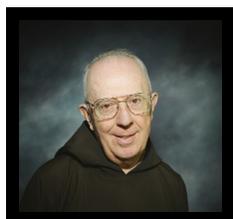


Neerology

Reginald Lawrence, Capuchin
1925 - 2016



Paul Anthony Lawrence was born on 12 July 1925 in Seneca, Kansas, the son of Henry and Anna Regina Lawrence. Around four years later, the family (Paul had two sisters) moved to Anna's hometown, Sun Prairie, Wisconsin. Paul attended Catholic schools in Sun Prairie, and as early as his sophomore year in high school, he was thinking seriously of priesthood:

I came home from school one day, and told my mother that I had been thinking of becoming a priest. She looked at me, immensely pleased, and said, "My dear boy, for almost ten years I've been praying every single day for that very grace."

So, in 1941, after the family had moved to Menomonie, Wisconsin, Paul went to see his pastor (an alumnus of St. Lawrence Seminary in Mt. Calvary), to discuss the possibility of going to St. Francis Seminary in Milwaukee. His pastor ruled out the diocesan seminary, and told him he should "go to the Capuchins...They'll take an interest in you." So that September he transferred to St. Lawrence.

The very first friar Paul met was Lawrence Merten, and Paul thought perhaps it was a good omen that his last name was the same as the first name of this Capuchin. But two days after his arrival, Paul was homesick, and went to Lawrence's office to talk about it. Lawrence successfully convinced Paul to stay at SLS, but there was another issue: Paul didn't have any money to purchase items from the school store. Lawrence said, "I'll fix that," and sent him to see Gerald Walker, who managed the store. Gerald charitably gave Paul paper, ink and other school supplies, and even a pair of tennis shoes so that he could play basketball. The kindness of these two Capuchin friars greatly impressed and consoled him.

One afternoon, while preparing for confession in the chapel, Paul could hear the friars chanting the Divine Office in the choir behind the main altar. That experience, he said, "gave me a spiritual lift... and I decided that I wanted to be a Capuchin."

During his two years at St. Lawrence, his mother's health — both physical and mental — began to deteriorate. This was a very real source of pain for him. He and his mother were close, and he believed that his future as a religious priest was going to be the result of her continued prayers.

In 1943, Paul was invested as a novice and received the name "Reginald." During that novitiate year, his mother was in and out of a mental hospital. As difficult as it was for him not to be able to go home to visit his mother, the experience of community gave him the strength to carry on.

After professing his first vows in 1944, Reggie (as he was called) went to Garrison NY for studies. He remembers vividly how worried he was preparing for the oral exam before his graduation. In addition to the provincial minister and counselors, the examiners included his logic professor, Francis Heidenreich. He spent most of his preparation time studying his notes from his logic course. As he and his classmates gathered in a classroom for the oral exam, Reggie calculated that if he were called on first he would do well; but if he had to endure listening to the questioning of his classmates first, he'd most likely panic and fail. Finally, Francis Heidenreich stood up and called the first student to be examined: "Frater Reginald." Reggie breathed a sigh of relief, and was able to satisfy the examiners.

In 1948 Reggie began theology studies in Marathon WI. It was during his four years there that he began to get visits from his dad and sisters, his mother being too ill to travel. Eight months before his ordination in 1951, his mother entered the hospital for brain surgery and died. This was particularly heartbreaking for Reggie. He wanted so much for his mother to be with him on the day for which she had so ardently prayed.

In 1952, Reggie received his first ministerial assignment as assistant to Ludgar Janowski, pastor of St. Elizabeth Parish in Milwaukee. Additionally, he taught classes at Messmer High School. Two years later, he was transferred to parish ministry at St. Joseph Parish in Appleton WI. This troubled him, since he interpreted the transfer as a negative reflection of his ministerial performance in Milwaukee. He spoke to Gerald Walker about this, and their conversation consoled Reggie. He moved on.

He enjoyed his ministry in Appleton, but after only one year was transferred — once again — to Saginaw MI to begin ministry at Queen of Angels Retreat Center. Reggie recalled that the local minister, Cyprian, often clashed with the other friars over the retreat schedule. Ultimately, Gerald Walker (provincial minister) had to travel to Saginaw to facilitate the conflict. Reggie remembers telling Malcolm Maloney that Gerald's intervention was a bit "like Dag Hammarskjöld mediating the dispute between Israel and the Palestinians!"

In 1963, Reggie was sent to Lame Deer MT to replace Ludgar Janowski, who was very ill. He continued pastoral ministry in Montana until 1974; but these were difficult years, indeed. Reggie became addicted to a number of things, including tranquilizers and alcohol. It began when he had difficulty sleeping. He started taking sleeping pills, and eventually got a prescription for Valium ("It was the wonder drug of the 1960s," he said). And Valium did, in fact, work for him. But it worked so well, that he kept taking more and more until "I was hooked!"

These were also the years following Vatican II, and Reggie felt a need to update his ecclesiology and theology, and enrolled in a graduate course at St. Mary College in Winona MN. "It was the best idea I ever had," he said. "It helped me greatly in understanding the thinking sparked by Vatican II." After five summer sessions, he graduated with a master's degree in theology.

Reggie spent three years in the preaching ministry in Huntington IN (1974-77) and then transferred to Little Falls MN to be chaplain to the Franciscan Sisters there. He claimed that he decided to leave that ministry in 1979 because "I started acting like a nun! It was time to get out of there."

Beginning in 1980, Reggie fell into depression and was not functioning well. He entered the therapy program at the House of Affirmation in Whitinsville MA, a therapeutic program for religious and clergy. During his six months there, he had to give up his Valium and sleeping pills as a condition for remaining in the program. His psychiatrist prescribed a "safer" tranquilizer, along with an anti-depressant. But this only prolonged his addiction and eventually he decided that he had to stop.

Reggie committed himself to the treatment center at Mercy Hospital in Denver CO. He remained in Denver for a year doing pastoral ministry while in therapy. During that time, he was able to give up all drugs and to live soberly — free of alcohol and mood altering medications. From that time on, he said, "it was a different life for me, and even my physical health got better...Living out the 12-Step program gave me new life and spirit, and greater self-esteem."

In 1981, Reggie enrolled in a two-year cabinet-making program at a technical college in St. Paul MN. He had acquired a little skill at woodworking while in Montana, and had taken an adult class at St. Labre one night a week. He continued to perfect his skills at the tech school in St. Paul, but "felt dumb compared to the other younger ones in the class," and felt that his instructor was not supportive. In fact, the instructor advised him to drop out of the class! It seemed that the instructor was concerned that this 57-year-old priest probably would not be able to get a paying job in woodworking. That appeared to be the reason he was advising Reggie not to continue. But a fellow classmate — whom he had befriended — stood up for him and went to the chairman of the department to speak on Reggie's behalf. After convincing the department chairman that he didn't need to find a paying job, that he simply wanted to learn woodworking as a hobby, Reggie was allowed to continue classes, and graduated in 1983.

After graduation, he found an old house with a roomy basement where he could do his woodworking. Gradually, he became more and more confident. One of his instructors even used a pair of candlesticks Reggie had made to demonstrate to students how perfect miters should look!

This was certainly an important turning point for Reggie. Many friars would agree that Reggie had a some "rough edges." When I requested information for writing this necrology, several

friars mentioned his cantankerous personality. And although he couldn't seem to "smooth out" those "rough edges" of his persona, he was able to "smooth out" the rough edges of wood, creating many items of beauty, and resulting in an amazing sense of accomplishment.

Among his many creations were cabinets for the provincialate in Detroit and other ministries of the province. He made a large cherry-wood dining room table with twelve matching chairs for the novitiate in Mt. Calvary. "I learned that it isn't much fun just making things to admire," he said of his newly-developed skills. "It's much more satisfying making things *for others*. I love making things for others." Reggie continued his woodworking project for many years while doing parish help-outs in the St. Paul area.

Over a dozen friars responded to the request for information for this necrology, and almost all of them mentioned Reggie's woodworking skills. Those skills, said Ken Smits, "were a labor of love in his retiring years. It was also evident from our conversations why he lived alone and needed to live alone. He steered through life with rough edges. Yet he could be a very caring person at times."

Jerry Johnson remembered Reggie saying once that what he feared most was losing his eyesight: "You can't really feel your way around a table saw," he said.

John Celichowski remembers Reggie as "very generous in sharing the fruits of his labors," including a set of beautiful candle stands for Our Lady, Gate of Heaven Parish in Chicago. Perry McDonald has a clothes closet made by Reggie. Visiting him one day at St. Anne Home in Milwaukee, Perry asked him how he managed to get that closet up to the second floor of St. Francis Friary and into his room. Reggie told him that he had built it in sections for easier transporting. The closet is "both substantial and delicately done," said Perry.

And it wasn't just furniture that Reggie carved. Steve Kropp received a chalice and paten for his ordination made from zebra wood, along with a cherry wood carrying case.

Francis Dombrowski also remembers Reggie's generosity and love for the poor. When the Dwelling Place Center in Milwaukee was just beginning ministry in the mid 1990s, Reggie built cabinets and tables for the community, as well as a tabernacle for the chapel. He also made easels for the art classes at the jail. They're still in use today.

His generosity was felt at other ministries in the province, as well. Jerry Smith noted that Reggie periodically sent donations to the Soup Kitchen. Jerry visited him in St. Paul to personally thank him for his support of the ministry, and remembers fondly how Reggie took him to visit the cathedral. Afterwards, Reggie treated him to lunch at his favorite restaurant. "I'm grateful," said Jerry, "that I had such a pleasant experience by which to remember him."

As with many friars, losing his driving privileges and the independence that came with that "was a real cross for Reggie," recalls John Celichowski. "I think he tried to make up with it with

his motorized wheelchair...but it just wasn't the same." But Brian Braun remembers that Reggie called him to see if Cap Corps might be able to use his old car. "That old car looked and ran like it was brand new," and was gratefully accepted!

"Reggie had quite a temper, and it could be tough to be on the receiving end of his anger," recalls John Celichowski. "But I always sensed in him a real desire to stay connected to the fraternity. In the final years of his life, the brothers at St. Conrad's were very kind to him, and visited him regularly at St. Anne's Home."

Nathan Linton remembers visiting Reggie and listening to him relate his vocation story, and how his devotion to Mary — along with his mother's prayers — gave him a sense that he was being called to religious life and priesthood.

His local minister, Kent Bauer, was an exceptional care giver for Reggie, and offered these reflections:

Reggie took pride in telling me he was one of the first Capuchins in our province to play golf. He challenged his superior at the time that it wasn't a rich man's sport, but just good exercise and a way to get outdoors and into nature.

He had a great appreciation for spiritual books and enjoyed keeping up to date in the latest knowledge including using his computer while he was ninety-one years old; rather resourceful in being able to embrace a modern world view and a forward way of thinking when it came to theology.

Reggie was enamored by the Enneagram, a number system for personality types. He was convinced that it made it easier to understand people. If you didn't know what number you were, it didn't matter because Reggie would know immediately!

He liked the speed limit in the area called "Big Sky Country" (Montana) because on the earth you could travel from fast to faster. Unfortunately that habit later in life got him in a little trouble with his motorized scooter and the need to rush to his next stop. More than a few times pedestrians had to yield to him!

Reggie was not happy about going to St. Anne's for health care. It was rather difficult after having the independence he enjoyed in his earlier career and ministry as a friar. After being the pastor of several parishes, it was a difficult transition and a humbling challenge to not be in charge anymore. Eventually he was able to let go, and allowed relationships with the staff to grow, and came to better understand and appreciate the variety of people working there. He became an advocate for several of the employees and patients, especially if he didn't think they were being treated right. Some sought him out from time to time for pastoral advice and support.

All this became much more apparent after his death. Some nurses, social workers and other personnel came forth to let me know how much they appreciated his counsel. One example was a women who had just gone through a divorce; she was extremely grateful for Reggie helping her get through the situation. Cleaning out his closet, I found his clothing to be minimal, as he tried to live a simple life and insisted that his clothes came from a Good Will store.

When the staff at St. Anne's gathered after Reggie's death they reflected on his years there, and said one word that described him was "spicy." That was the seasoning he brought to their day. One of the nurses even called him "Uncle Reggie."

Not having known Reggie that well before he moved into St. Anne's, I am glad I had the opportunity to know more about him in these past three years.

Richard Hart visited Reggie almost every Friday, and often took him to the drug store to pick up needed items. "He loved Richard Rohr's books, and probably read every one of them. We often talked about death, and he was ready for it, but tried to hold the two tensions — of wanting to live, and yet wanting to die — in a delicate balance," said Richard.

Reggie became easily agitated when his computer wouldn't "behave" the way he wanted it to, and he often telephoned me to troubleshoot. Usually, it involved a file that I had sent that he couldn't open. He called so often — even several times a day — that I would sometimes let his calls go to voice mail. This was my way of addressing his concerns in a fraternal way, and avoiding expressing frustration for his constant interruptions. I always returned those calls, however, and was usually able to help him solve the computer "problems." His last call to me came on 7 November, and this time I did *not* let the call go to voice mail. He hadn't called with a computer problem; rather, he said "I just wanted to call and thank you for all the help you gave me over these last few years." It was truly a humbling moment for me.

One week later, on 14 November, Richard Hart went to St. Anne's for what was his last visit with Reggie, and anointed him. An hour later, Reggie died at the age of 91.

"As we gathered at Calvary on the day of Reggie's funeral," said Kent Bauer, "the wind was so strong. It seemed so surreal." As another blast of wind made it difficult to hold on to the casket, Kent said to Gary Wegner, "I think Reggie's asking for another transfer!"

~ TL Michael Auman