

Neerology

Daniel Kabat
1934 - 2015



The future Dan Kabat was born June 19, 1934 in Green Bay, Wis., where his father owned a barber shop. His father was Bernard Ignatius Kabat, and his mother was Irene Margaret Heimerl. At baptism, he was given the name Bernard Anthony. Within a year and a half, his father sold the barber shop and the family moved to the small town of Freedom, Wis., where Bernard Anthony grew up and received his primary education at the parish school there. His father bought and operated a cheese factory, just a mile outside of the town of Freedom. Bernard was the second of three boys.

St. Nicholas parish in Freedom became the center of the family's life. As much as possible, they participated in the parish's activities, organizations and choir. Despite years of sickness, his mother was often president and principal animator of the various parish committees. Bernard and his brothers served at Mass. It seemed only natural that his vocation blossomed in that atmosphere. After finishing grade school in Freedom, Bernard opted for high school at St. Lawrence Seminary, Mt Calvary Wis. (1948-1952). In his letter of recommendation to the seminary, his pastor wrote: "Bernard comes from the best family we have in our parish." After struggling with a botched surgery during much of her life, Bernard's mother died in 1951 when he was in his senior year at Calvary. She was 55 years old.

A few months later, when Bernard told his father that he wanted to join the Capuchins, his father responded by saying: "*Your mother and I, from the day we were married, prayed every day that God would bless one of our children with a vocation to religious life.*" That was all he needed to hear. Dan later wrote: "Somehow or other, our church involvement awakened in me a desire to be a missionary. Then the ambient at Calvary, and the example of the Capuchins, their simplicity, humility and humanness, and the fact they had foreign missions ... all these went into awakening my vocation to become a Capuchin. After that, I always felt that the greatest grace God gave to me after my Capuchin and priestly vocation, was my going to Nicaragua as a missionary. That became the greatest faith experience of my life."

Bernard did his novitiate at St. Bonaventure in Detroit (1952-53) where he was given the name Daniel. Philosophy was at St. Felix Friary in Huntington, Ind. (1953-57), and theology at St. Anthony, Marathon, Wis (1957-1961). He was ordained at St. Mary's, Marathon, on Sept 8, 1960, when he was 26 years old. In his first Mass discourse, he attributed his vocation to the words of Christ: "*You have not chosen me, but I have chosen you*" (Jn 15,16). Dan went on to explain: "I am a

religious – a Capuchin today– because this is the way of life Christ wants me to live. It is the way of life, a life of close imitation of Christ, that I have desired to follow to save my soul.” As for his priestly mission, Dan again quotes scripture: “*A priest is one taken from among men, ordained for men in the things that pertain to God*” (cf. Hebr. 5,1f). Dan adds: “And so I am one of you, ordained for you, in the things that pertain to God. In the spirit of deepest gratitude, therefore, I shall always pray for you and always remember you each day at Holy Mass.” True to his word, Dan kept a record of all the dates and intentions of all the Masses he celebrated — 14,389 Masses – up until June 16, 2015.

After completing his pastoral year at St. Francis Parish in Milwaukee and a six-week Spanish language course at Georgetown University in Washington D.C., Dan arrived in Nicaragua. On August 20th, 1962, he began five months of missionary training in Puerto Cabezas. After that he transferred to his first assignment as pastoral assistant in Rama (March 1963). At the time, the virgin jungles of frontier parishes like Rama were rapidly being settled by slash and burn homesteaders, and parishes organized chains of rudimentary chapels to serve them. Without roads, our Capuchin missionaries spent 30 to 50 days on the trails in two day missions to those rustic chapels.

The 5,000 square mile Rama parish was averaging 3000 baptisms per year! His first 30 day mission was through an area that will later become the parish of Ayote. At one chapel (Naguawas), Dan heard over 500 confessions, celebrated 102 baptisms and 22 marriages, plus many first communions and confirmations. All that in just one 24 hours period! Spending most of the night writing down the necessary data for so many sacraments, and giving a rudimentary catechesis for them, left him (and his fellow missionary, Ward Schnur) with just two hours of sleep! In addition, travel from one chapel to another was anywhere from three to ten hours by mule.

It was experiences like those, that convinced Dan and others that they could no longer continue that kind of ministry. They decided they had to train lay men and women to minister to those chapels. After brief, intensive courses on scripture and pastorals, teams of such ministers then conducted Sunday Word services, pre-sacramental catechesis and eventually social projects. Those lay ministries gradually changed those crude chapels into Christian communities that continue to this day. Dan — and all of us — were amazed by the profound changes that occurred so rapidly in those barely literate lay ministers. Only God’s grace can explain the unexpected success of those “*delegates of the Word*” and the communities they coordinate.

As a second response to the rapidly increasing settlers in the area, Dan and others subdivided the vast Rama parish into three new parishes. In 1967, Dan became the founder and first pastor of one of those new parishes, with its center at Muelle de los Bueyes, and some 40 rural chapels.

Two years later (1969), Dan was transferred to Managua, the capital. With some 35 American Capuchins in Nicaragua at the time, Dan was asked to build a residence in Managua as a community center for the friars on business there. After being elected Capuchin minister of the

Nicaragua Region for two terms (1972 to 1979), Dan transferred to Bluefields. It was there that he began the Capuchin postulancy and formation program for native Nicaraguans, and was instrumental in setting up the Capuchin novitiate for Central America in Cartago, Costa Rica. While in Bluefields, Dan was also pastor of the St. Martin Parish and Pearl Lagoon creole communities (1974-1981). In those same years he was also elected as president of the Conference of Major Capuchin Superiors of Central American and the Caribbean (CONCAM). In 1981, he was appointed by the General Council to set up the Capuchin Vice-province of Central America which then included all five Central American countries and Panama. The Vice-Province was officially established in March 1982.

Historic, too, was Dan's role during the Nicaraguan revolution that overthrew the Somoza regime in 1979. During our annual Capuchin retreat in June 1976, concern shifted towards the atrocities being suffered at the hands of the Somoza military against hundreds of men, women and children, especially in the northern part of the vicariate. In an effort to eradicate small pockets of Sandinista guerrillas, parishioners were being tortured, imprisoned and often executed. After long discussions, the friars decided to compose a letter ("the Matagalpa document") to denounce those atrocities. The 12-page document detailed communities and the names of parishioners who were known to have been executed. It referred to them as "los desaparecidos" (the disappeared ones), though in most cases the mass graves where they were buried, were known. The document was addressed to President Somoza, with copies to the Nicaraguan episcopal conference, and to the international news media.¹ Dan, as regional minister, headed the list of 35 Capuchins who signed it.

The letter and its data received widespread international publicity, eventually bringing action from the U.S. Congress. The State Department sent delegates to investigate. They interviewed those of our missionaries who had access to the atrocity areas and eventually cut off military aid to the Somoza regime. On July 19, 1979, Somoza fled the country, and the young Sandinista revolutionaries took over. Dan left an 8-page document, detailing his experiences in Managua during those final six weeks of the Somoza regime.

Dan was a missionary in Nicaragua for 20 years, from 1962 to 1982. He later wrote: "Without doubt, those days in Nicaragua were the greatest thing that ever happened to me. They changed me, made me the person I am today. They were some of the happiest years of my life and had a profound influence on me. I considered them as a special blessing from God; the people taught me more than I taught them. Their cultural values enriched me tremendously, and gave me to this day, a passionate love for the Hispanic people."

Dan returned to his home Province of St. Joseph in Dec of 1981. After an 8 month sabbatical experience at our San Damiano Community in Madison, Wis., he was appointed assistant novice director at St. Felix in Racine, Wisconsin (August 1982 to July 1984). He brought a cross-cultural dimension to the program there. After that he served as pastor of St. Anthony Parish in

¹ *Time Magazine, Newsweek, Washington Post and New York Times.*

Saginaw, MI for two years (July '84 to Aug. '86). Then seven years as associate pastor and administrator of St. Francis Parish in Milwaukee (Aug '86 to June '93); then a year as provincial mission secretary in Detroit (June '93 to Nov '94), then back to Madison, Wis. to serve for almost three years as chaplain to Hispanics there (Nov 94 to Sept '97).

The final 14 years of his pastoral ministry were as associate pastor of the Old Santa Ines Mission Parish in Solvang, California. His main ministry was with the Hispanic people of the parish (Sept '97 to Oct 2011). When Dan arrived there, he found there was little outreach to the Spanish-speaking community. In a series of meetings in the church hall, community leaders and important issues were identified and eight groups were formed, each dedicated to a different task. He worked hard to train lay leaders of the Hispanic community. The effort has been successful, and the groups have more than doubled in size. By the time Dan returned to the province, the lay leaders handled all the major ministries and activities of the community, under the direction of one of their own Hispanic deacons.

Dan left Old Santa Ines Mission to retire at St. Fidelis in Appleton (October 2011) where he died of pancreatic cancer four years later on June 25, 2015. He was 81 years old, with 62 years of religious life and 54 in the priesthood. Dan was an avid reader, and kept an up-to-date list of all the books he read, most of them about St. Francis, scripture and spirituality; over 10,000 of them in all. When asked what he would like to have people say about him, he responded: "That my faith was the most important element and strength of my life. That I had a great love for the church and her continual renewal, and that I had a very sincere and passionate love for the Hispanic people that I was so privileged to serve for so many years in my priestly ministry."²

– August Seubert

² This necrology was compiled and summarized almost entirely from Dan's own biographical files.