

Neerology

Gale Leifeld
1928 - 1994



Gale Leifeld was born on December 9, 1928, the only child of Henry Leifeld and Helen Lee. He was baptized William Henry Leifeld at Sacred Heart Parish in St. Francis, a suburb of Milwaukee. Later the family moved to Milwaukee, where they joined St. Elizabeth Parish, staffed by the Capuchin friars. William graduated from the parish school and then enrolled at St. Lawrence Seminary. After completing high school and one year of college at St. Lawrence, he decided to join the Capuchins, "to make my salvation more sure," as he wrote on the application.

The rector at St. Lawrence, Gerald Walker, wrote on his recommendation for William that "he is a worthy candidate in whom we can find all of the signs of a true vocation to priesthood in the order." Gerald acknowledged that William's decision not to apply for the order at the end of high school was that "he did not want to be in the novitiate with certain other boys whom he did not like. However, I can testify that this faulty state of mind has changed entirely during the past year, that he realizes his fault and regrets it." Another concern was raised by his pastor, Kenneth Barnes, who portrayed William as a typical "spoiled (only) child." Gerald acknowledged some evidence of this, but that William possesses "such an abundance of good will to improve and progress that I would have no hesitation about recommending him."

Gale was ordained in September of 1955. After completing studies at St. Anthony's, he was assigned to teach at St. Francis Brothers School (Calvary Station). Two years later he joined the faculty at St. Lawrence Seminary. During the summers he attended Marquette University and received a master's degree in education. In 1964-65 he also went to the University of Wisconsin in Madison to study history.

After 20 years of teaching at St. Lawrence, Gale was appointed rector of the seminary in June 1977 as a result of the sudden resignation of Joe O'Connor the previous December. Gale was the only friar at the time on the faculty with the license to serve as rector and principal of the school. He is remembered by some as having been a strong leader. "He ran a tight ship," as one faculty member put it. Some found him hard to deal with. Gale could be quite charming while at the same time there were those who experienced Gale as something of a bully. While he appeared to be quite popular with many of the students, who would often gather in his office in groups during free time; subsequent revelations of abuse on his part would cast a more sinister

light on this apparent popularity. It was during his time as rector that Gale committed many of his admitted acts of abuse.

In August 1981 Gale wrote to the provincial minister, Ron Smith, about his next assignment. He said his "dream for the future" was to move into parish work. He recalled how he had spent two months one summer doing parish work on Guam and found it deeply fulfilling. At the same time, he asked if his widowed father could live with him in the parish rectory. He noted that his father would turn 80 in a few months; and while at present he was able to care for himself that could change at any time. He went on to say that he and his father have had "a unique relationship" of mutual love and respect. Gale summarized his request: a one-man parish; with facilities to accommodate an elderly person; location within reasonable distance of a good medical facility.

In December 1981 Ron Smith wrote to Gale informing him that he and the Provincial Council were open to his request to become pastor of a parish with accommodations for his father. Meanwhile, Gale took a sabbatical program from July 1982 to January 1984. In February 1983, provincial vicar Keith Clark wrote to Gale informing him it would be very difficult to find a one-man parish, since those are the ones that diocesan priests are also looking for. Gale did help out from January to June of 1984 at St. Robert's Parish in Shorewood, Wis. His father died sometime during those months.

Meanwhile, Gale applied for and was given the position of director of continuing education at Sacred Heart School of Theology in Hales Corners, Wisconsin; beginning in July 1984. Later he was appointed academic dean. It is not clear where he lived during this time. Two different provincial ministers did confront Gale by letter about his receiving money from his father's estate without accounting for it.

Gale's life as a Capuchin friar ended in public shame. In December 1992 the *Milwaukee Journal* printed a front-page story containing detailed allegations of sexual abuse of students by Capuchin friars at St. Lawrence Seminary. Gale Leifeld was named as the most egregious of the perpetrators. Gale admitted that he had committed much of the abuse that was alleged in the newspaper account. He was promptly removed from public ministry. Gale was sent for an evaluation and then placed in a facility where he would be supervised and have no contact with minors. Later he was diagnosed with prostate cancer and went to St. Fidelis Friary in Appleton. In June he entered St. Mary's Hospital in Milwaukee; he died on June 22, 1994 at age 65.

At his request, Gale was buried at Holy Cross Cemetery in Milwaukee, not far from where his parents are buried. Perhaps as evidence that those who commit the terrible crime of abuse can present another side of themselves to others, one of his physicians, wrote that "he was the most caring man I have ever met." Those Gale abused tragically experienced something quite different. On his tombstone are inscribed the words of St. Paul (Eph. 3:20): "Now to Him who is able to accomplish more than all we ask or imagine, by the power at work within us, to Him be glory in the Church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen."

The public revelation of Gale's crimes more than two decades ago began a slow, painful process by which the friars of the Province of St. Joseph have worked to acknowledge and address the terrible scourge of sexual abuse of minors by Gale and others. It is work that continues. May this "power at work within us" bring healing and hope to all generations. May our church and our province be safer places for all God's children.

— Martin Pable