THE AIR WAS CHARGED WITH FAITH

by Father Vaughn

"I guess it sounds a bit corny, but I am overwhelmed at this moment." With these words I began my sermon on the night of April 29, 1967.

"Being overwhelmed" is actually an understatement. This most moving spiritual experience of my life occurred as I stood in the pulpit of St. Alphonsus Church and gazed upon the tremendous crowd of devotees of Father Seelos gathered there for the transfer of the remains of Father Seelos from St. Mary's to St. Alphonsus Church. We don't know exactly how many people were present, but it was certainly over 1200. The pews were packed. People were standing in the aisles, in the sanctuary and throughout the rear of the church. The one thought in my mind was the fact that every one of those people were there precisely because they had personally experienced the power of God in their souls. They were there because they had prayed to God through the intercession of Father Seelos for a favor that meant very much to them. God had heard their prayer through His Servant. Now they had gathered here to show their honor to God and pay their respects to a man whom they never met in life, but whom they loved very dearly in death. The air was charged with faith.

It all began on September 9, 1965 when the shrieking winds of Hurricane Betsy steam-rolled the city of New Orleans. Almost a third of the roof slates of St. Mary's Church were torn off. The building had to be closed.

In the ensuing year and a half people continued to come, desiring to pray at the grave of their beloved Father Seelos. The doors were locked. Many times I saw people kneeling on the concrete pavement outside of the church, kneeling there praying to him, coming up and touching the door which was locked against them.

Eventually the Redemptorist Superiors decided that St. Mary's Church was to remain closed and that the remains of Father Seelos were to be re-
moved to St. Alphonsus Church. The Archbishop of New Orleans decided, however, that he wished St. Mary's Church to be preserved and allowed a new roof to be put on it to prevent further deterioration. While St. Mary's Church is to be preserved, it will not be the center for the devotion to Father Seelos.

On Friday night, April 28, at 6 P.M. there gathered in St. Mary's Assumption Church the following people: Most Rev. Abel Caillouet, Auxiliary Bishop of the Archdiocese; Very Rev. Paul J. Baudry, C.SS.R., Vice Provincial of the Redemptorist Fathers; Rev. Nicolás Ferrante, C.SS.R., the Postulator General of the Redemptorist Fathers in Rome (Father Ferrante is in complete charge of the cause of Father Seelos. It is his task to supervise the argumentation of the cause in Rome. In other words, as vice-postulator, I work for him); Right Rev. Monsignor Charles Plauche, the official notary on this occasion appointed by Archbishop Hannan; Very Rev. Alvin O. Billimek, C.SS.R., rector and pastor of St. Alphonsus parish; the other Fathers of the Redemptorist community at St. Alphonsus parish; three doctors, Dr. Esmond Fatter, Dr. Angelo Giorlando and Dr. Jack Ruli; two official photographers: Steve Duplantier and Tim Kemery, both seminarians of Notre Dame seminary; and finally Messrs. Patrick and Leo Donegan, funeral directors.

The heavy marble slab over the tomb was raised and rolled back. It revealed the bones of Father Seelos. I lowered myself into the tomb and began the laborious task of carefully removing each bone. As I picked them up one by one I handed them to the doctors nearby. The three doctors examined each bone declaring that it was a genuine human bone and identifying each by name. This process was continued until all of the bones had been removed. We had to separate the small bones from the decayed pieces of the cypress box in which he had been buried. The purpose of the identification by the doctors was to determine that only one skeleton was present and to verify them as human bones. Practically the entire skeleton was recovered.

As the doctors called out the scientific name for each bone, it was carefully recorded by the notary. When this process was completed the remains were placed in a bronze hermetically sealed casket, together with a document drawn up by notary, Monsignor Plauche, describing exactly what was found, the condition of the remains and listing the precise bones that were placed there.

Each step of these proceedings was recorded by the official photographers.

I have often been asked if Father Seelos' body is still intact or if it has become corrupt. I can declare to you as an eyewitness that his body has corrupted. All that remains is his skeleton.

The next day at 3 P.M., the coffin containing the remains of Father Seelos was transferred to St. Alphonsus Church. The people crowded around the casket, touching it and placing pious objects upon it. At 5 P.M., the notary arrived to place the official seal upon the casket. A red ribbon was stretched across the hermetically sealed glass; the sealing wax was dropped on the edge of the ribbon; and the official seal of the Archdiocese was placed on the wax. When the remains are once again exhumed the first thing the notary will look for is to see if the seal is intact.

At 5:30 P.M., a solemn procession entered the church led by 30 or more altar boys of St. Alphonsus School. The priests followed by the con-celebrants of the Mass, Most Rev. Abel Caillouet, Very Rev. Paul Baudry, C.SS.R. and Rev. Nicola Ferrante, C.SS.R.

The atmosphere was indeed charged with faith and devotion. The Mass began.

To be perfectly honest with you, I frankly do not remember what I said in my sermon. I remember kneeling on the steps of the pulpit while Father Baudry was reading the gospel and praying to Father Seelos to enlighten me as to what to say. I do remember encouraging the people to renew their faith in the power of God through the intercession of His Servant, Father Seelos. While I cannot remember exactly what I said I know that every word came from my heart. While in the pulpit I thought of the time six or seven years ago when I began working on the development of this cause. At that time very few people knew about Father Seelos or prayed to him. Now, this vast crowd of people had come to render their tribute and honor to him.

We were not able to count them, but there were at least 800 people who received Holy Communion.

At the end of the Mass, six Redemptorist priests acted as pallbearers, bringing the casket in solemn procession to its resting place in the sanctuary. The grave was then blessed by Bishop Caillouet. Prayers offered to God requesting Father Seelos' beatification followed. Then I read a passage from the diary of Brother Louis. Brother Louis had nursed Father Seelos in his last illness and was present when he died.

This particular passage of his diary tells of how after the prayers for the dying had been said and all the Redemptorist priests were standing about his bed waiting for the end, they asked him if he would like to have them sing some of his favorite
hymns to the Blessed Lady. He smiled and nodded his head. The priests then sang two hymns -- "Milde Noenigin" and "Mutter ich Vergehe." While they were singing these hymns he died.

In memory of that event, and in some attempt to relive it, the choir now sang these two hymns as his remains were lowered into their present resting place. Everyone knelt for four minutes of silent prayer. Then in silence the priests marched in procession from the church.

Really, you would have had to be there to appreciate and understand what was taking place. There was a strange feeling that seemed to fill the air. No words can describe it. It was one of those things that must be experienced if it is to be understood.

The cause of this saintly Servant of God must now move forward. Father Ferrante has declared that it might be possible for Father Seelos to be beatified in seven or eight years if the required miracles are performed. Experience teaches us that these miracles are performed when the devotion builds to a certain peak. We have every reason to expect that Father Seelos will one day be declared a saint; however God uses the instrumentality of human beings to bring forth His divine effects. In other words if the declaration of Father Seelos' sainthood is to become a reality, all of us must work doubly hard, visit his tomb in St. Alphonsus Church, encourage people to pray to him, make him ever more widely known.

**SEELOS DOUBLOONS IN PREPARATION**

Doubloons, or medallions, commemorating the centennial of the death of Father Seelos (which occurred on Oct. 4, 1867) are in preparation. Only a limited number of these doubloons are being manufactured. It would be well to place your order as soon as possible. The standard doubloon will cost $1.00 each. However, for those who want a more permanent and lasting memorial of this event, a deluxe doubloon manufactured from .999 silver will be available for $5.00 each. There will also be an issue of only 1,000 sets of five separate commemorative coins. These are certain to become a collector's item. They will be available for $15.00 per set.

You may order any of the above by writing to:

THE SEELOS CENTER
2030 Constance Street
New Orleans, La. 70130

Dr. Esmond Fatter and Patrick Donegan examine a relic of Father Seelos, together with Monsignor Charles J. Plauche, official notary appointed by Archbishop Philip Hannan of New Orleans.

**HERE AND THERE**

.... Judging from the many letters we have received, the visits made by Father Vaughn to bless the sick in hospitals with the curcifix used by Father Seelos have been a great consolation to the patients. If a friend or relative is hospitalized in the New Orleans area phone 895-6176.

.... How about joining the book of the month club -- S & H Green Stamp books that is. We have collected a considerable number of green stamp books --over 600 so far-- but are still far short of the 2000 books needed to get our new addressing machine. Won't you please help us?

.... Father Curley reports that he is nearing completion of the book he is writing on the life of Father Seelos. No publication date has been set so far. It will still be some time before the book will be available.

.... Father Ferrante, Father Curley, and Father Vaughn got together this month and decided on what documentation to send to Rome. Now that all documents written by, to, and about Father Seelos are in the hands of the Roman lawyer, Mr. Carlos Snyder, the cause in Rome should move more rapidly.