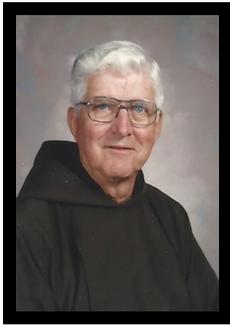


Neerology

Vernon Wagner
1928 - 2017



If you were to ask Vernon where he was from, he undoubtedly would say West Bend, but actually he was from Nabob, Wisconsin, which is a small village nestled between West Bend and Allenton, Wisconsin. He was born 7, February 1928 of Sophie and Philip Wagner and was next to last of the eight children the Wagner's were blessed with, four boys, four girls. They were farmers living close to the Nabob parish of St. Mathias, but he was baptized at Holy Angels in West Bend, because his folks belonged to that parish at the time, but received his first communion and was confirmed at St. Mathias parish.

Vernon wrote that he always wanted to be a priest ever since he knew what the word meant. The example of good parents, encouragement at time from his pastor, the Sisters in grade school, helped him to keep his vocation alive. At the end of grade school he wanted to go to the seminary, but he did not know where it was and how to apply so he followed his siblings to West Bend High School and graduated there in 1944, and was valedictorian of his class. He waited for the opportunity to enter a seminary and three days after his graduation his pastor said to him "Did you ever think of going to the seminary?" Two or three weeks later he was enrolled at Lawrence Seminary even though his pastor studied at St. Francis Seminary and never knew about the Capuchins.

Charles was the first seminarian from St. Mathias parish in Nabob in one-hundred and four years to attend St. Lawrence Seminary run by the Capuchin Order where he entered a special class to catch up on Latin and some other subjects. He excelled in basketball, baseball and any other sport he undertook. The example of the Capuchin friars at the seminary, especially Gerald Walker and Louis Biersack, inspired him to join the order after his two years of college. Charles finally summoned enough courage to ask Gerald for an application to the order, but he was afraid he might say "No." His brother, Bernard Wagner, followed in his footsteps a few years later.

In 1946, Charles, Carl and Fabian Fehring, Earl Goeden, Eugene Wolf, all from the area, traveled by train from West Bend to St. Felix friary, Huntington, Indiana. The story is told by Reynold Rynda that when the five of them were leaving from the West Bend train station, an elderly man sitting there growled, "They will never make it." Charles was invested on the 31, August 1946, and given the name Vernon as he began his one year novitiate leading to his first profession on 1 September 1947. From there he traveled to Mary Immaculate Seminary in Garrison, New York, to pursue his philosophy courses where he was solemnly professed 1

September 1950. After finishing his courses, he traveled to Marathon, Wisconsin for his theological studies and was ordained 27 August 1953 by William O'Connor (La Crosse diocese bishop). Vernon was a brilliant student and would ask Mark Stier, his theological professor, a question that he could not answer, but the following day Mark came back with the answer.

His first appointment after ordination was to teach at Mt. Calvary, Wisconsin, and later in 1954 Vernon became registrar and vice-rector in 1955. Among the many gifts he shared, Vernon is remembered for his amazing ability to loft a softball out of the park. He was Alfredo Gundrum's spiritual director, and before he left for the novitiate Vernon gave him a discipline chain and some wine-soaked cigars. Alfredo laughed because he did not believe him about the chain until he came to the novitiate.

In 1964 he was sent to Innsbruck, Austria, to study systematic theology and then for three years taught it at St. Anthony Seminary in Marathon, Wisconsin, until it closed in 1967. Vernon took Francis Dombrowski's place at Marathon, Wisconsin for three years teaching dogmatic theology while Francis went to Washington, D.C. to finish his classes in moral theology. This was the era of the "new breed" and the clerics were pushing for change, a challenging time for dialogue, debate, resistance and yielding on the part of the faculty and students. All were involved in trying to implement Vatican II not only in moral and dogmatic theology but also in fraternal life and formation. The faculty resisted, but the clerics pushed for change and in the end the changes were made. All tried, including Vernon, to create a more open, equal and sharing community.

When Marathon closed, Vernon joined a three-man religious preaching staff at the Capuchin Retreat, Washington, Michigan, which was a new facility enabling him to implement his gardening and horticultural talents in the development, beautification, of the grounds. His vegetables were used for meals and he felt that retreatants needed beautiful surroundings like a pond, trees, flowers, bushes where they could enjoy God's creation. On one occasion he and Simon Hesse fabricated cement blocks which were used as edging around the pond. Vernon became local minister, director while preaching at the retreat center and left a lasting heritage which many now enjoy when making a retreat there. He had a temporary assignment of a few months at the House of Prayer in Madison, Wisconsin. His talent was also evident at Queen of Angels Retreat Center in Saginaw, Michigan, where he ministered from 1989-2003, and helped to beautify the grounds there.

Vernon retired in 2003 at Mt. Calvary, Wisconsin, where he served as a chaplain at St. Francis home in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin for approximately ten years and was available for helpouts at Rocky Noll, did gardening and gave special care for the grape vines and tomatoes. He was asked by the John Celichowski, provincial minister, to translate from the German journals of Francis Haas. When he completed the task, John thanked him writing, "For years the province and indeed the entire Capuchin Order have been enriched through your scholarship and in particular your skills as a translator. This is but the latest example; and your work in this area is especially critical because we do not have any other friar who has these skills. The work that

you are doing now will benefit not only historians but future generations of friars who will be able to learn from contemporary accounts and insights into our founders and others who helped establish the Capuchin presence in North America." John also wrote that Vernon struck him as one of those friars who "flew under the radar," because he kept to himself.

Mark Joseph Costello also commented on the massive amount of translating he did of original letters, journals and other provincial materials from the archives which he was willing to do even though he was "retired." Vernon was an inspiration for Mark Joseph because of his generous spirit of using his gifts as an older friar. He would respond with a twinkle in his eye when asked to translate from German into English something which challenged his meticulous ability to figure out handwritten material, especially some times indecipherable scratchings, of our founder Francis Haas. Vernon and Ronald Jansch translated countless manuscripts and journals of the early friars whose writings in German would be lost to us today if not for their painstaking efforts. He also translated the monumental task of translating twelve volumes of St. Lawrence of Brindisi sermons from Latin.

When he celebrated his 70th religious jubilee in 2017, he wrote, "How odd of God to choose me." He died in his sleep 8 December 2017, and was given his wish for a quick death without a lot of illness, disability and suffering. and is buried at Mt. Calvary cemetery.

~ Richard Hart