

Neerology

Rupert Dorn
1924 - 2014



Perhaps the reason that Alfred Dorn, after his birth on June 4, 1924 and having been raised on a farm outside of Waunakee, Wisconsin, was such a realist, was that he learned early that life on a farm in the 1920s was not easy. There were some things which you could control, but other things you just had to put up with. Ingenious parents, John Peter Dorn and Agnes Christine Maly, supported their family of four children by accommodating themselves to the weather in their planting and harvesting and to the prices they could get for their produce and milk. That was reality.

Alfred worked on the farm after school and during the summers until he began high school at Saint Lawrence College in 1939, when his farming talents were exercised only in the summer time. Almost immediately after entering Saint Lawrence as a freshman, he was so homesick that he bought a picture postcard in the college store and wrote home that he didn't want to stay at Saint Lawrence. But he couldn't find a penny stamp with which to mail the card. By the time he found one, he was over the worst of his homesickness, and he never did send the card.

After graduating from Saint Lawrence College's high school program in 1943 he entered the Capuchin novitiate at Saint Felix Friary in Huntington, Indiana and was given the name Rupert. He studied philosophy at Mary Immaculate Friary in Garrison, New York and made perpetual profession on September 1, 1947. He studied theology at Saint Anthony's in Marathon. He was ordained to the priesthood on September 5, 1951.

His first assignment after ordination was to Saint Lawrence College in Mount Calvary. He was revered by the students as a religion teacher and the freshman dorm prefect, positions he held for only two years. When it was announced at the end of the 1953-54 school year that he would be transferred to Detroit to become the provincial secretary, some freshmen approached Emil Schneewis and told him, "We don't care if he is dumb, we want him!"

The misguided freshmen got the idea their beloved "Fr. Rupert" was dumb because he was so down-to-earth and simple in his dealings with them. Also, he had a close-cropped full beard allowing the whiskers just beneath his lower lip to grow to the bottom of his chin; and he had the habit of biting his lower lip, thus making the whiskers expand in peacock fashion. And he wore high-top black men's lace-up dress shoes, footwear strange to the high school freshmen.

Instead of ridiculing the freshmen for their misjudgement of Rupert, Emil, who had been one of Rupert's theology professors at Marathon, explained that Rupert was the brightest student to have yet gone through the province's educational system, and being the provincial secretary did not mean he was going to type letters for the provincial.

Rupert had been slated to work for awhile with Salesius Schneweis, Emil's uncle, in the office of the provincial secretary and treasurer, and then go off to Rome to obtain a degree in canon law. However, after he had been a short time in Detroit, Salesius died. Rupert asked the provincial minister, Cyprian Abler, who was going to take over Salesius's job. Pointing at Rupert's belly, Cyprian told him, "You are." So much for canon law studies in Rome.

Rupert's involvement in the church and civic life of Detroit included a regular help-out at Saint Germaine Parish in Saint Clare Shores, with whose pastor, Monsignor Lenk, he became great friends. Even as provincial minister he wanted to help out there on weekends when he was in town. He was the assistant spiritual director for the large Third Order at Saint Bonaventure's. He served the province as provincial procurator (treasurer) until he was elected provincial minister. He also served as the provincial secretary and archivist during that time. He was the local minister at Saint Bonaventure's. He became the chaplain for the Sons of Saint Patrick, an Irish fraternal group which met with some regularity. Annually they met at an Irish pub on Saint Patrick's Day, where Rupert presided at Mass. During Mass, the bar area was curtained off by a sheet which was then removed for the festivities which followed.

The provincial chapter of June 1967 elected Rupert provincial minister. He had served three terms as a member of the Provincial Council prior to his election as provincial minister. His brief address to the chapter after his election presented an assessment of the state of the province very different from that which his predecessor had given at the beginning of the chapter. His predecessor had noted that the province had not been affected as so many other orders and provinces had been after Vatican Council II. Saint Joseph Province had not experienced the "defections" other orders had in the aftermath of the council. Rupert intimated in his address that troubled days lay ahead. In later years Rupert said that when he arrived in Detroit to take office after chapter there were six friars lined up at his door to ask for dispensations from their vows.

Rupert kept in touch with those friars who were on leave of absence. One friar who returned to the province after a time out of the order credits Rupert's interest in him as the reason he returned. As provincial minister and long afterwards, he attended the weddings of many former friars and returned to tell the friars at home all about their new sisters-in-law.

The years immediately following the council were called by many the period of experimentation. For some it was a period of great creativity; for others what was happening was regarded as utter nonsense. Friars approached Rupert with their ideas for experimentation; other friars approached to object to the changes which were occurring. Years later Rupert said that he had never discouraged the proposals friars made for renewal and adaptation,

aggiornamento as John XXIII had called it. But he said he actively supported the endeavors which seemed to him to be good and right.

During his term as provincial minister, the province launched efforts for social justice. The younger friars who propounded the establishment of an Office for Peace and Justice met with heavy resistance from other friars, but that was one of the projects which Rupert supported. Other new things were undertaken liturgically. The nature and function of the soup kitchen in Detroit developed significantly under the direction of Albert Sandor, and then Austin Schlaefer. In Milwaukee the House of Peace came into being under the guidance of Matthew Gottsalk and Booker Ashe.

The chapter of 1967 had authorized a program of self-study which was undertaken by Arthur Deegan, resulting in the Deegan Report, which directed many of the activities of the province for several years. The province agreed to the request of the general minister to send friars to Australia to help with the establishment of the Capuchin Order there. Many other things were begun as well, too numerous to include here. [Consult Campian Baer's *Lady Poverty Revisited* for more details.] The point of interest is this: not many of these initiatives were Rupert's. He simply supported the insights and initiatives of others.

Some former provincial ministers are remembered for their very specific contributions to the province, at least by those who have been members of the province for many years. Rupert doesn't seem to be remembered for specific accomplishments, yet the province changed during his terms of office possibly more than during the administration of any other minister. But we seem to consider those changes to be things *we* did, not things Rupert did. There's genius in that.

Many years later, when Ron Smith was provincial minister, a friar wanted to try something new, and said that he was frustrated because the province never tried anything new. Ron appeared one day at his vicar's office door and announced that during Rupert's and Lloyd's terms forty-three new things had been tried. Most of them had disappeared after a few years, but some of them perdured.

One change which Rupert did initiate almost immediately after he became provincial was in the novitiate program of the province. He combined what had been two separated novitiates, one for the clerics and one for the brothers, and appointed Mark James Pesch to be the novice director. Mark agreed to take the position, but asked that Keith Clark be appointed to novitiate formation as well. The two of them asked that Tom Kessler be added to the team, because he had expertise in Franciscan studies. And the three of them asked for Ray Meier to be added to the team so that there would be one lay friar on the combined novitiate team. The idea of a team was a new concept. The four members of the team asked Rupert what he wanted them to do. Rupert said, "I don't care, just so it's something different." Again, a sign of leadership genius.

The number of friars who asked for a dispensation from their vows, and the flack Rupert received for allowing and supporting some movements in the province, took a personal toll on him, a toll about which very few friars knew. Ron Rieder, who served Rupert as personnel director for the province, reported that sometimes after a particularly trying day, Rupert would go into his bathroom and vomit. Some friars objected to the particular changes which were taking place within the province. Others object simply to the fact that things were changing.

Sometimes the reports of changes in the province were inaccurate. For instance, one friar came to Rupert's office to register his dismay at some practice he had heard had been introduced into the novitiate program. Rupert picked up the phone while the friar was sitting across the desk from him, and he called the novitiate to ask if indeed that objectionable practice were taking place. He was told it was not. Rupert said, "Thank you," hung up the phone and told the friar sitting across the desk from him that no such thing as he had heard was going on in novitiate.

Rupert longed for the end of his term as provincial minister. Prior to chapter, he told one friar whom he thought might get elected to the next council, "Promise me that whatever happens at chapter, we'll go out to dinner after the chapter has adjourned." The chapter was held at Monte Alverno in Appleton. Rupert was a great meat eater in those days, and he had his eye on The Left Guard, a steakhouse restaurant. Rupert and his companion had a couple of drinks in the lounge while they were waiting for a table. After finishing a large steak dinner, the other friar thought Rupert might like another drink, so he said, "Well, Rupe, how 'bout another?" Rupert said, "Good idea," and ordered another steak!

For Rupert fraternity was a conspicuous value, not because he preached it a lot, but because of the way he lived. He probably never raised his voice to another friar except in singing "Buttercups and Daisies." He relished being with a group of friars at home in the friary where he lived or where he was visiting. His notion of fraternity went beyond that of corporate membership in the province, and beyond the way fraternity was traditionally measured in the province in those days: the chapel, the dining room and the recreation room, where friars would pray together, eat together and play together.

Rupert seems to be remembered as one whose strong suit was "play together." On many occasions he would ask a friar visiting Saint Bonaventure's in Detroit if he had any plans for the evening. If the friar did not, Rupert might say, "Meet me at the back door at six o'clock," and Rupert would direct them to a favorite restaurant where he would raise his cocktail glass and say, "Remember, we wouldn't be doing it if we didn't deserve it."

During his years at San Damiano in Madison, he was again spiritual assistant for the Secular Franciscans, the chaplain for the Knights of Columbus, and a member of the German Club and an Irish Club. He attended all the formal functions of these groups, and was conspicuous for his presence at all their social gatherings. He liked to attend Polka Masses in the area and enjoyed the dancing afterwards. His popularity was evidenced by the fact that at Christmas time he received over four hundred cards.

Rupert celebrated his birthdays – before the date, on the date, and after the date. At his twenty-fifth jubilee as a priest, he decided that since it was his jubilee year, he needed to celebrate every day of the year, and that there needed to be twenty-five *major* celebrations, including one in Rome, where he was a delegate to the general chapter. At each major celebration he wore a white sport coat with a carnation in the lapel, sometimes wearing the sport coat over his habit.

For Rupert fraternal bonds extended also to many beyond the order. Besides Monsignor Lenk, Rupert's friends included his dentist in Detroit, who was more to Rupert than a medical professional. Rupert used to say, "He always schedules my appointment for the end of the day. He'd fix my teeth and then take me out to dinner to be sure they worked OK." During his tenure as pastor of Holy Cross Parish in Mount Calvary, he became dear friends with Wally Orzechowski, the pastor in Johnsbury. Years later, when Wally was in the assisted living section of Saint Francis Home in Fond du Lac, and Rupert was a resident in Saint Paul Home in Kaukauna, Rupert asked that he be driven to Fond du Lac to see his friend. It was a touching scene when each tried to embrace the other over their walkers.

Rupert was a genius, as demonstrated by his scholastic accomplishments during his years as a student in the province's educational system. He used his genius, not to be the smart hero who proposed the answers and solutions to the challenges faced by the province, but to be a servant leader who empowered and encouraged others to contribute what they had to offer to the province's progress through the turbulent times of his administration as provincial minister.

The same kind of genius showed in his ministry as a pastor of what was acknowledged up to that time to be a difficult parish to administer in Mount Calvary. Shortly after Rupert arrived as pastor, he began to visit every household in the parish to introduce himself. He said that someday the parishioners might want to get rid of him, but if they did, he wanted them to know what they would be getting rid of. He served as pastor for eleven years.

After a sabbatical in 1984-85, Rupert was assigned to San Damiano Friary in Madison as part of the House of Prayer community. A year later he moved to Saint Bonaventure's in Detroit as local minister, in which position he served for six years. After another brief sabbatical, he returned to San Damiano in 1994 where he was a confessor and spiritual director to priests and bishops and did parish help-outs. In February 2012 Rupert retired and moved to Saint Fidelis Friary in Appleton, eventually moving to Saint Paul Home in Kaukauna because of declining health.

Rupert died on September 25, 2014. His funeral was held at the chapel of Saint Lawrence Seminary, after his body had laid in state and been waked at the parish he had served in Mount Calvary. The crowds which appeared in both places bore testimony to their love for Rupert and their recognition of his love for them. Several of the those who had asked Rupert to seek dispensations for them from their vows of profession and ordination decades earlier traveled great distances to attend his funeral.

Shortly after his election as pope, Francis said, in response to a question about changing structures in the church, that before one could change structures one must change attitudes. During the time he has been pope, he has changed attitudes by the things he has said, by way he has lived and by the way he has treated people. Rupert Dorn was a harbinger for the province of what Francis has become for the church.

These are some of the things people recall about Rupert. How did Rupert regard himself? He told me one day that he was leaving instructions that there be no homily at his funeral. I asked him to change his mind and instead leave instructions that I should preach the homily at his funeral. "Oh yes," he asked "and what would you say?" I told him I would choose for the gospel reading the text: "The pharisees said, 'This man is a wine-drinker and a friend of sinners.' The gospel of the Lord." Then I'd extend my arms to the assembled group and say, "See!" He left instructions that I should preach the homily at his funeral.

On a personal note: the tears which have come to my eyes as I have written this necrology are not tears of sadness because Rupert has passed on, but tears of gratitude that I lived in the province while Rupert passed through.

— Keith Clark, Capuchin