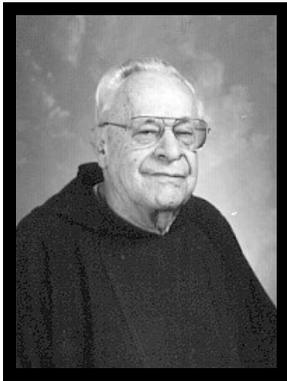


Neerology

Ambrose DeGroot 1918-2006



There is a saying that, "Those who can, do; and those who cannot, teach." That is, if you can honestly do something very well, then you should be doing it instead of teaching it. This saying certainly did not apply to Ambrose DeGroot, since he became not only a fine teacher but also a well known preacher.

Leon John DeGroot was born 26 May 1918 in Appleton WI. His parents were Peter DeGroot and Mary(Kiefer) DeGroot. He had three brothers: Frederick, Robert, and James. Leon attended grade school at St. Joseph Parish in Appleton. He wanted to be a priest like his brother Frederick. Robert joined the Divine Word Fathers at East Troy WI, but later left the novitiate. Leon was impressed with the Capuchins at St. Joseph Parish, especially Aloysius Mahoney. After grade school he went to the seminary in Mt. Calvary WI, and joined the Capuchins in Huntington IN on 26 August 1937, where he received the name Ambrose. A year later he made his first profession, and was perpetually professed at Mary Immaculate Seminary in Garrison NY on 29 August 1941. Four years later, on 16 May 1945, he was ordained at St. Mary Parish in Marathon WI.

His first appointment in 1946 was at St. Felix Friary where he became assistant novice director and taught dogma, moral theology, and gave spiritual conferences to the Victory Noll Sisters. In 1949 he was asked to teach moral theology and homiletics at St. Anthony Seminary in Marathon, which he did for eight years. Ambrose did much research developing his own moral text, offering students probable opinions. He was well liked as a teacher and admitted that these were the happiest years in the order. He would often tell his students (tongue in cheek) that he was like an old shoe being kicked around. His hearty and loud laugh echoed through the corridors of St. Anthony Friary.

While at Marathon, Ambrose went on a parish mission with Omer Kelley at Knowlton WI, before they were officially assigned to the Mission Band. Omer believed the pastor was looking for a "Wal-Mart" special instead of one of the seasoned mission band members. Omer wrote: "Ambrose was loved and appreciated by the students. He was gifted and solidly grounded in the field of morals, and a successful preacher, highly thought of by all the clergy who knew him in the La Crosse Diocese. So much so that at Christmas time he would get a lot of cards thanking him for the good he was doing." Omer teased him because he sorted the mail in the recreation room, and would yell out his full name every time a card came in for him. "And none for Omer Kelley!" he exclaimed.

In July 1957, Ambrose was assigned to St. Francis Friary in Milwaukee WI to be part of the Mission Band. He preached missions and retreats for sisters for 35 years. He found this ministry very difficult in the beginning because of loneliness, since he always belonged to large communities. But he regarded an obedience from the provincial minister as a definite indication of God's will. He found it challenging to face new audiences, living in different places, dealing with pastors, but did feel supported by other Mission Band members. He wrote that "Twice I had to be salvaged from the throes of alcoholism." The first time direct intervention was needed, and he shuddered to think what might have happened had this not transpired. There were times he pleaded with the Lord to relieve him of the Mission Band and put in some other type of ministry. Ambrose, however, became a forceful preacher filling churches, and later found his preaching spiritually rewarding. He experienced the many hours spent in the confessional tedious, but spiritually rewarding. He felt that his ministry could be compared to the early friars whom he called vagabond preachers, and how he was helping the province not only spiritually, but materially. He witnessed how God's grace was evident during a parish mission, and considered himself unworthy to be Christ's instrument. Ambrose loved to travel great distances to preach missions and conducted many of them in Iowa. He and Caspar Stollenwerk drove out to Santa Barbara CA for a renewal program, and Ambrose did all the driving. He also loved to go up to Boulder Junction in northern Wisconsin during the summer months for help-outs and to fish.

Ambrose, along with other missionaries, conducted a traditional type of mission. Its purpose was to effect a true conversion. It was a call to repentance and reform of one's life. The evening talks were foundation, sin, mercy of God, chastity, marriage, and Christian charity. No fixed stipend was asked, but a collection was taken up on the last night. Ambrose and Caspar Stollenwerk took the collection with them because they found that some of the pastors would take some of the money when sent later. Short instructions on the Christian life were given after the morning liturgies. School visits, as well as visits to the homebound, plus counseling, were also part of the mission.

During the 1970s, another type of parish mission was developed and approved by the Provincial Council, but allowing the more traditional form to continue. Ambrose told Rupert Dorn, provincial minister, that he was very disturbed by the changes in the church and in the province. Omer Kelley found him a very kind partner, fun to work with, and a friar totally convinced about the pope's stance on birth control. He wanted Omer to be more forceful when he preached on marriage and chastity. Ambrose thought there should be more docility shown to the pope, and would look for parishes where he was on surer ground. He tried to change his way of preaching, but then returned to his former style.

He was transferred to St. Benedict Friary in Milwaukee in 1968, and then back to St. Francis Friary in 1970, where he stayed until he was assigned to St. Joseph Friary in Appleton in 1973. In April 1992, because of failing health, Ambrose was transferred to St. Fidelis Friary in Appleton, where Simeon Keogh was his local minister. Ambrose would wander off the property by himself and ended up often in the city of Appleton. After being declared a ward of

the state, he was sent to a small community house of lay people called Carroll House in Neenah WI. Loran Miller, his new local minister, visited him every Sunday and brought him back to St. Fidelis for the day. When the community house closed in 2001, Ambrose was taken to Franciscan Care in Appleton, which he did not like. His Alzheimer Disease was progressing and he started to hallucinate. Loran would visit him, celebrate Mass, and take him for a ride around the city. He recognized certain places, especially his homestead. After about eight months, Loran was told by the caretakers that they preferred he would not continue the practice because Ambrose became too agitated after these rides. The ironic part was that he did not know who Loran was but he did remember Simeon.

Ambrose remained here until he died on 2 June 2006, at the age of 88 at St. Paul's Nursing Home in Kaukauna WI. He wrote, "I tried to live the Franciscan way of life as best I could, and my prayer life helped me very much." And when asked what he would like said about him after he died, he replied: "I tried to be faithful to the church, the order, and my vocation as a Capuchin and priest. I loved Christ and spent my life for him." His funeral liturgy was appropriately celebrated at St. Joseph Parish in Appleton, and he was buried in Mt. Calvary WI.

— *Written by Richard Hart*