

# Nelson Baker

## Holy Man of the Rust Belt

*Susan K. Roll*

Driving south along interstate highway 190, with the city skyline of Buffalo, New York, on the left and the Niagara River on the right, one veers onto Route 5, the Skyway. While the view on the right opens out onto Lake Erie and the distant Canadian shore, the view on the left grows progressively more industrial and grim: massive grain elevators, rusted factory walls and towers, here and there a plume of white exhaust from a chimney. The decayed plants once belonging to Lackawanna Steel, later Bethlehem Steel, now employ only 300 workers where once 20,000 counted on lifelong employment. The appearance of the factories and blast furnaces gave the name to the 'Rust Belt', a region in the northeast United States once flourishing with heavy industry, but now dilapidated and plagued with unemployment and various social ills.

Nelson H. Baker (1842-1936) lived during the transformation of this settlement south of Buffalo to an industrial city. This deeply beloved pastor and astute administrator dedicated his priestly career of 60 years to meeting the numerous human needs generated by industrialization and social change. Baker founded a complex of social welfare institutions to care for orphans, runaways, unwed mothers and others in need. Among the local population he is revered and genuinely loved for his personal concern for the poor even today. A popular movement for his beatification has developed, but for differing reasons: on the part of many in the Catholic population out of respect for a beloved pastor, by the local diocese for devotional reasons, and by city officials hoping to improve the dismal economic situation of Lackawanna. This article will examine Father Baker within the socio-economic context of his city, both in his own time and today, and raise questions related to the intersection of religious faith and social issues in a particular locality.

### 1. Biographical sketch

Nelson H. Baker had seemed well on the way to a successful and lucrative career in business when he began studies for the Catholic priesthood at the age of 28. His priestly life however was shaped precisely by his solid business sense, the ability to turn around a bankrupt institution and build it into a complex of operations not unlike the secular business barons of the same period of American history, combined with genuine Christian compassion.

### 1.1. Early life and young adulthood

The second of four sons born to Lewis Baker, a German Lutheran immigrant merchant born Becker,<sup>1</sup> and Caroline Donellan, a devout Irish Catholic immigrant girl, Nelson was baptized one month after birth in St. John's Lutheran Church. Later records show that he was baptized again at age 9 at Old St. Patrick's Catholic Church on Buffalo's East Side.<sup>2</sup> Baker seems to have been particularly attracted to the faith of his pious mother.

A former seaman, Lewis Baker owned a grocery and general store. Nelson completed his schooling at Central High School in 1859. He worked in his father's business, with a brief hiatus when he was called up for active duty during the Civil War (1861-1865). Following his discharge in 1863 Nelson and his business partner, Joseph Meyer, opened what was to become a highly successful feed and grain business. At this time Buffalo, a prosperous city of 20,000 inhabitants, served as an important trade juncture between the Erie Canal which linked the Great Lakes with the Hudson River and New York City, and the grain-growing regions of the Midwest.

Baker became involved in the St. Vincent de Paul Society and other church-related charitable projects, gradually giving thought to the possibility of entering the priesthood. During this period he met and aided Father Thomas Hines, pastor of St. Patrick's church at Limestone Hill and administrator of St. Joseph's Orphanage and St. John's Protectory for delinquent and homeless boys. Baker left the business and entered Our Lady of the Angels Seminary (now Niagara University) in 1869.

Although an active student leader in the seminary, he lost nearly a year of study due to a severe blood infection. Not long after his recovery and return to study, Baker volunteered to represent the seminary and the diocese of Buffalo as a member of the first American pilgrimage to Rome to express support for Pope Pius IX shortly after the annexation of the Papal States. Both to and from Rome Baker stopped in Paris to visit the small but renowned shrine to *Notre Dame des Victoires*. He meditated on the crutches and other tokens of miraculous cures attributed to the intervention of Mary under the title Our Lady of Victory. Thereafter he committed himself to personal devotion to Our Lady of Victory, attributing to her all prosperity of his undertakings.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> T.R. Allan, interviewed in T. MCHENRY (producer): *Legacy of victory: remembering Father Baker* (Buffalo: Daybreak TV Productions/Diocesan Office of Communications 2002).

<sup>2</sup> Today the Catholic church would normally accept the Lutheran baptism and not rebaptize.

<sup>3</sup> B. HANLEY: *Servant of God Monsignor Nelson H. Baker, 1841-1936*, in *The Anthonian* 53 (1971) 10. Baker's own account in *The Catholic Union* 3 (25 June 1874) 5 does not support the legend that he was profoundly affected by this particular shrine.

## 1.2. Priesthood and charitable institutions

Baker was ordained a priest in 1876 and assigned to assist Father Hines in administering the orphanage and protectory. The financial recession of 1873 coupled with high expenses had pushed both institutions into a total debt of \$27,000. Baker applied his business acumen to the increasingly desperate finances for five years until, discouraged, he requested a transfer and was sent to the small town of Corning. One year later the bishop reassigned Baker to Limestone Hill, this time as director of the homes and pastor of the local parish. By then the debt had risen to \$56,000 per year. Baker, according to extant accounts, did two things: he emptied the remainder of his still-sizeable personal savings account, and he called in the creditors to offer them terms: either accept payment now but no expectation of further business from the homes, or extend credit awhile longer. Only a few creditors demanded immediate payment.<sup>4</sup>

Baker began to apply a humane approach to the boys' upbringing in the two homes. The protectory, built in 1863 to house delinquent boys age 11-16, had barred windows like a prison. Baker took down the bars and renovated the facility to provide a more homelike atmosphere. He expanded the available job training including farm work, carpentry, plumbing, shoemaking, tailoring and electrical repairs. The daily schedule was highly structured, beginning at 5:30 am, including Mass, school, trade school, play time, study time and bedtime prayer.<sup>5</sup> Saturday evenings the boys took a mandatory bath and Sunday afternoons they often watched a film. Several times a year children from the various institutions enjoyed an outing at the park sponsored by the Automobile Association.

The orphanage housed younger boys ages 5-11 who were often brought by a widowed parent or relatives who could not care for them.<sup>6</sup> While the Brothers of the Holy Infancy had charge of the protectory, Sisters of St. Joseph cared for the boys in the orphanage, which included two classrooms for basic grammar-school education as well as trade school training. Soon the fame of Father Baker's homes was so great that orphaned boys would turn up at the train station from far away with a note pinned to their coat, 'Father Baker. Victoria, West Seneca, New York'.<sup>7</sup>

The Working Boys' Home opened in Buffalo in 1897 to house some 80 employed boys age 15 and older, without family, who were "...too old [for] an

4 A. PYTAK: *A Christian commitment. The story of Father Nelson Henry Baker* (Lackawanna 1986) 8-9.

5 T.A. GALVIN: *A modern apostle of charity. Father Baker and the 'Lady of Victory' Charities* (Buffalo 1925) 30.

6 *Ibidem* 209-211. Today a generation of adults relate with a smile that when they misbehaved as children, their parents would shout in exasperation: "If you don't behave I'm sending you to Father Baker's!"

7 HANLEY: *Servant of God* 22.

orphan asylum, too good to be detained in a reformatory.”<sup>8</sup> Between 1883 and 1901 the population of the protectory increased from 120 to 385, the orphanage grew from 118 to 236, plus those in the Working Boys’ Home and two Working Girls’ Homes.<sup>9</sup>

In 1906 infant skeletons were dredged up from a canal.<sup>10</sup> In 1907 construction began on Our Lady of Victory Infant Home, across Ridge Road from the protectory and the church. By 1925 forty nurses at the infant home cared for over 200 babies at a time, many of whom were to be placed for adoption.<sup>11</sup> Word spread that an empty bassinet was always available in the entrance foyer which was kept unlocked, and often a baby was placed there anonymously.<sup>12</sup> In 1915 Our Lady of Victory Maternity Hospital was built to care for unmarried mothers until they gave birth. One year after its opening, OLV Hospital became a general care facility incorporating an obstetrics department.

In this society Baker displayed unusual courage in defending the provision of services for unmarried mothers and their infants. He claimed the infant home was to “guide the misguided, and not only to place the babies in good homes, but also to return the girls, more sinned against than sinning in a great majority of cases, to their families with hopeful futures.”<sup>13</sup> In another interview he explained further:

It is sad to listen to the stories of these girl mothers. Many of them have no place to turn. Today there are 230 babies in the orphanage, two in [each] crib, and of these 100 are bottle babies. So nurses care for them and the girl mothers.<sup>14</sup>

Baker claimed that

no troubled woman was ever turned away, and there were no grilling questions before admittance. (...) After her ordeal the woman was given (...) a ticket to her

<sup>8</sup> GALVIN: *Modern apostle* 247.

<sup>9</sup> [www.ourladyofvictory.org/bakerstory/htm](http://www.ourladyofvictory.org/bakerstory/htm) The girls’ homes are attested only in F. ANDERSON: *Apostle of charity* (Lackawanna 2002<sup>3</sup>) 108.

<sup>10</sup> Researchers such as Allan and H. Hartel cannot verify reports from news sources on the unearthing of infant bones. See HARTEL: [www.angelfire.com/ny5/media-medusa/projects/baker/background/html](http://www.angelfire.com/ny5/media-medusa/projects/baker/background/html), p. 3. Secondary accounts vary widely, from the bodies of infants being found in different parts of the city, to 200 skeletons discovered in the Erie Canal. HANLEY: *Servant of God* 26, says simply that “over the years people very often left abandoned infants on the doorsteps of Our Lady of Victory.”

<sup>11</sup> GALVIN: *Modern apostle* 271-273.

<sup>12</sup> ANDERSON: *Apostle of charity* 78.

<sup>13</sup> *Buffalo Express* (3 June 1923) no page.

<sup>14</sup> *Buffalo Courier* (3 August 1923) no page.

home. It was urged that she take her baby with her, if possible. But when – as frequently is so – it was impossible, the child was taken for adoption.<sup>15</sup>

Baker's associate Galvin illustrates the severe social judgment against unwed mothers:

We have heard it said that such an Institution 'is an invitation to crime', 'a monument to man's lower instincts', 'an insult to Society', 'an offense against the higher nature', and other like innuendoes. (...) Crimes of this nature have been committed from time immemorial and shall be committed till the end of the world. No human power can stop them. How deserving of admiration, encouragement and assistance must be that Charity that is prepared to cope with such an evil...<sup>16</sup>

Even for a shrewd business manager the money had to come from somewhere: maintenance of the buildings ran several hundred thousand dollars per year. Although Baker credited the intercession of Our Lady of Victory, he may be the first fundraiser to make use of direct mail solicitation of potential donors. About 1885 Baker began writing systematically to postmasters all over the United States to ask for the names and addresses of local Catholic women known for charity. He then wrote to each one describing the orphanage and protectory and offering membership in the Association of Our Lady of Victory. Dues of 25¢ per year entitled members to be remembered in the prayers of the children and their caregivers and in masses at the Limestone Hill institutions,<sup>17</sup> and a subscription to the newsletter *The Victorian*. Not only did funds in small amounts pour into the institutions, but the fame of Father Baker's projects spread nationwide, partly accounting for the arrival of orphan boys from far away.

### 1.3. Later life and the Basilica

By 1921 Baker was nearly eighty, still chief administrator of the OLV complex and Vicar General of the diocese, yet he undertook an audacious building project: a basilica in honour of Our Lady of Victory, modelled on the most magnificent Renaissance churches of Europe, and from which no expense would be spared although he had no funds. To cover the \$3,000,000 cost Baker asked donors to contribute one marble brick for \$10, and went door-to-door for contributions of gold and silver for the monsternce.<sup>18</sup> The Basilica was entirely paid for at its May 1926 dedication.

<sup>15</sup> *Buffalo Times* (29 July 1936) no page.

<sup>16</sup> GALVIN: *Modern apostle* 273.

<sup>17</sup> ANDERSON: *Apostle of charity* 53.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem* 88-89.

Built of mostly Italian Carrara marble, the brilliant white Basilica features two towers and a copper dome second in size in the United States only to that of the Capitol in Washington, D.C. Angels of all sizes and styles figure prominently in the decoration. Virtually every interior surface is ornately decorated. Exquisite Stations of the Cross, the painted mural inside the dome, stained glass windows, African mahogany pews and a custom-made pipe organ inspire visitors' awe. Outside above the main entrance stands a four-meter-high marble statue of Our Lady of Victory, and over the colonnades on either side stands the figure of Father Baker surrounded by thirty boys on one side, and a Sister of St. Joseph with thirty girls on the other.

During the 1930's Depression more pressure was exerted on the Baker institutions to provide for large numbers of the hungry, homeless and unemployed. At first day-old bread was distributed, then a soup kitchen was set up in the protectory. Baker gave out small amounts of money freely over the objections of his associates.<sup>19</sup> The Sisters would stand near the lines of Lackawanna Steel workers on payday to ask for contributions.<sup>20</sup>

At his death on 29 July 1936, Baker was embalmed and his body lay in state three days in the Basilica. Some 300,000 to 500,000 mourners passed by his casket in sweltering July weather to pay their last respects or to touch a religious object to the gloves on his hands. Baker was buried next to his parents in Holy Cross Cemetery.

## 2. Legends and miracles

Both written and oral accounts attribute to Baker miracles which follow familiar patterns in hagiography: prescience or unexplained knowledge, healing power, multiplication of food or other resources for the poor, even a story that he was visited by Satan.<sup>21</sup> He was known for his ascetic style of life, taking minimal nourishment, sleeping little in his tiny simply-furnished room in the protectory, and maintaining not only a huge correspondence but visiting the children in all the homes regularly.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem* 97-102; and Power to raise millions miracle of priest's life, in *Buffalo News* (30 July 1936).

<sup>20</sup> Interview with Mrs. Ruth Monk, 25 May 2003.

<sup>21</sup> L. FISH: Father Baker: legends of a saint in Buffalo, in *New York folklore* 10 (1984) 23-33.

<sup>22</sup> Death of Father Baker mourned widely, in *Buffalo Courier-Express* (30 July 1936) no page, and ANDERSON: *Apostle of charity* 31-32. On his visits to the children see GAILVIN: *Modern apostle* 56-67.

## 2.1. The gas well

By 1891 the increasing fuel bill led Baker to wonder whether the natural gas recently discovered in Canada might be present under the rock of Limestone Hill. No extant accounts tell of geological surveys to confirm this, but Baker was able to persuade Bishop Ryan to give him a total of \$5,000 to hire drillers from Pennsylvania. The drilling commenced at a spot where Baker had buried a statue of Our Lady of Victory.<sup>23</sup> In the face of growing public cynicism about Baker's chances of finding gas he began a novena of prayer services to ask Our Lady of Victory to intercede. After the engineers had drilled over 352 meters, a vein of natural gas burst nine meters into the air. Within a month the fuel bill for the protectory alone dropped by \$4,500.<sup>24</sup> Nearly as extraordinary is the fact that this well is still in operation after over 100 years.<sup>25</sup>

## 2.2. Healing

Already in Baker's lifetime stories circulated about miracles of healing attributed to his presence or his reassurance to the sufferer that he/she would recover. Several of these were reported during Baker's assignment to St. Mary's in Corning, 1881:

Mrs. William Killigrew tells me that her father, Dennis McCarty of Caton, was convinced that he owed his cure of a painful kidney ailment to [Baker's] intercession. Father Baker came out to visit the sick man, took a glass of water, stirred it with his fingers and gave it to him to drink, saying: "You will be all right." The priest had only reached the bottom of the hill on his return journey when Mr. McCarty's pain ceased, and never thereafter did it return.<sup>26</sup>

Other stories of miraculous healings attributed to Father Baker in Lackawanna generally took place following the sick person's participation in a public novena at the Shrine. A wheelchair-bound girl met Father Baker in the Basilica. He asked whether she believed the Blessed Virgin would help her, and when she emphatically said yes, he pinned a medal to her coat and instructed her mother

<sup>23</sup> HANLEY: *Servant of God* 19. The legends vary on this point.

<sup>24</sup> GALVIN: *Modern apostle* 260.

<sup>25</sup> W.O. KERN: Victoria gas well considered a blessing not a miracle, in *Western New York Catholic* (August 1998) 12.

<sup>26</sup> R.F. MCNAMARA: *A century of grace. The history of St. Mary's Roman Catholic parish, Corning N.Y. 1848-1948* (Corning 1948) 227 note 52. Brother Stanislaus who helped care for the boys at the Protectory attested that the same pattern followed Baker back to Lackawanna: "...if he would go to see a person who was very sick and would say, 'Now, you are going to be all right,' the patient recovered." cited in ANDERSON: *Apostle of charity* 51.

to wheel her around the various altars of the Shrine. When they finished, the girl suddenly screamed, stood up, and walked.<sup>27</sup>

A steelworker had a piece of steel lodged so firmly in his eye that physicians could not remove it, and it became infected. The man delayed the operation until he had made the novena to Our Lady of Victory, and on the last day his eye was healed.<sup>28</sup> A California woman who needed crutches travelled to Lackawanna but was too exhausted to make the novena. Father Baker visited her hotel room, assured her of prayers during the novena, and told her to return home. She sent back her crutches, able to walk and drive.<sup>29</sup>

### 2.3. Living witness accounts

An elderly gentleman stood up at a meeting and began to tell his life story: "I was a Baker boy..." Then he bent his head and began to weep – out of gratitude. Another 'Baker boy' said: "It was the only home I ever knew. Father Baker was the only father I ever knew."<sup>30</sup> A wealth of personal memories of Baker exists among older residents.

Father Baker baptized Mrs. Ruth Monk, a 92-year-old retired nurses' aide at OLV Hospital, when she was 22. Her family had migrated from South Carolina to find work in the steel mill, part of a growing population of African-Americans in Lackawanna to whom Baker, via Galvin, undertook a pastoral outreach in the face of prejudice and opposition. Baker secured a black priest to serve them since African-Americans were not welcome in the nearby Catholic churches.

Mrs. Monk describes him as "this little bitty man with people all around him... His heart was big and open, ready to help. He always had time for you. Never in a hurry. I always said he was a saint on earth." She speaks of the transformation that took place in boys placed in the protectory: "When they go to Father Baker's it's a different kid altogether. He knew them all by name. They respect him. Some of them never left."

Mrs Monk remembers Baker, then in his 90's, as a personal friend who would sometimes take her into his private chapel and say: "My dear child, I want to tell you about Our Lady of Victory. You pray to her and the Lord will work with you. She will intercede to Jesus for you." She says, "A lot of what Father Baker told me came true." Today she visits his tomb in the Basilica several times a week: "I have to go. He's my only arm to lean on. I just feel Father Baker's closer to God than I am." She speaks with him in prayer as naturally as

<sup>27</sup> ANDERSON: *Apostle of charity* 94.

<sup>28</sup> GALVIN: *Modern apostle* 89-90; J. BOCIO: Father Baker, friend to poor, homeless, in *Buffalo Times* (30 March 1930) no page.

<sup>29</sup> GALVIN: *Modern apostle* 90-91.

<sup>30</sup> Accounts told to the author.



she conversed with him in life: "I could talk to him when I could talk to no one else."<sup>31</sup>

### 3. The process for canonization

Currently local authorities are caught between the uncertainty of the beatification process that comes with no time line, and the development of a concrete infrastructure to accommodate increasing numbers of pilgrims as a result. Civic planning requires feasibility studies, funding sources and construction projects completed within a defined time frame. The two do not fit.

#### 3.1. The Catholic diocese of Buffalo

In 1987 the diocese petitioned the Vatican to begin the formal process of canonization that consists of three steps or titles accorded to the person: Servant of God, Blessed (at beatification) and Saint (at canonization). At present Baker has been declared Servant of God. In July 1998 the Vatican Congregation for the Causes of Saints authorized the transfer of Baker's remains from the cemetery to the interior of the Basilica to promote accessibility to pilgrims. In March 1999 his remains were exhumed together with three jars of blood and fluids drawn during embalming. Inexplicably the blood had remained in a liquid state, and in spite of the diocese's hopes that this would constitute the miracle sufficient for beatification, Vatican officials ruled instead that only a cure of bodily illness following prayers for Baker's intercession to God would constitute an acceptable miracle.<sup>32</sup> Verifying a miraculous cure depends on the signed testimony of medical personnel that a particular case was not and could not have been cured by scientifically explainable means.<sup>33</sup> In January 2003 Bishop Henry J. Mansell presented a 750-page *positio* to the Vatican outlining the case for Father Baker, and told the press that the diocese is presently examining several claims of cures.<sup>34</sup>

To educate the public about the life of Father Baker the diocesan religious education department developed a curriculum on his life and virtues distributed to all 92 Catholic elementary and high schools and to religious education

<sup>31</sup> Private interview with Mrs. Ruth Monk, 25 May 2003.

<sup>32</sup> K. KEENAN: Praying for a Father Baker miracle, in *Western New York Catholic* 132 (March 2003) 2.

<sup>33</sup> Interview with Ms. Beth Donovan, public relations director at Our Lady of Victory, 2 June 2003.

<sup>34</sup> J. TOKASZ: A march of saints, in *Buffalo News* (20 April 2003) A-8.

programs.<sup>35</sup> On 19 March 2003 a two-hour program, *Legacy of Victory: Remembering Father Baker*, produced by diocesan-owned Daybreak TV Productions, was broadcast on local commercial television. The program featured an in-depth narrative of Baker's life, interviews with historians and with former 'Baker Boys' and local residents who remembered Baker.<sup>36</sup> Holy cards with Father Baker's image and a prayer for his intercession are distributed widely.

### 3.2. The city of Lackawanna

Before Baker's remains were re-interred inside the Basilica visitors numbered 10,000 per year. The beatification of Baker, and even more the canonization which might make him the first male American-born saint, could result in a doubling of current visitor traffic from some 20,000-30,000 per year to well over half a million.

A focus group consisting of representatives from the city of Lackawanna and the Basilica hired a consulting firm to research statistics and projections to make available to potential developers. A delegation visited the shrine of St. Katharine Drexel in Philadelphia to study the effects of the 'overwhelming' increase in visitor traffic following her October 2000 canonization. Focus group planners envision a link between the Basilica and the nearby Botanical Gardens as twin attractions, with Father Baker the primary draw.

Although a new hotel opened near the motorway, tourist housing near the Basilica would become vitally necessary. Beatification could spark an immense urban renewal movement in struggling Lackawanna: planners envision new restaurants, shops and expanded parking facilities. If private developers equipped with the research data were interested, the price of land would rise dramatically.<sup>37</sup>

### 3.3. The civic context: Buffalo and Western New York

Lackawanna took a severe blow with the closing of Bethlehem Steel in 1983. Nonetheless an overall economic decline has been underway in Western New York since the early 1970's. The population of the city of Buffalo fell to less than 300,000 in the 2000 census, a drop of 50% since 1950.<sup>38</sup>

A popular stigma, largely undeserved, hangs over Buffalo. Its reputation for severe lake-effect snow makes Buffalo a byword, and so does its 'Rust Belt'

<sup>35</sup> [www.buffalodiocese.org/cathed/ci/father\\_baker.htm](http://www.buffalodiocese.org/cathed/ci/father_baker.htm)

<sup>36</sup> [www.fatherbaker.org](http://www.fatherbaker.org)

<sup>37</sup> Compiled from conversations with Nicholas Monafo, executive director, Lackawanna Community Development Corporation; Don Grosso, secretary to the mayor of Lackawanna; and Beth Donovan.

<sup>38</sup> Return: many relocating from South, in *Buffalo News* (8 September 2002) A-10.

atmosphere of ongoing economic depression and municipal listlessness, leading to a sort of collective low self-esteem. Comedians on national television poke fun at Buffalo, and the Broadway musical *A Chorus Line* includes the joke, "Committing suicide in Buffalo is redundant." Yet Buffalo can boast considerable cultural and educational resources as well as natural beauty and geographic proximity to Niagara Falls.

At the same time 71% of Western New York residents identify with a particular religious denomination, the highest proportion in the nation. Roman Catholics constitute some 56% of the regional population.<sup>39</sup> In such a climate where both the local media and the citizenry grasp for reasons to take pride in their city, the prospect of having a local hero declared a saint arouses a good deal of interest, not only among Catholics.

## 4. Observations and conclusions

An observer's remarks must be prefaced by a recognition of the genuine love of many for Father Baker and the caring he exemplified. Both diocesan support for Baker's devotional cult and the city's hopes for an economic boost serve as complementary aspects of the picture. Although the generation that knew him personally is aging and passing away, the love for Father Baker is at heart a grassroots phenomenon.

### 4.1. The cult of saints

Traditionally the cult of the saints in the Roman Catholic Church is linked to their function as intercessors. The diocese's official prayer text makes this clear: "O God, Our Father (...) I pray in confidence that through his intercession, You will grant me the favour which I request."

Yet theologians such as Elizabeth Johnson critique the underlying worldview as "a social system of patronage (...) see[ing] God like a monarch ruling in splendor, with hosts of courtiers ranked in descending order of importance. Being far from the throne, people need intercessors who will plead their cause and obtain spiritual and material favors that would otherwise not be forthcoming."<sup>40</sup> Richard McBrien charges that, first, "The overwhelming majority of people who are held up as models are priests and nuns. Those aren't typical people." Secondly, the process is one of public relations for religious orders or dioceses with sufficient financial resources, "getting your guy or gal into the Hall of Fame." Thirdly, according to McBrien Baker "is not

<sup>39</sup> D. CONDREN: Full of faith, in *Buffalo News* (2 October 2002) A-1, A-4.

<sup>40</sup> E.A. JOHNSON: *Friends of God and prophets. A feminist theological reading of the communion of saints* (Ottawa/New York 1998) 2.

a model. He's simply a point of pride – and that's not what a saint is supposed to be.”<sup>41</sup>

While not disparaging the suffering of those who call upon a favourite saint for relief in a grave crisis or deep pain, perhaps a more realistic and healthy re-positioning of a saint as model, inspiration or prophet would call believers to a courageous and intelligent faith. Baker is already recognized among his people as all of these.

#### 4.2. Model value

The figure of Nelson Baker stands out in the context of the late nineteenth century when robber barons flourished and the capitalist entrepreneur stood to earn fantastic wealth through initiative and cunning. Baker displayed a lifetime of business acumen in his virtually one-man micromanagement of charitable institutions well into old age. He amounts to a mirror-image champion in an age which lacked any more than an informal social safety net: a hero-manager, hero-fundraiser and hero-caregiver, as it were.

Not a hint of scandal, even by rumour, surrounds his institutions at any time in their operation, a remarkable (and today almost unbelievable) feat. While Galvin alludes to the difficulty of housing street-toughened boys and disciplining them to adhere to a structured schedule, no hint of harshness emerges. Baker's success with street boys lay partly in his insistence that the protectory be a home, not a jail. Though no one is saying so aloud, the iconic image of Baker, a diminutive, radiant man surrounded by affectionate boys, provides a healthy contrast at a time when the American Catholic church still has not fully confronted the extent of clergy sexual abuse.

#### 4.3. Political uses of Baker's canonization

Bishop Mansell enumerates some of the hoped-for consequences of Baker's beatification: “... the story will spread and will be a lift to the Church across the United States, a lift in the culture of life, a lift in multiplying candidates to the priesthood, a lift in terms of the inspiration to live the universal call to holiness, the call to fidelity.”<sup>42</sup>

Mansell's reference to a “lift in the culture of life” is not a chance expression. Baker's work to provide for abandoned babies and unwed mothers has been interpreted in the post-‘Roe vs. Wade’ context of legal abortion as a Catholic model to promote the protection of human life from the time of conception. Tokasz writes

<sup>41</sup> Quoted in TOKASZ: A march of saints A-8.

<sup>42</sup> K. KEENAN: Pope receives Father Baker ‘Positio,’ in *Western New York Catholic* 132 (February 2003) 5.

Politics could also enter into the candidacy of Father Baker. His promoters have pitched Baker to the Vatican as a 'champion of the right to life' because of his work with unwanted children. In a country where abortion is such a divisive issue, it is a theme on which the pope might choose to focus.<sup>43</sup>

The national Republican agenda which tries to place primary responsibility for social welfare on 'faith-based initiatives' fits all too well with Baker. On the level of intra-church politics, the thoroughly orthodox Father Baker would deftly model 'the call to fidelity'.

#### 4.4. Gender aspects

Baker's devotion to Mary as Our Lady of Victory can be easily psychoanalysed: like many priests he was devoted first to a pious Catholic mother of strong personality. One could even adduce as evidence the overpoweringly ornate, fussy and 'feminine' decoration on every visible surface of the Basilica. Galvin refers repeatedly to Baker's passion for his 'Lady Love'. Yet contemporary chroniclers and witnesses point to a sort of *quid pro quo* deal with Mary: he gave her unquestioning confidence, she responded by granting all the financial means necessary. This even-handedness is borne out by Ruth Monk's testimony: if you pray to Mary, Mary will reward you. Whatever sublimated attachment may have played a part in his psyche, the operational paradigm was simply business.

In Baker's own time one of his most remarkable accomplishments was his prophetic and exceptional advocacy for a class of despised women: unwed mothers. He had to stand up to popular opinion and state regulatory commissions to argue that the work would not promote social immorality and to protect the women's privacy. In his society a reputable businessman likely to be taken seriously by civic leaders, donors and the state alike could accomplish this most effectively. To say nothing of his own people, the poor of Lackawanna.

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<sup>43</sup>TOKASZ: A march of saints A-8.

