

Necrology

Campion Baer, Capuchin
1930-2016



Campion “Robert” Baer was a Capuchin of the Province of St. Joseph for almost 68 years, and a priest for almost 60 years. An intellectual giant and trusted leader, he was also a celebrated teacher, self-effacing mentor and beloved uncle.

Robert Herbert Baer was born in Marshfield, Wisconsin on 5 August 1930—the third of four children to William Peter Baer (d. 1970) and Mary Margaret Seidl (d. 1981). Bobby began grade school at Sacred Heart in Marshfield, transferred to Sts. Peter and Paul in the middle of the fifth grade, and after graduating 8th grade went to St. Lawrence Seminary in 1944.

After his graduation from St. Lawrence he entered the Capuchin novitiate on 31 August 1948, receiving the name Campion. After first profession in September of 1949, Campion moved to Garrison NY where he pursued his B.A. degree, completing it (after the division of the province) at St. Felix Seminary in Huntington IN in 1953. He then took up graduate theological work at the Capuchin Seminary of St. Anthony in Marathon WI. He was ordained a “simplex priest” —as was the custom at that time— at the beginning of his fourth year of theology on 10 October 1956.

Recognizing his intellectual gifts, upon his completion of theological studies at Marathon in the spring of 1957, he instantaneously moved from student to professor, and began teaching at the theologate in Marathon during the fall of 1957. This was the beginning of a long and illustrious career as educator, formator and mentor. While teaching at the theologate, he also taught at the St. Mary School of Nursing in nearby Wausau WI.

In the summer of 1958, Campion began graduate studies in education at the University of Notre Dame. He left Marathon in 1959 to pursue full time studies at Notre Dame and was awarded the M.A. in education there in 1960. Campion then matriculated at Oxford University in the fall of 1960, which granted him a certificate in education on 1 August 1961, and a diploma in education on 4 August 1961.

Campion returned to the U.S. in the summer of 1961, and began 13 years of teaching at the Capuchin Seminary of St. Mary [college] in Crown Point IN, where he eventually became academic dean. While teaching at Crown Point, he continued pursuing the Ph.D. in education from Notre Dame. This required him residing in South Bend during the week, then taking the train to Hammond IN where he was picked up on what was then known as the “milk run,”

which dropped him off at a local parish, where he heard confessions, celebrated Saturday evening and Sunday morning masses, and was then delivered back to Crown Point Sunday afternoon. Campion would teach classes on Monday and Tuesday, and then would return by train to Notre Dame where he continued work on his dissertation. After two years of this teaching and commuting he finished his dissertation (on the topic of the accreditation of Roman Catholic seminaries) and was awarded the Ph.D. in the history and philosophy of education from Notre Dame in the spring of 1963. He later confessed that his years at Crown Point were very difficult for him; he was a 31 year old professor teaching in a seminary environment he never envisioned, and wondered “is this where I will spend the rest of my ministry?” His teaching at Crown Point and its vision of education were not enormously fulfilling for him.

Campion’s worst fears were not to be realized, and the college seminary in Crown Point closed in the spring of 1974. He had begun teaching part time at Calumet College in 1966, and moved there full time in the fall of 1974. In the summer of 1975 his career in higher education ended when he was named co-pastor of St. Joseph Parish in Appleton WI (1975-78), and then in 1979 pastor at St. Anthony Parish in Marathon WI (1979-85). He subsequently served as pastor at St. Mary’s in Marathon (1985-87), and finally at St. Anthony Parish in Saginaw MI (1987-90). He often remembered his years of pastoring as the richest and most blessed of his ministry. He loved being a pastor and was an instinctive pastoral minister.

Always a multitasker, Campion was never simply a “pastor.” His combination of brilliance and self-effacement prompted his Capuchin brothers to assign, promote or elect him to innumerable positions in the Province of St. Joseph. He was elected to the Provincial Council a virtually unprecedented five times (1975-78, 1981-84, 1984-87, 1987-90, and 1993-96). He also served as the director of research for the province (1978-79), director of continuing education (1979-84, 1987-90), and director of overseas missions (2004-8). He even accepted the job of provincial archivist for a year, and wrote volume two of the history of the Province of St. Joseph: *Lady Poverty Revisited* (2005).

In the twilight of his ministry, he moved to St. Lawrence Seminary in Mt. Calvary WI, where he served as academic dean and teacher of psychology and Spanish (1991-2002). Since he pastored a bi-lingual parish in Saginaw (1987-90), he dedicated segments of several summers in those years to studying Spanish at the Mexican American Cultural Center in San Antonio TX, and then—ever the learner—took a four month Spanish intensive course in Guadalajara, Mexico in the fall of 1990. In the spring of 1991 he spent four months in the Chepo Mission of the Capuchins in Panama to test his Spanish learning, a testament to his practical approach to education. Even while at St. Lawrence as a teaching faculty, he never relinquished his pastoral instincts, and for almost two decades assisted at St. John the Baptist Parish in Plymouth WI.

While confreres and students knew him as Fr. Campion, he was first and foremost the beloved “Uncle Bob” to his many nieces and nephews and their offspring. They cherished his visits, reveled in his affection, and reported that he always seemed more like one of their generation than that of their parents [his siblings]. His students eventually came to see that side of him as

well. As noted in his funeral homily, some of us thought that “Bear” was more an attribute than a homonym. To some of us, he was a growly, even moody professor: too smart and too demanding. Little did we understand, however, how much had been put on his shoulders so early. Over the years we increasingly experienced his generous, often ebullient, truly magnanimous generosity and care. Campion was never about Campion; despite his celebrated accomplishments and brilliance—one joke was that he could illuminate small villages off of his neural wattage—he was devoid of pretense. Campion Baer was an authentic friar minor.

In April of 2016 Campion was involved in a car accident. While the prognosis was initially good, he quickly declined, and was put on life support. Knowing the end was near, he asked those around him—family and friars—if they might sing the *Salve Regina* for him, a text ordinarily sung at Compline, at the end of the day. Mindful that he was at the end of his day, he listened to his niece bring the *Salve* up on her iPad, mouthed the words to the ancient chant, and then gave himself over to God. He died on 17 April 2016 at the age of 85.

It is an overstatement to suggest that every Capuchin friar—especially those of us in the Province of St. Joseph— is “unique.” Unique, however, is not a synonym for rare. Campion Baer was a rare human being, a rare educator, a rare friar, and a rare family member. Maybe here the synonym for “rare” is best rendered as “beloved.” Brilliant without pretension, a leader without grasping for leadership, an educator who understood education not as some university position but as a life-stance, Campion Baer was a rare and beloved brother, mentor, and friend. We did not only respect him and care for him, we loved him: something clearly on display at his packed funeral at St. Lawrence Seminary on 22 April 2016. We shall not see his face, nor know his luminosity again.

Eternal rest grant until him, oh Lord, and let perpetual light shine upon him.
Requiescat in pace.

– Edward Foley