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# FATHER NELSON BAKER AND THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY:

## A LIFETIME OF DEVOTION

*Richard Gribble, C.S.C.\**

On January 14, 2011, Pope Benedict XVI declared Monsignor Nelson Henry Baker to be “venerable” in the Church. Who was Monsignor Baker (who always preferred the more humble title of “Father Baker”) and why did he achieve this level of recognition from the Church? Nelson Baker (1842-1936), a priest of the Diocese of Buffalo, New York, became an iconic figure in his region of the country through his operation and supervision of an orphanage and protectory for male youth, an infant home for unwed mothers and their children, and his pastorate of St. Patrick’s Parish, later to be known as Our Lady of Victory. This series of institutions, known by local people as “The Second Holy City,” protected, educated, and gave faith development to thousands of children during Baker’s fifty-four-year tenure as superintendent and pastor. The remarkable career of Father Baker, which continues today as Our Lady of Victory Homes of Charity and Baker Victory Services, was inspired by Baker’s strong and constant devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary under her title of Our Lady of Victory.

This essay chronicles the development of Father Baker’s devotion to the Blessed Mother and how this religious zeal was manifested, from his days as a seminarian to his construction

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of the Basilica of Our Lady of Victory. Gifted in business and with significant organizational skills, but most especially possessive of great faith and devotion, Father Baker combined his God-given talents with complete trust in Mary to supervise an operation that has made his name a household word in Western New York.

### **Nelson Henry Baker: Early Life and Influences**

Nelson Baker, the second of four sons of Louis (Lewis) Baker and Caroline Donnellan, was born in Buffalo on February 16, 1842.<sup>1</sup> After completing his public education through secondary school, he parlayed his acute business acumen to make his way in the world. Initially he worked as a clerk in his father's grocery and general store, but later he gained financial success in a grain and feed business partnership with a friend, Joseph Meyer. This continued for six years, interrupted briefly between June and early September 1863 when Baker volunteered to serve as a private in New York's 74th State Militia, seeing brief action in the Civil War and being present in New York to assist in quelling riots that engulfed the city.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Nelson Baker's birth date has been debated in the historical record. In his book *Father Baker and His Lady of Victory Charities* (Buffalo, N.Y.: Buffalo Publishing Co., Inc., 1925), Thomas Galvin, C.Ss.R., who knew Baker well, both as an orphan in St. Joseph Orphan Asylum and later working with him closely as a priest in a specialized apostolate to African Americans, indirectly supports the date of 1841 by suggesting that Baker was eighty-five when he celebrated his fiftieth anniversary of ordination in 1926. Baker's tomb in Our Lady of Victory Basilica lists 1841 as the year of his birth. The main supporting evidence for the 1841 date is his Catholic baptismal record (1851) which says he was in his tenth year at the time of baptism. All relevant historical accounts (save Galvin), however, including his military record and the records in the Archives of the Diocese of Buffalo concerning his ordination confirm the 1842 date.

<sup>2</sup> For five days, July 13-17, New York was rocked by some of the most destructive and deadly riots in the nation's history. Referred to as the "New York Draft Riots," white citizens, generally Irish, went on a rampage burning buildings and murdering innocent people in response to the Federal Conscription Act of March 1863. This law stated that all men 20 to 35 and all single men 35 to 45 were eligible for military service. However, a provision in the Act allowed one to buy a replacement for \$300. The Irish in New York, unable to buy a replacement due to their poverty, believed the law doomed them to a fight in a war that was being waged to free the very people, slaves, who

Baker's physical and intellectual development was matched by an equally rich spiritual maturity. As an infant he was baptized in his father's Lutheran faith. While there is no extant record that clearly explains the reason, Baker was re-baptized a Catholic by Father Joseph Lennon on November 29, 1851, at St. Patrick's Parish.<sup>3</sup> Assuredly, Baker's decision to enter the Roman Catholic Church came from the influence of his faithful mother. Years later, writing after his ordination, he stated, "I thank God for having raised me to the dignity of the Catholic priesthood through the influence of an Irish Catholic mother."<sup>4</sup> A couple of years later Baker completed his Christian initiation by receiving the sacraments of First Communion and Confirmation at St. Joseph's Cathedral.<sup>5</sup>

Although Baker was highly successful in business and possessed the skill for such a career, he felt called to change radically his direction in life. In September 1869, after consultation with some Jesuit priests and taking a cruise on the Great Lakes that allowed him to contemplate his future, Baker entered Our Lady of the Angels Seminary in Niagara Falls to study for the priesthood. Although he had been away from formal education for more than a decade, he adapted well to his new environment. He was an excellent student and an active participant in seminary life. Baker was equally if not more involved with various societies that fostered the spiritual development of the seminarians. In his first year, foreshadowing his lifelong dedication to the Blessed Virgin Mary, Baker helped initiate the

would be competition for their lower paying jobs. For more information see: Iver Bernstein, *The New York City Draft Riots: Their Significance for American Society and Politics in the Age of the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 708; Bruce Catton, *Never Call Retreat* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1965), 215. Extant records show that of 79,975 conscripts examined under the 1863 law, 6,998 procured a substitute. See [www.dmma.state.ny.us/historic/reghist/civil/milAffairs](http://www.dmma.state.ny.us/historic/reghist/civil/milAffairs).

<sup>3</sup> Baptismal Record, Cathedral of St. Joseph: found in Kern, Baker Papers, Vol. I, Archives Our Lady of Victory (hereafter AOLV), Lackawanna, New York.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Floyd Anderson, *Apostle of Charity: The Father Nelson Baker Story* (Buffalo, N.Y.: Our Lady of Victory Homes of Charity), 8.

<sup>5</sup> Walter Kern, "Life and Times of Father Baker," #4, Kern, Baker Papers, Vol. I, AOLV. It is not clear precisely when Baker received these sacraments, but based on the general practice of the day, he was probably 14, which would be 1856.

Sodality of Our Lady of Angels (also referred to as the Sodality of the Immaculate Conception) so seminarians devoted to Mary could “reap all the graces and blessings attached to that devotion.” In October 1869 he was elected treasurer of the Sodality, initiating his association with a group that would claim much of his time for the next several years of his religious formation.<sup>6</sup>

### **Building a Marian Spirituality**

The latter years of Baker’s time at Our Lady of the Angels were a period when major events in the universal Church made a significant impact on American Catholicism. The nineteenth century saw the rise of several ideologies that the Church recognized as hostile to Christian thought. Rationalism, socialism, liberalism, communism, and religious indifferentism were countered by Church documents and policies that sought to correct errors and re-emphasize the central position of Catholicism in the life of people. The institutional Church was also under attack from within its own ranks. Gallicanism, known in some lands as Febronianism or Josephinism, which drew its name from the Gallican Articles of 1682, promoted the power of the local national church in decision making. In contrast, Ultramontanism was the belief that answers to questions of faith must be found by looking (over the mountains, i.e., the Alps) to Rome. Beginning in August 1832, with the promulgation of Pope Gregory XVI’s encyclical *Mirari Vos*, which attacked liberalism and religious indifferentism, the Vatican staunchly and consistently raised its voice against the ideologies of the age and opponents within its own ranks. This stance reached its apex in the pontificate of Pope Pius IX. In 1864, Pius issued “The Syllabus of Errors,” a list of eighty contemporary propositions that he viewed as erroneous. The apex of the ultramontanist response to the nineteenth century came, however, in the proclamation of papal infallibility

<sup>6</sup> Heather Hartel, “Producing Father Nelson H. Baker: The Practice of Making a Saint for Buffalo, New York” (Ph.D. Diss: University of Iowa), 25; Baker, Diary, January 29, 1870, AOLV.

in *Pastor Aeternus*, the principal document of the First Vatican Council (1869-1870).<sup>7</sup>

The result of these events in Europe was in some measure a re-ignition of the fires of anti-Catholicism in the United States.<sup>8</sup> Greater centralization of power by the pope was viewed as un-democratic and rejected. Pius IX became the lightning rod to which much of America's anti-Catholic sentiment was directed. In an effort to demonstrate support for the pontiff, Father Edward Sorin, C.S.C., Superior General of the Congregation of Holy Cross and former President of the University of Notre Dame, a man with a true spirit of *romanitá*, devised the idea of an American pilgrimage to Rome to bolster support for the pope. He wrote, "They [the pilgrims] will return content, enchanted, and will fashion public opinion in the United States over the next decade, a very important thing."<sup>9</sup> Realizing that a member of the hierarchy could best serve as leader of the pilgrimage, Sorin asked his local ordinary, Bishop Joseph Dwenger of Fort Wayne, Indiana, to be the titular head of the group.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Many fine books and articles provide amplifying information on this critical period in Church history. Some of these include: Roger Aubert, et al., *The Church in a Secularised Society* (New York: Paulist Press, 1978); Aubert, et al., *The Church in the Age of Liberalism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981); Austin Gough, *Paris and Rome: The Gallican Church and the Ultramontane Campaign, 1848-1853* (Oxford, England: Clarendon Press, 1986); Derek J. Holmes, *The Triumph of the Holy See* (London: Burns & Oates, 1978); Don Cuthbert Butler, *The Vatican Council, 1869-1870* (Westminster, Md.: The Macmillan Co., 1962). Papal infallibility, as defined in *Pastor Aeternus*, says that the pope can speak infallibly when speaking from the Chair (as pope), to the universal Church on a teaching in the deposit of revelation on faith and morals.

<sup>8</sup> United States bishops were divided into three camps over the definition of papal infallibility. One relatively small group wholeheartedly endorsed the definition; a very few opposed the teaching. The majority, however, while believing the definition to be theologically sound, thought that its definition at the time was highly problematic for American Catholics. Since the papacy had always been one of the great roadblocks that fueled Protestant animosity toward Catholics, the U.S. bishops perceived that the definition of papal infallibility would be seen as a move for greater Vatican power and lead directly to increased hostility toward American Catholics. For more information on this idea see James Hennesey, S.J., *First Council of the Vatican: The American Experience* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1963).

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in Marvin O'Connell, *Edward Sorin* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001), 641.

<sup>10</sup> In reality, Sorin believed himself to be the true leader of the group. In a rather arrogant tone he wrote, "In fact, it is I who will be the pilot of the pilgrimage. Nobody

In the spring of 1874, Baker read in the newspaper about the pilgrimage and was immediately interested. It seems that his desire to thank God for his physical recovery from erysipelas<sup>11</sup> and the opportunity to visit some of the famous shrines of Europe were his principal motivations for participation in the pilgrimage. Baker described his next actions: "I have written to New York to try to go on the pilgrimage to Rome and go today to see what the bishop says." He continued, "Have seen the bishop and he makes no objections, says the intention is a good one, and the passage is cheap."<sup>12</sup> After also receiving the permission of the Seminary rector to serve as the school's representative on the trip, Baker sent in his deposit of \$150.00. The Seminary newspaper, *Niagara Index*, reported,

[Mr. Baker] has discontinued his studies for the remainder of the year . . . to be the bearer of a handsome donation from the faculty and the students to the Holy Father. . . . We are confident that the tribute to be presented on behalf of the Sem[inary] of O[ur] L[ady of] A[ngels] will give His Holiness an assurance of the feelings of affection which animate his children and which the most distant separation cannot estrange. We wish Mr. Baker a bon voyage.<sup>13</sup>

Baker left Buffalo via train for New York on May 13, carrying with him gifts of money (\$175) and a scroll for the pope. Arriving the next day at noon, he joined the group which consisted of Bishop Dwenger, thirty-three priests, fifty lay men and eighteen lay women. On May 16 Archbishop (later Cardinal) John McCloskey offered Mass at St. Patrick's Cathedral for

has crossed the ocean twenty-seven times as I have done, and nobody knows Rome and Lourdes better than I. . . . Perhaps I suffer from illusion, but it seems clear that Divine Providence has disposed these matters so as . . . to allow me to render to the Holy Father a signal service" (ibid., 641-42).

<sup>11</sup> In December 1871, Baker contracted erysipelas, also known as St. Anthony's Fire, a serious infectious skin disease. He did not fully recover until almost one year later.

<sup>12</sup> Anderson, *Apostle of Charity*, 38-40; Baker, Diary, March 5, 1874; Walter Kern, "Life and Times of Father Baker," #36, Kern, Baker Papers, Vol. III, AOLV.

<sup>13</sup> *Niagara Index* V(17) (May 15, 1874): 125, Archives Niagara University (hereafter ANU), Niagara Falls, New York; Baker, Diary, April 6, 1874, AOLV. The full passage for the pilgrimage was \$350.00.

the pilgrims who then, after a brief return to the Metropolitan Hotel, boarded the *S.S. Periere* which set course for France.<sup>14</sup>

During the transit to Europe a retreat-like regimen was maintained for the pilgrims as much as was possible. Mass was celebrated by Dwenger each morning, with a novena and angelus at 11:30 AM. At 2:30 PM all prayed the rosary which was followed by a short instruction by the Bishop.<sup>15</sup>

On May 27 the *Periere* reached LeHavre, but the group immediately pushed on to Paris arriving the next day. Cardinal Joseph Guibert, Archbishop of Paris, greeted the group at his private chapel where Mass was celebrated. Originally the plan called for a brief stay in Paris before moving south, but because the Shrine at Lourdes was overcrowded with pilgrims, the decision was made to stay in Paris a couple of extra days. This allowed the group to see many of the churches there, including the fabled Notre Dame Cathedral, Church of the Madeleine, La Sainte Chapelle, Ste. Clotilde, Ste. Genevieve, Holy Trinity, and St. Sulpice.<sup>16</sup>

The group also visited Notre Dame des Victoires, a rather small but renowned church in the city. After celebrating Mass, Dwenger told the pilgrims of his own devotion to Our Lady of Victory, whom he believed had interceded on his brother's behalf to bring about a miraculous healing.<sup>17</sup> Baker wrote in his diary about the experience:

The church is ever in one continuous religious enthusiasm where eighteen secular priests minister to the people and where the greatest miracles of grace, in bringing back lost and hardened sinners, are daily

<sup>14</sup> Walter Kern, "Life and Times of Father Baker," #37, Kern, Baker Papers, Vol. III; Baker, Diary, May 16, 1874, AOLV; Clipping from *Freeman's Journal*, 22 August 1874, Bishop Dwenger Papers, in the Clergy and Religious Printed Material collection (hereafter PCLR) in the Archives of the University of Notre Dame (hereafter AUND), Notre Dame, Indiana; Anderson, *Apostle of Charity*, 39-40.

<sup>15</sup> Baker, Diary, May 24, 1874, AOLV; Anderson, *Apostle of Charity*, 41.

<sup>16</sup> Boniface Hanley, "Servant of God Msgr. Nelson H. Baker, 1841-1936: One Lifetime," *The Anthonian* 53, no. 2 (1971): 10; Walter Kern, "Life and Times of Father Baker," #39, Kern, Baker Papers, Vol. III, AOLV.

<sup>17</sup> Hanley, "One Lifetime," 10; *New York Times*, June 21, 1874, clipping in PCLR, Bishop Dwenger Papers, AUND.

being performed through the powerful intercession of *Our Immaculate Lady* [emphasis Baker].<sup>18</sup>

Considering Baker's future ministry that centered itself in devotion to Mary, Our Lady of Victory, Baker's initial recorded reaction seems a bit muted. Years later Robert Doran, who worked with Baker for many years, reflected on the latter's experience:

He [Baker] was amazed as he entered the shrine. His eyes focused on the intensely appealing statue of a lady holding a little boy in her arms atop the main altar. . . . He knelt at the communion rail, still gazing at the statue. And then his words came in a torrent of whispers: "From now on I shall devote my entire life to your service. I shall devote all my thoughts and actions to your name. I will spread the devotion of Our Lady of Victory throughout America."<sup>19</sup>

After the delay in Paris the pilgrims journeyed via Bordeaux to Lourdes on June 2 and stayed two days. The group then moved onto Marseilles where they boarded the steamer *Et Jerome* for an overnight trip to Civitavecchia. On June 8 the group arrived via train in Rome, the ultimate destination of their pilgrimage, where they stayed until June 20. On June 10 the pilgrims met in audience with Pope Pius IX. Nelson Baker presented the pope a personal gift plus the \$175 donation and scroll from the faculty and students at Our Lady of the Angels.<sup>20</sup> Baker commented on his brief encounter with the Holy Father: "In health, he seemed strong and active, his voice sonorous, and his gestures most vigorous. He seemed as if he were inspired with new life, at the sight of so many of his faithful flock."<sup>21</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Walter Kern, "Life and Times of Father Baker," #38, Kern, Baker Papers, Vol. III, AOLV.

<sup>19</sup> René Ruberto, "Father Baker—Folk Hero: Legendary Study of the Life of Nelson H. Baker, 1841-1936" (M.A. Thesis, SUNY Buffalo, 1976), 11.

<sup>20</sup> Walter Kern, "Life and Times of Father Baker," #40, Kern, Baker Papers, Vol. III, AOLV.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

On June 21 Baker and his fellow travelers began their trip home. They stopped first in Loreto, then moved on passing through several Italian and French towns and cities before arriving once again in Paris on June 24.<sup>22</sup> Baker went to the church of Notre Dame des Victoires once again, where he had been so profoundly inspired by his initial visit. Thomas Galvin, C.Ss.R., who had much association with Nelson Baker over the years, suggests this is the visit that convinced him that henceforth he would devote his life to the promotion of Our Lady of Victory.<sup>23</sup> Baker reached LeHavre on July 4; he returned to Buffalo later that month.

### **Ministry in the Name of Mary**

Nelson Baker was ordained a priest on March 19, 1876. He was initially assigned as an assistant to Father Thomas Hines at Limestone Hill, five miles south of Buffalo, ministry which included a small parish, St. Patrick's, and two large institutions for orphaned and troubled boys: St. Joseph's Orphan Asylum and St. John's Protectory. The Catholic Union reported the assignment: "Of the young clergymen just ordained, Rev. Nelson Baker goes to the Reformatory [at] Limestone Hill to assist Father Hines—a most suitable appointment." Baker celebrated his first Mass at St. Patrick's on March 25, 1876, the Feast of the Annunciation, a date that might have been coincidental, but appropriate in view of his future devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary.<sup>24</sup> Save one year at St. Mary's parish in Corning, New York (1881-1882), Nelson Baker spent the rest of his priestly ministry at Limestone Hill (later named Lackawanna), including fifty-four years as superintendent of the institutions and pastor of the parish.

Operation of the two institutions for boys, St. Joseph's Orphanage and St. John's Protectory, while serving an often forgotten population, did generate a significant debt that required Baker's vigilant attention. Harkening back to his pilgrimage to

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, #41, Kern, Baker Papers, Vol. III, AOLV.

<sup>23</sup> Galvin, *Father Baker*, 20-21.

<sup>24</sup> Anderson, *Apostle of Charity*, 49; Hanley, "One Lifetime," 12; Hartel, "Producing Father Baker," 26; *The Catholic Union*, March 30, 1876, 5.

Rome in 1874 and his transformative experience when visiting the Church of Notre Dame des Victoires in Paris, Baker decided to dedicate his work to Our Lady of Victory and place the institutions under her patronage.<sup>25</sup> His idea manifested itself in the initiation of the Association of Our Blessed Lady of Victory and the creation of one of the first direct mail solicitation campaigns. The Association, established in 1883 to satisfy Baker's acute need for funds, but fueled through his combined business expertise and indomitable faith, was a bold and rather unique development program. Indeed, the historian Timothy Allan has written, "Baker was . . . a pioneer in the art of direct promotional mailing."<sup>26</sup> Initially he wrote to postmasters throughout the country asking to be supplied the names and addresses of Catholic women in their locales who might be willing to financially assist (with) his ministry with orphans and wayward boys. With the responses he received, Baker conducted a "full court press" letter campaign, writing to thousands of women, explaining the Association and seeking their assistance. Membership in the Association was only twenty-five cents annually. Members agreed to the daily recitation of the Litany of Our Blessed Lady of Victory; other devotions, such as the rosary, Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament, participation in perpetual adoration, and daily communion, were highly encouraged. In turn, Association members received the newsletter, "The Appeal for Homeless and Destitute Children," which kept all abreast of Baker's work and their remembrance

<sup>25</sup> Walter Kern, "Life and Times of Father Baker," #58, Kern, Baker Papers, Vol. IV, AOLV. Baker's idea to seek Our Lady of Victory as his patroness came from his heart and past experience, but it was a devotion with roots in the French Church. In December 1836 a dejected French priest, Abbé Desgenettes, was saying Mass at the Church of Our Lady of Victory in Paris. He was dejected due to the fact that people were not attending Mass or the sacraments. As he celebrated Mass a voice came to him: "Consecrate your parish to the Holy and Immaculate Heart of Mary." Buoyed with confidence he called a meeting of parishioners for one week later. To his great and pleasant surprise 500 people showed up for the meeting. This was the initiation of the Archconfraternity of Our Lady of Victory.

<sup>26</sup> Timothy Allan, "Nelson Henry Baker, Priest and Servant of God: An Overview of His Life with Its Historical Context," 15, Unpublished paper, AOLV.

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in several annual novenas as well as Masses celebrated at St. Patrick's and specific Marian shrines worldwide.<sup>27</sup>

Father Baker drew a direct connection between his work at the Institutions, his Association and Mary:

As it is evidently God's holy will that His own Mother should be better known and more tenderly beloved, why not strive to carry out God's will in this regard, by doing all that we can to propagate this devotion by extending the influence of the Association which has as its object the cultivating and spreading of this beautiful devotion, resting assured that our efforts will not be unnoticed or unrewarded.<sup>28</sup>

Whenever Baker needed funds he was not averse to asking his benefactors to dig deeper, for he believed the cause was right and he knew his patroness was assisting him at all times. In a typical appeal, Baker unabashedly professed his total confidence that people would respond to his request:

The new building and all its improvements and accommodations will cost nearly \$50,000 when completed; we started out to build this without the means, but with the implicit confidence that our Blessed Lady would inspire our friends to help us to meet this large sum, and we are not being disappointed, but we have yet much to pay. We hope our good friends will

<sup>27</sup> Anderson, *Apostle of Charity*, 53; Hanley, "One Lifetime," 14-16; Galvin, *Father Baker*, 129-34; "The Appeal for the Homeless and Destitute Child," n.d. [1932], Miscellaneous File; *Victorian* 34, no. 4 (April 1928): 3, AOLV. The annual novenas (still prayed today, but on different dates) for members of the Association were: (1) March 17-25—Annunciation, (2) June 12-20—Sacred Heart, (3) August 7-15—Assumption, (4) October 18-25—Our Lady of Victory, (5) November 2-10—Suffering Souls, (6) November 30-December 8—Immaculate Conception, (7) December 17-25—Nativity of the Lord. Baker promised Association members remembrance in 25 Masses per week, with those on Wednesday, Friday and Saturday especially for the deceased. Additionally, he arranged for 100 Masses to be celebrated at *each* of several Marian shrines in Europe: (1) Our Lady of Victory in Paris (for solicitors), (2) Lourdes (for those who no longer lived the faith), (3) Loreto (for the concerns of the faith), (4) Our Lady of Perpetual Help—Rome, (5) Our Lady of Mount Carmel—Rome (for needs at the hour of death), (6) Our Lady of Knock—Ireland (for perseverance of members), (7) Shrine of the Sacred Heart—Paray-le-Monial, France (to encourage devotion to the Blessed Mother). See Walter Kern, "Life and Times of Father Baker," #59, Kern, Baker Papers, Vol. IV, AOLV.

<sup>28</sup> *Annals*, 4, no. 1 (January 1891), clipping, Baker Published Writings File, AOLV.

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not lag in their zeal but continue to assist us as generously in the future as in the past, and I am sure that our Lord will not fail in generously rewarding them for so doing.<sup>29</sup>

### Lifetime of Devotion to Our Lady of Victory

On an intellectual level there was nothing truly remarkable about late nineteenth-century American Catholicism. While it is true many bishops and a few other clerics and other Church thinkers battled each other during what was known as the Americanist crisis, and fewer still took sides in the debate over theological modernism, most American Catholics had little stake in theological discussion.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, American Church historian James O'Toole has accurately captured the experience of the vast majority of American Catholics in late nineteenth-century America:

American Catholics, like their fellow Americans who went to other churches, lived their faith through countless unremarkable routines. Deep questions of theology usually meant little to them, but parishioners clung to deeply ingrained habits of devotion, both public and private.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 7, no. 4 (April 1894), clipping, Baker Published Writings File, AOLV.

<sup>30</sup> Americanism, which played out between approximately 1884 and 1899, pitted more transformationalist bishops against those who were more traditionalist. The basic question that Americanism asked was whether Catholicism could be in any way adapted to meet the unique situation the Faith encountered in the United States. In the end, Pope Leo XIII, writing in *Testem Benevolentiae* (January 1899), answered no. The pope wrote, "It [Americanism] raises the suspicion that there are some among you who conceive and desire a church in America different from that which is in the rest of the world." See John Tracy Ellis, ed., *Testem Benevolentiae*, in *Documents of American Catholic History* (Milwaukee, Wis.: Bruce Publ. Co., 1962), 542. While numerous sources on Americanism are in the literature, the only one-volume account of this time period is given in: Thomas G. McAvoy, C.S.C., *The Great Crisis in American Catholic History, 1895-1900* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1957). Theological Modernism, which originated in Europe, but which had some American proponents, was based on two premises: (1) promotion of the historical-critical method of Scripture study and (2) the concept of the development of doctrine. Modernism was declared the "synthesis of all heresies" by Pope Pius X in his encyclical *Pascendi Dominici Gregis* (1907). As for Americanism, there are many scholarly sources about Modernism. The one volume that addresses Modernism in the United States is R. Scott Appleby's *"Church and Age Unite!": The Modernist Impulse in American Catholicism* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992).

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Particular devotions changed over time, waxing or waning in popularity, but the habits endured.<sup>31</sup>

Church historian Colleen McDannell suggests that devotionism was the unique contribution made by Catholics to American religion: "One way that Catholics successfully claimed a part of the American religious landscape was by creating a devotional life that spoke to their concepts of the supernatural."<sup>32</sup> Ann Taves, in her seminal work on Catholic devotionism, specifies how popular piety eclipsed theological teaching in common practice:

Forms of devotion . . . were promoted and widely adopted during the mid-nineteenth century. . . . Evidence suggests that by the middle decades of the nineteenth century, the reception of the sacraments was overshadowed for most lay Catholics by devotional practices associated with Mary, Jesus, the Sacred Heart, and the Blessed Sacrament.<sup>33</sup>

Unlike twenty-first century America, where religion is often a low priority or even ancillary to one's life, Americans in the late nineteenth century experienced religion as part of their daily routine. Speaking from a pragmatic sense, Robert Orsi, one of the foremost historians of Catholic popular religiosity, has stated that religion cannot be compartmentalized in one's life:

Religion cannot be neatly separated from the other practices of everyday life. . . . Nor can "religion" be separated from the material circumstances in which specific instances of religious imagination and behavior arise and to which they respond.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>31</sup> James O'Toole, ed., *Habits of Devotion: Catholic Religious Practice in Twentieth-Century America* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2004), 1.

<sup>32</sup> Colleen McDannell, *Material Christianity: Religions and Popular Culture in America* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1995), 133.

<sup>33</sup> Ann Taves, *Household of Faith: Roman Catholic Devotions in Mid-Nineteenth Century America* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986), vii-viii.

<sup>34</sup> Robert Orsi, "Everyday Miracles: The Study of Lived Religion," in *Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice*, ed. David Hall (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997), 6-7.

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He continues, "Religion comes into being in an ongoing, dynamic relationship with the realities of everyday life." Orsi suggests that religion is not a fixed dimension of one's person, but rather, "People appropriate religious idioms as they need them, in response to particular circumstances. All religious ideas and impulses are of the moment, invented, taken, borrowed, and improvised at the intersections of life."<sup>35</sup>

The religious idioms of which Orsi speaks were manifested in nineteenth-century Europe through a flowering of Marian devotion. A series of Marian apparitions highlighted this piety: La Salette (1846), Lourdes (1858), and Pontmain (1871) in France, and Knock in Ireland (1879).<sup>36</sup> Additionally, the proclamation of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception by Pope Pius IX in 1854 and the designation of Our Lady of Guadalupe as Patroness of the Americas in 1900 bolstered this devotion.<sup>37</sup>

In many ways devotion to Mary defined Roman Catholic spirituality in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. While it is clear that Mary has played an integral role in Roman Catholicism from the apostolic era, the concentration of devotion in this time period is noteworthy. Colleen McDannell has commented on this phenomenon: "Although Catholics understood their Marian piety to be truly 'Catholic,' the expressions of that piety drew from the culture of the time."<sup>38</sup> Popular religious practices such as recitation of the rosary, devotion to the Immaculate Conception, the Sacred Heart of Jesus and Immaculate Heart of Mary, plus the use of various scapulars, such as the Brown Scapular to Our Lady of Mount Carmel, were so common they largely defined the spirituality of the epoch.<sup>39</sup>

Clearly, Nelson Baker possessed a great devotion to the Blessed Virgin, but this piety developed over time. In the

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 7-8.

<sup>36</sup> McDannell, *Material Christianity*, 137.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 137-39.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 133.

<sup>39</sup> Taves, *Household of Faith*, 36-38.

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opinion of Buffalo Catholic historian Walter Kern, Baker's devotion to Mary at the seminary had rather ordinary roots:

Nelson had a great devotion to the Blessed Mother, but it had only the form of general Marian prayers, the scapular of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, the Little Office, and Our Lady of Peace. There is no proof that he had devotion to Our Lady of Victory this early in life.<sup>40</sup>

When Baker made the pilgrimage to Europe in late spring of 1874 and by chance visited the Church of Notre Dame des Victoires, his devotion was strengthened, but his enthusiasm and zeal would continue to deepen and mature with time.

The greatest manifestation of Baker's devotion to Mary was his unceasing and indomitable trust and confidence in her intercession. This has been noted by many of his contemporaries. Thomas Galvin, C.Ss.R., describes how Baker approached various projects:

Solicitous? Yes, he was! . . . But discouraged and worried? Never! Trials, hunger, cold, troubles of every variety arose to test his courage, but never did he swerve from that self-abandonment to God's care and to confidence in his Blessed Lady of Victory, and never did she disappoint him.<sup>41</sup>

Clara Balduf, who worked at St. John's Protectory from 1916-1918, stated, "He put all his trust in Our Lord and Our Lady. . . . When he prayed I really believe that he was sure it would be granted." Similarly, Sr. Theophane Bwie, S.S.J., commented, "His [Baker's] love for Our Lady of Victory was not just love; it was confidence, it was trust."<sup>42</sup> Baker described the evolution of his confidence in Mary:

If we have succeeded in our work, it is because we have had unbounded confidence in God's Holy Mother, as she has been pleased always to

<sup>40</sup> Walter Kern, "Life and Times of Father Baker," #33, Kern, Baker Papers, Vol. II, AOLV.

<sup>41</sup> Galvin, *Father Baker*, 100-1. Galvin continued, "This trust in his Blessed Lady of Victory is the secret of his success. It is the most precious flower in the garden of the soul."

<sup>42</sup> Clara Balduf, Interview with Walter Kern, May 22, 1990; Sr. Theophane Bwie, S.S.J., Interview with Walter Kern, November 29, 1987, AOLV.

extend to us her generous aid; in our poverty and want, surrounded by every need, when one hardly knew which way to turn, Mary always came to our rescue and opened to us the pathway of success.<sup>43</sup>

Nelson Baker saw Mary as a friend with whom he could talk on a personal level. His devotion to her, as expressed by Balduf, was never manifest from afar: "From the way he preached about the power of Our Lady, you would think he had a close connection with her."<sup>44</sup> He often seemed to lose himself and forget about others when looking at a statue of Mary and then speaking to her as if she was standing before him. One contemporary recalled her impression of Baker's relationship with Mary:

There never was anyone with *greater* [emphasis original] faith in the Blessed Mother—and very few with as great faith in her—as Father Baker. He was always close to her. He'd talk to her as if she were a living person right there with him. He praised her for her favors and even scolded her when she kept him waiting for something he needed badly.<sup>45</sup>

Since Mary was his friend it was quite logical for Baker to entrust all his projects to her protection and intercession. He once stated, "Our Blessed Lady is my friend. She understands me. She comforts me. I pray to her and she tells me the course I should pursue. I do nothing without her advice, and with her support I cannot fail."<sup>46</sup> When people praised him for his great accomplishments, such as his ability to successfully obtain financing for a construction project, Baker set the record straight by giving credit where credit was due:

I had very little to do with it. . . . The Blessed Mother is the manager. She is the banker. She financed the whole affair. I placed the institution under her care. I am only the administrator. I never worry. If she wishes this undertaking to succeed it will, despite my infirmities.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>43</sup> *Annals* 25, no. 4 (April 1913): 5, AOLV.

<sup>44</sup> Clara Balduf, Interview with Walter Kern, May 22, 1990, AOLV.

<sup>45</sup> Josephine Quirk, "A Man to Remember," *Victorian* 56, no. 1 (1950): 19.

<sup>46</sup> Quoted in *Buffalo Times*, July 29, 1936, in Ruberto, "Father Baker—Folk Hero," 39-40.

<sup>47</sup> "Read This about Father Baker," *Victorian*, clipping, n.d., in Kern, Baker Papers, Vol. II, AOLV.

As his ministry expanded so his confidence in Mary increased proportionally. In October 1924, with additional expansion of the institutions in progress, Baker confidently wrote:

We are still building and have many plans for the future, all to advance God's glory, and we continue to depend upon our dear Blessed Lady, that she will inspire our many good friends to continue to aid us in the future as in the past, and then we can promise to our kind friends, every blessing that heaven contains, and these will be obtained and bestowed through the generous hands of Our Dear Blessed Lady of Victory.<sup>48</sup>

Throughout his half century as Superintendent of the Our Lady of Victory institutions, Nelson Baker seemingly had no magic formula for his ability to meet all his financial responsibilities. Near his death, the estimated value of his institutions' assets was \$25 million. In response to this fact he only said, "I haven't the slightest idea how it was paid for. It was the Mother of God who did it one way or another."<sup>49</sup>

Baker's love for Mary and his total confidence that any project engaged in her name would be successful and secure from debt, prompted him to hope that others could share his belief and experience. He was sure this was possible since his own work had been generated from the proverbial mustard seed of faith that had blossomed into the great tree that covered thousands of homeless and destitute children. As his dependence became greater so too his trust grew stronger. Considering it imperative for others to catch the same fire that glowed through him, he realized the responsibility, common to all, to promote devotion to the Blessed Mother.

<sup>48</sup> *Annals* 37, no. 3 (October 1924): 3, AOLV.

<sup>49</sup> Alice M. Pytak, *A Christian Commitment: The Story of Father Nelson Henry Baker* . . . ([S.l.: s.n.], c1986), 20. One further example of Baker's total faith in Mary to liquidate all financial responsibilities is given in an essay, "The Glorious Festival of Our Lady of Victory": "The financial means required to erect buildings for our enormous family has ever been a serious problem, but our generous Lady has ever looked upon us with compassion and inspired the hearts of our good friends, and their kind offerings seem to grow and be multiplied, and thus our difficulties seem to meet and melt, through the help of our dear Lady of Victory." See *Annals* 40, no. 4 (October 1927): 3, AOLV.

We must realize then the importance of making use of every opportunity to advance the interest of Our Blessed Lady, in speaking of her glories, extolling her virtues, and making known her great love for us, and thus we will inspire all hearts with an ardent desire of loving our Blessed Lady more and more, and of enkindling her love more ardently in our hearts, which will be to us a foretaste of the happiness which we will afterwards enjoy at her hands in heaven.<sup>50</sup>

This mandate, as he understood it, to foster devotion to Mary was evident throughout Baker's ministerial life.<sup>51</sup>

Closely allied with the more public vistas of Baker's devotion to Mary was his profound personal fidelity to her. Ruth Monk, who was baptized by Baker during his active evangelization of African Americans, called Baker's personal Marian devotion "deep and sincere."<sup>52</sup> Baker was thankful to God for giving Mary as a great advocate and the one who showed perfect example. He wrote, "Mary's life we may not only study and admire, picture and paint,—we are to imitate it as much as we can." Baker saw Mary as the one who brought calm out of chaos.<sup>53</sup>

Baker was also a great champion and practitioner of devotional prayers and rituals honoring Mary. He was very devoted to the rosary. He wrote,

This devotion, so charming [,] needs but little encouragement, as it is filled with happiest thought and sweetest consolation; it must be most

<sup>50</sup> *Annals*, 19, no. 3 (January 1907): 6, AOLV.

<sup>51</sup> One further example of Baker's strong belief that all had a responsibility to bring others to greater devotion to Mary is provided: "We trust that all lovers of Our Blessed Lady will prove their fidelity to her, by striving to attract others to her love, by infusing into their hearts, some of that love for her, which they find by God's grace, burning in their own, and then they will be fulfilling God's will, and draw down upon themselves special grace from heaven." See *Annals* 4, no. 1 (January 1891), clipping in Baker Published Writings File, AOLV.

<sup>52</sup> Ruth Monk, Interview with Author, August 9, 2008, AOLV. In 1933, Father Baker inaugurated an extensive sacramental outreach ministry to African Americans. Over 600 adult men and women were catechized and baptized. Confirmations and weddings were also celebrated. For more details on this ministry, see Roderick Brown, O.P., "A Gathering at the River: 150 Years of Black Catholic History in the Diocese of Buffalo," Essay, 1997, 6, AOLV.

<sup>53</sup> *Annals* 24, no. 2 (October 1911): 5 and 17, no. 1 (July 1904): 5, AOLV.

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dear to Our Blessed Lord, as we are thinking of Him from its beginning to the end; Jesus and Mary go with us hand in hand, as our fingers glide over the Rosary.<sup>54</sup>

Baker also regularly prayed the Stations of the Cross, but he was most devoted and took great time meditating on the fourth station, when Jesus meets Mary on the *Via Dolorosa*. In 1894, desiring a place of reflection and prayer dedicated to Mary, Baker built a shrine to Our Lady of Victory adjacent to St. John's Protectorsy.<sup>55</sup>

The prayers and devotion offered by Father Baker and others, whether public or more private, were often answered in remarkable ways. The *Annals* and *Victorian* reported many favors granted through the intercession of Our Lady of Victory. A typical report from a grateful mother read:

Our Lady of Victory has indeed proved herself a friend to me. Recently my son was in a terrible railroad accident, but thank God he escaped uninjured.—He wore the miraculous medal of Our Blessed Lady of Victory.<sup>56</sup>

One young woman described another favor granted:

About four months ago I asked of our Blessed Mother a favor for my father which has been most beautifully granted. I asked to have my father's sight restored and also his hearing which was almost gone and I rejoice to state that both requests have been granted.<sup>57</sup>

While Nelson Baker's devotion to Mary was unswerving, powerful, and consistent, his zeal at times ascribed to the Mother of God powers she did not possess. In a meditation titled "Mary's Wonderful Power," Baker wrote,

<sup>54</sup> *Annals* 24, no. 2 (October 1911): 1, AOLV.

<sup>55</sup> "Father Baker—A History of Charity" (Publication of Our Lady of Victory Homes of Charity, 1979), 2, AOLV.

<sup>56</sup> *Annals* 17, no. 1 (July 1904): 3, AOLV.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.* Baker wrote his own prayer asking Mary for favors: "O Victorious Lady, thou who hast ever such powerful influence with thy Divine Son, in conquering the hardest of hearts, intercede for those for whom we pray, that, their hearts being softened by Divine Grace, they may return to the unity of the true faith, through Christ our Lord. Amen." See Walter Kern, "Life and Times of Father Baker," #59, in Kern, *Baker Papers*, Vol. IV, AOLV.

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Mary is most powerful and omnipotent in heaven; she commands not only the angels but God himself, whose omnipotence is the omnipotence of Mary. Think now what Mary can do on earth, since she is so powerful in heaven. All power is given her in heaven and on earth.<sup>58</sup>

**Father Baker's Edifice of Faith: The Basilica of Our Lady of Victory**

When Nelson Baker arrived as Superintendent of the institutions at Limestone Hill in 1882, he brought with him a strong devotion to the Mother of God under her title of Our Lady of Victory. From the time of his first encounter with this devotion during his participation in the 1874 pilgrimage to Rome, Our Lady of Victory was central, not only to his spirituality, but was also foundational to his work, as he placed all endeavors under her patronage. As mentioned previously, due to an oppressive debt incurred through operations of St. Joseph's and St. John's, he started the Association of Our Blessed Lady of Victory. This unique solicitation by mail rather remarkably brought economic recovery and, therefore, the ability to expand operations in short order. Baker's two major organs, the *Annals* and the *Victorian*, also found a patron in Mary. Images of Our Lady of Victory were also present everywhere. In 1889, when a new chapel was built in St. John's Protectory, a six-foot-high statue of Our Lady of Victory was placed in a prominent position. Additional statues and other "reminders" of the patronage of Mary, Our Lady of Victory, were found throughout the institutions.

Father Baker had demonstrated his true love for Mary, yet the one manifestation he truly sought, a church in her honor, eluded him. He had thought of such a project as early as 1906. While the institutions that identified Baker's work in the Buffalo area were physically immense and generated lots of attention, St. Patrick's Parish church was rather small and becoming more and more crowded with increased population, especially with the arrival of the steel industry at the

<sup>58</sup> *Annals* 12, no. 1 (July 1899): 11, AOLV.

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turn-of-the-century.<sup>59</sup> However, at this time Baker's attention was fixed on the construction of the Infant Home as a way to address a significant moral issue in the community.<sup>60</sup>

The way forward to Baker's dream shrine dedicated to Our Lady of Victory came about somewhat accidentally. On April 8, 1916, a fire at St. Patrick's Church caused the belfry to collapse. Fortunately no one was injured and the blaze was contained, but the event was an additional catalyst to drive Baker's master plan. It was decided that only necessary repairs to the worship space would be made. Instead of putting money and effort into the old church, Baker used the fire as a catalyst to introduce his master plan. At a parish meeting held shortly after the fire, Baker announced his plans to build a magnificent church, one that would rival similar sanctuaries in Europe, as a way to give thanks to Our Lady of Victory for her constant patronage.<sup>61</sup>

<sup>59</sup> In the latter months of 1899, Walter Scranton and Moses Taylor of the Lackawanna Iron and Steel Company, along with Buffalo capitalists John J. Albright, John G. Milburn, and Edmund Hayes, advanced \$15 million to construct a steel plant in the Buffalo area. The company approved the transfer of operations from Scranton, Pennsylvania, in December. A two-square-mile, 1600-acre, plot of land was acquired along Lake Erie, just south of downtown Buffalo, for the plant. Construction began in May 1900; the first blast furnace was operational on February 13, 1903. Production began immediately, but the physical plant continued to expand, reaching its full extent of 15 mills by 1918.

<sup>60</sup> While the orphanage and protectory were well-known throughout Western New York, there was still a significant piece of Nelson Baker's work that needed to be inaugurated. In the early days of the 20th century, Baker became aware of the need for outreach to save abandoned newborn children and prevent possible abortions by providing a safe and secure facility where women with unplanned pregnancies could go, receive care for themselves and their newborn child, and do so with complete anonymity. In 1906, Baker made his first appeal to his support base for funds to construct such a facility. On August 16, 1908, the Infant Home, located adjacent to St. Joseph's Orphan Asylum, was dedicated. Baker's institutions at Limestone Hill now served youth from birth through high school age, and through his Working Boys' Home, young men as well. Nonetheless, Baker's dream of a grand church was percolating. The *Annals* reported, "It is known by Father Baker's best friends that he is ambitious of giving his parish here one of the greatest churches in the world before his earthly career is ended and he is called to his reward for his saintly works." See *Annals* 19, no.1 (July 1906): 8, AOLV.

<sup>61</sup> *Buffalo Evening News*, April 8, 1916, 2. The damage estimate to the church from the fire, believed to be caused by defective wiring, was \$5000.

Father Baker's monumental edifice to the Mother of God, as with any of his other projects, began on the drawing board. Baker chose Emile Uhlrich, a native born Frenchman with an extensive resumé in the United States, to design the shrine. Uhlrich's philosophy for the shrine was both to honor the Mother of God and create an edifice of grandeur and beauty. He wrote to Baker explaining his ideas:

I feel that this monument should be in an exuberant, exultant mood befitting a national expression of gratitude to Our Lady of Victory as a testimony to Her triumph over the modern spirit of irreligion like a trumpet blast on this prominent knoll, on this national highway, fairly shouting Victory to all who may be inspired by the appeal of this striking monument to place themselves under the Blessed Mother's banner.<sup>62</sup>

In addition to a professional and experienced architect, Baker's prize project needed a similarly well experienced and reliable contractor. He was fortunate to find the right candidate among his own parish flock. Edward S. Jordan, a parishioner at St. Patrick's, was hired in January 1921 as the general contractor for the shrine. Jordan had been the principal contractor for many buildings in Baker's "Second Holy City."<sup>63</sup> Jordan received a strong vote of confidence from Uhlrich who described him as "so capable and trustworthy a man." He wrote to Baker,

At this stage of the work I intended to be a great deal more on the job than the once per month agreed. In fact, under ordinary circumstances, I would have remained at the site as much as Mr. Jordan. But we have really started work ahead of completely worked out details and [we] are still deeply in them. I find that I can be more useful here just now. Besides, you can, no doubt, trust Mr. Jordan. I have asked him to ask for information or any visit whenever it seems useful for the good of the work. Having not heard from him I suppose that he gets along all right.<sup>64</sup>

<sup>62</sup> Emile Uhlrich to Nelson Baker, March 24, 1921, Miscellaneous Papers; Fiske Report, [1991], AOLV.

<sup>63</sup> Galvin, *Father Baker*, 174-76.

<sup>64</sup> Quoted in Fiske Report, [1991], AOLV.

With his two major players for this massive undertaking in place, Father Baker could now turn his attention to the important task of financing this project. As in the past, Baker first went to his loyal Association of Our Blessed Lady of Victory, who had supported his efforts so significantly in the past. His first appeal appeared in July 1921:

We have then only to request our dear Lord to inspire our many devoted friends who are sincere friends to His dear Mother, to erect this Shrine as a loving testimony of their fondest affection and deepest gratitude for the countless blessings and graces that have been so generously bestowed upon them through her sacred hands.<sup>65</sup>

In July 1922, a new mini-column, "A Block of Marble," appeared in the *Annals* asking for a \$10 contribution "to furnish a block of marble for the National Shrine of Our Blessed Lady of Victory."<sup>66</sup> In the column, Baker encouraged his benefactors by referencing the small contribution of the poor widow in the Gospel (Luke 21:1-4):

The faithful clients of Our Lady of Victory who wish a share in the graces which must come to those who help by their "mites" in this glorious building, should endeavor at least to furnish a block of marble.<sup>67</sup>

Baker was also able to convince religious orders, his fellow priests, and a few bishops to contribute more substantial funds to sponsor an altar or a statue of a particular saint.<sup>68</sup>

Nelson Baker's supreme confidence that his financial needs would be met through the intercession of his patroness and the generosity of Association members and other friends, allowed him to boldly go forward even though adequate financing had not been achieved. His goal was to build the

<sup>65</sup> *Annals* 34, no. 3 (July 1921): 3, AOLV.

<sup>66</sup> *Annals* 35, no. 3 (July 1922): 6, AOLV. Lucie Beckett, who worked as a nurse at the Infant Home in the later years of Baker's life, recalls contributions of \$5.00 for a block of marble were also graciously accepted.

<sup>67</sup> *Annals* 36, no. 3 (July 1923): 5-6, AOLV.

<sup>68</sup> Hartel, "Producing Father Baker," 136.

shrine and incur no debt. In the spirit of great faith and assurance, he wrote to a benefactor:

We have great confidence in Almighty God in taking care of our work, as He has always been remarkably good to us, and has always made it easy and pleasant for us to care for this large group of dependents, and we feel if we did the external temporal work, He would see necessary means would be provided.<sup>69</sup>

Construction of the shrine took five years and required the services of at least twenty-two significant contractors. Throughout the process, Baker maintained close oversight on the project by observing daily activity and maintaining a lively and detailed correspondence with his architect and, when necessary, specific contractors. He was not averse to venting his frustration and disappointment when he believed construction had slowed, especially due to the inefficiency of those in his employ. Although their relationship was at times a bit frazzled, Baker counted on Uhlrich to coordinate the efforts of other contractors; he was to be a "second watchdog" for Baker.

As the shrine rose majestically from the earth, the skyline of Lackawanna changed significantly. During the latter years of construction, Father Baker continued his vigilant and strict oversight of every aspect of the project. He was happy to report to Uhlrich, "Everything has gone along smoothly, as we have had no accidents and Almighty God has been very good to us, because everything has worked so pleasantly and safely."<sup>70</sup> The fact that construction had proceeded relatively smoothly was due largely to Father Baker's ability to wear several hats simultaneously in order to get the job done. He often served as a cheerleader keeping all contractors and various other parties as happy as possible. Yet, his main concern was to support Uhlrich. In regular correspondence, Baker supported his architect in disputes. He once wrote "I know you are

<sup>69</sup> Nelson Baker to John Sullivan, January 29, 1922, Basilica File, AOLV.

<sup>70</sup> Nelson Baker to Emile Uhlrich, February 19, 1924, Miscellaneous File, AOLV.

working very hard and the climate is against you.”<sup>71</sup> In response, Uhlrich sought to please Baker, knowing that the project was close to his heart. He told him, “Above all I desire to be useful to you and not abandon the work if anything could be helped by my presence.”<sup>72</sup>

While the project did incur a couple of delays, due to problems with the shipping of materials and a rare bout of ill health for Baker himself, the Shrine was dedicated on May 25, 1926. Baker was the principal celebrant at the dedication Mass; Cardinal Patrick Hayes of New York preached the sermon. He proclaimed,

I know of no church like this, so beautiful, so uplifting, so glorious—I know of no other church like this, consecrated to the Charities of Christ, Our Lord. It is a monument to the Buffalo Diocese, the city of Lackawanna, to our great Lady of Victory and to a modern Apostle of Charity—Father Baker.<sup>73</sup>

The Shrine deservedly received significant praise from many fronts. Its crowning accolade was its designation as a Basilica by the Holy See, as reported on July 20, 1926, by *L'Osservatore Romano*. The ceremony conferring this distinction on the shrine was held on October 3, 1926.

## Conclusion

Nelson Baker, builder of institutions, advocate for the poor, and “Father to the Fatherless,” was, above all things, a priest and servant of Jesus Christ. His legacy of assistance to orphans and troubled youth, the construction of the Basilica of Our Lady of Victory, and the many ways he touched the hearts and minds of thousands of people were for Father Baker sources of spiritual enrichment that nurtured his vocation to serve God’s people as a priest. His ministry and consequently his legacy

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Emile Uhlrich to Nelson Baker, October 19, 1925, Miscellaneous File, AOLV.

<sup>73</sup> “Masterpiece in Marble,” Newsclipping, n.d., Vertical File, Nelson Baker, Buffalo Erie Public Library, Buffalo, New York.

were founded upon a deep and rich spirituality centered on devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary, Our Lady of Victory. From the moment he first encountered his patroness, Baker's life work found a source of sustenance that sustained him throughout his life. This devotion, along with his many physical accomplishments in ministry, is what he leaves to history and to the many who admire his life and work. It is a legacy worthy of sainthood.