

**The Making of an American Catholic Devotion:
The Shrine of Our Lady of Consolation in Carey, Ohio, 1873-1929¹**

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The town of Carey in northwest Ohio is located half a world away from Lourdes, Fatima, and Knock – all places of pilgrimage where miracles and healings have reportedly occurred through the Blessed Virgin Mary’s intercession – yet like the others, for decades those who have experienced cures or spiritual favors have contended that “Mary chose Carey.” Carey, a town birthed by the railroad in 1858 and situated along the tracks connecting Lake Erie to the Ohio River, was an unlikely location for the development of one of the most significant Marian shrines in the U.S., the National Shrine of Our Lady of Consolation. An unassuming town, populated largely by farmers of Germanic ancestry, Carey never had a Catholic majority. At the shrine’s founding, only two dozen Catholic families resided among predominately Protestant neighbors. And while Carey’s Catholic minority did not often face overt discrimination, the kind of devotion celebrated at the shrine and the reported healings there evoked a skepticism shared, at least at first, by many, non-Catholic and Catholic alike.²

The few Catholics near Carey attended Mass at nearby Berwick or Crawfordsville until 1868 when a parish under the patronage of St. Edward was organized in town. The congregation was ethnically mixed, including German, Belgian, French, Irish, and Luxembourgian families.³ Rev. Joseph P. Gloden, a diocesan priest and native of Luxembourg, arrived at the young parish in 1873, bringing with him a devotion from the Old World: a dedication to the Blessed Virgin Mary, under the title “Our Lady of Consolation.” Knowing that an image of Our Lady of Consolation in Luxembourg was venerated as the source of healings and miracles since the seventeenth century, Gloden vowed to build a church in the United States under this title. He

received permission to rename the church at Carey. Eager to spread the devotion, he obtained from his homeland a replica of the statue, which included a particle of the seventeenth-century statue. The wooden replica, thirty-six inches high, depicted Mary holding the infant Christ with mother and child dressed in ornate garments, often embroidered and with jewels.⁴

Within months of obtaining the statue, Gloden organized a solemn procession with the statue from St. Nicholas Church in Berwick (also known as Frenchtown) to Carey, a distance of seven miles. The procession concluded with the statue's enthronement in Carey for the first time. While fearing an outdoor procession with the image would upset Carey's Protestant majority, the pastor decided to take the risk. On the designated day, May 24, 1875, storm clouds gathered and the priest contemplated cancelling due to the threat of inclement weather. Because of the large crowd and their disappointment if the procession were cancelled, he proceeded. Gloden later recorded that despite the ominous clouds "as soon as the statue was brought out of the church, the sun pierced the clouds." As many as one thousand took part in the procession, some in horse and buggy. Even Protestants, to Gloden's amazement "stood there silent and by far the greater part of them uncovered their heads as we were passing by."

As the procession reached its midpoint, a storm seemed imminent. Gloden reputedly called out, "Let the procession proceed; there is no danger," urging the crowd not to scatter. Rain poured down, but not on the procession itself. When the statue reached the church at Carey, however, "All of a sudden the rain poured down like a cloud-burst and hardly anyone found time to enter the church or seek shelter."⁵ Viewed as a miraculous event, no rain had fallen on the Blessed Virgin. Gloden wrote, "This remarkable occurrence made a deep impression upon Protestants as well as Catholics, and from this time on, people began to come to Carey from all sides, far and near."⁶

But the miraculous procession was not the only miracle that day; the first healing attributed to Carey's Our Lady of Consolation occurred at the same time. A little girl named Eugenia "Jennie" Biloque, incapable of assimilating food for nearly a month, was cured. Her father, Benoit, a Luxembourg native, had participated in the procession with his other children. When they returned home, they found the little girl well. Within months, other healings were reported after visits to the church.⁷ At first the parish received pilgrims from neighboring parishes who heard of the miracles, but quickly the devotion spread beyond northwest Ohio.⁸

After a series of pastors who took little interest in the devotion, Rev. John Mizer arrived in 1900. He promoted the devotion and welcomed an increasing number of pilgrims. Healings experienced at the shrine became more widely publicized as dozens of newspaper reports detailed improved health, and in some cases complete cures: an eight-year-old boy's sight restored, a Chicago woman cured of thirteen cancerous tumors, a little girl from Cleveland healed from curvature of the spine, and an invalid of twenty years relieved of multiple illnesses including asthma, heart disease, and dropsy.⁹ But as fame grew, suspicion mounted.

Bishop Joseph Schrembs, first bishop of the Diocese of Toledo, invite the Conventual Franciscans of the Immaculate Conception Province (Syracuse, New York) to take charge of the shrine, directing them: "I do not want devotion stifled or the shrine killed if it be genuine. On the other hand, I do not want it commercialized and exploited as a money-making scheme. If it is from God, God will take care of it."¹⁰ The bishop advised, "I expect you to send a strong and prudent man to take charge. It will be a difficult position at the start."¹¹ The friar chosen, Aloysius M. Fish, OFM Conv. (1869-1939), son of a German father and a Luxembourgian mother. Bishop Schrembs asked Fish to pass judgment upon the integrity of the devotion. Though described as a man of "little faith and piety," Fish soon became convinced that the

devotion to Our Lady of Consolation was authentic. He described the shrine as “a good and holy thing . . . not a humbug nor a graft.”

The Franciscans welcomed an increasing number of pilgrims to the shrine, organizing a schedule of devotions, including daily Mass, opportunities for confession, public recitation of the rosary, litanies, and benediction of the Blessed Sacrament. The events culminated in a candlelight procession, sometimes stretching for miles through the streets of Carey as friars and visiting priests led the pilgrims in prayer and hymn signing.

Traditionally, pilgrimages were conducted on foot. But as means of transportation changed, pilgrims adapted. In 1919, railroads began offering reduced rates to Carey during the spring and summer pilgrimage season. Pilgrims streamed to the shrine from Cleveland, Detroit, and Youngstown, as well as Pittsburgh, Chicago, and St. Louis.¹² In 1920, the August pilgrimage attracted upwards of 9,000 pilgrims; by 1923, 15,000 attended.¹³

To put the shrine on the map, Fish advertised Carey as a pilgrimage destination for Catholics in the Great Lakes region. With taglines such as “radiating comfort and cheer out over afflicted souls,” advertisements appeared in Catholic newspapers in Columbus, Cleveland, Pittsburgh, and Detroit. Pilgrims represented various ethnicities – not just Luxembourgers – and included Germans, Poles, Hungarians, Slovaks, Slovenians, and Italians. Appealing perhaps to the curious, one ad noted, “Sights nowhere to be encountered in the United States except in the little city of Carey give one a glimpse of old-world religious customs and observances.”¹⁴

The increasing number of pilgrims necessitated a larger church. While Father Mizer had broken ground for a new church in 1907, construction had stalled. The task resumed after World War I. The cornerstone for the new “upper church” was blessed in 1919. In 1924, the impressive

red-brick Romanesque church, seating up to 1,000 people, opened for the celebration of its first Mass, though interior work was not completed until 1929.¹⁵

As the shrine grew in popularity, a tension developed with parishioners. When Fish arrived, Sunday collections rarely exceeded \$50 and often were much less. Pew rents provided significant income, though almost from the beginning pilgrimage receipts (including money from the sale of candles and other religious articles) and donations from “outsiders” outpaced income from parish sources. The pastor sent each parishioner a letter: “Are the Catholics of Carey going to allow other hands entirely to build their church? Is the Shrine of Carey to be a monument to Catholic generosity that is prevalent only outside Carey? . . . Our Blessed Lady has chosen Carey – let us show her that Carey has chosen Her.”¹⁶

While healings and favors through the Blessed Virgin Mary’s intercession were first recorded in the 1870s, the shrine increasingly became known through the first decades of the twentieth century as reports of “favors received” spread. Among those healed, Peter Columbus of Lima, Ohio, was freed from blindness and “muscular rheumatism” on two separate visits. Columbus, a Christian but not a Catholic, was carried to the shrine in a six-foot long basket when he was healed a second time. The man left the basket and later wrote, “I walked home and to this day I can see perfectly and am enjoying full health, thanks to Almighty God and the Virgin Mary.”¹⁷ As apparent healings increased, large numbers of crutches, casts, canes, bandages, and braces – and later even bottles of beer and cigarettes (indicating new-found freedom from addictions) were deposited at the shrine.

Though many accepted the apparent healings uncritically, the friars themselves offered cautious affirmation, noting they lacked the authority to determine whether any healing was indeed a miracle: Calling themselves “honorable and conservative men,” the friars did not want

the shrine seen as a 'miracle-factory.' Father Fish, seeking to assure the local clergy, wrote, "We have aimed to make of it a place for the manifestation of faith, confidence and devotion, intense perhaps but not exaggerated. . . 'Tis true [shrines] are liable to exaggerated claims, distorted devotion and commercialization, but these errors we are aiming to avoid here."¹⁸ Despite the cautions, many believed the divine was at work in Carey.

Among the many reasons to visit the shrine, pilgrims came often for physical healing, but others sought remedies for ruined relationships, difficulties at home or work, or family troubles. The friars reminded pilgrims, that while many were physically healed, "Some of the greatest and most grievous ailments are not always those of a physical nature."¹⁹ Some pilgrims came in thanksgiving for cures and favors already received at the shrine, fulfilling a vow to return there each year. Others came out of sheer curiosity.

Fish cautioned against seeing the statue itself as miraculous: "If there are cures at the shrine they are accomplished by prayers and faith in the Almighty." Portraying the shrine as mainstream, Fish asserted no "hysteria," "no laying on of hands," "no healer here." "The doings here are based on solid, orthodox principles and follow safe and sane lines of practice," he told the Cleveland newspaper, *The Catholic Universe*. He found the pilgrims were of "average sanity and education." "People of all classes, but mostly of the average middle class, come here quietly, spend a few days in prayer and devotion and leave quietly," he said.²⁰

Predictably, some criticized the shrine. The virulent anti-Catholic publication, *The Menace*, took aim at the shrine on several occasions. As a play on the shrine rector's name, Fish, the paper proclaimed that "the big fish is taking in the suckers." Calling the statue a "hoodoo," the article writer incredulously asked, "Do the people believe that it is the image that does the healing, or the saint, or faith?" The article contended that the shrine was invented when the

parish needed financial help, and the parish continued to profit financially from the “pretended miracle.”²¹

In the 1920s, the Ku Klux Klan targeted the shrine. At an outdoor KKK rally in July 1923 Klansmen threatened that if Fish “did not cease standing against the Klan, there would soon be a funeral in the Catholic church.” The Klan had planned a “counter-demonstration” to disrupt the shrine’s most significant annual event, the procession on the vigil of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary (August 14). Fish reported, “They wished to hold a parade in gown and mask in competition” to the procession, however, they decided to hold a gathering on the edge of town. Still some Klansmen coldly watched the procession take shape, creating an uneasy tension, but neither a counter-demonstration, nor violence occurred.²²

Vandals and thieves targeted the shrine and its miraculous image.²³ In the early morning hours of May 19, 1927, a thief stole the statue and pinned a ransom note to the rectory door demanding \$200 for its return. The cocky thief closed his letter: “Tell your janitor he should lock the back iron door in the boiler room at nite (sic). He never locks it.”²⁴ The thief had stated that he would destroy the statue in fifteen minutes if his instructions were not carried out, but the note left at 2 AM was not discovered until the next morning (the housekeeper had twice responded to the doorbell, but did not see anyone). Later that morning, the thief phoned Fish with instructions on paying the ransom. When the pastor agreed to pay, the caller took him at his word and informed him that the statue had been stashed nearby. The statue was found unharmed.²⁵

When two days later the thief attempted to recruit a local boy to collect the ransom, he was arrested. The thief, known as Ray Marsden (and a dozen aliases), claimed to have robbed 7,000 churches over a twenty-year period and confessed to setting fire to at least seventeen

churches because he had a “grudge against the Church.” He was sentenced to five years in the Ohio Penitentiary, but died before completing his term.²⁶

Despite naysayers, “doubting Thomases,” vandals, and thieves, the shrine thrived. When Fish concluded his service at the shrine in 1929 it counted over 1,000 parishioners, the Confraternity of Our Lady of Consolation had tens of thousands of members, and dozens of cures had been reported. The skeptical Father Fish had been made a believer, a believer that Carey had truly been “Mary’s choice” for special manifestations of divine grace and healing.

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The friars obtained the shrine’s designation as a “minor basilica” in 1971. To this day, the most important annual celebration is the feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary. On the evening before, some 10,000 pilgrims gather for a candlelight procession from the basilica to the outdoor shrine where Mass is celebrated. Pilgrims come via cars and chartered buses, not rail. No longer do descendants of European immigrants make exclusive claim to the shrine, but large numbers of Iraqi (Chaldean Rite), Latino, and Filipino Catholics also attend.

¹ This paper was adapted from a presentation at the American Catholic Historical Association Mid-year Meeting held at Xavier University, Cincinnati, Ohio, March 28, 2014.

² Steve Zender, *Carey, Ohio, 1858-2008* (Carey, Ohio: *Progressor-Times*, 2008); Gregory E. Faiers and Carolyn V. Prorok, “Pilgrimage to a ‘National’ Shrine: ‘Our Lady of Consolation’ in Carey, Ohio,” in *Pilgrimage in the United States*, Geographia Religionum 5, eds. Gisbert Rinschede and Surinder M. Bhardwaj (Berlin: Dietrich Reimer Verlag, 1990), 140. There are several histories of the shrine; among the earliest is Margaret Haferd, “The Shrine of Our Lady of Consolation, Carey, Ohio,” *Records of the American Catholic Historical Society* 48, no. 2 (June 1937): 204-214. Now in its third edition, the most comprehensive history is Jeffrey Hines, OFM Conv., *A History of the Basilica and National Shrine of Our Lady of Consolation, 1868 to 2012*, third ed. (Carey, OH: Basilica and National Shrine of Our Lady of Consolation, 2012).

³ The early Our Lady of Consolation baptismal register records the birthplaces of the parents. See “Baptisms, 1873-1886,” Our Lady of Consolation, Carey, Diocese of Toledo, at Bowling Green State University and Center for Archival Collections, Bowling Green, Ohio.

⁴ Hines, *A History of the Basilica and National Shrine of Our Lady of Consolation, 1868 to 2012*, 4-7.

⁵ “Told of Carey’s Church,” *Chicago Tribune*, May 4, 1896.

⁶ Quoted in Hines, *A History of the Basilica and National Shrine of Our Lady of Consolation, 1868 to 2012*, 8-9.

⁷ “Church Chronicles, Our Lady of Consolation, Carey, Ohio” (hereafter, “Church Chronicles”), 20-21, 30-32, Shrine of Our Lady of Consolation Archives, Carey, Ohio (hereafter SOLCA); parish records also show the surname as “Bilocque.”

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- ⁸ “Church Chronicles,” 56, SOLCA; “Schedule First Shrine Pilgrimage,” *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, April 18, 1915.
- ⁹ “Church Chronicles,” 63-64; “Some of the Remarkable Cures,” in *History and Reference Manual, 1909, Church of Our Lady of Consolation*, 32-33, SOLCA; “Is It True,” *Trenton Advertiser*, March 27, 1910, *Catholic Columbian*, March 26, 1911, both contained in Fish’s Scrapbook, SOLCA. Reports of healings at Carey coincided with an increased emphasis in the late nineteenth century on the possibility of faith healings as well as the Christian duty to care for the “whole man” through hygiene, diet, and exercise; see Ruth Clifford Engs, *Clean Living Movements: American Cycles of Health Reform* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2000), 103-109.
- ¹⁰ Bishop Joseph Schrembs to Rev. Leo Greulich, OMC, March 26, 1912, Shrine of Our Lady of Consolation collection, Archives of the Conventual Franciscan Friars, Province of Our Lady of Consolation, Mt. St. Francis, Indiana (hereafter APOLC).
- ¹¹ Bishop Joseph Schrembs to Rev. Leo Greulich, OMC, March 26, 1912, Shrine of Our Lady of Consolation Collection, APOLC.
- ¹² “1919 Pilgrimage Exercises,” Shrine of Our Lady of Consolation Collection, APOLC.
- ¹³ “Carey Pilgrims Arrive,” *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, August 15, 1927; “Convent Chronicle,” 9, 16, Shrine of Our Lady of Consolation Collection, APOLC.
- ¹⁴ “Advertisements” file, many from ca. 1927-1929, SOLCA.
- ¹⁵ Hines, *A History of the Basilica and National Shrine of Our Lady of Consolation, 1868 to 2012*, 16-21; “Facts Concerning the Shrine Church,” “Shrine History” file, SOLCA.
- ¹⁶ “Financial Ledger for Church of Our Lady of Consolation, Carey, O., Rev. Aloys M Fish, O.M.C., Pastor,” 2-19, SOLCA; Rev. L. Martins to “My dear Catholic Friend,” October 4, 1926, “Fr. Fish Correspondence, Business and Miscellaneous (4)” file, SOLCA.
- ¹⁷ “Says Prayer Cured Him,” *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, June 5, 1917; “Peter Columbus, Cured at Shrine, Leaves his Cot,” Fish Scrapbook, SOLCPA; Adrienne McGee, “A National Shrine: Thousands Made Pilgrimage to Carey Church,” *Lima News*, November 16, 2011. This same miracle is described in a letter believed to be from 1916 where a man was cured of blindness and arthritis in two separate visits to the shrine. The letter writer describes the man being brought in a long basket: “Stiffened as he was, he could only lie flat.” After the cure, he left the basket behind. See Archive of Letters Reporting Favors and Healings, <http://www.olcshrine.com/letters-archive/>.
- ¹⁸ A.M. Fish to “Reverend and Dear Father,” April 7, 1924, contained in “Church Chronicles,” 135, SOLCA.
- ¹⁹ “Advertisements” file, many from ca. 1927-1929, SOLCA.
- ²⁰ “Crippled and Ill Make Pilgrimage to Carey Shrine,” *Cleveland Leader*, April 28, 1913; “A Visit to the Shrine at Carey” (Cleveland) *Catholic Universe*, August 28, 1914, contained in Fish’s Scrapbook, SOLCA.
- ²¹ “The Hoodoo in Carey, Ohio,” *The Menace*, May 17, 1913: 1.
- ²² “Church Chronicles,” 126-131; quotes at 130-131, SOLCA.
- ²³ A troubled young woman had set fire to the shrine in 1922, resulting in slight damage; see “Church Chronicles,” 121-122. Many years later, the jeweled-crown from the image was stolen.
- ²⁴ Letter to Father A. Fish, May 21, 1927, “Extortion Letters, 1927” file, SOLCA.
- ²⁵ “The Kidnapping of the Image,” *Bulletin of the Shrine of Our Lady of Consolation* 8, no. 8 (June 1927): 1-2.
- ²⁶ “Robbery of 7,000 Churches Admitted: Gang Leader, Arrested at Upper Sandusky, O., Bares 27 Years of Pillaging,” *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, July 1, 1927: 1; “Church Robber Gets Pen Term: Sentenced for 3-15 Years for Carey Looting,” *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, July 8, 1927: 7; “Church Thief Admits Firing Quebec Shrine,” undated newspaper article in “Church Chronicles,” 158, SOLCA.