church, which in so many places, has lost its influence and is considered outdated needs happy, cheerful, joyful holy people like Father Seelos. Serious-minded people need to see for themselves that being close to God and trying with all their heart to serve him need not be a repulsive business, need not be oppressive, but can be filled with that joy and that happiness and that contentment which everyone is seeking. People need to be told that being holy is not a sad business, not a somber business; but the very fountainhead of exhilaration. Such holiness has the power of attraction, as Father Joseph Firle noted in his testimony:

He attracted all who were with him by his joyfulness and his happy disposition. He manifested a certain heavenly sweetness which inspired in everyone great reverence and esteem.<sup>130</sup>

And he retained his gift of holy hilarity even on his deathbed as a number of eyewitnesses have testified.<sup>131</sup>

Lest one think that his joyfulness was merely interior, something that, in a certain sense, was itself other-worldly, although in essence based on truths other-worldly, we must make it clear that his happiness manifested itself in all the ways that people manifest their human joy. He laughed often and easily, he was fond of telling jokes and listening to them. Father Neithart testified:

Although he was of a happy disposition and therefore loved jokes, he never used an indelicate word or those with double meaning.<sup>132</sup>

He was, moreover, adept at seeing the humorous side of unusual individuals and situations. It was easy for him to have an eye for the

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<sup>129</sup> *Summarium*, p. 62.

<sup>130</sup> *Summarium*, p. 62.

<sup>131</sup> *DocStud*, II/2: 1243-1305, where the edifying death of Father Seelos is described.

<sup>132</sup> *Summarium*, p. 109.

incongruous in human situations. This ability, as is well known, is the basis of humor. A delightful instance of this is found in the humorous poem he sent to Father Joseph Wissel, his good friend, about his sickness in February 1867.<sup>133</sup>

In a word, he had a fine sense of humor. It was not difficult for him to find something to laugh about, and it was not difficult for others to say something or do something that elicited laughter from him.

*His Holiness Was Not an Enemy of His Humanness*

Further, Father Seelos is a notable example of the assertion that holiness does not destroy one's humanity. Those who come in contact with many of the saints through reading about them often are given the impression that to be a saint requires an almost total suppression of one's natural humanity. Holiness is for those who can live with a great part of their human endowment suspended and left unused, if not totally destroyed. Again, this might be due to those who have handed down to us the lives of so many saints and others reputed to have lived outstandingly holy lives. But the fact that biographers felt compelled to write this way about holy people only reinforces the idea that an understanding of holiness did require the neglect of basic human traits, temperament, and personality.

Not to have done this would have indicated to the times in which the biographies were written that the holy person was, after all, not really that holy, because so much of his innate and native selfhood had not yet been destroyed but was still functioning quite well; in other words, the holy person was not other-worldly enough to be really holy. Somewhere hidden in such perceptions was the latent assumption, hardly ever actually expressed, that somehow the world and things of the world and values of the world, were all, to a greater or lesser degree, evil. There were realities that were of God and there were those that were of this world; and those of this world were not part of those that were of God. The basic goodness of God's creation was, if not explicitly denied, at least, somewhat suspect.

In Father Seelos we see an individual who did not consider hating everything in the world and its values as necessary to loving God; provided, of course, that all things were loved and treasured in relation to God. Once God had been placed as the center of one's existence then all things could be valued at their true worth and could be used as God

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<sup>133</sup> *DocStud*, II/2: 1262-1267: Seelos to Joseph Wissel, C.Ss.R., Natchez, Mississippi, February 25, 1867.



intended them to be used. In his retreat notes of 1848, Father Seelos does, indeed, speak of "hatred and not love," but there he is speaking of a holy hatred against "softness and love of the flesh," those realities that he perceived in himself that prevented him from giving himself totally to the service of God. This hatred had nothing to do with other values, as he clearly indicated in another passage from the same retreat: "[...] all created things *erant bona* because continually according to the determination, plan, and glory of God [...]"<sup>134</sup>.

From his letters, many citations of which are found in the *Positio*, it is amply clear how much worth he placed on the fundamental human value of love and attachment to his family members. In order to be holy he did not consider it necessary to break asunder any bonds of affection he had for each one of them; he did not think that his love for them impeded his love and service of God. He shows, very naturally, his special attachment to his sister Antonia, who was next in age to him, the one whom from earliest years he had known the most intimately. In 1872, she wrote to Father Beck about the special relationship that existed between them.

I am only a year younger than Xavier, and so from childhood on, we were the closest to each other. Though he loved all his brothers and sisters very much, still, even as a student, he wrote to no one but me, and I entrusted to him all my secrets and matters that were close to my heart.<sup>135</sup>

And he makes no apology for this love for her or feels any need to find some theological justification for it. It was natural and good; it was from God. He saw, however, that his letters were a means of spiritual help to those he left behind at home. In one letter, after telling them that he was thinking that he should give up writing letters to them and that "we should just pray a lot for each other," he writes:

But then right away, I think that a letter from me is for all of you an encouragement in your daily cross, and that you then carry it with renewed courage, to the honor of our divine Redeemer, and that it quickens our desire to find each other again in the next world.<sup>136</sup>

One need not cast about far and wide to be assured of how important this family attachment is today and of what great value it is. The Church, particularly through the writings and preaching of Pope John

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<sup>134</sup> *DocStud*, II/1: 488, 492; Retreat Notes, 1848.

<sup>135</sup> *DocStud*, II/1: 195; Antonia Seelos to Bernard Beck, C. SS. R, Füssen, Germany, June 6, 1872.

<sup>136</sup> RABP, Seelos Letters, 1859: Seelos to his mother and family, January 7-24, 1859.

Paul II, has stressed without ceasing the importance of family values, among which the most basic is the love and affection that exists among the members.

The affection that Father Seelos had for his family was not a kind of constrained and dutiful love, but one that sprang from the depths of his joyful and affectionate heart. He delights in telling them about himself and what he is doing; about his successes and failures; about many little things of no consequence to others, but things he knew would interest and delight his family at home. He was not above telling them about details that today seem insignificant to us, but which he was certain would delight those whom he knew loved him and were deeply concerned about him. He reveled, we might say, in the thought that he was loved by all the members of his family. This too is a value of human nature the enjoyment of which he did not think had to be suppressed because he was seeking to love God with all his heart. To love his family was not in competition with his love of God, but was rather a delicate and beautiful manifestation of it.

Much akin to his love of family was his love of friends. He had many friends whom he loved deeply and to whom he showed his love in word and deed. In fact, he seemed to have a special aptitude for making friends and keeping them. Friendship is, of course, a great if not the greatest human value. His friendship was marked by thoughtfulness and concern, as is evidenced by the letters he wrote to his friends and which have been preserved for us, some of which are cited in the *Positio*. Again here, Father Seelos did not consider it a sign of a divided heart to love his friends. Sharing his heart and thoughts with others whom he loved did not mean to him that he had taken back the decision to give all his love to God and to our Blessed Lord. Neither did having friends and loving them mean that he had less room to love God. Rather, he saw his love of friends, whose roots, of course, are quite natural, as a gift that God had implanted in his heart and that God wanted him to nurture. One of the finest ways of showing his love for God was precisely in loving his friends. He was also well aware that one of the ways that God showed his special love for him was through the love his friends had for him. From Baltimore, where he was then stationed, he wrote to someone close to him in Pittsburgh:

How gladly would I like, now and again, spending an hour or so in my second home, among those who are so close to me, to refresh myself in spirit and to be cheered up by God and those things that alone should occupy the human heart.<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> *DocStud*, II/1: 711: Seelos to Mr. Waellisch, Baltimore, August 17, 1856.

Within the circle of his friends were a number of women. Here again, Father Seelos did not consider his close relationship with women as in some way incompatible with his love of God or with his state as a priest and a vowed religious. And in this area, we can see from his letters that his friendship with women was not superficial nor distant. As his whole personality and temperament were marked by singular warmth and respectful graciousness, so here too in his relationship with women the same warmth and graciousness is discernible. This is evident from an excerpt of one such letter.

O dear lady, how could I become indifferent to you, since on your account I have already carried about deep within me many an anxiety for some time now, and I can truly say that I am never free from worry on your account. Could I today offer up my life for you, I would do it with the greatest joy.

Further on in the letter, he writes:

O how deep is the wish of my heart, to find you again on the other side. It is a pleading prayer, constant and lifelong. The deep sighing of the heart prays and sweet hope rests in my interior depths that this wish, this living prayer, will find a responsive ear at the throne of God.<sup>138</sup>

However, we must add quickly that his correspondence with these women shows clearly that his affection, respect, and concern for them was within the framework of his love for God and was a manifestation of his ever-present desire to lead them to the practice of a deeper inner life and a more fervent love of God. These letters are letters of spiritual direction, but are also more than that, they are letters that have all the characteristics of a deep spiritual friendship, or as is commonly said, a friendship in the Lord.

It is not difficult for us to see here that Father Seelos took it for granted that the need for friends in his life was part of being a human being and as such, was something that was good to foster. He was aware also that there was a place, if not a need, for the feminine in his life and that was also good; part of being a male human being and from God. These were human values that enhanced the quality of his life, but also played an important part in his spiritual growth and development. He was more a genuine spiritual person to the degree that he made room for these human values. From this we come to the observation that Father Seelos was not a stereotypical holy man. He was not turned out on some

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<sup>138</sup> *DocStud*, II/2: 1147: Seelos to Mrs. Augusta Wagner, New York, April 11, 1864.

pre-formed assembly line, so that what might well be said of others could also be said of him without much change and adjustment. He was very much himself, very much his real self, quite unique, quite different. In fact, because he was this kind of spiritual person, because he let God work in him through his own disposition, his temperament, his personality, he was not infrequently misunderstood by those whose lives were more rigid and less aware of the need for human values and their place in producing an authentic spiritual personality.

*Father Seelos Exemplifies the Theological Dictum: Grace Builds on Nature*

To sum up what we have presented up to this point, we may say without fear of contradiction or misreading the facts that Father Seelos exemplifies to an impressive degree the dictum of the theologians: grace builds on nature. It is part of God's plan that the natural endowment of an individual is intended to be the basis upon which a supernatural structure is to be developed. God is the author of nature; God is the author of grace. God intends, moreover, both to be in harmony in every individual, even if this is not evidenced in many people; and often, not even in individuals who are seriously pursuing the inner life. With some holy people, one has the impression that there is a basic conflict within them, between the endowment of nature and that of grace. In them, inner conflict seems to be the usual climate of their spirit. Nature and grace seem to be at odds in them.

With Father Seelos matters are otherwise. He let grace increase, expand, and develop the natural endowment given to him by God. Through grace his natural joyfulness of heart developed into an almost ever-present joy of spirit so that events and situations which of their nature were prone to disturb one's peace of heart and mind left him unruffled. His natural gift for friendship developed into friendships whose deep concern was the imparting and sharing of evangelical values and truths.

In this brief and summary appraisal, we cannot dwell upon every aspect of the natural endowment upon which he allowed grace to grow. We want merely to indicate some aspects of his spirituality that are particular to him and bring out the uniqueness of his inner life. As these personal qualities were able to effect much good in his lifetime so they are still a source of enrichment for the Church today.

These particular qualities are, we believe, part of his charism as a holy person in society and in the Church. They are part of what the Spirit of God wanted to say to those who came in contact with him then and want to say to the Church today. God speaks to us through his saints and

his holy men and women. Through them he has something important and necessary to say. We believe that what we indicated above about his joyfulness, his use of his natural endowment and his letting grace build upon it, are a message of significant importance to the contemporary world in which we are asked to put into practice the truths that our Blessed Lord came into the world to teach us.

*Father Seelos Had Two Extraordinary Awarenesses*

For the completeness of this first part of the appraisal, there remains the pleasant obligation to mention two elements of the spiritual endowment of Father Seelos that stand out in bold relief. The first is his appreciation for the virtue of chastity and the glory of the virginal life. Father Zimmer in his testimony says this:

As far as preserving purity is concerned he was enthusiastic. His whole external way of acting was an expression of his purity. As far as I know, persons who were very severely tempted against chastity experienced great relief in his presence. Some instances of this are known to me.<sup>139</sup>

This following citation from one of his letters to a layman gives evidence that in directing others to holiness of life he often writes of the value of chastity.

Similarly, your attitude makes me happy, that you yourself would like to leave the world and serve God in solitude. O such an attitude is like a beautiful blossom which, even if it never ripens, pleases God and heaven by its beauty and fragrance. Jesus gives this attitude in the reception of the sacraments, where he gives the basis for that life where one is not given in marriage, nor enters it, but where all will be like the angels of God in heaven. If, therefore, you cannot see at all how you can carry out higher desires and wishes like these, cultivate them nevertheless, for they enable the heart and soul to make you, even in the married state, more chaste and more virtuous, which is of great profit and brings a blessing upon the whole family.<sup>140</sup>

In a letter of spiritual direction, he has these frank and beautiful words to say that bring out most emphatically his special appreciation of the virtue of chastity and the trials necessary to preserve it.

Ah my Dear and Respected Lady, is it not with You a particular favor from Heaven, even in the world to life [sic] an angelical life? Is purity not Your delight? Is innocence from childhood not Your greatest treasure? Are you not like a lily among thorns? But just these thorns will preserve the in-

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<sup>139</sup> *Summarium*, p. 51.

<sup>140</sup> *DocStud*, II/2: 1270: Seelos to Mr. [Ambos], New Orleans, July 1, 1867.

tegrity of that delicate virtue. Yes, we must be as the gold in the furnace and get out of it with greater purity, integrity and brightness.<sup>141</sup>

In his conferences to the students, he spoke often of the special beauty of the chaste life, of its special power to beautify the soul, of its particular way of imitation of Jesus, and the special love that Mary has for the chaste heart and mind. In Appraisal I we have seen a poem that reveals his fervent appreciation of the beauty of innocence of life.<sup>142</sup>

In this, he stands in sharp contrast to the contemporary world, which has gone quite insane with its preoccupation with sexuality and its wild search for new and ever more exciting experiments in this field. Father Seelos, therefore, in this aspect, becomes for those of our times who still heed the Catholic message about sexuality and its proper uses a model to imitate and an exemplar to emulate.

Secondly, Father Seelos had a keen sense of the eternal. In almost everyone of his letters, he mentions something about heaven and the eternal life that awaits us all. He speaks with joy to his family about the time when they will all be reunited in heaven. We notice this theme in the first extant letter that he wrote from the United States:

And so, when I think of home, my ever-remembered parents and brothers and sisters, and other people who are dear to me, I offer them all up to God and recommend them to his love, and desire only that all of us will meet again in heaven.<sup>143</sup>

This tells us both the deep suffering he endured in being separated from them but also of the joy that he believed would be theirs when they met again in eternity.

A year before his death, in writing to a nun, he admonishes her to "be a very good child who thinks only of her sanctification, so that we may meet each other again in eternal life and can then be happy together throughout a whole eternity."<sup>144</sup> These two examples are typical of his correspondence in general. In her deposition in New Orleans, Mrs. Elizabeth Arlinghaus recalled this about Father Seelos: "Toward the end of his

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<sup>141</sup> *DocStud*, II/1: 620: Seelos to Miss Mary, Baltimore, June 11, 1855, where the peculiarities of the original English have been retained.

<sup>142</sup> A second poem of similar theme may be found in: *DocStud*, II/2: 808-809: Seelos to Sister Damiana and Sister Romualda, Cumberland, August 10, 1858.

<sup>143</sup> *DocStud*, II/1: 415: Seelos to His Family, Baltimore, August, 1845.

<sup>144</sup> *DocStud*, II/2: 1170: Seelos to Sister Mary Magdalen, Detroit, Michigan, February 20, 1866.

life, he gave the women many conferences on heaven. He spoke about heaven as if he were himself in heaven."<sup>145</sup>

Moreover, he had, in this context, a keen expectation of the resurrection of the body. One of the incentives for virtuous living was that his body would one day share in the glory that would be his. Among the notes he made during his retreat in 1848, he wrote this:

A basic idea must now go through all my meditations, prayers, and thoughts; that is, through a holy discipline to make this body very beautiful for the day of resurrection. [...] This body is to be beautiful and proper on my deathbed, beautiful upon its bier. [...] I want to make use of everything for this. It is to be a lust of the spirit; a holy lust for the eternal and the true. Only one life is for me the true one: the life on the day of resurrection! Toward that will I aim; toward that will I strive, toward that will I lust with body and soul.<sup>146</sup>

The pascal mystery in its fullness and completeness was part of his outlook on life and the spiritual life in particular. There was a destiny for him in his complete reality, not merely in his soul, his spiritual reality, but in himself as soul and body. Eternity was very real to him; the future life was as certain to him as anything that he could see and touch. That his body would one day share in all the glory that is the fruit of the redemption that Jesus won for all was also as certain as anything else in his life. One of the motivations of his constant striving for holiness was that he must make himself worthy of that great reward. The eternal was contained in the temporal for him; that which was to be in the future abided with him and was part of him then and there. The transcendent dimension of human existence was something that was the foundation of all he did, desired, or thought.

The modern world has, to a large extent, lost its sense of eternity and of the immortal life to which every human being is destined. Even more remote from modern thought is the resurrection of the body and its future entrance into the full glory of the Lord. Father Seelos stands as an example of how an awareness of this reality can permeate a life and mold it toward virtue. His example shows how the conviction of reunion with separated loved ones can be a solace for lonely hearts and can serve as a motivation for a deep hope in the promises of the Lord.

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<sup>145</sup> *Summarium*, p. 187.

<sup>146</sup> *DocStud*, II/1: 488: Retreat Notes, 1848.

## PART II THE CHARISM OF HIS APOSTOLIC WORK

*Father Seelos Spent Most of His Priestly Years in Serving the Faithful in Ordinary Parochial Ministry*

For all of his priestly life, Father Seelos was engaged in some direct apostolic ministry of the Church. Of his almost twenty-three years as a priest, he spent the greater part of these, fifteen years, in parish ministry. He was, therefore engaged predominantly in that work which can be called the grassroots action of the Church, ministering to the ordinary, everyday members of the faithful. Although nominated by Bishop O'Connor for the episcopal see of Pittsburgh, he was not chosen for this position, and so, he spent his entire ministry, as a simple priest, among the people of God. The *Documented Study* has examined his active years almost one by one: his nine years as a parish priest in Pittsburgh; his three years as a parish priest in Baltimore; his five years with Redemptorist students at Cumberland and Annapolis, where, in addition to his work with the students, he also was involved in the parishes attached to these two Redemptorist foundations; his three years as superior of the Redemptorist parish mission band, and his two final years in the parish ministry, one year in Detroit, and his final one in New Orleans.

We, therefore, again ask ourselves some questions: Was there anything special that he brought to his ministry? Did he have some special charism that makes his work with the people memorable and informative for today's faithful, as well as for priests who are engaged in the same work? What was the Holy Spirit intending to say through him for those times, and then for ours today? What was the message that the Spirit gave through him in his apostolic ministry and gives us today? We believe an answer can be found in three areas: Father Seelos as confessor and spiritual direction; Father Seelos as catechist of the young; and Father Seelos and his love and concern for the poor and disadvantaged.

*Father Seelos as a Gifted Confessor*

One of the special characteristics of the pastoral ministry of Father Seelos was his gift in administering the sacrament of reconciliation, his success in hearing confessions. Almost everyone who came in contact with him in every place that he was stationed, as well as those who attended one of his preached missions, is unanimous in stating that he was a most exceptional confessor. Remarks such as these were common: anyone who went to confession to him once always returned; he could read your heart; he knew what you were going to say before you had a chance to say it; his confessional was always the one besieged by penitents; he was always the



last to leave his confessional - to mention but a few of the observations that were made about his work as a confessor.

Of course, we cannot go into much detail about this, because the remarks of the penitents were made in general terms and not in detail, as one would expect from people talking about their own confessions. But the feeling was universal that Father Seelos was the one to go to confession to in a parish and on the missions. He was the one who understood the sinner best and the one who could give the most consoling satisfaction. Mrs. Regina Hierholzer, in her deposition about his early ministry in Pittsburgh, recalls this: "He had the greatest number of penitents; he had such zeal in hearing confessions that crowds came to his confessional."<sup>147</sup>

And Father Neihart, who had been on the missions with Father Seelos, notes in his deposition:

On a mission his confessional was usually surrounded by a crowd, while his companions had only those who could not get to Father Seelos. He wanted to be a confessor who was severe with himself but mild with his penitents. He had great compassion toward penitent sinners; in the confessional he was never impatient.

Father Neihart then goes on to relate how during a mission excommunicated Fenians, those who had joined a forbidden Irish society, went to Father Seelos to be absolved rather than to Father Bradley a fellow Irishman.<sup>148</sup>

This gift, for such it was - a gift of the Holy Spirit - made going to confession, not something to be feared, but almost a pleasure, something to which one could look forward. Mr. Robert Blakewell, an attorney in St. Louis, Missouri, hinted at something like this when he testified about Father Seelos during his Pittsburgh ministry:

I hardly had any conversation with the Servant of God except in the confessional; perhaps once or twice in the rectory. But in the confessional he made a certain extraordinary impression upon me. When I knelt in the confessional I was pervaded by a singular force, which I cannot explain. He told me about some things in the interior life that I have never heard from any other priest. He explained the connection between one sin and the other.<sup>149</sup>

In confessing to Father Seelos, one felt that one was confessing to the gentle Savior himself, that one was treated there by Father Seelos as one could imagine oneself being treated by Jesus. Father Seelos was able,

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<sup>147</sup> *Summarium*, p. 79.

<sup>148</sup> *Summarium*, p. 106.

<sup>149</sup> *Summarium*, p. 153.

through his gentle personality and manner in hearing confessions, to make the penitent almost palpably aware of the mercy of God. The sacrament of penance was for the sinner through his special ministry where the loving-kindness of the Father was to be obtained and even emotionally felt. The image that Father Seelos conjured up in the minds of the people was not that of an angry and vengeful God, but one of love, of mercy, one who was really and truly their Father in heaven. Father Joseph Firlé in his deposition says: "He had the ability to inspire in all the greatest confidence in God, especially in the confessional."<sup>150</sup>

The confessional was for the sinner the place where he could partake of the Good News that our Lord came to bring to all, but more especially to those who were most in need of it, to those from whose life God had been expelled by sin. Father Seelos, so to speak, was the Good News come in person to the sinner in the confessional in much the same way that Jesus himself was and is the Good News for saint and sinner alike, but more especially for the sinner. In his deposition about his ministry in Baltimore, Mr. Joseph Herzog, said:

I found Father Seelos to be a patient, affable, and charity-filled confessor. I never left the confessional without being consoled. I wanted to go to confession to him rather than to anyone else. Sometimes he scolded me, but his scolding never depressed me but rather fortified and consoled me.<sup>151</sup>

This gift made the practice of the Catholic faith for so many not a tremendous burden but a source of joy and happiness. This was no small gift when one considers that Redemptorists at that time were not especially known for their gentleness and suavity, but rather, for their 'fire and brimstone' preaching. This, no doubt, repelled many from the confessional. It was said that any mission that Father Seelos was on was a success, and one has to remember that the success of a mission was measured by the number of those who went to confession, not those who attended the mission. It was in the confessional that the sinner was reconciled to God; the purpose of the mission was to bring the wayward back into the fold of the Lord. Father Neithart, a companion on many missions with Father Seelos, remembers this:

Yet, though he preached but seldom, everybody flocked to him for confession, instruction, and consolation. He usually occupied the last and hardest confessional in the church, and God alone knows how much he suffered, and how many stray sheep he brought back to the Divine Shepherd.

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<sup>150</sup> *Summarium*, p. 62.

<sup>151</sup> *Summarium*, p. 114.

He was always the first to enter and the last to leave the tribunal of penance, and when others were backward in this holy work he would scold them well. Everywhere he was revered by priest and people as the Saint of the band. His usual name was: "The saintly looking father."<sup>152</sup>

And there is no evidence to suggest that Father Seelos was what has come to be called in ecclesiastical circles a "*refugium peccatorum*," that is a confessor who asks no questions, does nothing to ascertain the true nature of the sin and its attendant circumstance in those cases where such information is necessary for a confessor in order to help the penitent undertake a true change of heart and life. Evidence rather indicates that Father Seelos took his threefold role as a confessor seriously: judge, teacher, and physician. These offices entailed much more than merely being there and hearing what was said without any dialogue with the person who had fallen into some sinful way of life. Mr. John Letzkus in his testimony points this out:

In the confessional he was exact, but gentle. And whoever was sent away by him without absolution willingly returned to him at the stipulated time because of his gentleness.<sup>153</sup>

The manner in which Father Seelos exercised his threefold role is noteworthy and special. There was a gentleness in understanding the embarrassment of the penitent, a way of showing his deep and personal concern for the state of the individual's soul, and the kindly advice toward a change of life for the future. Father Dusold as a young man heard Father Seelos in a sermon on confession encourage sinners to come to confession in a rather unusual way.

Now it was in one of these sermons that he addressed himself especially to those who, either out of fear or shame, did not want to go to confession. He made an eloquent effort to give them courage. Then, all of a sudden, filled with burning love, he stretches his arms out wide and says in a loud voice. "O sinners, if you don't have the courage to confess your sins, because they are too many, or too great, or too shameful - then, please, come to me. I promise you that I am ready to treat you with the greatest kindness. And if I don't keep my promise I publicly give you permission to accuse me of it in the confessional and point out to me my lie."<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>152</sup> *DocStud*, II/2: 1211: Reminiscences of Benedict Neithart, C.SS.R., November 9, 1876.

<sup>153</sup> *Summarium*, p. 90.

<sup>154</sup> *DocStud*, II/2: 1215: George Dusold, C.SS.R., to John Berger, C.SS.R., Ilchester, Maryland, May 20, 1883.

It is not difficult to see how important the figure of a kindly and understanding confessor was then and is especially today. There is no secret about the fact that in many parts of the Church, the practice of receiving the sacrament of reconciliation has declined noticeably in recent years. What the causes of this are is not germane to this appraisal; however, one can say, with some assurance of correctness, that part of the decline might be due to the qualification or lack of it among priests as confessors. There is no indication that the members of the Church are less sinful than at any other period in the history of the Church; that sinners are less in need of reconciliation than at other times; that individuals who have fallen into grave sin are not looking for some kindly and understanding priest to help them find a way out of the torments of their conscience.

At such a juncture in the life of the Church, it is important that the charism proper to the confessor receive more than usual attention and highlighting. It is important that priests in general realize, as once they did in the past, the supreme importance of the sacrament of reconciliation in the life of the Church. One of the places where the Good News is not only talked about but felt is the confessional. Father Seelos, as a simple parish priest, involved in all the activities that make up the life of a parish priest, made special place in his life for hearing confession. He is a model for every parish priest who takes his calling seriously according to the mind of the Church today. He is an exemplar of all those ministers of the sacrament of reconciliation who realize the importance, the value, and the need for the expert and kindly dispensation of this sacrament.

#### *Father Seelos as Spiritual Director*

Closely connected with his gift of being a good confessor was his gift of spiritual direction. Father Timothy Enright, who knew him well, said that many agreed with him that Father Seelos was a spiritual director without parallel: "In spiritual direction I have never found anyone like him; and others say the same thing about him [...]."<sup>155</sup>

He exercised this ministry among the students while he was their prefect and did so admirably in their estimation. A former student, Joseph Firlé, enunciates a basic principle of Father Seelos in his spiritual guidance: "In directing souls he directed each one according to his character and disposition."<sup>156</sup> He did not, therefore, force anything on the one he was directing but followed the bent of nature in that individual. All

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<sup>155</sup> *Summarium*, p. 144.

<sup>156</sup> *Summarium*, p. 63.

through his life, in whatever ministry to which obedience assigned him, he exercised the ministry of spiritual direction, either in connection with the confessional, as has been traditional in the Church, or through written correspondence. Fortunately, some of his letters have come down to us and many of these letters are letters of spiritual direction.

We cannot pursue every facet of his method of directing individuals, men and women, who were seeking a closer union with God, but we will give several of the salient elements of his method of guiding penitents in the ways of the spiritual life. We have selected three themes that recur often in his letters of interior guidance; and then we will add some general observations about Father Seelos as a spiritual director.

First, he saw his role not so much as directing as following; that is, following the lead of the Holy Spirit. For him, God himself was the best and wisest spiritual director. He saw his work merely as discerning where God was leading the individual who was seeking his advice. Father Enright in his deposition has this to say in this regard:

As far as prudence is concerned, and especially prudence in directing souls, he gave me this advice as his guiding principle: "I let the Holy Spirit guide. I simply follow and try to preserve the soul from inclining either to the right or to the left."<sup>157</sup>

He was, therefore, not an aggressive spiritual director, but one who quietly looked for indications of the action of the Holy Spirit in the life of his penitent and then encouraged faithfulness to where the Spirit seemed to be leading him or her.

Secondly, he stressed the maturing value of suffering in the spiritual life. He was convinced that without suffering it was not possible to grow in holiness because without suffering there was no likeness to the suffering Savior. His work was to convince his penitents not to resist suffering, not to fight and complain about it, but to accept it as coming from God who sent it for the purpose of helping them grow in that holiness which made them more like Jesus. Typical is this section of his letter to a layman, February 7, 1867:

My dear and good countryman, our loving God is giving you trials, and I only hope that you are making very good use of this visitation. It does really hurt when the hour of suffering breaks dismally over a whole family, but the consequences are extremely blessed, for you personally and for the children who only in this way can obtain a proper understanding of this vale of tears. Just keep on showing the children, by word and deed, how

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<sup>157</sup> *Summarium*, p. 146.

they can become blessed in time and eternity.<sup>158</sup>

Thirdly, he tried to have his penitents see that everything that happened to them in life was under the special Providence of God. Father Wuest in his deposition notes this. "From my own experience I know of his great confidence in Providence. I know this especially from his advice given me while exercising the office of director."<sup>159</sup>

There was nothing that happened to his penitents that was outside the care and love of God. In today's language we would say that Father Seelos wanted to help them "read the signs of the times." He wanted them to be attentive to see where God was leading them. He saw his function as helping his penitents discern to what aspect of holiness God was inviting them through the events of their lives, through what was taking place, either in outward circumstances or in their inner dispositions and sentiments. As was mentioned above, quoting Father Firlé, he did not, therefore, try to mold everyone into his own pattern, but directed each one very personally "according to his own character and disposition."<sup>160</sup>

When reviewing his correspondence that is devoted to spiritual direction, one is struck by the fact that most of it is with members of the laity. Some, of course, is with religious women, but the greater part is with individuals in secular walks in life. The greater part of this correspondence of spiritual direction is with women, married and single.

This tells us much about him. First that he was convinced that everyone is called to holiness. Father Seelos was not one of those who thought that holiness was the special province of clergy and religious, a notion that during certain eras of the Church seemed to prevail. In this, he was following closely the example of Saint Alphonsus, his spiritual Father, who wrote many of his books for the spiritual nourishment of the laity. Father Seelos knew that holiness was not a closed garden for anyone. Everyone gifted with God's grace was called to holiness of life and to a deeper relationship of love with him. The content of his letters of spiritual direction are a clear indication that he was aware that his correspondents were being called by God to a deeper intimacy with him and that it was his office to help them attain that deeper intimacy.

In the wake of the Second Vatican Council's Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, in particular chapter 5, "The Call of the Whole Church to Holiness" (nos. 39-42), a healthy renewal of spiritual direction is discernible among clergy and laity. Much is being written on

<sup>158</sup> *DocStud*, II/2: 1262: Seelos to Mr. [Ambos], New Orleans, February 7, 1867.

<sup>159</sup> *Summarium*, p. 101.

<sup>160</sup> *Summarium*, p. 63.

the topic and many aspects of the 'ars artium,' as it is called, have been delved into. Courses of instruction and periods of time in houses of retreat offer clergy, religious, and others the opportunity to learn about spiritual direction both for their own spiritual advancement and as an aid in helping others. While there are many models in the long tradition of spiritual direction in the Church, still there is always room for new models and more recent experts in this area of pastoral care. It is not amiss, therefore, to harbor the thought that Father Seelos be one of the models upon whom today's spiritual guides can pattern their own ministry in this field.

The three aspects of his spiritual direction cited above, among other elements that might have been mentioned, can serve as minimal guidelines for directors of the interior life: the Holy Spirit is the first and last best guide in the life of the soul with God; sufferings are necessarily essential elements in the process of purification and, as such, are to be welcomed and not shunned; and every incident in life must be viewed as having a place in God's plan for the individual and as being a salutary component of spiritual maturity, that is, becoming more and more like our Blessed Lord.

#### *Father Seelos As Catechist to the Young*

Many of the witnesses to his apostolic ministry attest to his ability to teach Christian Doctrine to the young. Father Zimmer in his testimony stated:

As a priest, and especially as rector he taught catechism to the boys and girls in school several times each week notwithstanding many other affairs he was burdened with; and he did this also every Sunday for the boys of more mature age. While he was rector, prefect, and professor in Cumberland, he still found time to teach catechism to the boys. And he did this with such simplicity and in such a gentle manner that he won over all hearts to himself.<sup>161</sup>

This was a work that he loved to do and in which he was eminently successful. He had a way with children. He was able to keep their attention and they rejoiced when he came to teach them. Possibly it was his own childlike disposition that enabled him to understand how a child thinks and what will be attractive to him. The aura of reverence that his presence exuded when he spoke of spiritual things must have made unavoidable an awed reception of his words in the very sensitive and impressionable young children. A witness at the New Orleans investigation, Mrs. Caroline Cestac, has this to say about Father Seelos as catechist.

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<sup>161</sup> *Summarium*, pp. 47-48.

Three times a week he came to teach catechism. His explanations were so simple that all the children could easily understand everything; and at the same time, they were so filled with unction that what he said penetrated the heart. He showed the greatest patience with certain boys who were very unruly to whom he had to teach catechism; he never showed the least anger or impatience<sup>162</sup>

Old people, after many decades, could recall clearly his teaching them their catechism. After some fifty years, Mrs. Cecilia Hohenhort recalled the classes of Father Seelos in these words: "His manner of teaching catechism made a profound impression on me, as did his sermons."<sup>163</sup> And Mrs. Carlotta Keupers also after fifty years, noted: "When I was fifteen-years-old, I attended his instructions, which made a greater impression on me than those of the other priests."<sup>164</sup>

Vividly, they could remember, if not almost relive, the delight they felt when he came to them in school or in church, and also, the visible pleasure that he took in teaching them. It was a great joy for him to expound for young minds the truths of the faith that were so dear to him, to prepare the children for First Holy Communion, to teach them how to pray, and to have great devotion to the Mother of God. Father Joseph Wuest in his deposition in Baltimore made these observations:

He took special delight in instructing the ignorant poor and the children, and especially those children who could not go to Catholic schools and whom it was necessary to prepare for Holy Communion. Even adults were attracted to his catechetical instructions because of their simplicity and seriousness.<sup>165</sup>

He loved to be with the innocent ones, who reflected in a minor key, his own tremendous innocence of life. They were not yet tarnished by sin, they were not yet corrupted by the ways and wiles of the world. They were still, in their simple and unassuming way close to God. This is what he found so attractive in them, and to these he wanted to impart the most important truths of his life and, hopefully, of their later lives too. That he spoke to them in their own language and according to their understanding is attested to by the fact that the children behaved during his catechetical instructions and were never a disciplinary problem.

Here before him, in classroom and church, was the future generation of the Catholic Church; to these children, it was important to impart

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<sup>162</sup> *Summarium*, p. 176.

<sup>163</sup> *Summarium*, p. 70.

<sup>164</sup> *Summarium*, p. 82.

<sup>165</sup> *Summarium*, p. 100.



a love of the spiritual world, a love of God and Jesus, and a love for the Church. All this could best be done by having the children love the Church in its minister, in its priest. Father Seelos knew that what he was to them in their younger years, God and the Church would be for many in their later, more mature years. It was important that their experience of spiritual and ecclesiastical things be pleasant and joyful; not harsh and unpleasant.

He was so successful in this work, so beloved by the children, that we can conclude that he had a special gifting of the Holy Spirit for this work. This gifting of the Spirit was something that made him like the Master, who in an infinitely higher degree, loved to be with children, to have them come to him, and by his mere presence to leave an indelible mark upon their minds and hearts, upon their entire lives.

In a significant way, the future of the Church is dependant upon the nature and quality of the catechesis of the young. Not a very pleasant outlook is in prospect for the Church, if the young are not taught, from early years, to have a respect for the Church and to begin to interiorize its teaching; above all, to find in their teachers someone they can love and reverence. This love and reverence will be an unseen deposit left upon them by their teachers which will be with them for life. For catechists, loveable and understanding models are necessary. And again, here, we feel not to have gone beyond the facts to state that Father Seelos was a model for catechists in his day, and is a viable model in our own.

#### *Father Seelos and the Unfortunate and Poor*

Witnesses to his life are unanimous in stating that he had a special care and concern for the poor and the unfortunate. It would not be difficult to put together an anthology of incidents of this nature, where he went out of his way to be helpful and kindly to someone in dire need: giving his gloves to a freezing man in winter, doing the wash of a bedridden mother, dispersing financial help where and when he could. These are but a few of the more visible and concrete examples of his attention to the needs of the poor. Father Joseph Firlé in his testimony remarks: "His generosity toward the poor was admirable. He was suspected of being excessively liberal; the provincial, however, approved his actions."<sup>166</sup>

But, equally important, but less visible, was the respect that he gave to all; especially to those who are usually looked down upon by others. Father Seelos knew that the unfortunate need not only material help and assistance, but they need also to be thought well of, to be respected, and

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<sup>166</sup> *Summarium*, p. 62.

to be treated like other human beings. It is these things that are most often denied them in society.

The poor have always been considered the patrimony of the Church; Father Seelos saw them as his special patrimony, as his special object of affection and care. There was nothing spectacular about the ways he manifested his concern; he did not start immense projects to alleviate the misery of the poor; that was not the manner of his kindness and he did not have that particular gift of the Spirit to organize such programs. Such projects he lefts others, giving them his wholehearted support and encouragement. His help was more modest and humble; it was something of everyday; it helped those who came to him in time of trouble and need looking for someone to give them words of consolation and understanding, and for whatever little material help he was then able to provide for them.

Sometimes his attention to the needs of others was limited almost entirely merely to giving them time. The busy world often has no time for those who are not blessed with material things; those who are poor and ragged and come begging. And that was true, no doubt, in his days as it is in ours. But he managed to find time, busy as he was as pastor of a numerous and growing parish, to be with someone in need. He could not do much materially, but he gave what he could at the moment: some of his time to listen and to be present. Father Niethart in his deposition recalls this incident:

Father Seelos was especially filled with charity toward everyone without exception. On a certain occasion at New Orleans during recreation when I was present one of the confreres scolded Father Seelos severely because he gave time to and treated kindly a certain woman who was pious and filled with zeal but was rather inclined to be eccentric. This confrere actually accused Father Seelos of giving scandal because he lost time with this person. Father Seelos answered quietly and gently that he could not understand how he had done wrong because he had received all with equal affability and patience who happened to come to him and this without distinction. And Father Seelos added that it was wrong to receive some kindly and others rudely, but he could not see that any harm could come from the way he was acting.<sup>167</sup>

It takes a compassionate heart to do this. It takes a heart modeled on the heart of Jesus, who had time for everyone, to do this. There was not something more important to be done just then, leaving no time for

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<sup>167</sup> *Summarium*, p. 106.

the needy. Their needs were the important thing that had to be taken care of at that moment.

Possibly the people of our troubled and sinful world need nothing more than those who have time to be with them and to listen to them. To find someone like that in our too busy and bustling world is a treasure whose price cannot be estimated. Father Seelos is a model for those who are always thinking that the only help that others need and want is to have something done for them, or to have something given to them. In actuality, what many of them want, and possibly the most troubled of them all, is someone who will just be with them and hear them out and offer them an understanding mind and a more understanding heart.

### *Summary*

This appraisal sees the holiness of Father Seelos from the viewpoint of charisms. It is, therefore, an appreciation of the action of the Holy Spirit in the Church as manifesting itself in the personality and apostolate of Father Seelos. Through his joyfulness and humanness, the Holy Spirit brings to our attention that holiness is eminently compatible with happiness and humanity. Further, his special esteem for the virtue of chastity is a gift of the Spirit to a society that has lost its way in its unbounded pursuit of sexual pleasure. His constant eye on eternity, on the blessed life with God, on the resurrection of the body is a Spirit-filled message to a world that has become quite blind to anything beyond its present existence.

The Holy Spirit gifted Father Seelos in special ways in his apostolic ministry. It was a gift of particular grace that he labored so fruitfully in the ordinary parish ministry, the grassroots of the Church, where, among the average person of Catholic faith, it makes its greatest and most important impact. He had a special gift for reconciling penitent sinners to God in the sacrament of penance and for making them experience his Fatherly forgiveness. This same gift enabled him to guide more serious individuals toward a closer union with God as a spiritual director. He was gifted for teaching the young the rudiments of the faith as a catechist. For the downtrodden, the poor, the forgotten he was graced to bring help, consolation, and understanding. These gifts of the Holy Spirit graced Father Seelos during lifetime; they are gifts that still grace the Church today and make present the Spirit's living and continued activity among us.