The Patron Saint to the Navajo of the San Juan

An Essay By: Cathlena Plummer

No Water. No electricity. No clinics. No roads. The year was not 1842 but instead 1942, when the Utah strip (the land between the San Juan River and the Arizona state line) was first visited by Fr. H. Baxter Liebler.

Now, as then, the Navajo Reservation stretches across 25,000 square miles of dry deserts, high mesas, and deep canyons in three states. The White culture has always referred to us as Navajo, a name invoked upon us by Spanish settlers, so instead we prefer to call ourselves Diné which means “The People” in our language.

The People is used by many North American Indigenous nations as well so we are no different. According to our Navajo traditional stories we were “emerged” into this area in the early mists of time, having progressed through three or four (depending on family tradition) previous worlds.

The Diné Identify passionately with the land, historically marked at the extremities by the four sacred mountains. The present reservation, though the largest in the United States, is a fraction of the ancestral occupation. Anthropologists would argue that we have come originally from Asia, either moving south from the Bering Straits temporary land bridge, or crossing the
Pacific Ocean and moving north. The Dene of Alaska and of Canada are linguistically and culturally related to we the Diné.¹

We are known as small desert farmers and nomadic sheepherders. We live in great distances from one another in homes we call hooghans, six or eight-sided log and mudhouses, but buttressed by a strong clan system and rigourous annual cycle of religious ceremonies. We are known to also borrow from and adapt practices from other people, whether they are native or European, making it our own, and so this is how we became great sheepherders, potters, weavers, and jewelry makers.

Our recent history as a “People” is dominated, as is that of many other North Americans, by the forced removal and internment of our people. The Diné were rounded up and forced to march to a concentration camp at Bosque Redondo in New Mexico this happened in the years of 1863-1864. We were suffering from great cruelty and loss of life. A remnant returned in 1868 and with incredible fortitude, the Navajo Nation re-established themselves, and their economy, and grew in numbers, survived the boarding schools, and further government oppression. The nation now numbers 300,000 people, probably larger than it has ever been, and has its own government and services.²

This was the world into which Fr. Baxter Libeler came. The People were physically poor but rich in culture, folklore, myth, traditions, heroes, morals, and ceremonies. It was Fr. Liebler’s great gift to recognize this and value it. Unlike most missionaries of the time, he was

² Ibid.
able to work along side medicine men and to enable people to recognize Jesus as perhaps the Chief Medicine man. For this reason, he refused financial support from the Diocese of Utah, then only a Mission District. He raised money privately so as to be free of the possibility of pressure or compromise with what he perceived as the less enlightened attitude of the National Church. The Episcopal church has continued Liebler’s policy of working through the culture. Indeed, the culture is visibly around, every rock formation being associated with stories of the Holy People and the Creation drama. The whole land is Holy.  

Yet Father Liebler himself remains something of an enigma. Possessed of a dogmatic and intransigent Anglo-Catholic faith, he seems to have been deeply nostalgic for the old Spanish Catholic missions, even designing his church in Connecticut in a Spanish style which he later reproduced at St. Christopher’s in Bluff Utah and later at St. Mary’s of the Moonlight in Oljeto Utah. He also arrived looking like a nineteenth century Catholic priest, suggesting an unease with the modern world, even though he had worked nearly a quarter of a century as a business executive in New York City.

Harold Baxter Liebler, known as Baxter or Bax, was endowed with good health, intellectual curiosity, strong organizational and leadership ability, and the capacity for a genuine love of God and mankind. His family provided him with exposure to culture, an elite education and examples of industrious, gracious, moral, and ethical living.

Baxter had an almost boundless curiosity and energy. He mastered seven languages and several musical instruments during his life and wrote four books and numerous articles. It was

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not uncommon for him to work at two jobs or in two ministerial roles while writing books and
pursuing his study of American Indian cultures.

With such an abundance of energy and positive examples from his family, Baxter could
have chosen any of several vocations, and certainly could have lived out his life in reasonable
comfort in New England. In his late teens he heard God’s call to service, sometimes under the
most trying conditions. It became evident that God did not call him to a single task, but three
distinct missions, spanning almost 70 years. Wherever he was sent or felt led, the Church and
people were enriched for his having touched their lives.

Baxter Liebler was not raised as a “good” Episcopalian. Episcopalians “in good standing”
were expected to attend church regularly and receive communion at least on Christmas and
Easter. From his own writing, Baxter seemed to have little use for religion until he was in
college, and made no mention of either his parents or his attending church at all while he was
growing up. The only things found in Liebler’s book was that Baxter was baptized in an
Episcopal church, probably as an infant since he only needed to be confirmed when he became
active, and that he and his family did not attend church regularly, if at all.

Although his father’s reaction to his going into the ministry was extreme, one can never
be sure whether it was because Baxter had chosen to (a) become a priest rather than following
his father into the business world, (b) become an Episcopalian in the Anglo-Catholic tradition,
or (c) become a minister in any church.4

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Baxter revealed his early beliefs in *Boil My Heart for Me*, when he described his 1942 trip to Utah. While lying ill in his tent, he reflected on his earliest religious thoughts:

Christianity I had definitely rejected at the age of four, when with the help of my big brother [Theodore], I saw for myself that it wasn’t Santa Claus but my parents who put the presents under the Christmas tree, then lied about them. With one voice they taught Santa Claus and the baby Jesus. Both were obviously one and the same device—a labor-saving device to make children good! If you’re not good, Santa won’t bring you anything. If you’re not good, Jesus won’t take you to heaven. A plague on both fakes!⁵

Baxter’s spiritual nature is apparent in his early years but in another form. His fascination with Indian lore and his understanding of how the Indian expressed himself spiritually appear to have been far more influential than any nominal ties with the Episcopal Church.

Baxter stated that in high school history he learned about the secular power and corruption of the (Roman) Catholic Church, but also learned much about the beauty of certain aspects of Catholic life. His confession about his attitude toward Roman Catholicism revealed the strong prejudices of society in the early 1900’s, as well as within his own social circle.

I can hardly imagine anyone who could have been more bitterly prejudiced against Catholicism. It was “servant girls” religion. We were of the Best People. Only with great misgivings and under severe limitations was I allowed to play with a neighbor boy who was a Catholic. I even believed the boy who warned me against letting the Catholic upstairs maid ever see me undressed, because Catholics believed, he said, that if she could see my private parts daily for forty days she would surely go to heaven and I would be her slave there!⁶

By the time that Baxter entered college he said that he had put aside the ideas behind his prejudices but the prejudices themselves remained. He found religion something he was

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⁶ Ibid. p. 22.
unwilling to take part in, even during his first year of college at Columbia University in New York City, and described his conclusion as follows:

College is where country boys lose their faith. College is where we learn that the earth was not made in six days, that man descended from the ape and that God is not a nice old gentleman sitting on a cloud and waiting to welcome those who sing His praises while on earth. Before I finished my freshman year at Columbia, I had things straightened out in my mind. If God is even decent, He has had to reveal himself to man at least clearly enough so that man can find as much of divine truth as he needs. The Bible could not be the answer, because there were hundreds of denominations warring one with another, not only on minutiae but on fundamentals, such as What is God? Who is Jesus Christ? How is man justified? What is the ministry? And all basing their arguments on the Bible. The Bible, then, could not be the answer.\(^7\)

One could legitimately ask why Baxter did not become Roman Catholic, he stated:

The first day of the week meant not Sunday comics and Sunday school, but Mass...It was bitter pill for me. But the conclusion was crystal clear: if God is, He has spoken, and His voice is the Catholic Church.\(^8\)

The answer is that he easily could have but, to his delight the Episcopal Church had room for such people under its broad umbrella of tolerance for both “Roman” and evangelical Anglican believers, more commonly known as High Church and Low Church people. Thus, he avoided having to face more difficult questions and deep-seated prejudices associated with Roman Catholicism such as papal authority, papal infallibility and celibacy of the Priesthood. People who believed like Baxter that the Church of England never broke with the Historic Priesthood, the Sacraments and the Creeds established at the first four Councils of the Early Church, are referred to as Anglo-Catholics or “High Church” Episcopalians.\(^9\)

High Churchmen of Baxter’s day were inclined to use Latin terms more frequently and observe saints’ days and festivals more in accordance with the Roman Church calendar. Today, the Anglo-

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\(^8\) Ibid. p. 21-22.
Catholic members of the Episcopal Church are more aligned with Roman Catholic liturgy and worship than “Low Church” members, who tend to be more evangelical and less bound by ritual and tradition.\textsuperscript{10}

A second factor for joining the Episcopal Church might very well have been the underlying notion of the Roman Church as a “servant girls” religion. Many of the longstanding wealthy families of New England like the Rockefellers and Roosevelts were members of the Episcopal Church. In Riverside, Connecticut, St. Paul’s Episcopal Church was an established, well-endowed “society” church, so this would be a logical place for Baxter to seek out his religious path.

In his freshman year of college, Baxter wandered several times into St. Paul’s Chapel on the Columbia University campus, but felt nothing was there for him until the day a junior at Columbia took him aside on the chapel porch. He recalled the challenge laid before him:

I shall never forget him—the first man who ever spoke to me seriously about religion. He invited me to his Bible class...I learned not much, but he persuaded me to seek out my parish church, St. Paul’s in Riverside. I objected that no one except old Mrs. Lockwood ever went to church. He laughed and said, “Well, now there will be two of you going!”\textsuperscript{11}

This young man later became a priest and unfortunately died young. Baxter never forgot the one who brought him to Christ.

At St. Paul’s in Riverside came the revelation that the Episcopal church, the church of my baptism, claimed to be not a Reformation sect but the historic continuation of the English church—the church that had sent Boniface to my ancestors in Germany, the church of St. Thomas à Becket, of Richard the Lion Heart.\textsuperscript{12}

Baxter searched in vain to refute what he had learned at St. Paul’s and it was difficult for him to accept it at first. His reasoning was laid out in a logical manner.

\textsuperscript{11} H. Baxter Liebler, \textit{Boil My Heart for Me} (Salt Lake City: Univ of Utah Pr (T), 1994), p. 22.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid. p. 22.
Now, if the Catholic religion were true and the Catholic religion were the religion of the Episcopal church, I didn’t need to make a change—I needed only to use the means of grace that were available. . . Confession, Confirmation, First Holy Communion followed in what seems in retrospect rapid succession. By the beginning of my sophomore year I was conscious of a vocation to the priesthood.  

After graduation from Columbia, Baxter announced his intention to pursue a calling to the priesthood. Baxter’s grandson John stated that, at that time, Baxter’s father’s reaction was one of outrage and Baxter was disowned.

One might wonder why Baxter chose Nashotah House in Wisconsin for his theological education. Some of the finest theological colleges and seminaries were located in New England, and until Church Divinity School of the Pacific (CDSP) was established, nearly all men of traditional denominations headed East or South, often at great sacrifice. A major reason for Baxter’s choice was that Nashotah House could offer him an Anglo-Catholic education.  

Baxter had found his calling and his place as an Anglo-Catholic within the Episcopal Church. He took on more than the vocation of ministry. He became a self-disciplined, dedicated, life-long servant, teacher and preacher.

While Baxter was in his last term at Nashotah House in 1914, the Bishop of Milwaukee ordained him a deacon. He would be known as Father Liebler from that point on, the person who touched and changed lives from the Eastern seaboard to the Southwestern desert over the next 65 years.

Fr. Liebler referred to a Canon Douglas in *Boil My Heart for Me*. Fr. Liebler was on his 1942 trip to Navajo country, lying ill in his tent, remembering why he had decided to seek out a site for a mission.

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15 Ibid.
Canon Douglas was the second major influence on a journey that would lead him to Utah. The first was his association with Seton’s Woodcraft Indians as a youth. Fr. Liebler remembered:

... I recalled one evening at the seminary, Nashotah House, when Canon Douglas addressed the student body, not on music, for which he was then internationally famous, but on missions to the American Indian. He knew the Indian cultures well and respected them; he deplored the efforts of missionaries to destroy all that remained of the beauty of Indian life and thought instead of sanctifying it and enriching it with the truth and grace of the Gospel. I could not recall a single sentence of his talk, but the basic idea sank deep into my soul. Now, thirty years later, I might be facing a new life in which Canon Douglas’s [sic] theory might be put into practice.16

There is certainly excitement in Fr. Liebler’s last sentence. After twenty-five years as a parish priest in New England, what he had learned about Indian life, lore and wilderness survival finally might be put to use. All that he had anticipated from Canon Douglas’ lecture about bringing the Gospel to the Indians within their own spiritual context might finally be put to action. The intervening years had all been preparatory to fulfilling this calling to establish a mission where he could implement all that he had envisioned in his mind and spirit.

It would be likely that, after Baxter was ordained, he and Douglas kept in touch. Both had an interest in bringing the Gospel to the Indian in a way that would not negate the sensibilities of the established native cultures and spirituality. Both also had a strong interest in the Anglo-Catholic practices of sung liturgy and musical composition.

Fr. Liebler certainly used Douglas’ settings for the mass during his many years as a parish priest. Douglas’ A Missionary Service Book, published by the House of Bishop’s in 1937, most likely was among Fr. Liebler’s books as he headed west.17

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16 H. Baxter Liebler, Boil My Heart for Me (Salt Lake City: Univ of Utah Pr (T), 1994), p. 23.
In Fr. Liebler’s “Mass of St. Isaac Jogues”, which he arranged for the Navajo, he set the Nicene Creed to a 9th century plainsong which Douglas brought into Episcopal worship.\textsuperscript{18} His grandson, The Rev. John Liebler, proudly stated that a church in Orlando, Florida, not far from his own parish, uses his grandfather’s setting for the Eucharist.

Having so few resources regarding Father Liebler’s ministry and life through his east-west links has never been shared until a request was made to his ex-wife Frances. Frances, from her memory states,

We lived in New York City about a year when Bax was called to St. Paul’s Riverside. Fr. Boylston was rector there for many years and because of ill health and old age he resigned, he bought a nice house next to the church, St. Paul’s Riverside where we were married, we spent happy years.\textsuperscript{19}

St. Paul’s Episcopal Church on Chapel Lane, Riverside Connecticut, was founded in 1875 as a mission of Greenwich’s first Episcopal Church, Christ Church. According to a brief history of St. Paul’s provided by Nancy Barker, by 1893 St. Paul’s had a church and parish hall. It was here that the then 28 year old Fr. Liebler in 1918 received a call to serve the very parish where he had thought, as a youth, that only Mrs. Lockwood prayed. This was also the parish of his conversion, his confirmation, his call to the priesthood, and his wedding to Frances. Now, he returned as the parish’s spiritual leader, to live in the rectory with his wife and son, George.

In reading the brief history of St. Paul’s that Barker included with photos of the old church and a map of Greenwich, one name stands out: Lockwood. Two Lockwood family men were instrumental in the construction and daily running of St. Paul’s from its inception in 1875.

\textsuperscript{18} The Hymnal of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America. (New York: The Church Pension Fund, 1940). Fr. Liebler’s “Mass of St. Isaac Jogues,” which includes Douglas’ setting from the hymnal (#721) is included in the section about Fr. Liebler’s mission.

Although is it unknown to which of these men she was married, the Mrs. Lockwood, still attended St. Paul’s through Fr. Liebler’s ordination in 1914, at which time she gave him a bible.

While Frances managed the rectory with its many inhabitants, Fr. Liebler cared for his parishioners. During this time, he also saw another need on the horizon. Frances wrote:

Bax being Bax wasn’t satisfied with St. Paul’s—started up a mission in Old Greenwich, about 3 miles away. Later on with his own hands and the help of his altar boys built a little chapel. My mother donated the land...  

St. Paul’s had began supporting a mission in Sound Beach (three miles south of Riverside, now known as Old Greenwich) in 1918. St. Paul’s helped fund the construction of the chapel, and Fr. Liebler served both parishes for six years. On Sundays he would conduct the service at St. Paul’s, then ride on horseback across town to the Mission that would later become St. Saviour’s Church.

In 1924, Fr. Liebler resigned as Rector of St. Paul’s due to illness. This was possibly another bout of mastoiditis. In two of the church histories supplied by St. Saviour’s, Fr. Liebler is mentioned as having resigned from St. Paul’s due to illness. One history mentioned that he went to Europe to recuperate then became Vicar of St. Saviour’s on a full-time basis. The second account stated that as soon as his strength returned, he became Vicar of St. Saviour’s.

During his tenure from 1924 to 1943, he was non-stipendiary, earning his living with the Marks Company, which included a daily commute to New York City.

St. Saviour’s Church in Old Greenwich, Connecticut, was in a peculiar sense my baby. In 1918, a moribund Presbyterian group had decided that their only hope of survival was to submit to “prelacy” and “turn Episcopal”—since it was well known that “Episcopals are all rich.” They asked me to help, and although in the early days some might have felt that they had made a rash choice, twenty-five years of steady plodding, patient teaching and constant forward-moving produced a beautiful church building, a devoted congregation enjoying all Catholic

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priviliges, and an enviable reputation as a spearhead of the movement in Anglicanism for the recovery of all that had been lost in the Reformation.21

In 1925, Fr. Liebler published his first book *Anima Christi: Meditations on the Prayer of St. Ignatius*. Even as he worked at building up St. Saviour’s as a model of Anglo-Catholic worship and practice, his mind was on the West and mission work with the Indians. This particular church, already “odd” for having “turned Episcopal,” began to take on the outward appearance of Fr. Liebler’s innermost desire. Its southwestern Mission-style architecture looked oddly out-of-place in New England and, later, all would know why. The Rev. John Liebler wrote that his grandfather’s second book *Moccasin Tracks* was published in 1937. According to his grandson, Fr. Liebler also had been taking long summer trips to the Southwest. He had the following to say about his grandfather’s vision of mission service.

I’m absolutely convinced that this was on his heart for decades. The summer trips, the seemingly out-of-place Southwestern style architecture of St. Saviour’s, Old Greenwich, CT, and even the early publication of *Moccasin Tracks* all point to a life-long calling.22

In 1926, Frances gave birth to their third son, Robert. By this time they had moved out of St. Paul’s rectory and were living on Fr. Liebler’s salary from the Marks Company. Frances said of this time:

Well we moved back to my house on the hill and Mrs. Weed who was very fond of Baxter, gave him the money to build St. Christopher’s (sic)2 in Old Greenwich, my mother gave the property in memoriam (sic) to her sister Grace and the building of the church began. We lived in O[l]d G[reenwich] for 25 years but in the winter I had to go to Florida, below the frost line, we would drive down after Christmas & come back May 1st. Thru friends of my family named Binney, I rented a lovely apt called Casa Caprona. By my going there 5 families joined us & what fun we had. In the meantime my Father died

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and my sister Grace borrowed money from Mr. Miner, another friend of the family. She bought an old cracker house, had it moved back about 250 feet and remodeled it. In the meantime your uncle George graduated from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute as an electrical engineer... [End]23

From the mid-1930s on, Fr. Liebler took several summer trips to the Southwest in search of the “perfect” Indians—ones untouched by white man’s “civilization” or religion. His sons remember these trips fondly, and the following remarks made independently by George, Robert, and their nephew, Fr. John, confirmed that this was an ongoing goal.

George: He [Fr. Liebler] made several trips out west prior to founding the mission, starting in the mid 1930s including one to Mexico {sic}. My brother John [has] more details as he made more trips than I did.

Fr. John: You should definitely get some of the stories of his summer vacations out West with his boys (George, John, and Robert). They were recon missions of a sort.

Robert Liebler confirmed the thoroughness of the search in the following way:

Perhaps it was 1937 (the San Francisco World’s Fair was on—we didn’t go to it), I remember waiting in the car in Phoenix while my father went to see Bishop Kinslovington. . . We continued to Pyramid Lake, NV to an Episcopal mission and on to Yellowstone and into South Dakota and Iowa visiting various Indian tribes and missionaries. In 1939 we visited Farmington, NM mission and Ft. Defiance. By this time, HBL [Fr. Liebler] had narrowed his search to the Utah strip of the Navajo reservation.24

Robert later added that his father had taken him and his brothers on several trips all over the Western United States during the late 1930s in search of the perfect tribe to work with. They traveled as far north as Idaho, and his first choice was the Havasapi Indians near the Grand Canyon. Kinslovington, Bishop of the Diocese of Arizona, however, would not allow an Anglo-Catholic priest to work in his Diocese. As it turned out, the Navajos in the San Juan region of Utah were more compatible with Fr. Liebler’s ritualized approach to Christianity. Their deep spiritual beliefs and rituals fit into the worship

24 Ibid. p. 70.
patterns of Anglo-Catholicism. Further, because they were so isolated, they were perhaps the most in need of such simple basics as education and health care.

Fr. Liebler and Frances agreed that they would go west together to build a mission. The next steps would be more difficult than expected. It had to be determined which bishops had jurisdiction and which one would give permission. Suitable land had to be purchased and a mission agency to fund the endeavor had to be established. A versatile group of workers had to be assembled. Hundreds of details had to fall into place at exactly the right time.

The time had come for me to yield [the parish in Connecticut] to a younger and more vigorous priest, while I devoted what vigor remained in me to the pioneer work of the West, to bring this precious gift [of the Gospel] to the Navajo people.25

Little did Fr. Liebler know that “what vigor remained in me” would be fully tested in the desert for the next forty years.

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