

Neerology

Michael Graf
1940 - 2013



Daniel Roland Graf was born on June 15, 1940 in Sheboygan, Wisconsin. He was the first of four children born to Walter and Marie Maltby Graf. Daniel was raised in the nearby town of Kiel where his father owned a tavern, one of sixteen taverns in the small burg. Daniel and his siblings, Susan, James and Charles lived over the tavern in very spartan conditions. Perhaps Daniel's later reputation for being tight-fisted with his money was taught to him early because he did not have any "extras." In addition, his father was famous for never offering a free drink at his bar. In Daniel's usual unabashed honesty, he once confided that he thought it was great to go to the Brothers School in 1954 because they had dessert every night! At home there would be dessert only on Sundays and — even then — not all the time.

Daniel entered St. Francis Brothers School in Mt. Calvary, Wisconsin where he met and mixed with many friars and aspirants. His easy-going and fun-loving personality found expression and flourished under the direction of his teachers and mentors. Daniel recalled being especially inspired by Earl Goeden and Flavian Blong. These brothers nourished his fledgling vocation. Daniel entered the Capuchin novitiate at St. Bonaventure Friary in Detroit on March 18, 1958. He was given the name Michael. In June of that year the province transferred the lay friars' novitiate to Sacred Heart Friary in Baraga, Michigan. Michael's first profession of vows occurred on March 19, 1960 at Baraga.

His post-novitiate years were spent in the lay-friar formation or brother's *professorium*, as it was then called, at St. Mary Seminary in Crown Point, Indiana. Michael attended classes in theology and learned to cook and tailor. During the time Michael lived at St. Mary's, it was touted as the largest Capuchin friary in the world with more than 120 friars. Michael made his final profession on the Feast of St. Joseph, March 19, 1963.

After a short stint "on loan" to cook at St. Elizabeth Friary in Milwaukee, Michael was transferred to St. Anthony Friary in Marathon, Wisconsin to continue on-going formation or the brother's *professorium*. He lived and served in Marathon from 1963-1966. Michael's flamboyant personality was a challenge for some of the brothers. When one of them was asked what he thought of Michael, he responded, "Nice guy, great personality, but no vocation!"

Michael incited such comments because he did not fit the mainstream expectations of what a "brother" should be; and he delighted in the distinction. He loved the "inappropriate" for the stir it caused and the questions it raised. To the chagrin of the ordained friars, when asked how one

could distinguish between a brother and a priest, he would glibly reply that the brothers had clean cinctures!

In 1966, Michael was transferred to St. Joseph Friary, Appleton. He took special training in cooking for two years and served as cook and launderer to the friars. In 1968, the province was in a bind for a cook at St. Mary Friary in Crown Point and Michael was asked to go there. He agreed obediently, but wanted only an interim assignment because he wished to return to his beloved Appleton.

Michael's non-conformist ways expressed themselves in his love of long hair, cologne and leisure suits; and his naturally out-going personality and love of teasing made him the perfect mark for the brothers. He was given the name "Br. Ready-Froze," in honor of his quick but very adept meals for the large community. He didn't like the nickname and insisted that he made a lot of things from scratch. Nevertheless, the name followed him.

Michael returned to Appleton in 1969 and remained there until 1975. He served there in various capacities: as cook, porter and parish team member. His unconventional ways demanded a lot of latitude and patience from the friars who lived with him; but in return, he served them willingly and with a cheerful heart. He prepared good meals and did the chores assigned to him. He was always ready for an outing, a movie or a bowl of popcorn. He laughed easily and occasionally made off-color jokes.

Michael loved life and loved people and he wanted to have fun. In the midst of that fun, he also ministered. He lodged himself in others' homes and was glad to share in their supplies of Tanqueray to be sure; but he also visited hospitals, taught religious education, and faithfully brought Holy Communion to the homebound. While at St. Joseph's he rarely missed community prayer and was always faithful to spiritual direction, especially to his favorite spiritual companion, Richard Hart.

During the 1970s, the friars were encouraged to professionalize and become credentialed so that their skills would be more marketable. When he expressed his desire to pursue a religious studies degree, another friar told him that he was too "limited" to pursue studies. He was deeply hurt by this assessment and came to my room sobbing. I remember telling him: "Michael, the brothers have been hedging bets about you since the beginning. You were never supposed to last and you proved them wrong.so prove him wrong!" It seemed as if a cross had been lifted from his shoulders. Michael indeed proved them wrong. There is always more to us than we think there is; and Michael found that expansion within the brotherhood.

In 1975, Michael left his beloved Appleton and moved to St. Lawrence Friary at Mt. Calvary. Over a period of nearly ten years, he served as assistant vocational director, vocational director and recruiter for St. Lawrence Seminary. Michael enjoyed the work, the travel, the variety of personal contacts, and the good team. Michael's charm, engaging smile, and sense of humor proved to be invaluable assets to the ministry. These were very happy years for Mike; he often expressed that the vocational team was always there for him, especially Nicholas Widhammer.

In 1984, Michael was asked to be a team member at the St. Clair Capuchin Retreat. Michael worked in youth ministry and retreats for seven years, serving in various capacities there. Mike lists his time at the retreat center as one of the happiest and saddest experiences of ministry in his religious life. He felt that the ministry suited him, and making it financially viable created a new challenge of responsibility for him. It was there that he experienced the love and support and affirmation of the wider community that sustained him.

The decision to close the ministry was his heartbreak. He was convinced that they had a good program and were self-sufficient, but there wasn't an ordained friar available to provide the needed sacramental ministry. He lamented that the province was giving up an important ministry with youth and often remarked that he hoped and dreamed that the province would take St. Clair back.

In 1991, Michael asked for, and was given, a one-year sabbatical. Michael was restored and rejuvenated during this time. He loved the Capuchin community at St. Mary Magdalene in Hazel Park, Michigan, and he made the most of the opportunities that his sabbatical provided. He declared it to be among his favorite activities for self-improvement; along with walking, racket ball, sun tanning and vacations!

Upon returning from sabbatical Michael found work in the Archdiocese of Detroit. He served first as religious education coordinator at St. Damien Parish, Westland and later as a pastoral minister at St. Thomas Aquinas Parish in Dearborn. He found a special niche among the people of St. Thomas and deeply loved and respected his pastor, Leo Sabourin. Michael spent six years in the archdiocese and appreciated the variety that the ministry of the parish afforded him. With a change of pastors at St. Thomas, however, Michael found the adjustment to a new pastoral style too limiting and confining for the gifts that he had come to realize in himself; so he opted to leave.

In 1998 the province asked Michael if he would be willing to be part of the newly-formed community at Casa San José in Tucson, Arizona and to serve the friars as local minister. Michael was charged with the responsibilities of building a new community and providing a ministry of gracious hospitality, especially for the brothers who were returning to the province after many years in the missions. It seemed a perfect fit. Michael had good organizational gifts and was very outgoing and welcoming. Needless to say, he loved his new ministry; and he quickly found additional work as a pastoral minister at San Martin de Porres Parish in Sahuarita, Holy Family Parish, Our Lady Queen of Angels Parish, and Our Lady of Fatima Parish in Tucson.

As is frequently the case among the friars, the uniqueness of one's personality traits can get on the nerves of another; and sometimes one's personal style of ministry can prove to be an obstacle to genuine brotherly concern. Certainly Michael's personality and style sometimes caused consternation and some puzzlement. Brothers expressed concern about his partying and drinking. These concerns resulted in challenge, confrontation and some disquiet, not only for Michael, but also for the brothers who challenged him. When asked by Michael for my advice about how to respond to these challenges, I asked simply whether he heard the love in the questions. He said that he did.

Michael died peacefully on March 2, 2013 in Tucson of congestive heart failure. He was tended to lovingly by the brothers and his friend of many years, Sam Werzcinski. He is buried in Mt. Calvary, Wisconsin.

In 2010 Michael celebrated his golden jubilee as a Capuchin. In reflecting upon his vocation he stated: "I still can't get over it.50 years! I've been in many different ministries and communities, and that's what makes my life as a friar so great. I owe the province so much."

Michael's personality was characterized by gratitude and optimism. He graced the brotherhood and his ministries with his charm, a warm smile and attentive hospitality. The province owes him much, too.

— *Daniel Fox*