

Group pays tribute to miser who gave all to help needy

WATERBURY, Conn. – A small group of people traveled 140 miles on a recent Monday morning to pray briefly at the snow-covered grave of a man who died before any of them was born. He wasn't related to anyone in the group and he hadn't willed them an inheritance, but he had left them a legacy.

Representatives of the worship community at Graymoor, the headquarters of the Franciscan Friars of the Atonement in Garrison, N.Y., made their annual trek Feb. 25 to the grave of John Reid, also known as the miser of Waterbury for his frugal ways and as Brother Philip, a tertiary brother of the Atonement.

Reid, who died in 1922, was the first and arguably the most enthusiastic member of the Union That Nothing Be Lost, a fundraising effort begun in 1911 by Graymoor founder Father Paul Wattson.

The movement is dedicated to practicing self-sacrifice to provide for the needy. It takes its name from the story of the multiplication of the loaves and the fishes in the Gospel of John. After Jesus blessed the five loaves and two fish and distributed them to 5,000 men, he told the disciples to "gather the fragments leftover, so that nothing will be wasted."

Father Wattson envisioned that the union's members would "spend the minimum on self, so that we can have the maximum to give to God," specifically for missionary support in the United States and overseas.

Father Wattson's initial draft of a rule for the movement was so strict that Auxiliary Bishop Thomas F. Cusack of New York declined to bless the union, reasoning no one would be able to observe it.

Enter John Reid, a Waterbury farmer, who paid an unannounced visit to Father Wattson at Graymoor, 70 miles from his home. The priest reportedly mistook the man in threadbare clothing for one of the homeless supplicants who regularly found their way to Graymoor.

As they talked, Reid described how, by living on 50 cents a day, he was able to send all of the profits from his 40-acre dairy farm to missionaries in China, Africa and India.

Reid offered Father Wattson \$5,000 to build a seminary. Father Wattson told Reid about his nascent plan for the Union That Nothing Be Lost and invited him to be the first member. Reid agreed and sent a bank draft for \$5,200, which Father Wattson took as a sign from God, equating the amount to the five loaves and two fish.

Father Wattson recounted the meeting and the donation to Bishop Cusack, who replied, "After such a wonderful manifestation of divine providence in raising up a man to embody the rule of the union, which I thought to be so perfect that you would find no one to live by it, how could I hesitate any longer to bless and approve the rule of the Union That Nothing Be Lost."

From 1911 to his death in 1922, Reid made make regular donations to the union. He became a tertiary member of the friars, taking the name Brother Philip in honor of the disciple who helped Jesus distribute the loaves and fish.

According to Atonement Father Fred Alvarez, "People who passed Reid's dairy farm saw cows grazing alongside a ramshackle barn and house. Those who visited him at night knew that, after greeting them at the door with a candle, he would blow it out once they were seated. And those who received letters from him saw that he left no margins on the paper."

On his last visit to Graymoor, Reid traveled overnight by trolley to avoid paying more fare on a train. He gave Father Wattson \$2,100 in cash, the proceeds of the sale of eight acres of his farm, and said, "I haven't kept a dollar for myself. It is for the glory of God."

Before he died, Reid deeded his home and property to the union, so he was literally penniless when he died on his 82nd birthday, Jan. 30, 1922.

Brother Philip was buried as a Franciscan in his family plot at Old St. Joseph's Cemetery in Waterbury. The inscription at the base of the headstone describes him as "Perfect Observer UNBL."

Father Wattson referred to Reid as “God’s holy miser” and said his generosity helped him “amass immense treasure in the reserve bank of paradise.”

At the time of Father Wattson’s death in 1940, the union had distributed \$3 million to missions throughout the world. Since then, the friars have disbursed an additional \$17.5 million.

According to Atonement Father James Gardiner, the union made small grants totaling \$130,502 in 2007 to 29 organizations. Recipients ranged from small local social service groups to organizations with an international mission, such as the Catholic Near East Welfare Association and the World Council of Churches.

Father Gardiner said the Graymoor group’s visit to Reid’s grave is an annual Lenten event. This year, the service included several Scripture readings, prayers and a brief reflection by Father Alvarez.

Father Gardiner said the worship community at Graymoor was designating 10 percent of its Sunday Lenten offerings, as well as other freewill contributions, to the union.

“Things like the UNBL capture people’s imaginations,” he said. “It’s an idea whose time has come again. Giving has become so antiseptic – we write a check. Here, we can get personally involved by denying ourselves.

“One man stuffed a handful of bills into the collection jar at the door to Mass on Sunday and said, ‘That’s the coffee I didn’t buy all week.’ It’s harder to not buy the cup of coffee than to make a donation,” added the priest.