

Neerology

Conrad Heinen

1925-2016



Michel and Anne Marie (La Grange) Heinen from Schockville, Belgium arrived in the port of New York on April 15, 1872. Accompanying them were their daughters Marie, Christine and four year old son John. The family would eventually end up on a farm near St. Cloud, WI. There the Heinen family would begin a long association with the Capuchins of the Province of St. Joseph.

The first encounter with the Capuchins came when they and other families near Mt. Calvary approached Bonaventure Frey to help them select land on which to build a church. Bonaventure selected the land and three families donated an acre of farm land each. One of these families was that of Michel Heinen. Francis Haas blessed St. Joseph church at St. Cloud when it was finished and celebrated the first Mass.

Michel Heinen's son John became an accomplished carpenter. He eventually married Elizabeth Mannenbach from St. Cloud on October 4, 1892 in Milwaukee, WI. They became active members of the Capuchin parish of St. Francis on the north side of Milwaukee. Together they had nine children, the third oldest being Arnold John Heinen who would take up the carpentry trade and join his father. When John suddenly lost his wife Elizabeth in 1918 he thought about becoming a Capuchin, but they told him that it would be better if he would stay home with his children. Three years later he would marry his wife's sister Gertrude Veronica Mannenbach.

Arnold John Heinen eventually married Teresa Vogel from Jefferson, WI at St. Francis Church on July 19, 1921 with Capuchin Leo Wedl officiating. Arnold became a general contractor after a brief time spent in the grocery business. The Heinen's and their eight children were very active members of St. Francis parish. Among their children was a son Donald Edward who was born on April 27, 1925 in Milwaukee. He was baptized on May 10th of the same year by Leo. When old enough Donald attended St. Francis Elementary school. During this time he became an altar server and grew very devoted to the Eucharist. Graduating in 1940 he went on to attend St. John's Cathedral High.

His high school was interrupted by the beginning of WWII when many of his friends chose to sign up to serve in the armed services. Not wanting to be left behind Donald followed suit and ended up in the Navy and was sent to the Alameda Navy Air Base in California. He mentions that while there "one of the most rewarding experiences was serving Mass as many times as possible." The airbase sent him to auto maintenance school after which he went to a heavy equipment training program. This eventually led to his assignment on an Army troop ship with a hospital unit taking him to the island of Saipan. He remained on the island helping with the

construction of the hospital and other projects. On August 1944 Japan surrendered and not long after Donald's name came up for returning to the states. He arrived in Milwaukee on a snowy Christmas Eve to the surprise of all his family.

After his discharge from the Navy on April 1, 1946 from the Great Lakes Naval Station, Donald went to work for his father's construction company. He also used his "GI Bill of Rights" to enroll in a four year carpenter apprentice program and eventually received his journeyman card. He also spent time with Capuchin friars at St. Francis friary talking with them about the Capuchin way of life. On weekend he often ended up doing work for the Capuchins. Seeking to find where God was calling him, he wrote to Solanus Casey for prayer and believed that Solanus' prayer helped him decide on his vocation.

During this time Donald spend Saturday evenings in front of the Blessed Virgin altar praying and sitting in silence. Here he experienced a great peace. At other times he would sit in front of the St. Joseph altar where he would tell him about his work and the help he needed for doing a certain job. He mentions that it seemed to him that he received many answers when things were getting a little difficult in doing some construction project.

Eventually Donald began thinking about a religious vocation. Because of his long association with the Capuchins at St. Francis he decided this was the religious order he wanted to enter. One evening while praying in front of the Blessed Virgin altar, he told Mary, "If I never see a carpenter's tool in my life that would be okay because I am looking for an answer into making a decision about a vocation to religious life." In February 1958 his family took him to the Milwaukee airport for a flight to Detroit where he would enter the Capuchin novitiate taking the name Conrad. Right before boarding the flight Donald knelt down and asked for his father's blessing.

In July 1959 the brothers' novitiate moved from Detroit to Baraga, Michigan. On September 17th of the same year Conrad took his first vows. The day after his simple profession his family drove him from Baraga to the Capuchin Seminary of St. Mary at Crown Point, Indiana. This was the house of philosophy for those brothers studying for the priesthood. It also provided a three year formation program for brothers that involved training in cooking, tailoring, baking and maintenance work. When Conrad finished this three year formation program he took his solemn vows on September 17, 1962 and was sent to St. Anthony Friary in Marathon, WI where he began another three year training program for brothers. Among his biggest challenges was taking over the kitchen for six months with the help of Vincent Reyes. At the time he had not yet developed his cooking skills, but with Vincent's help they managed to put out delicious meals.

Conrad's first assignment after formation came October 1, 1964 when he was sent to Sacred Heart Friary in Baraga, MI where he was put in charge of maintenance and became the assistant novice director. Sensing he might have a calling to mission work in Nicaragua he spent a month in Mexico studying Spanish before heading to Nicaragua where he worked with Gaul and

Isidore building an addition to the house in Wispan. After two months Conrad realized that Nicaragua was not the place for him and he returned to Baraga where he handled maintenance and helped with friars in formation teaching them to do wood inlay work and how to make their own sandals.

In 1969 the friary at Baraga closed and Conrad was transferred back to Crown Point, Indiana where he remained until June 1974 when the house of philosophy there was closed. Those friars who were in first, second and third year studies were sent elsewhere to continue their studies. Those in their fourth year of study were sent to a rented house in Rensselaer, Indiana, so that they could complete their studies at St. Joseph's College there. Conrad served as their cook and housekeeper. After the graduation of this group of students the house was closed. Conrad and another brother moved all the furniture from this house and two apartments vacated by two other Capuchins to Detroit.

Conrad stayed at St. Bonaventure Monastery in Detroit on temporary assignment doing repair work on the rented properties there. Then in 1976 he was sent to St. Paul, Minnesota, to remodel a house purchased by the province for the four friars in ministry there. Conrad converted the third floor into bedrooms and also made a small prayer room and chapel in the basement. Following the completion of this work he was sent to Madison, Wisconsin to remodel the house rented from the Norbertine Fathers as a house of prayer. Conrad created four bedrooms on the third floor with a study room and large bathroom. He also put in a fire escape.

While involved in this remodeling Conrad asked the provincial if he might be able to go to Montana and work on one of the Indian reservations. Once he finished the remodeling work in Madison, he was given permission to visit the Montana missions to see if he would like to be involved in their kind of ministry. Larry Abler who was pastor at St. Xavier parish and administrator of Pretty Eagle Catholic School invited him to stay with him. After visiting the various missions and receiving encouragement from his Capuchin brothers and the Crow people with whom he visited, Conrad decided to accept Larry Abler's invitation to join him at St. Xavier. He arrived at St. Xavier in June of 1976 and would remain there until September 1985.

While at St. Xavier Conrad grew in a variety of ways that endeared him to the Crow people. At first he took over the maintenance of the church and school plants because the maintenance man was failing in his health. But it did not take long before Conrad set up his own carpenter shop and began to offer shop classes to the 7th and 8th graders teaching them to know how to use the different tools and make simple wood items. As they became more skilled they were able to make things like gun racks, hand game stools, cabinets, etc. The end result was that students grew in self-confidence and pride in what they could do. One day a week Conrad also offered a class to children in kindergarten.

Two years after Conrad arrived Larry Abler decided he was wanted to leave Native American ministry and move back to the Midwest. Two years previous to Conrad's arrival the St. Xavier

Catholic School was turned over to the Indian community and renamed Pretty Eagle School. A year after Larry Abler left, Conrad approached St. Labre Mission reporting that he felt the school was a complete failure as a community school and that it should be converted back to a Catholic school. Conrad asked the Indian community if they would want this change and the majority supported the idea. After about a year the school became Catholic again and part of St. Labre Indian Schools.

When Larry Abler left St. Xavier, no priest was available for his replacement. Conrad was given the pastoral responsibility for both the parish and the school. On Sundays and holy days Capuchin priests would come from other areas to celebrate Eucharist and administer the sacraments. But there came a time when weather and travel made it dangerous for them to travel. Finally the bishop intervened saying, "You men will not be any good lying in a hospital, so in bad weather, let Conrad have a communion service." Conrad had already had some experience doing this at times with the sisters when he led them in morning prayers and a communion service. During his time as administrator of St. Xavier parish Conrad prepared children of families for baptism, counseled couples for marriage, and visited the sick. He actually did the work a deacon would have done had he been ordained as one.

When John Guimond became pastor of St. Dennis parish in Crow Agency, Conrad asked him if after the Sunday liturgy at St. Xavier he could spend two days with him to have some experience of fraternity. This worked out well until John was transferred. Conrad mentions, "I found living alone was not my way of being a Capuchin." So in 1985 he asked if he could move to Lodge Grass and live with Jim Antoine who was grateful to have him both as a fraternal companion and in the many ways Conrad assisted him pastorally. Conrad was also named as minister for what came to be named the Capuchin West Community.

Once settled in Lodge Grass, Conrad over saw the maintenance of the parish buildings. He also took over the work of bookkeeping. He continued to spend every Friday at Pretty Eagle School for his wood working classes. He also did a lot of cooking for Jim and himself, much to the relief and appreciation of Jim.

As time went on Conrad took on the teaching of CCD for 7th and 8th graders at Lodge Grass. His interest in the welfare of young people led him to work with a couple from the parish to set up youth nights every Thursday where children and young people could spend time together playing basketball, playing bingo, watching a movie or baking some cookies. When pilgrimage retreats were organized at the parish Conrad volunteered to cook for them.

Conrad also immersed himself in Crow culture visiting with people to learn about their beliefs and customs. He took a course at the Little Big Horn College to study the Crow language. During the early days of his stay in Lodge Grass he was adopted as a son by Regina and Clem Goes Ahead. As part of the adoption they invited a clan relative to give a Crow name to both of them. The name chosen for Conrad was Bah-It-Shad May Dah Lash (Walks in His Path). The lady who gave him that name, Dorcella Little Light, had had the opportunity to visit the Holy

Land and follow in the footsteps of Jesus so that is why she chose to give him that name. The name she chose for him turned out, as do many Crow names, to be prophetic.

In so many ways that name described well how Conrad lived his life as a Capuchin friar. Every morning he was up early to take a long walk outdoors or in the church gym when the weather was bad. He followed this with a time of silent prayer in which he would offer himself to Jesus and wait for the Lord to suggest what they might do together in that day. A great deal of fruit came from those times of prayer. Conrad was one who acted on the Lord's suggestions.

Conrad was someone who stood in the background and when he saw a need or something he could do to benefit others he would act on it. He used his carpentry skills to make things that could be used to enhance the faith of others including, wooden crosses, cedar boxes for paraphernalia used in prayer. He made smudge bowls that could be used for burning cedar for purification and blessing.

Conrad related well with the religious sisters who were active in ministry with the Capuchins on the Crow and Northern Cheyenne reservations. Once when asked why he spent time with sisters, he answered, "Because they just don't talk about things, they actually get things done." One of the special blessings that came about in Conrad's life in this regard was a deep and lasting friendship with Cecily Schroepfer, a Rochester Franciscan Sister. Besides collaborating on many efforts in ministry, they shared a love that fostered the spiritual growth of each other.

One time, when Jim and Cecily were in Wyola for the celebration of Corpus Christi, Conrad was home in Lodge Grass because he was not feeling well. The phone rang with a distressed parent on the other end. He explained that something was tearing up his daughter's bedroom and all in the family were scared. Conrad volunteered to come over and bless the house. After he got there he sat the family down and explained what he thought might be going on. He put some sage that is used to ward off evil spirits over the house door. Then he lit some charcoal in his cedar bowl and blessed all the rooms in the house as well as the members of the family. A few days later the formally distressed father met Conrad and thanked him saying, "The family is again at peace."

Conrad helped with youth retreats to Chief Pretty Eagle's fasting spot. One time when a group of young people from Pretty Eagle School were on such a retreat, they were singing "On Eagles Wings," they noticed an eagle circling above. The eagle kept circling its wings rising and falling to the melody of the song. Everyone experienced the awe of being in God's presence. The Crow people hold the eagle in reverence as sign of God.

When Jim had to be away, Conrad would step in and provide Word and communion services for the people at Lodge Grass and Wyola. During Holy Week he organized a Seder meal followed by a Communion service for the people in Wyola while Jim had the Holy Thursday service in Lodge Grass. At times when he provided the communion service in Wyola he would have one of the Indian women lead the service while he stood by her side to coach her. In Lodge

Grass he worked with another Indian woman, a gifted seamstress, to create banners for the church.

When the Franciscan sisters of Oldenburg chose to set up a “Prayer Lodge” for the Cheyenne and Crow people—a place for prayer and discernment with a resident sister, Conrad, after talking it over with Jim, offered to help. He spent many hours donating his carpentry skills to help make modifications and additions while teaching two Cheyenne men many of his skills as they joined him in carrying out the work.

In 1996, after spending 10 years in Lodge Grass, Conrad was approached by the provincial to see if he might consider being transferred to St. Fidelis Friary in Appleton, WI to help oversee the maintenance of the friary. At first he was caught off guard since he enjoyed his ministry among the Crow people, but after some prayerful consideration he saw the rightness of the move. During his years at St. Fidelis he contributed a great deal to the improvement of the friary both in terms of maintenance and the fraternal and spiritual life of the community. On occasion he cooked meals for the friars who appreciated his culinary creativity. One of his many contributions was the setting up of a carpenter shop in the friary’s basement with tools and equipment his friends donated. His creative energy channeled itself in the making of wooden inlays. Among his subjects was Solanus Casey with the help of a local artist who did the face. He also developed an interest in ceramics and provided beautiful creations that became gifts for others.

As Conrad aged he seemed to need less sleep. To spend his early morning hours in some useful way he began writing memoirs the result of which were histories of his family, his religious life and ministry, as well as his experience in the Navy. He also wrote a small pamphlet on contemplative prayer. These writings give us a wonderful witness of the way in which God shaped Conrad’s soul and made of Him a pliable and powerful instrument of His grace in the lives of so many with whom he into contact.

Running through his life was a concern for others that he picked up from the example of his parents and a life of contemplative prayer that developed early in his life. Although not academically gifted in some ways, Conrad’s life brings to mind Jesus prayer in Matthew 11: 25: “I give praise to you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, for although you have hidden these things from the wise and the learned you have revealed them to little ones. Yes, Father, such has been your gracious will. All things have handed over to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and anyone to whom the Son wishes to reveal him.”

Conrad died peacefully at the age of 91 on November 7, 2016 at St. Paul’s Home in Kaukauna, WI.

~ Jim Antoine