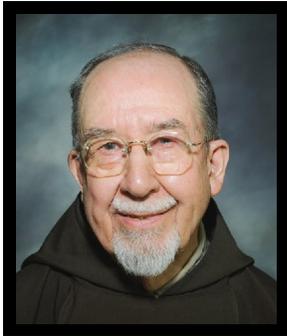


# Neerology

Leo Wollenweber  
1917 - 2012



Leander Wollenweber was born on the East Side of Detroit in September of 1917, the oldest of four children of Edward Wollenweber and Salina Stauch. He was baptized, confirmed and educated from grade school through high school at St. Martin Parish. His pastor, in a letter of recommendation for his entrance into the Capuchin Order, wrote: "He is one of the brightest students and one of the most highly esteemed boys, both by his teachers and his fellow-students, who ever went through our school." Throughout his life his mind and memory were prodigious, and whenever the friars in Detroit wanted to remember someone close to the monastery or the details of some event, Leo would have the answer, especially if it had anything to do with the City of Detroit.

"Lee," as he was affectionately known by his family, was a product of Detroit, and throughout his life had the city in his blood. Of his 72 years as a Capuchin he spent all but six in the Detroit area and 58 of those years at St. Bonaventure Monastery.

His father, at the age of eight, began his career driving a horse and wagon for a grocery store downtown. Later he got a job with the City of Detroit as a time keeper and worked there until his retirement.

Lee's mother was an expert seamstress and a convert to the Catholic faith. Later in life she would work for many years in the Eucharistic Mission Band. St. Bonaventure Monastery still has a set of gold vestments she sewed.

Lee, from an early age, was humble and self-effacing, but self-confident and determined as well. He shared with a friar that an hour after his mother had dropped him off for his first day of kindergarten he walked out of the class and headed home!

In high school the nuns thought that Lee would be a priest. However, he had other ideas. He enjoyed art, and right out of high school got a job in commercial art and advertising at a firm in downtown Detroit. He studied at night, and while studying the art of stain glass making became aware of the influence of St. Francis on art in the Middle Ages.

As he began to explore that connection in art, he felt drawn to the Franciscans. He had known the Franciscans at Duns Scotus Monastery in Detroit and requested information from them about their community.

His parents were not happy to hear that he would be leaving Detroit for Cincinnati for the Franciscan novitiate. In consultation with his spiritual director he was encouraged to further explore the Franciscan vocation by joining the Secular Franciscans. It was recommended to him that he "go down to the Monastery and talk to Fr. Solanus." Solanus Casey, who would later play a tremendous part in his life, sent him to Alvin Lefeir to join the Seculars. It was as a member of the "Third Order" that Lee began to know the friars, especially as an altar server at the daily masses at the monastery.

With the establishment of the brothers novitiate at St. Bonaventure in 1930 and his interaction with the brothers in his work as altar server (especially at busy times like provincial chapters), Lee became more acquainted with the Capuchin community. In 1939 he quit his job and became a candidate for the order. In response to a question in his application for admission about his motive for desiring to be a friar he wrote: "To love God, and serve Him."

After only six months as a candidate the provincial minister accepted Leander into the novitiate on May 17, 1940. He was given the name "Leo" in memory of the saint who was the secretary and companion of St. Francis. Later, on one of his trips to Europe, he convinced a Conventual friar friend at the Basilica of St. Francis in Assisi to give him a tiny sliver from the original coffin of that famous "Br. Leo" after it was discovered and re-interred in the crypt of the basilica, near the tomb of St. Francis.

Leo's long association with work in Detroit and around St. Bonaventure Monastery began as soon as he made his first profession in 1941. He was immediately assigned to the front offices of the monastery as assistant porter. He remained in the role of porter until 1946, and during that time worked closely with Solanus Casey in the office and began to help him with his mail. Leo was in Detroit at the time of the death of Solanus in 1957, and served as acolyte for his funeral. The only book Leo ever wrote was on his experiences with Solanus.

In 1946 Leo began a 14-year role as assistant novice director of brother novices in the province. (At that time the role of novice director was only assigned to a cleric.) During these 14 years Leo had to move the novitiate four times: from Detroit to Milwaukee (1952); from Milwaukee to Mt. Calvary (1955); from Mt. Calvary to Detroit (1957); and from Detroit to Baraga, Michigan (1959.)

During these years he began to explore again his artistic talents. Those talents and interests were very eclectic: charcoal sketches, oils, and (as it became more popular) photography. Leo had quite a collection of pictures taken during his work with the novices, and later after his death the province published a book of his photos.

What will likely be his most famous photo is one he took on a whim, during a visit of Solanus to Milwaukee to give testimony for the cause of Stephen Eckert. Solanus was on his way to the chapel, and as he walked past the cloister garden door Leo asked if he could take a picture. Solanus agreed and, standing in a sunlit doorway with his breviary under his arm, posed as Leo proudly snapped the picture with his Brownie camera. The picture would eventually become the official photograph for Solanus' cause of canonization.

It was around the period of his work in the novitiate that Leo began a lifelong friendship and artistic tutelage under the renowned artist and sculptor Frank Vargas, whose art is in museums around the world, including the Vatican. Numerous pieces on which Leo collaborated with Vargas are at St. Bonaventure in Detroit, including an image of St. Francis (in front of the monastery) and a statue of St. Joseph commemorating the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the province, which is presently in a shrine in the corner of the cloister garden. Vargas himself donated another piece of St. Francis and the cross which currently sits in the backyard of the monastery.

From 1960 to 1971 Leo returned to his work as porter in the front offices of St. Bonaventure. He would serve a total of 16 years over his lifetime in that capacity.

In 1971 he was invited to live and work at Capuchin Retreat in Washington, Michigan, where he eventually became part of the retreat team and also set up his art studio. Along with Bob Udulutsch he helped design and make the popular outdoor Stations of the Cross at Capuchin Retreat.

In 1974 Leo was asked to take on the role of vice postulator of the cause of Solanus Casey. At first Leo commuted two days or so a week to the monastery from the retreat center, but in 1978 he moved back to St. Bonaventure full time to work more intensely on the cause. During his tenure as vice postulator the writings of Solanus were gathered and bound and the archdiocesan tribunal interviewed 53 witnesses over a one year period to complete the informative process by 1984. 3,675 pages of testimony were delivered to the Vatican. Later he supervised and presented to the Vatican the work of Michael Crosby to give evidence of the heroic virtues of Solanus. This eventually led John Paul II to declare the "Servant of God Solanus Casey" the first U.S.-born male to be declared "venerable" by the Roman Catholic Church.

As he worked on the cause of Solanus Casey, Leo was able to indulge in one of his greatest loves: traveling and visiting museums and famous art as well as shrines. He loved to collect art and art books. His own artistic talents expanded during these years, branching into water color, wood sculpture, pottery and stained glass. Over the years, Pius Cotter accompanied Leo on many of these trips and shared much with him about his loves, which Pius summarized as "art, travel and the cause of Solanus." Pius felt that Leo was gifted with many virtues, including two that were often attributed to Solanus Casey: Faith and Trust. "Leo," Pius recalled, "treated people with respect, honor, love and concern."

Leo's later years found him driving and keeping a daily routine of office hours until shortly before his death. In an interview with another friar in 1987, Leo stated: "What the next years will determine in the cause of Solanus remains a question. It is sure to keep me busy in this work of love for some years. It may even be my last job."

Following a trip to Chicago and Wisconsin for a Patrimony Commission meeting in the spring of 2012, Leo suffered a five-month decline in health. A living patrimony of wisdom and provincial memory himself and the patriarch of the province, Leo Wollenweber received the Sacrament of the Sick at the hands of the provincial minister and surrounded by his brothers at the fraternity Mass on the Solemnity of St. Francis. At supper that evening he asked to stay a little longer at the table after dessert "to be with the brothers."

The next morning, October 5, 2012, shortly after his family arrived for a visit, Leo asked to be laid in his bed. With the assistance of a nurse he was laid down; and shortly thereafter he quietly and peacefully breathed his last. It was a quiet and undramatic end for a quiet and undramatic brother whose kindness, gentleness and many other gifts had touched so many.

— Larry Webber and Richard Merling