



REDEMPTORIST RENEWAL CENTER

AT PICTURE ROCKS

...a desert spiritual life center

Introduction: The two chapters that follow are taken from an unpublished manuscript prepared in anticipation of the canonization of Blessed Francis Xavier Seelos, C. Ss.R. Since one of the meetings rooms at the RRC is named in honor of the Blessed I thought there might be some interest in reading something about this wonderful man.

Chapter One: The Early Years in Fuessen

The village of Fuessen, 2,500 feet above sea level at the base of the Allgaeu Alps or the Tannheim Mountains as they are sometimes identified, is situated in the southeastern area of the Bavarian district of Swabia, very close to the Austrian border. A quiet place, Fuessen had been settled since the early Stone Age, a seemingly unbroken line of generation upon generation of people, looking for a place to raise a family and provide a healthy living. Long after the ancients had disappeared the Romans came and romanized the village in 15 BC, probably as a result of the military campaigns of Tiberius and Drusus, stepsons of Augustus Caesar. The Romans, of course, were followed by the next conquerors, which were followed by the next, and the pattern continued. But despite who may have ruled, or who may have desired to rule, life continued on, sometimes without interruption and at other times with some difficulty.

By the middle of the thirteenth century, a castle or monastery, suggesting that something of importance could be discovered within the village boundaries had dominated Fuessen. Perhaps the proximity to the arterial road called the *Via Claudia* and the long relationship between the merchants of Fuessen and their counterparts in Italy to the south on the great road might also have contributed to the perception.

Nestled at the base of the mountains and on the banks of the river Lech the residents of Fuessen were surrounded by the richness of nature. Vivid wild rhododendrons, mountain animals, cold and shallow rivers, waterfalls, and a deep canyon could be easily accessed and enjoyed by the people within the village limits. Situated in close proximity to a crossroads it would not have been uncommon that there would be those who might have stumbled upon the village, perhaps looking for something else, or just desiring to take a break from the weariness of travel.

All of this could have been observed as you walked up the main street, the Hauptstrasse, on this Monday mid-morning in January, the eleventh, in the year 1819. But perhaps what might have drawn your attention away from the beauty that surrounded you is the sight of one of the village cloth-makers briskly walking to his home at number 184 *Spitalgasse*, in order to tend to his wife and his family.

Mang Seelos, a hard working man, and on this winter day, father to five children, was soon to welcome the birth of his sixth child, Francis Xavier. Although there was joy in his

heart there were also some feelings of anxiety. Despite his best efforts, and the equally heroic efforts of his wife Frances, they were barely able to provide the essentials for their growing family. It was not that they were not grateful for the blessings of their children (there would be five more children including one adopted child who would complete the family) but it was rather that life was difficult. Business was not good in this age of the Industrial Revolution, and despite the success of the highly skilled violin and guitar craftsmen in town, there seemed to be no good news for the other merchants who were trying to make an honest living. This was a period of hard times, years before anyone thought about mechanical rope making, which would change the economic fortunes of the village in the years to come.

On this day, however, despite all of the difficulties and the hardships, there was reason to rejoice. The newborn Francis Xavier, safely delivered, was to be baptized in the parish church of Saint Mangus. Father Carl Zeitler, the parochial assistant, had been informed and the preparations were underway.

The choice of St. Mangus for the baptism, albeit because it was the parish church of the Seelos family, proved to possess symbolic meaning and perhaps even something of the prophetic. Was it purely coincidence that a future missionary priest was to be baptized in the church that housed the burial crypt of St. Marcus, laid to rest in September, 772? St. Marcus had labored for twenty-five years as a missionary in the surrounding countryside and Francis Xavier was to spend approximately twenty-five years of his life, from the time of his first acceptance as a Redemptorist postulant until his death, as a missionary. Certainly no one at the baptism that day could have been aware of the relationship but perhaps it was a sign of God's special favor. The coincidence is merely noted.

Regardless of the symbolic meaning of what happened that day for the family and the godparents that stood around the baptismal font, the promises made and the obligations accepted, were not merely performed as an obligation. The Seelos family was a very devout family, close-knit, loving, supportive of each other, and firmly rooted in a thoroughly Catholic daily routine. Years later Francis Xavier's sister described their practice: "The whole family arose early and went to Mass. After breakfast each one went to his accustomed work and the children went to school. Before meals we recited the Angelus and said our prayers. During the meal the children had to tell what they had learned in school, to which father added a few comments. When supper was finished, we had spiritual reading, which was always on the life of the saint of the day."

It was to this family, practitioners of a deep and living faith, that Father Zeitler posed the necessary questions that are essential for baptism. "Do you renounce Satan, and all his false promises?" "Do you believe in God, the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth?" And to the questions each person gathered answered "Yes" for themselves and for the infant Francis Xavier who was still too young to answer for himself. The blessed water was poured, the promises made, and the infant was baptized into the one, the holy, catholic, and apostolic church and into the communion of saints.

After the baptism it can be imagined that the family returned to their home, perhaps for a quiet celebration, before returning to the work of the day. The joy of the moment was tem-

pered by the reality of the situation in which the Seelos family discovered themselves. "My little debts," Frances Seelos would playfully call her children, but there was truth to the statement. Undoubtedly her playful jest barely concealed the anxiety that is always just below the surface in the life of the working poor.

Her concern was well founded because the Seelos family continued to grow, the family business continued to suffer, and the house, already too small for the family was much too small for any future needs. From the outside the house, a three story building with attic, looked adequate, but that was not the case. The first floor was used primarily for the housing of domestic animals and the second and third floors, very narrow and close to the street, did not provide the kind of room need for comfortable living. The house also did not have a central heating system, which provided an additional challenge.

Despite the best efforts of Mang Seelos it was not until November 2, 1830 that he was able to find a job with a steady income. It was not until he assumed his duties as sexton of the parish church and moved the family to the sexton's house near the church that the family was able to live with some measure of comfort and predictability.

The financial situation of the family certainly influenced Mang and Frances but it also clearly had an effect on each of the children. Although Francis, or Xavier as his parents and family called him, was thought to be good-natured and loving, it can also be said that he suffered the not uncommon lot of the children of the poor. Always a sick child, from the age of four until the age of nine he was sick so often that it was not possible for him to attend the *Folk-schule* with any regularity. This situation played an important role in the development of a special relationship with his mother. This should not be unexpected simply because the mother is often the caregiver and the sick child benefits from the attention. However, in this instance, there may be discovered an even deeper concern and connection.

Although Francis Xavier was the sixth born in the Seelos family, his brothers and sisters who preceded him in birth had not all survived. The first born, Elizabeth, born after one year of marriage was a healthy child and lived a normal life. Her birth was followed by the birth of twins, Mariana and Xaveria. The twins both lived for a little more than a year. Josephine and Ambrose followed the twins, and they too survived and were blessed with continued health and life. Francis Xavier followed, and although he survived, most of his family did not expect him to live because he was so weak and so sickly. His complexion was pale and he often suffered severe intestinal pains and, because of a lack of even the simplest medication, he also suffered from worms. This would have been a concern to any parent but to parents who had already lost two of their children it was perhaps even more of a concern. The reality of what could happen was never far from their immediate experience and memory and perhaps deepened the bond between mother and child.

Francis Xavier's brothers and sisters report that he was a favorite child in the family and in the village. He would not tolerate any type of quarrels and was often the peacemaker. He was perceived as very patient, obedient, and always willing to help. Others recognized in him a deep piety and devotion which was evident because of the many times he joined his mother in church for the various devotions and especially for the praying of the rosary.

A story is told that on numerous occasions, perhaps when Francis Xavier was sick and in bed, his mother often shared with him stories about the lives of the saints. He always showed a special interest in the life of his patron, Saint Francis Xavier, and promised his mother that he too would become a great missionary like Saint Francis Xavier. How many times, after hearing his mother repeat the heroic story did he dream himself off to sleep, thinking of the people of China or the people in some other far off land who had yet to hear the gospel?

Despite the numerous bouts with illness life still must go on and so it was in the Seelos household. Central to that life was the regular reception of the sacraments, within the time frame common for the period. Francis Xavier received the sacrament of Confirmation at the age of nine, conferred in the parish church by Bishop Augustine Ignatius Albert von Riegg, the bishop of Augsburg and later, on the Feast of Sorrowful Mother, April 2, 1830 his First Holy Communion. The sacrament of confirmation is memorable because of the questions asked by the bishop and because of the tradition of the gentle “slap across the face,” that often accompanies the sacrament. However, it was and is the sacrament of the Eucharist, the reception of a persons First Holy Communion, which is often the most memorable. Francis Xavier was no exception.

We might consider it odd that a person would receive their First Holy Communion at the age of eleven but it was not uncommon for the time. The devotional regimen for a person of faith was to attend or to serve mass on a daily basis, confess your sins, and receive Holy Communion once each month. To practice any other devotion would have been considered unacceptable.

His practice of the faith, his success with his schoolwork, and the generally good opinion of the people of the village must have been noteworthy because it came to the attention of the acting pastor of the place, Father Anton Heim. Father Heim recognized his talents and abilities and encouraged Francis Xavier to begin studies that would prepare him for a life different from what he might have expected because of his circumstances and his families position. “Xavier, you will have to become a student, because you are too weak for any trade,” might not seem like words of encouragement but these are the words spoken by Father Heim in explanation for his willingness to help. Perhaps, however, there might have been something more to his concern and his willingness to help, after all the village of Fuessen was filled with poor, young, and reasonably bright boys. Perhaps Father Heim was much impressed by the fun-loving and bright Francis Xavier and, recognizing his poverty and the circumstances of the family, realized that he would need his help. It is also quite possible that this good priest knew of his young prodigy’s statement, “I will become another Francis Xavier,” either hearing it himself or hearing others speak about it. Perhaps in his own way Father Heim was quietly doing his part to enable Francis Xavier’s childhood dream of becoming a great missionary.

We also have no idea if Father Heim took the next step, and in conversation with Francis Xavier, acknowledged the idea of a vocation to the priesthood or even proposed it as a possibility. It would not have been uncommon in those days, in one of the conversations that often take place in the sacristy before mass between the priest and his server, for the conversation to include the possibility of vocation. However, it can be assumed that if Father Heim did indeed

make such a suggestion of vocation that it would not have been entirely unexpected or perhaps even unusual. In that time and place, unlike our own, it was assumed that young men, especially young men from devout families, would pursue a vocation to the priesthood or religious life. God would not call everyone to this vocation, and certainly not every young boy would even seriously consider priesthood as an option, but the atmosphere and the support for such a choice was present in the society and in the family. If Francis Xavier made such a choice known that he intended to pursue a vocation it would have been both welcomed and encouraged.

The place to begin necessary preparations for university studies was the Institute of Saint Stephen in Augsburg, Germany. Immediately after his graduation on April 11, 1831 from elementary school the next step should have been taken and the program of study enacted. However, for reasons that are unknown it was not to be so, and the plans to enter St. Stephen were postponed for one year. Instead, Francis Xavier stayed at home and began his studies under the direction of the chaplain of the hospital, Father Joseph Lochbihler. Perhaps there was the reoccurrence of a childhood illness or perhaps it was simply agreed that a year of private tutoring would be beneficial. Whatever the reason it was not until October 1832 that Francis finally left home to begin his studies. He was never again with his family for any extended period of time.

Chapter Two: The Institute of Saint Stephan

To a young boy of thirteen years old the city of Augsburg, ninety miles north of Fuesen, must have been at least a little overpowering, but at the same time, filled with wonder and excitement. It was a city with a long history as a stronghold and military arsenal. By the time of the Emperor Hadrian in the year 14 BC it was already at the junction of many important trade routes. Its power and its prestige were assured and through the centuries, whether ruled by Romans, Franks, or Bavarians, it prevailed and, at times, even flourished. In 1832 it was home to a total population of thirty-thousand and firmly established and significant in both the political and ecclesiastical history of Germany.

For a devout Catholic, however, the city of Augsburg could have only one association: Martin Luther. Beginning in 1518, Luther and his followers flourished in Augsburg. It can also be asserted that it was in Augsburg where the Reformation took firm root in the hearts and minds of many of the people. Although peace was eventually made between the Reformers and the Catholic population it is also true that Augsburg will be forever associated with Protestantism because of the Augsburg Confession, the primary document that summarizes the basic tenets and beliefs of the Lutheran Church.

When Francis Xavier traveled to Augsburg in 1832, a journey made with two cousins and some other young men from Fuessen, it was probably not his first visit to the city. However, despite its familiarity, there is a certain specialness about a place that is your first home away from home. The Institute of St. Stephan, where he entered the second year of the preparatory school, was home to over six hundred students under the direction of secular priests and lay-people. Its primary purpose was to prepare students for studies at the Gymnasium of Saint Stephan.

Although there was excitement in this first adventure, there were also undoubtedly adjustments and challenges to be faced. Francis Xavier was from a very close-knit Catholic family and now found himself as one among six hundred. Another challenge was that provided by his first prolonged experience of living in a world that was not completely Catholic. Augsburg was not Fuessen, a thoroughly Catholic village, where out of a population of approximately 1500, all but twenty were Catholic. That was certainly not the situation in Augsburg and, as a result, there were sights and sounds to be experienced in Augsburg that would never have been heard or seen in Fuessen. With all of this, perhaps the singular challenge that might have proven to be the most daunting was the course of studies.

St. Stephan's Institute, although only four years old at this time, already possessed a reputation for excellence. The course of studies was divided into two sections, the first four years identified as Latin School, and the second four years identified as the Gymnasium. Latin, German, Greek, history, mathematics, religion, and geography formed the core of the course of study with an emphasis on Latin studies in the first four years. Later, in the Gymnasium, the course of study would also include Hebrew, French, drawing and calligraphy.

In his first year of study Francis Xavier attended twenty-four hours of class; twelve full hours of Latin and four hours of German provided the core class experience. Geography, mathematics, and religion each received two hours of attention and finally, two hours of study each week in French. While he was trying to balance this course of studies he also needed to deal with a boarding situation that was less than ideal.

Because of his financial situation and the limits imposed by the arrangements of his benefactor, Francis Xavier stayed with a family in town, close to school. However practical this living situation may have been it did not include meals. Each day he had to figure out what he was going to do for breakfast and dinner; the luncheon meal was prearranged but it was with a different family each day. Somehow he had to learn to balance all of his obligations and, most important of all, keep a cheerful disposition. From all reports he succeeded in doing so.

Although his studies received first priority there were other activities and attractions of interest to a young teenage boy. Francis Xavier was never considered to be athletic or robust, the years of illness had taken their toil on him, but he was considered to be fun loving and adventurous. Long walks through town were encouraged by the faculty of the institute, as were hikes of some distance through the mountains and the fields. He always participated in these events when organized by the school and at other times on his own.

In addition to the physical activities there were other interests that captured his attention and his enthusiasm. For a time he attempted to learn to play the violin, and even succeeded in learning enough of the instrument in order to play occasionally at the Sunday High Mass with the choir, but he was not able to perfect the instrument. He also exhibited interest and enthusiasm for singing. He might not have been blessed with a perfect voice but he was blessed with a loud one. On more than one occasion those around him would exclaim, "Seelos, Not so loud!"

What seems to be missing, or at least not recorded in any source, is mention of relation-

ships with women and girls of his own age, except for members of his family. In fact, one of his classmates, Anthony Schirsner, made it a point to reflect that "I am firmly convinced that during the whole time of his studies, in spite of very worldly surroundings, he remained completely innocent." The fact that such a point would need to be made, perhaps to illustrate the virtue of a young boy who might one day be declared a saint, would not be unusual for his time and place but today we might consider it as perhaps unfortunate. However, we must remember that it was a different world, with different viewpoints and assumptions about relationships and especially opinions about relationships with the "opposite sex." With this understanding perhaps we should not be surprised that no record exists and assume that a young man who seemed to be so balanced and emotionally healthy would have certainly enjoyed appropriate friendships with men and with women.

The three years of study at Latin School went by very quickly and in 1835 he was promoted to the four-year course of studies at the Gymnasium of St. Stephan. The surroundings were familiar and most of his friends and acquaintances were also promoted and so there was some comfort in all of this. However, the course of studies was significantly more difficult, all the more so because of the intervention of King Ludwig I of Bavaria who decided to sanction a Benedictine Abbey at St. Stephan and entrust the educational institution to their care. The immediate result of this decision was that a Lyceum was added to the school, offering two additional years of philosophy and the study of sciences to the established curriculum. Although Francis Xavier did not enter the Lyceum he did benefit from the addition of more qualified and renowned teachers to the faculty.

One other benefit that Francis Xavier enjoyed as a result of the appointments of the Benedictine Order to St. Stephan's was the beginning of a long friendship with the community. In fact, one of his professors at the Gymnasium was Father Boniface Wimmer, who later was one who would lead the Benedictines to the United States. Once ordained and a missionary in the United States, Francis Xavier would often be invited preach parish missions at Benedictine foundations as a result of this friendship and familiarity.

Yet one other benefit of this change in leadership at St. Stephan's was that the atmosphere of the school became even more supportive of the idea of a vocation to the priesthood and religious life. Francis Xavier had spoken often of his desire to become a priest to selected friends and to his benefactor Father Anthony Heim, but now he spoke quite freely about the idea to a much wider circle of friends and family.

During his summer vacation in 1836 after his first full year of study, Francis Xavier and his father set off on a one-hundred and fifty mile walking pilgrimage to Maria Einsiedeln, Switzerland. This shrine, popular since the middle of the ninth century, is the home of the Black Madonna, a Benedictine monastery, and the place where St. Meinrad was martyred in 861. Perhaps a series of events, along with the particular grace of the pilgrimage, and the reoccurring idea of a vocation all contributed to what happened next.

Francis Xavier approached those in charge of the Benedictine monastery and petitioned for admittance to the monastery as a candidate. Only sixteen years old at the time it may be assumed that he must have informed his father of his intentions and his father must have agreed

with the idea. It proved to be easier to get his fathers blessing then it was to convince the monks of the monastery that this was a good idea. After listening to his petition and considering it the monks refused his request because of his age and also because of the fact that he was not a native of Switzerland. Disappointed but certainly not defeated he returned to his home to complete his vacation and to return to the Gymnasium for continued study.

Upon his return to the Gymnasium he devoted himself once again to his studies and to the many other activities common to a person of his age and temperament. He continued to enjoy singing, long walks in the forests and the fields, and also remained dutiful to the practice of his faith. On more than one occasion he made it a point to inform others that he still seriously considered becoming a priest. At various times he would talk about becoming a Jesuit missionary and at other times a secular priest, assigned to a small village in the country, where he could be close to his people and to his God.

On August 26, 1839, after successfully completing his studies the faculty of the Gymnasium issued Francis Xavier a certificate that enabled him to continue his studies in a university or a lyceum. He was twenty-two years old, his health had been steadily improving, his conduct and character were excellent (as formally attested to by the faculty of the Gymnasium), and he had a dream to fulfill. Unfortunately, he did not have the money to continue and would have to be dependent on others if he were to take the next step.

For those who believe hope is not just a talked about virtue, but rather a realistic possibility. Francis Xavier, strong in his faith, just six weeks after his graduation from the Gymnasium, with the support and encouragement of the mayor of Fuessen, was approved for a tuition scholarship at the Ludwig-Maximilian University in Munich, Germany. He would still have to come up with the money to pay for his room and board, and there were some other minor details that needed to be figured out, but nothing stood in his way that could not be overcome.

Note: For further information about the life of the Blessed Francis Xavier Seelos, C.Ss.R. please go to the web page of the Shrine of Blessed Seelos located in New Orleans, LA. The web address is: www.seelos.org.