

BRIEF NOTICES

Burkey, Blaine, O.F.M. Cap. *Seelos: The Cumberland Years. The Life and Labors of Blessed Francis Xavier Seelos in Maryland's Allegheny Mountains, 1857-1865.* (New Orleans: The Redemptorists/Seelos Center. 2010. Pp. 92. \$13.65 paperback. ISBN 978-0-972-71695-6.)

This small but scrupulously researched work offers a glimpse into the mind and heart of a Redemptorist immigrant priest during a critical period in U.S. history: the years just before and during the Civil War. The setting is Cumberland, a city in the border state of Maryland. The author's ancestors were parishioners of Blessed Francis Xavier Seelos, and a great-great uncle was Seelos's confrere in religious life. This personal connection wreaths the author's portrait of his subject.

Seelos's letters, whether he was writing to friends in his adopted country or to family back home in Bavaria, bring to life a charming, decent, passionate, and perfectly human young man. After one mission, Seelos complained that the schedule was punishing. After another, he lamented the damage done in the parish by previous pastors he deemed unworthy.

At various points in the narrative, we see a city teeming with soldiers and hear gunshots; we cringe as a confrère maligns Seelos; and we mourn as illness, war, and poverty fell the city's youth. Seelos writes little about these matters, but in letters to family he writes at length, with humor and exasperation, about bedbugs. Was he fixating on small, manageable problems during a period of unbearable stress?

At times Seelos's candor is disturbing, revealing the impact of the political and social climate. He calls abolitionists hypocrites and accuses them of conspiring to send freed slaves to a distant colony. A helpful footnote by the author explains the history behind such scorn. Dozens of photographs and illustrations with explanatory captions also help to illuminate the text. One unfortunate lacuna: The work lacks a table of contents.

This meticulously footnoted work is not for the general reader so much as for historians and devotees of Seelos. When placed within the context of this decade's particular storms, some letters take on fresh meaning. In a few pages the reader is transported to another time when priests were suspect, and new immigrants were despised by their fellow Americans. Into this hostile world stepped one brave-hearted immigrant priest. He laid down his life in joyful service to all, dying far too young. But his example lives on through the letters and testimony presented here. ALICIA VON STAMWITZ (*St. Louis, Missouri*)