Producing Father Nelson H. Baker: the practices of making a saint for Buffalo, N.Y.

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PRODUCING FATHER NELSON H. BAKER: 
THE PRACTICES OF MAKING A SAINT FOR BUFFALO, N.Y.

by
Heather A. Hartel

An Abstract

Of a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the Doctor of
Philosophy degree in Religious Studies
in the Graduate College of
The University of Iowa

May 2006

Thesis Supervisor: Professor T. Dwight Bozeman
ABSTRACT

Since 1986, the Catholic Our Lady of Victory (OLV) parish of Lackawanna, NY and the diocese of Buffalo have been working to secure canonization for Father Nelson H. Baker (1842-1936), founder of the North American branch of the Association of Our Lady of Victory and the OLV Basilica and Institutes, which, among other services, included a hospital, orphanage and school. Lackawanna is also the site of the Bethlehem Steel Plant closings of the early 1980s, which have come to symbolize the Buffalo region's difficult and troubled transition to a post-industrial economy. Thus, I frame my dissertation with the overall idea that the possibility of Baker's sainthood offers hope for economic recovery to the city of Lackawanna. Specifically, this work seeks to combine the study of material history with the study of lived religion by using performativity as a theoretical tool. Through a comprehensive presentation of the material history of Father Nelson H. Baker from the 1880s to 2006, I demonstrate that material history is a significant, integral and vital component of lived religion. Further, I make the case that devotional practices include creative acts that both provide evidence of Baker’s sanctity for his cause and contribute to the performative nature of his material history. As such, this work attempts 1) to fill in a gap in the scholarship about contemporary Catholic sainthood in the U.S. by focusing on a specific cause for sainthood, 2) to further develop an understanding of the communal processes of representing sanctity, 3) to offer a way of combining analyses of the built environment, material, print and visual culture with the study of lived religion, and 4) to expand the scope of scholarly approaches to Catholic devotional practices by demonstrating that in the Baker case, devotional practices involve a cooperative effort by both official and popular agents in the creation of material items to promote and further a cause. Visual materials are presented in the body of the text in JPEG format.
Abstract Approved:  
Thesis Supervisor

Title and Department

Date
PRODUCING FATHER NELSON H. BAKER:
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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in Religious Studies in the Graduate College of The University of Iowa

May 2006

Thesis Supervisor: Professor T. Dwight Bozeman
Ph.D. Thesis

This is to certify that the Ph.D. thesis of Heather A. Hartel has been approved by the Examining Committee for the thesis requirement for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in Religious Studies at the May 2006 graduation.

Thesis Committee:

T. Dwight Bozeman, Thesis Supervisor
Ralph Keen
Richard B. Turner
David Wittenberg
Mark A. Peterson
To the memory of Frank Pearl,
to Kelly on an old promise,
and to the little one, a new promise.
…if we try to form a collective picture of the combined results of printing down to modern times, does not this total picture seem to us like an immense structure, having the whole world for its foundation, a building upon which humanity has worked without cease and whose monstrous head is lost in the impenetrable mist of the future? The printed tower is the swarming ant-hill of intelligences.

Victor Hugo, *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame*
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I first learned about Father Baker in 1979 when I was eight years old. Because I was misbehaving, my grandmother picked up the telephone and yelled, “I’m calling Father Baker to come get you and take you to his orphanage!” Threatening to send naughty children to “Father Baker’s,” a local name for the Our Lady of Victory Charity Homes, was a common method of discipline in the Buffalo region. If I had taken the time back then to read the copy of The Incredible Story of Father Baker my grandmother kept on her bedside table, I would have learned that her threats were empty ones. In my teens, I accompanied her on a yearly pilgrimage to the Our Lady of Victory Basilica for Easter mass, a trip I often anticipated with gruesome delight—Father Baker’s death mask was on display in the basilica’s basement. Thus, the first person I would like to thank is Dorothy Dalton Hartel. She handed her knowledge of Father Baker down to me, and her hope for his sainthood has inspired me to write for a wider audience than my academic peers.

Secondly I would like to thank the Our Lady of Victory parish and Baker-Victory Services for providing me with extensive and generous access to their grounds and archives and permissions to use many of their images. Specifically I am grateful for the friendly assistance of Monsignor Robert C. Wurtz, Beth Donovan, Tom Lucia, other new assistant, Diana Bellagama, Mary Ann Tomaka, and Sister Ellen O’Keefe. In addition, I am grateful to local Western New York academics Lydia Fish, Susan K. Roll and Timothy Allen for sharing their insights and observations. I would also like to thank Sister Ann Louise Hentges, Carl Hoegel C.S.S.R., Trish McHenry, Victoria Rich, Charles Roth, Robert K. Doran Jr., and Monsignor Walter O. Kern.
Third, I am deeply indebted to all of my committee members, especially T. Dwight Bozeman, whose pointed comments on my manuscripts and direct, affable and conscientious mentoring style proved invaluable; Richard Turner, whose honest guidance and unaffected professional advice motivated me to succeed with this project; and Ralph Keen, whose unwavering support helped me gain confidence in my work. I would also like to thank the University of Iowa Seashore/Ballard Dissertation committee, whose decision to award me the Seashore Dissertation Year Fellowship for the 2005-2006 school year allowed me the financial freedom to do the kind of meticulous research and writing this rich material deserves.

I also extend a warm thanks to the members of my personal support who have sustained me through this project and life’s ups and downs. Specifically, I would like to thank the Bradley Center, especially Jason B. and Arianna; the Domestic Violence Intervention Program of Iowa City, especially Mary Ann; East Iowa Psychology group, especially Alison; and the MWW Healing Arts Center of Cheektowaga, NY, especially Carolyn. Also thanks to Carter, Father Bart, Eric, Dewayne, Forrest, Jordan, Steve, Peter, Al, Amy, Anya, Denise, Judit, Karimie, Kelly, LuAnn, Melissa, Pauline & Verna. And, of course, thanks to family members Dennis, Connie and Grandpa for their many forms of inspiration; Gramma Pearl for her unconditional acceptance; Nixie for her antics; Debbie and Ted for the food and a place to stay; Krista and Jason for the Stargate and the place to stay; Matthew for being; and of course, Mom and Dad, who have supported me through whatever project, endeavor or grand mistake I have attempted. Finally, I would like to thank Father Baker for inspiring so many good works, including this one.
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<td>BC</td>
<td>Buffalo Courier</td>
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<tr>
<td>BECPL</td>
<td>Buffalo and Erie County Public Library</td>
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<td>BEN</td>
<td>Buffalo Evening News</td>
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<td>BT</td>
<td>Buffalo Times</td>
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<td>CC</td>
<td>Cause Correspondences</td>
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<td>CE</td>
<td>Courier Express</td>
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<td>Catholic Union</td>
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<tr>
<td>CUT</td>
<td>Catholic Union and Times</td>
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<td>DBA</td>
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<td>EH</td>
<td>Bishop Edward D. Head</td>
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<td>FBB</td>
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<td>FBD</td>
<td>Father Baker’s Diary</td>
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<td>FBFA</td>
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<td>FBGRC</td>
<td>Father Baker Guild and Recollections Collection</td>
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<td>KDNC</td>
<td>Kern-Doran Newspaper Clipping Collection</td>
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<td>LHNCA</td>
<td>Local History Newspaper Clipping Archives</td>
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<td>LL</td>
<td>Lackawanna Leader</td>
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<td>LSC</td>
<td>The Lackawanna Steel Company; newspaper clippings, April 1899-March 1911</td>
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<td>MNHBS</td>
<td>Monsignor Nelson H. Baker Newspaper Clippings from Buffalo Area Publications 1903-1989</td>
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<td>NHB</td>
<td>Nelson H. Baker</td>
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<td>OLV</td>
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<td>SPDRCC</td>
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<tr>
<td>WNYC</td>
<td>Western New York Catholic</td>
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<tr>
<td>WNYCV</td>
<td>Western New York Catholic Visitor</td>
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CHAPTER 1
PRODUCING FATHER BAKER:
THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

In the last ten to fifteen years, scholars of religion in America have increasingly examined material and visual culture and print culture history, as well as the daily religious practices of believers. The methodologies of these relatively new subfields of religious studies offer useful tools for examining the story of how Father Nelson H. Baker (1842-1936), a current candidate for sainthood, has been portrayed in material history from 1879 to 2005 and how those portrayals relate to the devotional practices of his cult.\(^1\) To my knowledge, there is no book-length study that investigates the material history of an American Catholic community involved in a cause for canonization.\(^2\) Further, the study of lived religion, as presently construed, does not actively and explicitly consider material history as an essential component. This work seeks to

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\(^{1}\) Using the term “cult” can be problematic in religious studies because the term can refer to more extreme groups in the American scene such as the Branch Dravidians or Heaven’s Gate. However, my use of it in this study reflects its Catholic usage in the Code of Canon Law as in the “cult of the saints.” Canon Law states that, “the Church also promotes the true and authentic cult of the other Saints [other than Mary] by whose example the faithful are edified and by whose intercession they are supported” (Cann. 1186). An “authentic cult” begins when Rome approves of public lay veneration for a particular person who is believed to be close to God after dying. However, private veneration for the person most likely existed prior to this official approval because a spontaneous cult is a necessary prerequisite for sainthood. In addition, after a person is canonized by the Catholic Church, veneration of him or her by all Church members is required. No longer is the person just venerated by laity who have chosen to do so. Thus, the saint has a “universal cult.” See Kenneth Woodward, *Making Saints: How the Catholic Church Determines Who Becomes a Saint, Who Doesn’t and Why* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990). Baker’s cause was approved by Rome in 1987, and his life of holiness was affirmed in 2000, but since he is not yet canonized, he has no universal Church cult at this time. However, prior to Rome’s approval, he did have a spontaneous cult as evidence demonstrates after his death in 1936. In this study I look at his cult from before his 1936 death to the present.

\(^{2}\) Victor Darryl Caterine, “Saints and social bodies: Socioreligious narrative of Mother Maria Luisa Josefa and the Carmelite Sisters of the Most Sacred Heart of Los Angeles” (PH.D. diss., University of California, Santa Barbara, 1997) is a recent dissertation which discusses a contemporary American cult in Los Angeles CA and the process of attempting to canonize Mother Maria Luisa Josefa. This work does focus on the narrations about Josefa, but not as they appear materially. Instead, it uses the scholarship on myth to argue that these ecclesial and popular narrations as myths represent unchanging truths about the meaning of life and offer archetypes of social organization which critique hegemonic myths of modern society by defining the separateness of religious communities.
combine the study of material history with the study of lived religion by using performativity as a theoretical tool.

In its simplest formulation, I rely on concepts of the performative to interpret the material history of Father Nelson H. Baker in order to demonstrate that it is an important component of lived religion. Further, I make the case that devotional practices include creative acts that both provide evidence of Baker’s sanctity for his cause and contribute to the performative nature of his material history. As such, this work offers a comprehensive record of the material history related to Baker in an attempt 1) to fill in a gap in the scholarship about contemporary Catholic sainthood in the U.S. by focusing on a specific cause for sainthood,³ 2) to further develop an understanding of the communal processes

of representing sanctity, 3) to offer a way of combining analyses of the built environment, material, print and visual culture with the study of lived religion by presenting material history as a significant component of lived religion, and 4) to expand the scope of scholarly approaches to Catholic devotional practices by demonstrating that in the Baker case, devotional practices involve a cooperative effort by both official and popular agents in the creation of material items to promote and further a cause.

The argument I present regarding Baker’s material history is seven-fold: 1) Baker’s own public writings and self-presentations guided lay devotion to Our Lady of Victory through his example; 2) before his death, others represented Baker as a venerable figure, a respectable person who had an intimate relationship with God; 3) after his death, much of the devotion to Our Lady of Victory that Baker had nourished through publications, practices and his own example transformed into veneration for Baker himself, yet retained its Marian interests; 4) post-mortem representations of Baker are implicitly and explicitly informed by reverence for him and hope for his eventual canonization; 5) devotional practice can include both the use and creation of materials; 6) the creation of materials about Baker by various agents contributed and continues to contribute to the shifting re-creations of how his sanctity is represented; and 7) these performative representations, as embodied in Baker’s material history, provide evidence of his sanctity that could lead to his eventual canonization. In order to emphasize the importance of Baker’s canonization to the local community, I situate this argument within the recent history of the Buffalo area.

Catholic Devotional Communities in America

The scholarship on Catholic popular devotional practices in America that informs this project includes Thomas Tweed’s *Our Lady of Exile* and Robert Orsi’s *Thank you, Saint Jude* and *The Madonna of 115th Street*. Orsi takes two figures, St. Jude and Our Lady of Mt. Carmel, and tries to distill the sets of overlapping meanings their cults attribute to them. His basic research question is, “What do these figures mean and do for
those devoted to them?” He seeks answers by examining how cult members’ life concerns, within the context of particular world-views and historical situations, influence their religious understandings. For instance, in Saint Jude he discusses the exchange of St. Jude statues and prayer cards, claiming that this practice allows women to voice their stories when a larger Catholic culture encouraged them to suffer in silence, and the medical establishment’s male-centered authority contributed to their sense of helplessness.4 Both works also examine cults in urban settings, which Orsi claims contribute to their uniqueness, a point he more comprehensively develops in Gods of the City. Religious experiences in urban settings evolve “from the dynamic engagement of religious traditions. . .with specific features of the industrial and post industrial cityscapes and with the social conditions of city life.”5 Thus, urban settings contribute to how people view and interpret their experiences. In The Madonna, Orsi looks at how the world-view of Italian immigrants, governed by the inherited culture of the domus, industrialization, and urban existence, affects the meanings they attribute to the Madonna.

Thomas Tweed offers a different approach to an urban Catholic American devotional cult in his book, Our Lady of Exile. Instead of deriving the meanings of a figure of devotion from a worldview developed through a detailed description of a “historical ground of being,” he interprets the shrine of Our Lady of Charity in light of her devotees’ imaginative conception of Cuba’s future when it will belong to the people, and its expatriates in Florida will return home.6 The shrine itself and activities of devotion to Our Lady of Charity are emblematic of this hoped-for future. Tweed also

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derives multiple possible meanings of the physical shrine by reading it against the
semantic fields of traditional Cuban dwellings and standard shapes of Our Lady of
Charity’s representations. This is a more literary-minded approach to visual and material
elements than Orsi’s.  

Although this project is situated among this work on devotional communities and
one cannot underestimate the important contributions of Orsi and Tweed to the study of
American Catholicism, their overall influence on this project is only partial. Both my
subject matter and approaches differ. Furthermore, Orsi and Tweed’s work contains two
notable deficiencies this project seeks to address: 1) a preference for discussions of
“popular” religious practices which do not express how popular and ecclesial concerns
and practices can collaborate and 2) an inadequate appreciation of material history as a
progressive and evolving component of lived religion.

First, my work differs from Orsi and Tweed’s because the objects of devotion
they discuss were not real people living in 19th and 20th century America; they were
imported figures whose representations did not begin with how the figure represented
him/herself. Our Lady of Charity was brought to Florida from Cuba by exiled Cubans,
The Madonna of 115th street was brought with Italian immigrants to New York from
Italy, and St. Jude, as one of Jesus’ apostles, was not indigenous to America. All of these
figures date back to the time of Jesus and already have a long history of representation
outside of the United States. Nelson H. Baker died in 1936, and his devotional following
arose during his lifetime. Thus, Baker’s cult differs from the cults Orsi and Tweed
discuss in that some of its members had actual contact with the object of devotion.
Furthermore, although his cult is also urban, its members are not mostly from one ethnic
group, like the cults of Mt. Carmel and Our Lady of Charity, nor is it particularly

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7 Thomas Tweed, Our Lady of Exile: Diasporic Religion at a Cuban Catholic Shrine in
significant to women, as is St. Jude’s cult. In addition, Baker’s cult is currently largely restricted to the Western New York area and has no counterpart in another country or nationally as do the cults in Orsi and Tweed’s books. His cult’s local character is partially due to the fact that Baker has not achieved sainthood yet, so veneration for him is not universally required by all Church members. In addition, Baker’s story is an integral, familiar and well-loved part of local Buffalo-area Catholic history. As one person commented, asking people from the area when they first heard about Father Baker is like “asking a Buffalonian when's the first time they [sic] heard about the Buffalo Bills.”

My approach to popular devotion is also different from Orsi and Tweed’s. Both authors, in their own way, view popular and ecclesiastic practices as being at odds or as being separate. In fact, there is an implicit sense in their work that the members of the church hierarchy do not engage in devotional practice themselves, but merely promote and regulate it by restrictive guidance or by presenting multivalent practices as if they were unitary. Orsi focuses on the “back religion” or the private popular religious practices behind official representations in *St Jude*, and in *The Madonna*, he looks at ethnic immigrant Italian practices that were not part of more official Church services, such as the Italian festa. Tweed shows how members of the church hierarchy attempt to standardize and restrict ethnic devotional practices brought by immigrants to the Our Lady of Charity Shrine, such as Santeria rites. He demonstrates how competition between ethnic and official practices can result in “contested meanings” of the shrine.10 While I

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9 John Koerner, email to author, 10 November 2005.

10 Tweed, 43-69.
also discuss popular religious practices or “the religion of the people,” in order to offer a more inclusive approach to devotional practice, I include examples of the continual and evolving cooperation between popular and ecclesiastic efforts to bring about Baker’s canonization.

Finally, this project differs from both Orsi’s and Tweed’s in that the main objects of my analysis are items of material history. Devotional practice’s capacity to generate material items is something I have not seen developed within the scholarship in such a way as to include material objects as the main point of analysis. Devotional practices have been seen as generating imaginative understandings, possible solutions to life situations, hope for the hopeless, or further action such as fulfilling promises made to a saint for favors. In addition, material culture of a devotional cult is often discussed in the context of its uses or consumption, with little attention to the items themselves or how, when, and why they were created. The trend seems to be to discern the multiple, unstable, layered and “poly-vocal” meanings of material items based on their uses and the life situations and needs of those who use them.

Both Orsi and Tweed discuss a limited number of material items, but use them to support discussions of community formation and imaginative conceptions of the figure of devotion. Orsi is most concerned with community formation and evolution, which he discusses particularly well in the *Madonna of 115th Street*. He addresses material objects, such as statues of St. Jude and prayer cards, more specifically in *St. Jude*; however, they are instruments which help create and spread St. Jude’s cult and imaginative understandings of Jude. Tweed uses material and visual culture to emphasize how imaginative concepts of Cuba’s future are reflected and reinforced in their visual

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11 See Peter Savastano, “Will the real St. Gerard please stand up? An ethnographic study of symbolic polysemy, devotional practices, material culture, marginality and difference in the cult of St. Gerard Mailla” (Ph.D. diss., Drew University, 2002).
elements. Like Tweed, I examine how a community’s concerns and hopes are reflected in material items. The particular hoped-for future in the imaginative life of Baker’s cult is his canonization, hope that was present even before the official cause went forward. More importantly though, I attempt to go beyond examining how material items relate to a cult’s imaginative life and community formation. By relating Baker’s material history to the practices which created it, I seek to demonstrate that it is an integral part of the performative nature of lived religion.

Scholarship in the relatively new subfield of lived religion has demonstrated the value of performativity as a conceptual tool. Lived religion does not center its analysis on intellectual traditions, theology or social history. Instead, it looks at what real people do and how they view personal religious practices given their life circumstances. Lived Religion in America, edited by David J. Hall, offers a theoretical approach to lived religion which conceives of it as a fluid, never completely structured object of study. The approaches in this anthology, according to Hall, are not “built around a structure of opposition” between popular and elite forces, do not “abridge” or “censure the messiness that leaks into everyday life,” and acknowledge “change” and “the tensions and ongoing struggle of definition. . .that are always present in how people choose to act.” 12 Robert Orsi’s essay in this anthology suggests the application of this unstructured-ness to interpretations of religious idioms, the expressions of devotion though which beliefs and various understandings and life experiences are articulated. “Religious idioms make desire and imagination possible at the same time as they constrict and discipline imagination; creating and disciplining are a simultaneous process.” Thus, “religious idioms are not stable bearers of power or unambiguous intentionality.” They are instead “charged,” having an ability to contain and produce multiple meanings. In the final

chapter *St. Jude*, he concludes that St. Jude’s meaning is ultimately ambiguous and dependent on his use, that it is impossible for a researcher using Orsi’s approach to pin down a complete, orthodox and stable version of Jude.\textsuperscript{13} This approach calls for a dynamic understanding of historical contextualization. History and culture are media though which religious idioms “are,” not what they are embedded within.\textsuperscript{14} I draw from the approaches of lived religion in an attempt to describe Baker’s representations as they “are” by linking a progressive and performative account of material history with the productive devotional practices of Baker’s admirers, promoters and devotional cult.

**Performative Material History and Productive Devotional Practices**

For the purposes of this project, I define material history broadly. It refers to a historical sequence of objects representing Baker that can be interacted with through the senses and includes material, visual and print culture, including manuscripts. Specifically, I examine how Baker established a system of material history related to Our Lady of Victory to promote her cult between 1882-1936, and I trace the evolution of Baker’s representations in material history between 1879-2005 in the context of her representations. My analysis includes a wide range of items such as: parish publications, prayer cards, a documentary, medals, statues, displays in the Father Baker museum, elements in the built environment, the actual archive of manuscripts and items collected to further his cause and individual items in it, books, newspapers, pamphlets and the Institutes’ web site. Although items such as a web site or a documentary are not “material,” as such, they are accessible through the sense of sight and have materiality; the web site is a kind of printed item accessed through a computer, and the documentary


\textsuperscript{14} Ibid. Orsi “Everyday Miracles.”
can be viewed and is also a VHS tape or DVD that can be duplicated, purchased, exchanged and moved about.

The Vatican would contend that saints are not culturally constructed or made. Saints are instead “named” because they already have an ontological existence that just needs to be discovered and recognized. In fact, the OLV public relations office was advised by Rome not to refer to Baker’s cause as “making” him a saint. I do not rely on such theological assumptions in this project by assuming that Baker’s sainthood has a reality beyond the created representations of him. Instead, I view Baker’s potential sainthood and notions of his sanctity as the results of representation. My understanding of the term “representation” and how I will use the concept of performativity draws on cultural theory and current scholarship on saint-making and sanctity to extract the following methodological starting points: 1) Father Baker does not exist outside of the stories told about him, 2) representations of Baker simultaneously construct him as a saint and his audience, and 3) these two constructions (Baker’s sainthood and audience) can be considered performative in that they are never finalized and are open to ever-changing shifts.

First, I assume that Baker’s sanctity exists in the fluid world of discourse. Simply put, Baker as a saint exists in what is said about him, and what is said about him can change. Thus, I view his representations in material history as a discursive practice, a practice in which presentations of his story shift through time and reflect the concerns of differing authors, intentions, and historical contexts. As discourse, no representations of Baker are exempt from this practice. For instance, several pro-life activists adopted him to their purposes because of his work with unwed mothers to save infants. Also,

15 Beth Donovan, interview, 20 January 2006.

16 See Personal Letters, P.S to RW, January 1988; L.W. to RW, 22 October 1987; E.B. to Whom it May Concern, 29 March 1999, FBGRC, OLVA.
Baker’s “Negro Apostolate” emerged as a prominent theme in the 2003 documentary. Thus, the concept of Baker’s sanctity, of Baker as a saint, is created by highlighting his work with unwed mothers in one instance and by stressing his charity toward African Americans in another. Neither version offers a complete portrait of Baker, and neither version is necessarily incorrect. Baker’s sanctity is discursive in that, as a consequence of portrayals that come from particular perspectives, it is connected to local and individual concerns and changes accordingly. The prospect of his sainthood is based upon the cumulative body of representations of him created by various agents between 1879-2005.

Edmund Kern offers an approach to analyzing sanctity as a discursive practice in “Counter-Reformation Sanctity: The Bollandists’ Vita of Blessed Hemma of Gurk.” Sanctity, for Kern, is a fragmented concept, composed of a variety of different representations, and he analyzes the Bollandists’ attempts to mold this variability into a stable orthodox account. There is a dialectic tension between the Bollandists’ presentations of a saint’s life as a unified account, “the saint as an object,” and the diversity of the legends, forgeries, embellishments and contradictions which obscure any kind of “factual” account. In their attempts to standardize the lives of the saints, what the Bollandists did was not to discover and represent the ‘real’ saint, but to participate in the discursive constructive practices they thought they were displacing, creating yet another version of the saint. Consequently, they contributed to the very fragmentation

17 Legacy of Victory.
19 See Hippolyte Delehaye, The Legends of the Saints (New York: Fordham University Press, 1962) for an example of applying historical criticism to the lives of the saints, or “a method for discriminating between materials that the historian can use and those he should leave to poets and artists as their property” (xiii).
20 Kern, 415.
their attempts sought to contain. Kern goes so far as to call his own article a contribution to Hemma’s representations, for there is no saint distinct and separate from the discourse about her. For Kern, Bollandists or historians like himself deceive themselves when they believe their representations of the saints are independent of their own concerns and intentions. They are just like the community of believers who produce saints’ legends through the constant negotiations and renegotiations between the production of new discourses and consumption of older ones. Kern suggests that a saint does not and cannot live outside of his or her representations. His work is useful to my project because he acknowledges saints as constructions, attempts to examine how newer representations of holy lives depend upon and emerge from older ones, and argues that even officially standardized accounts of saints lives are discursive practices.

Secondly, I examine how representations of person as a saint and the audience for those representations are constructed together, a process that in Baker’s case, began well before his death in 1936. Aviad M. Kleinberg’s *Prophets in Their Own Country* demonstrates how portrayals of lives of sanctity can construct both saint and audience during a saint’s lifetime. Kleinberg’s work focuses on hagiography in the later Middle Ages, concentrating on authors who recorded the life events of saintly people as they

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21 Ibid., 430.

22 Donald Weinstein and Rudolph M. Bell, *Saints and Society: The Two worlds of Western Christendom, 1000-1700* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1982) is a work that examines the representations of saints, which they explicitly acknowledge in stating that they are not writing about facts, but “perceptions” (13). While they acknowledge the multidirectional flow of perceptions between the clergy and laity, their work differs from mine in that they attempt to systematize these perceptions in order to describe the paradoxical nature of a saint. For Weinstein and Bell, the hagiographical literature then, expresses perceptions of a saint as one who, while reaching for spiritual perfection, must attend to the material needs of the devoted. Michael Goodich, *Vita Perfecta: The Ideal of Sainthood in the Thirteenth Century* (Stuttgart: Anton Hiersemann, 1982) examines hagiography arguing for the “saint as an ideal type” by offering a system of categories for saints’ stories.

happened. His main point is that hagiography of living saints is as much about the audience as it is about the saint. Saints are constructed in a dialectic between a recorder’s expectations and what the saint does, which ultimately reveals how concerns of the audience are projected onto accounts of the saint’s life. In other words, treating a living person as a saint in representational form is a practice that simultaneously constructs the saint and his or her audience, as well as the audience expectations that go with that relationship. In Delooz’s words, saints are “for other people…remodeled in the collective representation that is made of them [saints].” Kleinberg demonstrates that collective representations of a saint can and do exist during the saint’s lifetime. He offers a perspective on popular constructions of pre-death sanctity which considers how audience expectation can mold 1) a saint’s self representation, 2) the records of that representation, and 3) the audience. This approach expands conceptions of sanctity beyond post-mortem oral tradition and devotional practices, suggesting that the “saint” him or herself plays a significant role in how he/she is perceived. Kleinberg’s work informs my examination of materials created about Baker during his own lifetime which expanded his audience of admirers and reinforced local opinions about his saintly characteristics.

Thirdly, my view of how representations of Baker are performative relies in part on Nancy Caciola’s article, “Through a Glass Darkly” in which she develops a three-tiered performative theory of sanctity. Drawing from Catherine Bell and Judith Butler, she defines sanctity as “performative in that the performer (saint) colludes with the audience (contextual community) in an ongoing play of creation and shifting re-


creation.”  

26 Viewing sanctity as performative involves three factors: “the self fashionings of the saint as performer, the broader historio-cultural constructions of sanctity as a role, and the communal interpretations of the saint in the development of a cult.”  

27 Caciola is not talking about mere contextualization, but a kind of unfolding discursive process of representation, one that emerges from several different systems of meaning and one that emerges and re-emerges over time. Indeed, one of the questions she poses at the end of the article for further research, “How do representations of a saint alter over her lifetime and after her death?” is integral to my project. 

28 Caciola’s question offers a guide for my analysis of Baker in material history. The ways Baker’s material history has altered over time offers a record of the “ongoing play of creation and shifting re-creation” of Baker’s sanctity as perceived and promoted by particular individuals and groups at different times.

Another way of conceptualizing the performative nature of sanctity that has not been fully brought out in the scholarship is that representations of a saint also construct a set of possibilities for subsequent forms of representation that are often created by members of the saint’s audience. In other words, representations can derive their performativity from individual and group practices which create new materials. In Baker’s case, those who created materials about him were frequently his admirers, promoters or devotees, so for the purposes of this project, I will refer to their creative undertakings as productive devotional practices. The performative nature of Baker’s material history relies, in part, on productive devotional practices. Productive devotional practices are creative acts inspired by personal feelings about Baker’s sanctity or some

26 Ibid., 303.
27 Ibid., 304.
28 Ibid., 309.
form of regard for him. Specifically, these practices have been taking place since before his 1936 death and have resulted in a large body of visual, material, printed and written expressions which support his cause for canonization, whether they were created for this purpose or not. As such, productive devotional practices have not only created Baker’s material history and contributed to its performative nature, but have also contributed to the creation of his following and conceptions of his sanctity. Further they have supplied the evidence Rome needs to further Baker’s cause and may ultimately produce his sainthood.

Because Baker’s 1936 death was a momentous event in the community and a great loss, I rely to some extent on Joseph Roach’s methodology in Cities of the Dead to better connect performativity to its embodiments in material history. Roach hypothesizes that when losses through death or by other means occur in a community, its remaining members attempt to find “satisfactory alternatives.” The community tries out various “candidates” in a “doomed search for originals by continuously auditioning stand-ins,” which can result in many different co-existing and competing versions of the original that are always subject to revision. So for Roach, performance “stands in for an elusive entity [of memory] that it is not but that it must vainly aspire both to embody and to replace.” Performance take on three forms for Roach – “kinesthetic imagination, vortices of behavior, displaced transmission.” Roach’s kinesthetic imagination is a faculty of thinking through bodily movements that both remembers and reinvents past events. “Vortices of behavior” refers to sites of memory, like marketplaces, certain

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30 Ibid., 2.

31 Ibid., 3.

32 Ibid., 25.
boulevards or chapels where audiences are brought together and performers emerge. These sites are important because they have a powerful effect on collective memory, allowing it to survive despite changes in the places where the original remembered events occurred. Displaced transmission refers to how historic practices adapt to changing conditions. The repetition of these practices allows for new innovations with each new “surrogate” as memory and imagination converge. Though Roach’s approach is concerned mostly with actors in events such as carnivals, parades, and Mardi Gras, his concept of performance as “surrogacy” or “substitution” is particularly useful to this project. Actors in Baker’s case did not re-enact events, but they did create materials to substitute for the loss of Baker, especially immediately following his death. These “surrogates” were subject to constant revision as each new one emerged and as different agents created them at different times. In addition, the possibilities for each new “surrogate” depended on and were limited by previous ones. So, although Baker’s representations shifted over time, they did contain some invariable characteristics.

**Material and Visual Culture, with a Note on Print Culture History**

In examining the actual items that comprise Baker’s material history, I draw some of my methodology from the scholarship of material and visual culture that has been making inroads into the field of religious studies in the last ten years, particularly the work of Colleen McDannell and David Morgan. These two authors offer approaches to neglected domains within the field of religion and challenge various interpretative assumptions or norms, which has opened up new directions for the field. However, both authors focus their analysis mostly on the consumption, use and reception of items. While

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33 Ibid., 28.

34 The literature on sanctity and sainthood focuses mainly on hagiography and texts with little reference to how sanctity can be portrayed in material forms. There is some mention of local shrines in the literature on Latin American saints. See Macklin and Margolies.
I rely on their approaches to material and visual culture, it is my hope that I can offer ways to expand the possibilities for work in these fields.

McDannell is useful to my project because she critiques the dominant roles of the text and intellectual history in religious studies, contending that material objects have equal importance.35 She does not assume that material religious objects have any intrinsic meaning of their own; instead, she demonstrates that their meanings come from their positions within larger systems of meanings and their relationships with other factors, elements, objects, or cultural situations within those systems. Likewise, I look at the significance that items acquire from their systems of meaning, but I also look at these systems in a linear perspective to show how portrayals of Baker have been influenced by previous representations. I also examine the rhetorical strategies of items. For instance, I consider how items appeal to targeted audiences through emotional appeal, the establishment of narrative authority, and the use of evidence. Finally, I examine how some specific items are planned and created. Thus, I hope to go beyond an emphasis on the consumption and use of the religious items and paint a more comprehensive picture of the relationship between the material world and devotional practices.

David Morgan’s work in visual culture is also relevant to this project. He contends that the act of looking at religious images is a religious practice that influences believers’ perceptions of a given object and the object’s role in the community. Working within the theoretical traditions of aesthetics and art history, he has developed two theories of how the aesthetic experience of religious images is unique. In *Visual Piety*, he does not limit the aesthetic experience to a contemplative gaze that is simply a transformation of perception—Kant’s disinterested aesthetic gaze. Instead, he suggests a

As a subcategory of visual piety, he introduces the “apocalyptic gaze” which “longs restively for what will unveil itself only in the future.” Visual piety, then, is a kind of aesthetic contemplation that allows a viewer to enrich his or her “experience of an object” or “imbue it with certain meanings.” In *Protestantism and Pictures*, Morgan employs the concept of “aura” formulated by Walter Benjamin, a set of particular associations which tend to cluster around the object of a perception which gives an object its value and authority. However, whereas Benjamin contends that the mass reproduction of materials destroys the value of an image’s aura or “cult value,” Morgan argues that this is not true of religious images because, as a function of an image’s reception, aura is “graphically transmissible.” In other words, viewers can reinvest mass produced copies of images with their original authority and cult value. Morgan also collaborated with Sally Promey in editing the anthology *Visual Culture and Religion*, in which they delineate four ways that “images participate significantly in religious practice:” as communication between humans and the divine, as a way to provide social communion or cohesivity, as a means of creating and organizing memory and as modes of “constructing and synthesizing…meaning making practices.”

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37 Ibid.

38 Ibid., 116


Morgan, like McDannell, tends to focus on the use, consumption and reception of visual objects, an approach that cannot adequately explain how representations shift and replicate over time. Even so, my study builds upon several aspects of Morgan’s work. I look at how members of Baker’s cult invest their hope for his canonization in visual items. I also demonstrate that mass-produced images of Baker retain their aura, or set of associations that give them their value and authority, which is a rather obvious argument to make within Catholicism’s tradition of visual culture. However, I show that, in Baker’s case, some mass produced images have more potent auras than others. The issue, then, is not whether the image retains its aura or not, but the degree to which it does so. In addition, Morgan and Promey’s claim that visual elements construct both meaning and community speaks to my concerns about how representations of Baker can create his cult and concepts of Baker’s sanctity.

I also consider the “interested gaze” of Baker’s devotees as part of a process that contributes to subsequent material representations. In other words, material items can play a role in how visual piety can “construct and synthesize” personal concepts of Baker as a saint which are expressed in various creations. Morgan’s “apocalyptic gaze” operates in the Baker case when devotees invest images of Baker with a longing for his sainthood. Furthermore, evidence of this investment, of visual piety as a “meaning making activity,” is found in items that are created out of hope for Baker’s canonization. Thus, I propose that visual piety can inspire productive devotional practice.

Works in print culture history frequently highlight how various societies have produced, circulated and appropriated printed materials, as well as how these materials construct identity, power relations and modes of resistance, create knowledge, reflect civic or religious agendas, and affect cultural transformation.42 While I do consider the

printing, distribution and reception of printed materials about Baker and demonstrate how they created knowledge about him and expanded his audience, I also rely on rhetorical and literary analysis to examine how these materials represent Baker given the personal devotion and/or feelings of their authors. Furthermore, I consider both electronic media and manuscripts part of Baker’s printed cultural history.43 Although archival manuscripts do not participate in the creation of public knowledge about Baker, they do express how people thought of him and provide clues about how individuals’ opinions of him were shaped.

Methodological Limitations and a Final Note

There are several disadvantages to focusing my approach on discursive practices. First, there might be a certain lack of finality in my conclusions because Baker’s sanctity will continue to shift as his cause progresses. When Orsi, in his book on St. Jude, concludes that Jude is an ambiguous figure or a figure of in-betweeness that has the capacity to be shaped to individual devotee’s needs and desires, he allows for some open-endedness. The shaping of St. Jude continues beyond the pages of his book. Secondly, the process of writing about “discourses” can become very removed from the materials under study and those who create them. When Edmund Kern identifies his portrayal of Hemma as just another passing instance of representation, he weakens the value of his conclusions. It is also problematic to attribute a certain amount of power to this

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mechanism called “discourse.” The new emphasis on Baker’s work with African-Americans does not oblige perceptions of Baker to alter in significant ways.

It is also problematic to assume, without qualification, that representations in material productions definitively create conceptions of a person as a saint and audiences for the saint. I have attempted to use documented evidence wherever possible to demonstrate this process. Further, people other than members of a cult create and use material representations of Baker. Not all of the people who see, use or create materials are members of his cult, nor do they necessarily become members. In fact, Trish McHenry, producer of the recent documentary on Baker, expressed her misgivings about the folklore surrounding him. In addition, when one member of the historical commission for Baker’s cause was asked about his personal opinion of Baker’s sanctity by the cause’s postulator, he limited his comments to Baker’s historical significance to the Buffalo area. Finally, not all representations of Baker fit neatly into the historical progression I am tracing concerning concepts of Baker’s sanctity. There are other imaginary conceptions of Baker. For instance, an avant garde theater group in Buffalo performed a play that portrayed St. Joseph’s Orphanage as a horrible place where children were beaten. And there is a death metal band who has written a song portraying the imagined torture children experienced at the homes.

Because the story of Father Baker, his material history and those who loved and admired him is a compelling and often colorful one, and in order to hopefully avoid some of the dangers of becoming too removed from the materials with which I am working, I

44 Trish McHenry, interview, 10 July 2003.
45 Timothy Allen, interview, 29 July 2003.
46 Beth Donovan, interview, 9 July 2003.
have chosen not to obscure this work’s narrative flow with an overabundance of theoretical discussions. Instead, I relegate most abstract concerns to this introductory section and my concluding remarks. Thus, it is my hope that this work will be readily accessible both to my academic colleagues and the many admirers of Father Baker in Western New York.
CHAPTER 2
LACKAWANNA, NEW YORK:
CITY OF STEEL AND CHARITY

In 2004, the city of Lackawanna placed colorful signs along Ridge Road and South Park Avenue directing visitors to “OLV Basilica,” “Botanical Gardens,” “Caz & South Parks” and “Victoria Way,” cosmetic evidence of the city’s plans for developing tourism. However, visitors exiting Highway 5 from the north first have to drive past the shabby neighborhoods that, in the early 1900s, had been the main housing developments of Lackawanna Steel’s booming company town. After the steel company began closing its main operations in 1982, broken windows, empty buildings and graffiti came to distinguish this part of town. However, the neighborhoods closer to downtown where Our Lady of Victory basilica rises into view remained relatively vital. For most of the 20th century, Lackawanna identified itself as the “City of Steel,” home of Baker’s Our Lady of Victory “City of Charity.” Nevertheless, directions to the steel history museum in the Lackawanna public library are absent from the newest city signs, suggesting that the OLV Institutes and other recreational sites are more important to Lackawanna’s public persona than the city’s century long relationship with the steel industry. Moreover, Baker’s cause has given city officials hope for the future of tourism in the area and grounds for city renewal projects.¹ Although Lackawanna’s history is intimately tied to both industry and charity, the long-standing OLV Institutes preceded the steel company’s hold on the town and remain vital to Lackawanna’s post-industrial existence. The story of Father Nelson H. Baker’s life, as both the driving force behind the OLV Institutes and a reason for current urban renewal efforts, has endured in Lackawanna into the 21st century.

Nelson H. Baker

On February 16, 1842, Nelson H. Baker was born in Buffalo, New York to a German Evangelical Lutheran father, Louis Becker, and an Irish Catholic mother, Caroline Donnellan. The second oldest of four boys, he was the only one to inherit his mother’s religion and was baptized Catholic in 1851. The Baker family ran a grocery store on Batavia Street in Buffalo for much of Baker’s childhood, and this is where he worked after graduating high school in 1858. Baker was nineteen when the Civil War broke out, and he enlisted in the 74th Regiment of the New York National Guard when he was twenty-one. In addition to other assignments in Pennsylvania and Maryland, his company helped end the draft and race riots of 1863 in New York City. Upon his return to Buffalo, he started a feed and grain business with another Civil War veteran, Joseph Meyer. The business was successful and Baker’s savings grew. As a young successful businessman, he participated in the social life of Buffalo during this time, yet he was also a member of the St. Vincent DePaul Society and in 1868, began taking evening Latin classes at St. Michaels’ residence, which was to soon become Canisius College.

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2 Many of Baker’s biographers date his birth year as 1841 based on his baptismal records, and this is the date given by Victorian magazine. However, his military, ordination and chancery records indicate that he was born in 1842. For a discussion of this oversight, see WK, “LTB (3): Ancestry and Birth,” LTB Collection, OLVA. Baker’s death card, grave marker, and new crypt in the basilica also bear the 1841 date. Baker was an Anglicanized version of the German surname Becker.

3 Baptismal Register: Volume I. St. Patrick’s Church, copy from St. Joseph’s Cathedral Archives in OLVA.

4 WK, “LTB (4): Nelson’s Youth,” LTB Collection, OLVA.

5 WK, “LTB (7): The Civil War—Part II,” LTB Collection, OLVA.

6 Baker had a close to $10,000 in savings in the 1860s. WK, “LTB (12) The Businessman Gets Serious,” LTB Collection, OLVA.

7 WK, “LTB (13): A Businessman at Night School,” LTB Collection, OLVA. Canisius College was founded in 1870.
After a solitary summer retreat traveling around the Great Lakes, which several biographers suggest helped solidify his decision to enter the priesthood, Baker began his studies at the Seminary of Our Lady of Angels in the Fall of 1869.8 Both Meyer and Baker’s youngest brother, Ransom, did not approve of his choice to enter the priesthood, but Baker notes that his mother and God did.9 During his first year at the seminary, Baker founded the Sodality of the Immaculate Conception so that seminarians devoted to Mary could “reap all the graces and blessings attached to that devotion” established by Pope Gregory XIII.10 In the summer of 1872, he was taken ill with erysipelas, known in the Middle Ages as “St. Anthony’s Fire,” and was hospitalized for eighteen weeks.11 The disease primarily affected his legs, which were “lanced open in eleven places.”12 During his fifth year at the seminary, Baker’s superior appointed him to direct the St. Vincent DePaul Society, a job he accepted reluctantly. In addition, he sang tenor in a quartet, the Niagara Harmonists and was a member of the Philharmonic and Dramatic Association.13 In May of 1874, he participated in the first official American pilgrimage to Rome as the

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9 FBD I, 20, OLVA.


12 FBD I, 33-34, OLVA.

13 John L. Reilly, Letter to Joseph P. Driscoll, 9 March 1936, WKC, OLVA.
This pilgrimage had been organized to show support for the pope after the Italy confiscated the Papal States in its process of unifying the Italian city-states. Baker reports having visited several European Marian shrines during this pilgrimage, including the Basilique de Notre-Dame des Victoires, describing the activities there as “one continual religious enthusiasm” where miracles occur daily “through the powerful intercession of Our Immaculate Lady.” Several biographers mark this event as the beginning of his devotion to Our Lady of Victory. In 1876, Bishop Stephen V. Ryan ordained Baker at St. Joseph’s Cathedral in Buffalo on the feast of St. Joseph, March 19. Baker’s first assignment was as an assistant to Father Thomas Hines at St. Patrick’s parish in Limestone Hill, the parish that was to become today’s Our Lady of Victory.

Buffalo and Lackawanna in the 19th Century

The land where the current cities of Buffalo and Lackawanna are located had been part of the Holland Land Purchase completed in 1793. The Seneca Indians were allotted 130 square miles of land in the area with the original purchase, but had sold all of

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14 Ibid., 17.

15 WK, “Notes,” Seminarian Nelson H. Baker’s “Travel Letters” to the Catholic Union Newspaper Collection, OLVA.


17 See Thomas Galvin, A Modern Apostle of Charity: Father Baker and his “Lady of Victory Charities” (Buffalo: The Buffalo Catholic Publication Co., 1925), 21; Anderson, 51; WK, “LTB (38) The Pilgrimage to Rome—Part II,” LTB Collection, OLVA; Also see Clyde B. Davis, “Nelson Baker Gave up Successful Business to Enter Priesthood,” BT, 29 July 1936, RNHBS, 65-69, LHNA, BECPL. Davis posthumously cites Baker’s own account of this trip: “I was transported with joy and I forthwith dedicated my life to Our Blessed Lady. That moment was the turning point of my life.”

18 “Ordinations,” CU, 23 March 1876, 5, KDNC, OLVA

it by 1842.\textsuperscript{20} In the late 1700s, Buffalo was a settlement of houses at the mouth of Buffalo Creek, referred to as village of Buffalo Creek. During the first few years of the 19th century, Joseph Ellicott, surveyor for the Holland Land company, planned a village for this site, which he called New Amsterdam.\textsuperscript{21} In 1804, Reverend Timothy Dwight called it “A casual collection of adventurers, living like most other frontier folks in a state of relaxed religious discipline.”\textsuperscript{22} These initial years were marked by both progress and strife. In 1808, legislation officially named the village Buffalo and made it the county seat of the newly formed Niagara Country. However, five years later, British troops burned it to the ground during the War of 1812.\textsuperscript{23} The village revived slowly with its population increasing to only about 2,095 by 1820.\textsuperscript{24} In 1821, Niagara county split into two counties, one north and one south at Tonawanda Creek, and Buffalo became part of the southern half, Erie county.\textsuperscript{25}

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 2. The Senecas remained active in early Buffalo. They relied on its services, had conflicts with its inhabitants, and were the targets of missionary efforts. See William Clement Bryant, Orlando Allen. Glimpses of life in the village of Buffalo, Read before the Buffalo Historical Society, 16 April 1877, 335-338 in The Cornell Library New York State Historical Collection [database online] [cited 15 September 2004]; available from http://historical.library.cornell.edu; William Ketchum, An Authentic and Comprehensive History of Buffalo with Some Account of its Early Inhabitants, both Savage and Civilized, vol. 2, (Buffalo NY: Rockwell, Baker & Hill Printers, 1865 republished Michigan: Scholarly Press, 1970), 203-220. One Seneca chief, Red Jacket, has been called Buffalo’s first “pop star” and there are many stories about him in Buffalo folklore. See J.N. Larned, A History of Buffalo: Delineating the Evolution of the City, vol. 1, (New York: Progressive Empire State Co, 1911), 42.

\textsuperscript{21} Ketchum, 146.


\textsuperscript{24} “Population growth and Decline over the Years,” [cited 1 October 2004]; available from http://ah.bfn.org/h/bfpop.html.

The opening of the Erie Canal in 1825 signaled a new period of growth for the city. Upon its incorporation in 1832, Buffalo’s population of 9,200 were mostly Irish and German, with a few French. About one-tenth of the population was Catholic and the rest mostly consisted of an assortment of Protestant denominations. The Irish inhabitants were often Catholic unskilled laborers whose traditions of drinking and using public spaces for private dealings did not help their reputations. The Germans were often Catholic, Lutheran or Jewish, and many came with skills as bakers, carpenters or brewers and soon owned land or a house or both. Buffalo’s population increased dramatically to a total of 18,213 inhabitants by 1840, a number which doubled by 1850 to 42,261. Emigrants from the East and supplies passed through Buffalo on their journeys westward. Buffalo’s location on the canal and Lake Erie allowed commerce, especially in the grain trade, to thrive, and property values rose. One businessman recalls being able to sell five and 3/4 acres of desirable property he had purchased for $250 in 1815 for $20,000 in 1835.

Assorted religious groups practiced and established places of worship in the area. Quakers, Baptists, Episcopalians, Methodists, and Presbyterians applied to John Ellicott for church land after 1812. In 1825, Zionist Mordecai Manuel Noah bought over 2,000 acres on Grand Island, an island in the middle of the Niagara River near Buffalo, in a

26 “The Church Keeps Pace with Our City’s Growth,” CUT, 18 July 1882, KDNC, OLVA.


28 Ibid., 172.

29 Ibid.

30 There were twenty-seven grain elevators in Buffalo by 1867. See Gerber, 52.

31 Barton.
failed attempt to set up a Jewish homeland to be called Ararat.\textsuperscript{32} The first Catholic church in Buffalo, St. Louis’s on Main Street, was completed in 1832.\textsuperscript{33} Although the church had been built to serve a diverse community of German, Irish and French Catholics, the Irish and English speaking members soon separated to form their own parishes.\textsuperscript{34} Throughout the 19th and early 20th century, new ethnic parishes continued to develop to meet the needs of Buffalo’s growing Catholic immigrant population.

Because of the increasing number of Catholics immigrating to New York State, the New York diocese divided into three parts in 1847, forming the dioceses of New York, Buffalo and Albany. John Timon, Buffalo’s first bishop, was born in Pennsylvania to Irish parents in 1797. Like Baker, Timon had worked in business before entering seminary at age 26. After he was ordained as a Vincentian priest in 1825, he worked in the St. Louis diocese and traveled as a mission priest, successfully aiding the Church’s missionary efforts in Texas.\textsuperscript{35} Once he was bishop, Timon did much to organize Catholics in the western half of New York. When he discovered that many of the parishes under his jurisdiction were poor, unorganized and lacked priests, he traveled to Europe to seek aid from wealthy nobles in France to support the diocese and get sacramental supplies for his needy parishes.\textsuperscript{36} Moreover, he built St. Joseph’s cathedral in 1855, encouraged Catholic education, invited religious orders to the diocese to help manage its...

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 56-61.

\textsuperscript{33} Larned, vol. 1, 33-35.

\textsuperscript{34} Historical writings suggest that St. Louis’s parish was a troublesome one. Besides quarrels between Bishop Timon and the laity over priests appointed to the parish, in 1854, the Irish bishop excommunicated several German lay trustees in a conflict over who had decision making authority over St. Louis’s property. See Charles G. Deuther, \textit{The Life and Times of the Late Right Reverend John Timon, First Roman Catholic Bishop of the Diocese of Buffalo} (Buffalo: Sag, Sons and Co. Lithography Printing and Manufacturing Co., 1870), 211.

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 18-54.

\textsuperscript{36} Thomas Donohue, \textit{History of the Catholic Church in Western New York Diocese of Buffalo} (Buffalo NY: Catholic Historical Publishing Co.,1904), 131-133.
expanding services, and established numerous Catholic charity institutions, including the orphanage and reformatory that Baker would eventually manage.

In 1847, there was only one charity institute under the jurisdiction of the Buffalo diocese, an orphan asylum in Rochester, NY established in 1841. A group of Protestants from various denominations had organized the Buffalo Orphan Asylum in 1836, and Timon opened a female orphan asylum, St. Vincent’s, in 1848. However, an 1849 cholera epidemic in Buffalo created the need for more facilities, particularly for Catholic children. At first, St. Patrick’s church in Buffalo and an additional building on Niagara Street housed Catholic male orphans. In 1850, Timon bought land in Lancaster and built facilities at which to combine the Rochester and Buffalo male orphans. This home was incorporated as St. Joseph’s Boys Orphan Asylum in 1851. In 1854, St. Joseph’s moved to Best Street in Buffalo, and two years later, the boys made their final move to “a beautiful farm purchased for them” in West Seneca.

St. Joseph’s new home was in the Limestone Hill district of West Seneca, a loosely knit rural community located just south of Buffalo. Earlier, in 1842, 5,000 acres of this region had been purchased by the Ebenezers or the “Communion of the True Inspiration,” a group of about 800 German Lutheran immigrants led by Christian


39 Deuther, 169.

40 “Certificate of Incorporation St. Joseph’s Orphan Asylum,” State of New York, 1851, OLVA.

41 “Joseph’s Boys’ Orphan Asylum,” The Catholic Sentinel, 15 March 1856, KDNC, OLVA.
Between 1843 and 1845, they established four hamlets in the area. However, once they felt that their communal way of life was threatened by Buffalo’s increasing commercialism, they purchased land in Iowa and began establishing the Amana colonies there in 1855. The town of Seneca formed in 1851 from parts of three of Buffalo’s other outlying townships, Cheektowaga, Hamburg and East Hamburg. To the north, it bordered Buffalo and to the west, it bordered Lake Erie. The town of Seneca’s name changed to West Seneca in 1852 in order to avoid confusing it with another town with the same name in eastern New York.43

West Seneca was mainly a farming community comprised of a large number of German immigrants, but Buffalo businessmen also built homes in the region.44 Reminiscences of the area mention ample wildlife, including birds, bear, deer and panthers, as well as extensive open fields, flora and wooded areas.45 The Limestone Hill district, a name it received even before West Seneca became a town because of its geographical features, covered the area from Abbot Road to Lake Erie. The only Catholic church in the district came to be known as Holy Cross and was built around 1850 to accommodate the occasional missionary priests who offered mass for area Catholics.46 Unlike many of the Catholic churches being established in Buffalo at this time, and subsequent parishes to be founded later in Lackawanna, this church had not been built to


44 Emerling, 5.

45 Galvin, 201, 203.

46 Weller, 5; *The Catholic Almanac and Laity’s Directory for the Year of Our Lord 1856* (Baltimore: Lucas Brothers, 1856), 134.
serve a particular ethnic group. Heated by a small wooden stove, the church consisted of a small frame building with a dirt floor and no sacristy. Like many of the other parishes under Timon’s jurisdiction in rural areas, it was not well-outfitted for Catholic rituals, nor did it have a permanent pastor until St. Joseph’s Orphanage moved in next door.

The Limestone Hill Institutes

St. Joseph’s first orphanage building at Limestone Hill was located near the small Holy Cross Church, Holy Cross cemetery, and “White’s Corner,” the intersection of today’s South Park Avenue and Ridge Road and site of the Our Lady of Victory Basilica. When the orphanage first arrived in 1856, it was staffed by the Sisters of the Holy Cross under the temporary direction of Reverend J. M. Early and cared for about eighty boys. Timon had also assigned the Brothers of the Holy Cross to the orphanage to help teach trade skills to the boys, but they were only there briefly. In May of 1857, Timon asked the Sisters of St. Joseph to replace the Sisters of the Holy Cross and assigned the newly ordained Reverend Thomas Hines as pastor of the small parish and director of the orphanage. During that August, Hines worked to raise funds for the

47 Galvin, 204.

48 Holy Cross cemetery became a parish cemetery in 1849, though its earliest burial records are from the 1830s. See “Catholic Cemeteries—Historical Background,” [cited 24 September 2004]; available from http://www.cathcemsbflo.com/historical.html.

49 “Joseph’s Boys’ Orphan Asylum.”

50 “At Limestone Hill,” The Buffalo Sentinel, 29 November 1856, 2, KDNC, OLVA; WK, “LTB (51): Getting better acquainted with Father Hines,” LTB Collection, OLVA.

51 The Sisters of St. Joseph, contemplatives who also performed charity work, were founded in France in 1651. They came to St. Louis MO in 1836 and were invited by Timon to the Buffalo diocese in 1854. In 1862, they helped found Buffalo’s St. Mary’s School for the Deaf. See WK, “LTB (52): Getting to Know the Sisters of St. Joseph—Part I,” LTB Collection, OLVA; Galvin, 222. Hines had been born in Ireland in 1820 and immigrated to the U.S. with his family in 1828. He was ordained in March of 1857. See “Ordination,” Buffalo Sentinel, 4 April 1857, 4; “Death of Father Hines,” CUT, 28 May 1896, KDNC, OLVA.
orphanage by appealing for donations at local parish missions.52 Although historical details are a little sketchy, three members of the Brothers of the Holy Infant, founded by Timon in 1853 or 1854, were also present at the orphanage by the early 1860s.53

Difficult living conditions and financial struggle characterized the asylum’s first few years. A three year flea infestation from 1859-1861 compelled the Sisters to appeal to Timon for help. He suggested that they borrow a goat from a local farmer to walk through their entire living, sleeping and eating quarters so that the fleas would jump onto it and be carried away. The bishop’s suggestion worked, but another incident where eight sisters fell unconscious from an “imperfect pipe of a coal furnace” further indicates that living conditions were less than favorable. Moreover, there was no medical care except for a local man with some knowledge of medicine, referred to affectionately as “St. Joseph.” 54 However, the orphanage did have “visible and invisible benefactors,” the diocese held holiday fairs to raise money, appeals for donations appeared in local papers, and the Sisters relied on prayers to St. Joseph and the kindness of their neighbors for provisions.55

Over the next two decades, several changes improved conditions at Limestone Hill. Hines built a new facilities for the orphanage across the street, and Timon assisted in founding St. John’s Protectory, a reform school for delinquent Catholic boys, adjacent to Holy Cross cemetery. In 1864, Timon established the Society for the Protection of

52 “Ledger of Sister Mary Ann Burke, SSJ 1857-1865,” 57, copy in OLVA; “The Medina Mission,” The Buffalo Sentinel, 1 August 1857, KDNC, OLVA.


54 “Ledger of Sister Mary Ann Burke,” 67, 71.

55 Ibid., 64; “Orphan’s Fair,” The Buffalo Sentinel, 21 February 1857, 2, KDNC, OLVA. The pope granted plenary indulgences to donors who purchased membership in the “St. Joseph’s Charitable Society for the support of the Poor Orphans. See “Orphan Boy’s Asylum,” The Buffalo Sentinel, 11 October 1856, 2, KDNC, OLVA.
Destitute Roman Catholic Children of the City of Buffalo to care for both destitute and delinquent Catholic male children. Delinquent Catholic males, aged eleven to sixteen, were to be institutionalized at the protectory and schooled in various trades. One report indicates that Hines was afraid to do this kind of work, and during his time there, the protectory resembled a prison with locked doors and bars on its windows. However, it did have space for a visitors area, offices and a chapel, which helped improve the overall situation. The Sisters disciplined the boys with time outs, elimination of privileges and the occasional slap on the hand. Expert tradesmen ran the early trade school which was successful in producing chairs and brooms for local businesses in Buffalo, as well as shoes. In addition, its electrotype foundry set type for the local Catholic paper during the 1870s.

Other improvements included the addition of a Catholic elementary school in 1870 and the completion of a new brick church building dedicated to St. Patrick in 1875 to replace the small wooden church’s modest structure. Despite these improvements, the Institutes struggled with its finances. The chair factory had burned down during its first year of operations and carried a mortgage for its reconstruction. Moreover, the

56 Act of Incorporation of the Society for the Protection of Destitute Roman Catholic Children of the City of Buffalo and Acts Amendatory thereof with its bylaws, April 24, 1864 (West Seneca: St. John’s Protectory, 1904).


58 Galvin, 235.

59 Letchworth, 4.


61 Galvin, 286.

62 Ibid., 207.

63 Letchworth, 3.
financial Panic of 1873 helped create economic conditions that were unfavorable for charity organizations. In 1875, the Limestone Hill Institutes were $16,505 in debt. In 1876 until 1881, and he reports that his responsibilities included saying mass at St. Patrick’s and St. Vincent’s Orphanages, hearing confessions from the orphans, helping produce the Catholic Union at the protectory’s electrotype foundry, and supplying about 1,000 boys with recreational activities such as firecrackers on the 4th of July and weekend excursions. Baker recorded that, “Some try almost daily to get away, but they are generally caught.” The boys also performed pageants for the community, and it is likely that Baker helped arrange these, given his previous musical experience. Timon replaced Baker with Reverend C. O’Byrne in 1881, sending Baker briefly to St. Mary’s parish in Corning, New York to assist the Reverend Peter Colgan.67

Baker as Superintendent of Limestone Hill

In February 1882, Timon reassigned Baker to the Limestone Hill Institutes as superintendent, replacing Hines whose ailing health necessitated a transfer to the less demanding job of a parish pastor in Suspension Bridge. Baker inherited a sizeable debt from Hines, and during the rest of the 19th century, he put into operation several successful initiatives to help remedy the Institutes’ financial situation and establish a relationship with donors.69 Soon after his arrival, Baker increased donations by placing

64 Ibid., 9.
65 FBD II, 26-27, OLVA.
66 “Entertainment at St. Joseph’s Orphan Asylum, Limestone Hill,” CUT, 7 July 1877, 5, KDNA, OLVA.
67 “Changes in the Diocese of Buffalo,” CUT, 13 January 1881, 4, KDNC. OLVA.
69 Galvin states that the Institutes were bankrupt when Baker arrived. See Galvin, 9. Financial records of the SPDRCC indicate that in 1879, the Institutes debt was “about $19,500.” See “Special Meeting,” 18 September 1879, Finances OLV 1878-1897 collection (19 years),
the work of the orphanage and protectory under the patronage of Our Lady of Victory, forming an association to promote devotion to her, and soliciting members through a letter writing campaign. In addition, he began using the protectory’s printing facilities to help by publishing a fund raising appeal in the early 1880s, *The Appeal for the Homeless and Destitute Child.* This appeal promoted membership in the Association of Our Lady of Victory and asked for a twenty-five cent membership fee. Financial records from 1887 indicate that “Our Blessed Lady of Victory” brought in over $13,000 in donations. By 1888, that amount had risen to over $17,000. Under Baker’s direction, the Victoria Press, as the trade school’s printing department came to be known by the 1880s, expanded and aided in strengthening relationships with donors by increasing the Institutes’ visibility through its two main publications, *The Annals of the Association of Our Blessed Lady of Victory* and *The Victorian.* The quarterly *Annals* began in July 1888. The early *Victorian* was a monthly magazine started in 1895 that grew out of an in-house journal published by the boys for the protectory.

OLVA. By 1885, there was a $3,561 balance in favor of the Protectory. See “General Statement of Receipts, Earnings and Expenses from all sources for the year ending September 30, 1885,” Finances OLV 1878-1897 collection (19 years).


To be referred to as the “OLV Association” or the “Association” for the rest of this work.

“General Statement of Receipts, Earnings and Expenses from all sources for the year ending September 30, 1887 and September 30, 1888,” Finances OLV 1878-1897 collection (19 years).

*Annals* 1, no. 1 (July 1888): cover.

*Victorian* 3 (March 1897): 59.

Dempsey, 21.
With the help of these publications and through other successful fund raising efforts, Baker was able settle the Institutes’ debt within the next decade and begin extensive expansions.\textsuperscript{76} Besides enlarging the physical capacities of the Institutes, Baker also worked to increase his staff and expand educational and recreational opportunities for the boys. Between 1888 and 1898, the facilities for St. John’s Protectory and trade school grew to encompass 154,550 square feet adjacent to Holy Cross cemetery. Moreover, the discovery of a natural gas well on the grounds in 1891 helped save $4500 in fuel expenses for that year and provided future savings.\textsuperscript{77} Between 1882 and 1905, twelve men joined the dwindling population of the Brothers of the Holy Infancy and took over operations of the trade school.\textsuperscript{78} Education outside of the trade school was mostly the responsibility of the Sisters of St. Joseph. A parochial school was built in 1895, and during this decade, the boys began taking the State Regents Exams and receiving diplomas for graduating the eighth grade.\textsuperscript{79} In 1896, Baker built Victoria Hall which had a seating capacity for about 1000. The hall provided space for graduation ceremonies and pageants for the public. News reports called this hall “the most beautiful in the Western part of the state” and indicated that it was used for performances by both the boys and the Children of Mary, a devotional co-fraternity for young women.\textsuperscript{80} At this time the boys

\textsuperscript{76} The OLV Institutes remained debt free under Baker’s direction with one recorded exception. In 1934, it appealed to Catholic Charities for a $60,000 loan to help defray costs because donations had fallen off during the depression. See “Scores pay tribute to Famous Priest,” \textit{BEN}, 29 July 1936, RNHBS, 46, LHNA, BECPL.

\textsuperscript{77} “Excitement at Limestone Hill,” \textit{CUT} 27 August 1891, 5, KDNC, OLVA; “General Statement of Receipts, Earnings and Expenses from all sources for the year ending September 30, 1891,” Finances OLV 1878-1897 collection (19 years).

\textsuperscript{78} In 1882, there were only two aging members of the order working at the Institutes. See Monnin, 17.

\textsuperscript{79} WK, “Buildings at Limestone Ridge/Lackawanna,” WKC, OLVA; Dempsey, 19, 27.

\textsuperscript{80} “West Seneca,” \textit{CUT}, 14 May 1896, 5, KDNC, OLVA.
also formed a marching band, drill team and cadet corps that practiced in the hall. Later, the hall also showed censored movies on Sundays and came to be known by some locals as “the Reff,” an allusion to the “roughness” of the boys at the Institutes.

Near the time of the Protectory’s completion, Baker undertook additional responsibility. Bishop James E. Quigley, the Buffalo diocese’s third bishop, placed Baker in charge of the Working Boys’ Home, replacing Reverend Daniel Walsh, whom Quigley transferred to Buffalo’s new Nativity parish. Timon had established this home in 1888 to provide affordable lodging for young Catholic workingmen in Buffalo in order to prevent them from being exposed to older men of “immoral, irreligious and disreputable” character. Boys paid rates on a sliding scale according to their income, which in the late 1890s, averaged at about $1.80 per week. The home’s first location was in a mansion near Niagara Square in downtown Buffalo, and the efforts of the Ladies Aid Society of the Working Boy’s Home helped provide financial support and recreational activities for its residents. Baker assumed responsibility for the home shortly after it received newly built facilities on Niagara Street, which had interior oak trim and even “indoor bowling alleys.” The Working Boys’ Home became an extension of the Institutes at Limestone Hill as a place for the boys to live once they were old enough to have jobs in Buffalo and build up their savings. Accordingly, at the turn of the century,

81 Dempsey, 26.
82 Francis Rooney, interview by WK, 1 July 1987, 8, OLVA; Mr. Reno, interview by WK, 29 November 1987, tape 2, 18, OLVA.
83 “New Superintendent,” CUT, 6 October 1898, 4, KDNC, OLVA.
84 Galvin, 247.
85 “The New Working Boys’ Home,” CUT, 10 October 1897, 1, KDNC, OLVA.
87 Galvin, 249; “The New Working Boys’ Home.”
the charity services under Baker’s direction had the capacities to care for orphaned and delinquent male children, provide them with an education and occupational skills, and usher them into society as independent adults. Moreover, the Institutes were the largest establishment in the Limestone Hill district at this time.

**Lackawanna During the First Half of the 20th Century**

In 1900, the Limestone Hill’s population consisted of 5,300 residents.\(^88\) Just north of the Institutes, Frederick Law Olmsted, designer of New York City’s Central Park, developed South Park in the early 1880s as part of his plans for a park and parkway system in Buffalo. The park contained a botanical garden complex that been built between 1894 and 1897 under the direction of botanist John F. Cowell. Its unusual collections of plants from exotic locations drew a regular flow of visitors from Buffalo at the end of the century. Visitors to the 1901 Pan American Exposition also traveled to West Seneca to view the gardens, an excursion which offered a contrast to the exposition’s displays on technological advances in manufacturing, farming, sanitation, communication, printing, electricity, weaponry and transportation.\(^89\)

In addition to recreational improvements, the Limestone Hill area experienced a dramatic growth in industry. In 1899, Walter Scranton and Moses Taylor of the Lackawanna Iron and Steel Company from Scranton Pennsylvania and several wealthy local Buffalo capitalists, John J. Albright, John G. Milburn and Edmund Hayes, advanced fifteen million dollars to establish a steel plant in the Buffalo area.\(^90\) By the time

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\(^{88}\) *Lackawanna Diamond Jubilee: Commemorating Seventy Five Years of Progress* (The City of Lackawanna 75th Anniversary Committee, 1984), 13.


\(^{90}\) “Mystery ended: The Lackawanna Iron and Steel Company is the concern behind Buffalo’s Great Steel Industry,” *Commercial*, 24 April 1899, LSC, 7-8, LHNA, BECPL; Thomas
Lackawanna Steel began to transfer its operations to the region in 1902, investments had grown to about forty million dollars.\textsuperscript{91} The plant was built on land in West Seneca known as Stony Point, a region along the shore of Lake Erie directly northwest of the Limestone Hill Institutes. Reports about plant’s construction and innovative technology were optimistic, reflecting the local enthusiasm toward industrial development and progress that had characterized the Pan-American Expo.\textsuperscript{92} The company hired local immigrants and tradesmen to help built the plant and moved hundreds of workers from Scranton to operate it. Thus, within the first ten years of the 20th century, Limestone Hill’s population increased dramatically to about 15,000, a company town grew up around the plant, and Lackawanna’s history became intertwined with the story of the steel industry in the Buffalo region.\textsuperscript{93}

Before there were adequate housing and sewage facilities and organized municipal services, disorder characterized workers’ living conditions near the plant. A 1902 report indicates that an estimated 2-3,000 foreign born laborers from Buffalo hired to help build the plant were able to save on trolley fares by living in makeshift villages. Comprised mostly of Italians and Poles, these villages contained shelters built from cardboard, abandoned boxcars or scrap lumber, and their inhabitants cooked in the open and washed their clothes in Buffalo Creek. A number of saloons lined the entrance to the plant and “[caught] a certain number as surely as nets catch fish” on paydays, and crime in the area increased since the police force lacked manpower and encountered difficulties

\textsuperscript{91} “Capital Doubled,” \textit{Express}, 16 January 1902, LSC, 67, LHNA, BECPL.

\textsuperscript{92} “Will be Gigantic: Steel Plant at Stony Point Will be the Biggest and Best Equipped in the World,” \textit{Commercial}, 6 February 1902, LSC, 69-72, LHNA, BECPL; “Largest Coke Plant in the World at Buffalo,” \textit{Courier}, 24 April 1902, LSC, 97-98, LHNA, BECPL.

\textsuperscript{93} Emerling, 17.

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with language barriers when investigating incidents. Buffalo papers perceived the steel plant region as a dangerous one, reporting that workers who were out at night felt it necessary to illegally carry firearms. The fact that President McKinley’s assassin, Leon Czolgosz, had been a boarder on Center Street near Ridge Road where authorities found a gun, had not helped this reputation. Moreover, sewage problems led to an outbreak of typhoid near the plant in 1903.

Despite these difficulties, conditions improved during the next two decades as the plant provided both housing and community services for its workers, municipal services became centralized with Lackawanna’s incorporation, and cultural centers and social institutions opened to meet the needs of the city’s various populations. The plant contracted two villages of new houses for which it provided police and fire protection. In addition, it built the Moses Taylor Hospital to provide care for its injured workers since serious accidents and deaths were not uncommon during the plant’s early years. Limestone Hill was incorporated as the city of Lackawanna in 1909, and a centralized administration helped establish the city’s identity. In 1911, the local Presbyterian Mission Program established Friendship House, a social organization which helped steel workers, ran a nursery school, helped foreign born immigrants adjust, and aided needy

94 “City’s Biggest Annex,” Express, 11 November 1902, LSC 130-132, LHNA, BECPL.

95 “Many carry firearms,” Express 26 December 1902, LSC, 134, LHNA, BECPL.

96 Emerling, 13.

97 “City of Lackawanna?” Express, 4 January 1903, LSC, 135, LHNA, BECPL; “The Lackawanna Steel Company’s New Villages,” Courier, September 4, 1904, LSC 201, LHNA, BECPL. Leary and Sholes refer to these kinds of provisions as “corporate paternalism.” See Leary and Sholes, 42.

98 Emerling, 14.

99 “Burned to a Cinder in Fluid Iron,” Express, 18 May 1907; “Splashed by Molten Iron,” Express 2 August 1907, LSC, 245, LHNA, BECPL.

100 Emerling, 17,
families during depression. In 1919, the Polish population began Dom Polski, a community center, located on Ridge Road in a building they purchased from the Lenham Mercantile Company. In addition, Lackawanna held city events, such as the 1919 Labor Day international pageant to celebrate the proposed League of Nations. However, the section of Lackawanna near the steel plant, “down over the bridge,” retained a bad reputation throughout the 20s and 30s. Baker even expressed disgust and disappointment about the “lawlessness and crime” in the district.

Religious institutions opened for the growing variety of populations as well. St. Patrick’s remained the only Catholic Church in western West Seneca until 1903 when Reverend John Ryan became pastor of the first Catholic church in the steel district, St. Charles’s, later known as the Queen of All Saints. Additional Catholic parishes opened in the next thirty years including St. Barbara’s in 1904, St. Michael’s in 1910 and St. Hyacinth’s in 1911 for the Polish community; St. Anthony’s for Italian immigrants in 1917; Our Lady of the Sacred Heart of Jesus for Croatians in 1919; and the Holy Trinity Polish National Catholic Church for Poles from Scranton in 1929. Catholicism appeared to have been the dominant faith in the area, but other groups were also present.

101 Emerling, 36.
102 Ibid., 22. According to the 1930 census, there were 2,575 Poles in Lackawanna. The next largest ethnic group were the Yugoslavians, at 1,007. See “1930 Census of Lackawanna,” copy in OLVA.
103 Emerling, 20.
104 Kathryn Leary, interview by WK, second revision, 8 March, 1988, 8, OLVA.
105 NHB, Letter to John Sullivan, 7 December 1922, OLVA.
106 “Church for Steel Plant,” Courier, 3 July 1903, LSC, 159, LHNA, BECPL. This parish became a mission of Our Lady of Victory parish in 1923 and was staffed by Brothers of the Holy Infancy until 1949. See Emerling, 22.
Methodists, Presbyterians and Episcopalians all had churches in the area by 1910, a Serbian Orthodox church opened in 1917, and Bethel A.M.E. and Union Baptist churches opened for the African-American population in 1923. In addition, the First and Second Baptist churches opened during the 1920s, followed by Ebenezer and Mount Olive Baptist churches in 1935 and 1942, respectfully.\(^{108}\)

Once Lackawanna became urbanized, Lackawanna Steel directly impacted the city and its residents. What had once been a rural farming community was now encompassed by the “nerve racking sounds of mammoth auto-trucks and the wild, discordant tootings of auto claxons,” the “smoke and soot of a gigantic Steel Plant” and the “flare and flash of sulphuric flames from fiery furnaces.”\(^{109}\) When a striker was killed during a 1919 steel workers’ strike, a funeral procession for the deceased turned into a strike rally as workers marched down Ridge Road to the Holy Cross cemetery.\(^{110}\)

In 1922, Charles Schwab and Bethlehem Steel purchased Lackawanna Steel and modernized much of its equipment.\(^{111}\) Workers for Bethlehem Steel in the 1920s report being treated unfairly by foremen who played favorites, disciplined workers on a whim, and punished them for accidents if the mishaps were determined to be their fault.\(^{112}\) In 1931, the plant was only employing thirty percent of its workforce and providing little support for the city’s financial base or the workers it had laid off.\(^{113}\) Lackawanna had to seek public assistance to survive, and workers relied on local charity organizations, like

\(^{108}\) Ibid.; Emerling., 23.

\(^{109}\) Galvin, 204.

\(^{110}\) Emerling, 21.

\(^{111}\) Leary and Sholes, 51.


\(^{113}\) Lackawanna Diamond Jubilee, 28.
the Our Lady of Victory Institutes and the Friendship House, for relief. By 1939, workers had established the Bethlehem Steel Workers Union which became associated with the United Steelworkers of America in 1942, just in time for increased World War II production. Consequently, by the 1950s, Bethlehem steelworkers were well paid, respected members of the community, and Lackawanna was a thriving industrial city with more than half of its financial support coming from the plant.

The Our Lady of Victory Institutes

As Lackawanna Steel brought urban development to Limestone Hill, the corner of Ridge Road and South Park avenue became one of the busiest intersections in the region, and the Our Lady of Victory Institutes at “Victorhill” or “Father Baker’s Corners” also continued to grow (Figure 1.1). Baker began raising funds through The Annals in 1906 for an infant home to provide care for abandoned children under the age of five. In 1908, he established the “Crib Donor’s Guild,” the Institutes’ longest running charity appeal, which asked donors to contribute twenty-five dollars to supply one infant with a crib and bedding. The Institutes were already caring for a number of young children who were being housed by Amelia Mathieson in a home on Pearl Street in Buffalo. In 1909, the Our Lady of Victory Infant Home opened, and when unwed mothers began coming to the home during its first year of operations, it became one of the only homes in the Northeast providing maternity services to these “unfortunate young women in poor circumstances,” most of whom left their newborns with the home and returned to their

114 Emerling, 29.

115 Galvin, 95. When proposals began in Limestone Hill to create a city out of the district and name it Lackawanna, the 1903 Victorian magazine gave its address as “Victoria, West Seneca NY, and in 1905, its address was “Victorhill, NY.”

116 “A Plea for Our Infant Asylum,” Annals 19, no. 3 (Jan 1907): 2.


118 Galvin, 269.
lives with their characters “preserved and untarnished.”\textsuperscript{119} This program did not by any means promote single motherhood; rather it developed in response to negative cultural perceptions of pregnancy outside of wedlock and consciously tried to save lives by offering an alternative to illegal abortions.\textsuperscript{120} The home advocated for unwed mothers by protecting their identity, even from the employees, and provided services to many free of charge.\textsuperscript{121} By the 1920s, this promise of secrecy and affordable maternity care attracted women from at least thirteen different states as well as Canada and Germany, and the home was often “taxed to capacity.”\textsuperscript{122} During the 1920s and 30s, significant friction developed between the Institutes and the State Board of Charities over the issues of overcrowding and the home’s refusal to release background information about the mothers.\textsuperscript{123} While Baker worked to meet State requirements by expanding the home’s capacities and placing out infants to families, he remained adamant about protecting the mothers’ personal information.\textsuperscript{124}

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{120} “Supplementary Report of the SPDRCC,” 25 November 1925, 4, OLVA.
\bibitem{121} Ellen Hayes, 27 December 1987, interview by WK, 1, OLVA; Personal Letter, S.M. to RW, 23 January 1989, FBGRC, OLVA. The institute’s work with unwed mothers was the only charity that consistently ran at a loss. Its first year’s deficit was $7,940.08 which rose to $86,852.80 by 1929. See “Supplementary Report of the SPDRCC,” 12 November 1929, 4, OLVA.
\bibitem{124} NHB, Letter to Bishop William Turner, 4 June 1928, copy from DBA in WKC, OLVA.
\end{thebibliography}
Being responsible for a large number of children created a considerable need for provisions, staff and medical care at the Institutes. Forty-five to eighty percent of the children were solely supported by the Institutes, and between 1912 and 1936, 800-2,000 children were being cared for at any one time. The children came from three Canadian provinces and thirty seven different states in the Union, including Indiana, Arkansas, Kentucky, Michigan, and West Virginia.125 The Institutes ran a dairy and stock farm that provided vegetables, meat, eggs and milk until the 1940s, and the addition of larger laundry and educational facilities helped keep up with the orphans’ needs.126 A nurse’s training program was started to help staff the infant home, and despite recovering from a fire at the protectory in 1908 and another in the orphanage in 1916, the Institutes expanded to include a maternity hospital by 1920.127 This hospital, however, became a general care facility in 1921 after recent changes in state regulations required registered nurses to be trained in a general hospital setting.128 By 1923, a three story residence was completed for the nursing students and the infant home was actively recruiting young women who wanted to specialize in child care.129 Also, local girls volunteered to help feed the babies on “no school days.”130

Amidst all of these improvements, the crown and glory of Baker’s expansions was the Our Lady of Victory Basilica, a white marble edifice built to replace St. Patrick’s


126 “Supplementary Report of the SPDRCC,” 1 March 1918, OLVA, 1.


128 “Supplementary Report of the SPDRCC,” 18 November 1921, 2, OLVA.

129 “Supplementary Report of the SPDRCC,” 4 December 1923, 2, OLVA.

130 Personal Letter, Mrs. M. M. to RW, April 2000, FBGRC, OLVA.
church and consecrated in May of 1926.\textsuperscript{131} Bethlehem Steel received money for aiding in its construction.\textsuperscript{132} The basilica’s opening was a significant event for the Buffalo region, and all of Buffalo’s major newspapers reported its dedication in feature articles. The basilica not only became a center for devotion and a pilgrimage site, but it also helped raise finances. Announcements in the \textit{Annals} and \textit{Victorian} for five yearly novenas said in the national shrine brought in offerings from across the United States.\textsuperscript{133} By 1940, it was receiving over 250,000 visitors during the summer months.\textsuperscript{134}

Under Baker’s direction, the OLV parish also gained local significance for helping spread Catholicism and providing social and community services, particularly in the 1920s and 30s. In 1921, a free Our Lady of Victory high school adjoining the basilica site opened in a “fine new building…constructed of red brick with grey stone trimming.”\textsuperscript{135} Baker started the Our Lady of Victory mission church on Abbot Road to serve Italian and Polish Catholics in the area and staffed it with Brothers of the Holy Infancy. After a hurricane destroyed the mission building, he raised funds to replace it, establishing the Our Lady of the Sacred Heart parish in 1929 and donating a statue of OLV for the niche above the door.\textsuperscript{136} In the early 1930’s, the Our Lady of Victory Mission School opened on Ridge Road across the street from the fire hall on the “Steel City side of Lackawanna;” this school was staffed by Felician nuns and provided

\textsuperscript{131} “Consecration of the Beautiful Shrine at Lackawanna,” \textit{CUT}, 27 May 1926, 1.

\textsuperscript{132} “National Shrine of Our Lady of Victory,” finances and accounts, 1 August 1924, OLVA.

\textsuperscript{133} May J. Doane, Rosemary J. Kehoe and Ruth N. McCann, “Report of Basic Survey of Our Lady of Victory Infant Home and OL of V infant Home Placing Out Department,” October, November and December 1944, 2 OLVA.

\textsuperscript{134} \textit{Victorian} 46, no. 5 (1940): inside front cover.

\textsuperscript{135} “A Catholic High School,” \textit{CUT}, 17 August 1921, KDNCA, OLVA.

\textsuperscript{136} “Supplementary Report of the SPDRCC,” November 12, 1929, 2, 11, OLVA.
Catholic education for minorities and immigrant children. Also, Baker aided the Ladies Aid Society in establishing a boarding home for girls on Jersey Street in Buffalo to help “have as many protected from the evils of bad boarding houses as possible.”

During the depression when many of Lackawanna’s residents were unemployed, the Institutes donated over $9,000 in cash to the poor, spent over $8,000 on “shoes and mending” for the unemployed, and served 450,333 meals to unemployed men at the Institutes and the Working Boys Home, including “white people, Negroes, Indians, French, Polish, Italians, Hungarians, Arabians, unemployed, vagrants commonly called ‘tramps’ or ‘hoboes,’ Protestants and Catholics.” The expenses of these efforts were so great that Baker asked for finances from Catholic Charities and appealed to Representative James M. Mead for help.

In addition, the orphanage accepted boys whose parents could not afford to care for them. One mother recalls bringing her three boys to St. Joseph’s in 1928 after her husband abandoned her and she had no one to care for her children while she worked. She paid a small monthly allowance to the Institutes, visited her children every week, and was able to remove them from the orphanage in 1934 after remarrying.

Another service the Institutes provided was an apostolate to the African-American community. The 1930 Lackawanna census indicates that there were 2,051 African-Americans in Lackawanna, many of whom had been brought into the area by the steel

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137 Personal Letter, A.W. to RW, October 1987, FBGRC, OLVA.

138 NHB, Letter to Katherine S. Pfohl, 6 July 1932, OLVA.


140 Ibid., NHB, Letter to Mead.

company as workers or strikebreakers. The Institutes had long provided services to children of African descent. One visitor’s observations of the African-American babies crowing “as joyously as the white” and the integrated washrooms in the orphanage inspired him to call Baker a “pioneer in interracial relations.” In 1931, some of the unemployed Lackawanna residents of African descent who had been eating meals at OLV expressed their desire to join the Catholic church. By early 1932, Baker was providing daily religious instruction to about forty African-Americans. Because of his advanced age and many other duties, he soon enlisted the help of Reverend Thomas Galvin, a Redemptorist priest who had been an orphan at St. Joseph’s during its early years, and Margaret Bernardo, a woman of African descent from Cuba for whom Baker provided housing in exchange for her assistance.

Baker and Galvin’s missionary efforts were not without resistance from those within the parish in the form of what Galvin described as a “whispering campaign of persecution.” Also, local police began to arrest the program’s students and charge them with vagrancy instead of leaving them alone as they had previously done. Baker’s response to this was to examine the legal possibilities for prosecuting the city for unfair treatment by writing to a lawyer friend for advice and to provide his African-American converts with housing free of charge to prevent them from being kicked out of the city.

142 “1930 Census of Lackawanna,” copy in OLVA. In 1922, the steel plant employed 1,164 African-Americans. See Lillian Serece Williams, Strangers in the Land of Paradise: The Creation of an African-American Community, Buffalo NY 1900-1940 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999),72. Williams mentions that the practice of importing these workers was common enough for there to be a saying among Buffalo African-American women to marry a “Bethlehem Fool or a Wickmine Mule.” See 29. “Color Line in West Seneca,” Express, 26 January 1906, LSC, 232, LHNA, BECPL.

143 Alfred Barrett, “The Charity of Father Baker,” America, 4 April 1936, 611.


under vagrancy laws. Galvin’s report of the apostolate expresses baffled amusement when his students, in their enthusiasm, put holy water in their coffee or wore rosary beads as necklaces or watch chains, “not done through superstition, but from ardent piety and devotion.” However, he tactfully refocuses on the success of his corrective measures and the joy of the converts. By the end of 1932, the “Our Lady of Victory Colored Mission Society” saw a total of 340 converts, which included “two Mohammedens” from Calcutta. Baker expressed great pleasure in the success of this work in reports to friends and the local Carmelites, and the apostolate in Lackawanna influenced additional missionary efforts with Buffalo’s African-American population during the mid 1930s.

In the years before his death on July 29th 1936, Baker continued to work on ideas to improve the Institutes, had become an important and influential religious figure in the diocese and was treated as a local celebrity. During the last years of his life, Baker had been planning services for “mentally defective” children and a strategy for suggesting that successful local businesses make an annual contribution to the Institutes. He had functioned as Vicar General of the diocese since 1904 and was in close communication with many of the religious orders under its jurisdiction, providing spiritual guidance and advice in practical affairs. Rome had commended his religious leadership in 1923 by naming him Prothonotary Apostolic ad instar Participantium, an honor only five other

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147 Ibid., 12.

148 Ibid., 2.

149 NHB, Letter to Mother M. St. John of the Cross, 28 March 1932, Carmelites Collection, OLVA; NHB, Letter to Mary Margaret O’ Sullivan, 7 January 1936, copy in collection of letters from Sister Mary Margaret Sullivan to RD, 22 March 1976, RDC, OLVA; NHB, Letter to John J. Sullivan, 11 April 1932, FBGRC, OLVA. Rev. Francis Litz was influenced by Baker & Galvin’s work and established similar mission programs in Buffalo at St. Augustine’s parish in 1935 and St. Mary’s in 1937. See Rev. Francis Litz, Letter to WK, 29 October 1982, copy in WKC, OLVA.

150 “Secretary’s Record of The SPDRCC,” 43, OLVA.
clergymen in the United States had at the time. During the early 1930s, he was a spokesperson for Catholic Charities on the radio. Baker had also been one of the eight original incorporators of Catholic Charities in Buffalo. Furthermore, the managers of the Catholic Charities appeal distributed small photos of Baker to Catholic homes in the diocese during the 1934 campaign, which suggests that he was a local Catholic celebrity. Baker also received recognition from Rome when Pius XI sent an apostolic benediction on the 50th anniversary of his ordination in 1926. During his final illness, he received another apostolic benediction from the pope via telegraph.

Baker’s funeral was front page news for all of the major newspapers in Buffalo. Articles reported that the streets around the basilica were jammed with people waiting to view his body and referred to him as the “Padre of the poor” and the “Apostle of Charity.” Evidence from these reports indicate that the loss of Baker’s respected and loved persona and community leadership was a highly charged emotional event for many residents of Lackawanna and Buffalo. One person recalls the “hushed atmosphere of

151 “Tribute to Father Baker,” BC, 10 April 10 1923, NHBS, LHNA 2.
153 Personal Letter to WK, 11 September 1994, WKC, OLVA.
155 “Father Baker’s Appeal,” CE, 4 March 1934, series 8, 2; “Catholic Charities Appeal” pamphlet, 1934, OLVA.
156 “Holy Father Sends Apostolic Benediction to Monsignor Baker,” CUT, 10 June, 1926, 1.
157 Cardinal Pacelli, Letter to NHB, 16 July 1936, copy from DBA in OLVA.
sadness and awe” at the funeral. 159 Another remembers the sadness and grief in her home when Baker died and how her mother, who was seven months pregnant, stood in line for hours to view his body. 160 Several people waiting in line to see Baker’s body fainted from the heat. 161 Baker’s will indicates that he had no personal bank accounts or debts, that no one was financially indebted to him, and that he owned few personal belongings at the time of his death. 162 The parish buried him in the Holy Cross cemetery next to his parents. Baker’s coffin was covered with concrete to protect the grave and discourage relic seekers. 163

The Our Lady of Victory Homes of Charity 164

During his life, Baker created an extensive organization that promoted both charitable works and devotional Catholicism. In the ten years after his death, the Institutes’ charitable services underwent a period of substantial reorganization. Baker’s first successor was Reverend Joseph E. Maguire who, according to one former Brother of the Holy Infancy, was “not a businessman” and seemed “out of his element” at the Institutes. 165 Maguire, with the assistance of business manager, Irving E. Geary, oversaw a decrease in the number of orphans at the homes and a restructuring of the Victorian

159 Personal Letter, A.A. to RW, 25 November 1987, FBGRC, OLVA.

160 Personal Letter, B.C. to RW, 20 July 1986, FBGRC, OLVA.

161 “Women get First Aid After Collapsing From Heat at Funeral,” BEN, 9 August 1936, RNHBS, 100, LHNA, BECPL.

162 NHB and Charles O’Connor, “Last Will and Testament,” 2, OLVA.

163 The concrete was poured in reaction to a recent case of the death of another beloved priest, Rev. Patrick Power, in Malden MS in which locals began to claim that his grave had supernatural healing powers. See “Death, Wake, Funeral…” 3; Michael Beebe and Dave Condren, “Father Baker's Final Journey,” BN, 11 March 1999, sec. B.

164 In 1960, the Rev. Joseph McPherson changed the name of the Association of Our Lady of Victory to Our Lady of Victory Homes of Charity. See Kevin Kennedy, Letter to Rev. Joseph McPherson, 7 November 1960, OLVA.

165 George Smith (Brother Gregory), interview by WK, 6, 11 April 1989, OLVA.
With the rise of foster care in New York State, the population of boys at the homes decreased dramatically. St. Joseph’s continued to care for 80-110 orphans throughout the 1940s, but in 1939, most of the boys were removed from the protectory and given to state agencies or sent back to their own states or homes. All of the trade school’s departments closed except the laundry and printing shops, and most of the existing thirty-eight Brothers of the Holy Infancy left to join other orders or the secular world. With few boys left to train and no Brothers to run the printing department, its operations were turned over to a hired lay staff. Robert K. Doran, an important promoter of Father Baker’s sainthood, joined the staff of the *Victorian* magazine in 1939 and was its editor from 1943-1957. Under his editorship, the *Victorian*, which, by this time, had evolved from a boy’s paper into a family magazine, began to highlight and memorialize Baker. The Institutes also memorialized Baker in the basement of the basilica in 1941 when a replica of his living quarters opened in conjunction with a religious goods store.

In 1949, Bishop John O’Hara released Geary and split responsibility for the Institutes between two pastors, Maguire and Reverend Joseph McPherson. Maguire was responsible for the Our Lady of Victory parish and shrine, and McPherson, who had been a pallbearer for Baker’s casket, became general manager of the Our Lady of Victory

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166 “Secretary’s Record of the SPDRCC,” 20, OLVA.


168 Monnin, 43. Baker had been the Brothers’ spiritual advisor, and after his death, little was done by the diocese to replace him, so the order dissolved.

169 Volume 45 (1939) was the last volume to state that it was “published by the boys of Our Lady of Victory.”

170 “Secretary’s Record of the SPDRCC,” 58.

Institutes. Over the next dozen years, the Institutes continued to expand and adapt their services to the community’s changing needs. The infant home was completely remodeled and two new wings were added to the hospital, including the 1960 Bethlehem-Taylor wing which, using a fund provided by Bethlehem Steel, provided care for steel workers after the Moses Taylor hospital closed in 1953. In addition, the hospital’s nurses’ training program became affiliated with D’Youville college. With little need for orphan care in the 1950s, McPherson completely phased out the orphanage and reformatory programs and turned a wing of the protectory building into Baker Victory High School in 1953, which was staffed by the Holy Cross Fathers at first, and later by the Franciscans. He also decided to close the Institutes’ printing facilities and use outside contractors to publish the *Victorian*.

In addition, McPherson was responsible for two particularly significant changes at the Institutes. To continue the tradition of caring for troubled youth, he started the Baker Hall program in 1956 which provided residential care for emotionally troubled boys throughout western New York, aged 10-17, who were referred by family courts and social agencies, “without regard to race, color, religion or national origin.” It originally operated out of the orphanage, but moved in 1962 to a series of four cottages

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173 “Press release: Catholic Union and Echo,” final copy, 4 May 1962, 3, Protectory demolition folder, OLVA; Emerling, 39.

174 “Secretary’s Record of the SPDRCC,” 132; Business at the infant home had increased by 45% in 1950 due to the closing of another local home, St. Mary’s, which had been providing services for the County Welfare Department. See “Secretary’s Record,” 136.

175 Emerling, 42.


built on the Martin Road land that had been the Institutes’ farm. Another important change McPherson proposed was to demolish St. John’s Protectory, arguing that this was necessary to save on maintenance costs and make room for other needed facilities. He was met with initial resistance from the diocese, but successfully demonstrated the benefits of removing the dilapidated building. The huge protectory was razed in 1962 to make room for a high school, rectory and parking lot. By 1970, the primary services available at OLV were the infant home, hospital, and the Baker Hall program. Moreover, the parish ran a diocesan grade and high school, and the basilica remained a national tourist and pilgrimage attraction.

**The Bethlehem Steel Plant Closings**

While the Our Lady of Victory Homes of Charity and parish retained its vitality by responding to changing public needs, Lackawanna’s steel industry began to decline in the early 1970s. At this time, the greater Buffalo area was in the beginning stages of transforming into a post-industrial urban region characterized by economic stagnation and a declining population. Scholars have pointed to circumstances such as the gradual withdrawal of industry following World War II, ill-conceived urban renewal programs of the 1950s, ineffective city planning, and insufficient mass transit systems as contributing factors to Buffalo’s decline. A dramatic reduction of the number of industrial jobs in the area caused a population exodus. Buffalo’s 1970 population of 462,768 decreased to 292,648 in thirty years, and by 2000, Erie County had lost 163,226 people, dropping its

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178 The farm had ceased being profitable in the 1940s and was gradually phased out during the 50s. See “Secretary’s Record of the SPDRCC,” 108.


population to under one million. At the height of its operations during the 40s and 50s, Bethlehem Steel had employed some 20,22,000 workers, more than Lackawanna’s 2000 census total of 19,045. The Bethlehem Steel plant closings in Lackawanna are emblematic of the greater Buffalo area’s transformation and demonstrate the economic and emotional impact that industrial withdrawal can have on a city.

Between 1946 and 1962, Bethlehem Steel’s business was booming, but certain conditions developed during this time to set the stage for downgrades in Lackawanna. The company built a new plant at Burns Harbor near Chicago and began to invest much of its capital there. In addition, the opening of the St. Lawrence Seaway in 1958 and improvements to the Welland Canal, which connects Lakes Erie and Ontario, created a shipping route that bypassed Buffalo’s harbor, effectively making its location unfavorable for industry. In 1970, Bethlehem Steel recognized problems with the Lackawanna plant, but took over a decade to close most of its operations.

The first large scale layoffs occurred in 1977, a few months after the Blizzard of ‘77, when the plant cut 3,500 jobs. Layoffs culminated in 1982 when, two days after Christmas, the plant announced that 7,300 workers were to be let go. News reports in national papers emphasized the economic impact of these lay-offs by relaying stories of middle aged workers who had been earning over twelve dollars an hour at the plant.

181 “Population Growth and Decline over the Years.”


183 Leary and Sholes, 79.

184 Ibid., 117.


Despite these cutbacks, the company continued to operate a galvanized steel division and coke ovens at its Lackawanna plant. It was fined for air pollution in 1989 and required to install millions of dollars worth of pollution control equipment. Moreover, local residents expressed resentment over the coke dust in the air because the company took away jobs and left behind “the dirtiest part of the process.”\footnote{Sam Howe Verhovek, “As Prosperity of Steel Fades, a Town Debates its Future,” \textit{NYT}, 25 July 1989, sec. B.} By 2000, Bethlehem Steel had dropped from the S&P index of top five hundred companies and closed its coke ovens, leaving only 340 jobs in its galvanized steel division.\footnote{Glynn.} It filed for bankruptcy in 2001 and transferred what little remained of its assets to the International Steel Group in 2003.\footnote{Fred O. Williams, “End of an Empire,” \textit{BN}, 7 May 2003, sec. A.} The five mile strip of land and empty buildings on the shore of Lake Erie remain largely undeveloped as of 2006.

Lackawanna’s struggle for economic recovery and redevelopment has been a challenge. Bethlehem Steel had been paying more than half of the city’s property taxes
for years, and the loss of its revenue caused a financial crisis for the city. Much of the waterfront land was contaminated from years of steel production, and concerns about pollution have hindered certain kinds of recreational development.\textsuperscript{192} Two renewal programs, the Brownfields and Empire Zone programs have brought some cleanup efforts and new industry to Lackawanna by offering economic incentives, but concerns about pollution have also scared away some potential developers. Forty percent of the 114 companies who had signed onto the Empire Zone program dropped out.\textsuperscript{193} Plans in the year 2000 for an expressway to connect downtown Buffalo with the industrial areas in Lackawanna fell through.\textsuperscript{194} Moreover, after Bethlehem Steel declared bankruptcy, plans for an “industrial, commercial and recreational mecca” at the Lackawanna site stalled.\textsuperscript{195} Although Lackawanna city officials have been working actively for nearly twenty years to negotiate a direction for the Bethlehem site, as of 2006, there was not a highly noticeable transformation. A driver on Route 5, which parallels the old Bethlehem Steel complex, sees more abandoned buildings than evidence of new industry.

City officials have also had to confront Lackawanna’s reputation as a dying steel town. At the height of the layoffs’ effects, mayor Thomas E. Radich attempted to restore hope by referring to Lackawanna as “the city that refused to die” in a 1984 booklet.

\textsuperscript{192} Tom Ernst, “Golf Course Plan on Bethlehem Site Handicapped by Pollution Concerns,” \textit{BN}, 7 June 1997, sec. B.

\textsuperscript{193} James Heaney, “Disappointing Results in Lackawanna, Niagara Falls” \textit{BN}, 8 June 2003, sec. A.

\textsuperscript{194} Kevin Collusion, “Plans for Southtowns Connector Come to a Dead End,” \textit{BN}, 31 May 2000, sec. B.

celebrating the city’s 75th anniversary. In 2000, Mayor John Kurayk also worked to disprove public perceptions and improve public relations with letters to the *Buffalo News*. However, much of Kurayk’s damage control was directed toward rebuilding the city’s reputation after a national media frenzy in September 2002 highlighted an al-Qaeda terrorist cell turned up amidst the city’s several thousand Yemeni residents. Bishop Henry Mansell used this incident to encourage the media to rediscover the history of Baker’s “City of Charity.” Despite its best efforts and the greater Buffalo area’s claims of renewal, Lackawanna remains a casualty of Bethlehem Steel’s withdrawal, and although the downtown area is seeing some improvements, economic redevelopment plans have thus far been incapable of restoring the city’s previous prosperity (Figure 1.2).

**Baker Victory Services and Baker’s Cause for Canonization**

In 1959, Lackawanna celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of its incorporation with “Steel-a-rama,” a performance of the city’s history that covered everything from its Native American past and Joseph Ellicott’s land survey to Father Baker’s charity homes and Walter Scranton’s steel mill to the WPA projects and World War II, all culminating in a grand finale entitled, “We are Americans.” The city logo on the cover of the

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performance’s program contains a silhouettes of the steel factories on the left and the Our Lady of Victory Institutes on the right. In addition, the first few pages of the program contain pictures of both Bethlehem Steel and Baker’s Institutes, emphasizing Lackawanna’s identification with both charity and industry. By the end of the 20th century, Lackawanna could no longer lay claim to being the “City of Steel.” However, it could still maintain itself as the site of Father Baker’s charity Institutes, and the Institutes have helped fill an emotional, economic and social void left by Bethlehem Steel. In addition, with its slow progress towards revitalization, Lackawanna’s future has, to a large degree, become invested in the possibility of Baker’s canonization. If Father Baker becomes a saint, the entire community will benefit. Baker’s sainthood, thus, offers a beacon of economic recovery and could be a reliable solution to revitalizing the city.

While Bethlehem Steel’s industry was weakening and damaging Lackawanna and changes in the Buffalo diocese were bringing about the closing of many Catholic services, Baker Victory Services and the OLV basilica and parish were able to remain active providers of health and educational services, community events and devotional activities. The Buffalo diocese has reduced its number of schools, parishes and institutions through closings and consolidations in recent years. From 1974-2004, about 100 diocesan schools closed, and in 1997, the Catholic Health Care system was established to centralize management of Catholic hospitals in the diocese. These changes did not leave OLV unscathed. The parish no longer operates a diocesan high school and the grade school’s principal scrambles each year for enrollment. In addition, there were concerns over the possible closing of the OLV hospital as it faced

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201 Tina Taberski, Department of Catholic Education, email to author, Buffalo, 29 July 2004; Henry L Davis, “Catholic Hospitals Reach Final Accord on Consolidation,” BN, 7 June 1997, sec. B.

cutbacks and some of its services were transferred to Mercy Hospital.\textsuperscript{203} The hospital, however, did not close, and there are plans in the works for transforming it and some of the infant home into a senior care center which would create about 235 new jobs in a “village-like community” and include a 74 bed nursing home, 74 low-income senior apartments and a program to care for seniors in their homes.\textsuperscript{204} Moreover, the parish remains vibrant with 2,300-2,500 families.\textsuperscript{205}

The Our Lady of Victory parish and Institutes have continued to survive by reconfiguring its programs to meet current societal conditions and needs. One of the best examples of this transformation is the changing role of the infant home and maternity hospital. The infant home had begun taking developmentally disabled children in 1956 and this program has expanded.\textsuperscript{206} Whereas most unwed mothers surrendered their babies to the Institutes in the early 60s, by the 1980s, 90-95% of the mostly teenage mothers who gave birth at OLV kept their babies.\textsuperscript{207} The Institutes started a “Choose Life” program in the early 70s to provide an alternative to legalized abortion and provided inexperienced unwed mothers with medical care, counseling and parenting classes through the Responsible Adolescent Parenting (RAP) program, established in 1976.\textsuperscript{208} Currently, the maternity hospital is a prenatal care center. In addition, Baker Victory Services (BVS), created in 1996, continued offering adoption services by


\textsuperscript{204} Henry L. Davis, “OLV Senior Project Gets Start Up Funds,” \textit{BN} 1 July 2003, sec. B.

\textsuperscript{205} RW, interview, 30 July 2003.

\textsuperscript{206} \textit{Victory! The True Story of a 150-year Legacy of Caring}, 24.


\textsuperscript{208} “RAP,” pamphlet, OLVA.
developing an overseas adoption program, and it runs a residential home, the Dorothy Miller Residence, for young mothers and their infants.

BVS currently provides families and children in the Lackawanna and Buffalo community with a variety of other services as well, which include programs for those with special needs. Children, aged five to twenty-one, who cannot function in more conventional school settings because of their disruptive behavior can be referred to a Day Treatment Program which provides them with clinical services in an educational setting. BVS has outpatient and residential services for children and adolescents with serious emotional disturbances. There are also residential services for severely developmentally disabled children including a respite program which offers temporary relief to families from the stress that can accompany caring for a special needs child at home. And, family services include a preventative program that makes help available for families dealing with issues like sexual abuse, domestic violence and drug and alcohol abuse.209

Most of the original buildings that Baker and McPherson built are still intact, but some of their purposes have changed in accordance with the BVS programs. The first floor of the infant home currently houses the new Baker Victory Dental Center. The high school educates troubled youth from the Day Treatment Program. The orphan home is an office building and a care facility for severely handicapped children. And, BVS has continued to expand its facilities with recent projects like more cottages for troubled youth and new cottages and a swimming facility for the severely handicapped on Martin Road. It also opened Father Baker Manor, a retirement and nursing home, in 1994 in a Buffalo suburb.210 In accordance with the system established by Baker, all of these


services still rely on donations, and devotion to Our Lady of Victory continues to bring financial support.211

In addition to continuing the tradition of involving the laity in maintaining a “legacy of care,” the Our Lady of Victory site has increased its appeal as a pilgrimage destination with the progress in Baker’s cause for canonization. In 1986, four years after the major Bethlehem steel plant closings, the current executive director of the Institutes, Monsignor Robert C. Wurtz; Monsignor Robert E. Murphy, OLV’s pastor from 1971 to 1993; and diocesan historian and archivist, Monsignor Walter O. Kern approached Bishop Edward Head about beginning Baker’s cause. Baker’s potential to be a saint was not a new idea in the Buffalo region, for in the sermon for Baker’s funeral, Archbishop Thomas Hickey likened Baker’s life to that of to Saint Alfonso Ligouri.212 During the 40s and 50s the Victorian magazine printed letters of thanks to Baker and Our Lady Victory for spiritual favors. And, there is a strong local oral tradition of the many miracles Baker performed during his lifetime and after it. The Vatican approved the diocese’s intention to start the cause and gave Baker the title “Servant of God” in 1987, the first step towards canonization, and the diocese, with Rome’s recommendation, made Baker more accessible to his devotees by moving his body from the Holy Cross Cemetery to a crypt in the basilica in 1999.213 Since this move, the parish and diocese have been anxiously awaiting news from Rome confirming one of Baker’s miracles that are under consideration by the Congregation for the Causes of Saints. The community’s hope for the future fulfillment of this possibility is palpable. Each mass in the OLV basilica, at the

211 In 2001, promotion of devotion to OLV brought in 16% of the total public support and revenue for the Institutes. See The Voice of OLV 26.2 (Fall 2002), 3.


The possibility of Baker’s canonization has provided city officials with a reason to revitalize Lackawanna’s downtown area in anticipation of increased tourism, and there are signs that these efforts are starting. In 2001, the City Council postponed zoning changes in order to assure that it would be flexible enough to allow for major hotel development for tourists.\footnote{Anthony Cardinale, “Master Plan Ok’d Without Zoning Changes,” \textit{BN}, 21 February 2001, sec. B.} The basilica already consistently attracts about twenty to thirty visitors each hour to view its architecture or pay respects to Baker and Our Lady of Victory, but tourism would increase dramatically with any further progress in Baker’s cause, such as his formal beatification. Monsignor Wurtz commented, “You’re going to need a ticket to drive down Ridge Road.”\footnote{Vogel.} Our Lady of Victory is central to many of Lackawanna’s community events, like the annual chicken barbecue, which sells out days ahead of time.\footnote{RW, interview; Laura Mancuso, interview, 24 July 2003.} Moreover, the annual “Father Baker Day” celebration draws visitors from across the U.S. The OLV Homes of Charity and BVS have been able to offer some recourse to the steel plant closings by becoming one of the larger local employers with 800-1,000 workers. With its long history of contributions to the communal, economic and
spiritual life of Lackawanna, Baker’s “City of Charity” presents a viable alternative for Lackawanna’s post-industrial identity. Stories of Baker’s life and works and the hope for his canonization serve as more positive identity for the city than the story of Lackawanna Steel. In fact, a city sign on Ridge Road near the corner of Abbot Road welcomes visitors to the city of Lackawanna, “the home of Father Baker.” The steel industry may have been incapable of following through for Lackawanna, but there are few indications that community members feel the same about Baker.
Figure 2.1 Ariel view of the Institutes with Botanical Gardens, circa 1930

Source: OLVA. Courtesy of OLV Institutions, Lackawanna, N.Y.
Figure 2.2 Dom Polski Polish Community Center, 2003
CHAPTER 3
FATHER BAKER IN PRINT:
FROM SUPERINTENDENT TO SAINT

When the Institutes demolished the old St. John’s Protectory building in 1962, workers uncovered a time capsule from August 22, 1897 inside its cornerstone. Among the coins, various religious items and a photograph of Father Baker were three early issues of the Victorian Magazine, one issue of the Annals of the Association of Our Blessed Lady of Victory and several editions of local Buffalo newspapers.¹ Beginning in the 1880s, Father Baker’s name and photograph appeared regularly in the Institutes’ publications and in local Catholic and secular newspapers. He also received occasional national press coverage and was the subject of two books, one of which came out during his lifetime. While the Victoria Press’s publications had portrayed Baker with affection since the 1880s, local newspapers did not adopt this tone until the 1920s after Baker’s fiftieth anniversary as a priest and the dedication of the Our Lady of Victory Shrine as a minor basilica. After Baker’s death, this affection intensified into a form of devotional piety expressed in statements by individuals in the local secular press and by many Association members and authors in the Victorian magazine. By the early 1950s, the Victorian was a primary advocate of Baker’s holiness, and explicit expressions of hope for Baker’s canonization appeared in it regularly. Thus, portrayals of Baker in the print culture between the 1880s and 1960 illustrate a transformation of Baker from superintendent of the Institutes to an uncanonized Catholic saint.

Our Lady of Victory’s Publishing Activities

When Baker worked at the Limestone Hill Institutes under Hines, there was an in-house print shop in the protectory’s trade school that had been established in the 1870’s to train boys in the printing profession. One of its earliest jobs was setting type for the

¹ “Contents Cornerstone Box, Protectory Bldg.,” 7 August 1962, 9: 25 AM, OLVA; “St. John’s cornerstone gives glimpse of the past,” BCE, 8 October 1962, 32.
weekly *Catholic Union* newspaper, which was founded in 1871. Baker monitored the print shop and recounted difficulty in getting the *Union* out on schedule, for “the boys were doing it all.” 2 The print shop also set type for various books, including the first edition of Lambert’s *Notes on Ingersol.* 3

Shortly after Baker became superintendent, the Victoria Press began issuing publications associated with the Institutes to promote devotion to Our Lady of Victory and support the charity work of the homes. The first of these was the *Appeal for the Homeless and Destitute Child,* an eight-page newspaper-sized publication which sought to raise money “to aid us in this important work” by promoting membership in the Association of Our Lady of Victory through notices that emphasized “the many and remarkable benefits conferred upon” members. 4 On the *Appeal’s* cover was a large image of Our Lady of Victory or an etching of the Institutes. The paper contained information about the homes, appeals to readers to prevent homeless Catholic children from being shipped on trains from large Eastern cities to non-Catholic families in the Midwest, articles on devotion to Mary, and lists of favors received. In exchange for their twenty-five cent membership fee, which provided financial support for the Institutes, members received the special spiritual benefits of OLV’s patronage. 5

The Institutes’ second major publication, the *Annals of the Association of the Blessed Our Lady of Victory,* a “Catholic magazine devoted to the honor of the Blessed Mother of God,” appeared in July 1888. 6 This a thirty-two page quarterly went out to

2 FBD II, 29, OLVA.


4 Anderson, 58; *Appeal for the Homeless and Destitute Child,* August 1894, 3.

5 Ibid., 2. *Appeal,* August 1890, 1.

6 *Annals* 1, no. 1 (1888): cover.
Association members, and at its height of circulation in the 1920s, it reached over 280,000 households nationwide. The etching on the cover of its early volumes reflects the magazine’s intent of promoting OLV as a powerful intercessor (Figure 3.1). Our Lady, surrounded by angels, looks as though she is between heaven and earth. A group of people are reaching their hands toward her in supplication from below, and portrayals of Christ and God are bursting through the sky above her. To further supplement members’ spiritual piety and spread information about the Association, the Annals announced the availability of additional items from the Press such as membership certificates, engravings of the Sorrowful Mother and the Suffering Christ, photographs of statues of St. Joseph, and assorted prayer cards, some in German, with information about the Association.

By 1911 membership certificates were available in German, French, Polish, Hungarian and Italian languages upon request, suggesting an all-inclusive approach to the ethnic divisions within America’s immigrant Catholic population. In addition, Annals readers could obtain small flyers to promote the Association and pocket-sized novena cards with the litany to OLV.

Like the Appeal, the Annals sought to reinforce the reciprocal relationship between Association membership, Our Lady’s spiritual benefits, and financial support of Limestone Hill’s charities. Reports from the orphanage and protectory in the Annals confirmed the benefits of donors’ contributions by informing readers of such things as

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7 “Supplementary Report of the SPDRCC,” 4 December 1923, 6, OLVA.

8 Personal Letter, L.B. to RW, 9 March 1988, FBGRC, OLVA; “Notes for Solicitors,” Annals 2, no. 4 (1890): 13; “Notes for Solicitors,” Annals 2, no. 3 (January 1890): 13; OLV Association Prayer cards, 1897 and 1898, FBGRC, OLVA; Personal Letter, I.S. to RW, 7 April 1998, FBGRC, OLVA; Prayer card collection, WKC, OLVA; Prayer Cards donation with Personal Letter, T.T. to RW, 1 April 1981, FBGRC, OLVA.

9 Annals 24, no. 2 (1911): 11.

10 Personal Letter, RW to M.S.D., 30 July 1991, FBGRC, OLVA.
boys who were saved from destitution and losing their Catholic faith, orphans who were placed in good Catholic homes, and boys who heard mass in their new OLV chapel. A feature that appeared in each issue during the earlier 1900s, “Homeless Children,” included letters from people nationwide asking if they could send destitute and orphaned children to the Institutes. These letters revealed the details of requests for help received by the Institutes, and the *Annals* emphasized a policy of complete dependence on Our Lady of Victory in never “refusing to receive this class of destitute children” and even “advancing the means to transport them to us when necessary.” Accordingly, this kind of information helped readers feel as though they were active participants in rearing the Institutes’ children under Our Lady of Victory’s auspices.

The bond between Our Lady of Victory’s patronage, Association members and the work of the Institutes as expressed in the *Annals* was particularly prominent when the infant home was established. The magazine played a major role in fundraising campaigns by adding babies, or “little ones,” to the boys Association members already supported. Between 1906 and 1908, it printed drawings of the planned home and photos of its progress, asking for “a single dollar” donation “to aid in erecting a home for his homeless little ones, who are now, as He once was, without a home, and forced to live in a rude stable.” Readers could follow the progress of the home’s erection with each new issue, and notices promised donors that their names would be placed on the altar of Our Lady’s chapel and remembered in daily mass.

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12 “A Plea for Our Infant Asylum,” *Annals* 19, no. 3 (January 1907): 2.

In addition, Baker established the Crib Donor’s Guild, the Institutes’ longest running fundraising operation, to provide continued support for the home. This venture began with notices in the *Annals* entitled, “How to Befriend a Little Homeless Child,” “An Infant Appeal,” or “An Appeal from the Little Ones.” They asked for a twenty-five dollar donation to supply a crib and bedding for an infant, an amount that was to remain the same throughout the existence of the campaign until the 1960s. The *Annals* promised early donors Our Lady’s special protection and that their names would be engraved on bronze tablets to be hung in the home. Benefactors’ names were also printed in the *Annals* shortly after the home was completed. Baker’s office sent personalized letters of thanks to donors as well, which encouraged them to think of him as a personal friend. Also, by this time, photographs of the boys and babies accompanied reports of happenings at the Institutes, allowing readers to see the hundreds of boys and babies, sometimes of various races, in residence (Figure 3.2). It is likely that these compelling photographs encouraged further donations by presenting the actual faces and situations of the children in order to tug at the heartstrings of potential benefactors and provide visible evidence of the Institutes’ good works.

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14 The other fund raising campaign that appeared regularly in the *Annals* and continued until Victorian ceased publication was instructions for how to include the “poor children” in making out one’s will. See *Annals* 29, no. 1 (1916): inside back cover.

15 *Annals* 21, no. 4 (1908): 5; *Annals* 24, no. 1 (1911): 5; *Annals* 24, no. 2 (1911): 5.


17 See NHB, Letter to Ethyl J. Twist, 3 November 1932, FBGRC, OLVA; Also see Personal Letter, C.S. to RW, 12 February 1988, FBGRC, OLVA. The letter’s author recalls her mother mentioning Baker with “deep feelings and warmth, as if he were a close personal friend.”

Besides offering a showplace for the results of cooperative efforts between the Institutes’ “visible and invisible benefactors,” the *Annals* was instrumental in promoting devotion to Our Lady of Victory by relaying commentaries on devotional matters, announcing novenas, and publishing thousands of Association members’ petitions and favors received. Each issue contained a selection of articles addressing various topics of devotional life to encourage Association members to develop their own piety and trust in the power of divine intervention and wisdom. Baker, under the byline “N.H.B.,” wrote a selection of articles for the magazine such as, “Lovers of Mary Should Always speak Her Praises” and “The Month of May is the Month of Mary,” yet he also wrote numerous unsigned articles on religious and devotional matters, the sacraments, St. Joseph, the Sacred Heart, papal decrees, and purgatory. A number of these writings particularly express Baker’s own ardent religious passion and affection for Mary, the “most powerful and omnipotent in heaven,” for “what is there she does not, cannot do, who does all things?” His articles sought to ignite the same enthusiasm and devotion in others through descriptions of her intercession in various circumstance, explanations of church teachings regarding her status and power, and stories of her more famous “servants” like St. Vincent de Paul and St. John of the Cross. Baker even mentions George [Infants] in our Blessed Lady’s Care,” *Annals* 36, no. 2 (1924): 10.

19 *Annals* 19, no. 3 (January 1907): 6; *Annals* 34, no. 2 (1921), 1-2; It is highly likely that Baker wrote many unsigned articles on religious and devotional matters for the early *Annals*. Researchers confirmed this during the collection of Baker’s writings for the cause by consulting two English professors at Canisius college who determined that many unsigned articles matched the style of Baker’s signed ones and could be attributed to him with confidence. See Appendix A, “Father N.H. Baker’s Published Writings,” Ed. RW, OLVA.


21 NHB (ascr.), “Mary Performs Miracles for Her Friends,” *Annals* 12, no 1 (1899): 5; NHB (ascr.), “None Seek Mary’s Aid in Vain” *Annals* 6, no. 1 (1893): 5; NHB (ascr.), “A Mother’s Novena,” *Annals* 2, no. 1 (1889): 9; NHB (ascr.), “Mary the Hope of Sinners,” *Annals* 12, no 1 (1899): 7; NHB (ascr.), “Mary Our Life, Our Sweetness and Our Hope,” *Annals* 12, no 1
Washington’s devotion to Mary, which suggests she must be deserving of devotion from American citizens, especially if a founding father honored her. In reviewing these writings during the research for Baker’s cause, an English professor at Canisius College commented that, “genuine piety is evident on virtually every page of his writing.”

A striking public expression of the Marian piety expressed in the *Annals* was a series of yearly novenas held at the parish which Association members could participate in from afar. Baker sent out novena announcements separately from the *Annals*, but they frequently appeared in the magazine as well, asking, “Do you want any special favor, temporal or spiritual? Anything that you need badly?” and requesting readers to “unite with us in our Grand Novena” by sending in names and intentions. Intentions were regularly accompanied by monetary offerings and functioned to bring together the nationwide cult of devotees, if in writing only, at a central location. Reverend Thomas Galvin dramatizes a scene of the novena’s final procession of the “Most Blessed Sacrament” from St. Patrick’s Church to a “mammoth tent” near the small OLV Shrine on the lawn across the street. He writes that this pious demonstration had “all the gorgeous ceremonial permissible by the Church” and describes the order of the procession which included the Blessed Sacrament, the Lady of Victory Boy’s Band, the

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22 NHB (asr.), “George Washington’s Devotion to God’s Holy Mother,” *Annals* 18. no 1 (1905): 3. The story Baker tells is that, on his way to be the president of St. Mary’s Seminary in Baltimore in 1702, the Rev. Ambrose Marechal visited Washington and noticed that he had a “full-length picture of Mary Immaculate” hanging in his bedroom. Marechal quoted Washington as saying, “I cannot love the Son without honoring the Mother,” when asked about the picture.

23 Personal Letter, J.L. to WK, 2 June 1993, WKC, OLVA.

24 NHB, Form letter to ‘My Dear Friend,’ OLVA; “Notice!!” *Annals* 37, no. 4 (1924): inside front cover.

various religious societies, “the Nuns and Brothers in their religious garb reciting the Rosary,” and a large group of altar boys “bearing lighted torches” making their way through “thousands of people falling to their knees to adore the Blessed Sacrament…asking for a favor, a cure, a blessing.” 26 Photographs from the early 1900s show the formal setting of these ritual processions, crowds of people gathered on the Institutes’ grounds, even in the rain, and the scene inside the “mammoth tent.” 27 Banners reading “Oh Virgin Mother, Pure and Sweet,” “Holy Mary Mother Pray to Jesus,” and “Sweet Mother Our Maker Hail!” were posted in full view inside the tent during the novenas to highlight Mary’s qualities and intercessory capacity. 28 For those Association members who were unable to be present, mail-in petitions guaranteed their participation in the spiritual benefits of these “grand” festivities.

To some degree, because of the novenas, members sent the Institutes thousands of petitions and letters of thanksgiving for favors received through the intercession of “Our Blessed Lady of Victory.” The Annals allocated about one third of the magazine’s pages to printing these. Petitioners sought many different forms of help such as “for a young man who is a mental and physical wreck,” “for the mother and father of a young family, who are addicted to drink,” the “grace to be honest in business,” “that a brother may be cured of a hernia without an operation” or “that a mother’s prayers will be heard for her absent son.” 29 Published letters covered a variety of topics and offered public evidence

26 Ibid., 83-84.


of OLV’s patronage. A common favor received was when husbands, sons or son-in-laws were converted or brought back to the sacraments. One husband, a non-Catholic who ridiculed his wife’s faith, agreed to say “beads” with his wife after she unknowingly enrolled him in the Association and placed a medal of OLV on his neck.³⁰ Often, moral dilemmas were overcome, such conquering a “sinful habit” and stopping “playing a certain kind of music”³¹ And, of course, there were many medical cures and recoveries from things like a “fearful malady brought on by physical and mental run down condition” to the “recovery of my little boy from a serious illness.”³² Occasionally, the magazine published letters from overseas locations like England or North Ireland, which indicates the Association’s international reach.³³ Publishing numerous petitions and letters substantiated Our Lady’s powers and provided models for how she could help readers in spiritual and temporal matters.

Letters of thanks in the Annals also established standards for how Association members could thank OLV, for letters often included the ways petitioners showed their gratitude for favors received. In exchange for OLV’s supernatural aid, members frequently sent offerings of money such as a dollar or two, and, if a particular fundraising campaign was running, a thankful petitioner might send ten dollars for block of marble to build the OLV shrine or part of the twenty-five dollar donation for membership in the Crib Donor’s Guild.³⁴ One long time donor stated in 1981 that “my way of saying ‘thank

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³³ “Favors Granted…” Annals 36, no. 4 (1923): 19; “Letters of Thanksgiving,” Victorian 54, no.12 (1948): 37. Also see Personal Letter, B.D. to RW, 9 March 1992, FBGRC, OLVA. The letter’s author recalls receiving the Appeal in Ireland and her aunt’s devotion to OLV.
you’ is with a crib donation.” Thus, it appeared that Our Lady financially supported the Institutes through her devotees’ pocketbooks. Consequently, although the magazine’s techniques of spreading Marian devotion sought to increase piety and encourage confidence in divine intervention, these strategies were also ultimately good business practices.

The third and longest running publication issued by the Victoria Press was the Victorian, a monthly magazine in print from 1895 to 1975. It was first published “by the Victoria boys under the auspices of the Mother of God” and named the Victorian to “place ourselves completely under the protection of Our Lady of Victory.” A participant in the magazine’s founding recalls a “sort of accidental foundation” in 1894 while some of the printers were discussing the printing trade. One of them, “I think it was John Riley,” suggested an in-house magazine “for the boys and their friends.” The idea was taken to Baker who “laughed that ringing laugh we all remember so well,” seemed slightly skeptical, but approved of the undertaking. The boys themselves reported Baker picking up an early issue with a “kindly face beaming all smiles” and saying, “It’s a lusty youngster, and will surely live and become a great paper.”

The early Victorian boasted to be “the only boy’s paper,” and charges of the protectory and orphanage wrote, edited, and printed it as part of their occupational

35 Personal Letter, V.D. to Harry King, 1 October 1981, FBGRC, OLVA.

36 Victorian 1, no. 10 (March 1896): 2.


38 Ibid.

39 Ibid.

training at the trade school. Authors had pseudonyms like “Fuz” or “Farmer C.” One author, “Mike,” received praise from a local Catholic newspaper for his wit and philosophy. “A sprightly little paper published by Father Baker’s boys,” it contained articles about Catholicism, serial fiction stories, reports of world events and happenings at the orphanage and protectory, as well as advice on how to be a respectable looking boy by avoiding activities like “corner lounging” and gum-chewing. It also called for boy distributors, claiming they could make money to “buy a new catching glove” by selling subscriptions.

The magazine struggled for circulation until around 1917 when it began to seek a wider audience. By the 1920s, it had evolved into a nationally distributed family-oriented magazine with a devotional focus, and an editor and printer of the magazine, Brother Liguori, even suggested changing its name to the National Catholic Magazine. Baker writes that the Victorian’s purpose at this time was to “stimulate and encourage an interest in the work of Our Lady of Victory at ‘Victoria,’ Lackawanna, N.Y.” The Victorian had about 100,000 yearly subscribers during the 20s, and like the Annals, it contained letters of thanksgiving, novena announcements, information on the Association and pictures of babies and orphans accompanying reports of the Institutes. But while

41 Victorian 3, no. 3 (1897): 59.
42 “A Boy Philosopher,” CUT, 31 December 1886, 1.
45 Brother Stanislaus, “Let’s see…,” 33.
46 WK, “Notes on Brothers of the Holy Infant,” WKC, OLVA.
47 NHB, Letter to Rt. Rev. Matthew Harkins, 11 September 1920, OLVA.
48 Ibid.
the *Annals* limited its articles to appeals for donations and articles on devotional matters such as “Use of scapulars” or “The Rosary,” the *Victorian*’s content was much broader.\(^{49}\) It had a “Young Folks” section for children; the “Bright Side,” a “couple of pages of jokes which found favor;” and a “Here and There” section, which one editor called “a nice heading,” for it allowed them to print information that did not fit in other places.\(^{50}\) There was also a monthly feature about the Institutes called “Among Our Boys” and even a “Household” section with recipes and tips for women.\(^{51}\) During this period, the “Baker” or “Victoria” boys still contributed to the magazine’s production with about sixty-five of them working the Press, but they were no longer solely responsible for its content.\(^{52}\) Brothers of the Holy Infant contributed articles, as did other local writers. In addition, the Press offered additional promotional pamphlets to advertise the nursing school, commemorate and honor Baker, and provide visitors to the basilica with a written guide.\(^{53}\)

In 1929, a fundamental change in the Victoria Press’s publishing enterprises occurred when the *Annals* ceased to be a separate magazine and was absorbed into the *Victorian*.\(^{54}\) When the two magazines merged, the *Victorian*’s content did not change dramatically since it was already addressing matters of Catholic piety and promoting the devotional Association. However, because the new *Victorian* was published for a general

\(^{49}\) *Annals* 39, no. 4 (1926): 2, 7.

\(^{50}\) Brother Stanislaus, “Let’s see…,” 34.

\(^{51}\) “Supplementary Reports of the SPDRCC,” 1920-1929, OLVA.

\(^{52}\) Brother Lucid, “Report to: The Ladies’ Society of the Working Boys Home,” 18 May 1935, OLVA.


\(^{54}\) “Supplementary Reports of the SPDRCC,” 12 November 1929, 8, OLVA.
Catholic audience and not specifically for members of a devotional cult, it did not express the same quality of demonstrative Marian piety that the *Annals* had. Subscriptions to *The Victorian* and the Association memberships and donations it drew remained a main source of revenue for the charities. A twelve-page 1929 booklet filled with photographs of the homes, boys, babies and Father Baker advertised subscriptions to the magazine and urged readers to “share in his [Baker’s] work by giving assistance through your subscription to the *Victorian.*” Over the next two decades, *The Victorian* became a internationally distributed publication, aggressively and colorfully promoted the crib donor’s guild and other drives, evolved even more into a general interest magazine and reflected the “hysterical reporting” regarding the communist threat that the national American Catholic Press adopted during the 1940s, especially after Robert K. Doran, a member of the Catholic Press Association, became its acknowledged editor in 1943.

**Our Founder and Superintendent**

Most of the articles in the *Annals*, especially prior to the completion of the basilica, focused on the children and the charity Institutes. Baker’s presence in the *Annals* was often in name only as the “superintendent” who invited readers to participate in novenas or as the author of various pieces. He appeared occasionally in the photographs of babies and boys, and is the central figure in a number of photos. Frequently dressed in black flowing robes and black biretta, he presents a kindly, distinguished and formidable-looking authority figure (Figure 3.3). The Press duplicated some of these photographs

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55 Untitled Photographic Booklet, 1929, cover, OLVA.


57 “Father Baker and His Little Ones,” *Annals* 25, no 3 (January 1912): 10. This same photo also appears in *Annals* 26, no. 4 (1913): 10 and in *Annals* 32, no. 2 (1919): 10; See also “Father Baker and his Little Ones,” *Annals* 26, no. 2 (1913): 2; “Father Baker and Some of his Little Ones,” *Annals* 33, no. 1 (1920): 2; “Father Baker and a few of His Little Ones,” *Annals* 36,
of Baker and his wards, as well as other scenes from the homes, on promotional postcards during the 1920s. Some of the earlier issues of the Annals carried articles that commemorated the anniversary of Baker’s ordination, March 19, and praised his charity work, concern with saving of souls, cultivation of “ideal Christian m[e]n” from wayward and needy boys, trust in OLV and promotion of devotion to OLV in the boys and others. Baker’s public persona became somewhat more prominent in its pages during the 1920s when the magazine reprinted articles from Catholic Union and Times about Baker’s official annual reports, honors he received, or descriptions of his work. However, as a major advocate of the Association and a means of support for the Institutes, the Annals generally allotted most of its attention to Our Lady of Victory and the children.

On the other hand, from its very first volume, the Victorian magazine frequently reflected the fondness and admiration for Baker present within the Institutes. This was, in part, because it had originally been an internal publication, and because Baker had been an in-house celebrity long before he gained substantial outside acclaim. Various memoirs suggest that the boys had a distinctive familial affection for Baker and appreciation for the individualized attention and encouragement he provided. He was even called the
informal “Daddy Baker” by some.61 One former resident, who went on to a printing career, recounts how Baker personally comforted him during his first few weeks at the orphanage as he mourned his father’s death and was uncertain about his new situation.62 Another, who went on to serve as president of the local printing union, recalls Baker asking him to read a letter aloud to test his reading skills—“the next week I was enrolled a printer,” he writes.63 One staff member and former orphan recalls that Baker would visit the play yard regularly and talk to the boys, not about religion, but about their interests, treating them as men or “comrades.” This author writes he would always remember Baker “drifting around the yard where the boys were playing, his eyes picking out one little fellow or another, stopping to talk with this one or that one.” 64 Another Baker boy recalls that he was a shy child, and during a visit to the yard, Baker called him over and gave him an orange.65 Still another Baker boy recalls Baker handing out “cookies, fruit, candy or fresh baked cinnamon rolls” to the boys in the yard.66 Reverend Thomas Galvin expresses the spirit of these visits:

[Baker’s] appearance in the play yard was the signal for a whoop and a hurrah and a scamper, the boys rivaling each other in their efforts to be the first to reach him…A mass of boys swarming around him, jostling, pushing, scrambling for points of vantage to

61 WK, notes on “The Priests at OLV as remembered by John Phillips who lived at the Protectory,” WKC, OLVA; John Rooney, interview by WK, 1 July 1987, 15, OLVA.


64 Brother Stanislaus, “44 Years With Father Baker,” BT 30 July 1936, Brother Stanislaus Tells Stories about His Friend, Father Baker collection, OLVA.

65 Letter from a Father Baker boy, 1 July 1986, Baker Boys Reunion File, OLVA.

66 Personal Letter, R.J.S. to RW, 1 June 1988, FBGRC, OLVA.
talk to him…And how he enjoyed himself! He grew young again. He shouted and whooped with the most effusive of them.  

A city official describes a similar scene observed during an inspection, writing that he was “struck by friendliness between the little charges and Father Baker. The latter is like a real father to those youngsters. Whenever he appears where they are, they rush up to him, cling to his clothes and are tossed in the air by him.”

When the Institutes celebrated the anniversary of Baker’s ordination for the first time in 1896, expressions of this enthusiastic affection for Baker appeared in the tenth issue of the *Victorian* which reported the festivities honoring Baker’s twenty years as a priest. It printed a piece called, “Our Jubilarian,” on its first page, accompanied by a portrait of a middle-aged Baker, “our founder.” The intention of this piece was not to tell Baker’s life story, “although we are very sure it would be very interesting reading to hundreds of our readers,” but “to honor him, and placing before our readers a full account of our celebration to show that although we are boys we are not altogether ungrateful.”

In fact, the bulk of this issue contained heart-felt addresses to Baker that were given during the celebrations. The boys’ speech stated that they were “thankful for the tender solicitude you have ever manifested us” and would seek to return the favor and please Baker with “our good conduct and faithful fulfillment of all our duties as good Catholic children.”

March issues of *Victorian* continued to commemorate the yearly

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70 Ibid., 3.
anniversary of Baker’s ordination for the rest of his life. The author of many of these anniversary articles considered the job of writing the tributes a privilege.  

The Superintendent and Vicar General

Unlike reports about Baker from within the Institutes, early news reports in the local Catholic press were not tinged with the same degree of enthusiasm or genuine affection for Baker or the charities. In fact, news of the Institutes was often of a practical nature, particularly before Baker’s fundraising and publishing efforts. Local Catholic publications printed information about the orphanage in attempts to relieve financial challenges faced by the Institutes under Reverend Thomas Hines. In the mid-1800s, the Buffalo Sentinel ran a numerous appeals to local Catholics on behalf of the orphanage.  

One early appeal sold tickets of membership to St. Joseph’s Charitable Society for the Support of Poor Orphans, a society indulgenced by Pope Pius IX. Another contained a letter from the Sisters of Saint Joseph which expressed the desperate plight of the orphans as winter approached and asked for food and clothing to aid the “Boys Orphan Asylum at the Cemetery.”

The happenings at Limestone Hill were also items of general interest, and reportage frequently included detailed descriptions of social events. One writer expresses pleasant surprise in seeing the orphans and reformatory boys provide capable

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72 “Orphans’ Advocate,” The Sentinel, 20 December 1856, 2, KDNCA, OLVA.


74 “Clothing & Food for the Orphans,” The Sentinel, 7 November 1857, KDNCA, OLVA.
entertainment, suggesting a prevailing negative public attitude toward the boys at this
time:

We were somewhat diffident at first as to the ability of the boys to
do justice to the several numbers in the program, considering their
incompetence, but as the entertainment proceeded we were
completely reassured as the participants gave ample proof of the
real talent that is amongst them, and did justice to the excellent
directing of their devoted superiors…I cannot close without a few
words of praise for the unostentatious manner in which Reverend
Father Hines…and Reverend Father Baker…and the never-wearied
kind sisters are indefatigably prosecuting their noble work of
charity.75

Although this author commends Baker, he also attributes the success of the program to
Hines and the sisters as well.

During the 1880s, there was an active Catholic social life at West Seneca which
typically received attention in the Catholic Union and Times, yet two newsworthy events
occurred at “Father Baker’s” during the 1890s that received eager attention from local
presses.76 First, the discovery of a gas well on the Institutes’ property in 1891 brought
significant notice to Limestone Hill. The Buffalo Evening News carried reports of a fire at
the gas well which injured four people and money local speculators offered for the well,
referring to Baker with the familiar “Father Baker,” which suggests readers of the News
already knew him, at least by name.77 The Catholic Union and Times claimed that luck
had rewarded Baker’s “unremitting search” for gas, described the well as “a gusher…the


greatest in America,” reported the local excitement about the well and business interest in it, and stated that “Father Baker has little to say, but is in a very amicable mood.”

Although the *Union* provided more details about Baker than the *News* did, both papers’ main focus was the marvel of the gas well and local excitement, not Baker’s leadership role in discovering it. Later versions of the gas well discovery story would highlight Baker’s apparently miraculous influence.

Nevertheless, a second event, the twentieth anniversary of Baker’s ordination, brought full attention from the *Union and Times* to Baker himself and the community’s celebration honoring him. The *Union* provided an inventory of the gifts Baker received as well as the performances given in his honor, printed an etched portrait of Baker, the “superintendent,” and reported that Baker’s friends had “awaited the arrival of this anniversary in order to testify to him their great love and respect.”

This coverage of the jubilee festivities was certainly not as comprehensive as that found in the *Victorian*, yet it still offers a glimpse of the growing local admiration for Baker at the close of the 19th century within the Catholic community.

Reports in the *Union and Times* during this period also sought to improve the reputation of the protectory and orphanage by providing correctives to commonly held misconceptions like, “That is a home for incorrigible boys!”

One article, accompanied by an etched portrait of Baker, describes the real Father Baker in contrast to negative imaginary conceptions of him in order to shed some light on what was really going on at the Institutes:

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78 “Excitement at Limestone Hill,” *CUT*, 27 August 1891, 5.


80 “Our Lady of Victory: Annual Visit to the Institutions at Limestone Hill,” *CUT* 16 July 1896, 1, KDNCA, OLVA.
The average small boy may—and may not—imagine that Father Baker is a ogre or giant fond of slaying little culprits, or a counterpart of paddler Brockway, but those who know him are well aware of the fact that he is a loveable, tender-hearted, large minded and very capable manager of what is justly considered the best institution of its kind in America.\textsuperscript{81} Another piece commended Baker for his special aptitude in dealing with boys and his ability to see “the making of many an honorable man and virtuous citizen in the poor crabs that haunt the streets both day and night.”\textsuperscript{82} In addition, the Union’s coverage of groundbreaking ceremonies, the completion of each new building project and dedication ceremonies for new facilities frequently included approbations of Baker and emphasized the Institutes’ good works for the community.\textsuperscript{83}

While Baker was a relatively familiar figure in the major local Catholic paper and had garnered its admiration by the turn of the century, there are suggestions that he remained a somewhat unrecognizable and mysterious personage in the secular press. A 1903 article in the Buffalo Express about the Institutes contained a number of photographs of boys working in the various shops of the industrial school, but the writer also chose to include a photographic sitting portrait of Baker and a short biography, reasoning that, while “every Buffalonian knows of “Father Baker’s,” not as many know Father Baker himself, “for he is an exceedingly busy man.”\textsuperscript{84} However, this unfamiliarity did not persist for long. After the diocese appointed Baker vicar general in 1903, local papers reported the honor and printed portraits of him.\textsuperscript{85} Furthermore, his elevated

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{81} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{82} “A Father to Poor Boys,” \textit{CUT}, 27 October 1898, 4, KDNCA, OLVA.
\item \textsuperscript{84} “Father Baker’s Home,” \textit{Buffalo Express}, 8 Feb 1903, 2.
\end{itemize}
position within the diocese helped make many of his activities more newsworthy to a general audience. In particular, the construction of the infant home, which one report called a “Monument to Father Baker,” received attention from the press in Buffalo.86

The Modern Apostle of Charity

From time to time, the Institutes continued to be portrayed favorably in the local secular press, and Baker’s ordination anniversary celebrations were mentioned, yet a significant shift in the tone of local secular media coverage occurred during the 1920s.87 Several notable events at the Institutes encouraged secular sources to begin to reflect the affectionate and appreciative attitudes for Baker found in the Victorian, Annals, and Union and Times. It appears that Baker’s Golden Jubilee, the fiftieth anniversary of his ordination, and the dedication of the Our Lady of Victory Shrine as a basilica in 1926 particularly enticed the media to increase its Father Baker coverage and exhibit the local feeling of admiration for this “venerable prelate.”88 All of the major Buffalo papers reported on the Jubilee celebrations and basilica dedication. One article in the Buffalo Courier portrays Baker’s gratitude for the programs presented by the children in his honor and showed his emotional side: “He sat thrilled throughout the performance and his almost continual applause showed the feelings he has for the boys…The infants’ ‘Doll Show’ touched the heart of Father Baker and tears came to his eyes as he gazed on


88 “Father Baker, at 86, Runs Colony of 2,000; Prayer, Faith Helps Him,” BT, 26 Feb 1928, RNHBS, 12, LHNA, BECPL.
their efforts to please him.” The *Buffalo News* provided a brief biography of Baker and called the shrine “the crowning achievement of Msgr. Baker’s career.” In addition, the Victoria Press marked the occasions by printing a commemorative issue of the *Victorian* and special OLV prayer cards noting Baker’s Golden Jubilee.

Whereas Baker’s celebrity markedly increased in 1926 with these events, his Sacerdotal Golden Jubilee also called “into existence” the first book about Baker and his work, *Father Baker and his “Lady of Victory” Charities: A Modern Apostle of Charity* by the Reverend Thomas A. Galvin, C.SS. R. Galvin was born to Catholic parents in Buffalo on March 10, 1864, but after both of his parents died, he and his two brothers, Steven and William, were placed in St. Joseph’s Orphanage in 1869. When Baker arrived to work at the Institutes in 1872, Galvin was an altar boy and confided in Baker that he wanted to be a priest. However, he had a stammering problem, and claims Baker was uncertain how he would be able to preach. Nevertheless, Baker encouraged him and commented later that, “Even at that age, he was wonderfully brilliant and took naturally to religious subjects.”

Galvin entered a Redemptorist Juvenate in Northeast

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89 “Father Baker celebrates Fiftieth Anniversary As Priest in Catholic Church,” *BC*, 5 April 1926, RNHBS, 7, LHNA, BECPL.

90 “Msgr. Baker celebrates 50th Anniversary as a Priest,” *BN*, 5 April 1926, RNHBS, 8, LHNA, BECPL.

91 See *Victorian* 32, no. 7 (1926); “OLV prayer card,” donated with Personal Letter, E.I.K. to RW, 22 October 1988, FBGRC, OLVA.


94 “Father Thomas A. Galvin,” 1, copy from Redemptorist Provincial Archive, Brooklyn NY in OLVA.

Pennsylvania in 1881, returning to the Institutes during his college vacations for the next six years. Bishop Gibbons of Baltimore ordained him in 1892.

Galvin spent much of his time as an itinerant priest giving missions to “deaf mutes” across the Northeast. He viewed his revivals for the hearing impaired as important in preserving them from the Protestant evangelists, who had more frequent opportunities to missionize than did Catholic priests. Galvin’s reports of his work with the deaf, and later with African-Americans, reveal a faithful and zealous missionary who used paternal correctives to guide his audience through Church teachings. In one account, he notes the appreciation of his disabled audience members, writing, “they were so pleased that they even clapped in church, which of course, I stopped.” When Galvin’s health had begin to fail in 1925 and he was no longer able to maintain a busy mission schedule, he became attached to St. Mary’s parish in Buffalo. Baker enlisted his talents in 1931 to work for his “Negro Apostolate.” In 1933, Galvin died in Buffalo at age 69 after receiving final absolution from Baker. “Hundreds” of African-American converts who had been his students attended his funeral to pay tribute to their “kindly, sympathetic friend.”

A Modern Apostle was issued by the Buffalo Catholic Publication company at the end of 1925 and was “handsomely bound in dark blue boards with the title in letters of gold, and a statue of Our Lady of Victory and various insignia of the church embossed in the blue of the cover.” Its frontispiece displays a portrait of Baker, but this book is not

96 Galvin, Modern Apostle, 71.
97 “Father Thomas A. Galvin,” 3.
98 Ibid.
99 Ibid.
100 “Our Colored Missions,” 19 November 1933, 164, Redemptorist Provincial Archive, Brooklyn NY.
101 “Father Baker’s Services Told in Book Form,” BE, 25 April 1926, RNHBS, 8, LHNA, BECPL.
so much a biography of Baker as it is an extensive enthusiastic tribute. The Provincial Chronicles from St. Mary’s parish in Buffalo characterize Galvin’s relationship with Baker as one of “a strong attachment…as between father and son,” and this bond is evident in Galvin’s writing.\footnote{102 “Provincial Chronicles: St. Mary’s Buffalo, NY, 1933,” 17-18, Redemptorist Provincial Archives, Brooklyn NY.} Well aware that Baker himself would not approve of his flattering homage and prevent the book’s publication, Galvin writes in the forward, “This book, however, has not been submitted to Father Baker’s revision before publication, for the reason that its fate would not have been so fortunate as was that of the three young men who had been thrown into the ‘furnace of burning fire.’”\footnote{103 Galvin, \textit{Modern Apostle}, xii.} A companion of Baker’s reports receiving a letter in 1925 in which Baker relays he “told good Father Galvin, not to mention my name in any book as I desired no biography while I lived.”\footnote{104 Brother Stanislaus, “In Memoriam,” \textit{Victorian} 44, no. 7 (1938): 5.} Despite this protest, Galvin mentions Baker in nearly every chapter, earnestly portraying him as a foremost American Catholic figure whose primary goal is saving souls. Galvin claims that saving souls is Baker’s “dominant passion” and announces that he is more renowned than Roosevelt, Lincoln or Washington and that “no name is more lovingly and more universally mentioned than Father Baker of Our Lady of Victory.”\footnote{105 Galvin, \textit{Modern Apostle}, 33, 2.} Galvin contends that Baker does not just save souls, though. He molds good Americans, two hundred and thirty of whom have served their country during World War I, for “out of this heterogeneous conglomeration of boys Father Baker and his Assistant Priests… mold manly, moral, religious, high principled boys who would go forth… animated by a deep sense of their responsibility to God, to Society and to themselves.”\footnote{106 Ibid., 148, 52.}
demonstrating Baker’s effectiveness as a religious leader who promulgated devotion to OLV and encouraged the daily reception of communion, Galvin also portrays him as a good citizen, “A Best Democrat,” writing, “as a public spirited citizen… Father Baker has labored all these years for the betterment of the City of Buffalo… without receiving any or very little pecuniary compensation.” 107

Galvin goes so far as to allege Baker’s saintliness in a chapter, “The Secret of His Success,” which he begins by stating, “A characteristic virtue of all saintly souls, canonized or uncanonized, is confidence in Divine Providence.” 108 He claims that Baker possesses this confidence in God to an “eminent degree” and that his “whole administration..is one grand uninterrupted act of trust in God’s loving Providence” represented by his confidence in Our Lady of Victory. 109 In another section of the book, he provides an exuberant description of Baker blessing the sacrament, portraying Baker as a kind of mystic: “With utter abandonment so peculiar to Saints he seems to be unmindful of witnesses about him; he only remembers that he is holding in his hands the Sacred Heart of the Infant Jesus and His Living Blood.” 110 Galvin also provides accounts of several healings at the shrine through the intercession of Our Lady of Victory, demonstrating that Baker’s Institutes are a holy site since God “has selected Limestone Hill… to be a theatre of miracles, blessings and manifestations of a miraculous nature.” 111

107 Ibid., 137.
108 Ibid., 98.
109 Ibid., 99.
110 Ibid., 113.
111 Ibid., 87.
Even more significant than Galvin’s assertion of Baker’s saintly character, which was not an uncommon opinion during Baker’s final years, is that *A Modern Apostle* provides an early textual source for several legendary stories about Baker, which demonstrates that the foundations for some of the more extraordinary stories about Baker existed in the years before his death. Galvin provides his version of the details for three of the most reiterated written and oral legends—the beginning of Baker’s devotion to Our Lady of Victory, the discovery of the gas well and the founding of the infant home. Galvin accentuates the themes of Baker’s total reliance on Our Lady of Victory and dedication to the preservation of children that would become staple features in later portrayals.

In his account of Baker’s 1874 visit to the Basilique de Notre-Dame des Victoires in Paris, he claims that Baker “was so impressed with all that he beheld… he promised that should God allow him life and health, he would, to the utmost of his power, propagate devotion to Our Blessed Lady of Victory.”

Even though Baker left no personal account of the beginnings of his devotion and only briefly mentioned visiting the shrine in his diary, subsequent authors have elaborated on this version of Baker’s pilgrimage, one even to the point of portraying Baker as spellbound, burning up and sweating profusely before the statue of OLV in Paris whispering, “you are my Lady of Victory.”

Elements of Galvin’s version of the discovery of the “famous” gas well have also persisted over the years. Galvin’s story emphasizes Baker’s trust in Providence and

112 Ibid., 21.

113 RD, “Father Baker’s Year of Anniversaries,” *Victorian* 61, no. 2 (1955): 56. There is a second-hand account of the beginning of Baker’s devotion to OLV provided by Brother Stanislaus. Stan recalls Baker saying that it was during his trip to Paris that he decided to dedicate all his work to OLV. See Brother Stanislaus, “Our Lady of Victory Never Failed Me,” 46, no. 1 (1940): 25.
dramatizes a conversation in which Baker negotiates with the reluctant Bishop Stephen V. Ryan for money to drill the well. Because the prospects of finding a gas well were not very good, Baker “entrusted the whole affair to Our Lady of Victory” and formed a religious procession of altar boys and nuns which proceeded to a field near the present day infant home praying and singing.

He selected a spot at random along his “prayer path” and “placed a medal of Our Blessed Lady in the ground just alongside the selected spot,” instructing drillers not to disturb it. Workers struck gas on the eighth day of a novena, and Galvin claims upon hearing the news from a boy in the middle of a Benediction service, Baker continued the devotion undisturbed, then went to the site.

Galvin’s version gives credit to Father Baker for discovering, through faith and trust in OLV, the correct spot for workers to drill. This version of the story which emphasized Baker’s faith in OLV and her apparent intervention is the one that has survived, though in some retellings, the OLV medal is “a small lead statue,” or Baker states with confidence that “If there is no gas there, Our Lady of Victory will put some there.”

The third well-known story, which is particularly detailed in A Modern Apostle, is the narrative of the infant home’s beginnings, which Galvin compares to the beginning of St. Vincent De Paul’s infant home. According to Galvin, Baker conceived of the idea for an infant home after becoming dismayed when he heard that baby skeletons were

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114 Galvin, Modern Apostle, 255.

115 Ibid.

116 Ibid., 256.


118 Galvin, Modern Apostle, 274.
unearthed while local workers were cleaning the old canal. Enlisting the help of “a kind hearted and sensible widow,” Amelia Mathieson, who later came to work at the infant home, the two began to take infants into her rooming house, with Baker doing most of the physical labor building cribs. Galvin relays that the first infant died after being baptized, and the second had to be fed with an eye dropper and wrapped in wool to be kept alive, events he interprets through his missionary worldview reasoning that “God took the first baby to himself to prove to the world that the salvation of the soul was the greater and more important object of this Charity…and left the second… to show that the rescue of the body was also acceptable.” He also passionately defends the home as a work of God against its critics who argue it is “a monument to man’s lower instincts.”

In subsequent popular versions of the story, the detail about the baby skeletons, which draws attention to Baker’s pro-life efforts, has become a staple feature, while many of the other specifics about the first babies, Baker’s personal involvement and Amelia Mathieson’s role have not been as emphasized.

\[119\] While this fact cannot be confirmed to be true between about 1905 and 1907 when Baker was probably contemplating founding the home, infant corpses were discovered in the Toronto city sewers seven years after the home was completed, and this was reported by the Catholic Union and Times. See “Frightful Statistics,” \textit{CUT}, 2 August 1915, 5. The mention of infant skeletons also appeared in a 1924 annual report from the Institutes when the writer defended the infant home’s work by claiming that it was saving lives since “in removing an obstruction in a sewer built two years ago, the remains of 200 babies” were found. See “Supplementary Report of the SPDRCC,” 20 November 1924, 16. This is the same report Galvin reprints in its entirety in \textit{Modern Apostle}. See pages 158-164. Floyd Anderson mentions that the papers often reported the bodies of unwanted infants being found and that the frequency of these reports prompted Baker to found the home. See Anderson, 84-85. Finally, one nun recalls Baker telling her order about founding the home because of infant skeletons in the sewers. See Sister Mary Vernard, “Memories of Father Baker,” WK, OLVA.

\[120\] Galvin, \textit{Modern Apostle}, 271.

\[121\] Ibid., 272.

\[122\] Ibid., 273.
Though frequently romantic and over-zealous, *A Modern Apostle of Charity’s* accounts of the early Institutes and local history, descriptions of each branch and department composing the extensive Institutes, portrayals of recreational and devotional activities, and histories of the various religious orders and individuals who helped run the Institutes do offer some of the best and most reliable first-hand chronicles available. However, the revalist rhetorical devices that characterize Galvin’s recurring outpourings of praise for Baker ultimately end up revealing more about Galvin’s own personal feelings about Baker, defense of Catholic patriotism and enthusiasm for Catholic missionary efforts than Baker’s personality. The portrait of Baker that emerges from Galvin’s tribute is a highly inflated, but fairly accurate version of the positive attitude toward Baker’s civil and religious contributions that was developing during the 1920s in the Buffalo region.

Another early biography of Baker appeared in the 1931 *Catholic Union and Times*’ centenary book commemorating the 100th anniversary of the diocese. Though brief, this piece, written by Reverend Patrick J. Cormican, a pastor of St. Ann’s parish in Buffalo and frequent contributor to the *Victorian*, emphasizes Baker’s holiness and apparent supernatural abilities. Like Galvin, Cormican begins with a comment on Baker’s reluctance to be the subject of a biography, “If I say all that I know about that saintly man, I might wound his humility; and if I say less than I know and feel, I should be unjust to him and his great work.” He recommends Galvin’s book and provides some details about Baker’s childhood and brothers. Significantly, Cormican presents the specifics of three miracles attributed to Father Baker during his lifetime, “three girls who were miraculously cured by Our Lady of Victory through Father Baker’s intercession.”

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One of these girls, Josephine Pilkington wrote many articles about Baker for the *Victorian* after his death. By explicitly referring to Baker’s ability to work miracles, Cormican’s account reflects a growing public belief in the living Baker’s holiness that existed in Buffalo near the end of his life. Indeed, three years earlier, the *Victorian* referenced Baker’s miraculous powers in its “Favors received…” section by printing a letter from a woman with heart trouble who claimed that Baker had cured her heart palpitations by speaking to her and telling her not to worry during one of her trips to the basilica.\(^{124}\) Many Buffalonians and others tell stories of family members cured by Baker during his lifetime, and one Sister of Charity reported collecting locks of Baker’s hair sometime between 1928 and 1930 because she felt that he was a saint.\(^{125}\)

The Venerable and Beloved Prelate

The local secular papers may not have regarded Baker as a miracle worker during the last ten years of his life as did some individuals, but they did “justly regard Father Baker as good copy.”\(^{126}\) Enthused reporters regularly wove praise for Baker and testimonies from others about his saintly character into their coverage. All of the major local papers contained reports of his ordination anniversary celebrations during his last years, which often imparted information to reinforce the growing public perception of Baker as a man of unique faith and charity and saintly character. One account cites a lawyer who testified at Baker’s fifty-third anniversary about a loan Baker gave him eleven years ago without asking for repayment. The lawyer claimed that, “the kindness of

\(^{124}\) “Favors Granted…” *Victorian* 37, no. 9 (1929): 17.

\(^{125}\) See Personal Letters, R.G. to RW 3 May 1991; T. J. to RW, 24 November 1990; C. M. to RW, 7 October 1989; J. P. M. to RW, May 2 1989, FBGRC. OLVA; For hair relic testimony see Sr. Mary Dorothy Garrity, Letter to WK, 11 November 1997. WKC, OLVA.

that deed will color my whole life.” The Buffalo Times cites former Supreme Court Justice Daniel J. Kenefick saying, “I have never encountered a living saint, except your distinguished guest here,” in his address during the luncheon for Baker’s fifty-eighth anniversary.  

A feature about Baker cited one of his main assistants, Father Gerlach, saying, “All of us here who know him cannot help but love him. He is a remarkable man and one of the saintliest I have ever known.”  

On his sixtieth and final anniversary, the Buffalo News quoted President Roosevelt’s letter congratulating Baker and acknowledging “the supreme happiness which must come to one who has earned from a grateful people the title of ‘priest of the poor.’”  

Sketches of Baker in local and national magazines painted the portrait of a generous, accomplished and humble priest as well during this time. A 1930 feature article in a Buffalo city magazine relayed some of Baker’s personal history and attempted to capture his humility, charity and holiness:

He is determinedly uncommunicative about his own life and achievements…His main concern is with men. He has worked all his life with humanity, succored it, molded it, and eased it in death. It is all in his face. As you met him, behind the spectacles that glimmer whitely as the light catches them, there are the eyes of a mystic—and a very shrewd and kindly man.

A letter to the editor printed in the Commonweal during 1932 described the relief the Institutes provided for casualties of the Depression. The author writes that Baker, “who is

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127 “Honor Father Baker’s 53rd Anniversary of Ordination,” BCE, 20 March 1929, RNHBS, 14-15, LHNA, BECPL.

128 “Father Baker; 58 Years in Priesthood, Honored at Luncheon of Ladies Society,” BT, 19 May 1935, RNHBS, 34, LHNA, BECPL.

129 “Father Baker, at 86, Runs Colony of 2,000…”

130 “Father Baker Hears from President,” BN, 19 March 1936, RNHBS, 38, LHNA, BECPL.

the gracious host to men of every race, color and creed,” had been serving hot meals and providing housing since Christmas day 1930. She describes the Institutes’ distribution of bread and shoe-repair charity, commenting that “it seems like the miracle of the loaves and the fishes to witness the numbers who are fed, and occasionally Msgr. Baker gives them tobacco and a few coins.”

A few months before Baker passed away, America, a national Catholic weekly that published notable Catholic journalists like Dorothy Day and G.K. Chesterton during the 1930s, ran a piece about Baker which portrayed him as a “a bright little shrunken figure in his monsignorial red” who is “eager to show the visitor through the fifteen magnificent buildings of Our Lady of Victory.” This article comments on Baker’s enthusiasm about his “Negro converts,” compares him to St. Vincent De Paul and St. Frances de Sales, and credits Baker with helping maintain the reputation of the local clergy, stating, “if there is little anti-clericalism in the Buffalo diocese, it is because Father Baker…is too handy a refutation.”

The America piece is especially noteworthy because, other than Galvin’s book, it is one of the earliest nationally available sources for specifics on the Victoria well and infant home legends. As such, it demonstrates that some of the lore predating Baker’s demise was available outside the Buffalo region in printed form. America’s account of the Victoria well is of particular interest because the author presents it as coming from Baker himself, claiming that “miracles are nothing new to Father Baker” for “he likes to tell of his ‘miracle’ gas well,” even though the story’s details and many other particulars


133 Ibid.

134 Barrett, 611.

135 Ibid.
in the article are verbatim from Galvin’s book. As one of the only written accounts of Baker, Galvin’s book became a source for many reporters, especially for the gas well story. However, the America piece gives Galvin’s version a touch more validity by attributing it directly to Baker.

By the time he had reached his nineties, Father Baker had become a familiar face in the media and a local and even national celebrity, yet his own reaction to this acclaim was to tactfully and cleverly turn attention away from himself and back to Our Lady of Victory’s supremacy and the work of the Institutes. A feature about Baker in the 1928 Buffalo Times quoted Baker as saying, “I placed myself and my work in the hands of Our Blessed Lady of Victory. I besought her aid and intercession in carrying on sorely needed work. Through her powerful aid have our buildings grown into their present proportions.” One newspaper account relates that when Baker received seven hundred dollars as a birthday gift for his personal use, he converted it into dimes and quarters to personally give to anyone asking for aid. On his ninety-fourth and last birthday, he requested ninety-five candles on his cake in order to highlight the orphans. The extra candle was for an child in the infant home who had been born on that day the previous year and shared Baker’s birthday. A large photograph in the Buffalo Courier that accompanied the birthday celebration report showed a frail but cheerfully smiling Father Baker holding the baby, John, who is gripping a rosary with both of his hands. Baker’s

136 Ibid., 612.

137 For details, particularly on the gas well story, assembled from Galvin’s accounts, see John Boccio “Father Baker, Friend to Poor, Homeless, A St Vincent DePaul in Modern Guise,” BT, 23 March 1930, sec. B; Fred T. Alter; “Father Baker’s Faith in Prayer Rewarded Well,” BCE, 11 July 1948, series 16, 10.

138 “Father Baker, at 86, Runs Colony of 2,000; Prayer, Faith Helps Him,” BT, 26 Feb 1928, RNHBS, 12-13, LHNA, BECPL.

139 “Father Baker to Note His 59th Anniversary” BN, 24 March 1935, RNHBS, 31-32, LHNA, BECPL.
reported comment on his age was, “That seems like a ripe, old age, but there still is much to be done for all the poor orphan children of the world and I would like to continue doing it for several years.”

Baker was to live only another five months. The loss of the “venerable and beloved prelate” and a desire to keep his memory alive subsequently inspired a large body of printed materials which memorialized him as a holy figure and ultimately promoted belief in his ability to intercede with Our Lady on the behalf of petitioners.

The Saintly Little Man of God

As Baker became frail during his final years, experiencing the loss of an eye near Christmastime in 1927 and various other ailments, expressions of affection for him in the Victorian turned toward including sentimental reflections, particularly during a period of illness he encountered in 1935.

One author writes:

He tried to smile as he waves a greeting to the youngsters, but it is only a feeble effort. The tears stream down his cheeks as he reflects upon his helplessness…His wan face is almost motionless. His eyes are closed. The small mouth moves in silent prayer. Occasionally the nurse reaches over the shrunken form to wipe away a tear that has trickled down his wrinkled cheeks…this saintly priest is now in the twilight of his well-spent life. The Angel of Death is slowly winding her black mantle round his wasted frame…

Despite others’ concern for his health, Baker tried to remain active, sneaking out against doctor’s orders to visit the basilica Christmas eve for a novena and visiting the boys and infants when he could. And when festivities to celebrate his fifty-ninth

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140 “Father Baker to Have 95 Candles on Birthday Cake,” BCE, 20 March 1936, 8.


142 “October Novena to be Special Novena For Father Baker—who is Ill,” Victorian 41, no. 10 (1935), 16-17.

143 NHB, Letter to Frank J. Twist, 3 January 1935, FBGRC, OLVA; “Conclusions of Msgr Walter Kern, Archivist, about Father Nelson Baker at the End of His Life,” 2, OLVA.
anniversary as a priest were cancelled this year due to illness, he received flowers “cabled and telegraphed from around the world” and posed for publicity photographs. Baker spent the last few months of his life in the OLV hospital, yet he still celebrated another priesthood anniversary in March 1936, which prompted a Victorian reporter to acknowledge the resiliency and strength he exhibited despite his advanced age:

The footsteps of Father Baker have lost their sprightliness; the once strong voice has grown feeble and thin; his eyes no longer sparkle with their former luster; but the courage which years ago prompted him to carry on in the face of disaster is as strong today as it was the day he assumed responsibility of St. John’s Protectory.

After Baker died at the end of July, the August 1936 Victorian carried a brief, but prominent announcement of his death in its opening pages that included the portrait of Baker which appeared on his memorial death card. Under the headline, “The Saint is Dead,” a short statement explained that the Victoria Press had been stopped to include the death notice and that September’s issue would be dedicated entirely to Baker.

Archbishop Thomas F. Hickey of Rochester gave Baker’s eulogy and highlighted the prelate’s strong faith, charity, humility and extraordinary works in a “spiritual bouquet” for Baker. Yet when compared to the eulogy written by Bishop William Turner, who had worked closely with Baker for nearly twenty years, but had died a few weeks earlier, Hickey’s tribute seems ordinary. Turner’s eulogy, which the Catholic Union and Times printed in full a week after Baker’s funeral, lyrically portrays Baker’s

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faith and social service as divinely inspired and provides an effusive, but effective expression of local feelings about the late priest:

His humanity was more than human…it took its inspiration from above, that like the rose it got its splendor of color and its softness of hue, its gorgeous growth and its glorious perfume not from the roots that, as you all know, struck deep in the human earth from which we spring, but from the radiant sunshine of religion and revelation that is above us and around us and that wrapped him more than any other in our dull dismal days in its warmth, in the life-giving vitalizing force, that made his life so useful to those who lived in his day and age, and so beautiful to the sight of those who knew him as well.  

Father Baker’s death and funeral were front-page news of all the major secular papers in Buffalo, securing his status as a celebrated local personality and further establishing his reputation as a saintly figure. Reporters often recounted details of his biography, sometimes with storybook creativity that brought the deceased monsignor back to life by detailing conversations he might have had about being appointed to Limestone Hill or building the basilica. Most of the papers carried full-page photo spreads depicting scenes from Baker’s life or from his funeral. Articles referred to him as “the saintly little man known to millions around the world” or “venerable and saintly.” The Buffalo News printed a series of statements from city officials, socialites and religious leaders about Baker, and some of these people referred to him as “a saintly

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149 America also carried news of his death on a national level. See “Obituary,” America 55, 15 August 1936, 446.


152 “50 Priests Pray as Aged Cleric Breathes Last,” BN, 29 July 1936, RNHBS, 40, LHNA, BECPL; “Undying Fame Won by Priest in Aiding Boys,” BN, 29 July 1936, RNHBS, 42-44, LHNA, BECPL.
man.” The president of the Ladies Aid Society took a step further in her testimony, claiming, “whenever one had an audience with him one notices the atmosphere of peace and holiness that surrounded him. It was so holy that one felt like kneeling in his presence.” 153

Demonstrations of religious reverence for Baker also appeared in a front-page article entitled, “Father Baker Likely to be Declared Saint,” in which the Reverend Patrick J. Cormican articulated his perceptions of Baker’s holiness. Cormican increased Baker’s reputation as a mystic and healer by testifying that Baker “had, or fancied he had, visions of his heavenly patron, Our Lady of Victory,” “blessed himself more than 50 times a day,” during his final illness and had “performed miraculous cures.”154 He was convinced that Baker would be formally declared a saint someday and encouraged local devotion to him by emphasizing that, “even before his canonization Catholics may pray to him or for him according to their special inspiration.”155 As such, this local priest was one of the first to explicitly and publicly encourage the existing affection for Baker to transform into private devotional piety.

The *Victorian* dedicated its September 1936 issue to commemorating the death and funeral of Baker by reprinting many of these newspaper articles. Notably, it did not include the “Likely to be Saint” article, but instead chose to emphasize Baker’s broad appeal to many different kinds of people in the Buffalo region. Baker’s death card portrait appeared on its cover, and it referred to Baker as “the little man of God.” Photographs appeared on every other page, telling a pictorial story of the funeral.

153 “Scores Pay Tribute to Famous Priest,” *BN*, 29 July 1936, RHBS, 44-46, LHNA, BECPL.


155 Ibid.
proceedings in a series of twenty-nine photos. It also carried the full text of Archbishop Thomas F. Hickey’s eulogy and a version of Baker’s biography that reiterated some of the familiar stories and themes of his life—his shrewd business sense which brought the Institutes out of debt, the discovery of the gas well, the foundation of the infant home, his absolute generosity, and his devotion to Mary. This article also addressed the question of miracles at the shrine by reflecting Baker’s own attitude toward them, stating:

These were never denied by Father Baker, but neither he nor the Catholic Church made formal investigation or a pronouncement upon them. When pressed for a statement on the really miraculous happenings through the intercession of OLV at the shrine he repeated, “Nothing is impossible to God. Prayer can move mountains and prayer to Mary, our most powerful mediator with her Son, never remains unanswered.” 156

This memorial issue of the Victorian was the first in a long series of editions to print memories of Baker and expressions of belief in his sanctity.

Thanks to the Good Father Baker

Although the Victorian still endorsed membership in the Association and devotion to Our Lady of Victory, after Baker’s death certain editorial choices turned the magazine’s devotional attention away from Our Lady of Victory and toward Baker, a trend that continued until the mid-1950s. Testimonies printed in the Victorian suggest that the magazine was, to a certain extent, responsible for spreading word about Baker’s intercessory powers throughout the 1940s.157 The Victorian’s attention on Baker can be attributed to the community’s desire to keep the memory of Baker alive, but it was also largely due to the influence of Robert K. Doran. Doran, who dedicated the last years of


his life to planning strategies to promote Baker, joined the Victorian’s staff in 1939 and served as its editor from 1943 to 1957. Certain significant changes in the magazine coincided with Doran’s arrival on the staff. Articles praising Baker’s life, work and trust in Our Lady of Victory appeared on a monthly basis, and the Victorian’s new subtitle “Father Baker’s family magazine” or “Father Baker’s Victorian Magazine for the whole family” reminded readers that the Victorian was part of Baker’s legacy.

Whereas Baker had used Our Lady of Victory as the driving image for his charity raising efforts, the Victorian now used Father Baker’s image as its primary emblem. In 1941, a portrait of Baker in his biretta began to appear in and on the Victorian like a logo in commemoration of the 100th anniversary of his birth, although incorrectly dated (Figure 3.4). This particular photo of Father Baker was to become one of the most familiar images of Baker in the Victorian’s pages, and there is evidence that Baker wearing his biretta was a common sight at OLV during his life. Writers also used his name, photo and imagined desires to draw attention to current concerns. Ads used statements like “Father Baker Wrote This” or “Father Baker invites you…” to promote the Association and various charity drives. Father Baker even appeared to promote anti-communism, for “as a man of action,” reasoned one ad, he certainly would have helped keep America unconquered by communist reds. Memorializing Baker and using his memory and image to promote various charity drives and ideas became a such a customary editorial practice that Our Lady appeared to be relegated to a secondary status,

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158 Baker was born in 1842. See Chapter 2.

159 Personal Letter, S.M.M. to RW, 5 February 1988, FBGRC, OLVA; Personal Letter, J. H. to RW, 2 November 1987, FBGRC, OLVA.


161 Victorian 56, no. 8 (1950): colored insert.
even as she continued to appear alongside Baker in the magazine and membership in her Association remained strong.

With its a new-found emphasis on Father Baker, the *Victorian* also became a logical place for Baker’s devotees to express thanks for his intercession. Prior to Robert Doran’s arrival, it had already been printing occasional letters thanking Father Baker for spiritual and temporal favors in its “Favors Granted Through the Intercession of Our Lady of Victory” section beginning as early as March 1937. One of the first of these testimonies reasoned that “While on earth Father Baker devoted his whole life to unselfish work for God in honor of Our Lady, so how could she refuse anything to Father Baker when he arrived in heaven? That was my thought, so I asked him to obtain the favor for me.”\textsuperscript{162} By 1944, letters thanking Father Baker appeared regularly, for the magazine had started explicitly encouraging readers to pray to Baker and soliciting letters about favors received from him with requests such as, “If any reader has by chance prayed to Father Baker and has had the favor granted we’d be glad to have all the facts in a letter,” and statements like, “We receive many letters from persons all over the country saying they have received unusual favors by praying to Father Baker. Perhaps he can help you.”\textsuperscript{163} One article even boasted in its headline that “thousands pray to Father Baker.”\textsuperscript{164} Readers, however, were also encouraged to keep their devotions to Baker private, “just as you would pray to your mother or another person who has passed on.”\textsuperscript{165}

\textsuperscript{162} “Favors Granted…” *Victorian* 43 no. 5 (1937): 16.


\textsuperscript{165} “Will You do This?” *Victorian* 53, no. 7 (1947): 53.
Testimonies in the *Victorian* show that thankful petitioners mostly viewed Baker as the first in a chain of intercessors. The “good Father Baker” could appeal to Our Lady who would either grant the favor or appeal further to God or the Infant Jesus. Also, petitioners frequently enhanced their pleas to Our Lady by also appealing to Baker and other saints such as St. Jude, St. Anthony and the Infant of Prague. Besides providing medical aid, Baker appeared to be particularly adept at helping petitioners find lost money and proper housing.

By 1946 the *Victorian* was printing letters expressing an explicit desire to see Baker canonized in newly renamed “Letters of Thanksgiving” section which included letters thanking Our Lady, Baker and other popular saints. Along with this change, each favor received had its own headline, many of which proclaimed Baker’s saintliness or implied that Father Baker was the sole heavenly agent, even if the petitioner also prayed to Our Lady or another saint as well, which was more often than not the case. For instance, one headline reads, “I think Father Baker interceded for me,” but the petitioner reports praying to “Our Lady of Victory, the Sacred Heart, also Father Baker and the Saints.” Other headlines include statements like, “God Grant that Father Baker Will be Canonized,” “Prayed to Father Baker,” “I Know Father Baker Has Heard my Prayers,” “Received everything I ask from Father Baker,” or “Father Baker, Saint-to-Be…” Many headlines borrowed some words from the testimonies, but this was not true in all cases. The body of the testimony under the “Saint-to-Be” header did not even include

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these specific words, suggesting that headlines for testimonies were written by *Victorian* staff members seeking to promote Baker’s sanctity. Additionally, from 1947 to 1957, pictures of Baker and Our Lady framed this section’s title page, and published letters indicated that readers donated money and joined the Crib Donor’s Guild in gratitude for favors from both figures (Figure 3.5). The financial arrangement between the deceased Baker and his petitioners worked in much the same way as exchanges between Our Lady and readers previously had. Thus, the “heavenly benefactors” of the earthly parties involved now included Father Baker as well. Or, as one *Victorian* staff member put it in 1937, “we feel that Father Baker’s spirit is animating us as we are doing what we feel he would do so were he still among us.”

**Little Glimpses of Father Baker**

Shortly after Baker’s death, the *Victorian* also began to run monthly articles about Father Baker which elaborated his life story and underscored the themes of faith, humility and good works. Between 1938 and 1943, Brother Stanislaus, a “kindly soul,” an editor of the *Victorian* during Baker’s lifetime, and a long time friend and co-worker of the deceased priest, recorded a series of his memories about Baker for the magazine. Born John J. Gettens in Horseheads, New York to Irish parents in 1875, he came Limestone Hill in 1891 to learn the printing trade and joined the Brothers of the Holy Infancy. Stan had a wooden leg and also worked as head of discipline at the Institutes before

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171 The *Victorian* advertised Stanislaus as someone who “knew the ‘Padre of the Poor’ as did no other living person.” See *Victorian* 49, no. 5 (1943): 11.

172 Brother Stanislaus, “Fifty years at Father Baker’s” *Victorian* 47, no. 9 (1941): 41-42.
editing the *Victorian*. He often expressed strong personal feelings about Baker, once commenting to a reporter about his vocation:

> What really made me want to stay here more than anything else was that I wanted to live in the sunlight of Father Baker’s spirit. The kindliness, the gentleness of the man, his understanding of boys, his love for all people, his faith in the goodness of everybody—these things seemed far more precious to me than the half-hearted promise of the competitive working world.

Stanislaus died in 1966 in Buffalo at age 91.

Because of the unique details he provides concerning Baker’s personality and some of the more famous stories, Stanislaus’ memoirs are another important written source for subsequent authors and local lore. For instance, when the gas well was discovered, he recalls a local character, “The Wild Irishman,” who did not believe the well was a “gusher” and sat on an overturned pail over the hole, only to be blown off. Also, Brother Stan attributes the idea for the infant home to Baker’s dismay upon hearing of a young mother who destroyed her unwanted infant. And, he recalls hearing Baker tell a story about how he was initially reluctant to be assigned to Limestone Hill by Bishop John Timon and protested the assignment, a story which was incorporated in later biographies of Baker.

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173 Rooney, interview by WK, 9. “Brother Came to Follow Trade, Stayed to Follow Man,” *BT*, undated, Brother Stanislaus Tells Stories about His Friend, Father Baker collection, OLVA.

174 Ibid., “44 years…”

175 “Brother Stanislaus Tells Stories About His Friend, Father Baker,” binder, Brother Stanislaus Collection, OLVA.


177 Brother Stanislaus, “Little Glimpses of Father Baker,” *Victorian* 44, no. 8 (1938), binder, Brother Stanislaus Collection, OLVA.

When depicting Baker’s personality, Stanislaus relies heavily on his own affectionate private observations, beliefs and opinions, yet he does not tend toward over exaggeration. About Baker’s “child-like faith” in Our Lady of Victory, he describes seeing Baker place “bills with no money in sight, and other matters of moment” beneath a statue of OLV in his quarters, “and somehow, some way, it was always taken care of.” He mentions frequently seeing Baker in the chapel of OLV “at midnight, his eyes fixed upon the tabernacle, he was giving an account of the day to the Master and asking blessing on the labor of tomorrow.” About Baker’s relationship with the children, Stanislaus recalls how he learned from Baker that “there is no such thing as an intrinsically bad boy,” describes Baker’s role in the foundation of a juvenile court for Buffalo in 1900, and reveals the boys’ loyalty by telling a story about how a group of Baker boys defended the priest against negative comments at an Anti-Catholic rally in Buffalo. He also illustrates Baker’s special fondness for the infants describing how, before going to bed each evening, Baker would bless each individual baby in the home, an evening ritual also recalled by a nursing student and in which Stanislaus would sometimes join.

While Brother Stanislaus’s writings for the Victorian sustained the magazine’s tradition of expressing deep affection for Baker and recognizing his notable qualities and important works, they are tempered by recognition for Baker’s human qualities. Despite emphasizing Baker’s strong faith in his writings, Stanislaus does not view him with the


same kind of reverence and awe that Galvin or Cormican did. He recognizes Baker’s business skills, claiming, “Father Baker succeeded because he used, to the fullest extent, a remarkable business ability and because of his deep piety and abiding faith.” 183 However, Stanislaus did, apparently, have confidence in Baker’s sanctity, testifying for the Victorian in the 1940s, “I believe with others that Father Baker will one day be canonized a Saint.”184 Stanislaus’s memoirs were recycled and reprinted in the magazine throughout the 1940s as part of its efforts to promote Baker’s life and works.

Another of Baker’s chroniclers was Josephine Pilkington, whose articles appeared in the Victorian between 1942 and 1946. Around 1920 when she was sixteen, Pilkington came to the Victorian to work as assistant to Brother Ligouri and then to Brother Stanislaus.185 She also expressed confidence in Baker’s potential to be a saint, in some part, because she believed that he had healed her of complications from appendicitis. She writes, “I always considered my recovery a miracle.”186 In his brief biography of Baker, Cormican recounts Pilkington’s case:

One [miracle] was a girl whose appendix had burst and produced gangrene. When she was taken to the operating room, Father Baker heard her confession. Then he said to her, “Josephine, are you afraid to die?” She replied, “No Father, I am not afraid.” He said: “Well my child, you are not going to die, you have a mission upon earth.” She did not die and she is a picture of health today. That cure was evidently miraculous. The gangrene developed subsequently such to the extent that she became a seething mass of corruption with an odor intolerable even to herself.187

183 Brother Stanislaus, “Father Baker Dedicated…”


185 John Phillips, interview by WK, undated, 40, OLVA.


187 Cormican.
Pilkington’s own version of the healing is similar, and she adds that Baker also told the concerned nuns who were caring for her that she would not die. Because Pilkington worked at the Institutes for sixteen years while Baker was alive, she was able to provide additional details about Baker’s practices. In particular, she describes his habit of writing down people’s names who asked him to pray for them in a little notebook he carried with him at all times and his method for encouraging daily communion among the children at the parochial school by providing communicants with rolls, coffee or milk, and fresh cookies if they lived too far away to return home for breakfast after Mass.

In general, though, Pilkington chose to write frequently about Baker’s apparent supernatural abilities. In one of her earlier articles, she responds to an inquiry about people praying to Baker for favors:

…in our office are many letters from his old friends, testifying that they have prayed to him for his intercession with Our Lady of Victory, and have been favored with their petitions. And I personally know people who have obtained favors through prayers to him.

She also comments on Baker’s ability to spread devotion to OLV and confer blessings on visitors to the shrine from beyond the grave. Besides her own apparently miraculous healing, she relays the story of Sister Geraldine, who claimed her voice was healed by Baker when he asked her to sing the “Ave Maria” during a benediction. Above this story on the page, the words “Wouldn’t you say this is a miracle?” introduce the story and

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188 Josephine Pilkington, “Never a well man…”


190 Josephine Pilkington, “Thousand Pray…”

highlight its topic in bold letters. Pilkington also preferred to use italics to emphasize her points about Baker, a method that communicates an earnest tone. “He was never too tired, or too weary to devote at least a half hour before the Blessed Sacrament,” she writes. Like Stanislaus’ articles, Pilkington’s contributed new information about Baker to the existing body of memories, yet her perspective was more idealized and overstated, a reflection of the Victorian’s increasing optimism regarding Baker’s sanctity as the 1940s progressed.

During this time, the Victorian also gave readers the impression that they were participants in helping promote Baker’s life and works, a strategy that harkens back to how the earlier Annals impressed upon readers that they were helping raise the Institutes’ children. With the intention of collecting information “to be recorded for future use,” Robert Doran regularly solicited for photos of Baker and personal reminiscences to help with promotional materials. Some of the items sent to him from readers appeared in the Victorian. In addition, reminiscences of Baker from various contributors were occasionally printed, as well as ideas from readers for how to promote Baker. One reader suggested that Baker’s life-story would make a good Hollywood film, referring to specifics he quite possibly learned from Stanislaus’ articles:


Have you ever considered making some effort to have the works of Father Baker—his whole history—filmed? Surely it would make high class entertainment because of its truth and flowing from faith. It is one of the most amazing stories ever to happen. The title should be “Father Baker’s Gas well” but it should begin with young Mr. Baker in the feed store and the arrest of the young street urchin...Such a motion picture would have genuine mystical interest, which people need to catch and anchor their faith.197

This letter appeared on the magazine’s back cover and readers were asked to send in their reactions to this suggestion and to ask neighbors for their opinions as well. The Victorian subsequently printed a series of letters from readers enthusiastically approving of a Father Baker motion picture.198

Another way the Victorian spotlighted Baker was by publishing a serial comic strip about his life, “The Padre of the Poor, A pictorial story of the life and works of Father Baker,” between 1942 and 1946 (Figure 3.6). Illustrated by George Dietzel, the comic retold and dramatized prominent stories from Galvin’s book and Stanislaus’s recollections—Baker’s 1874 pilgrimage, his appointment to Limestone Hill by Bishop Ryan, the discovery of the gas well, the founding of the infant home. Frames often depicted Baker praying to OLV. The comic regularly appeared in the magazine on pages near the “Letters of Thanksgiving” or other features on Baker. Around 1950, a full color comic book about Baker’s life was published (Figure 3.7). This stand alone publication covers the familiar stories of Baker from the serial comic, yet it was also a vehicle for promoting the Association and magazine subscriptions. Accordingly, it claims the Victorian was a family magazine from its very beginnings and advertises its international appeal, maintaining that Father Baker spread devotion to OLV all over the world and depicting images of people in China, Africa, Germany and Paris reading the magazine

197 Victorian 47, no. 1 (1941): back cover.

and belonging to the Association. Evidence does suggest that Baker was an international figure, if not quite as international as the comic book implies. In the 1940s, the *Victorian* started a fund to send the magazine to foreign missionaries, and Baker had gained a following in India by the early 1950s. In 1953, Bishop Leonard Raymond of Allahabad, India visited Lackawanna to preach a sermon at a “Father Baker Day” celebration. He spoke of Baker’s international presence and mentioned that India was the only country that had published his biography.

Father Baker Day was one of Robert K. Doran’s most significant contributions to promoting Baker’s memory. During Baker’s lifetime, in appreciation for his contributions to the community, the Common Council of Buffalo declared the afternoon of June 16, 1934 to be Father Baker Day, a “civic half holiday.” With the help of the diocese, Doran revived this idea in 1945 and organized a Father Baker Day to commemorate the anniversary of Baker’s death. During its initial years, it drew crowds of four to six thousand people. The festivities started early with the Father Baker Boys Band playing on the steps of the orphanage. It also included a procession, reminiscent of earlier novena processions, of the Institutes’ children, Sisters, Brothers and other

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199 “Padre of the Poor” comic book, circa 1950, 8.


203 “First Father Baker Day honors 9th anniversary of his death,” *BCE*, 3 August 1945, 8.

204 RD, Letter to Marion Grimes, 6 June 1981, RDC, OLVA.
employees, as well as civic and religious leaders. Celebrants proceeded down Ridge Road from the shrine to Baker’s grave in the Holy Cross cemetery and recited the litany of Our Lady of Victory at the site and said other prayers. In addition, some Lackawanna merchants set up Father Baker displays in their windows.205

Although not explicitly founded to promote Baker’s sainthood, at least two of the early “Father Baker Days” were infused with overtones of hope for Baker’s canonization. In 1948, Baker’s successor, Monsignor Joseph Maguire, addressed the crowd of three thousand with the wish that, “may God soon see fit to raise him to the dignity of sainthood.”206 In 1950, the Buffalo Courier Express ran an article with the headline, “Sainthood for Father Baker Advocated at Services” and cited Maguire stating, “And may the day dawn in the not too distant future when ecclesiastical authority will see fit to take steps for public announcement of his blessedness and eventually his sanctity.”207

The “Padre of the Poor” comic book also explicitly promoted Baker’s canonization. It contained a “Letter from Paris” written by Josephine Quirk that records her observations during a visit to the Basilique de Notre-Dame des Victoires and encourages readers to pray for Baker’s canonization. Quirk, a Hollywood producer who wrote the screenplay for Blonds by Choice (1927) and Daughters of the Rich (1923), among other films, was a contributing writer to the Victorian during the 40s and 50s, mostly on the topics of juvenile delinquency and communism. She had first heard of Baker from an Irish governess during a boat voyage home from school in Europe and claims she was inspired by him to protest the production of indecent movies in Hollywood. Eventually she started making the stations of the cross daily for his


207 “Sainthood for Fr. Baker Advocated at Services,” BCE, 30 July 1950, section 5, 1.
Her “Letter from Paris” appears in the final three pages of the comic book. Highlighted in a yellow box at the top of the first page is the following excerpt:

I think that if a group of Father Baker’s Friends made a pilgrimage to the church where he received the inspiration for his great work to the Lady he loved and served so well would ask her Divine Son to let Father Baker perform the public miracle that would put him where he belongs—in the Calendar of Saints.

Quirk details how she felt close to Baker while in the church, stating, “He left his spirit there for if ever I felt the spirit of anyone seeping into every corner of the place, it was Father Baker right in that church in Paris.” In addition, she describes her interactions with an old French woman in the church who claimed to be inspired by Baker’s devotion to OLV and showed Quirk a picture of Baker she carried in her purse. Quirk closes with an enthusiastic appeal for those “who love him so well” to pray for his canonization.

This letter also appeared in a 1950 issue of the Victorian. Indeed, by the early 1950s, the Victorian gave the impression that Baker’s cause would begin soon. Records at the parish even have a prayer for his canonization written in 1953.

During the first half of the 1950s, first-hand accounts of Baker from those who knew him were no longer available, so other methods for memorializing him in the Victorian developed. The magazine reprinted articles from the early Annals and Victorian about and by him, and other pieces promoted “Father Baker Day” celebrations and several pilgrimages of the “Friends of Father Baker” to Rome and the OLV shrine in

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209 “Padre of the Poor” comic book, 10.
210 Ibid., 11.
211 Ibid., 12.
Paris. Robert Doran also transcribed several sections from Baker’s diaries for a series, “Father Baker’s Little Black Book,” and mined the writings of Galvin, Stanislaus and Pilkington for details with which to restructure “new” Father Baker articles.

The Incredible Story of Father Baker

Aspirations to see Baker canonized which had developed between the time of his death and the early 1950s lost momentum during the mid-1950s, at least within the printed materials coming from the parish. In 1956, Doran was released as editor, and the Victorian shifted back to its original focus on Our Lady of Victory under the direction of its new editor, Reverend Nelson W. Logal, a pastor of Annunciation parish in Elmira, NY whose parents had named him after Baker. Letters thanking Baker for favors no longer appeared, Our Lady was returned to the magazine’s title in 1960 as it changed to “Father Baker’s Victorian Our Lady of Victory’s Family Magazine,” and articles on Baker appeared less frequently. In the opening of one issue, Logal states that the purpose of the magazine, according to Baker is “to spread devotion to Our Lady of Victory, to serve and defend the Catholic Church, to serve Catholic families, to publicize the work of the Homes of Charity.”

In addition, the need for the magazine’s fund raising strategies declined. Superintendent Reverend Joseph McPherson began using IBM Direct Mail appeals in the early 60s for fund raising instead of relying on brightly colored fold-out inserts with


pictures of boys and babies that had been included in the *Victorian* throughout the 1940s and early 50s (Figure 3.8). Subscriptions to the magazine dropped as energies that had been used to solicit subscribers went toward raising funds in other ways.\footnote{218} In August 1964, the magazine came to be edited solely by McPherson and was reduced to a quarterly “small house organ” with a yearly circulation of about 24-27,000 distributed mainly to donors.\footnote{219} Baker’s name still appeared on the cover, but he was only in its pages about once a year regarding “Father Baker Day” celebrations on the anniversary of his death. The *Victorian’s* last issue appeared in November 1975 and included news of the Institutes’ new “Choose Life” program.\footnote{220} Similar to Father Baker coverage during the last decade of the *Victorian*, much of the news about him in the local secular press from the mid-1950s until the 1980s was also limited to reports of the yearly “Father Baker Day” celebrations with the occasional feature about Baker’s life, the gas well, or monuments erected in his honor.

There is evidence, though, that interest in Baker and the hope for his canonization, did not decline. Consequently, five years after Father Baker coverage decreased in the *Victorian*, a popular biography was published. The first edition of *Father Baker* by Floyd Anderson came out in hardcover in 1960 and sold for three dollars at Buffalo Catholic Union Stores. Its dust jack had the familiar image Baker in his black biretta with the basilica in the background and an account of the thousands of people who attended Baker’s funeral and when the “daily press set their boldest blackest headlines to proclaim the sad news.”\footnote{221} Unlike many of Baker’s other biographers, Anderson was not a native

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\item \footnote{218} Logal, Letter to McNulty, 2.
\item \footnote{219} Ibid.; For distribution see *Victorian* 71, no. 4 (1965): 9; *Victorian* 73, no. 4 (1966): 7; “Victorian Magazine to be Cut Back,” BCE, 22 July 1964, 4.
\item \footnote{220} “Choose Life—infant home Alternative to Abortion,” *Victorian* 81, no. 4 (November 1975): 10-16.
\end{itemize}
of the Buffalo region. Born a Scandinavian Lutheran in Superior, Wisconsin in 1906, he came to New York in the 1930s, intending to study finance. However, his father introduced him to the Jesuit editor of *America*, Wilfrid Parsons, and Anderson’s career plans shifted as he took a job with the magazine.222 After four years at *America*, Anderson converted to Catholicism, and by the time McPherson asked him to write *Father Baker* on commission, he was a respected Catholic journalist and founding editor of the *Advocate*, an archdiocesan weekly paper in Newark, New Jersey.223 Anderson went on to serve as president of the Catholic Press Association and as director of the Catholic News Service, and he wrote several other books, including a children’s book on the life of Mother Anne Seton.224 He once commented, “there is…so much of our Catholic history in the United States that is so exciting, glamorous, and frequently unknown, that one could almost make a career of resurrecting it,” adding that this was a job for both scholars and “those who can bring the past to life in popular treatment for Catholics of today.”225 In January 1988, Anderson died in Arlington, Virginia.

Anderson’s popular treatment of Baker is free of the accolades in Galvin’s book and, like the *Victorian* of the 60s, it does not explicitly promote Baker’s sainthood. Rather, it presents Baker’s story as “prodding inspiration” that will lead readers to “heightened charity and social action.”226 Unlike his Maguire, McPherson did not


225 Anderson, “Short…”

explicitly express hope for Baker’s sainthood. This stance is reflected in the editorial choices he made for the new *Victorian* and especially in his forward to *Father Baker*. His response to inquiries about Baker’s future canonization is somewhat anticlimactic, but it is in accordance with the Church’s “hands-off” policy in such cases. He explains in the biography’s forward that Baker’s sainthood is something known only to God and that no one can, with any certainty, confirm that this event will happen in the future.227

*Father Baker* as is an engaging book that reads much like a novel. Anderson embellishes historical events with imagined conversations, such as those he creates between Baker and his mother, the Reverend Thomas Hines, and Joseph Meyer to dramatize Baker’s decision to enter the priesthood. Anderson also combines versions of some of the more renowned stories with information from news reports. For instance, while his version of the gas well story is taken largely from Galvin’s account, he also includes Stanislaus’s account of the “Wild Irishman” as well as injuries reported by the *Buffalo Evening News* when the well caught fire.228

Although he relies heavily on anecdotal information and uses his creative license to reveal Baker’s personality with literary embellishments, Anderson provides many verifiable historical details from Baker’s diaries, newspaper reports, military records, diocesan records, diaries of Baker’s companions at seminary and the *Annals* and *Victorian*, citing his sources in a general manner within the flow of the text. As the primary archivist for Baker’s cause, Monsignor Walter C. Kern recognized the reliability of Anderson’s account, stating, “I have found his writing to be historically accurate, true, and all legitimate judgments made by the author to be the most probably [sic] solution in light of the evidence available.”229 Kern confirms that the book is “of important


228 Ibid., 67.

229 WK, Letter to “To Whom it May Concern,” 20 November 1993, WKC, OLVA.
historical and critical value” and acknowledges three important contributions made by Anderson: accurately proving Baker’s 1842 year of birth, relaying information about Baker’s military career, and providing many details about Baker’s 1874 pilgrimage.\(^{230}\) In fact, Vatican officials who voted to approve Baker’s life of virtue in 2000 relied on it because it was translated and reproduced in its entirety in Baker’s positio or the critical hagiography published for his cause.

In 1974, *Father Baker* was reissued in a paperback edition under the title *The Incredible Story of Father Baker* and sold for one dollar and fifty cents.\(^{231}\) This small affordable black paperback with red and white lettering and “limited edition” printed on its cover did not have any images of Baker, but it did print the original text from the 1960 edition’s dust jacket on the inside of its front and back covers. The publisher of this edition, Norman P. Kelly, was an admirer of Baker who had revered him since childhood, for both his stepfather and father-in-law had known the priest.\(^{232}\) A local business, the Erie County Savings Bank, or the “‘Big E,” at the Seneca Mall in Buffalo ordered one thousand copies “as a goodwill gesture to promote pride in the area in the little man who obviously was a saint” and distributed many of them for free.\(^{233}\) Further, A local editorialist wrote several columns promoting the cheap edition of the book, calling it “exciting” and “a story of deep love…the love of the little man for his Lady Victory.”\(^{234}\)

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\(^{230}\) Ibid.

\(^{231}\) Shortly after the second edition of Anderson’s book, a novel called *Father Baker’s Children* was released by Vantage Press. Its author, A.P. Nemeth, had been a resident of St. Joseph’s for eight years. Although Baker’s name appears in this book’s title, and there are a number of historical photographs in the book’s opening pages, Baker is not a character in the story. Instead it offers fictional accounts of boyhood mischief and the adventures of an orphan at St. Joseph’s named Ray. See A.P. Nemeth, *Father Baker’s Children* (New York: Vantage Press, 1976).

\(^{232}\) Gerald T. Leahy, “Aide Memoire,” 2 July 1990, 3, OLVA.


\(^{234}\) Ibid.; Matthews, “Interest Mounts…”
In the twenty years before the introduction of Baker’s cause for sainthood, Anderson’s book served as a major source for information about Baker published elsewhere. Excerpts appeared in the *Buffalo Evening News* during 1968. In 1979, an entire issue of *The Anthonian*, a small magazine published by the Franciscans out of Paterson, New Jersey for members of St. Anthony’s Guild, contained a version of Baker’s life that relied heavily on Anderson’s account. The author includes many of the anecdotal stories in *Father Baker*, but rewrites many of Anderson’s imagined conversations between Baker and various people. *The Anthonian* piece is unique, however, because it offers a series of historical photographs to accompany Baker’s story, including photos of Baker’s mother, Father Hines, Our Lady of Angels Seminary and Baker at various ages. The diocese reprinted this condensed biography in pamphlet form to distribute and to sell at the OLV gift store, and a downloadable PDF version is currently available on the OLV website.

Over the course of the first half of the 20th century, representations of Baker in printed materials went through several transformations in conjunction with a series of historical events and contexts, and Baker’s audience of admirers expanded. Early materials treated Baker with respect and affection that reflected local feelings about him. These expressions increased in number and intensity after his Golden Jubilee and the dedication of the OLV basilica. After his death, memorials to his life and works and individual testimonies about his holiness that appeared in various sources helped transform this affection into devotional piety. Baker’s image also became an emblem of

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236 Hanley.

237 Msgr. Wurtz sends “One Lifetime” to people who ask for more information about Baker’s life. See RW, Letter to A.C., 15 September 2000, OLVA.
charity and piety for the Institutes, and he became another major supernatural patron for Association members and the homes he founded. Both “Father Baker Day” and the *Victorian* magazine’s promotion of Baker’s life, work and supernatural efficacy facilitated hope for his eventual canonization. In addition, by the early 1950s, Galvin’s *Modern Apostle* and the large body of printed stories about Baker established a standard set of Baker narratives, out of which his pilgrimage to Paris, the discovery of the gas well, and the establishment of the infant home stand out. This chronological sequence of shifts in how Baker appears in printed materials demonstrates the performative nature of his representations and how they are linked to changing perceptions of him by his audience members over time.

Even though individual enthusiasm for Baker as it appeared in printed materials created a climate in which Baker’s sainthood seemed imminent by the mid 1950s, his cause was not introduced at this time. Instead, beliefs about his holiness were de-emphasized in the *Victorian* and a new, fairly historically accurate and compelling biography was commissioned by the parish. This is not to say that enthusiasm for his cause waned, that private devotion to him ceased, or that the popular stories about him vanished. However, it does appear that by the 1960s, the OLV parish and Institutes chose to celebrate Baker’s life and works, encourage others to view him as a model of charity and piety, and maintain a more moderate public stance on the possibility of his sainthood.
Figure 3.1 Cover, _Annals of the Association of the Association of Our Blessed Lady of Victory_

Source: _Annals_ 24, no. 1 (1911). Courtesy of OLV Institutions, Lackawanna, N.Y.
Figure 3.2 Racial diversity in the infant home

Figure 3.3 "Father Baker and Some of His Little Ones"

Figure 3.4 *Victorian Magazine* logo, 1941

Source: *Victorian* 47 no. 2 (1941): cover. Courtesy of OLV Institutions, Lackawanna, N.Y.

Figure 3.5 Title graphic for “Letters of Thanksgiving” section, 1947-1957

Source: *Victorian* 53 no. 8 (1947): 50. Courtesy of OLV Institutions, Lackawanna, N.Y.
Figure 3.6 “Padre of the Poor” comic strip

Source: Victorian 48, no. 10 (1942): 36. Courtesy of OLV Institutions, Lackawanna, N.Y.
Figure 3.7 *Padre of the Poor* comic book, circa 1950

Source: OLVA. Courtesy of OLV Institutions, Lackawanna, N.Y.
Figure 3.8 Crib Donors Guild colored insert

CHAPTER 4
MATERIAL AND VISUAL CULTURE: FROM RESPECT AND REMEMBRANCE TO REVERENCE

In 1932, the sisters at the Carmelite convent in Buffalo sent Baker an alb they had meticulously made for him. Baker enthusiastically thanked the prioress in a letter and told her of the pleasure he felt wearing it at high mass. He wrote, “I showed it around to everybody, and they wondered at the thousands and thousands of stitches that were made to form it, and as you tell us that every stitch was a memorial of your devotion to Our Lady.”¹ This alb illustrated Baker’s successful promotion of devotion to Our Lady of Victory, and the work the sisters put into making it rendered their spiritual devotion in a material creation. With its “thousands” of hand sewn stitches, this gift was also an indication of the high regard the sisters had for Baker. As such, it united devotion to Our Lady of Victory and esteem for Baker, sentiments reflected in much of the material and visual culture at the Institutes during Baker’s life. Baker’s own efforts to place representations of Our Lady of Victory in highly visible places around the Institutes and distribute statues, medals and prayer cards demonstrated the value of such items in promoting devotion. After his death, the Institutes relied on the network used to promote devotion to OLV to produce and distribute Father Baker souvenirs, individuals obtained and created their own Baker memorabilia, and in accordance with a tradition of religious and civic admiration for Baker, the Institutes, Lackawanna and the city of Buffalo erected and dedicated several Father Baker memorials. These material and visual items took on additional layers of meaning when the devotional ethos of Our Lady of Victory’s followers expanded to include Baker, Baker’s devotional following grew, and individuals used Father Baker items for devotional purposes. Thus, the meanings of material and visual items created or established in remembrance of Baker’s respected persona changed

¹ NHB, Letter to Mother M. St. John of the Cross, 28 March 1932, 1, Carmelites Collection, OLVA.
and transformed when provided with new historical circumstances and religious practices.

**Representing Our Lady of Victory**

When Baker became superintendent of the Limestone Hill Institutes in 1882, he brought his devotion to Our Lady of Victory with him and began to transform the Institutes interior and exterior settings to help encourage her devotional following and provide visual reminders of her patronage. In 1889, he directed the construction of a new OLV chapel inside St. John’s Protectory on the third floor. A six feet tall statue of Our Lady was, “imported from Paris” and placed above the altar with a circle of “richly stained glass, eight feet in diameter behind her head to give her a halo of radiance.”2 This chapel became the central location for novenas, masses for the dead, and for candles to be lit for intentions of members of the OLV Association.3 A 1930 photograph of this chapel shows the placement of candles and over fifty plants, demonstrating the care staff gave this altar.4 Additional early chapels to Our Lady existed inside St. Patrick’s church and on the third floor of the infant home.5

Furthermore, OLV statues prominently decorated the exteriors of new buildings, and her presence began to dominate the area’s skyline. An 1897 ceremony accompanied the raising of a stone statue of her to a niche above the entrance to the new parochial school building. The placement of “two American flags floating from the statue of Our Lady, as it gradually ascended to its throne,” suggest that this was both a public and

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4 *Victorian* 36, no. 9 (1930): 2.

religious event. A notable installation was the placement of a bronze OLV statue on the top of a cupola over one hundred feet from the ground above the front entrance of the expanded facilities for St. John’s Protectory in 1898. News reports of the dedication ceremony indicate that the raising of this sizeable statue to its position was an important event for the OLV community. The statue faced the city and was visible for two to three miles around. One reporter writes, “What a fine conception of Father Baker’s it was to place it there. He wishes to have it known that it is to OLV that his success due; and he has written his idea in lasting bronze; and he has written it against the sky.” The protectory became a local landmark, and another reporter, describing a sunset scene in an article about the steel plant, even mentions the familiar “towers of St. John’s Protectory.” Later it provided a landmark for aircraft entering Buffalo from Cleveland. Statues of OLV also served to honor donors who helped the charity work of the homes. In 1908, before an OLV statue was raised over the entrance of the new infant home, Baker hung golden heart-shaped lockets containing the names of donors around the necks of Mary and the Infant Jesus. In this way, the statue unified the home’s “heavenly and earthly benefactors” with the temporal results of their patronage.

6 “Solemn Blessings of the Ground for the New Buildings at ‘Victoria,’” CUT, 17 June 1897, 5, KDNC, OLVA.

7 Galvin, Modern Apostle, 241-244.

8 “Solemn Blessings;” “West Seneca,” CUT, 26 May 1898, 5, KDNC, OLVA.

9 Ibid., “Solemn Blessings.”

10 “City’s Biggest Annex: Lackawanna Steel Company’s growing Plant in West Seneca is One of the Wonders of modern times: Strange People Strange Customs,” Express, 11 November 1902, LSC, 132, LHNA, BECPL.


12 “Golden hearts to be Hung around the necks of the statues of Our Lady of Victory and her Divine Child,” Annals 21, no. 1 (1908): 12; Josephine Pilkington, “Father Baker was Most Contentious [sic],” Victorian 50, no. 9 (1944): 53-54.
The Our Lady of Victory Basilica and National Shrine is the principal material expression of the enthusiasm for Our Lady that Baker engendered within the Buffalo region and nationwide. Sometime in the mid 1890s, Baker had dedicated a small outdoor shrine to her, and there are stories of healings occurring at this miraculous shrine, which made it a popular pilgrimage destination (Figure 4.1). Reports of the shrine in West Seneca indicate that it was “growing famous by reason of the many spiritual and temporal favors there obtained” and that it was one of the “much visited shrines in this country” because of the “numerous…stories of cures effected.” Consequently, the community of devotees outgrew the little shrine, and St. Patrick’s church was razed in 1921 to make room for an ambitious and much larger devotional and pilgrimage center.

Funding the shrine’s construction was a communal effort. Local religious orders, priests, and laity, as well as bishops of various dioceses in the Northeast, provided funds for altars to various saints within the shrine, and these donors’ names are kept in a vault on the high altar. The forging of the basilica’s monstrance, too, suggests communal involvement, for some claim to have donated gold family heirlooms or pieces of diamond jewelry for it. Further, a former student of the OLV schools, Edward S. Jordan, owned the construction company hired to build the shrine. Additional funds came from a campaign in the Annals which sought finances from Association members nationwide by

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14 “Briefs,” *CUT*, 30 October 1897, KDNCA, OLVA; “Our Lady of Victory: Annual Visit to the Institutions at Limestone Hill,” *CUT*, 16 July 1896, 1, KDNCA, OLVA.

15 “Report of Shrine Finances,” 11 May 1926, 12-14, Basilica of OLV folder, WKC, OLVA.

16 Anderson, 99; Frances Burghardt, “Some diamonds for the monstrance,” WKC, OLVA.

printing architect, Emile Uhlrich’s drawing of the proposed shrine, showing photographs of its progress, altars, and ornamentation, and asking for donations of ten dollars for blocks of white marble, which were provided by the Georgia Marble Company (Figure 4.2). Thus, each block was “a silent tribute from someone out dear Mother has loved and helped.” With the help of advice of Congressman James M. Mead, Baker and Charles Leo O’Connor, the Institutes’ lawyer at the time, devised a legal way to import, free of duty, much of the marble statuary for the shrine sculpted by the Tonetti Brothers of Pietrosanto, Italy. According to regulations of the Fordney McCumber Tariff Act 1922, duties could be waived for statuary intended for individual altars or shrines. O’Connor argued that the basilica, though a large edifice dedicated to OLV, was composed of a number of smaller altars to various saints.20 A note salvaged from Baker’s records states that the marble edifice cost $2,800,000 to build between 1919-1930.21

The sizeable church and shrine opened in 1926, the year of Baker’s Golden Jubilee or fiftieth anniversary of his ordination, and the OLV community celebrated both events together.22 Early reports of the shrine and later pamphlets provide detailed descriptions of the impressive interior paintings done by Gonoppi Raggi and local Polish


21 Handwritten note found in a file of materials on the Father Nelson H. Baker at the Chancery, copy from DBA in Basilica of OLV folder, WKC, OLVA.

ecclesiastical artist Marion M. Rzeznik.\textsuperscript{23} Latin phrases from the litany of Our Lady of Victory appear around the interior, making the shrine a physical manifestation of her prayer. Rome granted the shrine the status of minor basilica at the request of Bishop William Turner, who consecrated it as such in October 1926.\textsuperscript{24} A news report states that two hundred and sixty priests participated in the dedication procession and estimates that ten thousand people attended the basilica’s consecration ceremonies.\textsuperscript{25} As the second minor basilica in the United States at the time, it brought national prestige to Lackawanna, greatly increased the visual impact of the Institutes in the cityscape, and drew pilgrims from across the United States (Figure 4.3).\textsuperscript{26}

Even though the shrine is dedicated to Our Lady, specific elements of its exterior design, completed by 1930, represent Baker’s elevated status in the community. Baker had planned for figures of the two religious orders who assisted him at the Institutes to be included on the basilica’s exterior, a plan that worked only in part. Above the basilica’s left portico, a statue of an angel towers above a Sister of Joseph in the middle of a group of girls. According to tradition, the figure represents Sister Mary Ann Burke, Reverend Mother of the Sisters of Saint Joseph at the Institutes for forty years.\textsuperscript{27}

\begin{thebibliography}{9}


\bibitem{note24} Bishop William Turner, Letter to Anthony Cardinal Vico, 12 May 1926, copy from DBA in OLVA; NHB, Form letter to “My dear friend,” 23 September, 1926, copy from DBA in OLVA.


\bibitem{note26} The first minor basilica in the United States, The Basilica of St. Mary in Minneapolis MN, was dedicated in February of 1926. See \textit{The Basilica of OLV}, 15. Baker, however, was under the impression that OLV was the first. See NHB, Letter to Sister M. Agnes of Jesus, 4 October 1926, copy from Dominican Monastery Archives, Buffalo NY in OLVA.

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the right portico, despite Baker’s plans for a Brother of the Holy Infancy to be portrayed, another angel towers over a statue of Father Baker among a group of boys and girls (Figure 4.4). As the story goes, Baker’s friends worked secretly with the basilica’s sculptor behind his back to replace the Brother with Baker. Baker protested the tribute, but acquiesced in the end. This statue portrays Baker with his left arm around one of the children and his right hand with its middle and index fingers up, as if he is bestowing a blessing. The choice to portray Baker in this manner recognizes him as a spiritual leader and indicates that others viewed him as an iconic figure during his lifetime. Furthermore, given a context in which many individuals recall how being blessed by Baker healed them of an ailment, this statue also implicitly acknowledges Baker’s apparent supernatural abilities.

The Distribution and Sale of Religious Goods

As representations of Our Lady of Victory increased in number and visibility on the grounds, the Institutes also promoted general Catholic piety and devotion to Our Lady through the distribution and sale of religious items. An OLV medal, embossed with the words “Our Lady of Victory, Pray for Us,” was made especially for the OLV Association in 1888 and indulgenced by Leo XIII. In 1912, the Annals began to advertise religious goods in the last three to six pages of each issue, under the title “Victoria Supply Bureau.” Ads stated that the bureau’s purpose was to supply religious goods at low prices to “our pious people…which they may not be able to obtain in their own city or town.”

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28 Anderson, 98.


The bureau specialized in OLV medals, rosaries and statues, but it also sold statues of St. Joseph, St. Anthony and the Sacred Heart of Jesus, bibles in both French and English, instructional booklets on aspects of the Catholic faith from the “Heart to Heart Series” published at the Institutes, and books such as Goffine’s Devout Instructions and Cardinal James Gibbons’ The Faith of our Fathers. Records indicate that this enterprise was not established to make a profit. Instead, it sought to provide cheap Catholic literature and increase the accessibility of objects of piety and devotion by sending them “all over the country by parcel and express.”

By the early 1930s, the tradition of selling and distributing religious goods and books was well established, and the Victorian also used certain items as incentives to promote the sale of magazine subscriptions. In 1933, readers could receive OLV devotional items if they signed up friends for subscriptions. One new subscription allowed a reader to obtain an OLV plaque, a candle and a holy water font, and ten new subscriptions entitled the reader to an OLV statue and altar equipment. Moreover, the ad quoted Baker’s opinion that, “an altar in the home will keep the Catholic family in closest communion with spiritual things…for children brought up in such a home it assures a firm faith and deep piety.” In 1935, the magazine offered Irish linen handkerchiefs instead of devotional items as incentives for obtaining new subscribers. However, this ad also relied on Baker’s reputation, claiming that, “Father Baker presents you with this beautiful gift.” The use of Baker’s name to sponsor magazine promotions suggests that

32 Ibid., 25-29.
33 “Supplementary Report of the SPDRCC,” 19 April 1918, 2-3, OLVA; “Supplementary Report of the SPDRCC,” 25 November 1925, 8, OLVA. The sale of religious goods through the parish’s magazines brought in about six to ten thousand dollars a year. See “Supplementary Reports of the SPDRCC,” 1918-1929, OLVA.
34 Victorian 39, no. 7 (1933): 1.
35 Victorian 41, no. 6 (1935): 33.
the *Victorian*’s staff thought readers would take Baker’s suggestions seriously or desire to be connected to him in some way, even if the connection was just owning a handkerchief endorsed by him.

Around this time, the Institutes expanded the range of items it offered for sale and established a book department. Also, Brother Ligouri and Brother Oliver opened the “Religious Reliquary Department,” a small gift shop in the foyer of the basilica.36 Ads for the new “Victorian Book Department” claimed that, “modern novels written to arouse are the worst type of temptation” and offered wholesome alternatives such as novels by authors approved by the Church, “clean summer reading” for vacationing schoolchildren, and Mary T. Waggaman’s books for children.37 The book department had an extensive catalog it could send to *Victorian* readers for ten cents and boasted selling “no cheap trashy stories.”38 In addition, the Institutes sold a “Cross-Guess game,” sheet music for “When its Rosary Time in Ireland,” and specialty books like a leather-bound edition of *Why God Loves the Irish* by Humphrey J. Desmond with gift box or a “Tiny Tots Prayer Book” with colored pages.39 By the time of Baker’s death, the religious goods division of the Institutes not only promoted Catholic piety by selling and distributing devotional items on the grounds of OLV and through the mail; it also actively sought to educate Catholic laity and counter less desirable secular influences by recommending and selling reading materials and activities that met certain standards of decency.

36 George Smith, interview by WK, 11 April 1989, 16, OLVA.

37 *Victorian* 39, no. 7 (1933): 44; *Victorian* 40, no. 5 (1934): 46; *Victorian* 40, no. 2 (1934): 45.

38 *Victorian* 41, no. 1 (1935): 47.

39 *Victorian* 40, no. 6 (1934): 37, 57; *Victorian* 41, no. 2 (1935): 39, 46.
Father Baker Memorabilia and Souvenirs

Baker’s 1936 death left the OLV community, Lackawanna and the greater Buffalo area without a much-loved and valued religious and public leader, and the desire to keep his memory alive was strong. His work had gained him local and national respect, and his death and funeral were significant and memorable events in the Buffalo region at the time. The Common Council of the City of Buffalo drafted a resolution in his memory claiming that, “he has brought fame to our community, through his benevolent and magnificent charity.”

New York State governor, Herbert H. Lehman, sent a telegram of condolence, and some of his relatives attended the funeral. Local papers reported that Baker’s funeral and wake drew an estimated 100-400,000 visitors and that one hundred police, many of them wearing Our Lady of Victory medallions in place of their badges, were required to keep the crowds in order. Archival and newspaper photographs show mourners lined up for blocks waiting to become part of the “unceasing stream” of people to view Baker’s bier during the four days his open bronze coffin was in the basilica. Radio stations WEBR and WKBW broadcast Reverend Francis A. Growney’s description of the funeral services. Further, many in Lackawanna and South Buffalo already considered him to be a saint.

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40 “Resolution,” 8 September 1936, The Common Council of the City of Buffalo NY, copy in OLVA

41 “Earth Receives Body of Father Baker,” CE, 6 August 1936, 1; “Governor Represented at Funeral of Father Baker,” BEN, 3 August 1936, 1.

42 “Hundred Thousand at Father Baker’s Bier,” CE, 3 August 1936, 1; “Remains of Father Baker are seen by over 400,000,” CUT, 6 September 1936, 1; “Autos Are Removed from Near Basilica,” BEN, 3 August 1936, RNHBS 101, LHNA, BECPL.

43 “Long lines of Sorrow,” BCE, 4 August 1936, RNHBS, 129, LHNA, BECPL; “Impressive Rites Mark Father Baker’s Funeral in Lackawanna,” CUT, 6 August 1936, 1; Photographs, “Baker’s funeral,” PC, OLVA; “Rites Concluded for Father Baker,” BEN, 3 August 1936, RNHBS, 96, LHNA, BECPL.

44 This was the second time a clerical member’s funeral service was broadcast in the Buffalo area. The first time had been earlier that month when Buffalo’s Bishop William Turner
This regard for Baker’s apparent holiness inspired many to seek mementoes of him. Some of those who were with Baker when he died removed his items from his room and kept them as treasured items. Many mourners obtained souvenirs at Baker’s funeral or immediately after it. The two most popular types of souvenirs were memorial death cards and various kinds of relics. The Victoria Press printed 300,000 death cards for distribution throughout the diocese and announced that “no request for a memorial card would be refused” (Figure 4.5). The card had Baker’s portrait and the dates of birth, ordination and death, as well as a prayer in his memory, and some were surrounded by a violet border symbolizing his rank as monsignor. Devoted individuals created surrogate representations of him by touching religious objects to his body or to the amethyst ring on his right hand as they viewed his bier, acts of reverence one reporter called “the greatest gesture[s] of belief in this priest’s saintliness that could come from a layman.” One former employee recalls touching a bag of medals to Baker’s body and distributing them to friends and relatives. Mourners also dropped dozens of small passed away. See “Autos are removed…;” “Funeral Broadcast is Given by Priest,” BEN, 3 August 1936, RNHBS, 102, LHNA, BECPL.

45 Mary Ann Yeates, interview by Patricia Hannon, 1976, FBFA.

46 Mary Winter Dole, interview by WK, 12 April 1987, 16, OLVA.

47 “Father Baker was Drummer In Civil War, Friends Recall,” BEN, 31 July 1936, RNHBS, 99, LHNA, BECPL; “Novena Opening Saturday Will Honor Father Baker,” CUT, 6 August 1936, 1.

48 Ibid., “Novena.”


50 Clara G. Balduf, interview by WK, 22 May 1990, 4, OLVA. See also Personal Letter, J.R.M. to RW, 18 November 1986, FBGRC, OLVA.
religious objects into Baker’s casket, “thinking they were unobserved,” and the parish decided to allow these items to remain with Baker when he was buried.\textsuperscript{51}

In the context of Baker’s saintly reputation, such mementos took on an additional layer of meaning as relics, items the devoted could use as conduits to access his intercessory powers. Indeed, testimonies contains many stories ascribing healings to items touched to Baker.\textsuperscript{52} One woman claims she was able to keep a damaged tooth because she touched her rosary’s crucifix to Baker’s right hand and then touched her tooth with the crucifix.\textsuperscript{53} Another woman attributes a healing to a medal touched to his body.\textsuperscript{54} Even directly touching afflicted body parts to Baker when viewing his body appeared to have an effect. One man claims to have regained strength and mobility in his right arm, which he had seriously injured in an accident at the steel mill, after touching it to Baker’s body and praying for it to regain strength.\textsuperscript{55}

Another popular “relic” to which several devotees report a unique connection is a small piece of cloth, said to be from one of Baker’s discarded cassocks.\textsuperscript{56} Several owners

\textsuperscript{51} “Mourners Pay Final Respect to Monsignor,” \textit{BCE}, 3 August 1936, RHNS, 125, LHNA, BECPL.

\textsuperscript{52} Some examples include a rosary said to have been touched to Baker’s body that was given to Joseph Donohue III in 2000 during his sickness. Donohue’s family credits Baker with his recovery from bacterial meningitis. See Lou Michel, “Family believes son saved by a Father Baker miracle,” \textit{BN}, 5 November 2000. Also see Mrs. P., “Miracle,” \textit{Father Baker Stories}, collected by Bill Kozak, 14 December 1973, State University College at Buffalo Library, for a story of a healing attributed to a medal touched to Baker’s body, and see Monsignor Michael J. Harrington, interview by Marsha Ryba, FBFA for a story of a policeman with cancer healed by a crucifix that had belonged to Baker.

\textsuperscript{53} Personal Letter, V.B. to RW, 11 December 1987, FBGRC, OLVA.

\textsuperscript{54} Mrs. P.

\textsuperscript{55} Mr. and Mrs. Thomas McCann, interview by Lynne Fitzgerald Schifano, 28 September 1978, FBFA. See also Bob Battaglia, “Father Baker,” 26 October 1976, FBFA.

\textsuperscript{56} Mullany; Personal Letter, M.S. to RW, 9 December 1992, FBGRC, OLVA. There is at least one healing attributed to this type of item. See Personal Letter, M.L. to RW, April 5, 1989, FBGRC, OLVA.
treat this “relic” with great care and keep it close to them at all times. One devotee purchased hers from a gas station near the basilica and carries it in her purse attached, with an OLV medal, to a picture of Baker cut from the newspaper.57 Another wears it daily around her neck together with an OLV medal.58 Choosing to combine Baker relics and OLV devotional items creates personalized objects that indicate dedication to both figures.

Some of these scraps of cloth turn up in other places when their original owners pass away. Several have been donated to the OLV archives. One was reportedly a gift from a woman in Buffalo to a friend in Rochester. The cloth was glued to a piece of delicately cut cardboard, and the edges of the cardboard were machine stitched to create a type of home-made prayer card (Figure 4.6).59 Another even appeared on Ebay. In 2004, a seller, whose mother was one of “Father Baker’s children,” sold a crucifix reliquary that he found in a mixed box of used jewelry purchased in Buffalo. A scrap of “Baker’s cape” lay inside.60

Other items considered to be relics by people in the Buffalo area include objects given to individuals by Baker himself or his relatives and handed down within families or amongst employees at the Institutes. Baker personally distributed OLV statues and medals, as well as other religious items, throughout his life.61 One Sister, who worked at

57 Catherine Leffler, interview, 17 April 1999.


59 Personal Letter, B.R. to RW, 11 August 1985 and 19 August 1985, FBGRC, OLVA. For another cloth scrap donation see Personal Letter, D.F. to RW, 22 June 1992, FBGRC, OLVA. One of these pieces of cloth was also sent to the family of Joseph F. Donohue. See Lou Michel.

60 Edward F. Ciszek Jr., email to author, 6 November 2004.

the Institutes, recalls that he had a barrel of rosaries in his office to distribute to anyone who visited him.\textsuperscript{62} Another woman claims to own Baker’s rosary which she received from her father who received it from Baker’s cousin, Howard Baker.\textsuperscript{63} A doctor who had cared for Baker during his final illness writes that Baker gave him his personal medal of Our Lady.\textsuperscript{64} And, one Florida retiree relays that her neighbor owns Father Baker’s cup and saucer given to her by Baker’s brother, Louis.\textsuperscript{65} Though verifying the origins of items like these beyond testimonials is difficult, if not impossible, they remain treasured reminders of Father Baker to their owners, representations of the belief in his sanctity and, for some, means through which to access his divine intercession.

The Institutes also provided people with Father Baker souvenirs during the years following his death, and Baker’s image became a prominent presence among the religious goods it offered. For their efforts to obtain more subscriptions, the February 1937 \textit{Victorian} offered readers a nine-inch statue of Baker, “in memory of…our dearly beloved deceased rector and administrator.”\textsuperscript{66} This statue portrays the top half of Baker’s body and resembles the photograph of him that appeared on his death card. He is bare headed, wearing glasses and clutching the crucifix around his neck with his right hand (Figure 4.7).\textsuperscript{67} Also during this year, “in response to numerous requests for a late picture of Father Baker,” the Institutes commissioned a copper etching of Baker to be made from his last photographic portrait taken March 19, 1936 as part of his appeal for Catholic

\textsuperscript{62} Sr. Heronime Murphy SSJ, interview by WK, 2 February 1988, 15, OLVA.
\textsuperscript{63} Personal Letter, M.S. to RW, 25 August 1999, FBGRC, OLVA.
\textsuperscript{64} Personal Letter, G.F. to RW, 20 December 1986, FBGRC, OLVA.
\textsuperscript{65} Personal Letter, F.B. to RW, 11 March 1989, FBGRC, OLVA.
\textsuperscript{66} \textit{Victorian} 43, no. 2 (1937): 2.
\textsuperscript{67} A large bust of Baker had been made without his knowledge in 1924 and is currently housed in the DBA.
Charities on the 60th anniversary of his ordination (Figure 4.8).68 These 10 x 12 prints sold for one dollar each and were “suitable for framing.”69 And, by 1938, the head-shot portrait of Baker was available framed in four different sizes and “tinted in oil by our studio boys.”70 This is the same portrait used as a logo on the cover of the Victorian magazine in 1941 and referred to by the magazine as “our favorite picture of the beloved Father Baker” in 1955.71 A photograph of the early basilica gift shop shows various sizes of Baker’s portrait prominently displayed on top of the main display case.72 One longtime parish member commented that “all the ladies [in the OLV parish] had pictures of Father Baker in their houses after his death.”73 Another mentioned that she had this portrait above her bed so that it is the first thing she sees when she wakes up.74 Yet another stated that she knew that this was the portrait that looked the most like Father Baker.75 Although the Institutes mass produced other portraits of Baker, such as his death card portrait, these images have not endured as well as the head-shot of Baker in his biretta in materials coming from the Institutes since the 1940s.76 As such, viewers

68 “Msgr. Baker Known Throughout the World for Charities and Achievements,” BEN, 29 July 1936, RNHBS, 50-51, LHNA, BECPL.

69 Victorian 43, no. 6 (1937): 32-33.


71 Victorian 61, no. 5 (May 1955): 52.

72 Photograph, “Religious Reliquary Department,” PC, OLVA

73 Downey, interview. Also see Personal Letter, M.W. to WK, 30 July 1994, WKC, OLVA for a description of a picture of Father Baker on the wall in mother-in-law’s bedroom

74 Laura Mancuso, interview, 24 July 2003.

75 Leffler.

have reinvested mass produced copies of this particular image with its original authority and cult value, or “aura.”

Other souvenirs paired Baker, in various ways, with the representation of Our Lady of Victory that he had used to spread devotional piety. Unifying the two commemorated Baker’s relationship with her, a relationship that was and is often expressed in popular legends and recollections describing how Baker was believed to have interacted with devotional OLV objects. He is said to have left unpaid bills underneath her statue and be rewarded with a check or donation for “the exact amount” in the mail. In other stories he turned her statue or picture to face the wall until she had granted his request or because he was angry at her. One Sister recalls Baker giving a statue of OLV a “little pat on the cheek” during a May crowning ceremony. In recognition of her significance to Baker, the community buried him with a statue of her, said to be the one he bought during his first trip to the shrine of Our Lady of Victory in Paris in 1874.

When Baker was still alive, readers of the parish’s publications and OLV devotees participated in his unique relationship to Our Lady by joining her Association, visiting the shrine, sending intentions and thank you offerings to the Institutes and

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80 Murphy, 3. For other recollections of Baker patting OLV’s cheek, see also Personal Letter, A.L. to RW, 14 March 1986, OLVA; Personal Letter A.L. to RW, 4 February 1988, FBGRC, OLVA.

81 Anderson, 108; Dole, 4.
owning OLV devotional items, all activities Baker promoted. After his death, the Institutes continued to provide Baker’s support of the OLV devotional community by offering a 5 x 3 Our Lady of Victory plaque “blessed by Father Baker” (Figure 4.9). The mail order department made this item readily available to readers at cost, for “due to the fact that the souvenirs are blessed, they cannot be sold.” The Victorian continued to offer this plaque until the early 1940s, advertising it as something Baker personally designed and wanted in every Catholic home. Because this plaque had been blessed by Baker, it retained his spiritual endorsement despite his absence.

While items like this plaque prolonged Baker’s work for OLV’s devotional community, other items began to imply that Baker himself merited devotional attention. One of the earliest objects to hint at Baker’s sanctity was a small memorial medal of Father Baker designating him “Padre of the Poor” (Figure 4.10). It mirrored Baker’s portrait on his death card, and on its reverse was the familiar image of Our Lady of Victory that had appeared on Association medals since the 1880s. This item served a double purpose; it commemorated Baker and provided access to OLV’s spiritual benefits. However, to use it in an appeal to Our Lady would, intentionally or unintentionally, provide a devotional consideration of Baker. Given that many people acted on their belief in his holiness by obtaining what they considered to be relics immediately after his death, it is likely that this item could be viewed as a devotional medal that simultaneously enhanced prayers to both OLV and Baker. Indeed, Barbara McNaughton reports using this medal, which she inherited from her mother, to pray to Father Baker and Our Lady of Victory for her husband’s recovery from heart problems in 1973. This medal made it

82 Victorian 43, no. 6 (1937): 25.
83 Victorian 48, no. 9 (1942): 59.
84 Personal Letter, Barbara McNaughton to RW, April 1989, OLVA; David Condren, “Slow Track to Sainthood,” BN, 8 August 1999, sec. A.
convenient for OLV devotees to make the newly deceased Baker an object of their piety. Consequently, some Father Baker souvenirs had dual meanings—as reminders of his life and as objects through which he and Our Lady of Victory could be contacted for divine favors.

**Father Baker Memorials and Monuments**

Throughout Baker’s tenure as superintendent, memorials to Our Lady increased in number and size on the Institutes grounds, but after 1936, permanent and temporary memorials to Baker and his works multiplied. In 1939, three brothers built a detailed scale model of the basilica as part of a Christmas display outside their home on Dempster street in Lackawanna.\(^8^5\) The following year’s holiday season saw an installation at the Institutes that included a series of memorials highlighting Baker to commemorate the 100th anniversary of his birth and celebrate the holidays. The “city of charity” became a “city of light...to reflect his spirit and character,” and the walls of the Institutes displayed tributes to Baker with his image as the central figure in several prominent exhibits.\(^8^6\) On December 22, various religious and civic speakers addressed an estimated crowd of 20,000 and a loudspeaker system was set up to carry the speeches into the streets of Lackawanna.\(^8^7\) The central display in the gymnasium depicted, “Christ with arms outstretched over a large picture of Father Baker.”\(^8^8\) Baker’s image was “standing on a sphere, which represented the whole world, to indicate that his charities embraced everyone,” and the portrait also included images of a guardian angel, the children under

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86 “Mayor Praises Event in Honor of Msgr. Baker” *CE*, 16 December 1940, 1; “20,000 honor Father Baker at Centenary,” *BEN*, 27 December 1940.

87 Ibid., “20,000…”

88 Ibid.
his care and the Institutes he built. This representation reflected a notion that Baker’s work had universal appeal and was sustained by Christ.

Another display over the entrance to St. Joseph’s Orphanage depicted a twelve and a half foot tall Baker in the middle of five boys. Baker is looking straight ahead and smiling, and both of his arms are around the two boys at his side. He dressed in black and is wearing his biretta. Thomas Galvin’s brother, also an early ward of the orphanage, writes that looking at this image of Baker brought up “many and happy memories…rushing through my mind.” This life-sized portrait of Baker also appeared on the cover of the *Victorian’s* July 1942 issue, and in the photograph, two real boys have joined the five surrounding Baker and one is pointing to Baker, as if he is explaining to the other who Baker is (Figure 4.11).

Commemorating Baker in portraits such as this one offered substitutes for his physical presence and presented visual cues through which OLV community members could both remember Baker and feel closer to him. Furthermore, the celebration which commemorated him through displays offered a co-celebration of the birthdays of both Baker and Jesus, suggesting that the community considered Baker virtuous enough share the stage with Christ. This celebration continued the community’s tradition of celebrating important events of Baker’s life, like the anniversary of his ordination, and served as a prototype for later “Father Baker Day” celebrations.

89 Ibid.

90 “Apostle of charity figures in Christmas Scene,” *CE*, 9 December 1940, 6; *Victorian* 47, no. 12 (1941): 28; Photograph, “Baker Christmas Scene,” PC, OLVA.


92 *Victorian* 48, no 7 (1942): cover.
Public memorials to Baker were also established after his death. Even though at the time of his death, his friends remarked that a monument on his grave would be “superfluous,” Bishop John A. Duffy (1937-1944) dedicated one in 1938 which was funded in part by the “Father Baker Memorial Fund” advertised in the Victorian. 93 Duffy commented that “Father Baker has built a more enduring monument in the hearts of millions of men, women and children,” implying that Baker’s work was more significant than any material tribute. 94 The relief sculpture on the white granite monument’s front was cut from the model of “the Infant Child and Our Lady of Victory, which Father Baker liked best during his lifetime” (Figure 4.12). 95 With its “shrine effect,” this monument looks like a simplified version of the original wayside OLV shrine. 96 Placing such a marker on Baker’s grave continues his efforts to make her image highly visible at the Institutes and pays tribute to his trust in Our Lady and promotion of her devotional community. This marker also serves as an important acknowledgement of Baker’s prominence in the diocese. As vicar general since 1903, Baker had given many individuals their canonical examination and communicated regularly with local religious communities regarding official, spiritual and even practical matters, such as garden fertilizer or the prices of water closets. 97

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95 Ibid., “Do you wish…,” 47.

96 Ibid.

97 NHB, Letter to Reverend Mother of the Blessed Sacrament, 4 February 1922, copy from Dominican Monastery Archives, Buffalo NY in OLVA; NHB, Letter to Mother M. St, John of the Cross, 1 June 1928, Carmelites Collection, OLVA.
The layout of other graves surrounding the marker suggest Baker’s importance among religious orders in the Buffalo diocese. Members of various religious orders are buried in a series of concentric circles around Baker’s monument, and each headstone is angled toward it. Visually, his grave is the head of the group, which symbolically acknowledges him as an important leader. Furthermore, until 1999, when Baker’s body was exhumed and moved to the basilica, this marker played a central role in yearly Father Baker Day celebrations. A radio broadcast of the third “Father Baker Day” in 1947 described the graveyard scene, stating, “it was not the monument which led to the reverence of those present, it was rather the grave,” suggesting that those present came to honor Baker more than OLV. However, a writer in the Victorian interprets the simplicity of the grave marker as another way that Baker posthumously continued “to give all credit to Our Lady of Victory.” Reports indicate that celebrants lingered behind after the ceremonies to kiss the headstone and that people took dirt from the grave to effect cures. People left flowers, coins, medals and prayer cards on it, and the graveyard’s superintendent, Ronald Paszek, reported seeing many people coming to the grave to pray, even in the snow. Presently, parish staff members still find offerings of money on it. When the headstone was desecrated by a vandal who wrote obscenities on it with black paint in 1996, a local business, Stone Art Memorials, donated their services to carefully restore the monument.

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101 Dave Condren, “Father Baker to be Moved to the Basilica,” BN, 1 August 1998, A7; Tom Ernst, “Father Baker’s Tombstone Will be Restored,” BN 1 November 1996, sec. A.

102 RW, interview.

103 Ernst.
affection local community members have for Baker as well as their devotion to him. Thus the grave and its memorial not only commemorate Baker, but also serve as a sacred site for his devotees.

Material and visual acknowledgements of Baker’s work also exist beyond the immediate vicinity of the Institutes. While signs announce street names like “Steelawanna” and “Bethlehem” on the northern side of Lackawanna acknowledge the steel plant, street signs to the south past the basilica have names like “Baker Ct.” and “Rosary Ave” indicate the influence of the Institutes history on the city’s layout. Indeed, in 1926, Revered Thomas Galvin suggested that the city of Buffalo rename Main Street “Baker Boulevard” or “Baker Avenue” after this public benefactor of Buffalo.104 And, immediately after Baker’s death, the local Lackawanna paper suggested renaming Ridge Road after Baker as a gesture of commemoration, a suggestion that recurred again in 2001.105

However, the most significant municipal tribute to Baker was when a public road bridge was named after him in 1961. The Father Baker Memorial Bridge, together with the Buffalo Skyway, connect Buffalo to Lackawanna. Initially, this bridge, which spanned a canal that serviced the Bethlehem Steel Plant, was to be named the Union Ship Canal Bridge. However, in 1960, Vincent. M. Gaughan, chairman of the Father Baker Memorial Committee, wrote to Governor Nelson A. Rockefeller in order to petition that the bridge be named after Baker.106 Rockefeller approved of the request and signed its bill, which included provisions for a bronze monument to Baker at the bridge’s southern

104 Galvin, Modern Apostle, 140, 139.


106 Vincent M. Gaughan, Letter to Governor Nelson A. Rockefeller, 18 August 1960, FBB folder, OLVA.
Gaughan also made arrangements for two green and white highway signs to announce the bridge’s namesake to motorists (Figure 4.13).

The context of the bridge’s dedication ceremony indicated that, besides being an important accomplishment for the Institutes, naming this bridge for Baker was also a local and national civic event. The ceremony coincided with the twenty-fifth anniversary of Baker’s death, both the Lackawanna and Buffalo mayors spoke, and representatives from the local Jewish and Episcopal communities attended. Both religious and secular authorities expressed respect and appreciation for Baker’s life and work. In addition, President John F. Kennedy sent a letter to the memorial committee which acknowledged Baker’s “vast contribution to the preservation and enrichment of human dignity” and commended the symbolic importance of naming a bridge that joins two cities after him. Because the condition of the original mile and a half high bridge had deteriorated greatly by the 1980s, the city replaced it with a lower and visually less impressive expanse in the early 90s. The new bridge retained the Father Baker name, and the community dedicated a new monument in 1991. As in the ceremony thirty years earlier, representatives from local religious communities and civic leaders attended to convey their admiration of Baker. Accordingly, as a municipal tribute to a religious figure, the bridge symbolizes how Baker’s reputation transcended divisions between religious and secular worlds.

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108 Vincent Gaughan, Letter to J. Burch McMorran, 5 April 1961, FBB folder, OLVA.
109 “Father Baker Monument to be Unveiled at Bridge,” BEN, 21 July 1961, 8.
110 John F. Kennedy, Letter to Vincent M. Gaughan, 7 August 1961, unsigned copy, FBB folder, OLVA.
111 “Dedication Ceremony Father Baker Memorial Bridge,” 6 September 1991, pamphlet, FBB folder, OLVA.
The Father Baker Memorial Rooms

The most comprehensive memorial to Baker, however, is located in the basement of the OLV basilica. The Father Baker Memorial Rooms are a museum space filled with artifacts from Baker’s life and were installed in 1941 along with an expanded gift shop facility. An ad from the Victorian at the time of its opening billed the museum and the “Father Baker Religious Arts Studio…one of the largest in the country” together. The ad describes the new store, adjoining “a replica of Father Baker’s living room,” as selling religious gifts for all occasions, service kits for “our soldiers and sailors in the armed services,” and various rosaries, medals, statues and framed Christian art. Together, these additions continue to offer visitors and pilgrims opportunities to obtain religious items for themselves or others and to gain glimpses into the life of Father Baker.

The opening of the Rooms coincided with closing ceremonies of a novena to Our Lady of Victory that included a procession around the basilica and a crowning of the main statue of OLV in the shrine by the school’s children. The original Rooms consisted of replicas of Baker’s bedroom and sitting room, which were arranged, “to approximate as closely as the possible the way they looked when Father Baker was living in them,” according to Monsignor Maguire. Originally, they were completely open to the public, with only a rope barrier. The first picture Baker owned of OLV hung over

112 “Secretary’s Record of The SPDRCC,” 58, OLVA.

113 Victorian 48, no. 7 (July 1942): inside back cover.

114 Van Eich, 33;

115 “Shrine to open Memorial to Padre of the Poor,” CE, 5 October 1941, RNHBS, 138, LHNA, BECPL; “Replica of Father Baker’s living quarters dedicated in new reliquary at the shrine of OLV” BEN, 6 October 1941, 8.

116 “Dedication to Honor Padre of the Poor,” BEN, 4 October 1941, RNHBS, 138, LHNA, BECPL.

117 Ruberto, 30.
his bed in his bedroom, and a large wall crucifix given to him by the Carmelites in Buffalo hung near it with a kneeler in front. Baker’s sitting room included a display of his “familiar black shawl.” An early photograph of the sitting room exhibit shows a desk and bookcases to the left, antique parlor chairs and lamp to the right, and Baker’s “black woolen shawl” with its “old horse blanket safety pin, familiar to many…still attached in the center back of the room displayed over some robes on a clothing stand.” Even though evidence suggests that the Rooms were arranged with care, anecdotal evidence demonstrates that items were not always treated with exacting reverence by children at the parish school. A basilica tour guide recalls that students devised a sorority initiation ritual that involved sneaking into Baker’s bedroom, putting on his slippers and jumping on his bed without getting caught.

Perhaps because of mischief like this and problems with theft, staff members eventually provided more security for items in the Rooms. By 1959, a cabinet with glass doors isolated a collection of various Father Baker artifacts from the public. The collection was disorganized and included “a baby picture, his biretta, the cloth that was used to bind his hands at ordination, a stole, [and] his roman collar.” In addition, a photograph indicates that the “horse blanket” safety pin, Baker’s slippers, a silver set and a small silver lead statue of OLV were also in the cabinet at this time. At least by the mid-1970s, perhaps earlier, the sitting room and bedroom exhibits were enclosed behind heavy locked wooden doors with windows through which visitors could look.

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118 “Dedication to Honor…”


120 “Points to remember from Ruth [Cullen’s] Tour,” OLVA; Ruberto, 30.


122 Ibid.

123 Ruberto, 30.
author notes that the Institutes decided to install this more durable barrier between viewers and Baker’s effects to prevent pilfering by relic seekers.\textsuperscript{124}

Besides increasing security measures, the staff also added more artifacts and images of Baker to the collections as time passed, many of which demonstrated high regard for Baker. An impressive large portrait of Baker done by Gonoppi Raggi, the basilicas muralist, was in the Rooms by 1959. Francis Van Eich or “Frankie Eich,” former Baker boy and director of the expanded gift shop and Rooms when they first opened, claimed this portrait was a work of love, for “Mr. Raggi was a great admirer of Father Baker.”\textsuperscript{125} There was also a 1934 line drawing of Baker by a local artist and popular character of Buffalo’s art district, Anthony Sisti.\textsuperscript{126} In addition, the Rooms came to include a collection of framed thank you notes to Baker and commendations of his work from various civic and religious organizations in the Lackawanna community.

The most unusual addition to the Rooms before the 1950s was a large off-white display case trimmed in gold paint to resemble a reliquary that contained “a wax death mask of Father Baker, prepared by one of the hospital doctors” (Figure 4.14).\textsuperscript{127} Death masks became popular in Europe, particularly in Germany, during the 1800s and were considered to be better than portraits, able to “transcribe the real thing” with three-dimensional representations of the deceased.\textsuperscript{128} An early photograph shows Baker’s

\textsuperscript{124} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{125} “Father Baker Memorial Rooms,” 8.

\textsuperscript{126} Well-known local artist Anthony J. Sisti (1901-1983), once a professional boxer, ran a gallery and art school from the 1930s to the 70s on Franklin Street in Buffalo’s Allentown art district. A sculpture park at the corner of Linwood Avenue and North Street in Buffalo is named for him. His portrait of Baker also appeared on the cover of a Buffalo newsweekly, \textit{Trend} 2, no. 10 (10 March 1934).

\textsuperscript{127} “Father Baker Memorial Rooms,” 10.

mask propped up and looking through a glass pane in the case. This display was in a highly visible position at the center of the sitting room where Baker’s shawl had originally been displayed. Displaying such a life-like representation of Baker in a case that is visually similar to a reliquary attaches a sense of sacredness to it and implies that it is a relic. The “reliquary” also had a large statue of Our Lady of Victory on top, visually uniting the impression of Baker’s face with his patron. Sometime after its addition, a light was added to the inside of the container to illuminate the mask. It remained the striking centerpiece of Baker’s sitting room throughout the second half of the 20th century and was a visual reminder of popular sentiment regarding Baker’s holiness.

At the time the diocese began Baker’s cause in 1987, the museum consisted of four small rooms connected by a short hallway. The two middle rooms were the replicas of Baker living quarters, and the front and back rooms held display cases of artifacts. The displays primarily contained historical artifacts related to a respected local hero, yet the museum itself had particular characteristics that created some ambiguity about its purpose and contents. The artifacts were displayed in indistinct categories. The museum had little overall narrative focus. Displays were targeted at viewers who were already familiar with Baker, and certain features implied that the Rooms were a Catholic devotional space.

In the front room, a large display case contained an assortment of Father Baker’s effects and appeared to be targeted at an audience familiar with Baker. The overall case was framed by two shelves that contained photographs of Father Baker. The upper left shelf had a collection of “Portraits of Father Baker” displayed in the kind of frame family pictures are often displayed in, which effectively presented Father Baker as “part of the family.” In fact, the pictures were arranged in the way a grandmother might arrange the

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129 Ibid.
photographs of grandchildren she receives in the mail by placing them where they fit (Figure 4.15). The bottom right shelf displayed an edition of the *Courier Express* that reported Father Baker’s death on the front page. A photograph of him was in the newspaper article when he was alive, but a complimentary photograph of him in his coffin was placed on top of the newspaper (Figure 4.16). This picture of Baker’s bier which thousands of mourners had viewed in 1936 recalled the historic local event for visitors to the museum who could re-enact and remember it by viewing this photograph.

Without a clear narrative scheme, the meanings and histories of some of the artifacts in this case were unclear, which created conditions for viewers to make their own inferences about certain items and further suggested that the museum was primarily for a local audience familiar with Baker. Although efforts had been made to label some of the items in the museum, especially those that would not be self explanatory, many items throughout the museum remained unidentified. For example, on one shelf were items Baker might have used daily such as a grooming set, a pen, a calendar, a pair of eyeglasses, made by Zilliox Optical Co., and a handwritten letter from Baker on OLV stationary. None of these items were labeled. Baker’s “horse blanket” safety pin sat, unlabeled, on another shelf next to a stack of liturgical prayer books and above a photograph of Baker surrounded by images of the infant home and Institutes (Figure 4.17). The only labeled items on this shelf was the books or “breviaries,” items which could not be easily identified. On another shelf, A picture of Baker’s mother stood next to a silver serving set and letter from a Baker relative. The only thing labeled on this shelf was the silver serving set to explain that Baker, with his vow of poverty, owned this expensive item because it was a gift. Nothing, however, was labeled on the shelf that displayed the photograph of Baker in his casket.

130 Personal Letter, D.S. to RW, 24 March 1988, FBGRC, OLVA.
Even some displays that appeared to be fully structured were not because they contained odd items that did not fit the apparent organizational scheme, which created the possibility for visitors to speculate about some of these items. For example, one shelf in the front room cabinet contained only items of clothing labeled, “Clothing as a monsignor: a monsignor at the time wore the color purple, a berretta (hat), habat [sic] and collar, stockings and ceremonial shoes.” Additional pieces of ceremonial clothing were on the shelf above this one and were also labeled. However, the small metal OLV statue that appears in a 1959 photo of the cabinet sat, unidentified, near these items (Figure 4.18). Given the popular and frequently repeated stories of Baker’s life in parish publications and regional oral history, inferences about items like this one could be based on these legendary accounts. Indeed, a group of four unguided visitors in 1999 discussed at length the possibility of that led statue being the one Baker put in the ground to indicate to workers where to drill to find the Victoria gas well.131

Furthermore, although the museum did not explicitly promote Baker’s sanctity or refer to his candidacy for sainthood, some of its characteristics created conditions in which visitors could make assumptions about the holiness of the its contents. Verbal and visual cues implied that items in the museum were holy relics ad that Catholic devotional activities could be performed there. Some parish publications and communications stated that the museum was located in the basilica’s “crypt,” a word that connotes sanctity since it can refer to tombs built under churches to house martyrs’ relics.132 In the bedroom and sitting room replicas, dim lighting cast a reddish hue, making it difficult to closely view their contents and creating an atmosphere of reverence, especially since the death mask in its “reliquary” remained the sitting room’s centerpiece and was the brightest object in the

131 Author’s fieldwork notes, April 1999.

132 Pytak, 9; RW, Email to author, 9 December 1999.
room. Viewed in context with the photograph of his funeral bier, this ghostly impression of Baker’s face offered a substitution for his real presence. Images of Our Lady of Victory were also prominent throughout the museum, adding to the devotional atmosphere. OLV statues were the central objects in both Baker’s sitting room and bedroom. And it in the corner of the back room that contained displays about the basilica, there was a life-sized OLV statue with a kneeler, indicating that people could use this place for prayer. Placing Our Lady in the Rooms acknowledged her historical importance to the Institutes, but in context of the tradition of devotion to her at the basilica, it also encouraged devotional practices within this space. And, by physical proximity and association, it also amplified the sense of sanctity of Baker’s belongings.

And even if viewers did not feel the objects were particularly sacred, enclosing items in the museum to protect them from the public also suggested that they were at least special enough to warrant these security measures. By the 1980s, deterrence stickers on every glass barrier that read “Warning. These premises protected by video surveillance system, indicated that the objects were even valuable enough to require high-tech protection” (See Figure 4.18). Further, museums can be conceptualized as mediated liminal spaces which foster ritual-like experiences and aesthetic contemplation.133 Given the larger local historical framework in which people petitioned Baker for favors through items that touched his body or belonged to him and local claims of Father Baker miracles, it is likely that some viewed objects in the museum as sacred, even before Rome’s approval of Baker’s cause, though this approval certainly helped affirm the Rooms potential to function as a Catholic devotional site.

There is evidence that some people did, indeed, view objects in the Rooms as sacred relics or items through which Father Baker could be contacted. One woman recalls

being told by others at Villa Maria Academy that their prayers would be answered to cure her of polio if she touched Father Baker’s bed, and she believes that doing so did help cure her. Some refer to the museum as Father Baker’s shrine. And, devotees shoved petitions for favors into the exhibitions of Baker’s bedroom and sitting room under the heavy wooden doors that divided the exhibits from the public. Accordingly, like the marker on Baker’s grave, this site took on an additional layer of meaning because people treated it with reverence. Thus, this memorial did indeed function as a devotional site for his followers.

**Our Lady of Victory and Father Baker**

The development of devotion to Father Baker is intertwined with the history of devotion to Our Lady of Victory. Because Baker had placed the Institutes under Our Lady of Victory’s patronage, established the Association of Our Lady of Victory, and helped nourish her devotional community with various activities and efforts, official devotional activities at the Institutes centered around her during Baker’s time as superintendent. Baker himself consistently attributed the success of his work to her. In thanking the community for celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of his ordination, Baker stated, “They call me the wonderworker. I am not, here is the wonderworker,” and pointed to a statue of Our Lady. In his last will and testament, Baker thanks God for

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134 Personal Letter, I.C. to RW, 25 October 1987, FBGRC, OLVA.
135 Anderson, 103.
136 RW, interview; Timothy Allen, interview, 29 July 2003.
137 “Father Baker Celebrates Fiftieth Anniversary As Priest in Catholic Church,” *BCE*, 5 April 1926, RNHBS, 7, LHNA, BECPL; “Monsignor Baker celebrates 50th Anniversary as a Priest,” *BEN*, 5 April 1926, RNHBS, 8, LHNA, BECPL.
blessing him with favors throughout his life, “especially the marvelous gifts he has bestowed through the intercession of Our Blessed Lady of Victory.” Baker modeled Marian piety for the community, and anecdotal evidence suggests that people emulated his method of attributing temporal successes to OLV and continue to do so. A financial report prepared for the Institutes board members seven years before Baker’s death reveals the Institutes characteristic reliance on Our Lady, stating that “in matters that do not belong strictly to our report, we depend on her [OLV] in every circumstance.” And, in 1988, one woman recalled praying to OLV for her grandson’s injury. When the grandson recovered he said, “Gramma’s done it again,” and she corrected him, “It wasn’t gramma. It was Our Lady.”

Baker’s legacy of trust in Our Lady has been retained by efforts to preserve the prominence of her representations at the Institutes and in the community. When a six foot high statue of OLV that overlooked the protectory’s play yard had to be removed for repairs, it became the centerpiece of the May Day crowning of Mary rallies to pray for the “preservation of peace and victory over Communism” at the Buffalo Civic Stadium from 1948 to 1952. For the 1949 rally, members of the OLV community placed the statue on the back of a decorated truck and formed a procession of vehicles to accompany her through the streets from the Shrine to the stadium. Because many believed Baker had blessed the statue and that it was one of his favorites, during both rallies, participants

138 NHB and Charles Leo O’Connor, “First Codicil: Last Will and Testament,” 7 July 1922, OLVA.

139 “Supplementary Report of the SPDRCC,” 12 November 1929, 11, OLVA.

140 Personal Letter, M.W. to RW, 12 February 1988, FBGRC, OLVA.

141 “Buffalo Honors Our Lady of Victory,” Victorian 55, no. 6 (1949): 30-31; “Famed Statue will be Focal Point of Rally,” BCE, 30 April 1952, 17.

swarmed the statue after the exercises to touch it and pray before it in order to participate in his special relationship with her. One organizer of the event commented, “The statue made a big hit traveling through the streets with citizens staring, mouths wide open, what the______?”

In 1959, when Monsignor McPherson suggested demolishing the sizeable protectory building, he was concerned that removing the “heroic statue of OLV which has, for a long time, dominated the skyline of Lackawanna and South Buffalo” might be associated with the passing of an era which belongs to the late Father Baker, or even misunderstood or exaggerated as a symbol of the cessation of his works. McPherson suggested that the “celebrated statue” be relocated to a place of honor on the grounds. By the 1960s, it was the centerpiece of a garden walkway next to the St. Joseph’s Orphanage building on the corner of Ridge Road and South Park Avenue (Figure 4.19). In 1972, the infant home remodeled its first floor to include a new OLV chapel with liturgical style art and architecture. This chapel was to “depict the special dedication of the institution to the needs of children and to reflect the ever-present patronage of Our Lady of Victory.” Besides symbols of the Eucharist and Our Lady, the chapel’s altar had carved on it “favorite verses that guided Father Baker in his service to Our Lady” such as, “She did it all” and “She will provide.”

Representations of Our Lady of Victory which remain omnipresent on the grounds help perpetuate her devotional following, along with six yearly novenas to her

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143 RD, Letter to Marion Grimes, 15 October 1981, RDC, OLVA.


145 Ibid.

146 “Our Lady’s New Chapel” pamphlet, circa 1974, OLVA.

147 Ibid.
and daily masses for Association members’ intentions.\textsuperscript{148} A strikingly displayed OLV statue greets visitors to the infant home building. In the grade school, a statue of her has its own corner in the first floor hallway, and students compete each year for the opportunity to be photographed with her for the yearbook.\textsuperscript{149} Most of the buildings still have statues of her above entrances, even the utility building behind the grade school. The gift shop is filled with OLV items including rosaries, medals, pictures, prayer and novena cards, and OLV rosaries are among the most popular items sold.\textsuperscript{150} One woman expressed anger, disappointment and sadness upon discovering that a large OLV statue in the basilica’s basement that she had been visiting for the last twenty years was replaced by a Coke machine. This suggests that some visitors have come to depend on her presence on the grounds for their devotional activities.\textsuperscript{151}

Further, many offices at the Institutes contain small OLV statues, personal collections of historical OLV artifacts, or OLV items passed down to newer staff from previous employees, and some staff members rely on these items to express their own Marian devotion, modeling their piety after Baker’s. Sister Ellen O’Keefe, current principal of the grade school, places raffle tickets under her statue and was disappointed when the beautiful glass doors engraved with OLV that were being moved from the high school to her cafeteria broke and had to be replaced with doors that had less impressive engravings.\textsuperscript{152} Monsignor Robert C. Wurtz, the current superintendent, carried a small statue of OLV in his pocket at all times until he lost it.\textsuperscript{153} His mother knew of Baker and

\textsuperscript{148} RW, interview.

\textsuperscript{149} O’Keefe, interview.

\textsuperscript{150} Author’s fieldwork notes, Father Baker Day, July 25, 2004.

\textsuperscript{151} Author’s fieldwork notes, July 2004.

\textsuperscript{152} O’Keefe, interview.

\textsuperscript{153} RW, interview.
contributed to his charities, and his father received an OLV statue for his work at the church.154 Wurtz currently has an extensive personal collection of OLV statues, and some parishioners have expressed admiration of his devotion to her.155

Although portraits of Baker were already a familiar item around the Institutes, since the introduction of his cause, visual and material reminders of his life and work have become nearly as ubiquitous as reminders of OLV’s patronage. However, the interconnectedness of devotion to Our Lady and devotion to Baker is frequently expressed in how Baker’s representations appear. The most significant material addition to the basilica was a new marble crypt for Baker’s body (Figure 4.20). Unlike his grave stone marker and the Father Baker Memorial Rooms, which were originally established as memorials but came to be used for devotional purposes, this crypt was built specifically to encourage devotion to him. In July 1998, the Vatican authorized the transfer of Baker’s body to the basilica so that people would have easier access to him to pray for miracles, and the diocese exhumed his body in March 1999. Devotees filed past the newly unearthed casket, and, echoing the thousands at his funeral, touched religious mementos to it.156 Unlike the altar for Saint Elizabeth Anne Seton’s body at her National Shrine in Emmitsburg, Maryland, Baker’s remains do not have their own altar. Instead, they are on the Our Lady of Lourdes altar. Moreover, Baker’s new marble tomb has the prayer of Our Lady of Victory inscribed on its side. Presenting Baker’s body in this way simultaneously encourages Father Baker devotional activities, honors Baker’s Marian piety and incorporates the Marian devotion already existing at the shrine. Baker, effectively, remains under her auspices.


155 Downy; Cook; Mancuso.

As the center of devotional attention to Baker, the crypt offers a new focal point for “Father Baker Day” celebrations, and pilgrims and visitors to the basilica often pray in front of both the main OLV altar and Baker’s crypt. Although devotion to OLV remains strong at the basilica, devotees treat Baker’s remains more informally than they do representations of OLV. Since only a red rope divides his crypt from the public, devotees have easy access to it. Many express physical affection for Baker by touching the crypt, laying their heads on it, or kissing their hands before touching it. A sign asks people not to place things on top of the crypt, otherwise, according to Monsignor Wurtz, it would be covered with pictures and tokens. Devotees even come to pay respects to Baker during private funerals and weddings in the basilica, indicating a strong dedication to him that is not impeded by decorum. These kinds of activities are not as evident at the Seton shrine, for a marble banister prevents the devoted from coming in contact with her crypt which is set back in an alcove, and docents keep a close eye on visitors. The familiarity with which devotees treat Baker’s remains indicates that people feel emotionally close to the “Padre of the Poor” and view him as an approachable personal saint. As anecdotal evidence demonstrates, he always had time for anyone’s requests or concerns during his life. A collection of Baker’s small notebooks with the lists of thousands of names of those who requested prayers demonstrates his meticulous

158 RW, interview.
159 Author’s fieldwork notes, Seton Shrine, August 2003.
attention others’ needs. And now, though many believe he is with God, devotees treat his remains as if he can still provide that individualized attention.

Images of Baker also appear in the shrine. Small tables at each entranceway display Father Baker prayer cards and a clipboard with a note asking visitors to sign petition sheets for his canonization. Although these displays emphasize Baker’s cause, they do not neglect the tradition of OLV devotion at the shrine or the basilica as an architectural attraction and pilgrimage center. They also include OLV prayer and novena cards, as well as basilica pamphlets. In addition, one of Baker’s prayer cards makes it clear that his canonization depends on the intercession of Our Lady of Victory and God’s will, stating “We pray through the intercession of Our Lady of Victory, if it be your will, that your servant, Nelson H. Baker, may one day be canonized.” By displaying Baker and OLV devotional items together and placing Baker’s cause for sainthood under her patronage, the diocese retains Baker’s original purpose for the shrine and maintains OLV’s devotional following, regardless of pious enthusiasm for Baker.

Devotion to Baker is, in part, an extension of devotion to Our Lady of Victory and has resulted in variety of visual and material expressions that are, by and large, produced and distributed by the outfits originally developed by Baker to support the devotional practices of OLV’s followers. Although the Institutes did not explicitly promote devotion to Baker by memorializing him in various forms of material history, these items did create conditions that fostered the development of his devotional cult. As devotion to Baker grew, particular items and sites were no longer just memorabilia or tributes to a important historical figure; they became sacred objects and places and were treated as such. Thus, individual devotional practices and the changing needs and desires of the community transformed the meanings of these items and provided them with a

161 Notebook collection, OLVA and Father Baker Memorial Rooms.
performative quality as they came to represent not just Father Baker the respected local icon, but Father Baker the revered saint and intercessor. Further, with the introduction of Baker’s cause in 1987 and the new practices encouraged by this event, the devotional significance of existing items became increasingly magnified, and more material history was created.
Figure 4.1 Our Lady of Victory wayside shrine
Figure 4.2 Shrine fundraising ad

Source: *Annals* 36, no. 2 (1923): 2. Courtesy of OLV Institutions, Lackawanna, N.Y.
Figure 4.3 Our Lady of Victory Basilica and National Shrine
Figure 4.4 Statue of Father Baker on left portico of basilica
Figure 4.5 Death card for the Reverend Nelson H. Baker

Source: OLVA. Courtesy of OLV Institutions, Lackawanna, N.Y.
Figure 4.6 Relic from Father Baker’s cassock

Source: OLVA. Courtesy of OLV Institutions, Lackawanna, N.Y.
Figure 4.7 Commemorative statue of Father Baker
Figure 4.8 Etching of Father Baker with printed signature

Source: OLVA. Courtesy of OLV Institutions, Lackawanna, N.Y.
Figure 4.9 Our Lady of Victory plaque blessed by Father Baker
Figure 4.10 “Padre of the Poor” in memoriam medal
Figure 4.11 Cut-out of Father Baker with children

Source: *Victorian* 48, no. 7 (1942): cover. Courtesy of OLV Institutions, Lackawanna, N.Y.
Figure 4.12 Memorial at Father Baker’s gravesite
Figure 4.13 Father Baker Memorial Bridge highway marker
Figure 4.14 Death mask of Father Baker display in replica of sitting room, Father Baker Memorial Rooms, 1999
Figure 4.15 Portraits in frame, Father Baker Memorial Rooms, 1999
Figure 4.6  Death of Father Baker display, Father Baker Memorial Rooms, 1999
Figure 4.17 "Horse blanket" safety pin, Father Baker Memorial Rooms, 1999
Figure 4.18  Metal or lead OLV statue near clothing items, Father Baker Memorial Rooms, 1999
Figure 4.19 OLV statue from cupola on St. John’s Protectory building
Figure 4.20 Marble tomb for Father Baker in basilica
In 1989, a mother who had placed her boys in St. Joseph’s Orphanage for six “long heart breaking years” sent the Institutes money to help canonize Father Baker. She included a photograph of an altar to Father Baker he had in her home that one of her sons helped her make.\(^1\) An 8” x 10” of Baker’s popular head-shot photograph served as the altar’s centerpiece. It was surrounded by candles and several religious statues, including a large white statue of Mary and a bust of the suffering Christ. In the accompanying letter, she told a story about how Baker cured one of her son’s muteness, adding, “I believe that he should have been a saint years ago.”\(^2\) By creating her altar, this mother enacted a devotional practice with a material result. By photographing and sending an image of it to the Institutes with her story she also participated in the process of making Baker a saint by contributing to the repository of materials collected to support his candidacy. After Baker’s cause began, the diocese and Institutes received thousands of donations like this to support Baker’s candidacy. These donations compose a substantial portion of the items about Father Baker created since 1987.

The flow of materials related to Father Baker peaked between the time of his death and the 1960s, but they slacked off in the twenty years before the Buffalo diocese introduced his cause. However, Robert K. Doran, a devotee of Father Baker and former editor of the *Victorian* magazine, continued to promote Baker during this time until he died in 1981. In particular, his efforts provide a vivid case study of how the creation of various Father Baker materials is a type of devotional practice. Moreover, selected samples from the thousands of archival donations received by the Institutes between 1987

\(^1\) Personal Letters, A.L. to RW, 3 January 1988; H.L. to RW, 28 May 1989, FBGRC, OLVA.

\(^2\) Ibid.
and 2003 demonstrate how individual devotion to Baker could be expressed by making something to help Baker’s candidacy. Doran’s efforts and many of the archival donations are creative acts inspired by personal feelings about Baker’s sanctity or some form of regard for him. These practices are directed at the goal of achieving his sainthood. As such, they offer evidence of contemporary productive devotional practices and result in visual, material, printed or written expressions that establish a body of materials to support his cause. Further, they provide supportive materials the diocese can use to support Baker’s canonization, thus making Baker’s cause a collaborative effort between the laity and hierarchy.

Robert K. Doran: Father Baker’s Promotional Visionary

Shortly after Baker’s death, an increasing number of Buffalo-area Catholics felt his cause for canonization should be introduced, and members of the Victorian staff began to collect materials with this goal in mind. Despite Baker’s popular appeal as a figure of devotion and rumors of his canonization, promoting his cause was not one of the Institutes’ priorities. One 1940s Victorian reader commented that the cause must have been “cancelled as we heard no more about [it].” Evidence suggests that Baker’s cause was considered important, yet it was overshadowed by more immediate financial and practical concerns. Baker’s successor, Monsignor Joseph E. Maguire often expressed hope for Baker’s eventual canonization. However, he had to put most of his energy and resources into reorganizing the Institutes after Baker’s death. Bishop John F. O’Hara (1945-1951) expressed interest in the cause, but felt it would be sensible to wait longer

4 Personal Letter, M.M. to RW, 30 November 1987, FBGRC, OLVA.
6 George Smith, interview by WK, 11 April 1989, 6, OLVA.
than twelve or thirteen years after Baker’s death to initiate it. O’Hara’s decision makes sense in light of Rome’s guidelines for initiating a cause. There must be evidence that a candidate’s reputation for holiness endures among the people and is not just a passing phase immediately following a local icon’s death. Monsignor Joseph McPherson, the Institutes’ general manager from 1949 to 1979, reportedly spoke of Baker’s cause on many occasions, took pleasure in retracing his steps at the Basilique de Notre-Dame des Victoires in Paris, commissioned Floyd Anderson’s *Father Baker*, and named cottages of the Baker Hall program after Baker. However, he also did not want to initiate the cause too early and was concerned that the Institutes did not have sufficient personnel or funds to support it. McPherson’s approach of honoring Baker where possible, but using existing resources for day to day maintenance and services represents the prevalent attitude toward Baker’s cause until the mid-1980s.

Although the Institutes did not choose to initiate a cause for fifty years after Baker’s death, there are indications that in the 1970s some thought he already was a candidate for sainthood, and his canonization was a particularly important goal to one-time Victorian editor Robert K. Doran. Despite leaving his staff position in 1957, he remained a loyal Father Baker devotee and continued to promote Baker’s life and works until he died in 1981. Doran was born in Attica, New York in 1901, was an alumni of Canisius College, and spent much of the 1920s and 30s doing public relations work and writing for business journals in Buffalo. He was also a musician and composer, played

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7 RD, Letter to RW, 3 October 1980, RDC, OLVA.


9 William J. Lang, “My recollections of Msgr. McPherson and his attitudes relative to initiating the cause for the sanctity of Father Baker,” 18 June 1991, 3-4, WKC, OLVA.

the piano, and ran a music studio. Among his musical scores was “Boost Buffalo,” a song that Buffalo used as its official theme during the 20s, and “Georgia Noon,” his personal favorite. As president of the Holy Name Society for Annunciation church in Buffalo for much of his life, he lectured on religious topics to members every Sunday. Doran’s story of how he came to work at the Institutes has mysterious overtones. He claimed that he had no knowledge of Baker or his work prior to leaving work early one day in 1939 and finding himself on bus headed for Lackawanna. “I just don’t know why I went out to Lackawanna on that particular morning,” he wrote. His unplanned journey ended in Monsignor Maguire’s office where he offered his services as a volunteer. After three or four months, Maguire gave him a full-time salaried position head of public relations and editor of the *Victorian* magazine.

Doran considered promoting Baker’s life and works an integral part of his new position at the Institutes. Besides working with the diocese to establish Father Baker Day, influencing the *Victorian* to increase its Father Baker coverage, and advancing Baker’s sanctity and devotion to him through the magazine, he presented himself as an expert on Father Baker. During the early 1950s he gave over one hundred talks “interspersed with the showing of wonderful graphic photographs of the late Msgr. Nelson Baker” to various organizations in several states. A later employee of the Institutes even assumed he had

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12 Ibid; “Robert K. Doran Dies…”

13 RD, Letter to Most Rev. Edward Head, 8 August 1978, RDC, OLVA. According to his son, Doran did have a sister who was a Sister of Saint Joseph in Buffalo and Sister Scholastica, who worked at the Institutes, was also in the family. This suggests he might have known something about Baker’s work through his family, but his arrival in Lackawanna is more compelling if he was just drawn there, as he claims.

14 Ibid.

been one of Baker’s friends, which suggests that Doran projected the appearance of being a first-hand witness to events in Baker’s life.\textsuperscript{16} His enthusiasm for Baker resulted in some instances of overgeneralization. For example, in some of his \textit{Victorian} pieces, he readily and openly attributed all of the writing in the \textit{Annals} to Baker even though the diverse styles of the articles indicate they were probably written by several different authors.\textsuperscript{17} Doran also worked on a biography of Baker during his time as editor, but it was unfortunately lost in a flood during the early 1940s.\textsuperscript{18}

Several incidents fueled Doran’s enthusiasm for Baker during the 1940s. Later in that decade, Bishop O’Hara, who Doran claims “treated him like a son,” presented him with two scrapbooks, one of which was a collection of articles about Baker’s death and funeral.\textsuperscript{19} Also, for Doran’s birthday in August 1946, a prison inmate in Jackson Michigan sent him a surprise birthday present—an oil painting copied from Baker’s popular head-shot photograph. Doran wrote that the \textit{Victorian} received many submissions from journalism schools in state prisons throughout the country, and prisoners were paid a “fair rate” for articles accepted for publication.\textsuperscript{23} One of the leading imprisoned journalists requested a photograph of Baker writing, as Doran recalled, “in the cell next to me is a man I regard as the best painter in the country—he’ll never leave prison. I’ll ask him to do a painting of your idol and send it to you in time for your birthday.”\textsuperscript{24} Doran never discovered the name of the artist, but this painting became a widespread version of the popular Baker image (Figure 5.1).

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{16} William Kessel, “From Protectory to Baker Hall,” 2, OLVA.
\item \textsuperscript{17} WK, “Note on Published Material Openly Attributed to Father Baker when this Material was Reprinted” in Father Nelson H. Baker’s Published Writings Collection, Ed. RW. OLVA. See also, RD, See also RD, “111 Years Ago this month,” \textit{Victorian} 58, no. 2 (February 1952): 51; RD, “Father Baker’s Year of Anniversaries,” 62, no. 1 (January 1956): 50-55.
\item \textsuperscript{18} Joan E. Given, “Father Baker has a Boswell,” \textit{BCE}, 14 February 1975, 70.
\end{itemize}
In July 1947 a few days before Father Baker Day, Doran arranged for this portrait to appear on the front cover of the Buffalo Courier Express’s “Pictorial” magazine in context of a photo essay about the Institutes.\(^{20}\) The Victorian staff sent copies of this magazine and Doran’s account of how he received the painting to regular donors. In December 1947, the Victorian printed a number of positive reactions to the painting which expressed its unique appeal. One letter writer wondered how a person who “painted with such tenderness” could “end up in jail.”\(^{21}\) Another wrote, “The painting of the saintly Padre stirred us to pray to him and you may feel very proud to have been honored with this portrait as a birthday gift.”\(^{22}\) This “prisoner’s portrait” also appeared on the cover of the Western New York Catholic Visitor in 1987 which announced Baker’s candidacy for sainthood.\(^{23}\) Currently, it appears on the prayer cards for Baker’s cause. After receiving a card in the mail, one woman wrote that she and her mother have the same picture of Baker, “who has been our saint all the years I can remember,” on display in their homes.\(^{24}\) Moreover, this version of the popular Baker portrait appears on current Father Baker memorabilia, including visor clips, pill boxes and t-shirts.\(^{25}\) One of Doran’s sons presently has the painting in his home.\(^{26}\)

After leaving the Victorian, Doran returned to general public relations work, but he remained a strong advocate of Father Baker. He continued to give talks about the

\(^{20}\) “Pictorial,” Buffalo Courier Express, 27 July 1947, cover.


\(^{22}\) Ibid.

\(^{23}\) WNYCV 116, no. 11 (1987); cover.

\(^{24}\) Personal Letter, B.M. to RW, 13 July 1988, FBGRC, OLVA.

\(^{25}\) Doran, “Portrait…”

\(^{26}\) Doran Jr., interview.
priest, and when he learned about plans to change the Victorian from a nationally distributed family magazine into a small magazine for donors, he wrote a ten page nostalgic letter to the bishop of Buffalo in 1964 objecting to the change. Doran’s letter expressed his deep admiration for Baker, lamented that the magazine had not focused on Father Baker in the last eight years, instructed the bishop about the importance of Baker’s life, quoted from Baker’s diary, and offered a list of practical suggestions for how to retain the magazine in its current form. Believing that “Our Lady wants Father Baker…memorialized for all time through the printed word,” Doran felt that the proposed changes would cause the magazine to miss ”the golden opportunity of keeping Father Baker and his tremendous spiritual personality alive in the hearts of men…for all time.”

Accordingly, the “main point” of his letter was to “suggest suitable and appropriate content” for the new magazine. Doran recommended that it be “devoted predominantly” to “spreading devotion to Our Lady of Victory, how Our Lady helped Father Baker,” and “how she will help you,” as well as to reporting about “Father Baker, his life, works, thoughts, [and] aspirations.”

Doran’s well-intended protest had no effect on the Victorian’s transformation, nor was he able to encourage it to cover Baker’s life and works with the same enthusiasm it had under his editorship. Doran, nevertheless, retained a commitment to researching Baker’s life. He wrote several articles for local newspapers and received warm responses from readers who recounted their experiences with Baker. In a 1975 interview he

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28 Ibid., 2.

29 Ibid.

reiterated his concerns about Baker’s fading popularity: “I am convinced that people are beginning to forget this great man and his works of charity.”

Doran also promoted Baker’s life as a good model for today’s youth and sought to rekindle interest in him by giving additional lectures. Doran’s 1970s talks relied on well-known stories of Baker and the fictionalized account of Baker’s visit to the OLV shrine in Paris that he previously had written for the *Victorian*. Doran continued to research Baker throughout the 70s, collecting materials from various people and sources, visiting Gonoppi Raggi, the basilica’s artist, in Orange, New Jersey, and requesting information from the Basilique de Notre-Dame des Victoire. Convinced he was gathering information for Baker’s cause, he assured one correspondent that her letters would “play a real big part” when Baker was canonized. His papers contain evidence that he was researching other American candidates for sainthood as well, including Mother Marianne Cope and the Jesuit missionary, Father Eusebio Francisco Kino.

Doran eventually wrote an incomplete manuscript about Baker’s life sometime in the 1970s. His version of Baker’s life ends in 1891 with the episode of the Victoria gas well. In the preface, Doran states that he intends to have a number of qualified people

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1975; Mrs. Colin McDonald, Letter to RD, 4 January 1976; Margaret Schneidel, Letter to RD, 15 December 1975; Margaret O’Shea, Letter to RD, 16 December 1975, RDC, OLVA.

31 Given.

32 Ibid.


35 RD, Letter to Sister Mary Margaret Sullivan, 29 March 1976, RDC, OLVA; Article Collection re: Causes, circa 1975-1977, RDC, OLVA.
read his draft, check the material and offer “frank comment” where needed.\textsuperscript{36} He also offers to gladly “relinquish [his] notes and this work to someone who can demonstrably write a better book,” which suggests that he sincerely wanted Baker’s story to be well-written.\textsuperscript{37} Entitled \textit{The Unconquerable}, Doran’s biography of Father Baker is written in a fictional style, “in line with the more successful biographies today.” Though he claims that first few chapters present what “reasonably” might have happened in Baker’s early life since little is known of Baker prior to his seminary days, Doran generally took great liberties with the known facts and added many creative details.\textsuperscript{38}

While the manuscript does present some historically accurate information, particularly in Doran’s treatment of the orphanage’s beginnings under Bishop Timon, \textit{The Unconquerable} predominantly reveals Doran’s deeply felt affectionate understanding of Baker’s iconic personality. Doran develops Baker’s character as a novelist would by describing imagined scenes which reveal his dominant traits. Although Floyd Anderson had used a fictional style in his book, he did not stray from the traditional stories about Baker, basing his embellishments on research and interviews. Doran’s storytelling, on the other hand, is more innovative and contains scenes for which there is little or no historical evidence. Writing in a gripping and dramatic style characteristic of many Catholic devotional biographies, he portrays Baker as a unique, charming and caring individual capable of convincing anyone to consider his point of view or help with his charities.

Several episodes demonstrate Doran’s method of characterization. He adds a revealing scene to Baker’s 1874 trip to Paris that foreshadows his work with orphans and reveals his unrelenting drive. According to Doran’s manuscript, Baker sees some

\textsuperscript{36} RD, “Author’s Notes,” \textit{The Unconquerable}, unpublished manuscript, 1, courtesy of Robert K. Doran Jr.

\textsuperscript{37} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid.
orphaned children in the streets of Paris being abused by a man who is going to send them to work on farms in the country. Baker subsequently tries to meet with the local Cardinal about the matter but is thwarted by an indisposed and reluctant assistant. Baker eventually wins over the assistant only to be met with a hardened and apathetic Cardinal. After lecturing the Cardinal about the duty of church officials to protect the helpless, Baker convinces him to look into the situation.\textsuperscript{39} Doran develops Baker’s charm in another episode set in 1882 when he first became superintendent. With just fifteen cents in his pocket, Baker captivates the Institutes’ creditors by joking and chatting with them. Not only do the creditors allow him more time to pay the bills, but they also offer him additional services free of charge.\textsuperscript{40} Because of these and other elaborations, Doran’s Father Baker is primarily a fictional character modified according to Doran’s creative impulses and personal perceptions. However, since his depiction effectively corresponds to Baker’s true-to-life reputation, Doran’s enthusiastic personal attempt to understand and relay Baker’s personality is a fairly successful, though private one. There is little evidence to suggest that \textit{The Unconquerable} was widely read by others.

Because Doran “thoroughly believe[d]” that Father Baker would be “canonized our first American-born male saint,” he developed plans to promote Baker during the 1970s and early 80s and shared his ideas with personnel at the Institutes. One of his ideas was a “25 year plan” to “promote this truly great man and his various properties and works of charity.”\textsuperscript{41} His proposal included a substantial reorganization of the business and residential areas around the Institutes and the relocation of Baker’s body to a new area in the basilica so that he could be more accessible to the public.\textsuperscript{42} It also included a

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item RD, “Chapter 6: Notre Dame Des Victories,” \textit{The Unconquerable}.
\item RD, “Chapter 10: The Bishop Decides,” \textit{The Unconquerable}.
\item RD, Letter to William J. McGuire, 28 April 1978, RDC, OLVA.
\item Ibid.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
huge Father Baker memorial building that would cover “the equivalent of one city block…midway between the Basilica and Niagara Falls.”\footnote{RD, Letter to William J. McGuire, 27 January 1976, RDC, OLVA.} Doran thought this memorial building should be both an informational Father Baker center and a devotional space. His plans included a giant statue of Baker surrounded by orphans, a replica of the basilica, pictures from the milestones in Baker’s life, recreations of Baker’s sitting room and office, and stations of the cross. Doran suggested that money for the complex be raised by targeting the Institute’s thousands of donors with a national fund-raising drive, a method similar to Baker’s for financing the basilica’s construction.\footnote{Ibid. Doran’s plans for a huge facility are not a unique response to Catholic sainthood. A 21,000 square feet museum and cultural center for Padre Pio opened recently in Barto, Pennsylvania. This facility will house replicas of seven different buildings in Italy which represent different phases in Padre Pio’s life. Pio was canonized in 2002. See http://www.padrepio.org.} Even though these particular plans were too elaborate to be undertaken at the time, the Institutes recognized Doran’s dedication to Baker. He and his wife were invited to carry the gifts to the altar during the 1979 Father Baker Day mass, an honor they “cherish[ed] greatly.”\footnote{RD, Letter to RW, 26 July 1979, RDC, OLVA.}

Despite suffering a heart-attack, Doran redoubled his efforts in 1979. While his “25 year plan” was somewhat unrealistic, several of his other ideas were wholly feasible, revealed his shrewd instincts for public relations, and prefigured subsequent promotional efforts. Further, he presented his efforts as selfless: “I want no credit nor money whatever for the little I am doing. I only wish in the remaining time allotted to me—long or short—to help Father Baker along the road to canonization, which he richly deserves, and to help the Homes, the Shrine, and the City of Lackawanna at the same time.”\footnote{RD, Letter to RW, 3 October 1980, RDC, OLVA.} Doran suggested that a Father Baker documentary or movie be produced, looked into ways to start such a
project, and offered to write the script.\textsuperscript{47} He also recommended renovations to the Father Baker Memorial Rooms which would include a theater for a fifteen minute slide presentation introducing visitors to Father Baker.\textsuperscript{48} In addition, Doran proposed that the Institutes duplicate all archival materials, solicit for additional items, research displays in other local museums, hire a museum specialist, train a staff of volunteer guides, print new literature and advertise the museum in local publications.\textsuperscript{49} Doran even met with people who were willing to donate items and offered to donate his own collection of things, including Baker’s diary and the “prisoner’s portrait.”\textsuperscript{50} He spent his final summer at Niagara on the Lake writing a series of Father Baker stories which he thought could be used in a booklet for the museum.\textsuperscript{51}

In 1980 and 1981, Monsignor Wurtz approved some of Doran’s ideas, though perhaps fewer than Doran had hoped. For financial reasons, Wurtz had reservations about proceeding with a cause. And, like the superintendents before him, his priority at this time was to care for the children in the homes and run the charities.\textsuperscript{52} Nonetheless, he did take some preliminary steps to publicize Baker at Doran’s prompting. He approved hiring an archivist to inventory materials and recommend how to use them. The Institutes hired

\textsuperscript{47} RD, “Father Baker Motion Picture,” April 1980; Letter to Marion Grimes, 30 April 1981; Letter to Fran Lucca, 20 April 1981, RDC, OLVA.

\textsuperscript{48} The Elizabeth Anne Seton Shrine in Emmitsburg PA has a theater space where visitors are shown a video about Seton’s life before they go into the museum.


\textsuperscript{50} RD, Letter to RW, 3 October 1980, 2, RDC, OLVA.

\textsuperscript{51} RD, Letter to Marion Grimes, 3 July 1981, RDC, OLVA.

\textsuperscript{52} RW, Letter to I.H., 9 June 1981, RDC, OLVA.
a local Sister and this task was completed in April 1981. In addition, he agreed with Doran that increasing public relations about Baker was a valuable strategy and approved Doran’s proposal to establish an annual Father Baker award. This award, the Annual Father Baker Service to Youth Award, was founded in 1980 and is presented yearly at the Friends of Father Baker Reception.

Wurtz also agreed to consult with Bishop Head about creating a Father Baker prayer card, an item Doran felt was particularly important for promoting Baker’s cause. To learn about promotional techniques for candidates for sainthood, Doran consulted with Reverend Francis Jerome Litz, assistant pastor of St. Mary’s on Broadway in Buffalo and Roman Vice Postulator for the causes of John Newman and Katherine Drexel, two successful American candidates for sainthood. Litz, a Redemptorist, was ordained in 1924 and served at St. Mary’s parish from 1929-1939. He had known Baker a few years before his death and was influenced by his and Galvin’s work with African-American converts to establish similar mission programs in Buffalo at St. Augustine’s parish in 1935 and St. Mary’s in 1937. Reports show that these missions were effective. By 1939 St. Augustine’s parish had grown from 250 to about 800 African-American parishioners. After leaving Buffalo, Litz worked at various parishes in

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57 John P. Conway, C.S.S.M., Letter to Father G.M. Powers, 12 March 1939, Redemptorist Provincial Archives, Brooklyn NY.
Pennsylvania and New York and became John Newman’s Vice Postulator in 1956.\textsuperscript{58} He returned to Buffalo’s St. Mary’s in 1978. Meeting with Doran on several occasions, he gave Doran sample promotional materials such as a brochure for Drexel’s cause and Newman’s prayer card. At Litz’s suggestion, Doran encouraged the Institutes to distribute a Father Baker prayer card “as soon as possible.”\textsuperscript{59} Doran had hoped that Litz could continue helping to plan Baker’s cause, but Litz was transferred in June 1981 from Buffalo to a parish in Annapolis, Maryland.\textsuperscript{60} He died in 1989, two years after Baker’s cause began.\textsuperscript{61}

Once the bishop approved the prayer card project, Doran assisted OLV personnel in creating it by contributing ideas, inspired largely from the Newman card, and helping raise money during 1981.\textsuperscript{62} Doran had previously enlisted a 1926 graduate of the nurses’ training school to help start a fund to promote Baker’s life and works which he envisioned would be called the “Friends of Father Baker” fund.\textsuperscript{63} The card was financed by her donation. It appears that the card’s production was delayed by minor disagreements about the wording for its prayer.\textsuperscript{64} Two of the early proposed prayers by Wurtz and Reverend Paul Bossi thanked God for Father Baker and asked for help


\textsuperscript{62} RD, Letter to RW, 27 March 1981, RDC, OLVA.


\textsuperscript{64} RW, Letter to I.H., 9 June 1981, RDC, OLVA.
following Baker’s example.65 Echoing some of the Victorian’s strategies promoting Baker’s sanctity during the 40s and 50s, Doran’s most insistent suggestion was that the prayer be addressed directly to Father Baker rather than God, so as “to get increasing thousands praying to [sic] him to receive back and file the things they have gained as a result of their prayers.”66 Doran expressed disappointment with the proposed prayers since neither was “a direct appeal to Father Baker for help [sic],” and he privately encouraged others to pray directly to Baker.67 However, official encouragement of direct appeals to Baker, particularly for favors, and expressions of confidence regarding his canonization were inappropriate at this time. The cause had not yet been officially introduced, and such encouragement and confidence that was openly and formally supported by the hierarchy would have violated the “super non cultu” clause of the canonization process mandating that there be no evidence of a public cult.68 However, evidence suggests that Wurtz did not want to discourage Doran’s piety and that the prayer card was an unofficial one.69 It was not provided with the bishop’s imprimatur, and Wurtz even suggested that “for private use only” be printed on the it.70

65 “Proposed Prayers for the Baker Card,” 13 July 1981, RDC, OLVA.
67 RD, Letter to Mr. and Mrs. Eugene Schultz, 4 October 1981, RDC, OLVA; RD, Letter to Marion Grimes, 24 July 1981, RDC, OLVA.
70 RW, Letter to I.H., 9 June 1981, RDC, OLVA.
The final 1981 version of the prayer card had a short biography of Baker on its back, composed primarily by Doran, and the familiar photograph of Baker in his biretta on its front with a short prayer that asked Baker to:

pray for us, that, during our time, we too may have the strength and faith to continue in our concern for others. Help us to see the worth of our lives, especially as we grow older. Keep us generous in spirit and constant in our love for Jesus and the Father. We also ask that you pray for us to OLV that she may be with us at the hour of our death.

This prayer was a combination of Wurtz, Bossi and Doran’s suggestions. It demonstrates Doran’s influence in that it appeals directly to Baker and mentions end-of-life concerns, which were on Doran’s mind at this time. And, it respects Wurtz and Bossi’s interests by asking Baker to help people develop the Catholic virtues his life modeled. As such, this prayer card is a primary example of a collaborative effort between a lay member and OLV personnel in promoting Baker. It also demonstrates how the decision-makers at the Institutes incorporated a layman’s contributions in a promotional project. Indeed, Doran viewed himself as an important assistant in promoting Baker’s canonization at this time. In several letters to various local and national media personnel he mentioned that he was helping the parish introduce Baker’s cause.

Although the diocese was not in the position to initiate Baker’s cause until the mid-1980s, Robert Doran remained a vocal and persistent reminder of popular belief in Baker’s sanctity. His independent efforts addressed many of the practical aspects of promoting Baker’s sainthood such as fund-raising and increasing Baker’s visibility in the


72 Father Baker card, circa 1981, Prayer card collection, WKC, OLVA.

73 RD, drafts of prayer for Father Baker card, courtesy Robert K. Doran Jr.

Buffalo region. In addition, he maintained the enthusiasm for canonizing Baker that had disappeared from the *Victorian* magazine and subsequent OLV publications until 1986. Although virtually none of his grander proposals came to fruition, he demonstrated formidable skill and knowledge of promotional strategies. Since Doran’s death in 1981 and the introduction of Baker’s cause in 1987, the Institutes have publicized Baker in many of the ways Doran originally suggested. Monsignor Wurtz established the Father Baker Guild in 1987 to raise money for the cause and gathered a large collection of Father Baker memorabilia, stories and artifacts. After Baker’s body was moved to the basilica in 1999, a Father Baker prayer card was printed specifically for the cause. In 2002 the diocese produced *Legacy of Victory*, a Father Baker documentary. Moreover, the OLV public relations office, established in 1994, renovated the Father Baker Rooms in 2002. Although specific suggestions for these changes and developments did not come directly from Doran, he was a promotional visionary for Baker’s cause. Since Doran’s efforts were largely inspired by his devotion to Father Baker, his work documents how devotional practices can include the production of a wide range of material, visual and printed items.

**The Father Baker Guild**

Because Baker’s cause has been handled by a diocese rather than a religious order as many causes are, it lacks some of the resources a religious community can offer, such as ready personnel to research Baker’s life and collect materials for the cause. Consequently, the diocese has relied heavily on the willingness of local community members and the Institutes’ network of financial donors to help. The 1986 Father Baker Day, which marked the 50th anniversary of his death and coincided with the first Baker boys reunion, presented an opportunity to begin soliciting the public for materials related to Father Baker, especially since the diocese was preparing to introduce his cause. After the cause was inaugurated on October 7, 1987 by Bishop Edward Head, both the Institutes and diocese actively solicited for materials and funds to support Baker’s
candidacy, and many responded generously. Contributions came from local laity and religious orders, as well as individuals, both male and female, from across the United States who were connected to the Institutes through family members or as financial contributors to the charities. Donations consisted of money, personal narratives, testimonies, newspaper articles, photographs, and historical artifacts. These donations helped finance the cause’s early stages and created a substantial body of materials to support the diocese’s arguments for Baker’s life of holiness and popular appeal. As a result, making Baker into a saint has been largely a cooperative process between diocesan authorities and religious and lay supporters.

Many donations came through the Father Baker Guild which was established in 1987 to solicit funds for the cause. This was the only time the Institutes explicitly solicited money for Baker’s canonization, though a box for contributions to help forward his cause was located in the basilica near his crypt as of 2006. Additional financing was provided by a diocesan foundation at the discretion of a board of overseers. In order to obtain charter members, Monsignor Wurtz sent a letter to the Institutes’ regular donors, enthusiastically announcing the Guild as the “opportunity of a lifetime... the opportunity that so many people could only dream about but were never able to have fulfilled, the once in a lifetime opportunity to aid in the canonization process elevating a holy person to sainthood.” Wurtz described the Guild as “the means by which we will be able to organize our efforts and promote the cause, through research and investigation into the life and holiness of Father Baker.” Further, Wurtz explained his job as Baker’s

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76 RW, interview.
77 RW, Form letter to “Friend,” 1987, FBGRC, OLVA.
78 Ibid.
Diocesan Postulator and asked readers for “any personal knowledge of, or…contact with Father Baker,” “any item, letter, note etc. signed by Father Baker,” and “knowledge of any cures granted through the intercessory powers of Father Baker.” Members of the Guild received special spiritual benefits, not unlike those available to members of the Association of OLV. According to their membership level, they also received Father Baker memorabilia such as medals, membership certificates, copies of Anderson’s biography, or 5x7 full color portraits of Father Baker. For instance, “helpers,” who donated ten dollars, received a membership certificate and Father Baker medal while “benefactors,” who donated one hundred dollars, received all available Baker items. Wurtz encouraged those who could not afford memberships in the Guild to help by distributing Father Baker prayer cards and collecting signatures on petition sheets for Baker’s beatification. Because calls for donations of materials also appeared in the Western New York Catholic and the Voice, the Institutes’ newsletter, some archival donations made between 1987 and 2003 are not connected directly with the Guild.

Contributors who sent historical items or narratives received personal responses from Wurtz which acknowledged the importance of their donations and affirmed their participation in the process of Baker’s canonization. Further, personalized responses helped contributors feel that they were partaking in an important historical event. This practice was similar to Baker’s technique of sending personal responses to individuals

79 Ibid.
80 “Application for Membership in the Father Baker Guild,” OLVA.
who supported his charities or requested special favors from Our Lady. Wurtz’s assured contributors that “your letter will be kept in the archives as we prepare the documents to be sent to the Holy See for Father Baker’s Cause,” “[your donation] will have a special place in the Father Baker Archives,” “I will keep this testimony and it will be used in the promotion of Father Baker’s Cause,” and “this will be used as some of the material presented to the Holy See requesting his beatification.”83 He also requested additional documentation, such as medical records or personal narratives, for miraculous claims that seemed medically valid, and he asked those who knew Baker personally to fill out questionnaires to help the cause.84 Thus, Wurtz encouraged contributors to feel as though they are active participants in assuring Baker’s sainthood. Many donations were accompanied by testimonies that “he should be a saint” or “I know he is a saint,” which demonstrate that popular sentiments about his sanctity had not significantly declined in the years since his death.85 One contributor even confidently wrote, “Please use this letter to make Father Baker a saint.”86

**Hand-Me-Down Devotion**

Several noteworthy characteristics of the devotional culture surrounding Father Baker are evident in the donations collected for the cause between 1986 and 2003. First,

83 RW, Letters to J.H., 25 February 1988; to Mrs. D.W., 1 December 1987; to E.B., 10 November 1987; to L.L. 9 November 1987, FBGRC, OLVA.

84 RW, Letter to A.O., 13 August 1990, FBGRC, OLVA; See also RW, Letters to K.B., 3 April 1995; to R.G., 6 May 1991; to G.M., 7 June 1990; to T.K., 27 December 1994; to T.C., 30 September 1988, FBGRC. OLVA.


86 Personal Letter, D.R. to RW, 10 January 1988, FBGRC, OLVA; See also Personal Letter, R.C. to RW, 2 February 1988, FBGRC, OLVA.
it appears that devotion to Baker and support of his charities was a respected family tradition handed down through generations. In at least four cases, devotion to Baker was passed on by naming children “Nelson” in honor of him.\textsuperscript{87} In the early 2000s, a family in the OLV parish named their cat “Nelson” after him, which demonstrates how this tradition persists in a different form.\textsuperscript{88} Even if members of subsequent generations did not become full Baker devotees, many still honored their older relatives’ devotion by contributing to the cause in some way. Commonly, after finding an item related to Baker among a deceased individual’s effects, a surviving relative sent it to the archives. Also, younger relatives wrote letters and donated items for elderly family members who were incapacitated. Donations included things like newspaper clippings, pictures of Father Baker, photographs, cassock relics, letters from Baker, certificates of Association membership, OLV and Father Baker medals, holy cards, and issues of the \textit{Victorian} or \textit{Annals}.\textsuperscript{89}

As a tradition in at least one local religious order, devotion to Baker was handed down with a collection of mementos and relics related to him. In 1994, the local Sisters of Our Lady of Charity presented a “carefully guarded and preserved” set of Father Baker memorabilia to Bishop Head.\textsuperscript{90} This extensive collection includes items such as


\textsuperscript{88} Susan Baldassari, interview, 15 December 2005.


\textsuperscript{90} WK, Letter to RW, 20 June 1994, CC, OLVA.
newspaper articles about Baker from 1947 to 1981, various prayer cards and postcards from the Institutes, an assortment of vestments used by Baker, Baker’s 50th anniversary of ordination candle, the candle Baker was holding when he died, and a slightly larger than life-sized bust of Baker made in 1926 without his knowledge.91

Financial donations also represent hand-me-down devotion to Baker and support of his work, particularly when accompanied by personal narratives describing family associations with Baker. After visiting Baker’s grave on his father’s advice in order to help him and his wife conceive a child, one person donated a substantial sum because he believed his petition worked.92 Another included a statement of excitement about Baker’s cause, explaining that she “grew up on” the stories of Father Baker in the Victorian magazine and that her mother had previously sent second-hand clothes to the Institutes for the orphans.93 Another donor expressed conscious participation in her family tradition of donating to Father Baker’s. Her mother had collected extra money in a special envelope for the charities, even when times were tough.94 Yet another contributor sent a monetary gift because her mother had always given to Baker’s cause before she died.95 Also, several people made financial donations in memory of deceased relatives who admired Baker and his work.96

91 “Check list: Gifts of the Sisters of our Lady of Charity from Archives and Museum Diocese of Buffalo,” FBGRC, OLVA; WK, Letter to Sister Dorothy Garrity, 15 August 1994, CC, OLVA; Father Baker collection, DBA.
92 Personal Letter, J.M. to RW, 24 June 1994, FBGRC, OLVA.
93 Personal Letter, M.M. to RW, 2 January 1988, FBGRC, OLVA.
94 Personal Letter, R.O. to RW, February 1988, FBGRC, OLVA.
95 Personal Letter, L.L. to RW, 22 November 1996, FBGRC, OLVA.
96 See RW, Letter to K.W., 15 April 2002; Personal Letters, Mrs. W.R. to RW, undated; A.P. to RW, 2 February 1988, FBGRC, OLVA.
Secondly, this collection both reflects devotional practices recorded earlier by the *Victorian* magazine and demonstrates ways devotion to Baker is linked to the tradition of devotion to Our Lady of Victory. Contributors used financial donations to ask Baker for favors, a gesture that harkens back to the tradition of sending small monetary amounts with petitions for OLV novenas. One woman donated a sum to Baker’s cause nearly each month for over a year and petitioned for Father Baker to help her grandchildren. At least one recent communication from OLV personnel demonstrated a reliance on the same supernatural chain of intercession in which many readers of the *Victorian* had trusted. When a petitioner sent a donation and asked for a favor from Our Lady of Victory, Monsignor Wurtz acknowledged it by saying he would pray to Father Baker to intercede with God and Our Lady. Contributing to Baker’s cause also provided a way to thank him for his divine intercession or for some kindness during his life, a system of exchange reminiscent of thanking Our Lady of Victory for favors by donating to her charity homes. One donor thanked Baker for many favors received through his intercession by sending in several historical items. Another even mentioned, “you may publish this favor in your paper,” even though favors received from Baker were no longer published, suggesting that she was familiar with the previous custom of publishing favors in the *Victorian*.

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97 Their grandmother to RW, March 1997; Their grandmother to RW, 3 May 1997; Their grandmother to RW, June 1997; Their grandmother to RW, 4 August 1997; Their grandmother to RW, 7 September 1997; Their grandmother to RW, October 1997; Their grandmother to RW, December 1997; Their grandmother to RW, January 5 1998; Their grandmother to RW, March 1998; Their grandmother to RW, 4 June 1998; Their grandmother to RW, Aug 1998; Their grandmother to RW, September 98, FBGRC. OLVA.


99 Personal Letter, J.Z. to WK, 2 June 1999, FBGRC, OLVA.

100 Personal Letter, E.S. to RW, 31 May 1989, FBGRC, OLVA.
Gratitude to Baker was also an enduring sentiment for at least three people who recalled favors or help received from Baker many years prior to their reports. One enclosed a financial gift in memory of her mother who had sent a donation to Baker around 1932, asking him to plead for her daughter’s recovery from polio. She hoped that both her monetary donation and the “humble report” of her cure through Baker, OLV and her mother’s prayers would help the cause. A second sent money in memory of Baker’s kindness to her father, who had been an orphan at St. Joseph’s when Baker was alive. And, the third donated a substantial amount in gratitude for Baker’s kindness to her family members during the 1920s when they were so poor they had to pick coke from the hot ash in the streets to heat their home. Testimonies such as these demonstrate how appreciative community members were for Baker’s assistance and substantiate his lasting impression on the community.

Finally, Father Baker devotion appeared to attract female pro-life activists who adapted Baker’s moral example to contemporary Roman Catholic concerns about abortion. In 1987, a reporter called Baker a “‘natural’ patron for the pro-life cause,” and letters in the archives show this to be an accurate assessment. One supporter of Baker’s cause urged that, “We must pray to his for cessation of the babies killed in the womb. Who is better qualified to be patron of the unborn since his infant home saved so

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102 Personal Letter, T.K. to RW, 20 December 1994, FBGRC, OLVA. Also see Personal Letter, D.T. to RW, 27 July 1988, FBGRC, OLVA.

103 Personal Letter, P.S to RW, January 1988, FBGRC, OLVA.

104 Personal Letter, L.W. to RW, 22 October 1987, FBGRC, OLVA.

105 Likoudis.
many from the Erie Canal.” Another, who was born in the infant home in 1951, was highly motivated to help the cause: “As a direct result of having been adopted from Father Baker’s I became involved in pro-life activities and have spoken to countless children on the horrors of abortion.” A volunteer with Birthright, a nondenominational organization which helps unwed mothers with their new infants, wrote that she and other volunteers were praying to Father Baker for help finding a new home for their girls. And, a friend of Joan Andrews, a pro-life activist whose September 1986 imprisonment in Florida galvanized both the Catholic and Protestant pro-life movements to rally for her freedom, wrote that she was praying to Father Baker for Andrews’ release. She sent a Father Baker novena she composed which begins, “Father Baker, please ask god to grant the freedom from prison of god’s servant, Joan Andrews, who like yourself has given up her life for the helpless.” Given the late John Paul II’s emphasis on a “new culture of life,” pro-life devotees help make Baker a politically viable candidate for sainthood by confirming his appeal to American Catholics who adhere to doctrinal teachings that forbid abortion.

Further examples of devotional practices which include the creation materials related to Father Baker can be found among the donations made to the cause between 1986 and 2005. These include narratives, unpublished stories and prayers, as well as

106 Personal Letter, E.B. to Whom it May Concern, 29 March 1999, FBGRC, OLVA.

107 Personal Letter, M.B. to RW, 2 December 1987, FBGRC, OLVA; See also Personal Letter, A.C. to RW, 27 July 2000, FBGRC, OLVA for a woman involved in prolife activities who wants to pray for Baker’s canonization.

108 Personal Letter, M.M. to RW, 3 January 1994, FBGRC, OLVA.


creative visual and material items. These materials frequently appear to be particularly inspired by strong feelings of religious piety, a desire to help canonize Baker, or both. And, even if not all of these creations were inspired specifically by devotion to Baker, the very practice of donating them suggests support for his canonization and the desire to help ultimately create his sainthood.

Personal writings compose a large portion of the archival donations, but some of them demonstrate an exceptional effort and attention to detail which suggest unique investments in the prospect of Baker’s sainthood. One visitor to the basilica in 1986 was so impressed by what she learned about Father Baker that she composed several pages of passionate prayers to Baker petitioning him for help. Another devotee composed a personal version of the “Hail Mary” which begins, “Hail Mary and Father Baker, full of grace, the Lord is with you.” Two authors wrote short narrative stories. One enthusiastically recounted the story of the gas well and the beginnings of the infant home in great detail, expressing her avid belief that Baker’s sainthood relies on these important events. The other recalled an episode from his own life when he took a shabby person to Father Baker’s for help during a snowstorm in 1931. He described his narrative as his “tribute eulogizing the kind and charitable deed so pertinent to Father Baker’s saintly life.”

Two Sisters from local orders carefully and thoroughly composed dramatic narratives of their experiences with Baker. Sister Mary Lawrence Francis recollected her profound disappointment when she almost failed to receive a blessing from Father Baker, “the frail and gray-haired priest, unpretentious in his simple black cassock.” She

111 Personal Letter, E.A to OLV, 18 November 1986, FBGRC, OLVA.
112 Personal Letter, E.N. to Msgr. Robert Murphy, 25 April 1989, FBGRC, OLVA.
113 Personal Letter, H.C. to RW, 19 March 1989, FBGRC, OLVA.
114 Sr. Mary Lawrence Franklin, “A celebrity I have met,” FBGRC, OLVA, 1.
highlighted Baker’s humility by writing that Baker first suggested that her brother, a newly ordained priest, would be just as suitable for the task. However, after some persistence, she did receive the blessing from Baker, adding “I have often recalled in my secret heart (not wishing to anticipate the pronouncements of the Church) the memorable day when I received the blessing of a saint.”\(^\text{115}\) Sister Mary Schmidt, a cloistered nun, recalled Baker joking with members of her order by telling them to coax their mother superior to let them out to visit the basilica. She declares that his memory “remains fixed in our hearts with sentiments of love, gratitude and praise of God for all the marvels he has been pleased to work through His humble servant, our own Father Baker.”\(^\text{116}\)

Other contributors provided detailed miraculous, visionary or spiritual experiences which they thought demonstrated Baker’s supernatural abilities and saintly status. One report told of a relative who lost her necklace with a crucifix pendant on the day she visited Baker’s grave, had several dreams in which Father Baker told her where to find it, and was able to recover it from the graveyard just a few feet from Baker’s burial site.\(^\text{117}\) Another account, “Father Baker’s Crucifix,” described how a crucifix that belonged to Baker helped revive a woman from a coma.\(^\text{118}\) A woman who owned one of Father Baker’s socks relays a calming and spiritual dream she had after placing the sock under her pillow before sleeping, adding that her mother had a dream in which she was very happy while using the same method.\(^\text{119}\) Another recounted having a vision of Father Baker while she as recovering from an operation, an experience she described as

\(^{115}\) Ibid., 2.

\(^{116}\) Sr. Mary of the Sacred Heart Schmidt, “Recollections,” FBGRC, OLVA

\(^{117}\) Personal Letter, P.S. to “Father Baker & Cause,” 16 May 1989, FBGRC, OLVA.

\(^{118}\) Henry E. McPherson, “Narrative about Father Baker’s crucifix,” OLVA.

\(^{119}\) Personal Letter, D.R. to RW, 10 January 1988, FBGRC, OLVA.
“consoling and peaceful.” Perhaps the most comprehensively reported visions of Father Baker are Mary Timm’s. She reported her cures and visions to a local paper and wrote a lengthy and detailed account of her experiences for the cause. Timm, who knew Baker as a child and later worked in the orphanage’s kitchen, claims to have had several visions of Baker after his death, one of which she believes cured her of cancer of the womb in the 1950s.

Finally, there are a number of visual and material creations in the archives, many of which offer new takes on well-known Father Baker memorabilia. One former Baker boy, who wrote that Baker should have been made a saint “years ago,” sent a picture of himself posed next to the head-shot photograph of Baker. The contributor is holding a rosary blessed by Baker on one hand and a Father Baker t-shirt against his chest with the other. Another contributor sent in two photographs she took of a drawing her sister did of Father Baker when she was twelve. The artist had copied Baker’s head-shot portrait, and the contributor had placed the photographs in a decorative fold-out cardboard frame. When the Lackawanna post office created a special cancel stamp for the 150th anniversary of Baker’s birth, the Polish Cadets Stamp Club offered a special cachet, which used a logo from the Institutes of Father Baker’s head shot image with some children and the basilica in the background “to honor this great humanitarian and founder of OLV institutions” (Figure 5.2).

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120 Personal Letter, M.M. to RW 11 February 1988


122 Personal Letter, A.M. to RW, 10 November 2000, FBGRC, OLVA.

123 RW, Letter to M.S. 2 March 1988, FBGRC, OLVA.

124 Personal Letter, M.B. to RW, 9 March 1992, FBGRC, OLVA.
cachet to accompany the Father Baker cancel that included an image of OLV and an excerpt from one of the Institutes’ Christmas letters.\textsuperscript{125} Several items donated by the Sisters of Our Lady of Charity also show that devotion to Baker can have a material result. Among their collection at the diocese are four pieces of Baker’s cassock encased in plastic, three of which have lace hand-embroidered edges (Figure 5.3). There are also a few flowers from Baker’s funeral encased in plastic and stitched around the edges with a blanket stitch.\textsuperscript{126}

Efforts to help the cause were not necessarily restricted to archival donations. While Robert Doran was one of the most enthusiastic promoters of Baker, he was not the only one inspired by his devotion to contribute a proposal to promote Baker’s life and works. Another devotee, Gerald T. Leahy, who claims he was inspired by a friend in the 1960s to “translate passive admiration, respect and veneration for Father Baker into active promotion,” worked with Norman P. Kelly, publisher of the second edition of Anderson’s biography, to propose ambitious plans for celebrating the 100th anniversary of the discovery of the gas well.\textsuperscript{127} Leahy expressed feeling “mystified by the molasses like tempo of this project [the cause]” and wrote that it had always been “a given” in his family that Father Baker was a saint, adding that he wants to “see this hero of the poor be made a universal hero by the universal church.”\textsuperscript{128} His plans for the celebration included a one day event that would involve a traditional Latin mass and a huge public rally at the Hamburg fairgrounds featuring a talk by Mother Theresa on the theme of charity. In addition, Kelly offered to produce silver medallions with an image of Father Baker on

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Personal Letter, P.B. to RW, July 1992, FBGRC, OLVA.
\item Sisters of Our Lady of Charity collection, Father Baker collection, DBA.
\item Gerald T. Leahy, “Aide Memoire,” 2 July 1990, 1, CC, OLVA.
\item Ibid., 3-4.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
one side and Mother Theresa on the other to commemorate the event.\textsuperscript{129} Wurtz met these plans with moderation and suggested that the men use their enthusiasm instead to help plan the 55th anniversary of Baker’s death and collect information from the Baker boys to help establish Baker’s reputation for sanctity. This example summarizes several characteristics of how personal understandings of Father Baker translate into the cooperative process of making a saint. It offers evidence of how devotion to Baker directly engenders productive devotional practices and reveals the impatience of many devotees with the slow ecclesiastic process of canonization. Moreover, it demonstrates how those in charge of the cause can try to re-direct enthusiasm for Baker into efforts that, though somewhat unsatisfying to the devoted, still involve their contributions, are more practical, and help the cause move forward.

\textsuperscript{129} Ibid., 2.
Figure 5.1 Print of Robert K. Doran’s “Prisoner’s portrait” of Father Baker

Source: OLVA. Courtesy of OLV Institutions, Lackawanna, N.Y.
Figure 5.2 Special commemorative cachet and post office cancel, Polish Cadets Stamp Club, 1992

Source OLVA. Courtesy of OLV Institutions, Lackawanna, N.Y.
Figure 5.3 Cassock relic ornamented by the Sisters of Our Lady of Charity

Source: DBA. Photograph by Patrick McPartland. Used with permission.
Before all of the orphans at St. Joseph’s were transferred to foster homes in the 1940s, some of them drew pictures of the walls on the top floor of the orphanage building. Images of fighter planes, battleships, and “elroy was here” and a few impolite comments about the Sisters of St. Joseph testified to their boyish excitement about World War II and mischievous feelings about their guardians (Figure 6.1). In 2003, these images remained hidden on an unused floor of the building while pictures of Baker which had been decorated by children attending religious education classes or the grade school hung in the basement of the basilica and in the school’s cafeteria. Some of these pictures displayed lists of why Father Baker should be a saint and others had lists of his characteristics and accomplishments. According to the children, Baker “followed Jesus’s example,” “dug for gas,” “helped moms with babies,” “never did anything for himself,” was “loyal to Mary,” and had a “nice smile.” These pictures expressed what they learned about him from their teachers and represent the standardized narrative of Baker’s life that has emerged from the Institutes and diocese since his cause began. The focus on Baker’s charitable works and piety in these children’s works reveal an instructional emphasis on his emulative characteristics. However, other representations of Father Baker, particularly between 1999 and 2005, focus more on his wonder working abilities. These two complementary and sometimes competing versions of Baker coincide with the two conceptions of sainthood that have existed throughout the church’s history of naming saints—the saint as miracle worker and as exemplar. Further, the diversity of representations of Baker and the Institutes created by both ecclesiastic and popular agents demonstrate that Baker’s story is deeply ingrained within the imaginative life of the greater Buffalo region.
The Red Tape of Canonization

Although Baker is a personal saint for many, his canonization would expand his “spontaneous, popular, and un-encouraged” local cult into a universal public cult supported and advanced by the authority of the Roman Catholic Church.¹ Monsignor Wurtz’s “stock answer” to why Baker’s cause had not been introduced earlier speaks to his popular appeal: “Those who knew him were convinced of his sanctity. Those that didn’t, what difference does it make?”² Some scholars suggest that saint making is rooted in the popular desires and practices of those who compose the church’s body of members and is fundamentally an process of the people. A saint is made “by others for others.”³

Certainly, popular practices have established Baker’s sanctity and supported it with a large body of devotional materials. However, producing Baker’s sainthood is also an ecclesiastical process, one which involves official efforts and approval by members of the centralized church hierarchy and requires a considerable amount of research and paperwork at this level. All historical evidence supporting Baker’s sanctity must be collected, systematized and presented to the Congregation for the Causes of Saints. In addition, official norms and procedures must be strictly followed so as not to jeopardize or delay the cause.

The history of sainthood in the Catholic church revolves around two core understandings of sainthood—the saint as a wonderworker and the saint as a model for others. During the first three centuries, general consensus among the early Christians was

¹ WK, Letter to Right Reverend Edward Head, 7 July 1986, CC, OLVA.


enough to determine who would become a saint, and sainthood was primarily reserved for martyrs, those models who chose to witness to their faith, suffer and die as Christ did rather than renounce their beliefs. Confessors, those who openly confessed their faith but were not executed, were similarly venerated. After Constantine became emperor near the beginning of the fourth century and Christians were no longer actively persecuted, martyrs’ tombs were considered to be sites of supernatural power, and saints gradually became renown for their wonderworking abilities. As the cult of the saints strengthened, it began to rival worship of God and Christ with practices such as the veneration of relics and feasting at saints’ tombs, both of which reinforced the notion that a saint’s remains were loci of supernatural powers.4

A saint’s supernatural ability soon came to dominate understandings of sainthood and provide the primary measure for adding a candidate to a local canon or list of saints. Between the fourth and sixth centuries, confessors were renowned for their extraordinarily asceticism and ability to perform miracles in their own lifetimes, and by the sixth century, the main criterion for sainthood was the ability to perform miracles.5 Although there was controversy among the church fathers about some of practices related to the cult of the saints, the Second Council of Nicea effectively endorsed it in 787 by requiring every church altar to house a saint’s relics, a decision which validated the veneration of relics.6 The primacy of the miraculous reached its height during the Middle Ages, and the process of making a saint remained nearly entirely popular. Canons differed by locality, though some regional bishops exerted control over who was added to


the calendar of saints by requiring vitae and testimonies demonstrating the saint’s virtues.\textsuperscript{7}

Gradually, the saint making process became highly legalized and thoroughly juridical, much like a court case. Scholars have suggested that the church increasingly regulated the canonization process in order to curtail popular enthusiasm for miracles and restore saints as exemplars.\textsuperscript{8} Saint Uldaricus became the first documented case of a papally approved saint in 973. In 1234, Gregory IX attempted to centralize control over the sainthood selection process by declaring that only the papal office could canonize a saint.\textsuperscript{9} As part of his efforts organizing the Roman Curia, Sixtus V established the Congregation of Sacred Rites in 1588 to authenticate relics and manage causes.\textsuperscript{10} Canonization became completely controlled by the papacy under Urban VIII who relegated the beatification of saints to the Holy See in 1625.\textsuperscript{11} Between 1734 and 1738, Pope Benedict XIV clarified and standardized the church’s approach to canonization in a five volume work, \textit{De Servorum Dei beatificatione et Beatorum canonizatione}. Benedict’s judicial procedures, with some modifications, were included in the 1917 code of canon law.\textsuperscript{12} By 1969, changes that would simplify the procedures were initiated by Paul VI who organized a commission to investigate updating the canonization process and divided the Congregation of Sacred Rites into the Congregation for the Causes of

\textsuperscript{7} Woodward, 65.

\textsuperscript{8} See Cunningham, 44; Woodward, 71; Brown, 58. See also Paul Molinari, \textit{Saints and Their Place in the Church} (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1965).

\textsuperscript{9} Cunningham, 45.

\textsuperscript{10} Sixtus V, “Immensa Aeterni Dei,” 11 February 1588.


\textsuperscript{12} For an outline of these procedures accessible to the common reader, see Thomas F. Macken, \textit{The Canonisation of Saints} (New York: Benzinger Brothers, 1909).
Saints and the Congregation for Divine Worship. At the beginning of 1983, Pope John Paul II issued a series of reformed procedures in “Divinus Perfectionis Magister,” a brief Apostolic Constitution which described the increased responsibilities of the local bishop, reorganized the Sacred Congregation for the Causes of Saints, and explained the Congregation’s role.

The initial stages of the new procedures are, in general, similar to the older ones. A petitioner must ask the local bishop to introduce the cause. The bishop must collect information about the candidate to determine if a cause should be started, gather the candidate’s published writings so they can be examined for signs of unorthodoxy, and show that the candidate has not become the object of a public cult. Rome must approve of the diocese’s intention to initiate a cause, provide a nihil obstat or a declaration that the Vatican’s files contain no objectionable information about the candidate, and authorize naming the candidate a “Servant of God.” And, the diocese must provide Rome with historical materials and testimonies about the candidate based on its own investigations and research.

The most significant change in the new procedures is that they require the use of modern historical-critical methods to prove the candidate’s sanctity in Rome, thus dispensing with the lengthy and repetitive arguments between the candidate’s advocates and the Promoter of the Faith, or commonly-called “devil’s advocate.” The role of the Promoter of the Faith changed significantly from an adversarial to a supportive one. The Promoter of the Faith, now called the Prelate Theologian, is primarily responsible for administrative tasks such as presiding over meetings and choosing theologians to judge causes. Consequently, the current process no longer resembles a trial. Instead, it is

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15 Woodward, 91.
much more akin to the preparation of a dissertation with a positio, or printed critical hagiography, at center stage.\textsuperscript{16}

The positio is prepared by a member of the Sacred Congregation’s College of Relators. Ideally, a cause’s realtor should be trained in both theology and history and capable of the using the historical and testimonial evidence provided by a diocese to assess the candidate in his or her historical context and write a convincing and well documented account of the candidate’s life of holiness.\textsuperscript{17} Rome’s judgment of the candidate’s life is based largely on the positio, and once the candidate’s life of virtue has been determined, miracles can be introduced to Rome by the diocese. Miracles are defined as events, most frequently medical cures, that are explicable only as divine interventions. They are examined closely by the Vatican’s extensive staff of medical experts and judged by a panel of theologians. The new 1983 procedures reduced the total number of required miracles from four to two—one is required for formal beatification and another for canonization.

\textbf{Father Baker’s Road to Sainthood}

A month before the 50th anniversary of Baker’s death in 1986, Monsignors Walter O. Kern, Robert C. Wurtz and Robert E. Murphy, pastor of the OLV parish, sought to begin the process of introducing Baker’s cause, but their correspondences suggest they had little knowledge of official procedures.\textsuperscript{18} Kern had hoped that Bishop Edward D. Head would be able to announce the cause at the end of July as part of the Father Baker Day celebration and first Baker boys’ reunion, so the three monsignors

\begin{footnotes}
\item\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.
\item\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 100.
\item\textsuperscript{18} Kern prepared a simplified version of the \textit{New Laws for the Causes of Saints} by organizing the steps into an easy to read chart and distributed it to Wurtz, Murphy and Head. See \textit{New Laws for the Causes of Saints}, Rome 1983, translated by Rev. Robert J. Sarno, prepared for use by Buffalo by WK, 15 June 1986, WKC, OLVA.
\end{footnotes}
prepared a list of reasons why Baker should be canonized and presented it to the bishop. Their list emphasized Baker’s late vocation, humility, trust in divine providence, promotion of social justice, reputation for sanctity and moral stance on pro-life issues. Kern also included a pointed comment from the Canadian Vice-Postulator for Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha’s cause: “If Baker was European he would have been canonized by now.” However, Head did not announce Baker’s cause at the July celebration. According to the New Laws, in order to begin the process, the petitioners also needed to present the bishop with “any existing biography” or “an accurate chronologically arranged report” on Baker’s life and reputation for sanctity, a copy of all of Baker’s published writings, and a list of people who could help with the cause. These requirements had not been met at this time. Head and Kern subsequently sought advice from Vatican officials about how to proceed. By January 1987, the necessary paperwork was sufficient, so acting as formal petitioners, Murphy and Wurtz requested that Head begin the canonization process.

In June 1987, Head publicly announced that the diocese had begun studying Baker’s life with the intention of beginning the canonization process. Around this same time, the Vatican’s Sacred Congregation for the Causes of Saints approved Baker’s candidacy, making him a “Servant of God,” and encouraged the diocese to compose a

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19 WK, Letter to EH, 7 July 1986; Letter to RW and Msgr. Robert Murphy, 13 June 1986, CC, OLVA.

20 WK, Letter to EH, 7 July 1986, CC, OLVA.


prayer for his canonization. Head strategically announced Rome’s approval four months later during closing services for a novena to Our Lady of Victory on October 7, 1987, placing Baker’s cause under Our Lady’s patronage. The news was received “joyfully” by those present. A Father Baker prayer card with a short biography and a prayer for canonization began to be distributed at this time as well.

The bishop’s initial responsibilities during the diocesan investigations included appointing officials to direct the cause, collecting letters from other bishops to support Baker’s candidacy, and submitting all of his published writings to two local theological censors to make sure they contained nothing “contrary to faith and good morals.” In 1987, Head appointed Wurtz as Diocesan Postulator, Murphy as Diocesan Vice-Postulator and Kern as Notary. Head had already received a number of supportive letters from bishops in states like Indiana, Ohio, and Pennsylvania by the time of his October 1987 announcement. Among these letters was one from the archbishop of the New Orleans diocese who recounted the story of the Victoria gas well that he had heard as a child from Buffalo Bishop William Turner. In 1989, Head again solicited letters from all of the retired bishops in the United States and received a number of supportive

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24 Congregation for the Causes of Saints, Letter to EH, 2 June 1987 and Letter to EH, 6 July 1987, CC, OLVA.

25 Briggs, “First Steps…”


27 John Paul II, I:3.


29 EH, Letter to “Your Eminence,” 8 July 1987, CC, OLVA.

30 Archbishop Phillip M. Hannon, Letter to EH, 10 July 1987, CC, OLVA.
replies. By 1994, the censors had reviewed Baker’s published writings and found nothing unacceptable. They commented on Baker’s “personal and unremitting love for the Blessed Virgin Mary,” his “gracious politeness which reflects his respect for all persons whom he addresses or about whom he speaks” and his “absolute trust and confidence in divine providence.”

After Head determined that there were no serious objections to proceeding with the cause, all of Baker’s known writings, published and unpublished, as well as any historical documents related to his life, work and times had to be collected, a process that had already progressed throughout much of the 80s. According to the procedures for diocesan inquiries, these documents should include both “primitive data,” information about Baker’s “life activities and factual surroundings,” and “ambientational data,” information on the “religious, historical and social ambient,” in which he “unfolded [his] heroically virtuous life.” The primary researcher who conducted “the necessary and exhaustive” search for any historical Father Baker materials was Monsignor Walter O. Kern. In 1987, Kern was hosting a weekly radio program, “Day by Day,” on WBEN-AM radio and serving as diocesan archivist, director of the diocesan “Mini-Museum,” and pastor of the Sacred Heart Diocesan Shrine in Bowmansville, New York. He had

31 EH, Letter to Bishops, 5 July 1989, CC, OLVA.


34 Ibid., 116.

35 WK, “Resume,” CC, OLVA.
begun collecting and organizing the Father Nelson H. Baker Archives at the Chancery in 1984.36

Between 1986 and 1995, Kern completed a substantial amount of work for the cause. Relying on his years of experience as a historian, he operated primarily in the background collecting evidence of Baker’s sanctity through meticulous investigations into his life. He researched the saint-making process and provided advice for how to proceed with the cause, and he systematized all of the known documents related to Baker according to the saintly virtues they demonstrated.37 He also prepared Baker’s documents for the theological censors, interviewed possible witnesses for the diocesan tribunal, and organized and chaired the historical commission, a group of scholars and experts who prepared reports for Rome on Baker’s life and historical context using historical-critical methods.38 Moreover, he acted as the cause’s ad-hoc administrative assistant and completed much of the detailed paperwork. For instance, he composed and distributed periodic updates about completed work for the cause, especially during its first two years.39 Also, in order to fulfill the New Laws’ requirement that there be “no evidence of fraud or deceit on the part of the petitioners in delaying” Baker’s cause, Kern

36 Ibid.


solicited testimony explaining why Baker’s cause had not been introduced within the New Laws’ required time-frame of thirty years after his death.\textsuperscript{40}

Although Head appointed Kern as a Diocesan Notary for the cause in 1987, a position which would require him to transcribe the testimonies of witnesses who were under oath during the diocesan tribunals, he resigned in 1989 because he had conducted preliminary interviews with many witnesses and did not want a conflict of interest to arise in the future.\textsuperscript{41} He also wanted to be available as a secondary witness in case any of the witnesses died before the diocese was able to conduct the official interviews.\textsuperscript{42} Kern’s preliminary interviews were important because he sought to “help the postulator identify persons he might decide to have as witnesses…, collect information usable for a later biography of Father Baker…, and seek the truth behind some negative hearsay repeated by generations of priests about Baker.”\textsuperscript{43} Given Baker’s nearly flawless public reputation and persona, thorough investigations into negative hearsay were critical since “the Congregation can hold up cause as long as they like[ed]” if these issues were not addressed.\textsuperscript{44}

The questions Kern prepared for his preliminary interviews demonstrate that, besides trying to ascertain evidence of Baker’s virtues, Kern was specifically looking for negative opinions.\textsuperscript{45} He asked questions like, “Do you remember Father Baker acting

\textsuperscript{40} New Laws, 11; WK, Letter to Most Rev. Bernard J. McLaughlin, 19 October 1987, CC, OLVA.


\textsuperscript{42} WK, Letter to Msgr. Robert Cunningham, 20 December 1988, CC, OLVA.

\textsuperscript{43} WK, Letter to Sarno, 20 October 1987.

\textsuperscript{44} WK, Memo to Popadick.

\textsuperscript{45} WK, “Questions for Interviews,” WKC, OLVA.
vain or proud?” “Was he a stubborn man?” or “Did you ever see him angry?” There were three identifiable rumors that Kern sought to clarify through his interviews. First, Baker was rumored to have had a rivalry with a South Buffalo priest, Monsignor John Nash.46 Upon further investigation, Kern discovered that any existing rivalry was most probably not antagonistic, a fact confirmed by the diocesan tribunal.47 Further, the rivalry may have been in fun. Baker and Nash’s sports teams competed against each other, and when Nash’s lost, Baker would reportedly “razz him about it” on the telephone.48

Secondly, a rumor existed that Baker abruptly dismissed one of his assistants, Reverend Herman J. Gerlach, in 1933 because of a falling-out. Gerlach proved to have a disagreeable reputation. Witnesses recalled several incidents in which he acted discourteously. For instance, he once threw a pig that had been roasted for the priests down the dumb waiter, and he pulled people out of charity lines if he saw them return to the queue after already receiving money.49 Furthermore, witnesses claimed that he refused to help with the African-American Apostolate and declined aid to an African-American who drove up to the bread line in a Cadillac.50 A letter from Bishop Turner discloses that there were indeed many complaints about Gerlach’s rough character and

46 Rev. Msgr. Eugene Selbert, interview by WK, undated, OLVA.


49 Smith, 13; Phillips, 9.

50 Mr. Reno, interview by WK, 29 November 1987, 14; Raymond Thomas, interview by WK, 3 December 1987, 1, OLVA.
that he negatively influenced other priests assigned to help Baker. However, Baker reportedly did not publicly speak ill of him or show evidence of strong anger about his behavior. In fact, Turner reported that Baker had “begged” him not to act on complaints about Gerlach. Nevertheless, Turner transferred Gerlach from the Institutes to Our Lady of Angels church in Cuba, New York at the end of December 1932.

In a third incident which might be viewed as unfavorable, Baker supported Francis Van Eich, a former ward of the orphanage, in his pursuit to enter the priesthood even though officials at St. Bonaventure Seminary expressed reservations about the boy’s “temperament and disposition” and refused to allow him to continue his studies in 1933 because of poor grades. After this failed attempt to enter the priesthood, Van Eich ran the basilica’s gift shop for years, reportedly gained a reputation as a homosexual, and later committed suicide under circumstances which suggested he was embezzling money from the basilica gift shop. Testimonies indicate that Baker had no knowledge of Eich’s sexual orientation or financial indiscretions. True to his character, Baker tried help Eich by recommending him for the priesthood in 1930 and encouraging him to run gift

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51 Bishop William Turner, Supplementary Letter to Rev. Herman J. Gerlach, 27 December 1932, copy from DBA in OLVA. For more on Gerlach’s character see also Housten, 2; Smith, 12; Sr. Heronime Murphy SSJ, interview by WK, 2 February 1988, 9, OLVA.

52 Ibid., Turner; See also Phillips, 29.

53 Bishop William Turner, Supplementary Letter to Gerlach and Letter to Rev. Herman J. Gerlach, 27 December 1927, copies from DBA in OLVA.

54 Ibid., Letter.


56 There is speculation that Eich hung himself because he was either in trouble with the IRS or ashamed of his sexuality, which included a penchant for boys. Also, police found a suspiciously large sum of cash in paper bags in his home after his death. See Phillips, 50; Reno, 22-24; Smith, 17.
shop. It was also evident that Eich thought highly of Baker. He wrote a laudatory article about him for a Canisius College publication and referred to him as a “life-long friend” and “a living saint.”

Baker’s cause progressed in Rome throughout the 1990s with a few minor delays. In 1989, Bishop Head announced that the diocesan tribunal, headed by Monsignor David S. Slubecky, pastor of Fourteen Holy Helpers in West Seneca, New York, would begin questioning witnesses for the cause. By 1991, Wurtz had collected some 17,000 signatures for the petition supporting Baker’s candidacy. In May 1993, Andrea Ambrosi, a Roman attorney, became the cause’s Roman Postulator. Ambrosi appointed Wurtz as Roman Vice-Postulator, and Bishop Head established an account at the Vatican bank to finance the cause there. Wurtz traveled to Rome in May 1993 as well to sort out any procedural difficulties and clarify the correct canonical format and timing for submitting additional necessary materials. Ambrosi informed a “delighted”

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57 Reno, 24-25; Phillips, 51. NHB, Letter to Diocese of Buffalo, 11 June 1930, OLVA.


60 Dave Condren, “Panel to Take Testimony in Step To Sainthood for Father Baker,” BN 11 March 1989, MNBHS, 389, LHS, BECPL.

61 RW, Letter to WK, 29 July 1991, CC, OLVA.


63 Andrea Ambrosi, Letter to RW, 24 May 24, 1993; EH, Letter to Instituto per le Ope Di Religione, 25 May 1993; Instituteo per le Ope Di Religione, Letter to EH, 30 June 1993, CC, OLVA.

64 RW, “Report from Rome,” 25 May 1993, CC, OLVA.
Wurtz that the Roman process for Baker’s cause would begin in September of 1993. By 1995, the diocese’s historical commission had completed its work, and its confidential final report and Kern’s inventory of Baker’s writings and historical documents were forwarded to Rome shortly thereafter. By 1998, the cause had progressed far enough in Rome for the Congregation to suggest that the Buffalo diocese move Baker’s body to a location that would be more accessible to the faithful. Members of the Congregation’s historical congress affirmed Baker’s heroic virtue in 2000, and his positio was published in 2001. Compiled largely by Roman Postulator, Andreas Ambrosi and Realtor, Brother Ambrosius Eszer, the positio contained basic information about Baker’s life and times, depositions of the witnesses, documents supporting the claim of his sanctity, the entire text of Anderson’s biography, samples of Baker’s own writing and a report and vote from the Congregation’s Historical Congress. Bishop Henry Mansell presented the positio to Pope John Paul II in January 2003. As of 2006, the diocese has investigated twenty four miracles for the cause.

**Father Baker in Print: The Search for Miracles**

Prior to the 1999 reinterment of Baker’s body in the basilica, local secular media sources restricted their coverage of Father Baker to major developments in the cause or

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65 RW, Letter to Andrea Ambrosi, 23 July 1993, CC, OLVA.


67 Dave Condren, “Father Baker to be Moved to the Basilica: Transfer aims to Make Sainthood Candidate More Accessible,” BN, 1 August 1998, sec. A.


70 Beth Donovan, email to author, November 29, 2001.
special events at the Institutes and did not speculate about Baker’s candidacy. During this
time, however, the cause did receive regular attention from the *Western New York
Catholic*, the local diocesan newspaper. While researching Baker’s life, Monsignor Kern
wrote a series of articles called “The Life and Times of Father Baker” which ran in the
*WNY Catholic* from 1987 to 1998. Kern relied largely on the work of Galvin, Anderson
and Brother Stanislaus, but he also used many primary documents and historical
newspaper articles. Kern considered his series an attempt to “to see some of Father
Baker’s life with “new eyes” as well as “to see deeper into the traditional material which
has been mined over and over again down through the decades since the death of Father
Baker.”

The articles communicated historical details about Baker’s life and attempted
to encourage people to pray for his canonization by ending each article with an
exhortation to, “Pray for the Cause of Father Baker.”

Kern’s writings are significant because they are historically reliable, report some
previously unrecorded details, and reveal some of the difficulties he encountered while
investigating Baker’s life. For example, Kern described the challenges he faced
understanding Baker’s diary. Baker had devised a private system of organization to
prevent others from being able to read his personal writings. In particular, he wrote on
every other page of his diary and filled blank and partially blank pages with other
material, such as his accounts or notes to himself. Further, he recorded some events
backwards, relaying earlier occurring details on later pages in his records.

Kern’s series is also important because it helped maintain interest in the cause and sustained Baker’s
popular following within the Western New York Catholic community by regularly
reminding readers about the story of his life and his candidacy for sainthood.

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71 WK, “Overview of the Life and Times of Father Baker,” LTB Collection, OLVA.
72 WK, “LTB (14) A Trick and a Retreat,” LTB Collection, OLVA.
Although the diocese had been working consistently on Baker’s cause throughout the 90s, local excitement remained at a steady moderate level until it was fueled when Baker’s body was moved to the basilica in 1999. The reinterment “was the top story for over a week with local and regional media outlets.” In Summer 1998, Wurtz announced that Baker’s body would be moved from the Holy Cross cemetery to a marble crypt in the basilica. Under a tent that had been erected to conceal the exhumation, Baker’s casket was unearthed on March 9, 1999 in a “dignified manner.” On top of his casket was a conolite box containing square glass jars of his blood and thoracic and abdominal fluids which had been taken from him when he was ill at the suggestion future interim bishop of Buffalo, Reverend Joseph Burke. Baker’s unearthed coffin was taken to the OLV hospital, and the fluids went to an undisclosed location for testing. On March 11, six white-gloved former Baker boys escorted Baker’s casket into the basilica. Over 1,200 people came to the ceremony, learning about it largely through word of mouth. An estimated 5 -6,000 people visited Baker’s remains that day. Commenting on the crowd and Baker’s persistent popular appeal, Bishop Henry Mansell, diocesan bishop from 1995 to 2003, said, “This is the obvious voice of the people.” Each of the three major local television stations sent crews, resulting in a media “feeding frenzy.”

73 Father Baker Memorial Rooms, label, front room cabinet, 2003


75 “Death, Wake, Funeral and Burial of Father Baker in Pictures and Text,” 6, OLVA.

76 WK, “Exhumation,” III.

77 Ibid, 4.

78 Ibid, 5.


80 WK, “Exhumation,” 5.
Moreover, Lackawanna’s paper, *The Front Page*, donated resources to print a four-page souvenir Father Baker supplement about the cause and reinterment ceremony, “The Road to Sainthood.”

Once Baker’s remains were fixed in the basilica, the local secular news began to pay more attention his cause. Stories about him were again regarded as “good copy,” much as they had been during the last ten years of his life and immediately after his death. However, media reports were not focused on the “venerable and beloved prelate,” his good works, or the details of his life at the Institutes. They centered instead upon the possibility of his sainthood and claims of his supernatural efficacy. Accordingly, alleged Father Baker miracles have regularly appeared in the news since the transfer of his body, reinforcing conceptions of Baker as a wonderworker.

The blood and bodily fluids that had been unearthed with Baker’s coffin had remained in a liquid state, and speculation that the blood was preserved because he was “such a holy man” made the news three months after his exhumation. Moreover, a featured front page article in 1999 announced that the strategy of moving Baker’s body “has paid off in dramatically increased visits to the new tomb by faithful Catholics praying for Father Baker’s intercession” and reported that three miracles were under investigation by the diocese. The article also highlighted several miracles attributed to Baker in the past which did not meet the diocesan requirements to be considered by Rome, including the cases of James Fennie, who was cured of an inoperable cancer by


84 Dave Condren, “Slow Track to Sainthood,” *BN*, 8 August 1999, sec. A.
holding Baker’s cross in the 1930s, and Frank McNaughton, who was cured of heart problems in 1973.

The year 2000 saw a significant increase of Father Baker coverage in the *Buffalo News*. In Fall, Baker’s “inexplicably fresh” blood received front page coverage again when a representative from the Vatican came to Lackawanna to conduct a confidential investigation. In order to “avoid any activities that may jeopardize this process,” Wurtz asked that reporters “respect this process and refrain from an pursuit of interviews or footage.” However, the article reflected excitement about Baker’s cause by stating that the pope could beatify Baker if the blood was declared a miracle. The recovery of a sixteen-year-old from bacterial meningitis in 2000 also gained considerable local and national media attention as a possible Father Baker miracle. The family of Joseph Donohue III claimed to have prayed only to Baker for his recovery, a rosary that had once belonged to the prelate was placed on Joseph’s chest, the family received a Father Baker cloth scrap relic from a well-wisher, a local priest brought dirt from Baker’s gravesite in the Holy Cross cemetery to the boy’s hospital room and sprinkled it in his hair, and people prayed to Baker for Joseph’s healing over the Internet. After recovering, Joseph claimed that while in the coma he saw Father Baker and his grandmother sitting in a castle and felt a sense of peace. Even though the report expressed local anticipation about this miracle’s potential to help beatify Baker, the diocese did not propose it to Rome nor did the diocese offer any specific explanation for this decision. Possibly, diocesan investigators were not able to rule out medical intervention or the aid of some other divine intermediary.

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85 Dave Condren, “Vatican official to ask questions on Father Baker’s blood,” *BN*, 19 November 2000, sec. A.

86 Ibid.

During the Christmas season of 2000, a prominent and strategically timed sequence of Father Baker articles appeared in the *Buffalo News*. Highlighting a local icon of charity during a holiday season when giving is emphasized implicitly presented Baker as a model for the community. The three part front-page series, “Father Baker: Man of the Church, Man of the World,” highlighted Baker’s life, works and cause. The first feature included a color photograph of a devotee praying before Baker’s tomb in the basilica. It relayed details about Baker’s life and work, including his trip to Paris and the story of the gas well, and described how his “cradle-to-grave” system of care was still at work in Lackawanna, calling it “Father Baker’s legacy.” The use of the term “cradle-to-grave” associates Baker’s work with the church’s right to life ethic endorsed by John Paul II, particularly as formulated by Chicago’s popular Cardinal Bernardin. The second feature focused on Monsignor Wurtz’s job as postulator, included a color portrait of him, and claimed that “making Father Baker a saint is the passion of his life.” In addition, it recounted the Donohue miracle and relayed the healing of Anthony Kubik, a boy whose recovery from leukemia was being attributed to Baker, but that was also not being considered by Rome. The diocese’s hope that Baker’s “wondrous blood” would be accepted as Baker’s first miracle was also reiterated in this article. The final feature speculated that Baker’s canonization might enhance Lackawanna’s economy through tourism, displayed a photo of some of the Father Baker memorabilia available at the gift


shop, and compared Lackawanna’s potential development with the exponential growth of Benslem, Pennsylvania after Katherine Drexel was canonized in October 2000.\footnote{Jane Kwiatkowski, “Lackawanna could see rush of tourism: Ready, set, saint,” \textit{BN}, 26 December 2000, sec. A.}

A few days later, the \textit{News} published an editorial to clarify and defend its choice to draw attention to the prospect of Baker’s sainthood:

\begin{quote}
It is not the province of a secular newspaper to advocate or oppose the naming of a saint by religious authorities. But Father Nelson H. Baker was more than a purely religious figure, he was a man who had a huge impact on the lives of tens of thousands of impoverished or lonely Western New Yorkers; it’s hard not to cheer for his cause…Any declaration of sainthood is the business of the church, but we applaud the continued and dedicated efforts of…Monsignor Robert C. Wurtz and others who champion Baker’s cause…He was our treasure long before he became the world’s.\footnote{“The Road to Sainthood,” \textit{BN}, 30 December 2000, sec. C.}
\end{quote}

By defending its series, explicitly cheering for Baker’s cause and supporting the diocese’s efforts, the paper echoed local excitement about sharing him with the world and implicitly endorsed his candidacy.

In 2005, a flurry of local, national and international media coverage focused on the recovery of coma patient Donald Herbert, a resident at Father Baker Manor. Herbert had been in a coma for ten years and his healing came at the heels of the Terri Shaivo case. Shaivo was another long-term coma patient in Florida who received considerable media attention. Her case brought the issue of euthanasia into public consciousness because of an extended court battle between her parents and husband about cutting her life support. Shaivo died at the end of March 2005 after her feeding tube had been removed by court order a few weeks earlier. Herbert’s recovery began a month later at the end of April. While Herbert’s doctor, a Muslim, credited God and an experimental combination of drugs with the recovery, those involved in Baker’s cause hoped that Herbert’s recovery could be a miracle attributable to Baker, especially because Herbert’s family had placed a piece of Baker’s robe on him daily during his illness. His family requested privacy about the matter, but Monsignor Wurtz publicly extended his willingness to speak with them about the possibility of a miracle when they were ready.

Frequent coverage of Father Baker’s alleged wonders in the secular media between 2000 and 2005 is reminiscent of the Victorian’s emphasis on Baker’s supernatural efficacy during the 1940s and 50s in its “Favors Received...” section. This focus on miracles also reflects popular hope within the Western New York region for Baker’s beatification and eventual sainthood. Even though Vatican II emphasized the cult of the saints as a means toward enhancing one’s relationship with God rather than a way


to gain supernatural favors, Baker popular appeal appears to depend mainly on his alleged wonderworking capacities.\(^{96}\) As of 2006, the only things lacking in order for Baker to become “Saint Nelson” or “Saint Father Baker” are two verifiable miracles, and local anticipation for such miracles is intense. One devotee reported ardently attempting to produce a miracle to help the cause, and National Public Radio even featured Lackawanna’s hope for Baker’s blood to be the miracle that would allow Rome to beatify him and attract pilgrims to improve the local economy, commenting, “Lackawanna waits, waits and works and plays and prays.”\(^{97}\) However, as of 2006, no miracle has been verified by Rome for formal beatification. Although Monsignor Wurtz confidently expressed his personal belief that Baker’s “wondrous blood” was a true miracle, it did not pass muster in Rome.\(^{98}\) The Congregation agreed that it defied scientific explanation, but did not want to accept it as one of the required miracles as it was not representative of Baker’s life-long concern for others. They wanted to see a medical cure instead.\(^{99}\) Consequently, amid the uncertainty of Baker’s formal beatification, it is likely that any new claims of his wonders will continue to draw the media’s interest and speculation, especially since those working on the cause are bound by confidentiality to refrain from revealing specifics about any miracles being investigated.\(^{100}\)

**Legacy of Care: Promoting Father Baker**

Unlike reports in the *Buffalo News*, promotional materials for Baker’s cause produced by the diocese and Institutes since 1999 do not underscore Baker’s apparent

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\(^{96}\) See Pope Paul VI, *Lumen Gentium*, 21 November 1964, Ch. vii, 51.


\(^{98}\) RW, interview, 30 July 2003.


\(^{100}\) RW, Email to author, 15 November 2005.
wonderworking abilities. Nor do they add further elaborations to the well-known stories about him as some previous publicity did. Then again, they do not actively seek to suppress rumors or stories about him either. Instead, based on research for the cause, they offer reasonably accurate and instructional portrayals of his life and work, intending to provide factual information as a corrective to some of the more inventive rumors. In addition, they highlight Baker’s paradigmatic value and demonstrate how his work has continued at the Institutes through its present programs as his “legacy.”

Shortly after the transfer of Baker’s body to the basilica, Kern suggested that a new prayer be composed for the cause’s prayer card which, at the time, had an appeal to Our Lady of Victory for Baker’s canonization. Like Robert K. Doran, Kern thought that the prayer should be directly to Baker: “I shall pray only [sic] through your intercession, so that any wonder which occurs can be attributed to your intercession.” Kern’s emphasis on praying directly to Baker, however, appeared to be motivated by a desire to further the cause rather than by personal passion for Baker. Kern believed that a prayer directed to Baker, and Baker alone, was vital because the closely related devotion to Our Lady of Victory and Father Baker might make it difficult to prove Baker’s sole intercession as the cause of a miracle. An additional prayer card began to be distributed in 2003, but its prayer of petition is not directed to Baker. Instead it is directed to God, offers thanks for Baker, and concludes, “I pray in confidence that through his [Baker’s] intercession, You will grant me the favor which I request.” The lack of an official prayer directed to Baker functions to emphasize God’s supremacy over what the faithful

101 Beth Donovan, interview, 9 July 2003.
102 WK, Letter to RW, 27 April 1999, CC, OLVA.
103 Ibid.
might view as Baker’s direct supernatural abilities. The prayer also identifies traits which make Baker a good role model for Catholics. He “lived your love in service to the poor, the sick, the homeless and the young.”

This appears to be a typical format of prayers for contemporary prayer cards. The prayers on cards for Father Michael J. McGivney, Mother Marianne Cope, Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha and St. Josemaría Escrivá take similar approaches.

In 1994, the Institutes established a small public relations department to handle promotional materials, fundraising events, press releases and publications for the parish, the Our Lady of Victory Charity Homes, Baker-Victory Services and the Victory Health Services. Staffed by communications professionals who formerly worked for the Ohio State athletics department and Wendy’s, this department promotes Father Baker’s sainthood as well. Much of their publicity seeks to connect the Institutes’ past with the present and Baker’s candidacy. For instance, circulars for the Institutes’ services such as its day treatment program for special needs children advertise that Baker-Victory Services are “Continuing Father Baker’s Legacy of Care,” and the basilica’s pamphlet designates it as “the final resting place of Msgr. Nelson H. Baker, Servant of God.” The public relations department also promotes Baker’s sainthood with 180,000 direct mailings to the Institutes’ supporters. It increased its Father Baker publicity significantly after 1999 by creating a collection of standardized visual, material and printed items to publicize his life, works and candidacy for sainthood.

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105 Ibid.

106 “Prayer for the Canonization of Father Michael J. McGivney,” June 1998. McGivney, founder of the Knights of Columbus, is presently the only other American born male candidate for sainthood. Interestingly, Bishop Henry Mansell of the Buffalo diocese was made archbishop of the Hartford diocese in 2003 and became involved in promoting McGivney’s case instead of Baker’s. See Tokasz, “Saintly Priorities Shift…”

107 Dave Condren, “Slow Track...”
promotional materials include a website, a new edition of Floyd Anderson’s *Father Baker*, an informative booklet and souvenirs produced for the Institutes’ 150th anniversary, and an updated Father Baker museum.

Between 2000 and 2005, the Our Lady of Victory website underwent significant changes which included expanding its treatment of Father Baker. In 2000, it included information about the parish and Institutes as well as a link to a page with information about Father Baker. Baker’s page displayed Doran’s “prisoner’s portrait,” gave a brief summary of Baker’s life and the cause, and offered links to the prayer for Baker’s canonization, Father Baker’s prayer to Our Lady of Victory, and an Adobe Acrobat version of Boniface Hanley’s short biography of Baker, “One Lifetime,” which had appeared in *The Anthonian* in 1979.108 By 2001, the web site was updated and the OLV home page now sported Baker’s familiar head-shot photograph along with photographs of the basilica and children cared for by the homes. “Father Baker Info” and the “Fr. Baker Story” were the first links in the sidebar, suggesting that the web developer thought viewers would be most interested in those topics. Baker’s page now included a brief description of his accomplishments and how “Father Baker’s legacy continues to this day in many ways.” Moreover, besides linking to Hanley’s biography and the prayers, it also linked to an “on-line pictorial history of the humble priest,” a “Father Baker photo of the month,” and updated information about his cause.

The on-line pictorial history was composed of five phases covering his early life, his seminary years, his struggle to bring the Institutes out of debt, his “growing legacy,” and his last years. Unlike many previous biographers, the author of this brief biography refrained from speculating about Baker’s visit to the Paris shrine of OLV writing, “Once in Paris, Nelson spent much time admiring the shrine to Our Lady of Victory, and one

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can only guess what went through his mind, as he was to devote the rest of his days to dutifully serving her.”\textsuperscript{109} The photo of the month feature published archival photographs with historical notes. For instance, one photo showed Baker dedicating an OLV statue in 1897 and comments on the Institutes expansions between 1883 and 1907.\textsuperscript{110} The canonization update highlighted the Vatican’s investigation into Baker’s blood, and this continues to be the only investigated miracle reported on the website.\textsuperscript{111}

By 2002, the Father Baker section of the Our Lady of Victory website had expanded to include a photo gallery which replaced the photo of the month feature; a “Road to Canonization” section which outlined the canonization process, defined miracles for readers and provided brief information about the cause’s progress and significance; and an online community where the website’s editor posted testimonies from a number people Baker had helped. These posts included petitions to Father Baker, expressions of gratitude for his aid, and statements of hope for his canonization.\textsuperscript{112} As of 2006, no further updates to the Father Baker section of the website have been made.

The design for the opening web page of the 2002-06 Father Baker section offers an example of the uniform visual style that promotional materials and flyers from the Institutes began to display around 2002 (Figure 6.2). A large semi-transparent photograph of Baker’s ubiquitous head-shot portrait looms in the background and a line of Baker boys are in the foreground against a royal blue background. Baker’s portrait and a

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\textsuperscript{110}“Photo of the Month” [cited March 2001]; available from http://ourladyofvictory.buffnet.net/FrBaker/photomonth.html.
\textsuperscript{111}“Canonization Update” [cited March 2001]; available from http://ourladyofvictory.buffnet.net/FrBaker/canonization.html.
\end{flushright}
uniform color scheme appear in many of the Institute’s other publications. His photo also provides the background for the cover of the 2002 Annual Report, and all of the circulars for Baker-Victory Services have a teal blue color scheme. When the diocese published another edition of Floyd Anderson’s *Father Baker* in 2002 “to spread the word” about Father Baker, a faded head shot portrait of Baker looming behind a line of Baker boys appeared on its cover as well (Figure 6.3). This line of Baker boys also appears as a central image in several of the new displays of historical photographs installed between 2003 and 2005 in the hallways of the orphanage and infant home buildings.

A number of new Father Baker materials which followed this basic design scheme were produced in 2004 for the Institutes’ 150th anniversary. The program pamphlet for the 2004 Father Baker Day celebration looked just like the cover of the new edition of Anderson’s biography. Further, the public relations department designed a white and blue anniversary logo with Baker’s portrait hovering above silhouettes of the basilica and Institutes (Figure 6.4). For the celebration, banners with this logo were hung on lamp posts along Ridge Road between Route 5 and Abbot Road. This logo also appeared on event flyers, commemorative lapel pins, and even on chocolate candy bars wrapped in royal blue foil. Promotional materials like these continue the tradition of using Father Baker’s portrait as an emblem for the Institutes and charities much like the *Victorian* did throughout the 40s and 50s. However, whereas the *Victorian* used Baker’s image in the past to validate and endorse its charity drives, publications and certain viewpoints, today’s Father Baker portrait represents his legacy, the manner in which the work he began has continued and developed since his death. Frequently appearing as a semi-translucent image the background or hovering above other images, Baker’s portrait also stands for the driving force behind the Institutes’ original charities and today’s services.

Moreover, it represents the continued presence of his “animating” spirit felt by those at the Institutes since his death.\textsuperscript{114} Indeed, Sister Veronica Anne Armano, an employee at the infant home from 1942 to 1985, voiced an enduring sentiment at the Homes: “I always felt close to him. He seemed to be around all the time.”\textsuperscript{115}

In 2004, the public relations department released a new booklet about Baker, the basilica and the Institutes, \textit{Victory! The True Story of a 150-year Legacy of Caring}. The booklet follows the blue and white color scheme, and a large photograph of a line of Baker boys wraps around both sides of its cover. The Institutes had published no booklet of this type since 1986.\textsuperscript{116} It provides a biography of Baker which explains his Lutheran and Catholic background, emphasizes the influence of his Catholic mother on his conversion, relays previously unknown details about his military service and describes his new tomb in the basilica. The editor includes Anderson’s account of the Victoria gas well and the unverifiable detail about “thousands” of infant skeletons in the Erie Canal inspiring the infant home. As such, this booklet pays homage to traditional Father Baker stories while highlighting details of Baker’s life collected for the cause.

Many of the key messages about Baker found on the website and in the booklet are also evident in the renovated Father Baker Museum. Previously, the space had functioned as a repository for Father Baker’s effects, was not provided with a specific narrative direction by its curators, and supplied a devotional place for some of his followers. As of 2003, devotional characteristics of the museum have been de-

\textsuperscript{114} “In Fond Memory,” \textit{Victorian} 43 no. 3 (March 1937): 41.


\textsuperscript{116} See Alice M. Pytak, \textit{A Christian Commitment} (Lackawanna: OLV Homes of Charity, 1986).
emphasized, and the space offers an informative and instructive journey through Baker’s life and the history of the Institutes. It is no longer a repository of memories for a local audience familiar with Baker who understand the context of its contents with little or no explanation. Instead, in response to the progress of his cause and an increasing number of pilgrims, it seeks to promote his life and candidacy and communicates explicit information intended for an audience who knows little about him.

The new museum no longer feels or looks like a Catholic devotional space. There is a new wainscot floor, track lighting and softer overhead lights (Figure 6.5). Items may be closely observed, and the various displays avoid ambiguity by providing narrative frameworks for the artifacts on display. Instead of being welcomed to the Father Baker Memorial Rooms by a visually prominent statue of Our Lady of Victory as in the old museum, museum visitors now first encounter a sign welcoming them to the “Father Baker Museum” and describing the “remarkable legacy” of Baker’s “City of Charity.” The large statue of OLV and kneeler have been removed from the back display room, and Baker’s sitting room and bedroom exhibits no longer resemble shrines with extensive displays of religious items. To counter rumors that Baker actually lived in the basilica’s basement and discourage viewers from regarding the museum as “Father Baker’s shrine” a sign with Baker’s headshot on it reads, “Contrary to popular belief, Father Baker did not reside here…He resided next door at St. John’s Protectory.” The dark heavy wooden doors have been replaced with three sided glass barriers that permit a viewer to step into each room. Although the lighting is still dim in the office and study, it is possible to clearly view the items and read their descriptive tags. Baker’s death mask is no longer the central display in his sitting room and many religious items have been removed from the center of the bedroom exhibit. Effort has been made in both rooms to display Baker’s clothes and personal effects in the context in which they might have been used and labels are provided for many items. For instance, all of Baker’s desk items that were in the front room case in the old museum have been moved to his desk in the sitting room display. A
label on the desk next to a name stamper reads, "Father Baker hand signed hundreds of thousands of letters. As he grew more feeble, a stamper was used. Many of them were literally worn out." In Baker’s bedroom, the central display is of his familiar black cassock and biretta with a label which explains that these were the clothes worn by a monsignor at the time. These rooms are now more akin to educational historical exhibits than shrines.\footnote{117}

One of the most significant changes is the relocation of Father Baker’s death mask. The mask which had glowed mysteriously in the center of the sitting room exhibit under the lights within its case has been moved to the back display room (Figure 6.6). Even though the curators want to include the mask because of its historical importance, they are trying to downplay it.\footnote{118} It is still in its reliquary, but the interior of the case is not separately illuminated and a viewer can examine the mask in detail. This accessibility eliminates much of its previous visual mystique, and its new manner of display no longer encourages devotional attention. Left unlabelled, the mask is still somewhat mysterious and occasionally garners negative or curious comments from people who visit the museum without a tour guide.\footnote{119} The mask’s new accessibility resembles the display of St. John Newman’s body at the parish of St. Peter the Apostle in Philadelphia. Newman’s body is encased in glass under the main altar with no barriers preventing visitors from examining it closely. In order to make the Newman display more attractive, a smooth white wax mask has been placed over his face.

Another significant change in the rooms is the addition of a definitive narrative scheme. The narrative in the front room’s display case recounts the story of Baker’s life,\footnote{117} Tom Lucia, interview and tour, 10 July 2003.\footnote{118} Tom Lucia, email to author, 2 February 2004.\footnote{119} Ibid.
death and cause. The case has a left, middle and right section, each with three shelves. The narration on the left section tells the story Baker’s life before his vocation. The story of his life as a Catholic begins on the top shelf with a photograph of his mother, a copy of his baptismal records, a photograph of his family, and a map of land they owned on what is now Broadway Avenue in Buffalo on the top shelf. The middle left shelf includes narrations of his military service and displays historical documents and items from his regiment. The center set of shelves displays the story of his vocation, including his assignments in the diocese, his position as vicar general and his devotional practices of saying the liturgy of the hours and recording the names of those who asked him to pray to OLV for their intentions. The final set of shelves to the right highlight his death and cause with his reinterment ceremony on the top shelf, his death and funeral on the second and a display of his positio and an account of the miracle of his blood on the bottom. The labels on items in the cabinet are generally both informative and instructive. For example, the label regarding Baker’s cause, “Father Baker's Miracle” explains both the process of canonization and where Baker’s cause stands:

At the time of the exhumation, a small crypt was unearthed containing three glass vials of Father Baker's bodily fluids. One of the vials held Father Baker's blood which was tested by experts locally and in Rome. The blood was found to be "unexplainably fresh." After official testimony was taken, the information was submitted to the Congregation for the Causes of Saints at the Vatican. It is hoped that this finding will be considered the first miracle for Father Baker's Cause for Canonization which would elevate him to the second of three levels, Blessed (Beatification). A second proven miracle would be then needed to elevate him to Saint (Canonization).

A closer look at the shelves in this cabinet reveals that many of the same items that were located here in the older museum remain. For instance, the photograph of Baker in his coffin appears much as it did in the old museum, but the new display has an explicit narrative framework that emphasizes Baker’s popularity (Figure 6.7). It is called,
“Father Baker’s Death” and describes how over “a half a million people” came to see Baker at his funeral. Historical photographs show long lines of people waiting in line to view his body and scenes from the funeral, and Father Baker’s will is displayed. Consequently, this new display explicitly communicates Baker’s importance to community instead of assuming viewers are familiar enough with Baker to know his local reputation.

The content of the cabinets in the back room have also been reorganized. The large cabinet narrates the history of Baker’s ministry to orphans and children and paints a picture of what life was like for the children under his care. Though most of the children Baker worked with were not African-American, a photograph of the neatly dressed African-American boy that also appears in the anniversary booklet and in one of the new hallway photographic displays is the centerpiece of the “life of a Baker Boy” display (Figure 6.8). This image’s prominence in the museum reflects the parish’s concern with promoting a particular view of Baker’s racial tolerance, one that might help him on the road to canonization and that makes him a good model for Catholics. Katherine Drexel, who was known for her work with African-Americans, was canonized in 2000 while the diocese was working on Baker’s cause. Archival contents suggest that researchers for Baker’s cause consulted her positio and thoroughly researched Baker’s “Negro Apostolate.”

Several new historical artifacts including a baby wrist band identification set and some toys also help narrate the stories of the orphanage and infant home. The “horse blanket” safety pin that held together Baker’s shawl appears in this display as well, but

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120 Newspaper articles estimate that between 100,000 to 500,000 people visited Baker’s bier. See “Hundred Thousand at Father Baker’s Bier,” CE, 3 August 1936, 1; “Remains of Father Baker are seen by over 400,000,” CUT, 6 September 1936, 1.

121 A copy of Drexel’s positio is in the OLVA. Also see WK, “Father Baker and the Evangelization of the Black People,” OLVA; Timothy Allen “Nelson Henry Baker...” 31-33.
this time it is visually contextualized among other items from the infant home (Figure 6.9). Given its previous ambiguous context, the curators thought it was a diaper pin. The story of how Baker decided to build the infant home after reading about infant skeletons being dredged from the sewers is also explicitly narrated in this display’s label. Although it appears that effort has been made to communicate the factual historical information about Baker that research for the cause uncovered, this legendary detail has persisted in various materials. It speaks to his special concern for the beginning of life, and the choice to present it draws attention to him as an exemplary pro-life model.

The absence of religious overtones and the presence of a clearer narrative in the new museum highlight Baker’s paradigmatic worth. The officially sanctioned miracle of Baker’s blood used for his cause is included, but there are no other indications of the rumors of his wonderworking abilities or characteristics that hint at his local legendary status. Baker is not a mysterious mythical icon or the wonder worker that characteristics of the old museum helped to preserve. Now he is represented as the son of a Catholic mother, a convert to Catholicism, a patriot who served his country in the Civil War, a pious and charitable individual, a supporter of racial equality, and a candidate for sainthood.

**Father Baker’s Legacy of Victory**

Others outside of the public relations department have been involved in promoting Baker as well. Sister Ellen O’Keefe, principal of Our Lady of Victory grade school, collaborated with a committee of other teachers including Julie Gannon, Sharon Michalewski and Shelia Flynn, to develop a Father Baker curriculum for the diocesan schools. O’Keefe, a Sister of St. Joseph, grew up in Lackawanna and recalled visiting the

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122 Another of these pins is in the diocesan archives. It was given as a gift by Baker to one of the Sisters of Our Lady of Charity during a boat ride on the lake. See Sisters of Our Lady of Charity collection, Father Baker collection, DBA.
basilica as a child on Sundays with her sister after buying candy at a local store.\footnote{Sr. Ellen O’Keefe, interview, 22 July 2003.}

Although she actively promotes devotion to both Our Lady of Victory and Father Baker in her school, devotion to Baker appears to have taken precedence. One of O’Keefe’s main concerns is ensuring that younger generations learn about him and help preserve his memory. She took many of the school’s children to Baker’s reinterment ceremony, commenting that it was something they could tell their grandchildren about.\footnote{Ibid.}

Moreover, instead of giving students statues of Our Lady of Victory at the annual Christian ideals awards ceremony as she had, she awards them the newer Father Baker statue instead (Figure 6.10).\footnote{Ibid.} This was, in part, a financial decision because the Baker statue cost less, but the change also indicates an interest in promoting Baker.

O’Keefe’s main objective for the Father Baker curriculum was to instill a love of Baker into younger people, especially since the first generation of those who knew and loved him were dying out.\footnote{Ibid.} In 2002, the diocese announced that the curriculum would be used in the diocese’s 92 elementary schools and in 267 parish religious education programs.\footnote{Dave Condren, “Promoting the Padre’s Story: Catholic Pupils will Study Life of Father Baker,” \textit{BN}, 16 January 2002, sec. B.}

The curriculum includes lesson plans for grades K-8 “developed to spread the good news about a great man.”\footnote{“Introduction,” Father Baker “Padre of the Poor” Lesson Plan Packet, Diocese of Buffalo, Department of Catholic Education, 2001-2002.} It covers Baker’s life, works, legacy and cause, pairs lessons with scriptural readings, and is adapted to several different subjects including social studies, language arts, math, and art. For instance, a lesson plan for K-3
Language Arts has students construct a “Giving Tree.” Teachers are instructed to have students brainstorm about ways they can carry on Father Baker’s work and then write down their ideas for “giving acts of kindness” on leaves for the tree. The emphasis on Baker’s legacy and paradigmatic life in the curriculum echoes themes in publicity materials from the Institutes.

Another diocesan project to promote Baker was a film about his life. This was not the Hollywood production readers of the *Victorian* had proposed in 1941, nor was it associated with Robert Doran’s ideas for a Father Baker documentary in 1980. Instead, in 2001, the Vincent and Harriet Palisano Foundation awarded Daybreak Television, the diocese’s television production branch, a $60,000 grant to produce a historical documentary, *Legacy of Victory: Remembering Father Baker.*129 Founded in 1962, the Palisano foundation provides scholarships and grants for local Catholic colleges and had previously funded other Daybreak projects.130 The diocese hired former CNN producer, Trish McHenry, to make the film, and local Channel 7 news followed the documentary’s production, airing a series of reports about it.131

Although McHenry had produced news features for CNN, this was her first documentary, and it took eighteen months to complete. She researched Baker’s life with the help of local historian, Timothy R. Allen, who also served on the cause’s historical commission. The project proved to be a challenging one. Allen could find few documents recording the details of Baker’s early life.132 McHenry, too, felt some discouragement

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130 Victoria Kearns, “Father Baker Documentary to Air This Week,” *WNYC online* [cited 25 March 2003]; available from [http://www.buffalodiocese.org/wnyc/television.html].


about the lack of documentation and expressed frustration at how myths and legends about Baker had displaced more factual accounts. Consequently, the film relies closely on the few available sources and frankly acknowledges the lack of documentation for several key events. Similar to other publicity about Baker, the film highlights his mixed religious heritage, conversion to Catholicism, military service, piety and service to others.

Interviews complement the film’s historical narration which is somewhat limited by the lack of sources. Thus, Timothy Allen’s authoritative biographical commentary composes a considerable portion of Baker’s story. Allen’s observations emphasize Baker’s business acumen, managerial abilities and persistent drive. Significantly, visual images and interviews from the Basilique de Notre-Dame des Victoires in Paris fully contextualize Baker’s devotion to Our Lady of Victory within the history of devotion to her at the European site. Also included are recollections from several Baker boys and local people who knew Baker, including Ruth Monk, one of Baker’s African-American converts and member of the OLV parish who recalls, “Once you talked to [Baker] you never wanted to leave him.”

Overall, the documentary offers an even-handed historical presentation of Baker’s life and work and demonstrates a familiarity with Baker’s local iconic status. McHenry relied on the familiar image of Baker in his biretta when recreating scenes in which he appears. The actor is wearing black robes and a biretta, but is shown from behind, so he is recognizable as Baker only by his apparel. Although McHenry received many claims about miracles from the public, she refrained from including any of them because she felt

133 Trish McHenry, interview, 3 July 2003.
that it was not her place to judge or imply their validity.\footnote{McHenry.} She also avoided presenting the local excitement about Baker’s cause and belief in his wonderworking abilities in favor of a historical narrative. While the film begins with a re-enactment of William F. Markoe, one of Baker’s colleagues from the seminary, writing an 1871 letter which calls him “a real saint,” the cause for Baker’s canonization is never mentioned in the 90 minute film, and only near the its end does it mention that people currently pray to him. In addition, McHenry avoided directly narrating any of the legendary accounts of Baker’s life unless those details were provided in an interview. For instance, the film includes a clip of Monsignor Wurtz commenting on the general history of the Institutes and recounting the story of baby skeletons that inspired Baker to start the infant home. By including this detail through Wurtz, the film acknowledges the legend without actively promoting it.

On March 19, 2003, the day the United States began bombing in Iraq, Legacy of Victory premiered on Buffalo’s WKBW-TV Channel 7. Two large television screens were set up in the basilica, and Bishop Henry J. Mansell introduced the film from the basilica to those watching it at home.\footnote{Barbara O’Brien, “Father Baker’s Legacy Remembered,” \textit{BN}, 20 March 2003, B3.} One viewer at the basilica lauded the film and commented that it “brought tears to your eyes.”\footnote{Angela Cook, interview, 23 July 2003.} Daybreak TV online also produced a web site to accompany the video which includes a synopsis of the film, a timeline, press releases, and biographies of several people involved in the film’s production.\footnote{“Legacy of Victory: Remembering Father Baker” [cited 20 September 2005]; available from \url{http://www.buffalodiocese.org/frbaker/}.} As of 2006, the documentary was available in both VHS and DVD formats, with the DVD containing bonus footage of the reinterment ceremony. Consistent with the basic design
elements of publicity materials from the Institutes, the documentary’s cover shows Baker sitting at his desk with an image of the basilica in the background and a line of racially diverse Baker boys in the foreground. The film was nominated for a New York State Emmy in 2004, and Buffalo’s WKBW Channel 7 aired the film again on Christmas Eve 2005.139

**Inspired Productions**

In 2002, www.frbaker.com was owned by “a freelance performer who [was] not affiliated with Our Lady of Victory or Father Baker’s cause,” Charles Girard.140 Girard used the site to self-promote his independently produced one-man show, “The Life and Times of Father Nelson Baker.” On the web site, he claimed his intentions were “to reintroduce people to the greatest man ever to come from Western New York State…to help find the miracles that will help raise him to Sainthood…and to encourage young people in the audience to consider a life as a religious.”141 As an instructor of community education courses such as “How to Sell Anything,” and “The Seven Secrets of Self-Marketing,” Girard appeared to have relied on his own techniques to promote his performances.142 One of his circulars dramatically drew attention with the header, “Need help? Don’t know where to turn? Learn how to solve your problems using the power of prayer as taught by Father Nelson Henry Baker.”

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In his performance, Girard adopts the persona of Father Baker, dresses in the familiar black robes and biretta, and presents a dramatic reconstruction of events in Baker’s life. Girard’s one-man show evolved from a play he wrote about Baker in 1996 that he was unable to market to theater groups in the Buffalo area. Based on research from Floyd Anderson’s book, personal interviews and consultations with Monsignor Walter Kern, the full length stage play is framed by scenes from July 1936 in which Brother Stanislaus recalls Baker’s life for a reporter as news of Father Baker’s critical condition and imminent demise are updated on the radio.

Girard’s Father Baker offers yet another fictionalized version of the priest. Unlike Robert Doran, Girard develops Baker’s personality through dramatic effect rather than Baker’s personal charisma. Baker is the hero of every scene, putting out a fire at the gas well by praying the rosary, saving boys from jail, receiving a girl who cannot pay for care into the maternity home, helping to start a union at the steel plant, and using prayer to stop two steel plant “goons” from beating him. The play also consciously and didactically develops the theme of racial tolerance and diversity. For instance, Baker’s family is portrayed as sympathetic to the underground railroad in Buffalo; Baker gives a Native American woman a medal of OLV; and during Baker’s funeral, the bishop states “I see Jew and gentile, Moslems [sic], Hindus. Father Baker helped not only Catholics, but also Protestant, Jews and any one that was in need.

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143 Condren, “One Man Show…”

144 Charles Girard, “Father Nelson Henry Baker: This man, who raised 12,500 boys said, “There is no such thing as a bad boy,” 1996 manuscript, OLVA; Charles Girard, interview, 17 June 2003. Charles Girard, Letter to WK, 16 September 1997, WKC, OLVA.


146 Ibid., 121
Although Girard’s full-length Father Baker play was never produced, his one-man show has been enthusiastically received by those outside of the OLV Institutes. He performed it over thirty times for various groups and organizations in the Western New York region between 1997 and 2003. Some 200 people packed the Lackawanna Public Library to see a performance in 2000, and one viewer commented, “Girard sure kept everyone’s attention. When you can get kids to sit still for an hour and a half, it’s pretty good.” Despite Girard’s self-promotional interest, he appeared to have genuine affection for Baker. A native of the Buffalo, he recalled visiting the basilica while a student at St. Joseph’s grade school and wondering at everything Baker accomplished. He invited Monsignor Kern and Bishop Head to his first performance at D’Youville College in 1997 and asked Kern to pray for him that all would go well with the production. Moreover, he reported that he felt a deep personal connection to Father Baker and looked to him as a guide.

In 2005, another Buffalo area native used the internet to help promote his work on Baker. John Koerner, a 28 year old author established an email account at bakermysteries@yahoo.com for inquiries about his book about Father Baker. The Mysteries of Father Baker was printed in Spring 2005 by Western New York Wares, a regional publishing company established in 1984. The first run of 2,000 books sold out by October, with the majority of its distribution in the Western New York region. Koerner’s book offers an in-depth exploration of Baker’s alleged miracles, “the

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147 Condren, “One Man Show…”
149 Charles Girard, Letter to WK, 16 September 1997, WKC, OLVA.
150 Girard, interview.
151 Western New York Wares, Email to author, 11 November 2005.
inexplicable events in his life, and even after his death, which seem to be a gateway between heaven and earth.”152 A Buffalo area native and graduate of St. Francis High School in Hamburg, Koerner is a parishioner at Our Lady of Victory and at one time vied for the position of Niagara County Historian.153 While the first run of Mysteries was in local bookstores, Koerner was employed by the Buffalo and Erie County libraries, taught American History at Niagara Community College, and worked as a historical tour guide.154

Koerner’s book presents a compelling case for Baker as a miracle worker. Koerner recounts miracles reported in Galvin’s Modern Apostle of Charity, Anderson’s Father Baker and the Victorian magazine and seeks to provide corroborating evidence from other sources. He also explores miracles from Baker’s short time at St. Mary’s parish in Corning during 1881 and 1882, investigates claims that Baker could control the natural elements, and provides thoroughly detailed reports of more recent miracles attributed to Baker including John Donohue’s, Frank McNaughton’s and the case of Baker’s “miraculous blood.” Koerner also explores how Baker might have developed supernatural powers by attempting to connect some of his healings with the physical ailments he suffered, speculating that “maybe miracles are something about spiritual empathy.”155 Koerner pinpoints Baker’s battle with erysipelas and the loss of his eye as

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155 Koerner, Mysteries, 140.
events that allowed him to heal skin and eye problems. Baker’s miracles also resemble Christ’s, according to Koerner, as he attempts to draw parallels between Baker and Jesus at several points in the book.\textsuperscript{156} In a September 2005 internet radio broadcast, Koerner even suggested that Baker may have intentionally performed miracles akin to Christ’s.\textsuperscript{157} Koerner claims he tried to provide an “objective” and “journalistic” approach to reports of Father Baker miracles, but also hopes the book will also be inspirational: “I believe that the story of Father Baker, and the idea that perhaps miracles literally do happen, can inspire people and bring a sense of hope to so many individuals who have lost a sense of security and faith in our modern world.”\textsuperscript{158}

Even though Western New York Wares publicizes Koerner’s book as “meticulously researched,” his resolve to connect all known miracles at the Institutes with Father Baker in order to support his theme results in a lack of thorough historical investigations, particularly regarding the miracles reported by Reverend Thomas Galvin in his 1925 book about Baker and the Institutes, \textit{A Modern Apostle of Charity}.\textsuperscript{159} Galvin believed that God had selected Limestone Hill to be a “theatre of miracles, blessings and manifestations of a miraculous nature,” and he reported the details of several miraculous cures at the shrine of Our Lady of Victory.\textsuperscript{160} Koerner chooses to ascribe miracles traditionally associated with OLV’s intercession to Baker’s supernatural abilities and ignores the cult of OLV that Baker encouraged and the long history of her miracles at the Lackawanna site. In his discussion of the miracles that Galvin reported occurring at the

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{156} Ibid., 26, 35, 58, 76, 95, 129.
  \item \textsuperscript{157} Koerner, “Wildcard Fridays.”
  \item \textsuperscript{158} Ibid; Cullivan.
  \item \textsuperscript{159} “Mysteries of Father Baker,” [cited May 2005]; available from http://buffalobooks.com/frbaker.html
  \item \textsuperscript{160} Galvin, \textit{Modern Apostle}, 87.
\end{itemize}
shrine of Our Lady of Victory, Koerner overlooks two important facts that would specifically associate these miracles with Our Lady’s intercession instead of Baker’s.

First, Koerner reasons that the miracles Galvin reported must have actually occurred in St. Patrick’s church, even though Galvin, according to Koerner’s reading, places these miracles in the basilica, which had not even been completed yet, “for reasons of publicity.”161 He even claims that Galvin “simply made a mistake” by reporting that these healings happened in the basilica.162 Koerner’s assumption is not completely unfounded. There were OLV chapels inside the protectory and St. Patrick’s. However, since the Annals informed its readers that their petitions were placed at the OLV chapel in the protectory, it is likely that the protectory’s chapel was the more popular sacred site.163 Further, resources refer to these sites as “chapels,” not shrines.164 Since Galvin had been a ward of the orphanage during the late 1800s and early 1900s, it is also probable that he would have been familiar with how people at the Institutes referred to these sites. It is more likely that Galvin was writing about a small outdoor wayside Our Lady of Victory shrine at the Institutes that became a renowned pilgrimage hotspot in the 1890s because of its reputation for healings from Our Lady.165 There is definitive evidence of this shrine and its popularity. Thus, Galvin’s accounts perhaps do not have the “curious inconsistency” Koerner thinks they do.166

161 Koerner, Mysteries, 50.

162 Ibid.

163 “Notes to Our Solicitors,” Annals 2, no. 2 (October 1889): 13.


165 See “Briefs,” CUT, 30 October 1897, KDNCA, OLVA; “Our Lady of Victory: Annual Visit to the Institutions at Limestone Hill,” CUT, 16 July 1896, 1, KDNCA, OLVA.

166 Koerner, Mysteries, 49.
Secondly, Koerner does not give serious consideration to the history of public novenas to Our Lady of Victory at the Institutes and their resulting miracles reported in the *Annals of the Association of Our Lady of Victory*. Instead he reasons that since Baker organized the novenas, “we can accurately associate the monsignor with these…miracles through his management of the novenas.”\(^\text{167}\) Because of Baker’s own emphasis on Our Lady of Victory’s patronage, it is highly unlikely that people at the time attributed the healings in Galvin’s book to Baker’s association with the novenas. In fact, in Galvin’s accounts of three of the four miracles Koerner examines, the cures are clearly attributed to OLV: “the miracle won for Our Lady of Victory…veneration and love;” “A cure at last! And that cure not by natural remedies, but through the blessing of Our Lady of Victory from her distant Shrine in Lackawanna;” and “She…prostrated herself on the floor…expressing in a loud voice her gratitude to Our Lady of Victory for her miraculous cure.”\(^\text{168}\) Koerner, however, does not provide details about this gratitude to OLV in his accounts. For instance, he reports that the prostrating woman was merely “on the floor of the Basilica in complete rapture” and leaves out her gratitude to OLV.\(^\text{169}\)

Despite his selective use of resources and at least one instance of self-acknowledged “circumstantial, and not evidentiary” evidence, Koerner appears to have become a local authority on Father Baker’s miracles.\(^\text{170}\) Indeed, Koerner gave a lecture about Baker for an online radio station that was more organized and less speculative than

\(^{167}\) Ibid.

\(^{168}\) Galvin, *Modern Apostle*, 89, 90-91


\(^{170}\) Ibid., 78. Koerner admits in *Mysteries* that he is relying on circumstantial evidence in order to speculate that Baker may have performed a miracle to calm the weather in 1891, the day before the Victoria well was found. He cites a newspaper article about a boat ride on the lake and river organized by Baker on August 20th that did not meet with bad weather despite meteorological reports of rain some areas included in the trip.
his book and demonstrated his considerable knowledge and thought about Baker’s miracle working.\textsuperscript{171} When in May 2005, the \textit{Buffalo News} consulted him instead of the public relations department at the Institutes about Donald Herbert’s recovery, he speculated on Baker’s possible connection.\textsuperscript{172} Koerner’s focus on miracles reflects the local media’s marketable emphasis on extraordinary happenings and is reminiscent of collections of miracle stories read on saints’ feast days during the Middle Ages. With its limited concentration on Baker as a wonder worker, \textit{The Mysteries of Father Baker} may not offer a full historical picture, but it does reinforce belief in Baker’s supernatural abilities and functions as an emblem of the local hope for miracles to beatify and canonize Baker.

Other creative works do not go into detail about Baker’s life, but confirm the imaginative appeal of life at the Institutes. Photographer and photo editor, Victoria Rich, was born in the infant home in 1970. Originally named Bridget, she was renamed Victoria after Our Lady of Victory when she became a ward of the home. Rich later returned to the infant home to complete a series of photographs and a short ten minute video for her MFA thesis in 2000. Her series of bleak photographs center on the “mundane details” of what life must have been like for an expectant mother in the home.\textsuperscript{173} She writes that she is “drawn to the idea that interior spaces and the objects in them are suggestive of the people who inhabit them.”\textsuperscript{174} Her photographs also examine issues of identity, especially “the questions that are raised by being an adopted person having an anonymous birth mother with an unknown history.”\textsuperscript{175}

\textsuperscript{171} Koerner, “‘Wildcard Fridays.”
\textsuperscript{172} Violanti, “Religion and Science…”
\textsuperscript{174} Ibid., 2.
\textsuperscript{175} Ibid., 3
Rich’s work expresses a sense of anonymity and displacement. Mothers who came to the home to have their babies and leave them did, in effect, lose their identity when they were residents because they were given assumed names for the duration of their stays. In her photo of the statue of the Our Lady of Victory in the infant home’s entranceway, Our Lady’s identity is detracted from in favor of the details of her setting (Figure 6.11). The photo cuts off the bottom two thirds of the statue, drawing attention to the textured curtain behind her and the patterned ceiling tiles above her head. Photographs of other items in the home also represent this lack of identity. In a photo of the rows of chairs in the infant home’s chapel, each chair looks like the next one with only slight differences in their color (Figure 6.12). In another photograph of a stack of white examining gowns on a table, nothing distinguishes one gown from another except the way the light falls on each of them or a slightly different fold. By making textures and repeated patterns the subject of these photographs and capturing the institutional sparseness of the home in other photos in the series, Rich represents the thousands of anonymous mothers who occupied the home’s liminal space during their pregnancies. Moreover, these photos attempt to elicit in viewers feelings of the loss of identity through such an experience.

The theme of anonymity is also captured in a series of Baker boys prints by Erie Country Community College instructor, Charles Roth. In the early 80s Roth portrayed historical subjects, such as bread lines or the woman’s suffrage movement. He based his Baker boys series on data gathered from photographs and letters at the Institutes. The stark black and white works show various scenes of the boys at St. Joseph’s orphanage, some imagined and some derived from historical photographs. In most of the works, the

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176 Ibid., 6.

177 Charles Roth, interview, 20 September 2005.
boys are not distinct from each other. As institutional wards, they, too, underwent a lack of identity. Instead, they appear as though they are a unit—a line of Baker boys linking arms, a group of boys in the Father Baker band, a collection of boys swimming. Thus, viewers are left with an impression of the collective orphans instead of individual personalities. Roth also includes a symbolic horizontal line through some of his prints which functions to connect the boys together. In “The Boys Swimming Line,” the line is the edge of the swimming pool, but in other prints, such as “Baker’s Golden Lines,” a gold line runs through the background. According to Roth, these lines symbolize Father Baker as the thread that holds the boys together.178 Indeed, once grown, orphans often identified themselves more as “Baker boys” than as members of their individual families or ethnic groups.

Roth plays on the theme of the boys’ lack of identity by identifying himself with them in one print, “The Runner” (Figure 6.13). This work shows a boy in the play yard with one of his trouser legs cut off. Roth learned that boys who ran away had their pants altered this way so that they could be distinguished easily from the other boys. Roth modeled the shape of the runner’s head after his own, creating a subtle self portrait. However, this is not something an uninformed viewer would be able to ascertain, and the runner remains an anonymous Baker boy with the back of his head toward the viewer.

Rich and Roth’s works are unique representations because their use of anonymity as a theme creates impressionistic portrayals of life at the Institutes. Thousands of people were affected, and continue to be affected, by the charities Baker established, and it is likely that all of these people will never be identified. These artists’ choices to obscure the identity of their subjects attests to the persistence of generic categories such as “the

178 Ibid.
Baker boy,” “the unwed mother,” or “the babies” which exist within the imaginative life of the Buffalo region as a result of Baker’s work.

The imaginative life of the Buffalo region also includes the idea of Father Baker as a tyrant or punisher of naughty children, a perception that has existed since the late 1800s.\(^\text{179}\) In the mid 1970s, one Buffalonian said, “as a child I heard he beat young boys in a home.”\(^\text{180}\) Drawing from a series of interviews for a Father Baker folklore project, one student recorded that “The people who worked in the home were very evil and would beat the children for little to nothing...just at the mention of Father Baker’s name, any child would behave.”\(^\text{181}\) As a result of rumors like these, thousands of Catholic and non-Catholic parents have threatened to send their children to “Father Baker’s” for misbehaving, some even going so far as to pack their children’s bags and drive them to Lackawanna.\(^\text{182}\) And this practice has continued into the 21st century even though Father Baker’s no longer has an orphanage or protectory. In 1997, a hardcore death metal band from Florida, Deicide, recorded a track on their *Serpents of the Light* album called “Father Baker’s” which explicitly expresses the imagined fear of what could happen to children sent there:

There exists a place of agony  
Where children are held captive  
Belt across the back, the nuns attack  
Believe in god or be beaten to death…

\(^\text{179}\) See “Our Lady of Victory: Annual Visit to the Institutions at Limestone Hill,” *CUT* 16 July 1896, 1, KDNCA, OLVA.

\(^\text{180}\) Brian Boyle, “Father Baker,” FBFA.

\(^\text{181}\) Joy Wiley, “Father Baker,” FBFA.

At Father Baker's the pain is divine
If you are lucky you'll get out alive.183

In 2002, the myth of Father Baker’s as a place of punishment made its way to the stage in a puppet show. “The Bedeviled Chest” by Franklyn LaVoie, local storyteller and resident set designer for Buffalo’s Subversive Theater Collective, was performed at Buffalo’s New Phoenix Theater. One reviewer called the play “a wry, witty, rollicking fantasy that is not only riotous but churning with the lurid Freudian undertones of some forgotten Medieval witches’ tale.”184 “The Bedeviled Chest” suggests that the imagined horrors of Father Baker’s are a strong incentive in local Buffalo culture. It tells the fantastic story of a boy, satirically named Zigmund Fried, who is so afraid of being sent to Father Baker’s that he would rather take the unpleasant job as a person who guides boats on the Erie Canal. Zigmund subsequently has several adventures including being stalked by the devil and seduced by a sea hag before he winds up in hell, which happens to be located at the bottom of Lake Erie.185

Lastly, as part of the local landscape, the Father Baker bridge has received some creative attention. An editorial cartoon in the Buffalo News showed a car going over potholes on the Father Baker Bridge with one of the passengers asking “Do they call it the Father Baker bridge because its holey or because you should take last rites before crossing it?”186 Also a person once joked that Father Baker must have been a jerk because her car ran out of gas twice on the bridge.187

183 “Father Baker” by Diecide [cited 9 July 2000]; available from http://brunop.tripod.com/lyrics/serpents.htm#Father

184 Richard Huntington, “Those Wonderful, Wicked Puppets,” BEN, 1 August 2002, sec. B.


187 Linda Burgio, “Father Baker? Who?” FBFA.
After the diocese of Buffalo started Baker’s cause, the reality of the prospect of Baker’s sainthood generated a renewed interest in creating various materials about Baker. With the transferal of his remains to the basilica, the turn of the 20th century marked the beginning of a surge of Father Baker publicity that was rivaled only by media coverage immediately following his death and during the next twenty years in the Victorian magazine. However, new materials reveal the different strategies used by their creators in order to meet the needs of an audience composed of second, third or fourth generation Baker devotees who are less familiar with him. Consequently, they do not seek to remember or honor the priest as much as they seek to promote Baker’s life and candidacy for sainthood through unified and instructive portrayals that highlight his emulative characteristics.

Yet Baker’s potential sainthood does not rely upon his status as a paradigmatic figure alone. Portrayals of him in the local Buffalo media and other sources which focus on his apparent wonderworking capacities address another important aspect of sainthood. Since miracles are a compelling and mysterious topic and Baker’s canonization ultimately depends upon them, they have tended to dominate other depictions of him. Because the diocese chooses not to actively suppress or discourage these kinds of portrayals, they exist alongside official public relations materials and provide a fuller picture of how Baker’s sanctity is perceived and produced in the Buffalo region. Thus Baker’s case is a contemporary example of the fluctuating dialectic between the saint as wonderworker and the saint as exemplar.

Although Baker’s material history has proliferated recently with the possibility of his sainthood, he was and is more than a “purely religious figure.”188 Father Baker is a

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pervasive and enduring icon within the Western New York region. As such, his story is adaptable to a wide range of creative endeavors which suggests that whether or not he achieves sainthood, his story is compelling and colorful enough to continue sparking the imagination. Even though a standardized Father Baker narrative was developed to promote his cause, this narrative does not necessarily represent the “real” Father Baker or displace other representations. Instead, like other versions of Baker, even less favorable ones, it participates in discursive constructive practices which play upon many different aspects of his history and legends.

Concluding Remarks: “Our Father Baker”

From to roast beef on kimmelweck or “Beef on Weck” to hot wings at the Anchor Bar, from pierogies at the corner store to the Polish market on Broadway, from the ski slopes in the southern-tier to the Buffalo Bills, and from the Underground Railroad to rumors of sunken bootlegged liquor at bottom of the Niagara River, the Buffalo region has a strong and unique identity. Despite the region’s post-industrial economy and its development of white-collar industries, working-class values continue to be potent reminders of the region’s explosive industrial growth during the first half of the 20th century. A recent ad for a local law firm recognizes these persistent local values: “No silver spoons at our law firm. Just lawyers with plenty of grit. Working as hard as the people we represent.”

Father Baker’s legend remains an integral part of this cultural milieu, particularly for area Catholics, and the possibility of his canonization offers a potential avenue for the region’s economic recovery. Baker’s story and the stories of his devoted and those who seek his canonization also touch on many aspects of Catholicism in America including: Marian piety, the Catholic Press; Catholic education, religious orders, mission work, charity fundraising, social justice, respect for life issues, and

189 Artvoice 4, no. 50 (December 15-21, 2005): 27.
American sainthood. Moreover, the historical sequence of performative shifts in Baker’s material history documents both conceptions of his sanctity and the productive devotional practices of his audience.190

Documentary and anecdotal evidence leave little doubt that Nelson H. Baker was an extraordinarily appealing Catholic personality. His humility, shrewd fund raising instincts and persistence in caring for others remained dominant characteristics until the end of his life. At age 92 in 1932, he wrote to the head of the diocese’s Catholic Charities to propose that he “quietly” suggest members of the clergy donate a small portion from their yearly salaries to make the quota for that year’s struggling financial drive because, “it doesn’t seem right that our clergy, who, as a rule do very nicely, financially, should be exempt from adding a little to a cause of this kind.”191 Because of his modesty, those who wanted to repay his kindness during his lifetime often had to do so on the sly. Sometime in the 1920s, employees of the Institutes waited until he was out of town to build a solarium for him outside his rooms in the protectory. Despite protesting the gift, he came to enjoy feeding hundreds of pigeons there daily.192

There is little to indicate that Baker actively sought the attention and admiration he received from local individuals, community groups, and the Catholic and secular media. His acclaim developed gradually as his consistent work on the behalf of others become more and more well-known. By the mid 1920s his reputation as a patriarch of charity and popular local Catholic icon was well-established. Since Baker often turned thetributes he received into opportunities to give thanks to Our Lady of Victory or to ask for help caring for the children in the Institutes, the enduring admiration and love he


191 NHB, Letter to Reverend Lee A. Geary, 21 March 1934, OLVA.

192 “Father Baker’s Summer Home,” Victorian 46, no. 7 (1940): inside front cover.
gained from many in the Buffalo region was and still is genuinely earned. Baker’s self fashionings were authentic, and by all accounts, he was indeed a clever, humble, charitable and pious person. Further, for the purposes of this project, Baker’s direction of the creation of many different kinds of Our Lady of Victory materials because of his own deeply-felt devotion to her serves as a model for the productive devotional practices of his admirers, followers and promoters.

Representations of this well-loved priest in material history began during his lifetime. We can mark the beginning of him in print in 1879, the start of visual representations of him around the turn of the 19th century, and his appearance in material culture in the mid 1920s. Most of the early representations of him between 1879 and 1925 in printed and visual formats corresponded with events in his life, such as his promotion to Vicar General in 1904, events at the Institutes, or promotional materials in the Annals and Victorian which solicited funds for the homes. Moreover, these portrayals were often secondary to representations of Our Lady of Victory. However, once Baker gained a large audience of admirers, some representations of him were re-fashioned by his enthusiasts to stress opinions about his “sainthood.” Specifically, 1926 marks an important year when productive devotional practices began to affect the trajectory of Baker’s material history. His saintly reputation and rumors of his abilities to perform miracles inspired people like the Reverends Thomas Galvin and Peter J. Cormican to express their feelings through heart-felt writings that portrayed him as a holy and saintly individual, an opinion that eventually spread to the secular media. Further, unbeknownst to him, his cohorts commissioned a statue of him for the basilica that would permanently embody his status as a local religious icon.

Baker’s 1936 death was a great blow to his audience of admirers and those he had helped during his lifetime. Thus, we see another shift in representations of Baker occurring after his death as a result of productive devotional practices. Certain items conveyed implicit hope for his canonization and beliefs about his unofficial sainthood. Many members of his faithful audience created their own surrogate “Father Bakers” by touching religious objects to his body.\(^{194}\) The fact that many of these relics still circulate among his devoted in the Buffalo region nearly seventy years after his death attests to the deep-seated local belief in his supernatural efficacy. The productive devotional practices of Baker’s devotees also created additional layers of meaning for existing objects. When used to petition Baker for favors, items from his earlier material culture not only expressed the community’s appreciation of his work and desire to memorialize him, but also represented his ability to intercede with God on the behalf of petitioners. In response to the desire for Father Baker souvenirs, within a year of his death a memorial medal, statue and lithograph were made available by the Institutes, and Baker’s ubiquitous head-shot portrait was made available soon thereafter. Evidence shows that at least the medal was used for devotional purposes, thus making it a sacred object for some devotees. Furthermore, devotees visited the 1939 memorial headstone on Baker’s grave and the 1941 Father Baker Memorial Rooms to petition him for favors, thus creating sacred places out of these memorials.

Along with these objects of material culture, printed and visual representations of Baker in the Victorian magazine between 1941 and 1957 were especially instrumental in preserving his story, spreading word about his life and works, reflecting its editors and writers feelings about Baker’s sanctity, and cultivating devotion to him. The 1939 arrival of Robert K. Doran to the magazine’s staff denotes another transformation in how Baker

was represented. Not only was Baker’s head-shot portrait used as a logo for the magazine, but it appeared regularly as the most preferred image of him and was often paired with expressions of belief about his sanctity. Moreover, the productive devotional practices of his admirers such as Brother Stanislaus, Josephine Pilkington, Doran and Josephine Quirk created a body of affectionate and enthusiastic published pieces about the priest. Under Doran’s direction, which was highly influenced by his own devotion to Baker, the magazine explicitly promoted the possibility of Baker’s eventual canonization, encouraged others to pray to Baker, and demonstrated his intercessional abilities by publishing accounts of favors received from him. Thus, the representations of Baker in the Victorian planted hope for Baker’s canonization in its readers, created an audience for him as a saint, and contributed to the formation of concepts of his sanctity.¹⁹⁵

Compared to the 40s and 50s, the 1960s and 70s saw a decline in the number of appearances of Father Baker in material history. However, this lack of quantity did not mean that Baker or the hope for his canonization had been forgotten. The 1960 edition and 1974 paperback reissue of Floyd Anderson’s Father Baker made Baker’s story accessible to many in the region, and when a city bridge was named after him in 1961, his namesake became part of Buffalo’s built environment. The high visibility of these two items helped ingrain his name and story within the local imagination and history. Although evidence does not demonstrate that these two items are direct results of personal devotion to Baker, they were responses to local admiration of him. Personal devotion, however, inspired Robert K. Doran to promote Baker throughout the 60s, 70s and early 80s. Doran’s case illustrates how religious fervor for Baker continued to result in the creation of materials about him. As such, Doran’s story is a prime example of productive devotional practices and marks another transformation of Baker’s material

¹⁹⁵ See David Morgan and Sally Promey, eds., The Visual Culture of American Religions (Berkley: University of California, 2001), 3-4.
history as explicit hope for his eventual canonization, rather than remembrance, compelled individuals to represent Baker.

After Baker’s cause was initiated in 1987, explicit hope for his canonization motivated hundreds of people to contribute what they could to help the cause. Given that over fifty years had elapsed from the time of Baker’s death to the introduction of his cause, the immediate relationship between devotional feelings about Baker and the creation of items as seen in Doran’s case and in his first generation of devotees was not a necessary condition for productive devotional practices to take place. Productive practices were often the result of indirect devotion, as in the case of some archival donations. Since the first generation of Father Baker devotees was aging and fading away, archival donations often relied on previous devotion to Baker and its related historical items. Within the new context of the diocese’s intention to achieve Baker’s canonization, donations made by non-devotees reached back through older generations, brought previous materials and memories from the past into the present, and reasserted them while retaining some of their original connection to Baker. Moreover, because these donations were contextualized by both historical narrations describing past devotion and the objective of canonizing Baker, they symbolized a historical chain of Baker’s material history and its related devotional practices from the 1920s to the 2000s.

Since diocesan officials relied, in part, upon these donations when collecting and composing the official documentation for Baker’s case to send to Rome, the creation of the Father Baker archive was a communal productive devotional practice that demonstrated collaboration between diocesan authorities and religious and lay supporters toward a common goal. The history of the OLV parish and Institutes suggests that this kind of collaboration is particularly possible at this site. Baker himself had encouraged racial and ethnic accord and helped create an atmosphere where laity and hierarchy worked together to meet the Institutes’ needs. It appears that the fervent conflicts between ethnic and racial groups so characteristic of many early late 19th and early 20th century
urban Catholic parishes did not exist at OLV to the degree that they did at other Buffalo area parishes. The presence of African-American and other non-white children at St. Joseph’s Orphanage and the infant home in the 1930s, as well as Baker’s African-American Apostolate may provide a partial explanation. Further, providing ways for laity to feel that they played a significant role in the work of the Institutes to care for the diversity of children established a collaborative spirit early on, a spirit that is evident in the way people have created materials to support Baker’s cause, and continue to do so. Consequently, the archival collection of donations is one of the most potent material results of the history of devotion to Father Baker—a communal creation that both represents and substantiates his potential sainthood.

The start of Baker’s cause also provided the context for another transformation of his material history. It confirms the holiness of Father Baker’s images, relics and holy sites. Devotees still consider Baker’s grave marker and the Father Baker Memorial Rooms holy sites despite the transferal of his body to the basilica in 2000 and Rooms’ renovation in 2003. However, his new crypt in the basilica offers a powerful place for devotees to petition him and express their affection for him. In addition, Baker’s head-

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196 Ethnic conflict may not have been common within the OLV parish, but it was certainly not absent from Baker’s experiences. Monsignor Kern records one such conflict regarding the two diocesan cemeteries over which Baker was the director in the 1920s. In 1913 the Buffalo diocese purchased 20 acres of land for an Italian cemetery so that, like other nationalities in the area, they could have their own place to be buried. However, by 1926, the cemetery was in debt because Italians were not choosing to be buried there. Apparently, another cemetery and local funeral directors “conspired together to sell large plots of land to the undertakers, who enticed Italians not to buy their graves in the Diocesan Italian Cemetery, but in their plot.” The cemetery conspiring with the funeral directors was a French and German one, who appeared to be taking financial advantage of the Italians. Baker’s solution was to ask pastors of Italian parishes to refuse to sign cards for burial in any other cemetery other than the Italian one so that the cemetery could get out of debt. See WK, “C/Cemetery” notes, WKC, OLVA. When compared to conditions at St. Louis’s parish in Buffalo where heated conflicts between French lay trustees and the Irish lead diocese over building projects and parish priest appointments eventually led to several excommunications in 1854, Baker’s cemetery incident sounds incidental. See Charles G. Deuther, *The Life and Times of the Late Right Reverend John Timon, First Roman Catholic Bishop of the Diocese of Buffalo* (Buffalo: Sag, Sons and Co. Lithography Printing and Manufacturing Co., 1870), 121-145.
shot portrait in both photographic and painted formats became the dominant image on devotional items such as prayer cards and holy water bottles distributed by the Institutes. After 1987 devotees invested these visual and material objects with explicit hope for Baker’s canonization. Parish members hold Baker’s prayer card in their hands at the end of each mass in the basilica and recite the prayer for his canonization. Baker’s head-shot portrait is and has been the most dominant mass produced image of him, and it has retained the most potent aura, or set of associations that gives it value and authority.197 This portrait currently not only represents a beloved local icon, but it also represents a potential saint. Its value and authority, in fact, has increased over the years.

Another final important change in Baker’s material history has been contingent upon the start of his cause. Promotional materials from the Institutes and diocese created after 1987 seek to highlight events and characteristics of Baker’s life other than those legendary ones established by Thomas Galvin’s 1926 Modern Apostle of Charity and subsequently repeated in various other sources. While these new materials do include information about Baker’s trip to Paris as a seminarian, the discovery of the Victoria Well and the establishment of the infant home, they do not have the lively diversity of opinions and feelings about Baker found in the Victorian magazine or in the personal reminiscences of him in the archives. Instead, these newer promotional materials provide relatively uniform presentations of his life and works that permit today’s Catholics to better relate to him. It was not uncommon for Catholics in the Buffalo region to have one Catholic and one Protestant parent as Baker did, and so-called “mixed marriages” are commonplace today. Baker’s military service might help current servicemen and women relate to him, as well as confirm his patriotism. With the current lack of young men entering the priesthood, Baker’s later calling might serve as inspiration for those who

choose a late vocation. His tolerance toward different races and ethnicity is appealing to today’s emphasis on acceptance of America’s diverse population. As a result of these new emphases, representations of Baker in promotional materials do not just present him as a well-loved, charitable and pious individual who is an integral part of the local history and imagination. He is also presented as a contemporary Catholic exemplar who has characteristics worthy of canonization. However, these institutional efforts do not contain the many versions of Baker that continue to exist. As a number of creative endeavors and personal reminiscences Father Baker and his works are still alive and well within the imaginative life of the Buffalo region. In particular, Father Baker the miracle worker and Father Baker the tyrant remain dominant views of him. Thus promotional materials merely offered another version—Father Baker the potential saint.

Baker’s case demonstrates that producing a saint is a complex process which involves a series of historical shifts regarding notions of his sanctity, the development, spread and maintenance of his devoted audience and the practices of that audience which involve the reception, use and creation of materials about him. One way to discuss all of these aspects and demonstrate that material history is a viable, integral and significant category of lived religion is through a sequential examination of Baker’s material history and a consideration of the ways productive devotional practices can affect and modify it. Baker’s sainthood, should it come about, will ultimately be produced by how people, including laity, religious and the officials in Rome, continue to regard and represent him. Regardless of the outcome of his cause, however, representations of Baker are likely to remain inconclusive and multivalent according to the individual feelings, religious practices, historical contexts, and organizational intentions that influence them. Consequently, to those in the Buffalo region, Baker, in all his different incarnations, can be aptly called “Our Father Baker.”
Figure 6.1. Drawing by orphan on top floor of St. Joseph’s orphanage building, 2003
Figure 6.2 Father Nelson Baker website, 2006

Source: http://www.ourladyofvictory.org/FatherBaker. Courtesy of OLV Institutions, Lackawanna, N.Y.
Figure 6.3 Cover of the 3rd edition of Floyd Anderson’s *Father Baker*

Figure 6.4 150th Anniversary logo

Source: Courtesy of OLV Institutions, Lackawanna, N.Y.
Figure 6.5 Old (left) and new (right) entrances to the Father Baker Memorial Rooms
Figure 6.6 Death mask of Father Baker display, Father Baker Memorial Rooms, 2006
Figure 6.8 “The Life of a Baker Boy” exhibit, Father Baker Memorial Rooms, 2006
Figure 6.9 Baker’s “horse blanket” safety pin, Father Baker Memorial Rooms, 2006
Figure 6.10 Statue of Father Baker, Our Lady of Victory Basilica gift shop, 2003
Figure 6.11 “Mary” photograph by Victoria Rich

Used with permission.

Figure 6.12 “Chairs” photograph by Victoria Rich

Used with permission.
Figure 6.13 “The Runner” print by Charles Roth

Used with permission.
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