

# Neerology

Fabian Fehring  
1926-2019



Few people have heard of Polk, Wisconsin. Situated between Slinger and Jackson, this is where our brother Fabian first saw the light of day on August 29, 1926. The son of John Fehring and Alma Wenninger Fehring, he was baptized Thomas Michael. Fabian had five brothers and one sister. Throughout his life he remained close to all of them, even though geographically he was almost always distant from them. All of them preceded him in death.

He had a special bond with his older brother Nathan. Nathan and Thomas would frequently talk about becoming priests. Nathan entered St. Lawrence Seminary and before long Thomas followed. There both of them felt the desire to also become Capuchins – and on August 31, 1946 they entered the order together. Nathan took the name Carl and Thomas took the name Fabian. In the aftermath of Vatican II Carl left the order to marry – a decision which must have been very difficult for Fabian, but few (if any) people came to know Fabian’s innermost thoughts and feelings, pains or struggles.

After ordination at St. Mary’s in Marathon WI on August 27, 1953, his first assignment was teaching religion and Latin at St. Lawrence Seminary. That lasted only a year, for he felt a desire to serve as a missionary in Nicaragua. He was granted permission and served there for three years; first in Puerto Cabezas and then in Siuna. Hepatitis forced him to return to the States in the spring of 1958. For almost a year he was stationed at St. Benedict the Moor, probably to be close to St. Anthony Hospital for needed treatment. Recovered, he spent the next three years as chaplain at St. Joseph Home for Boys in Jackson, Michigan.

In the fall of 1962 he was transferred to St. Labre Mission in Ashland MT, where he once more taught high school religion, as he had at Calvary, and ministered in other ways to the Northern Cheyenne people, especially with folks in the Busby-Kirby areas. In 1967 the province extended its ministry to Native Americans by accepting responsibility for the neighboring Crow Reservation after the Jesuit community could no longer do it. At this time Fabian had requested to return to the mission in Nicaragua, but Alphonse Heckler, the first Capuchin pastor of St. Joseph Parish in Hardin (which borders the Crow Reservation), became sick. Fabian was asked to take his place, arriving in August 1968 and remaining until June 2013. *45 years!* His Capuchin longevity in Montana is surpassed only by the legendary Pat Berther, who ministered in the Big Sky Country for 61 years.

Like nearly all towns bordering Indian reservations, Hardin holds deep prejudices against Native Americans. It must be said that over the course of his years as pastor there, Fabian absorbed some of these attitudes. But it must also be said that he never lost his affection for the Cheyenne people, generously helping them (as well as Crow people) when they were in need, and inquiring from friars ministering “on the res” about the well-being of particular families he had grown close to.

Fabian was deeply loved and respected by his Hardin parishioners. A good many rejoiced in the fact that he would never preach long sermons; even his weekend Masses would rarely go much beyond a half hour. When he first arrived in Hardin, Fabian experienced prejudice not only against Native Americans, but against Catholics as well. His persistent presence, genuine care, humor as well as his magic performances gradually broke this down and he became readily recognized and respected in virtually every aspect of community life in Big Horn County. This was obvious at the memorial Mass celebrated at St. Joe's after his death: the church was packed and many who came were not Catholic. While he was still pastor Fabian himself had said, "A lot of progress has been made. Non-Catholic people who stared at me and hated me began to ask me to bury them." His simple, direct approach to the Catholic faith did bring a good number into the faith, but he would say, "I am more concerned that people go to church rather than *where* they go to church."

For practically all his life Fabian enjoyed exceptionally good health. He exercised every day, even when temperatures were 26 below zero. Even into his 80s he played tennis (with a vengeance) in summers and skied in winters. He won a city-wide tennis tournament in 1980. Maybe it was to enhance his youthful, athletic appearance that he dyed his hair as he grew older – a fact his fellow friars enjoyed teasing him about.

One skiing-related incident has been told and retold in the Hardin community. Fabian was enjoying one of his ski trips to Red Lodge when he was suddenly approached by two FBI men who pulled him off the mountain. They had been watching him intently, convinced he fit the description of some wanted Montana criminal. As they brought him, arm in arm, down the mountain, Fabian protested, "But I'm a Catholic priest!" "Everyone says that!" the men replied. Inside the lodge he was able to show them his Roman collar and prove his identity. Sheepishly they allowed him to go back onto the mountain.

During all his years in Hardin Fabian lived alone and seemed to relish his privacy. Parishioners knew, however, that he loved being invited to their homes for dinner. One Christmas he dined at 12 different homes! In spite of living alone, he would rarely miss any of the monthly gatherings for all the friars ministering in Montana. He could always be counted on to bring up one of his favorite subjects – like why couldn't the American bishops make a uniform rule telling people when they should sit, stand or kneel at Mass. There was too much variation! Even the bishop of Great Falls-Billings, Michael Warfel, would chide Fabian's office assistant, Helen Wiseman: "Have you and Father Fabian come out of the 19<sup>th</sup> century yet?"

Fabian was 87 years old when he finally decided to retire in June 2013. Because his health was still fairly good and his years of living alone made him reluctant to return to community life in the province, he was allowed to get an apartment in Hardin. He had many friends, especially retired attorney James Seykora and his wife Sue. Together they enjoyed camping out in the mountains where Fabian always loved to celebrate Eucharist. Not surprisingly, his health gradually began to deteriorate – to the extent that Jim and Sue cared for him in their own home for a month. It soon became obvious that he needed more care than they could give. He needed to return to the province. In late January 2018 they lovingly drove him all the way from Hardin to St. Fidelis in Appleton WI.

In less than a month Fabian had a stroke. After hospitalization it became clear that he needed the kind of care St. Paul Home in Kaukauna provides. He could no longer walk, had difficulty

speaking and swallowing. All of this was extremely difficult for Fabian. Fortunately for him, Sister Death came fairly soon. He died quite suddenly June 19, 2019, at the age of 92. He is buried at Mt. Calvary.

~ Daniel Crosby