Blessed Francis Xavier Seelos: A guiding light for missionaries

Like so many others in the litany of America's saints and blesseds, Blessed Francis Xavier Seelos (1819-67) was filled with missionary zeal. His boyhood desire to follow in the footsteps of his namesake – the patron of missionaries, St. Francis Xavier – led Seelos to spend his life leading many souls to the Lord though preaching and the sacraments. And his saintly example continues this work today, as Pope St. John Paul II prayed when beatifying Seelos in 2000, "Today, Blessed Francis Xavier Seelos invites the members of the Church to deepen their union with Christ in the Sacraments of Penance and the Eucharist."

The German native was baptized on the day of his birth in 1819. Early on, Seelos felt called to the priesthood. After entering the seminary, he became familiar with the Redemptorist order, known for works of evangelization and care for the poor. Seelos was moved by letters he read from Redemptorist missionaries in America who told about the great need for spiritual care among the German immigrants. Seelos decided to offer his life to join in this noble work.

Seelos arrived in New York City in 1843, and he completed the Redemptorist seminary and novitiate in Maryland. He was ordained a priest the following year at St. James Church in Baltimore. He spent eight months there before his first assignment at St. Philomena Church in Pittsburgh. There he served alongside St. John Neumann, and the young priest was greatly influenced by his saintly pastor. Of Neumann, Seelos wrote, "In every respect, he was a remarkable father to me … he guided me as my spiritual leader and confessor." Seelos quickly showed leadership abilities and was named the order's

novice master.

Cheerful and kind, Seelos always was smiling. He enjoyed a good joke and wasn’t afraid of humor. Devotion to prayer and dependence on the will of God also characterized Seelos. Quickly developing a reputation as an ideal pastor, Seelos was known for his empathy and understanding as a very popular spiritual director and confessor. His confessional became known as a place of forgiveness and mercy, open to all who wanted divine healing. “I hear confessions in German, English, French, of whites and of blacks,” Seelos said.

After leaving Pittsburgh, Seelos was assigned to various parishes in Maryland and to the formation of Redemptorists. In 1860, Bishop Michael O’Connor of Pittsburgh resigned and recommended Seelos as the most qualified candidate to succeed him. Seelos wrote Blessed Pope Pius IX asking “to be liberated from this calamity” as he explained his inadequacies. Learning another priest was chosen for the position, Seelos joyously said, “I would rather be bishop of my students than bishop of Pittsburgh.”

After a military draft in 1863 required all men to serve during the Civil War, Seelos traveled to Washington, D.C., to seek an exemption for Redemptorist seminarians. In a meeting with President Abraham Lincoln, he obtained the exemption. Not long after, Seelos unfortunately was removed from his office. Others in the order faulted him for not being strict enough, and this caused him great sorrow.

From 1863 to 1866, Seelos was a travelling missionary. He preached in English and German throughout many states between Rhode Island and Missouri. After spending a few months at a Detroit parish, Seelos arrived as pastor of Assumption Church in New Orleans in 1866, prophetically stating, “I have come here to pass the rest of my days and find a last resting place.”

In New Orleans, Seelos was known for his devoted service to the poor and marginalized. Caring for the victims of an outbreak of yellow fever, Seelos contracted the disease himself. Suffering intensely but patiently, Seelos died on Oct. 4, 1867, at the age of 48. A miracle was attributed to Seelos' intercession the next day, when the sickly Christine Holle touched his hand and was instantly cured of all pain. His remains were buried that day in the New Orleans church where he died.

His feast day is October 5.