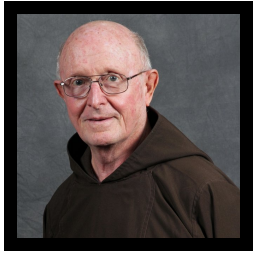


Neerology

Michael Crosby
1940-2017



Michael Hugh Crosby was born in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin on February 16, 1940, the third of four sons of Blanche Bouser Crosby and Hugh Crosby: Pat, Dan, Mike and Jerry. After grade school at St. Patrick's in Fond du Lac, he attended St. Mary Springs Academy, becoming involved in a multitude of activities. Some of this involvement was one of his ways of resisting the tug he felt toward becoming a priest. Finally after graduating in 1958 he gave in at least partially to the tug: he enrolled for his first year of college at St. Lawrence Seminary.

Resistance took a different shape at St. Lawrence – this time conscious or unconscious resistance to becoming a Capuchin, probably because his brother Dan had already taken that path. Feeling he had royally “screwed up” his four years of high school (actually nothing worse than beer parties), he felt inclined to join an order which worked with youth, to save them from the perils he had pursued.

Early in the summer after his year at St. Lawrence, he went out East to visit two of these communities. On his return he shared his experiences with Dan who had just moved, along with all the clerics and brothers, into the newly built Capuchin Seminary of St. Mary in Crown Point, Indiana. After expounding on the glorious mission of these communities, he asked what the Capuchins had as their “mission.” Simply recalling the first words of the *Rule* we used to read every Friday noon, Dan said that all St. Francis wanted to do was to “observe the Holy Gospel of Our Lord Jesus Christ.” It hardly seemed impressive or earth-shattering. Within a few weeks this became the reason for his applying to enter the Capuchin Order (the novitiate was now at St. Felix Friary in Huntington). Resistance was over! Years later Mike confided that following Francis in “observing the Holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ” – making the Gospel come alive first in his life and then the world's – became the goal, the “mission” behind everything he did and wrote. Everyone who knew him would attest to the never-ending energy and enthusiasm he brought to this life-long endeavor.

Mike professed his temporary vows on Sept. 1, 1960. He completed college at the Capuchin Seminary of St. Mary and then moved to St. Anthony Seminary in Marathon, Wisconsin where he professed perpetual vows, and was ordained on October 6, 1966. During his years at Marathon he was the first student friar to publish a book: *Bearing Witness: the Place of the Franciscan Family in the Church*. What began as an article for the clerics' publication, *Round Table of Franciscan Research*, ended up being a book.

He and his ordination classmates moved to St. Francis in Milwaukee for their “pastoral year” in 1967-68. This was the summer of urban upheaval not only in Milwaukee but many other cities in the country. Mike, along with other Capuchins, believed this was a sign of the Spirit moving and felt impelled to become involved. It served as a kind of launching pad for much of his future Capuchin life and ministry.

After this pastoral year he volunteered to minister in the inner city and so was assigned to the Capuchin parish of St. Elizabeth in Milwaukee. The parish was experiencing its own upheaval as a result of many white parishioners moving out as they saw more and more black people moving into the neighborhood. His Capuchin superiors told Mike they hoped he’d be able to bring about racial reconciliation. Mike would later admit this fed into his “messiah” complex. If he wasn’t destined to save a host of young people from the perils of adolescence, perhaps he could save Milwaukee’s inner city from the perils of racial hatred and bigotry. For five years he tried mightily, but ended up feeling like a failure. He came to know, of course, that the causes of division and the ways of bringing about true reconciliation go far beyond the efforts of one person.

In this process he came to see clearly America’s need for structural reform if there is ever going to be true reconciliation, healing and justice. To assist in this, he was happy to serve on the board of the newly formed Capuchin Office of Justice and Peace. At first these efforts were opposed by some in the province (and Mike would admit that some of the opposition was justified; he acted too often as an overly intense mini-messiah), but those beginnings – with more positive than negative features — helped to shape the Province of St. Joseph into what it is today. Gradually Mike became aware of his own weaknesses, that sometimes he could get caught up in issues of injustice than in observing the gospel message of peace, love and justice for all people (especially enemies). It was the beginning of his own deeper conversion.

His work for justice, starting with corporate/structural reform, continued. It especially took the shape of working – beginning in 1973 – with the Interfaith Center for Corporate Responsibility for Investments. When he died, he was executive director of ICCR’s Midwest Seventh Generation Interfaith Coalition. Mike was a pioneer among Catholics in promoting corporate reform through socially responsible investing. He helped Catholic dioceses and religious orders to work with Protestant and Jewish communities in this effort. Over the years he became very involved in a wide range of issues – from South Africa apartheid and infant formula to climate change and tobacco control. For years, after studying all the implications of a corporation’s stands which did not reflect gospel principles. He became a well-known presence at stockholders’ meetings articulating the Gospel message, calling for change in corporate policy. Most of the time it was like David fighting Goliath; but Mike was persistent, year after year, and in some significant instances his efforts bore fruit, especially on infant formula, tobacco, smoke-free work places and climate change. And even as an adversary, CEO’s and corporate staff opposing him respected him for his integrity and courageous humility. More than one CEO would acknowledge that Mike Crosby had the gift of being able to disagree without ever becoming disagreeable. The conversion definitely was happening.

To gain more credibility for his work, Mike earned a master's degree in economics from New School University in New York, and then a doctorate in theology from Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California. In both places he desired to live with Capuchins, contributing in many ways to regular community life. His writings – and subsequent requests for talks and retreats – multiplied. As he delved deeper into the Gospel and the need for structural reform, he realized the need for Catholic Church reform – because too often structures in the church keep it from operating with full gospel integrity. This realization took shape in his book, *The Dysfunctional Church: Addiction and Co-dependency in the Family of Catholicism*. In spite of his own more authentic gospel approach to all these realities (including a section on his own dysfunctionality and addiction), some bishops and religious leaders found him a threat and banned him from their institutions. This was always painful for Mike, and when it happened he would always attempt to speak directly to the bishop or leader, as the gospel requires, but usually to no avail.

The majority of bishops and religious communities, however, remained open to his biblically-based prophetic speaking. Our own province elected him to leadership as a councilor and, because of his expertise, asked him to serve on our finance and investments committees. He was chosen to be the American Capuchin representative for the fifth plenary council of the order in Rio Grande del Sul in Brazil. Several times he was asked by our General Curia to come to Rome and give input to them or to particular groups who could benefit from his Franciscan gospel insights. Among other groups, he gave keynote addresses to the Catholic Theological Society of America, the Conference of Major Superiors of Men – and for years was a much sought-after speaker at the Los Angeles Religious Education Conference. He wrote almost twenty books, many of which won awards for their quality and biblical scholarship. His doctoral thesis became the book *House of Disciples: Church, Economics and Justice in Matthew*. His books *Can Religious Life Be Prophetic?* and *Finding Francis: Following Christ* won first place in their categories from the Catholic Press Association. His book, *Spirituality of the Beatitudes* went through at least 21 printings in its first edition..

A major influence in his own life as well as a major contribution to the life of our province and church was his work on Solanus Casey. With his doctorate in theology, our provincial leadership asked him to be the official theologian for the cause of Solanus. In that capacity he wrote a three volume *position* on Solanus' life, writings and virtues. This was submitted to the Congregation for the Causes of Saints to authenticate the holiness of Solanus – and was one of the essential steps in the process that led John Paul II in 1995 to declare Solanus “venerable,” truly holy. Mike wrote a smaller, more popular version of Solanus' life in his book *Thank God Ahead of Time* which has gone through many printings. For Mike this was a labor not just of scholarship, but of love. Solanus' simple faith and deep mysticism inspired him in his ongoing conversion and throughout his life. Before he died he was thrilled to know that Pope Francis had declared Solanus to be *Blessed Solanus Casey*. His last desire was to update his official position book so that it would be re-printed with the title *Blessed Solanus Casey*, ready for the November beatification.

After receiving his degrees Mike was always stationed in Milwaukee, at St. Benedict the Moor. Much of the time he was on the road giving retreats, parish missions (often in other countries) or going to stockholders' meetings. All this travel put him in the top 1% of United Airlines Frequent Flyer program. Mike delighted in that distinction and happily shared his extra miles with friars or family who could use them. When he was home, he always appreciated his community life and the daily insertion into the life of the poor which is so much a part of St. Ben's. In 2014, in response to the Bangladesh garment workers' tragedy, Mike founded *The Human Thread*, a Catholic effort to raise awareness, undertake direct action and build solidarity with garment workers.

Involvement in all his ministries began to change the last week of Advent 2016, when, after experiencing difficulty swallowing, he was diagnosed with cancer of the esophagus. With the help of St. Francis and Solanus, he faced this with the same faith and trust he had tried to develop throughout his life. Some friends set up a biog. for him on the Caring Bridge website so he could keep people updated on what was going on and how he was responding. For example, he wrote early on; "I believe that God is everywhere, so God is in my cancer. I believe that God is love, so love is in my cancer. What is there to be afraid of?" The Caring Bridge website registered over 8000 hits – a tribute to the many friends he had made in so many parts of the country and world. Many of them commented on how blessed they felt to know him and benefit from his faith-filled courage.

After chemo and radiation and even surgery in April (which at first seemed promising), a June CT scan revealed his cancer had come back aggressively; there was nothing more the doctors could do. Days after receiving this news, he attended our provincial chapter in Chicago. A highlight for many friars was the morning prayer service which incorporated a communal anointing of Mike at which his brother Dan presided. Consciously embracing Sister Death, after chapter Mike came to live with the help of hospice at St. Bonaventure's in Detroit so he and Dan could have this sacred time together. During this time Interfaith Center for Corporate Responsibility gave him their Legacy Award for over 40 years of commitment to the poor and marginalized. Similarly, representatives from FAMRI (Flight Attendants Medical Research Institute) flew from Florida and Texas to present their award "for your work and accomplishments in eliminating tobacco from our planet." These were the last two of many awards given to him throughout his life and ministry.

On August 5, 2017, helped by hospice and grateful for the love and support of his Capuchin brothers, Mike peacefully gave himself over to the Lord. It was the exact same time as two young brothers were professing their perpetual vows in the chapel below his room. Wakes were held both in Detroit and in Milwaukee; his funeral and burial were at Mt. Calvary.

~ Daniel Crosby