

COMMENTARY

# Finding path to sainthood — right here

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By Rod Watson

You've got to be kidding! All the beloved Father Nelson H. Baker needs is a couple of miracles to reach sainthood, yet we're fretting over the possibility that it may not happen?

It should be clear in the wake of [Sunday's Buffalo News article](#) about the revered priest that backers of the canonization effort have been focusing on the wrong kinds of phenomena.

Curing the sick is commendable, but the Vatican has become inured to such a traditional path to sainthood. Rome is looking for something bigger.

Fortunately for the Lackawanna priest, he hails from what military analysts call a target-rich environment. The prospects for civic miracles around here are so abundant that a piece of the priest's garment planted in any number of nontraditional places could get him canonized in no time.

All Father Baker would have to do is:

- Give Chris Collins a heart.

The Erie County executive has lacked one ever since winning office and promptly declaring war on the poor and Buffalo's inner city.

This is the millionaire businessman who closed urban health clinics serving the impoverished, slashed day care subsidies for children of the working poor and cut the financial lifelines of small cultural groups that pump educational and artistic vitality into otherwise poor neighborhoods.

Giving a heart to such a man would be quite a feat. Our prospective saint would face much more of a challenge than the Wizard of Oz ever confronted, because at least the Tin Man wanted one. The "Padre of the Poor," by contrast, would have to implant a heart in a guy who has shown no such desire.

In fact, it would be understandable if a priest who devoted his life to helping the less fortunate wanted no part of a

politician devoted to making the lives of the poor as miserable as possible.

But converting such people is the essence of what religious leaders do—and the Vatican would be most impressed.

- Turn up the heat on National Fuel executives.

If Father Baker were alive, he'd no doubt be a member of VOICE-*Buffalo*. The faith-based community organization recently joined the coalition trying to get the utility to devote more of its—actually, its customers'—conservation dollars to low-income neighborhoods.

With President Obama and congressional Republicans scapegoating the poor by looking to gut the Home Energy Assistance Program, the local effort initiated by PUSH Buffalo takes on even more urgency.

The utility's response so far? Filing a lawsuit against the advocacy group.

This would be a twofer for Father Baker: Not only would he be helping the poor, he'd also be saving the souls of National Fuel executives, lest they ultimately end up in a place where no natural gas will be needed.

- Convince the area's warring politicians—Buffalo's mayor and the Common Council's factions, the multifactioned Erie County Legislature, the splinted state delegation—to work together.

If Father Baker could get them to focus on the good of the region instead of succumbing to knee-jerk opposition to anything the other side has to offer, he would meet anyone's criteria for sainthood.

- And, of course, it almost goes without saying: If the venerable Lackawanna priest really wants to impress the powers in Rome, he could get a new Peace Bridge built.

In fact, if Father Baker could accomplish any of these feats for Western New York, even the Vatican—with its exacting standards and thorough scrutiny—could not deny that a miracle had occurred.