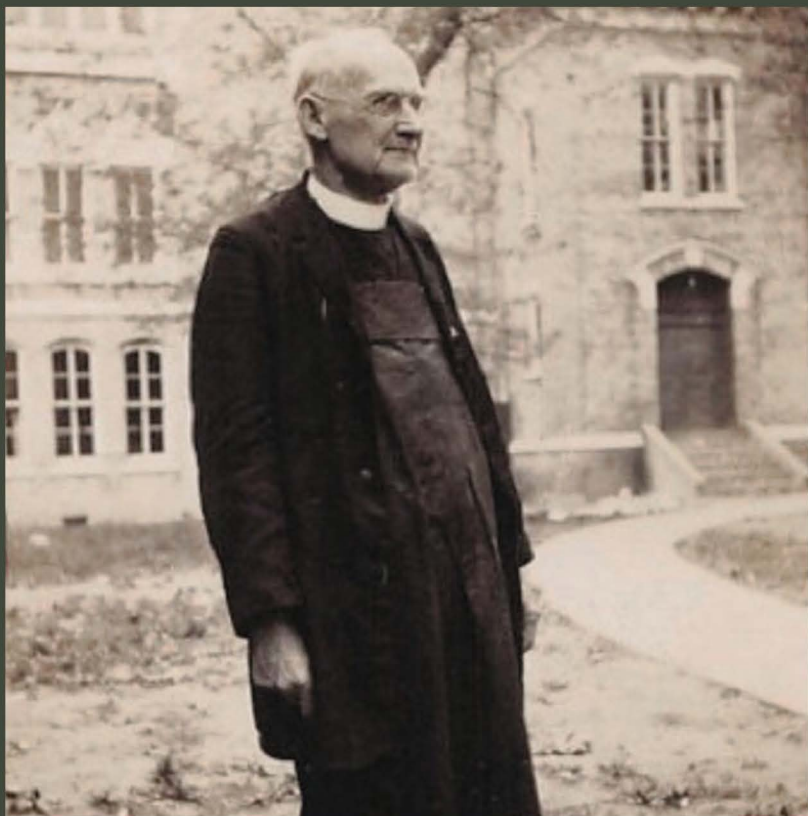


BROTHER
COLUMBA O'NEILL, C.S.C.

MIRACLE MAN OF NOTRE DAME





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Brother Columba O'Neill, C.S.C.

Miracle Man of Notre Dame

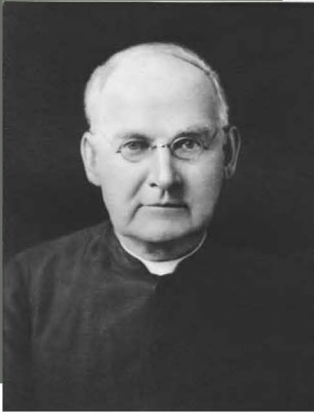


Br. Philip Smith, C.S.C.
Mr. Edwin Donnelly, C.S.C.

*Congregation of Holy Cross
General Administration
Rome, Italy*

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Brother Columba
O'Neill, C.S.C.
1915

The Miracle Man of Notre Dame—that is how Br. Columba (John) O'Neill, C.S.C., was known even prior to his death. Word of the miraculous cures and healings attributed to his prayer and intercession through the Sacred Heart of Jesus had spread from the campus of the University of Notre Dame in northern Indiana as far away as several European countries and

Australia. God was working His healing grace through this man. How is it that this humble Holy Cross Brother, who worked mostly as a cobbler, came to be known as the Miracle Man of Notre Dame?

Childhood and Youth

John O'Neill was born on 5 November 1848 to parents Michael and Ellen in Mackeysburg, Pennsylvania. He had a congenital foot abnormality and was not expected to survive, so he received an emergency baptism two days later. To the surprise of the O'Neill family and their friends, John lived 75 years.

Immigrants to the United States from the Irish city of Kilkenny, Michael and Ellen had a total of six children. Neither Michael nor Ellen was formally educated, but they were faithful Catholics and raised their children in the faith.

John grew up especially close to his mother. While his father worked long hours in the bowels of the earth mining coal, John spent most of every day in his mother's care, as she patiently taught him to walk with his malformed feet. It is a testament to his mother's love and John's determination that he eventually developed the ability to walk relatively gracefully.

In the mid-19th century, Mackeysburg was an epicenter for Pennsylvania quarrying. A coal miner himself, Michael seized the opportunity to instruct his sons in the trade of mining for coal. The men of the O'Neill household were expected to work in the coal mines with their father, who was, in John's words, "as strict as the blazes" and was known to whip his children "for every little thing."

John was determined to be like the other men in the family and work in the coal mines, even if doing so meant dealing with the real pain that such work would cause him. Despite his best efforts, John was unable to wield the pickaxe, which was a symbol of manhood among blue-collar families in 19th-century Pennsylvanian mining

towns. He attempted to handpick slate from coal to bring home a meager week's wages of \$1.50, but his physical limitations prevented him from performing even this task.

Being unable to work in the mines was a source of great shame for John. It was the capstone of countless humiliations that John endured during his youth, both at home from his austere father and at school from his classmates, on account of his frailty. He learned how to face suffering and rejection. And yet, John never let that defeat him. Instead, much like the Apostle St. Paul, he came to learn: "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9).

Michael and Ellen were at a loss as to how their fifth child might earn a living. Though it was evident from a young age that John was determined, witty, faithful, and humble, it remained unclear how an unlearned man of less than average means could survive in a mining town if not by the manual labor sustaining the local economy.

Interestingly, given that his feet were the source of most of his physical limitations and thus the humiliations that he suffered, John developed an interest in shoemaking and sought the tutelage of the village cobbler. This was God's grace working through John's humility.

In admitting his unfitness for the mines and allowing one door to close, John discovered a passion for working with shoes. John had no idea that the simple labor of a cobbler would be the door through which God would do great things through him.

A shoemaker's apprentice throughout the 1860s, John had to face not only his personal struggles but also the struggles of his nation. Civil War broke out with the Battle of Fort Sumter on 12 April 1861. Though news traveled slowly in those days, word of bloodshed and a call to arms soon reached the O'Neill's small mining town. The miners of Mackeysburg were quick to supply troops for battle, and this put pressure on the village cobbler and his apprentice to produce an abundance of strong new shoes.

Amid the trials of his country, his town, and the ultimate closing of the village cobbler's shop, John, hardly fourteen years of age, began to feel a special call to serve God in the religious life. At the same time, John was in need of work, and so in 1862, he set off from Mackeysburg, cobbler tools in hand, looking for job opportunities. What began as a simple search for work slowly transformed into a great journey that would eventually lead John not only to reach the West Coast of the United States but also to discover his vocation.

Vocational Journey

Through his travels and labors of his teenage years and early twenties, John's sense of a calling to the religious life deepened. He spent the early days of his journey in Pennsylvania working for parishes, where he would remain for as long as his services were needed. This itinerant work—which was undoubtedly a cause of further suffering on account of his foot condition—proved rather successful. The demand for traveling cobblers was high in those days, when the nearest neighbor might have been several miles away. John's work in local parishes also provided him with a much-desired occasion for private prayer before the Blessed Sacrament.

Around 1869, a little over 20 years old, John wandered “guided,” he believed, “by the direction of the Blessed Virgin”—out of Pennsylvania and into the West. After an initial stop in St. Louis, Missouri, he continued on to Colorado, where he had found a good deal of work.

While in Denver, John attended the 6:00 a.m. daily Mass prior to going to work. Reflecting on his Rocky Mountain days, John would later say: “In those days, one who [went to Mass every day] was counted very pious. I was the only layman that you could find in the church.” Although rare

for an individual to receive frequent—let alone daily—Communion in the 1860s, for John this was a vital part of his day. On Sundays, when resting from a long week of work, the young cobbler sat for hours praying in a church. His personal relationship with the Lord was deepening along the way, his ears tuning so as to hear more clearly His voice.

After his stay in Denver, John set off for California between the years 1870 and 1873. Revealing his resilience and determination, John made this journey mostly on foot, stopping along the way to San Francisco to practice his trade and thus cover his expenses.

Having continued to experience the stirrings of a vocation to the religious life in his prayer, John sought to join the Franciscans in California, but he was not admitted to the order because of his foot condition. Yet, just as John was rejected from the ranks of the miners of Mackaysburg and was not deterred, so too was he not discouraged by this more recent rejection. Remaining confident in the call he had heard since he was 14, John recalled learning of the Congregation of Holy Cross from another traveling cobbler, Johnnie O'Brien, who encountered Holy Cross during his time as an apprentice in the shoemaker shop of the Manual Labor School at Notre Dame, Indiana. The stories John had heard from



Manual Labor School
Notre Dame, Indiana

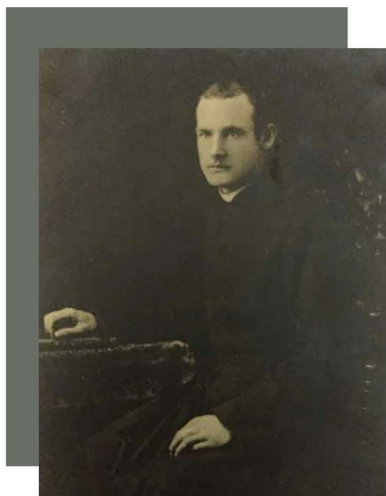
Johnnie about Notre Dame's working brothers teaching blacksmithing, tailoring, carpentry, and many other trades led John to consider that perhaps his vocation might involve joining this "great band of men."

Around the time of his father's death in Mackeysburg in 1873, John wrote to the novice master at Notre Dame, Fr. Augustin Louage, C.S.C., to inquire more about the community. It is unknown what, if any, response John received, yet the following year, on 6 July, after providentially receiving a train ticket, he departed back east for Notre Dame.

On a hot and humid 9 July 1874, around five o'clock in the afternoon, John was met at the Notre Dame gatehouse

by Br. Francis Xavier Patois, C.S.C. Br. Patois was among the first seven Holy Cross religious to arrive in America in 1842. "I am here to meet with Fr. Louage," announced John. John met with both Fr. Louage and Fr. Edward Sorin, C.S.C., the founder of the University of Notre Dame and the superior general of the Congregation of Holy Cross. Fr. Sorin asked John, "What can you do if you become a brother?" The young man replied, "I am a cobbler and a shoemaker." That very day John entered Holy Cross as a postulant for the brothers.

Early Years in Holy Cross



Br. Columba O'Neill, C.S.C.
1876

John was given a seat in the community chapel where he could look directly at a statue of the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

The Congregation's founder, Blessed Basil Anthony Marie Moreau, dedicated the Priests of Holy Cross to the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

Little did John know that over the next 50 years, he would be known as a devoted intercessor with the Sacred Heart for thousands of suffering men and women. Indeed, it is through his devotion to the Sacred Heart that he would come to be known as the Miracle Man of Notre Dame.

On 1 September, Fr. Louage told John that he had been formally accepted for the novitiate. The novitiate is the special year of formation required by the Church of all those discerning religious life. At the end of the time in novitiate, the novices profess their religious vows. On the feast of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, 8 September, John formally entered the novitiate, donned the novices' habit, and received the name Columba. The perseverance that allowed St. Columba to lead countless men and women in Scotland to Christ became a model for Br. Columba's religious life. With the strength of the faith of his ancestors and their perseverance, Br. Columba was—in the words of Fr. Charles O'Donnell's eulogy decades later—"a miraculous man cut from an apparently un-miraculous cloth. He would lead thousands of individuals to experience intimately the healing love of 'these two Hearts': the Sacred Heart of Jesus and the Immaculate Heart of Mary."

On 15 August 1876, Br. Columba took Final Vows, professing the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience according to the *Constitutions of the Congregation of Holy Cross*. Revealing his apostolic zeal and missionary heart, Br. Columba also chose to profess what was known in Holy Cross at the time as the “fourth vow of mission,” whereby he vowed “to go anywhere in the world the superior general pleases to send me.”

By professing the religious vows, Br. Columba had fulfilled the desire that had long stirred in his heart to give his life in service of God. He immediately volunteered to go to India or to Molokai, where he could help Fr. Damien in his work among the lepers. In this zeal to serve in the foreign missions, Br. Columba was certainly a kindred spirit with Blessed Basil Moreau, who from even before his foundation of the Congregation expressed a desire for missionary work. Yet as was the case with Fr. Moreau, who never served in missions outside of France, God had other plans for Br. Columba and how he would give his life to make Him known, loved, and served.

Initial Healings

On 13 September 1876, Br. Columba and two other

brothers were assigned to open a home for orphans under St. Joseph's patronage in Lafayette, Indiana. It housed 60 boys. It was there at Lafayette that Br. Columba's extraordinary gift for intercessory prayer and healing first began to manifest itself. He began to use water from Lourdes, France, and pray with the boys who were sick. Some of them were cured of their illness. Much like St. André Bessette, who attributed all the healings through his prayer to St. Joseph, Br. Columba took no credit for a single cure. Rather, he claimed that the healings were the effect of the intercession of the Sacred Heart of Jesus through the Immaculate Heart of Mary.

Br. Columba requested to leave his work at the orphanage because there was no longer any need for his trade. As he simply wrote to his religious superior, "The boys have their shoes." By the summer of 1885, Br. Columba returned to Notre Dame and was assigned to the campus shoe shop, where he remained until his death on 20 November 1923.

On the one hand, not much happened during his 38-year span at Notre Dame. He was a brother living a simple life, praying in silence, and making and repairing shoes.

He seldom stepped foot off the campus of the University of Notre Dame, except for the occasional visits to his sister Elizain Keokuk in Iowa. On the other hand, Br. Columba's healing ministry would slowly spread far beyond the bounds of Notre Dame's campus to the rest of the world.

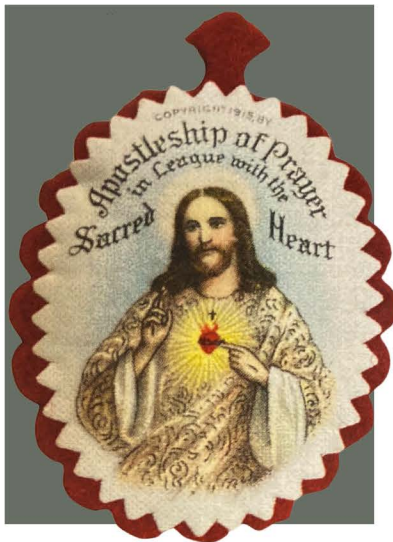
Devotion to the Sacred Heart

In the early 1890's, in addition to his work at the campus's shoe shop, Br. Columba assumed the responsibility of personal caretaker of Fr. Sorin. This assignment lasted from 1891 until Fr. Sorin's death in 1893. During those years caring for Fr. Sorin in the shadows of the Church of the Sacred Heart on Notre Dame's campus, Br. Columba's devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus continued to deepen and transform him.

Back in 1887, Br. Columba had joined the Archconfraternity of the Sacred and Immaculate Heart of Mary for the Conversion of Sinners. Then on 14 July 1892, he received his certificate of admission to the Apostleship of Prayer of the Holy League of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Br. Columba pledged that he would "offer in the morning, the prayers, actions, and sufferings of the day for the intentions of the Sacred Heart."

Br. Columba took his devotion to the Immaculate Heart

and the Sacred Heart so seriously that during that same year, while still serving as Fr. Sorin's personal caretaker, he started producing and distributing images of the Immaculate Heart of Mary (approximately 10,000 paper badges) and the Sacred Heart of Jesus (approximately 30,000 cloth badges). A widespread form of popular piety at the time, the badges were meant to be worn pinned on one's clothing. Normally, a devotional prayer was said as the badge was pinned and then at other moments throughout the day. The production and distribution of these badges would come to mark a decisive expansion in Br. Columba's ministry of prayer and healing.



Shortly after Fr. Sorin's death on 31 October 1893, Br. Columba was reassigned by his religious superior to return full-time to the cobbler shop. This re-assignment freed him to be present in a more intentional manner to the students at Notre Dame. No matter how far news and fame would spread beyond campus of the healing powers of his intercessory prayer, Br. Columba always remained faithful to his primary obedience at the cobbler shop on campus. There he attended to students, not only repairing their shoes, but also offering advice with his refined Irish wit and inviting them to place their hope in God and, above all, in the Sacred Heart of His Son Jesus.

Stories of Healings

Stories of cures on Notre Dame's campus began to spread beyond the university community and circulated throughout North America, Mexico, and as far away as several European countries and Australia. More and more people began to write to him and to visit his shoe shop at Notre Dame. He wrote thousands of letters in response to those who had written to him sharing their physical sufferings and requesting prayers and "favors" through his intercession to the Hearts of Jesus and Mary.

As early as 1916, Br. Columba was traveling to various Midwest towns and cities on “curing tours,” and news of healings were publicized in local newspapers.

The following two stories are emblematic of the many stories that survive of healings credited to the prayers of Br. Columba.

The first story was recorded in a letter from 85-year-old Jean P. [née Schwartz] Donohue.

She suffered from polio and visited the shoe shop in 1918 when she was just four. Her left leg was paralyzed and shriveled. The verdict had been the same from all the specialists: Surgery to unbind the leg meant it would hang limp; leave it alone “and the foot will never touch the ground.”

Jean’s father learned of Br. Columba who made special shoes for people with physical disabilities in the area. According to Jean, her father also had heard that this Holy Cross Brother had a “supernatural devotion to the Sacred Heart, and there were known to have been some cures. So, we traveled to Br. Columba’s workshop behind the Golden Dome. The room had walls filled with crutches and braces from persons who had been cured after he had prayed for them. Br. Columba patted my head and said simply, ‘The little girl will be all right.’”

Jean remembers getting on the train for the trip back to Lansing, Michigan, when “my father lifted me onto the seat [and] he noticed that my leg was no longer bent. It was shorter, but it hung straight like its mate. In less than a year, as brother had said, ‘The little girl was all right.’” Jean lived to be 93.

Another story concerns an instantaneous cure that took place in June 1923, just five months before Br. Columba died. Sr. Lioba Holtz, O.S.B., was living at St. Walburg Priory in Covington, Kentucky. From 1918 through June of 1923, she suffered from frequent bouts of heart trouble. She explained that her attacks were so severe that, “I would lose breath, my face and fingernails would assume a purple color, my limbs grow stiff, and I could neither move nor speak.” On more than one occasion, the sisters and the chaplain thought she might die.

“I was never able to walk fast, to lift anything heavy, to stay in a crowd or in a closed room,” she said. “to exert myself in any way would bring on an attack.” Her physician told her prioress that Sr. Lioba suffered from an enlarged, leaking heart, an incurable condition.

In the spring of 1923, the sisters were given permission to do summer studies at the University of Notre Dame, and Sr. Lioba wanted to attend to begin study for her Master

of Mathematics degree. Her prioress was against the idea because of Sr. Lioba's severe heart condition. Sr. Lioba's physician, however, told the prioress to let her go, explaining that, "she can die just as happy a death at Notre Dame as here in Covington."

The day before she left for Notre Dame, Sr. Lioba had a severe attack, yet arrived safely at the University. Exhausted, she was taken to see Br. Columba at the Community House.

"I shall never forget the incident," she said. "Br. Columba said, 'Have courage, Sister. If you can trust in the Sacred Heart, the Sacred Heart will cure you.' Then he went into the house, [and] brought out some Sacred Heart badges. He gave me two. . . . Then he made the sign of the cross with one Sacred Heart badge over my heart, praying, 'Most Sacred Heart of Jesus, I trust in Thee.' He bade me to wear the badge and to repeat the above prayer five times daily. From that moment until now [1926] I have never had another attack."

Forty-four-year-old Sr. Lioba lived to be elected the fourth prioress of her monastery in 1931, and returned to Notre Dame in 1936 to tell of her cure to the Holy Cross community.

She died in 1951 at age 70 after an impressive academic career.

A Moving Death

Five months after Sr. Lioba was returned to health, Br. Columba died on 20 November 1923, from complications of Spanish influenza that he had contracted in 1918. Word of his death spread rapidly throughout South Bend and beyond. In a letter informing the members of the Congregation in South Bend of Br. Columba's death, Br. Isidore Alderton, C.S.C., assistant religious superior of the Community House, describes the events of 20-22 November 1923:

I feel it is my duty to write you of the last hours of our Saintly Brother Columba and the events of the past two days. His was a very peaceful death. Our men had taken turns watching with him for a number of nights. As I went there day after day, it was easily seen that he was gradually going. The last three days he went very fast. Father Gallagher [his religious superior] brought him Communion Tuesday morning and was standing over him with the Host raised on high when he passed away. His lips were too tightly closed to give him Communion.

He was conscious up to the very last, never complained, never asked for anything except just what was necessary.

News of his death soon spread to the people in South Bend and vicinity and dozens of the members of the community. Sisters and strangers were there to view the body before it was even in the casket. For the past two days and nights, the parlor in the Community House has been a veritable shrine. He looked so peaceful, so happy, it was difficult to say prayers for him, and I am convinced that thousands of petitions were made to him, where but hundreds were made for him.

The members of the community were all there, the sisters from St. Mary's, from the kitchen, the hospital, the schools. All who were able to walk or ride were at his bier. The professors from the college, students, and strangers, all made their pilgrimage. One had to wait in line for his turn to enter the room or get near the remains. They came with their beads, their badges, their medals, cards, and trinkets and all were applied to his hands and face. The high and the low, the rich and the poor, the learned and the unlearned, all became as little children in his presence. Not one entered and went away without carrying some precious artifact that had for him become a real treasure because it had touched the body of one of the holy ones of God. ...

What can be said of the funeral? It was a community

funeral, as grand as could be arranged with visitors from the vicinity and even from distant parts. ... To see such men as Father Bolger, Father Haggerty, Father Hugh O'Donnell go forward and place their beads upon his withered hands would convince a man that here was something beyond the power of man to describe. Members from Moreau, the Seminary, Novitiate, and Dujarié, they all have their treasures today and all have others to send to their parents.

The world and the strangers were anxious to hear about the miracles, but it seemed to me that the members of the community thought little of these things during these days. They meditated upon his life; they took into account the sacrifices he had made, the example of humility, love of neighbor, confidence in God, lively faith, devotion to the Sacred Heart, life of prayer, of poverty, etc., and all realized that in these was found the secret of his sanctity.

His remains have been conveyed to the earth, but there is no question but that his work will continue.

If in his lifetime he was powerful in obtaining assistance for us, what can be said of his power tonight when he is resting close to the Sacred Heart of Our Divine Lord?

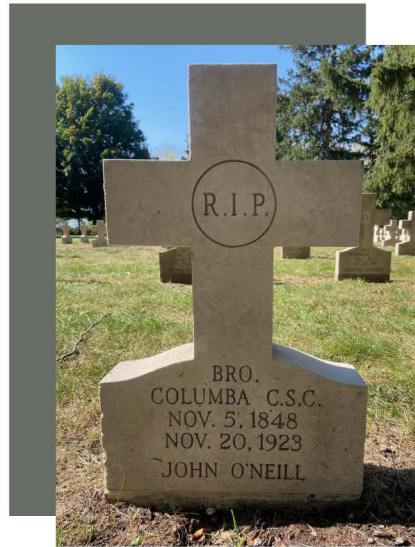
He spent his life in promoting this devotion to the Sacred Heart. The Sacred Heart has been very good to us as a community and as individual members, and it now remains for us to but increase that devotion in ourselves and spread the same to those in our charge.

Yours in the Sacred Heart,

Brother Isidore

In his sermon at Br. Columba's Funeral Mass, on 23 November 1923, Fr. Charles O'Donnell, C.S.C., preached: "He strongly and actively promoted devotion to the Sacred Heart, a devotion which years ago had not the general favor it has now. His efforts were crowned with a peculiar success. He lived to see all Notre Dame a shrine to the Sacred Heart."

Br. Columba, with humorous simplicity and humility, had summarized his life and his life's work a bit differently to one of his brothers in community in the weeks leading up to his death: "I'll be dying one of these days, and maybe they'll be putting something in *The Scholastic*," he said. "You can tell them to say there was an old shoemaker at Notre Dame, and he had a devotion to the Sacred Heart, and there seem to have been some cures."

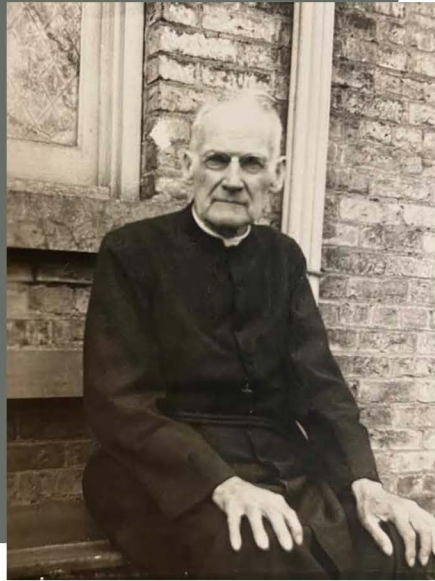


Brother Columba is buried
in the Holy Cross
Community Cemetery
Notre Dame, Indiana

Miracle Men of Holy Cross

The words and spirit of Br. Columba clearly echo those of Blessed Basil Moreau, who referred to himself on several occasions as but a “simple instrument” in the hands of Divine Providence. He had told his religious that it would be through their “generous cooperation and faithful correspondence with the grace of vocation” that God’s Providence would be able to act through them.

Without a doubt, Br. Columba generously and faithfully cooperated with God's grace in his life, and thus became such an amazing instrument in the hand of God's Providence.



Brother Columba O'Neill, C.S.C.
1922

In that regard, and in so many other ways, Br. Columba's life shared much in common with that of his better-known brother in Holy Cross, St. André Bessette, the Miracle Man of Montreal. Both were born with ailments that necessitated emergency baptisms and foreshadowed

lives marked by physical suffering. Both as young men spent years as itinerant workers, journeying in search of work, yet ultimately—though not without a few twists and turns—discovering their vocations. Both as Holy Cross Brothers dedicated most of their religious lives to humble ministries (St. André as a doorkeeper and Br. Columba as a cobbler).

Both confronted their significant limitations with deeper faith, which allowed God in His grace to use those same limitations as founts of His limitless love through the intercession of St. Joseph and the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

Br. Columba and St. André most likely would have met each other in 1920, when the Congregation held its General Chapter on the campus of the University of Notre Dame. While on campus, St. André, a delegate to the Chapter, stayed in Dujarié Hall just across the lake from the Community House where Br. Columba lived. Though there is no direct record of their meeting, Br. Columba certainly knew of Br. André, having written a friend in 1912 that, “We have a brother in Canada working miracles [through] St. Joseph.” Among the items found in Columba’s room upon his death is a black skullcap. It was a common practice that Canadian brothers wore such a cap, but it was not so among the American brothers. Could the two brothers have exchanged gifts?

Apart from whatever physical gifts they may have exchanged, by far the greater gift Br. Columba and Br. André would have shared with each other was their deep faith and trust in God's healing, merciful love and how even the crosses of their lives, and the lives of those they met, could be borne as a gift. In that faith, these two Holy Cross Brothers truly were, in the words of the *Constitutions of the Congregation of Holy Cross*, "men with hope to bring."

**Prayer for the Intercession of
Br. Columba O'Neill, C.S.C.**

*Provident God,
we thank you for how you made known
the love of the Sacred Heart of your Son, Jesus,
through the life and ministry
of your servant, Brother Columba O'Neill.*

*We ask that you bring many to know and imitate
the virtues of this humble Holy Cross Brother,
so as to grow in faith, hope, and charity.*

*We ask you through his intercession
to grant us the favor of ...
(state your intention).*

*May his life inspire us to follow after Jesus,
who says, "Come. Follow me."
We ask this through Christ, our Lord.*

Amen.

To report a favor received through the intercession of Br. Columba O'Neill, or any other Holy Cross religious in the process of canonization, please send an email to:

saints@holycrossroma.org



FRIENDS OF MOREAU
Volume 3

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