

**Brother Columba O'Neill, CSC (1848-1923)**  
**A One-Year Update on His Canonization Process**

**Presented at**  
**The 2022 Holy Cross History Conference**  
**King's College, Wilkes Barre, Pennsylvania**  
**Brother Philip R. Smith, C.S.C., Ed. D.**  
**Archivist/Postulator: Brother Columba O'Neill, C.S.C.**

**On Friday, June 3, 2022**

In April of last year, I delivered a paper on Brother Columba O’Neill, CSC (1848-1923) suggesting that the Congregation might have another saint - at least, one in the making. That paper recounted my discovery in the Midwest Province Archives of three boxes of correspondence written to Brother Columba, and also a number of letters written by Brother Columba and, finally, the chronologizing of these documents that took nearly six months. With the assistance of some Moreau seminarians, we organized the letters beginning with the first one of May, 1907 through the last one in August, 1997.

By April of 2021, I discovered that we held something north of 10,000 items, and now, in June, 2022, somewhere north of 13,000 items. The vast majority of these artifacts is correspondence written to Brother Columba - about 9,000 letters. The current archive Columba-crew of five persons has unearthed enough clues to suggest that perhaps hundreds if not thousands more letters were either not saved or are housed someplace on the Notre Dame campus.

Now, some twelve months later, I prepared a *libellus* – a petition to have Columba declared Servant of God and hand-delivered it to Bishop Kevin Rhoades on October 28, 2021. As of this June, about 1,000 of the Columba-letters have been read, summarized and processed into the document *In Kind Love: A Definitive Chronology of Brother Columba O’Neill, CSC*. This is the “master outline,” if you will, now nearly 100,000 words in length, that I will use, God willing, to write an up-dated biography of the saint-in-waiting. The

only other biography of length, about 40 pages long, was written by Brother Ernest Ryan, CSC (1897-1963) in 1947, *These Two Hearts*.

In early May, 2021, I had collected enough information to begin to wonder why Columba's cause had not been petitioned soon after his death in 1923. In fact, over thirty years after Columba's death, beginning the cause was seriously considered by superior general Father Christopher O'Toole, CSC (1906-1986) at the behest of Brother Sabinas Herbert, CSC (1917-1955), but the funds for such an effort were invested in the causes of Blessed Basile and Saint André. In a May 15, 1954 letter from O'Toole to Herbert, the Brother was assured by the superior general that once Moreau and Bessette were listed among the saints, Brother Columba would be the next candidate. On May 13, 1955 at 7:20 a.m., Brother Sabinas died from a massive heart attack while eating breakfast at Columba Hall. He was 38 years old, and all things related to Brother Columba, including the flourishing Apostolate of Brother Columba, were shelved, literally, in the archives, until I discovered them in 2021.

In May, 2021, I emailed the Fort Wayne-South Bend chancery and asked if I could secure an appointment with the bishop to share with him my findings. A few days later, the bishop's secretary called me to set up a visit from the bishop to the archives for June 10, 2021. Bishop Rhoades arrived at 2:30 p.m. and did not leave me until three hours later – only getting into his car, once I had taken him to Holy Cross Cemetery to view Columba's grave. As we strolled through a very humid cemetery, he would stop at several graves

saying, “Tell me about Brother Willibrord,” or about Brother Eustachius or a John Climacus and other Brothers whose names had been assigned to them from the annals of the Roman martyrology. To say that the bishop was interested is to minimize his enthusiasm for Brother Columba’s wonderful life and ministry. It was on June 14, 2021, that I received a letter from Bishop Rhoades supporting my continuing work and his unofficial “mandate” to begin composing a *libellus* to begin the formal process toward canonization with a first designation of Brother Columba as Servant of God.

On June 23, 2021, I began writing the first of many “Columba Notes” for the *Midwest Midweek Brothers Newsletter*. These provided detailed information on Brother Columba’s life at Notre Dame, some descriptions of “favors received” and the on-going process of moving his cause toward Servant of God status. These articles were discontinued in late November, 2021, after I presented the *libellus* to the bishop.

On June 28, 2021, I was contacted by Fort Wayne-South Bend diocesan canonist Anne Therese Stephens. She asked me three questions: in what year did Brother Columba die – 1923; where did he die – in the infirmary of the Community House on the campus of the University of Notre Dame; and did he die a martyr – not in the physical sense. To these answers, she responded that she would get back to me as this assignment would be the first time she would be involved in a cause for canonization.

By June 30, 2021, I had completed a search through all of the Columba correspondence to cull out letters written by persons living in Keokuk, Iowa, between 1912 and 1963. Around 1880, some of Columba's immediate relatives settled in Keokuk: specifically, Minerva (Minnie) L. Schwiete, the sister of Elizabeth Schwiete, Columba's younger brother Dennis O'Neill's wife; Elizabeth McNamara nee O'Neill, Columba's older sister; and Lyda O'Neill, one of Dennis's four children. The fourth Keokuk resident of interest is Father George G. Giglinger (1868-1957), the pastor of St. Mary's Parish in Keokuk from 1906-1926. These four persons, along with a Mrs. Michael Mack of Connerton, Pennsylvania, carried on extensive correspondence with Brother Columba – in total, about 140 letters between 1912 – 1923. These letters provide a great deal of hagiographical and biographical information. Seven additional letters written by persons, who graphically recounted their “cures” by Brother Columba, provided the detail for the petition to prove that Brother Columba lived the evangelical counsels - poverty, chastity and obedience - and the theological virtues – faith, hope and charity - to a “heroic degree”.

In an effort to learn more about Columba's family and early years in Mackeysburg, Pennsylvania, at the suggestion of Brother George Klawitter, CSC, I asked former Holy Cross Brother, James Pritchett of Monroe, Michigan to assist and to create a family tree for Brother Columba. Today, South Bend native, Mrs. Erin Ryal assists with this research that has added a great amount of new flash and bone to the O'Neill genealogy.

On July 21, 2021, Mrs. Deborah Buzzard, assistant archivist for the US Province of Priests and Brothers contacted me: “we have several drop-files with Brother Columba letters and items in them.” On July 27, 2021, I visited the US Province archive on the campus of the University of Notre Dame, and viewed a number of Columba-items: eighty-six Sacred Heart badges made by Columba, candles that were burned in his infirmary room in the Community House as he was dying, his skull cap, a seven-decade rosary, two of his handkerchiefs embroidered with the laundry number J227 and a Brother Columba poster created by Brother Sabinas.

Also, on July 21, 2021, I received from canonist Stephens, “Explanation of the Diocesan Phase Initiating Cause for the Canonization of Brother Columba O’Neill.” As I assumed, this document describes a very time-intensive “gathering of data” to prove “a life lived with heroic virtue.” I was well along with the composing of the libellus by this time and satisfied that I had anticipated responses to the information she provided in the document.

When I decided to tackle the Columba letters in February of 2021, I knew I needed the assistance of additional workers. In was on July 27, 2021, I hired Holy Cross College senior, Dane Litchfield, for part-time work in the archives. The grandnephew of Brother Theophane Schmidt, CSC (1911-1963), he had contacted me in the early part of 2021 for information on his great uncle. Over the last twelve months, he has worked to digitize, read and summarize about 600 letters written by religious sisters to Brother Columba. We have many

letters from Sisters of the Holy Cross. The award for continuous correspondence, twelve letters, is held currently by Sister Clementina (Bridget) Hasenbehler, CSC (1877-1961). Two other Holy Cross Sisters, Severina (Maryanna) Hosinska, CSC (1876-1962), the sister of Brother Peter Clever Hosinski, CSC (1872-1958) and Sister Maria Louisa (Josefina) Cardenas, CSC (1890-1972) wrote letters attesting that Columba cured both sets of their parents of Spanish Influenza. Sister Severina wrote that both parents were in a coma in a South Bend hospital when Columba visited them with the Sacred Heart badge. The next day, they were conscious and both lived to tell about the “favors received”.

On July 28, 2021, I made a 30-minute presentation to provincial Father Bill Lies, CSC of the US Province of Priests and Brothers about my work. He was very receptive and set up a meeting for me with Fr. Austin Collins, CSC, Vice President for Mission Engagement at the University of Notre Dame and his assistant Mr. Charles Lamphier. Lies also agreed to reach out to Father Wilfred Raymond, the president of the Family Rosary Movement, the petitioners for the cause of Venerable Father Patrick Payton, CSC (1909-1992) regarding moving someone from Servant of God to the Venerable stage. Later in the day, I received an email from Chuck Lamphier, setting up an appointment for August 17 at 2:00 p.m. in 408 Main Building. In anticipation of this first get-together, I prepared a list of bullet points of events and Columba-data for their review.

August, 2021 became filled with significant progress. On August 7, Brother Robert Mosher, CSC, (b. 1928) first in rank in the Midwest Province of Brothers was given the *libellus* to read. He entered Holy Cross in 1948, taking first vows in 1949. Why, he asked, had he not known anything about the specifics of Brother Columba and “his amazing cures through his intercession to the Sacred Heart?” I could provide no adequate response other than Moreau and Bessette claimed all the attention.

On August 9, 2021, St. Andre Bessette’s birthday, I received an email from canonist Stephens. “I read through the letters from Brother Columba as well as the document you originally sent. In my opinion, it is worth initiating his cause for canonization. I base this opinion on the evidence which you have provided, namely, the innumerable successes of Brother Columba’s intercessory prayer both during his lifetime and after his death.”

On August 13, 2021, Stephens requested that I submit three mandates to Bishop Rhoades: one for the naming of the petitioner, at that time (the Congregation of Holy Cross, Midwest Province of Brothers); one for the appointment of the postulator (Brother Philip Smith, CSC); and one to petition for Servant of God status for Brother Columba.

The project was moving forward with much more speed than I initially anticipated. My goal was to have the Servant of God petition granted by Bishop Rhoades on November 20, 2021, the 98<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Brother Columba’s death.



On August 16, I finished the two mandates for petitioner and postulator and sent the drafts to canonist Stephens and asked if she thought that November 20, 2021 would be an appropriate date for the bishop to proclaim by decree the cause? She replied in the affirmative. That assumption would prove to be very incorrect because of Stephens's inexperience with the ways of the Church regarding saints, especially those saints-to-be who are born in the United States.

On August 17, 2021, I met with Father Austin Collins and Charles Lamphier at 11:00 a.m. The meeting was a positive one with interest expressed by both men for having the University of Notre Dame "participate" in Brother Columba's cause. Collins asked me to develop a set of bullet points for review by university president Father John Jenkin's, CSC.

On Saturday, September 11, 2021, I made a presentation to the Midwest Province Provincial Council regarding my work and received their unanimous support to move forward with it.

On September 15, 2021, after dinner with Chicago friends Craig and Kelly Dean, I brought them to the archives and introduced them to the work on Brother Columba. Kelly Dean has a devotion to the Sacred Heart. It was then that they told me about Holy Trinity High School sophomore Pablo Montezuma, who was in a coma as the result of a bicycle accident. Kelly asked to take a badge and the novena prayers for the boy's mother. Some days later, she reported that when the mother placed the badge to the boy's forehead, he opened his eyes. I have had no further reports.

On September 30, 2021, all of the components of the 17-page *libellus* with 500 pages of illustrative data was completed and scanned into the Cloud. With the *libellus* and its proofs completed, I was ready to deliver them to Bishop Rhoades, and on October 4, I requested a meeting with the bishop in Fort Wayne.

It was on October 7, 2021, that I received a bit of a curve ball from the canonist who asked for proof of Brother Columba's confirmation which we do not have. I sent a request to the Archdiocese of Philadelphia archive for some indication that John O'Neill had been confirmed. I have yet to hear anything, but there is the possibility that Columba was confirmed on the same day he was baptized *sub conditione* because, apparently, the baptizing priest, M. Malone, did not expect him to live beyond a few days because of his foot deformity.

On October 12, 2021, canonist Stephens signed off on the *libellus*, and she said that Matthew, the bishop's secretary, "will contact you with the date you can meet with Bishop Rhoades." On October 16, the bishop's secretary booked and confirmed November 2, 2021 as the time to present the bishop with the *libellus*.

On October 26, 2021, the canon lawyer emailed:

Here is the process going forward. Upon receiving the petition, the Bishop will read through the documents and will prayerfully discern whether the criteria necessary for accepting the petition are present. He has the option either to accept the petitioner or reject it. He would do so by means of a decree with the reasons noted in the decree. Then after he has accepted it, he has three consultations to make: 1) with the regional bishops 2)

announcement to the public at large 3) consultation with the Congregation for the Cause of Saints in Rome. These consultations are directed to take place after he has accepted the petition. Its not clear to me what happens if one of these consultations turns up opposing information—I would suspect that you as postulator would do what you can to explain what is brought up in opposition.

Then the formal diocesan inquiry begins. Bishop will appoint people to be the three main “players” namely, the delegate, the promoter of justice, and the notary. These officials will work with what you have submitted and will be in touch with you with any questions. It’s a similar process of investigation to a marriage nullity case. It is a lengthy process with various steps. However, once the Bishop accepts the petition by means of decree, Brother Columba will officially bear the title of “Servant of God”. Thus, you would be able to call Brother Columba, Servant of God in all your publications, writings, etc.

On October 26, 2021, I received a phone call from the Bishop’s office informing me that I would present the *libellus* to Bishop Rhoades on Thursday, October 28, 2021, not November 2, 2021, at the Motherhouse of the Sisters of Saint Francis of Perpetual Adoration in Mishawaka, Indiana. At 3:00 p.m., I delivered the *libellus* to Bishop Rhoades, and his response was most positive. We talked for nearly two hours, and I felt certain he would move quickly on a formal decree because, as I walked down the steps to leave, he yelled after me, “You will have my decision shortly.” The word *shortly* needs to be defined according to the Roman Magisterium’s sense of timeliness - anybody’s guess!

On Friday, October 29, 2021, first assistant Superior General, Brother Paul Bednarczyk, CSC invited provincial Brother Kenneth Haders, CSC, “to make a proposal to open Brother Columba’s cause for canonization,” and “to prepare a presentation for the Council of the Congregation in February of 2022.

On November 4, 2021, Brother James Kane, CSC of the Moreau Province began work in the archives on Brother Columba. A very detailed, nose-to-the-grindstone worker, Brother James has personally summarized over 300 of Columba's letters and developed a spreadsheet containing data on all items that have been processed beginning with the year 1848 and now through the end of 1916.

On January 17, 2022, Father Bill Lies requested that the US Province of Priests and Brothers become co-petitioners with the Midwest Province of Brothers supporting the cause. On that evening, Bishop Rhoades made a visit to Moreau Seminary for dinner and to give a reflection on the virtue of humility to the seminarians. I was told the day after his presentation that during his comments, he specifically referenced Brother Columba and his cause and used my name as its promoter. Moreover, he told the assembled that a positive decision would be made in a "few weeks." I was then and I am still perplexed by his public statements as I had heard nothing from the bishop or the canon lawyer since October 28, 2021 about any progress with the *libellus*.

On February 14, 2022, the request for co-province petitioners was formally made to the members of the Council of the Congregation of Holy Cross. On February 18, a copy of an email was received from superior general Father Robert Epping, CSC. It was addressed to Bishop Kevin Rhoades and copied to Brother Ken Haders and Father Bill Lies.

Bishop Rhoades, you have been immersed more than I have in the progress from discovery of boxes of letters to and from Bro. Columba O'Neill, C.S.C. and the desire of the Midwest Province to promote his eventual canonization. With the help of your canonist,

it was finally determined that I needed to give my blessing to the effort. Just before the Council of the Congregation, I had a meeting of the General Council and according to what I was told I had to have the consent of the Council to support this project. Now that I have it, I am pleased to support the efforts that will go into the process of examining his life and holiness to be able to propose his life as a model of holiness for others to live similarly. Like St. Brother Andre, Bro Columba can be an example for us to know how to live simply and bear the Cross our Only Hope.

With Father Epping's words to Bishop Rhoades this report on the progress for Brother Columba's cause formally ends. The on-going, Monday through Friday work of the archive staff continues as we chronicle, read, summarize and assess the Columba papers. At our current pace, we will continue to process about 125 documents each week, perhaps through 2025.

Brother Columba O'Neill is a saint because he was meek and humble of heart: a common man who lived his life in an uncommon and heroic manner. There is clear evidence provided in hundreds of letters that many suffering persons put their faith in him and were provided with solace. His prayers and personal faith in Mary Immaculate to intercede to the Sacred Heart of her Son aptly allow him to be known as the Divine Healer and the Miracle Man of Notre Dame.