

Corning-area Catholics back sainthood for Father Baker

By Father Robert F. McNamara
Diocesan Archivist

His many charitable institutions at Lackawanna, New York, won for the late Monsignor Nelson Baker the popular title "Padre of the Poor." Father Baker has now been officially proposed for canonization. Will the pope proclaim him a saint?

He will if Catholics of the Corning area have anything to say about it.

Corningites have a special reason for that hope. Although Monsignor Baker spent most of his priestly career in Lackawanna, he did have one other assignment. In 1881-1882 he served as assistant pastor of St. Mary's Church in Corning. It was a short term, but he was long remembered.

Monsignor Nelson Baker died on July 29, 1936, acclaimed as a holy man and an astounding philanthropist. No fewer than 500,000 people took part in his funeral rites. Fifty-one years later, in 1987, Bishop Edward D. Head of Buffalo got permission from the Holy See to start an inquiry that might lead to Monsignor Baker's beatification and canonization. Traditionally, this process takes many years, but even now Church law says for the former pastor of Lackawanna as "The Servant of God, Nelson Baker."

When this good news was announced, the Catholic priests of Corning were enthusiastic and ready to help in any way they might. Of course, Corning is no longer a one-parish town. St. Mary's Church still holds pride of place, with Father Richard M. Murphy as pastor. But the mother-parish has borne three daughters: St. Patrick's, on the south side, with Father Francis R. Davis, pastor; St. Vincent De Paul, on the north side, with Father Robert C. MacNamara, pastor; and the youngest daughter parish, Immaculate Heart of Mary in Painted Post, with Father Walter L. Wainwright, pastor.

The associate pastor of St. Vincent De Paul, Father Patrick L. Connor, was especially pleased by the opening of the canonization inquiry. He is a former parishioner of Our Lady of Victory, Lackawanna, and attended its parochial school and Father Baker High. Monsignor Baker died a couple of decades before Patrick Connor's time, but his spirit still hovered over the locale.

The Corning priests are now working out the details of their plan to publicize the Baker cause. Choosing as an opening date Father Baker's birthday, February 16, they distributed in all four parishes cards bearing his picture, a brief account of his life and a prayer to be offered for his canonization. Through their Sunday bulletins, they later issued further information about the candidate and the methods of the canonization process.

Corning's Catholics have been invited to sign a petition for sainthood to be submitted to the pope. They have also been urged to pray privately to the deceased monsignor for special favors.

Reports of favors — and even miracles — traceable to his intercession are, naturally, very helpful in documenting the case. Especially important are any letters written by the Servant of God, and the people of Corning who cherish family anecdotes about him have been asked to submit those stories in writing.

Father Murphy also discovered that Nelson Baker baptized 20 people at St. Mary's font, and the committee intends to search out the descendants of these people. Future plans are not yet complete. One possible event would be a novena for the beatification, focusing on the anniversary of his death, July 29. A spring pil-



Father Baker was said to have cured 19-year-old Corning resident Katherine Dwyer of typhoid fever.

grimage to Our Lady of Victory Shrine has been definitely agreed upon, although the date has not yet been determined. Planned as a Marian Year festivity, this bus tour will give Corning Catholics an opportunity both to visit Our Lady's Basilica at Lackawanna and to pray at the tomb of the padre who built it.

If Monsignor Baker should at length be canonized, he will be a typically American saint. His piety towards God and the poor were outstanding, but the means he used to operate his homes came right out of Horatio Alger. All his institutions, including the splendid basilica, he built and maintained at no cost to the Buffalo diocese. They were, and still are, financed by a nationwide campaign of postal solicitation.

Nelson Henry Baker's early business experience doubtless helped him to hit upon this efficient plan of support. Born in Buffalo on February 16, 1841, Baker, the son of a Lutheran father and Irish Catholic mother, attended the Buffalo public schools, served briefly in 1863 as a soldier in the New York State Militia, and then formed a feed and grain partnership with another Buffalonian, Joseph Meyer. But in 1868 he left the firm; Meyer and Baker, and began the course of studies leading to the priesthood.

Illness forced a postponement of his ordination (he was always slight in build and constitutionally frail), but he finally received the order of priesthood on March 19, 1876. He was then 34.

Bishop Stephen V. Ryan of Buffalo named the new priest to the post of assistant pastor of St. Patrick's Church, Limestone Hill (as Lackawanna was then called). The pastor, Father Thomas Hines, was also in charge of St. John's Protectors, a home for destitute Catholic children. The new assistant took readily to this double task, and showed special interest in the protectors.

Father Baker probably regretted having to leave Limestone Hill in 1881. The bishop transferred him in February of that year to the position of assistant to Father Peter Colgan, the pastor of St. Mary's Church in Corning. (Steuben, Schuyler, Chemung, and Tioga Counties remained a part of the Buffalo Diocese until 1896.) However, Baker was reassigned to Lackawanna the following February,



Already considered a "saint" in Lackawanna, Monsignor Nelson Baker is also remembered for his short stay at Corning's St. Mary's Church.

this time to succeed Father Hines as both pastor and manager of the protectors. The bishop had chosen his man well. Although Nelson Baker started off at Lime-

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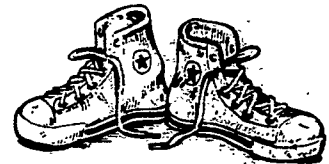
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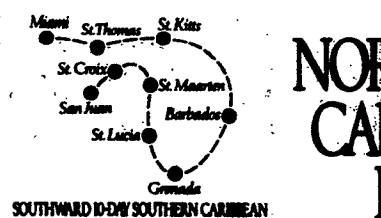
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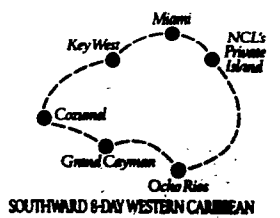
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