

Servant of God Brother Columba O'Neill, CSC (1848-1923)

The Binding Up of Lepers

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On August 14, 1876, when Brother Columba O'Neill, CSC was 28 years old, he professed final vows and added the fourth vow to "go anywhere in the world the Superior General pleases to send me." In Br. Ernest Ryan's 55-page biography of Br. Columba, *These Two Hearts*, he writes: "He had finally attained the greatest desire of his heart. He immediately volunteered to go to India and/or Molokai to help Father Damien in the magnificent work among the lepers." (26) I have no idea what *immediately* means, but Br. Columba's desire to serve in India or Molokai was never realized, yet his desire to do so continued throughout the end of the nineteenth century and into the early years of the twentieth.

Immediately after Br. Columba's final profession, he spent a few weeks in the shoe shop located in the Manual Labor School at Notre Dame, and then received an assignment to work as a cobbler and prefect at St. Joseph Orphan Asylum in Lafayette, Indiana. In 1875, Bishop Joseph Dwenger, who succeeded Bishop John Luers, the founder of the orphanage, moved the asylum from Rensselaer, Indiana to Lafayette. In February of 1876, Dwenger wrote a letter to Holy Cross Provincial Father Alexis Granger, reminding him that Father Edward Sorin promised to "send Brothers to teach and superintend the orphans."¹ The first two brothers sent to the orphanage were shoe makers Columba O'Neill and Raymond Guilfoyle. Br. Raymond was appointed the

¹ Cullen, Br. Franklin, CSC, "Holy Cross on the Wabash, Lafayette, IN", 1991 an unrepresented paper written for the Holy Cross History Association.

director and superior, and Br. Benoit Crowe joined the two brothers in January of 1877 to pick up perfecting duties. After nine years at the orphanage, Br. Columba was recalled to Notre Dame in 1886 and would remain there for the remainder of his life.

From 1890 through October of 1893, along with his obedience as the university cobbler and shoemaker, Br. Columba was assigned to be the night nurse for the ailing Fr. Sorin. Soon after Sorin's death on October 31, 1893, and during the early days of Fr. Gilbert Francais's term as superior general, Francais received a letter signed by three brothers from Notre Dame: Columba, Denis and Felix. Their letter has yet to surface, but Francais responded to it on January 17, 1894 while living at Neuilly sur Seine in France.

My very dear Brothers,

I am happy that you are offering yourselves for the Bengal missions. There is much good to be done there and even greater sacrifices to be made. I just sent two of our French priests there. Consequently, we have to wait before we prepare for another departure. Moreover, I will need to hear from Father Corby, your priest provincial, and the bishop. While waiting, develop in yourselves a spirit of piety and a spirit of sacrifice without which one can do nothing, neither solid nor big, nor truly profitable for the good of souls. With my very dear affection in Our Lord.

Brothers Denis (William) O’Kelly and Felix must have been satisfied with the superior general’s response as there is nothing to be found that suggests that they requested permission from Fr. Corby to go to Bengal. Brother Denis worked at St. Joseph Farm driving the milk wagon and died at Notre Dame in 1907. The *General Matricule* lists nine brothers named Felix, but it is uncertain which of them added his name to the letter. Brother Columba, on the other hand, did not give up his desire to work in Bengal or with Fr. Damian. Moreover, it was not uncommon for Br. Columba to go directly to the superior general for a permission rather than through his provincial.

On September 2, 1894 an article appeared in the New York Time: “LOUISIANA LEPPER BOARD ORGANIZED; Plans to Stamp Out the Disease and to Locate a Hospital”. This article describes the need to remove the scores of lepers “living in secluded rooms in garrets, hidden through the fear of their relatives that they will be sent to the pesthole that now serves as a retreat for leprosy patients.” The desire was to house these lepers in a hospital designed to meet their needs. Dr. Isadore Dyer was elected the first president of the proposed hospital and a committee was formed to select a site somewhere near New Orleans.

The article goes on to describe the need for such an asylum because it was estimated that there were more lepers in Louisiana (about 500 at the time) than in all other States and Territories. This newly formed board was poised to do battle with New Orleans’s Mayor John Fitzpatrick from the outset of the

project. Fitzpatrick was being paid \$25 per month for each leper patient entrusted to him, and the newly formed board wanted the mayor to allocate that money for the building and the maintenance of the new hospital. The mayor went on record that if he lost the money, “he would decline to permit any of the appropriation to be used for their care.” This forced the board to propose other sites than New Orleans for the establishment of the hospital, yet “the indignation of the residents will probably make the board adhere to the determination to locate in New Orleans.” Indeed, there was an outcry of opposition from residents in every city, town or hamlet that were being considered as possible sites.

In 1890, four years before the above plan was designed, the New Orleans *Daily Picayune* published an exposé “creating an outcry in New Orleans” among the residents to move the pest houses for lepers outside the city limits. Most of the general population believed that leprosy was so contagious that anywhere within the state of Louisiana might be too close for comfort.

In 1892, the Louisiana State Legislature passed Act 85. It states “that persons diagnosed with leprosy in the state are to be quarantined to a selected location.” And in 1894, the State Legislature passed Act 80 establishing the creation of a Board to oversee and run the future hospital appointing Dr. Isadore Dyer as its first president. It was in 1896, after signing a contract with the State of Louisiana, that four Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul

from Emmitsburg, Maryland arrived in April to provide care for the 37 patients at the Louisiana Leper Home under the leadership of Sister Beatrice Hart.

On the 1850 US census leprosy was listed as a cause of death in the US for the first time, and the four recorded cases occurred in Louisiana. In the 1880s, the incidence rate of leprosy in Louisiana was 4.5 per 100,000 people. By the 1890s, most accepted that leprosy existed in Louisiana, that no one knew how the disease was transmitted, and that there was no cure. The Louisiana Lepers Home was opened in 1894 in Carville, Louisiana with the first seven patients coming from New Orleans and arriving on December 1, 1894. Due to several name changes over the years, the treatment center was frequently referred to as *Carville* because of its location. The goal of this treatment center was to provide a place for patients to be isolated and treated humanely.

There is nothing in the Columba letters and documents that indicates how Br. Columba discovered the information about lepers in New Orleans. The best bet is that he heard about it from one of the brothers working at Holy Cross High School in New Orleans or from a brother canvasser for *Ave Maria Magazine*. Whatever the means of obtaining the information, Br. Columba made a second appeal to Father Francais to be sent to work with Fr. Damian before he focused his energy on working with lepers in New Orleans.

Br. Columba wrote an undated letter to Fr. Francais sometime after he and his two friends received the superior general's January 17, 1894 letter

denying permission to go to Bengal. I will read the entire letter. Remember that Br. Columba had perhaps a fourth-grade education and that the contents are written in thought-clusters, with no punctuation and are rife with misspellings. Br. Columba, however, composes prose in a bold hand that is orchestrated to motivate his superior general to see things under a new light.

Very Rev. Father General

I read in one of the papers that Brother Joshup [sic] at lepers wanted some help very much / he has to tie up from 100 to 150 sores every day and lots of other work to [sic] / I could tie up sores for the lepers very easy with God's help / Something tells me that you will let me go this time. I humble [sic] ask you to let me go. I spoke to the preacher about is [it] and he told me to ask you again. I did not want to say anything about it be that I gave my name for India. I would rather go to the lepers. I think I am most suited for it.

Use your own judgement. I mean to [do] God's will.

The Brother Joshup referred to is Saint Damian of Molokai. He was baptized Jozef De Veuster. When Jozef entered the novitiate of the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary in 1858, he took the religious name of Damien. Secondly, the business of "tying up sores" was done in the nineteenth century to mask the disfigurement of the disease and was also thought to prevent its spreading. Those lepers not confined in a colony were also made to announce their presence with the ring of a bell. Thirdly, "I spoke to the preacher about this" must be a reference to Father Corby. I have no idea why he uses the title

preacher, and he clearly writes PREACHER, and not Corby's name. *Preacher* might also be one of Br. Columba's creative spellings for *provincial*. No matter, Br. Columba is told by the *preacher* to ask again for permission. Although "I gave my name for India", Columba now feels that he can better serve as a missionary working with Fr. Damien "with God's help". I have yet to find the response to Br. Columba from Fr. Francais, but I am certain that he was, once again, denied permission.

Sometime after September 2, 1894 and prior to February 1, 1895, Br. Columba wrote a letter to Dr. H. J. Scherck, the secretary of the board for the proposed New Orleans leprosarium. Scherck responded on February 7, 1895 to Columba's request to minister at the leprosarium. "We will be glad to have you and will give you a reasonable salary for nursing those unfortunate people. Ask your superior for permission and you can show him this [the letter] as evidence of the same." Once again, Br. Columba is stopped at the boarder of his desire with the need to get permission from a superior. I assume that in the initial letter he wrote to Scherck seeking employment, he mentioned that whatever the opportunity for service offered, he would need to clear it with Frs. Corby and Francais.

Although there might have been another letter from Br. Columba soon after his response from Scherck, the next Br. Columba letter in the collection is dated September 9, 1895, seven months after Dr. Scherck's February letter, and it is addressed to Rev. Father. This letter, I believe is written to Father Corby although his name is not mentioned. Whenever Br. Columba addressed

the superior general, he used the salutation Very Rev. Father General. The letter is again in Columba's bold handwriting, this time on University of Notre Dame letterhead. The letter is brief and contains no punctuation.

Rev. Father

Before / I asked you the last time [unsure of the date] / I wrote to the Board of Health [New Orleans] to know if they would take me in case you would leave me go / now here is the ansor [sic] [Feb. 7 letter] I hope you won't refuse me. I mean to be obedient all the time. I use an honest means to get there / if possible it may be the will of God.

Your son in Jesus Christ.

When Columba writes "now here the answer", it might mean that he sent along Dr. Scherck's letter for Fr. Corby to read for himself. If Fr. Corby responded to this letter in writing, I have not found it. More likely, he met with Br. Columba and discussed the offer. For Br. Columba to write to his provincial on university letterhead is a clear indication of the serious nature of the request because "I hope you won't refuse me." The "honest means to get there" certainly has something to do with the cost of travel and board along the way.

Br. Columba wrote to Dr. Scherck on September 21, 1895 and received a response on September 29, 1895.

Brother Columba

University of Notre Dame

Dear Sir: -

Your favor of the 21st instant received, and in reply to you [I] will say, and this can be used also by you as a receipt to your superiors to allow you to come. We offer you the position in our institution as nurse and assistant superintendent, and should you be willing to come, we will pay your expenses down, and do all in our power to make your position as satisfactory as possible.

Very truly yours,

Dr. H.J. Scherck, MD

This response is remarkable because Br. Columba is offered far more than the opportunity to be a nurse: he also is offered the position of assistant superintendent! Certainly, when Dr. Scherck received Br. Columba's first inquiry about work at the leprosarium, he, and perhaps others, had to realize that he was a man of little to no formal education. He clearly has an inability to write a letter in standard English.

I have no hard evidence for what I will now suggest. There is the possibility that the average lay men and women were not lining up for jobs with lepers because of what was thought to be the level of contagion. In the late 1890s, medical professionals were still attempting to discover the cause and the means of transmission. Persons afflicted with leprosy often became hideously disfigured. Who would want to work closely with such outcasts? Br. Columba is willing to take that risk "with God's help". But he does not take the job. When God closes one door, often he opens another. Recall that the first four employees

at the leper hospital were Daughters of Charity who signed a contract in 1896 to take charge of 37 patients. These women were a blessing because, in spite of the risks, it was their vocation, so to speak, to put themselves in harm's way because of their commitment to work with God's outcasts.

One might think that the matter of Br. Columba's desire for missionary work is now ended because he fought the good fight to no avail; it is time to move on with shoes and souls to save at Notre Dame. Not so.

There is one last appeal to become an active missionary. Sometime in early October of 1917, Br. Columba writes to Fr. Francais indicating interest in the missions - once again in Bengal. Fr. Francais drops a postcard into campus mail with his response. Both men are 69 years old and Francais is blind in one eye.

Dear Brother Columba, it has been a joy for me to read your letter—I understand and share your feelings for Bengal Missions—If I was younger, I would like too to be a missionary. Now both for you and for me it is too late. But just as you do, we can pray and help our confreres in many ways, according to our means. Yes indeed, you may send to the bishop the money you are speaking of in your letters—I recommend myself to your prayers and I am sincerely yours in X.”

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