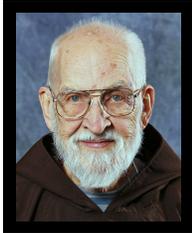


Neerology

Robert Udulutsch
1929-2018



The day after Robert Udulutsch's funeral, the *Appleton Post Crescent* ran a front page article titled: "Founder of LEAVEN remembered for his passion." The photo accompanying the article was of him standing by his quite famous casket. LEAVEN and the casket: two icons that say much about his life. The one showed his creativity in working with his hands, and the other how he brought it to his ministry.

This life, where creativity was important, began in the little village of Norwalk WI, June 13, 1929 as Robert Anthony was born at home, the sixth down the line of a family of eight children of Michael and Sophia Udulutsch. Mike was in partnership with another villager owning the Norwalk Hardware Company, but life was still a struggle, as these were the years of the Great Depression. Sophia always had a huge garden which all the children tended, according to their age and ability.

The seeds of his vocation began at home where faith and faith formation were integral to family life. It was the usual praying together as well as going to daily mass. There was no Catholic School in Norwalk, but the pastor insisted that all the Catholic children attend daily mass and stay for a daily 20 minute catechism lesson.

Other probable influences on Bob's eventual Capuchin vocation was the fact that his Uncle Joe Udulutsch became a priest for the Diocese of La Crosse WI, and his older sister joined the La Crosse Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration. As "Father Joe" had gone to St. Lawrence Seminary, it was another obvious "fit" that when Wilfred, Bob's older brother, showed an interest in becoming a priest, he would go to St. Lawrence Seminary. But unlike Uncle Joe in 1939, Wilfred joined a large group of classmates and others to become a novice in the Capuchin Province of St. Joseph. At investiture, Wilfred was given the name Irvin, a name he kept for the rest of his life.

When asked about how his vocation came about, Bob would always explain that it happened when the Udulutsch family decided to travel to Huntington to visit the novice (Irvin) they had given to the Capuchin Order. Of the family of ten, three children had already died of various childhood diseases. So the five remaining siblings piled into the family auto with Mike and Sophia for the long ride. "One night after the novices had finished their community night prayers," Bob recalls, "everybody gathered outside, under the large covered patio or pavilion, for recreation. And the novices started singing, and they were singing in harmony, and I had never heard anything like that before in my life. I was able to join in with my boy's soprano voice. That was when I knew that I wanted to join *that* group!" His gifted singing voice was an asset wherever Bob ministered and a great benefit to community prayer and celebrations wherever he resided.

Studies were always a struggle for Bob, even in grade school. Many years later it offered him some comfort to realize that he just had a number of different gifts that were not diagnosed perhaps, or cultivated — something outside of “linear thinking” — intuition, perhaps a strong one. After grade school Bob went to St. Lawrence Seminary in Mount Calvary WI, but had to quit after the second semester due to a severe sinus condition *and* poor grades. The following year, however, he returned, but had to repeat the freshman year. All through his remaining years he averaged out as D or C student. His brother, Irvin, joined the faculty of St. Lawrence in 1947. Bob was in his choir, singing first tenor.

Bob joined the novitiate class of 1948 — the largest class ever, with 33 novices. After vows his class moved on to Garrison until the split of the province in 1952. The conversion of St. Felix Friary in Huntington into our house of philosophy was where Bob and his classmates completed their fourth year, with Bob serving as the “senior.” Things improved for Bob when he got into theology with greatly improved grades. He and his classmates, 14 in all, were ordained on October 10, 1956, and at the end of the school year, in the spring of 1957, they received their first assignments.

Bob’s obedience assigned him to St. Francis Brothers School where he arrived in June with plans to take some shop courses at Stout Industrial College that same summer and two subsequent summers. In those days the system seemed to go like this: If your father was a doctor you were probably going to be put in charge of the infirmary; if your father owned a hardware store you will probably be a good choice as a shop teacher! Actually, this was a pretty good fit. Bob already had a reputation for building a lot of different things in his seminary days. He also had a strong artistic bent. This persuaded the province to send him to Notre Dame University in 1963-64 to get his masters in art education. Those years offered Bob plenty of opportunities to use and develop his creative skills. At the same time he developed preaching skills through weekend help-outs and giving retreats and monthly conferences for sisters, preparing him for his next call in ministry.

In 1970 Bob started the next major part of his ministry — preaching — by being assigned first to Queen of Angel’s Retreat in Saginaw as retreat director, working with Blaise Gitzen, and then one year later to take the place of Gerard Hesse who died suddenly at Capuchin Retreat in Washington, Michigan. Bob ministered there for the next three years as retreat director, during which time he was able to take classes and eventually obtained a master’s degree in religious studies from the University of Detroit.

The preaching ministry continued for Bob when he was assigned as a member of the Capuchin Mission Band, and went to live at St. Conrad Friary in Milwaukee from 1974 until 1980, at which time Bob asked for and received permission for a sabbatical year which he took with the Jesuit program in Berkeley CA. Bob appreciated those months to “put together” the various pieces of his life—as he expressed it.

Upon completing this sabbatical experience Bob was asked to go to Monte Alverno Retreat Center in Appleton WI to be part of the retreat team. Although this preaching ministry was satisfying, there was always a sense of yearning in Bob to “get into pastoral work.” He made this known to the provincial minister and council, and it became a reality in 1984 when he was assigned to St. Joseph Parish in Appleton as one of the pastoral associates, joining Bob Lexa and

Bob Malloy under the leadership of Roger Zach, the pastor. When asked about how he was getting along with the three, Roger used to say, "Oh, we're just bob, bob, bobbing along!"

In Bob's first meeting with Roger to find out what his responsibilities would be, Roger asked if he would head up the parish's Social Concerns Committee. This was a group of parish members who would meet monthly to report on which, if any parishioners, might be needing help and the kind of help it might be. Then they had to decide if there was something that could be done to meet such a need. Almost as an after-thought Roger said, "Oh, yes, and if somebody comes to the door for a handout, you take care of the person."

Bob has always insisted that the story of LEAVEN cannot be told without the story of St. Joe's Food Pantry. The same social committee that Bob was now part of had already discerned things beyond parish boundaries. Its members noted not only that there were people in the city finding it a challenge to have enough to eat, but also that there seemed to be an enormous amount of food wasted; for example, by food stores throwing away day-old bakery into dumpsters, and so forth. Several months before Bob came to the parish this committee had already started an appeal of parishioners to bring dry or canned foods with them when they would come to the weekend masses. These would then be separated and bagged by parishioners on Monday, so that when someone would show up with a need for food, he or she could be given a bag of groceries. Now, with his new assignment, Bob became the designated bag fetcher. After a few months the requests for food had grown so much that the whole operation had to move to larger quarters in the basement of St. Joe's middle school. Thus was born St. Joe's Food Pantry. After this move, Bob thought that now his task would become easier. Not so. Now those who came for food found it also convenient to come back to the rectory with other requests: a gas voucher, a bus ticket, etc.

Bob liked to explain that LEAVEN really got started because he found that he had been "taken" a couple of times because of some very creative stories of need, which turned out not to be true. This made him angry and he was determined that would never happen again if I could help it. His "solution" was to start keeping notes of every person who came asking for help. But this bookkeeping began wearing him out in short order. So he had to seek help. Answering an "ad" in the parish bulletin, a retired Huber Law policeman, Clayton Smith (known to everybody as Smitty), came to his rescue. The two diligently checked out the stories of clients coming for help with Bob admitting that in those early days both he and Smitty were pretty much out "to catch crooks!"

One day Bob said to Smitty: "There must be a better way to build a mouse-trap." With that Bob reached for the Appleton telephone directory and turned to the Yellow Pages, to find 153 churches listed. "That's a nice biblical number," Bob thought. "There were 153 fish that St. Peter caught in his net after the Resurrection, so many that they had to 'summon their companions in the other boat' to help them." So Bob spent the next month calling each church to find how they handled similar requests and suggesting working together to address their shared problems. Out of these conversations an ad-hoc committee was formed and eventually led to the organization of LEAVEN, a unique comprehensive helping social agency. (LEAVEN is an acronym for *Limited Emergency Assistance Valley Ecumenical Network*.) The full story of LEAVEN can be found elsewhere. An appropriate footnote here is this paragraph from the latest LEAVEN bulletin where Bob's death is reported: "Father's profound impact to our community cannot be overstated. Since our inception in 1987, LEAVEN has helped more than 130,000

households with nearly \$14 million dollars in direct client assistance. Many of these people will never know his role in turning their hardship into hope." So as LEAVEN had come into its own and was building its new facility, Bob's work at St. Joe's was ending.

In the Summer of 1987 the friars — who had been laboring in Saudi Arabia, serving the needs of Catholics who were working in the oil fields by an arrangement with Saudi Aramco — were all expelled due to the imprudence of one of the friars. Myron Kowalski, provincial minister, and the council, were scrambling to find replacements. Two friars were contacted to see if they would be willing to go: Nick Widhammer and Bob Udulutsch. This was a test and challenge for Bob. Myron came to Appleton to extend the invitation personally. Bob's response was: "I'm not volunteering, but if you say you want me to go, I will." Myron answered, "Yes, I'd like you to take this assignment." The rest is history. Bob would spend the next six years in the Saudi.

Bob always looked back on those years in Saudi Arabia as one of the richest times in his life and ministry. It was quite scary and challenging the first couple of months, as everybody worked to get things back to normal. But (in his own words) "for me, the extra effort that had to be put into arranging a theatre or a school gym into a 'church' for the Saudi weekend (Thursday-Friday), and then looking out on the gathered flock to see an American well paid — maybe \$200,000 monthly salary — standing next to a Catholic 'street sweeper' from say Bangladesh, and over there an Indian woman wearing her sari, holding hands with a Filipina or someone from elsewhere during the singing of the Lord's Prayer: It couldn't get better than that for me."

Bob and the others were also there during the tense times of the Gulf War.

Bob returned to the province in June 1994 hoping to be able to get back into some parish ministry, but discovered that all of the province's places were well staffed. It was suggested that he check out neighboring dioceses, which he did. In the meantime he took advantage of the summer to take in the last RENOV program at Marathon Retreat Center after which he was invited to attend the annual clergy days with the bishop of Green Bay WI. It was at this gathering that he learned that one of the diocesan priests had just left his parish and the priesthood to get married. The bishop offered the pastorate of that parish to Bob who accepted the offer. The next day when the clergy days ended, he drove to the place where he would spend the next 12 years: St. Mary of the Annunciation Parish in Kaukauna WI.

Again he found this move to his liking. There was much healing that had to be done as the parishioners were obviously in shock over their (beloved) priest leaving. Bob's experience of working collaboratively and sensitively came in very handy, so the healing process and the back-to-normal seemed to move along quickly. Also at St. Mary's other Capuchins (Loran Miller, Kieran Hickey, Bob's brother Irvin and Leopold Gleissner) joined him at various times adding a touch of appreciated fraternal life to the scene.

In 2006 Bob reached his 50th year as a priest, while Irvin reached his 60th year. That seemed to be a good time to retire from the parish. So after several jubilee celebrations in May and June, Bob officially retired and left the parish for St. Fidelis Friary in Appleton.

Bob's last 12 years at St. Fidelis proved to be happy and quite productive in that he was able and available to take help-outs whenever and wherever. During his years at Kaukauna, by design, Bob would take his vacation by serving as chaplain on a cruise ship. A member of *The*

Apostolate of the Sea, Bob did a number of these. “Cheapest vacation I could ever have,” he would say. “All I had to do was get to the ship and the rest was paid for!” So Bob continued this practice, as well as accepting extended help-outs to Guam, to Saudi Arabia, and especially to Hawaii during these last years of his life. Due to the demand for rooms at St. Fidelis for friars with special needs, he was asked to seek residence elsewhere. He lived back in Kaukauna from 2014-17.

However an accident brought him back to St. Fidelis. Bob’s last help-out in Hawaii was in June 2017 after experiencing a very bad fall at the provincial chapter that same month. When he was examined in Hawaii, it was discovered that he had cracked three ribs and had blood in the left lung. On returning to St. Fidelis, Bob had a procedure done to draw the blood from the lung after which he was plagued with severe bronchitis, affecting his vocal cords and his singing. A scheduled annual checkup including various tests revealed that Bob had Mantel Cell Lymphoma, which was, by that time, present throughout his entire lymph system and bone marrow. The oncologist hesitantly suggested a prognosis of from six months to a year, or 18 months. Bob accepted the news peacefully.

He had spent the previous year, from June 2016 until June 2017 building his own casket of scrap-wood, cardboard and brown paper, and now came to understand that he had somehow done all that “intuitively” as preparation for the news he had just received. The story of Bob and his casket made the rounds of the media: local papers, diocesan papers, a professional funeral director’s magazine — these all led to many interviews and visits from interested persons. He had designed the casket for a green burial which he promoted for several years. He incorporated symbols and statements on the casket about death from a Christian and Franciscan point of view, and promoted these in all the various interviews — teaching to the end.

On January 26, 2018 Bob entered hospice care. But never one to sit around, even as he was on the way to his next phase of existence, he began editing and updating the house’s booklet of canticles and service music used for the Liturgy of the Hours and the Eucharist. Most of the actual work on it—under his direction—was done by Sally Maas, a staff person at St. Fidelis. It was put into use shortly after his death. Bob died on July 23, 2018, and received a green burial in St. Lawrence Cemetery in Mt. Calvary WI. As Bob awaited Sister Death, he had in a prominent place this quote: “Athirst is my soul to see the Face of the Living God.” His thirst now is quenched.

— James Zelinski