

## A ‘Father Baker Boy’ Makes Good: Thomas Galvin, C.Ss.R.

Thomas A. Galvin was born in Buffalo in the cathedral parish of St. Joseph, March 10, 1864. His mother, Anne Bagley Galvin, died nearly four years later in 1871. Shortly after her death, Galvin’s father Martin joined the military. He drowned in 1875. As a resident of the St. Joseph Orphan Boys’ Asylum in West Seneca (Lackawanna), New York, Galvin was raised in the faith by Sisters of St. Joseph and it is here that his vocation was fostered. After a period of youthful rambunctiousness, Galvin was placed, according to his own autobiography, “under the personal care, guidance, and holy influence of my best earthly friend, the Rev. Nelson H. Baker.” In fact, for Father Baker’s first Mass in Lackawanna, March 25, 1876—the occasion of his assuming responsibility for the orphanage—Galvin was the acolyte. It was Baker who recommended Galvin to then provincial Father Elias Shauer. By September 1880, Galvin was in the minor seminary at Ilchester and, when the property at North East was secured, began studies at St. Mary’s College. He professed in 1887 and was ordained by Cardinal James Gibbons, December 7, 1892.

Galvin was involved in two distinct and important ministries—the deaf and the apostolate to Black Catholics. Early in his career, he gave missions to the deaf. When Father Henry Schorp inquired of Galvin in 1930 about his recollections on the beginnings of his mission-retreat work with deaf-mutes, he indicated that his memory was poor. Further that Galvin “destroyed all my manuscripts and Mission Lists, etc.” Nevertheless, he did recall his first experience giving such missions. It was to the St. Joseph Institute for Girls in Brooklyn, New York, in 1901. Though he could not be certain, his next mission was on West Biddle Street in Baltimore, likely at the Convent of the Sacred Heart, which ran a school for some two dozen deaf students at the



time. Galvin also lectured widely in cities such as St. Louis, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Erie, and other places.

According to this letter, he began to become interested in the deaf while a confessor in Boston’s Mission Church, which drew several deaf penitents. Over the course of his career, he “heard” thousands of confessions of the deaf and signed scores of retreats both in and out of churches in the northeast quadrant of the United States. Many came from great distances to participate in the renewals. Most importantly, he reached many deaf people who had never had the Gospel preached to them or had it made intelligible to them by a Catholic priest. In 1911, when he returned to the “Mission Helpers” at the Sacred Heart Convent in Baltimore, Cardinal Gibbons assisted in the closing of the mission. The following year he was made superior of Our Lady of Perpetual Help in Brooklyn, though he occasionally preached in sign. Perhaps the largest congregation of the deaf that he reached was in

the Jesuit parish of St. Francis Xavier in New York City in May 1920. On that mission he heard close to a thousand confessions. Afterward, the people presented Galvin with a large silver loving cup, on which was inscribed: “Presented to Rev. Thomas A. Galvin by the Xavier Ephepheta Society, New York, in recognition of his devoted service of twenty-five years in behalf of the Catholic deaf-mutes of the United States, 1895-1920.”

With respect to the “Negro Apostolate,” Galvin himself wrote in December 1932 that “up to date we have in less than a year brought into the Church and baptized 333 Colored Converts of whom 199 have already been confirmed. Of these 333 I myself baptized 285, Father [Nelson] Baker having baptized the other 48 during my stay at Ilchester last year. I am thankful to God that He allowed me the opportunity and just sufficient health to promote His honor and glory and to save the souls of this most abandoned class of people.”

Earlier in 1932, Galvin wrote a report of this apostolate, lauding the efforts of then Monsignor Baker—who was over 90 years old at the time—to assist the hungry masses who lined up outside his door. The destitute were aided without regard to their ethnic, racial, or religious background. Galvin noted the following:

It is generally known that among the cherished desires of Father Baker’s long life was the evangelization of the millions of pagan Negroes in the United States. Providentially, several thousand of these Negroes were brought from the Southern States to work in the ‘Steel Plant’ of Lackawanna. When Father Baker beheld these unfortunate, spiritually-benighted Negroes wandering about town without Baptism, his heart grieved and he felt stricken in conscience that he, the Vicar General of the Diocese, would allow so deplorable a condition to exist at his own door and

nobody attempting anything for the religious amelioration of the poor Colored people. He often spoke to the writer of these lines, asking his advice about plans he was contemplating on behalf of the Negroes.

Galvin’s insight into Baker’s interest in this apostolate was contextualized further in the report, which claimed that “there existed in Father Baker’s household a spirit of hostility and vindictiveness against any project that Father Baker might inaugurate in favor of the ‘Dirty Nigger Bums’ as they were styled. The animosity and inimical sentiments were so intense that life would become nigh intolerable for any visiting Priest who would be induced to take charge of the work.” For Galvin’s part, he became frightened at Baker’s suggestion that he instruct Black Catholic converts. When Bishop William Turner asked Galvin if he would do so, he finally acquiesced. In the civic sphere, too, Galvin encountered numerous instances of blatant bigotry. He relayed one example of a class of neophytes that he instructed. On their way home a dozen were rounded up by a police officer and brought to Court for vagrancy. The judge, in turn, “ordered some to leave town in twenty-four hours; a few were sent to jail.” This police persecution, Galvin lamented, went on for weeks. He likened the ones who were expelled from Lackawanna to “the first Christians fleeing to other countries [who] brought with them the light of faith and scattered the seed of Christianity among their Colored brethren.” Knowing that the catechumens would be harassed or that some sacrilege or affront to the Bishop might occur on the occasion of their confirmation, the converts were spirited secretly to Buffalo by Father Baker, billeted there, and confirmed in May 1932. Galvin went every morning to instruct them and in the afternoons went out to Lackawanna to work with Black Catholics there. Between February 2, 1932 and December 31, 1932, Galvin reported that “over

500 Colored people came to the instructions regularly or irregularly according to the varying circumstances.”

Father Galvin died in Buffalo, September 20, 1933, in his seventieth year. He was buried

in the Redemptorist plot at Calvary Cemetery. His friend, mentor, and brother priest, Monsignor Baker, gave the final absolution. In January 2011 Pope Benedict declared Baker venerable; Galvin awaits his crown. – *PJH*