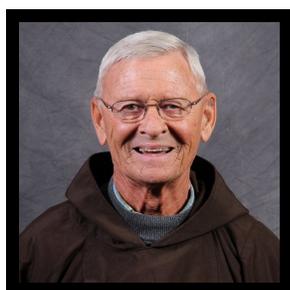


# Neerology

Nicholas Widhammer  
1935 - 2017



Leo Anthony Widhammer came into the world on the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception on December 8, 1935. More practical in his outlook than liturgical, Nick would not have given much thought to the significance of his birthday any more than he would have placed much emphasis on the fact that he died on October 3, when Franciscans around the world celebrate the *Transitus*, or passing of St. Francis of Assisi from this world to the next. No, Nick Widhammer would have been more likely to have responded “Whatever” should he have had the opportunity. Nick was, if nothing else, a practical man of action.

Nick’s parents, Franz and Celia Widhammer, raised Nick along with his sisters Lucille, Elizabeth and Rita, and his brother Elroy during the years of the Great Depression and World War II. They belonged to St. Joseph Parish in Milwaukee, one of the churches that would be destroyed when the freeway through Milwaukee was built. After graduating from St. Lawrence Seminary, Nick was invested with the Capuchin habit on August 31, 1954 at St. Bonaventure Monastery in Detroit, Michigan. Professing temporary vows on September 1 1955, Nick then began four years of philosophy studies at St. Felix Friary in Huntington, Indiana. Nick made his perpetual profession of vows on September 1, 1958 and began his studies for the priesthood the next year at St. Anthony Friary in Marathon, Wisconsin. Nick was ordained a priest on April 20, 1963 during the heady days of the Second Vatican Council, less than two months before the death of John XXIII. Without a doubt, Nick was a friar and a priest who embraced the spirit of renewal that so characterized the council.

After completing his pastoral year while residing at St. Francis Friary in Milwaukee, Nick was appointed a vocation director for the province and began a fruitful fifteen years of ministry recruiting students for St. Lawrence Seminary. It was a time when many minor seminaries were closing, and the fact that St. Lawrence survived and even thrived during this tumultuous period is at least partially the result of Nick’s work and his ability to make connections with pastors, principals, parents and prospective students.

Practical yet creative as always, it was in his capacity as vocation director and SLS recruiter that Nick launched the first Action Retreat in 1964 with kids from local parishes. Mel Hermanns, in a recent issue of “Sons of Calvary,” the SLS alumni magazine, described these retreats: “For years Nick spear-headed the effort of the Action Retreats with help from the rest of the Capuchin recruiters, recent graduates of the seminary and brothers school, young Capuchins in formation

and current students. Most of the attendees came from the Midwest states: Wisconsin, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, Minnesota, but some from far beyond. Retreats were generally two and a half days, except when students came from as far away as Detroit, Saginaw and the northern part of lower Michigan. The retreats were geared to the age of the kids, with plenty of exhausting races, skits, talent shows and prayer times. The effort was to give them a positive experience of God in their lives and how God might be leading them into their future. Hundreds of gallons of "bug juice" (a Kool-Aid like drink) were consumed; food was abundant. The kids were divided into groups of 10 or 12, each group led by a skilled pair of "fearless leaders" (a Capuchin student and a Calvary student). The "fearless leaders" facilitated the small group prayer, discussion and other small group activities." There are many Catholic men who although they did not enroll in St. Lawrence will fondly recall how they participated in one of these memorable Action Retreats.

One of the great testaments to Nick was his willingness to visit prospective students who lived in some of the most impoverished high rise housing projects in Chicago. At the vigil service for Nick, Brian Braun told of an African-American alumnus of St. Lawrence who loved and admired Nick because he was the first and only white man other than police officers who was willing to visit him in his home in one of the projects. Nick never forgot his own humble roots on Milwaukee's north side, and judged students on their desire to enroll in St. Lawrence and their capacity to be successful. Unproven legend has it that at least a couple of prospective students were baptized by Nick on the way to St. Lawrence. In no small measure, Nick Widhammer was largely responsible for integrating St. Lawrence Seminary.

Finishing his years as a vocation director and recruiter for St. Lawrence in 1980, Nick was appointed associate pastor of St. Francis Parish in Milwaukee. Nick seemed to relish the challenge of renovating the parish buildings. He spearheaded the effort to tear down the old school that was no longer needed and replace it with a parking lot. Seeing a need to feed the bodies as well as the spirits of those living in the neighborhood, Nick renovated the old parish hall into a place for a meal program and chapel. As Mike Bertram, who has served as pastor at St. Francis tells it, Nick became legendary for the time he recovered a sound system that had been stolen from the hall. Fearless, and perhaps demonstrating skills from his youth in Milwaukee, Nick learned the name and the address of the culprit. Unwilling to trust the slow moving wheels of justice, Nick took it upon himself to enter the apartment of the thief and take back the stolen sound system. Few other friars would have had the street smarts and the wherewithal to carry out the heist!

Following his time at St. Francis, Nick returned to recruiting for St. Lawrence for one more year. The seminary leadership of Keith Clark and Joe Diermeier recognized the need to re-establish good relationships with the pastors and principals in Chicago and Milwaukee. Nick took on the challenge and then prepared himself to begin a new chapter in his life. Thus began in 1987 seventeen years of ministering to the Catholic expatriate workers of Saudi Aramco in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. These seventeen years were in many ways the highlight of Nick's life and ministry as a Capuchin. It should be noted that Nick's 17 years in the desert were

interrupted by one year of ministry from 1993 to 1994 when served as associate pastor of St. Patrick Parish in St. Paul, Minnesota. It was a year for which Nick had little to say except that it was about the coldest place he could have been stationed after six years in the desert. Nick was in his element in the desert kingdom, not just for the warmth of the climate but also the opportunity to invest himself in pastoral ministry without the need to worry about buildings or church bureaucracy. Nick thrived celebrating the Mass for thousands of workers and their families from all over the world. He had a knack for serving all groups, whether wealthier Americans or the poorest nationals of countries from the developing world. Perhaps the only exception to this evenhanded approach was his fondness for and closeness to the Korean community.

Nick, practical and creative, was proud of the combined Triduum service he developed during this time that managed to condense the Holy Thursday, Good Friday and Easter Vigil services into one hour. It was his pastoral response to meet the needs of folks who lived off of the Aramco camp and had little or no opportunity to come onto the camp for three consecutive services. Nick even thought that his combined Triduum might have had a future in a typical American parishes if given a chance. Throughout his years in the Kingdom and afterwards, Nick became noted and beloved for his simple homilies that almost always referenced the comic strip *Peanuts*. In fact, Charles Schultz sent Nick a signed cartoon upon the request of Jim Freeman, a United Feature Syndicate editor who gave Schultz his start as a published cartoonist. Freeman heard some of Nick's homilies and thought Schultz would be pleased to know that a priest in the Arabian Gulf often made reference to *Peanuts* in his sermons. Schultz was flattered and one can see the framed cartoon in the St. Lawrence Seminary Heritage Room. It is there because Nick gave it to me to place at St. Lawrence, commenting "I'll be its neighbor someday." That was Nick. It mattered more to him to have this drawing put where many could enjoy it rather than keep it to himself. It is a drawing of Snoopy looking at a church sign that quotes Ecclesiastes: "A live dog is better off than a dead lion." Always the recruiter for St. Lawrence, it was during his time as pastor in the Kingdom and through his efforts that St. Lawrence began to enroll a significant number of international students.

Summing up his years of ministry, especially with regard to his time in the Arabian Gulf, Nick commented upon the celebration of his 60<sup>th</sup> religious jubilee that "A wonderful charism of our Capuchin province is that we allow each other the freedom to venture forth into new and exciting apostolates, and then our superiors give the support needed. I will always be grateful to the friars for allowing me to be my own person and for their total support of my adventures over the years." Nick used those opportunities to the fullest. While he retired from full-time ministry in Arabia in 2004, Nick continued to return to the Kingdom almost every year for up to two months helping out the friars still serving there. When not in Arabia, Nick lived at Casa San José in Tucson, Arizona from 2004 until his death on October 3, 2017. During this time, Nick served the people of Corpus Christi Parish in Tucson, Our Lady of the Valley Parish in Green Valley and Most Holy Nativity of Our Lord Jesus Christ Parish in Rio Rico. Green Valley is retirement community that Nick affectionately referred to as "Wrinkle City." As Nick put it when interviewed by a local reporter at the time of his jubilee "I enjoy serving young families

especially, hearing their confessions and serving at weekend Masses. The Diocese of Tucson is a great place to be for a retired priest. I feel appreciated here. I've had a wonderful career." Nick served for two months in the autumn of 2007 as the temporary administrator of Holy Cross, St. Cloud and St. Joseph parishes in Wisconsin's "Holyland." Although he was there for only a short time, his ready smile, simple homilies and genuine care made a lasting impact on those he served.

Nick was a great sports fan. In a documentary made while Nick was a cleric in Marathon he can be seen next to a radio cheering on the Milwaukee Braves. In later years he was great fan of the Milwaukee Brewers. A cousin of Nick said that in the family he was affectionately known as "Uncle Baseball." In my homily for Nick's funeral I concluded by noting that "Nick was a Packer fan. That is an understatement. Anyone who enjoys popping in a cassette of a game from one, five or ten years earlier is definitely a fan. Nick was a fan when Bart Starr was throwing touchdown passes to Boyd Dowler. Nick was a fan when Brett Favre was throwing touchdown passes to Donald Driver. Nick has been a fan as Aaron Rodgers throws touchdown passes to Jordy Nelson. With faith, hope and love, we commend to our God. If Jesus is the quarterback – Nick is one of his receivers who has scored a touchdown and now makes, not a Lambeau leap, but a leap into eternity."

After Nick died, Kelly Gavin wrote an op-ed piece for the *Green Valley News*. It was a tribute that probably would have embarrassed Nick but concludes with this description of our brother: "This all leads me back to my belief that the 'laying down of one's life for others' might happen in an instant or in the case of Father Nick, over the course of a lifetime of ministry. It seems to me that Father Nick has exhibited that same 'greatest love of all' by laying down his life for others. In his case, he did it over 50 years which qualifies for sainthood in my book."

Nick's funeral was celebrated on October 9, 2017 in the chapel at St. Lawrence Seminary. A Memorial Mass was also celebrated at Our Lady of the Valley Parish in Green Valley, Arizona on October 18, 2017 with the bishop, Gerald Kicanas, presiding. Nick is buried in the Capuchin cemetery in Mount Calvary, next to the school he did so much to keep alive and to fill with students.

~ Gary Wegner