

Neerology

Glenn Gessner
1934-2018



Born in Sheboygan WI on June 21, 1934, Glenn was the second son of William and Theresa (Schmid) Gessner, both emigrants from Germany. At baptism, he was given the names Albert John. (He received the name Glenn in novitiate). His good German mother, who worked as a hospital nurse, was the animator and spokesperson for the family. As Glenn later wrote, she taught him to never give up when facing a challenge.

On completion of grade school in Sheboygan, he followed his older brother, Bill (future Kurt Gessner), first into the seminary at St. Lawrence College, Mt Calvary, and then into the Capuchins. After novitiate at St. Bonaventure, Detroit (1952-1953), he continued on to philosophical studies at St. Felix Friary, Huntington, Ind.(1953-1957), and then on to theological studies at St. Anthony Monastery, Marathon, Wi. (1957-1961). He was ordained to the priesthood at St. Mary's, Marathon, on Sept 8th, 1960. Upon completion of studies at Marathon, he continued on to a fifth year of pastoral studies at St. Francis parish, Milwaukee, and ministry experiences in the Milwaukee area (1961-62).

Following a further year of ministry at St. Elizabeth Parish in Milwaukee, Glenn was assigned in 1963 as a missionary to the Bluefields Vicariate (now diocese) in Nicaragua. Glenn and fellow rookie missionary, John Francis Samsa, often enjoyed recalling their humorous experiences on that first trip which they made by road via Mexico and Central America to Nicaragua. The trip was with veteran missionaries, Delbert (Tony) Will and John Chrysostom Nolan.

Glenn later wrote that he "went to Nicaragua with a young missionary's vision of helping the people become Christian and showing them how to better their lives. It didn't take long to realize: 'I had nothing to give... I had everything to receive. So I learned from these people... and I became one with them in their growth'".

On arrival in the mission, Glenn had brief introductory experiences at Bluefields and Siuna before receiving his first assignment as administrator of the Bluefields river communities. These were communities in the headwaters of some six rivers around Bluefields, accessible only by boat. Nurses from the Madre del Divino Pastor sisters often accompanied him on his mission visits for catechesis and treatments of the sick (1965-'69).

Shortly after Vatican II, Capuchin regional superior, Florian Ruskamp, began sending the missionaries to various Latin American institutes for updating to the council's theological and

pastoral insights. For Glenn, it was seven months studies at the Catechetical Institute in Manizales, Colombia. It was a life changing experience for him. He came back with new enthusiasm for liberation theology and for the excellent pastoral documents of the Latin American Episcopal Conferences. Glenn frequently quoted them and following them in practice in his own ministries. Liberation theology — reading scripture through the eyes of the poor — motivated his life long dedication to schools and medical ministries for the poor.

Upon finishing his studies in Colombia, Glenn was assigned to the recently founded parish of Muelle de los Bueyes, on the newly built Rama road (1969). Muelle de los Bueyes was a frontier town with the usual cantinas and all the lawless violence that resulted. There the dirt poor homesteaders came to drown their miseries. Men wore their machetes in scabbards at their belt and, emboldened by home distilled rum, used them to defend their honor whenever they reckoned their virility had been questioned. The area averaged a murder per week!

All that changed rapidly when the rural zone parishes combined their energies into forming lay ministers (*"delegates of the Word"*). These soon organized Christian communities to share the Word among those thousands of jungle homesteaders. Motivated by the Word, the communities soon added projects such as health leaders with basic medicine kits, adult literacy programs and eventually rustic schools. The Muelle parish was blessed with wonderful Sisters of Saint Francis of the Holy Cross (Bay Settlement, Wis.). They first organized literacy programs for the whole rural area, then added workshops for health leaders and eventually teachers for the little schools. Most important too were their homemakers courses for the much abused campesino women. Glenn later summed it all up by writing that true gospel praxis "must free men and women from anything that can hinder their full development as human beings. That means illiteracy and poverty. To erase illiteracy means to lessen poverty and to lessen poverty means to help people become whole and live with dignity."

After nine years in Nicaragua, Glenn returned to the States in 1972. He served two years as chaplain at St. Michael Hospital in Milwaukee, and then the following twelve years in Racine. There, working along with his brother, Kurt Gessner, Glenn helped found Cristo Rey (Hispanic) parish and pastoral center. The parish soon became a sanctuary for Central American refugees. Glenn and Kurt were also active with a group of area priests who met to discuss how to better minister to their Hispanic membership and form leadership among them. The group eventually extended to the diocesan and regional levels and later evolved into the "Encuentros Nacionales" – National Hispanic Gatherings that meet every four years.

In September 1986 Glenn returned to Nicaragua for further ministry, first in the El Jícaro parish of northern Nicaragua and then in the La Cruz de Rio Grande parish with Theodore Niehaus. The La Cruz parish originally extended for some 120 miles (without roads) across the entire width of eastern Nicaragua. When that vast parish was divided into four new parishes, Glenn was made pastor of a western section. That new parish with it's center in El Ayote, served some 45 rural chapels. Glenn served there for the final 14 years of his mission life.

As in all the mission parishes, Glenn's primary focus was the ongoing biblical and pastoral formation of the many lay delegates and other ministers. Something new: Instead of one day stands for Mass and sacraments at the various chapels, Glenn began to spend a week in most of them, for in depth evangelization and catechesis. He had a team of more experienced lay delegates to help him. Eventually the teams did mission visits on their own as preparation and backups to Glenn's own missions to the areas.

Always interested in education and health care, he soon organized the first secondary school for the area, and a clinic that not only cared for the sick but coordinated the health leader programs in all the communities. He oversaw the construction of a new San Jose Parish Church at El Ayote. It is a modern octagonal structure that replaced the original dirt floor, rough lumber chapel. Parishioners donated calves and pastured them on their lands so that by the time the new structures were built, the parish had some 65 cattle on hand to fund materials for the projects. A parish radio station constantly fed local news, music and religious programming to the entire parish.

Volunteers of a Wisconsin area Fox Valley Mission Group organized mission trips to El Ayote and provided many of the skills necessary for the parish construction projects. Kaukauna and Appleton area hospitals donated medicines for the clinic and community health leader medicine kits. Area doctors made annual trips to do operations and fit eye glasses.

Towards the end of his years in the missions, Glenn suffered a first stroke that affected his speech and left him without feeling on one side. Men had to hoist him into the saddle for his mission trips. Whereas we, his fellow friars, found his speech difficult to understand, his friends seemed to understand him well; apparently he communicated more by empathy than by words. Eventually his physical limitations obliged his superiors to recall him, against his will, from the missions. He was assigned to St. Fidelis Friary, Appleton (Aug 1, 2013). He had spent a total of 36 years in the Nicaragua missions.

At St. Fidelis, Glenn took helpouts to local Hispanic Catholics who soon became his new friends. He continued to serve as a spiritual mentor to Elizabeth Ministries International, founded years earlier by his brother, Kurt (died Sept 24, 2000) together with Jeannie and Bruce Hannermann. Glenn urged the members to stay close to each other: "Don't build walls between people — we need each other. What Elizabeth and Mary did, we're doing all the time. As Pope Francis says, we are all brothers and sisters".

Glenn continued contacts with friends in El Ayote by Skype and internet. Both parishioners and friends sought his deep spirituality. Mary, whom he loved much, was his "*madrecita*" — his little mother. And his biggest emphasis was on "*the God Family*" — the Holy Trinity. We're all called to be part of that family. At his last jubilee celebration in 2017, his friend Jeannie said he was just glowing. He said: "This was a taste of heaven, what heaven will be for me, where all the people I love will know each other, and love each other too."

He seemed to have a premonition of his death. A few days before his final medical crisis, he asked a friend to take him to Sheboygan for a last visit to his parent's graves there. They took photos of the graves. His death came rapidly soon after. To stop a hemorrhaging liver, doctors had to remove him from the blood thinners he took for his heart. A stroke soon followed. As his health deteriorated, he was surrounded by both Anglo and Hispanic friends who crowded his hospital room to, as he said, "push him into heaven". He died happily. As men and women, old and young, sang Nicaraguan songs and German lullabies (his childhood mother tongue), he slowly passed away. It was noon on July 4th, 2018, at St. Paul Elder Services in Kaukauna, Wis.

Glenn Gessner died in Kaukana WI in 2018, at age 84, after 65 years of religious life and 57 years in the priesthood. The funeral Mass in Spanish by Capuchin bishop Paul Schmitz, was live streamed via Facebook to his Ayote parish in Nicaragua, as was his burial also. The live stream was picked up by radio and TV stations across Nicaragua. Glenn was buried next to his brother, Kurt, in St. Joseph Cemetery, Appleton.

~ August Seubert