

Neerology

Michael Fountain
1944-2014



Michael William Fountain was born in Remus, Michigan on March 10, 1944. He was the only son of Harold and Frances (Stamper) Fountain, but he was blessed with seven sisters. Michael and his family developed a strong work ethic because of the need to survive on a small, family farm. This was complemented by a deep love for the land; a love that he cherished throughout his life.

Michael is survived by his sisters, Janice Vogel, Jeanne (Larry) Perry, Mary Fountain, Patricia (James) Fountain, Maureen Fountain, Nina Fountain, and Teresa Cox, along with numerous nieces, nephews, and cousins. His father died prematurely on October 22, 1964, but his mother was a strong influence, keeping the large family together. As the only male, Michael took his role very seriously and placed a high value on being present for any family gatherings and celebrations.

Michael cherished memories from early childhood of being at his mother and father's side as they carefully selected and planted seeds for the family gardens. He worked along with them and his sisters, tending the gardens, gathering, storing and preserving the harvest, and using the harvest to prepare delicious foods. Like his mother and grandmother, he preferred to use the produce from his gardens, home-raised or hunted meats, and fish freshly caught in his cooking; his joy was serving and sharing those meals with others while engaging in energetic conversation. At his table one was fed body and soul, and there was most often wonderful laughter. He was a gourmet cook and a wonderful baker. He relished making homemade bread and made a multi-layered wedding cake for each of his married sisters.

He had a deep love for God's creation; it was to be enjoyed to its fullest, but taking no more than one needed. Michael was constantly *creating* beauty from raw materials. He loved to work with wood and over the years, he made lovely inlays, butterfly houses, bird houses, bookshelves, and even a china cabinet for his mother. He helped his dad build a lovely outdoor housing for Our Lady's statue. As winter approached, he would gather red berries, milkweed pods, cattails, small boughs of greenery, small red twigs, dried bull thistles, and using flowers that he had dried from the garden, he would make beautiful wreaths or arrangements with them in pottery.

Prior to entering the Capuchin candidacy and novitiate, Michael spent three years of high school at the Passionist Mother of Good Counsel Seminary in Missouri. Because of a health

issue, he did not return for his senior year, but graduated from Mecosta High School in Mecosta MI in 1962. He pursued some undergraduate studies at the University of Detroit from 1962-1964. Michael was drawn to the simplicity of the Capuchins and was accepted as a candidate in August 1964. Because of his father's sudden death, he chose to leave the candidacy at that time to return to the farm and help his mother take care of his sisters.

However, being assured that they were adequately taken care of, he was re-invested on April 23, 1966 at Baraga MI and professed first vows on May 1, 1967. Blessed with a keen mind, he continued his undergraduate studies at Crown Point IN, earning a BA in philosophy and education at St. Joseph College, Rensselaer IN in June 1969. From 1970-1973 he studied theology, first at St. Anthony Seminary in Marathon WI and then at St. Francis Seminary in Milwaukee WI, earning a master's degree in theology on January 1974. He professed his perpetual vows in 1971, and he was ordained to the priesthood by +Salvator Schlaefer on June 9, 1973 at St Lawrence Seminary. Michael did additional studies at St. Bonaventure University in Olean NY, where he focused on Franciscan history and theology. He also studied at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee from 1982-1987, earning another master's degree, this time in foreign language and literature. He attended Yad Vashem in Jerusalem, Israel in 1990 focusing on his interest in the holocaust and anti-Semitism.

Michael used his pastoral skills for 40 years in pastoral ministry at two of the Capuchin parishes in Milwaukee, as well as providing chaplain services to many of the area religious women's communities. He served on the parish team and in Spanish ministry at St. Francis of Assisi Parish from 1974-1982. From 1986-1993 he was pastor at St. Benedict the Moor Parish and participated on the advisory boards for the St. Ben's Community Meal and for the Health Care for the Homeless. He also ministered for a time in a parish in Ponce, Puerto Rico. His pastoral ministry was well-received as evidenced by the over-flowing crowds at his vigil and funeral liturgies. He was especially appreciated for his thoughtful and well-developed homilies. (Bound copies of his Sunday homilies are available in the provincial archives.)

Michael was a quiet, introverted individual, but this did not deter him from reaching out and being totally available to his parishioners. He savored the visits that he had with them and was eager to minister to them, whether that was at baptisms, weddings, funerals, or other special events. He was also a *hands on* Capuchin priest. Examples of this were his providing of special dishes for parish gatherings or his bread-making at St. Ben's. The latter became the primary fund-raiser to make it possible for the church to install an elevator.

Coinciding with his pastoral ministry, Michael was a professor and faculty member at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (UWM) for 30 years from 1983-2013. He counseled, mentored, and energized his students and colleagues. As a senior lecturer in comparative and holocaust literature, he also imparted a sense of justice and fair treatment for all. This concept even found its way into his funeral liturgy as he requested that a copy of the *Vow of Non-violence* be given to each person attending. Throughout his 18 months of battling cancer, he was constantly surrounded by students, teachers and friends from UWM. The testimonials and

eulogy at his vigil and funeral were eloquent in speaking of his gifts to his students. It was obvious that he was loved by many, and he loved them in return.

Michael retired from UWM in May 2013 due to his failing health. Having been diagnosed with colon and brain cancer in the fall of 2012 and having endured many sessions of radiation and chemotherapy, his body had tolerated as much as it could. On hearing of his retirement, one of his students wrote to the College of Letters & Sciences: "Michael was one of the greatest parts of my experience at UWM. I've never met anyone as genuinely kind nor as entirely human. He was a monument to patience, tolerance, and understanding. I am forever indebted to his tireless cheer and support during the challenges of graduate life." Professor Emeritus Roy Arthur Swanson, in his eulogy, praised Michael for his capacity to care for his students and, in turn, to instill in them a sense of caring motivated by compassion for others. He noted, "Enrollment in his courses was consistently large. He placed no caps upon the numbers who signed up for his courses; he was not perturbed when those numbers exceeded the usual sixty and approached one hundred." Another friend and student noted, "Michael was a deep thinker, and I cherish my times spent with him. . . he was an inspiration for living. . . he put thoughts and questions into my head that forced me to think outside of my comfortable box."

Michael was well-known for his interfaith work with the Milwaukee-area Jewish Community. He contributed time and effort to the Wisconsin Society for Jewish Learning, and he served on the boards of the Center for Jewish Studies and the Holocaust Resource and Information Project. He also was an active member of the initial advisory board for the Capuchin Franciscan Volunteer Corps (Cap Corps Midwest), the volunteer organization for the Capuchins.

In many respects Michael could be categorized as a Renaissance friar! (This was echoed in an extended obituary in the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* on Sunday, May 18, 2014.) He was a minister, professor, gardener, counselor, philosopher, a lifetime learner, and a Franciscan scholar. As a gourmet cook, he used that skill to perfection over the last 20 years as he provided outstanding meals for the Cap Corps volunteers during their orientation program each August. In that process he also mentored and modeled for them the Capuchin value of simplicity. For many years he also cooked the Passover meal for Edie and Ollie Adelman, a prominent Jewish family in Milwaukee. He learned tailoring during his novitiate year from +Mark Rehlinger, but he made this an art form as he sewed and quilted. He made ornate afghans and quilts for many of his family members.

Michael struggled with the notion of community life, especially when this conflicted with his personal value system and idealism. Eventually, he found greater peace living alone. The provincial minister, John Celichowski, emphasized this point in the funeral homily.

Living alone enabled Michael to broaden his vision of community, including not only his family and friars, but also Cap Corps volunteers, university professors, students, holocaust survivors, former parishioners, neighbors, and street people. In many ways, the apartments and especially the rear cottage on Palmer Street where he lived the last years

of his life were Michael's "Walden Pond". In that place of solitude, among his many books, tending to his garden, baking bread, and making his own laundry soap. .he learned to live deeply and deliberately.

Michael was the ideal model for *lesser brother* with his humility and unassuming nature. He lived simply, but was not simple! It was obvious he was intelligent, articulate, and well-read, but he was able to set aside knowledge and intellectual accomplishments to relate to the ordinary. He was *at home* whether he was working in the garden, celebrating liturgy, or lecturing to a auditorium full of students. In preparing for his death, he sorted and donated over forty boxes of books that he had accumulated over his years of study and teaching.

Our Capuchin brother and friend died at the age of 70 on May 6, 2014, following a long battle with cancer. His legacy and example of love lives on in his family, friends, friars, students, and parishioners.

— David Schwab