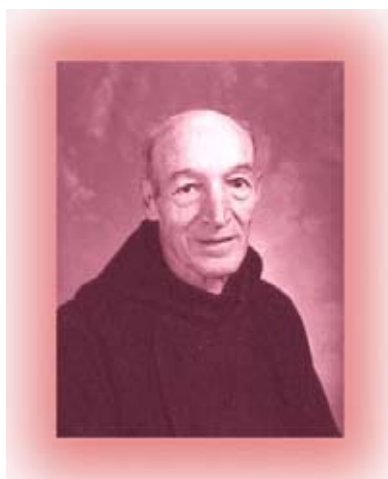


Neerology

Benedict Adams

1924 - 2002



Even today the small town of Stratford, Wisconsin which is composed of wood frame houses, a tiny grocery store, a baseball diamond, and its tallest building — the grain elevator, emits an almost stereotypic image of rural American life. It's a simple place where day is light, night is dark, summer is hot and winter is cold, right is right, wrong is wrong, and either you believe in God — or you don't, and no one expects it to change. Deeply formed by his childhood experiences, when Clarence Adams was born to Ethel Raleigh and Felix Adams in Stratford in the midst of the winter, 29 January 1924, he became one who embodied his hometown environment. He was baptized Clarence Edward Adams at Saint Joseph Parish in Stratford on 10 February 1924.

Clarence attended the public school through grade 7 and completed his 8th grade at Saint Joseph's School. He began his high school education at Stratford High, but didn't earn a diploma. His father died in an accident, and the family was comforted by a chaplain at the Marshfield Hospital, Capuchin Michael Reder, a member of the Saint Mary Province. Aided by his uncle William Raleigh, Clarence was able to earn his GED in 1949.

After the Great Depression, during World War II, Clarence joined the U.S. Navy, enlisting at the Great Lakes Naval Station, and spent 15 months in service of his country. The idea of a vocation to religious life and the priesthood was first implanted in Clarence by an unnamed confessor, while he was in the Navy, in Myrtle Wood, Oregon. Years later he remarked, "Navy discipline made our Capuchin discipline seem easy." Clarence eventually joined the province as a "delayed vocation" in the summer of 1950 taking the name Benedict: novitiate, then Garrison, and then St. Anthony's in Marathon, where Ben again found himself back in Central Wisconsin only 25 minutes from his home town.

Studies were a burden for Ben, staying up late at night trying to make sense of his Latin textbooks, sneaking a light to read, trying not to be caught being up too late. Those years stretched his resolve to continue preparation for ordination, and stretched his own grasp on what self-esteem he possessed. Yet one of the greatest gifts of God in Ben's life flowed day and night along the north boundary of the monastery property, the Rib River.

The river was Ben's place of solitude, his place of recreation, his place of insight, his place of prayer, and eventually his place of ministry.

The celebration of ordination at the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary Parish in Marathon, Wisconsin on 4 September 1957 by John P. Tracy brought much joy to Ben and his family. In time Ben became an associate pastor at St. Elizabeth Parish in Milwaukee, he helped teach a course at St. Lawrence Seminary and joined the mission band from 1964-1969. Ben once commented that his years of working with youth from 1969-1981 "were very fulfilling years for me." Listening to Ben's stories it seems that his time working along another river in Saint Clair, Michigan became the backdrop for his own experience of evangelization. Being with the youth who came for retreat, praying with them, listening to their prayer, their witness of faith stuck with Ben throughout his life. Ben sometimes spoke of the youth as one would speak of a great instructor. Learning from and being ministered to by the youth that participated in his ministries would continue throughout Ben's life.

Through his ministry in various retreat houses of the province Ben found it possible to devote most of his time in ministry with young adults and youth. For nine years from 1972 forward, Ben spent his weekends working with adults and his weekdays working with high school and junior high school students. In his final year of the program at St. Anthony Retreat in Marathon, Ben directed and preached 83 retreats for youth in only eight months.

His work with young adults in Marathon also took place on Sunday evenings. Each Sunday throughout the year, gathering about 6:00 PM, young adults came together from near and far, some making an hour long drive to get to St. Anthony to match their skills against each other and against Ben in volleyball. The old court just north of the monastery was alive every Sunday evening with 30 and as many as 80 players between the ages of 15 and 30, and Ben could be seen and heard spiking the ball in his habit or "setting up" a new player with a shot every week.

As darkness overtook the outdoor court, everyone gathered inside to pray and share. For most of the youth gathered there it was a unique experience to attend mass while sitting on the floor and to be invited to lead the music or share reflections on the readings, it became a beautiful experience of church.

Over the years Ben sat and listened to hundreds of young adults reflect on the readings, enduring the simplistic metaphors, the lack of exegetical background, the discontinuity of thoughts, and the ordinary — though real — expressions of God's presence in their lives. After the sharing of reflections Ben presided at Eucharist with these young adults, week after week, for nine years before accepting a transfer to yet another ministry. Ben once commented that he particularly appreciated the enthusiasm with which the young people responded to the gospels, and that their response continued to energize him.

As Ben continued to age the strength of his lungs continued to weaken after years of smoking, until auxiliary oxygen became necessary to breathe. Living now in Madison, his

tether, his oxygen tube, did more than keep him alive, it kept him bound. The freedom of open countryside was gone; he loved the lake, yet that tube tied him down, except for the riding lawn mower that carried Ben and his oxygen around the yard. Most days Ben did not consider the tube to be his friend. And at times life became a burden. At St. Fidelis Friary in Appleton the opportunity to return to an old hobby, the wood inlays, brought him enjoyment, especially giving them to old friends.

Life was still difficult, and as more and more physical care was needed, he moved to St. Paul Home in Kaukauna where he enjoyed new friends, until he died peacefully on 15 April 2002. Ben wrote about his family and friends in his preparation for his funeral: “Just make sure you tell them that I loved them.” He considered his ministry with youth to be his most significant contribution to the church. They didn’t use these words back then, but the young people who’s faith was encouraged to deepen and grow by Ben knew that when Ben was given the option, he preferred to minister with them.

Ben was buried in Marathon in the friar’s cemetery behind St. Anthony Retreat and friary, only yards away from his old companion, the Rib River, and only yards away from that old volley ball court where so much of his love of the gospel was gently set up in others and given more than a point value in the countless number of young hearts he touched.

— Randall Knauf