

Printed - 5/30/2011
(2011-7)

BROTHER COLUMBA O'NEILL, CSC
Fr. John VandenBossche, CSC. 2011

Bro Columba, John O'Neill, the Miracle Worker of Notre Dame, was born the fifth day of November 5, 1848, in McKeesburg, Pa. He was the fifth child of Ellen and Michael O'Neill, both uneducated but faithful Catholics... The father was a coal miner. Brother Columba, crippled from birth, said of his father that he was very kind to all the children, but "as strict as the blazes; he whipped us for every little thing we did." In his youth brother did not attend school for any length of time for it was necessary to work and help support the family, and the school was too far away to permit regular attendance. He did not like to attend school, anyway, and would run off every chance that he had. "If any body ever got licked in school" he said, "I did because I was very dull. In some ways I was sharp. No one was ever able to pull the wool over my eyes". None of the children went to school much and he did not go very long on account of having to work picking slate from the coal. The pay was merely \$1.50 a week—yet it helped keep the family.

At fourteen years of age, his parents sent him to Minersville, Pa to learn the trade of shoe making, an interesting trade for a man with a crippled foot. He lived and worked with the shoemaker in that town for about two years. Then he began to travel about the little mining towns practicing his trade. During all this time he felt that he had a vocation. He did not know what a vocation meant, but he did not feel satisfied in the world and felt some deeper call sounding in his soul. This he felt more keenly whenever he would pass nuns on the street: he would say to himself, "that is what I should be." This internal longing for a something more lasting than the world, dawned on him at about the age of fifteen and was something urging him for twelve years before he entered the religious life. Never after experiencing this craving for religious solitude did brother feel satisfied in the world.

Until his twentieth year he traveled about the little mining towns near his home practicing his trade. Then, urged on to see the country, or better, as he said himself "just for fun", he set out in company with another shoe maker, Ted Mangan, for Denver, Colorado. On the way they stopped in St. Louis, "it was a long trip". After a couple days they went on to Denver where they separated. Brother remained in Denver about a year working at his trade. The money he earned he sent home to his parents. While he was in Denver he went to Mass every day at six am before going to work. He said, "in those days, one who did that was counted very pious. I was the only layman that you could find in the church". At that early period, 1860, frequent communion was unheard of. On Sundays, instead of going out to any of the amusements, he used to go to church and just sit there and pray till he grew tired.

From Denver Brother went to California for the purpose of joining some community of Brothers. On the way to San Francisco, he stopped over here and there to cover his travel expenses, by practicing his trade. Providence was guiding him in all his travels, for when he arrived at San Francisco, he stayed with a family who had two boys attending a Franciscan College. He asked these boys if they had any shoemakers among the religious at the college. When they told him no, he knew that was not the place for him. Providence had chosen him for Holy Cross.

Brother learned about Notre Dame before going to California from a man named Jhonnie O'Brien, who had been an apprentice in the shoemaker's trade at the college. When Brother became dissatisfied in California, he returned to Denver. It was with the intention of coming to Notre Dame to find out if it was the community he had been seeking for such a long time.

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Before coming to Notre Dame, he wrote to Fr. Louage, the novice master, to seek entrance and was accepted. He left Denver on July 6, 1874, twenty-six years old, and entered the novitiate on July 9. He had felt all the time while in the world that it was no place for him; that he should enter religion and work for God and save his soul. At the time brother arrived at Notre Dame, Fr. Louage was in Europe. Brother lived in the novitiate as a postulant until Fr. Louage returned. He started his retreat on September 1, and received the habit on the eighth.

During his novitiate he worked in the shoe shop walking back and forth each day. He had a bad limp, and it was not easy to walk. After completing his year of Novitiate he made temporary profession for one year. He offered himself to the provincial for Bengal and for the lepers of Molokai, but Fr. Granger, the provincial would not let him go. After one year of temporary vows, brother made final vows, living in the professed house, now Columba Hall.

In 1876 he was given the obedience of shoe repairer, prefect and general repair man at St Josephs Orphan Asylum at Lafayette, Indiana. The institution was then in charge of the Brothers and Sisters of Holy Cross. When he went there, Fr. Hartman, a secular priest was chaplain. Later Fr. John Guendling was appointed chaplain. Two other brothers, Peter and Raymond, were sent with Brother Columba to open the asylum. For seven years he was stationed there. He used Lourdes water on the sick boys and says that he had some cures. During the winter of his last year in Lafayette, he nursed a number of boys with flu. He caught the flu and had such a severe case he was returned to Notre Dame.. At Notre Dame he was made the manager of the shoe store and worked in the infirmary in the evening nursing the aged and the sick including Fr. Sorin. (See Bro. Aidan and Fr. O'Donnell, CSC)

DEVOTION TO THE SACRED HEART.

For some reason, now unknown:: "During the last two years of the life of Rev. Edward Sorin, Brother Columba was his personal attendant. After the death of Father Sorin in 1893, he returned to his duties at the College shoe store where he continued until 1920. One day he arrived at work with a small Sacred Heart statue. A few days later he brought a box of candles. He made the little building a shrine to the Sacred Heart. There he made and distributed Sacred Heart badges and Immaculate Heart of Mary badges to many. People by the hundreds came to visit him with their sick and to beg his prayers. "Brother Columba received much acclaim through his devotion to the Sacred Heart. He was known by many as the 'Divine Healer' and as the 'Miracle Man of Notre Dame'. He, however, never claimed any credit for cures which may have occurred and no official investigation was ever made of such cures." See Fr. Steiner

After Fr. Sorin died and he was managing the shoe store, again. Fr. Wm. Corby, Provincial decided that Brother should go to Chicago to the then famous surgeon, Dr. Senn, to have something done to his foot. In obedience Brother went, but dreaded the expense to the community. The operation was successful and he walked with only a little limp. (See Bro. Ernest, pg. 28)

Concerning the devotion to the Sacred Heart, Fr. Sorin wrote in 1885, "No practice has affected us more sensibly than that of our venerated friend, the Rev. F. Ramiere, S. J. the pious founder of the Apostleship of Prayer—an Association we were the first to introduce, at his request, in this country, as the first volumes of the *Ave Maria* clearly and simply show.

(2) Circular Letters. Fr. E. Sorin.

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If he (Bro. Columba) did not actually initiate The Apostleship of Prayer at Notre Dame, he strongly and actively promoted devotion to the Sacred Heart, a devotion that thirty-three years ago had not the general favor it has now. His efforts were crowned with a peculiar success. He lived to see, as he said only a few days ago on his deathbed, he lived to see all Notre Dame a shrine to the Sacred Heart. (3) Cir. Let. Rev. Charles O'Donnell CSC

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"Brother Columba first attracted attention some twenty-five years ago when he began actively to promote devotion to the Sacred Heart. It gradually became noised abroad that the prayers of this simple shoemaker were very efficacious and soon people of all kinds and of all classes of society came to him and asked for his prayers. Mostly there were cases of physical ailment and distress. They received sympathy and wise advice, together with the promise of prayers." (4) See Bro. Aidan's Abstracts.

Bro Columba first promoted the League of the Sacred Heart in 1890. He wrote: "During 31 years I promoted the Sacred Heart devotion. Over the years I made some 30,000 badges of the Heart of Mary, then I prayed to the Sacred Heart. If money was sent to me, I used it to promote the devotion.....I continued working for 20 years before a cure was attributed to the devotion.. I started the First Friday's with the students twenty years ago. At this time, cures are announced 2 or 3 a day. Some 350 cures are written up in a box in my shop." Daily, Oct 4, 1916

In another article written in 1923, "Bro Columba has but a few days more to live. He is slowly passing away in his humble room at the Community House, where he is cared for in his last hours by the tender hands of his fellow Religious. (Daily is the University newspaper.) The clipping states: "In these days when the whole country is singing the praise of the Notre Dame team, when the student body is liable to feel that this same team exemplifies all that is best and noblest in the University, a great and good service can be done by showing the students and the nation that this institution is built on a more solid foundation, a foundation of sacrifice, devotion, charity to fellow men and an undying love of Almighty God."

SOME STORIES TO UNDERSTAND BRO. COLUMBA.

A clipping written after his death stated, "Thousands of homes in this fair land will join in mourning the departure of the saintly Brother. He has made many trips to the Middle West carrying his message of love and hope. Hundreds and thousands have found him here in his humble retreat and besought his prayers for cures of their maladies, spiritual and physical and other thousands have sent their letters asking for his Sacred Heart badges and asking him to remember their petitions in his prayers. Dozens of letters are arriving each day, and it was just recently that a lady called on him, having traveled here from New York.

"When all is summed up and you are looking for the big thing for this life, the work that he was sent to perform, just look around you. It is only a few years back when about the only outward devotion manifested at Notre Dame to the Sacred Heart was a little red light burning before the statue in the shoe shop. This holy soul kept talking this devotion, kept handing out Sacred Heart leaflets, kept distributing his badges until this has now become one of the favorite devotions of the Congregation and of the student boys.

"Brother Columba has about finished the work given him to perform, the Sacred Heart has been most gracious to him, and it only remains for us to reap the fruits of his labors. He has sown the seed, and who can say what the harvest will be? He was worked wonders in this weary world, but who can foretell what the increase will be when he is united in glory with the Sacred Heart?

Brother was a great story teller. He told one tale of his travels. In winter while making his way to Denver, he ran out of money in a city named Roland Springs, Wyoming. It was

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cold and he knew he must get to some place where he could find employment. This small village had only a few houses. He placed his trust in God and his Blessed Mother and got on the train, confident that she would do her part. He told the conductor his story: he had no money. "If they had put me off the train, I would have died". The trainmen did not say a word to him, but let him pass into the train. The next morning, the trainman woke him up and said: this is Rock Springs, the place where you want to get off. This protection brother rightly attributes to the protection of Mary. A second incident occurred in Denver the last time he was there. He lost his job, and started looking for another. He went into one shop and asked them for work, but they said they had none. Brother then went to church and prayed to Our Blessed Mother to help him. Returning home he stopped in the same shop. This time the proprietor came up to him and told him they would give his \$20 a month and his board, if he was willing to accept the terms. Brother says that was very high wages at the time. The next day a letter came from another city where he had sought work before with an offer even better than the one he accepted in Denver. An example of the protection afforded him by our Blessed Lady

Fr. Flood, CSC wrote in 1982: Here was a man who was my kind of saint. Fr. Wesley Donahue was our superior in my last year in philosophy in Moreau Seminary. He would assign one of us to be a bedside sitter all night with the aged and dying in the Community House (now Columba Hall). It was a great privilege of mine to spend the night with Bro. Columba. We talked all night. He told me that a couple of days ago Fr. Donahue had visited him and started talking piously when Brother interrupted him: "Wesley, what is the score?" "What do you mean, Brother?" "Wesley, Notre Dame is playing Army and it is on the radio. You are a hell of a Notre Dame man if you do not know the score." "My kind of saint on his death bed". See Fr. Flood Drop File, IPAC

In his memoirs, Fr. Flood also wrote: In those years, the seminary for high school students was across the road from the Community House, now Columba Hall. Bro. Columba used to sit on a bench, in the sun, facing the field where the younger students played. , : During my little seminary days, I used to slip up on the lawn of the community house and sit and talk with Bro Columba. One day I asked him why I had seen two women depart quickly from his bench. He roared with laughter. He said many devotees came from far and wide with the idea that they were meeting a saint. He would sense they were about to venerate him and he would tell them a story that was a bit off-color. That was his test—if they passed it, he would talk with them, if they did not, they suddenly departed like the two prudes who just left. See Fr. Flood : Drop File, IPAC.

In another place Fr. Flood wrote of the badges Bro Columba used to pin on sick people. In one case Hunk Anderson, coach at Notre Dame and later the Bears of Chicago, while playing college ball had an infected thumb. Hunk was not Catholic, but Brother pinned a badge on the huge bandage which Hunk held up to his shoulder by doctor's orders. He walked all over campus and South Bend with that badge showing. I know because he sat next to me in math class and I shared my notes with him. Hunk was no dummy, he graduated as a Civil Engineer, the hardest course on campus in those days.

Fr. Steiner wrote: There was a boy afflicted with an incurable bone disease. The doctors said he simply could not recover. The parents asked Brother to come to Pontiac to do what he could for the boy. The good Brother set out for Pontiac. When he arrived he pinned a Sacred Heart Badge on the boy's night clothes and then knelt to pray. According to Fr. Ryan, the prayer was something like this: "O most Sacred Heart, please cure this boy. I came all the way from Notre Dame—don't make a fool of me. Please cure him." At the time Father Ryan told this to the writer, the boy was out in the yard playing with the other boys.

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Bishop O'Hara, then prefect of religion, was wont to joke with Brother Columba. Whenever he heard of a cure by Brother Andre of Montreal, he would say to Brother Columba: "I see that Brother Andre got another one". Brother Columba would shrug his shoulders and reply that Brother Andre went about it in a round-about way, through the saints, while he himself went directly to the most Sacred Heart. (Fr. Steiner)

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To the *Annals*, another publication from Notre Dame, a note was sent three years after Brother had died: "I scarcely know whom to write to thank the Sacred Heart and dear Brother Columba for the cure of Wilbur Milam, aged 22, who was epileptic, very delicate, taking two or three spells a day. I made the novena for him with his assistance and now find him perfectly restored to health....He was a Protestant and has since become a Catholic. Many thanks to dear Sacred Heart and Brother Columba. Please forward badges as soon as possible." (Fr. Collentine, CSC)

Some two hundred lay people attended his funeral in 1923. The provincial allowed the coffin to be opened at the cemetery and many people touched rosaries and medals to his body. For several years after his death fresh ground had to be hauled in to fill the depressions around his grave left by people carrying away handfuls of earth. It was reported that twenty-four or more hours after his death, while the remainder of his body was cold, the portion near his heart was still warm. It was also said that he told one of the brothers that he would do more for the community after his death than he did while living. So far nothing miraculous has been reported. (Fr. Steiner)

There are several lists of cures attributed to Brother Columba, but as Fr. Steiner wrote nothing was done to follow up on any of them. Some feel that because a shrine was not erected on campus to the Sacred Heart as Brother wished, and the interest in the Sacred Heart devotion more or less disappeared, that the help promised the community was not given. We need to go ahead with this devotion again.

Bibliography:

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Fr. Steiner: See IPAC(Indiana Province Archives) Douglas Road. Drop File.

Fr. Flood: See IPAC Drop File

Fr. Collentine, CSC See Abstracts

Fr. Charles O'Donnell, CSC See Circular Letters Nov. 1923

Fr. Sorin CSC See Circular Letters. 1885.

Bro. Ernest, CSC "These Two Hearts"