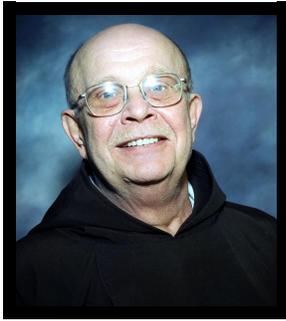


Neerology

Thomas Gregory Kroll
1940 - 2013



Thomas Gregory Kroll was born on July 11, 1940 in Detroit, Michigan. Tom's parents, Valentine Kroll and Leocadia (Lottie) Maxinowski Kroll, carried him to St. Ladislaw Church to be baptized on July 26, 1940. Tom's dad was a tool and die maker by trade and his mother, Lottie, was a homemaker. In later years, in order to make ends meet, she worked in the factory for General Motors. Tom's upbringing was simple, rooted deeply in his Polish Catholic faith and traditions.

Tom's parents nurtured the seed of his Baptism by seeing to it that he attend parochial school. He studied at St Stanislaw Elementary and High School in Detroit, graduating in 1958. His Catholic home and Catholic education bore fruit in Tom's heart. After working for a year, he desired to chart a different course for his life. Following the promptings of the Spirit within him, Tom set out to pursue a religious calling. Tom applied for and received acceptance to enter St. Jerome College in Kitchener, Ontario; then St. Peter's Seminary in London, Ontario; and finally to Notre Dame Seminary in New Orleans, Louisiana. However, the rigors of study and the emotional strain, complicated by physical illness, led to Tom's departure from seminary; and he was dismissed for medical reasons. Physical and psychological burdens seemed to shadow Tom throughout his life; but he was undeterred from following the invitation to religious life.

On June 14, 1966, Tom completed his application to the Capuchin Order. In addressing his reasons for desiring to enter the community, Tom wrote in his typically simple direct style: "the work, the life, and community appeals to me." He was received as a candidate on September 11, 1966 and invested as a novice on October 26, 1966, at Sacred Heart Friary in Baraga, MI. Tom suffered from terrible bouts of insomnia that would last for two or three weeks at a time. In an attempt to deal with this difficulty, he took an overdose of sleeping pills. In a state of grogginess, he had to be restrained by several brothers from throwing himself over the railing of the stairway. Tom left the lay friar candidacy program on January 25, 1967 with the notation of the novice director, + John Myers, stating that while Tom had "many fine qualities that would recommend him for religious life," he would need to deal with the causes of insomnia before re-admittance.

Tom did reapply and was invested as a novice on December 12, 1967. That novitiate year was undoubtedly the most personally challenging year of Tom's life. During that year he had to face incredible physical pain induced by strangulated intestinal tract, ultimately requiring and irreversible colostomy. This physical trauma was heightened by the delay of those responsible in attending to the malady, thus creating resentment that was further compounded by the inability of the province to pay for the medical expenses. Tom's parents were forced to mortgage their home in order to pay his medical expenses. Tom's residual bitterness festered. Despite and anguish and pain, Tom elected to ask for and receive first profession on December 15, 1968.

Tom's post-novitiate training took place in three different friaries: St Mary, Crown Point for nine months; St Anthony, Marathon, for one year; and finally St. Francis, Milwaukee. Completing initial formation, he requested and received acceptance for solemn vows and made his perpetual profession on December 9, 1972. Tom served with Booker Ashe at the House of Peace until he requested to work with Ojibway people in Baraga, MI. He worked there with John Hascall, who inflamed in him a desire to serve native peoples. In Tom's own words: "There was one person up there who didn't just preach love which so many do now days, but practiced it, which to me is so much more important. He stood up against everything imaginable but always told me: 'faith, Tom, we'll get through.' It was rather funny because we always did."

The preparatory formative work is not only in the academic or the ministry options provided by our Capuchin formation program but also in the manner with which our faith-walk embraces the Paschal Mystery. Truly the Lord placed Tom in the crucible of suffering to try his heart. The waiting on the Lord in any friar's formation flows from a temperate and thoughtful response to personal sorrow; and Tom was a well-taught disciple in the school of suffering. "While up there I came face to face with the poverty of the Indian and the prejudice against them. It seemed strange to me to see people living in abandoned cars....For some reason or other, they called me their brother and accepted me as one of them. I was in no position to advise them. They just wanted to talk and I listened. On frequent occasions I received phone calls both day and night. This is where I think I learned what availability meant. I'd usually drop whatever I was doing and tried to get to them."

Tom's ministry history is a record of serving those who found themselves caught between a rock and a hard place: the poor and afflicted. He ministered at St. Elizabeth Parish and served as a hospital chaplain and eventually in his happiest ministry assignments at St. Labre in Ashland and in Lame Deer, Montana, between the years of 1976 and 1982. In Montana, Tom seems to have thrived. His own brokenness found resonance in those he served. He did some outstanding work, especially in setting up programs for recovering alcoholics. In Ron's Smith words: "Tom's ministry was a breakthrough and helped to establish the best foothold we have been able to accomplish on the reservation in the many years that we have been there."

Tom's personality was imbued with a great deal of intensity. Tom had shifts of moods, ups and downs. On one hand, he could be a most enjoyable confrere who would laugh easily and cajole you out of your room for fun, frolic and festivity. In another incarnation, however, he would wall himself off in his room for periods of withdrawal and when coming out of his room would confront the same person caustically, with insulting accusations, fierce judgments and condemnations. You never knew where you were with Tom. You could be a best buddy one day and Satan's spawn the next. Such inconsistency didn't lend itself deep to friendship because of the fear of intense rejection. I am certain that his behavior produced feelings of enhanced personal abjection, as he dealt with the demon of depression and other forms of compulsive behavior. Tom seemed to collect pain, pocket it, and store it in his excellent memory. He would often share bitter personal stories of himself, with the exact time and place where he was wronged. Every individual pain seemed to open all of his pain.

It was in reaction to behavior of this sort that the brothers entrusted with leadership challenged him and asked that he seek treatment in order to bring forth a more integrated and happy personal and communal experience for himself. Tom received treatment at Guest House for alcohol abuse and at the House of Affirmation for personality integration.

After treatment Tom was assigned in 1982 to St. Bonaventure Monastery in various capacities. He served the brothers and the people of Detroit as porter, business manager, director of the friary kitchen, and local vicar. We were all treated to the incredible baking skills that he learned from his dear mother. Tom's cakes and Lottie's pies were some of the best the friars ever enjoyed. In 2003 he was assigned to work as

chaplain to the Capuchin Soup Kitchen, once again serving those most in need with his singular compassion and understanding.

Health concerns forced his retirement in 2011. His increasing need for higher levels of healthcare forced the brothers to place Tom in Riverview Health and Rehab facility in November 2011. It was from there, on one of his multiple excursions to the hospital that Tom died on November 4th 2013.

To suggest that Tom conquered definitively the demons that he suffered would not be the total truth. Demons seem always to be in the backseat, waiting for a chance to take the wheel. Life is struggle both physically and spiritually. It is the fight that ennoble. The knowledge that our Redeemer lives is what saves us. In the few years that preceded his death Tom exhibited what John Celichowski would term his nine lives. He was often on the brink of death—sometimes as a result of his own injudicious choices. He continued to smoke even while on oxygen! He caused great angst to those around him; but the care of the brothers at St. Bonaventure was exemplary, particularly the care he received from Larry LaCross.

On the occasion of his 25th religious jubilee, Tom asked that I preach. In the homily I used the story of the re-assembly of the rose window of the Cathedral of Rheims after World War II. It had been shattered by bombing; and in a desperate attempt to save their rose window, the people of Rheims gathered the fragments and saved them. After the war, they put those fragments back together and created an even more beautiful window.

I smile when I remember Tom saying to me after the celebration: “You called me a broken window.” “You are,” I said, “We all are. But oh, how that light, shines through our brokenness.”

— *Daniel Fox*