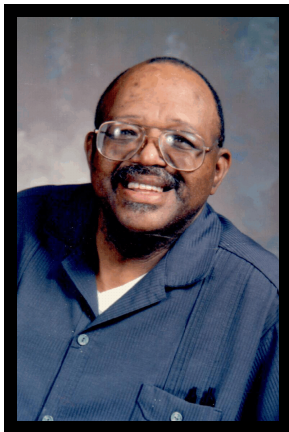


Neurology

Booker T. Ashe
1932-2000

"He [Solanus Casey] told me that I would make solemn profession, that I would see my twenty-fifth jubilee, and that I would help to bring about a lot of changes in the province. He even told me that I would do things no other brother had done." — Booker T. Ashe in *Solanus Casey*, edited by Michael Crosby, Crossroad Publishing Company, 2000 pp 119-20.



Booker Taliaferro Ashe, Jr. was born on 30 January 1932, in Columbia, South Carolina. His father, who was born in Barnwell, South Carolina, is described as a truck driver. His mother, Evelyn Livingston, who was born in Columbia, was a domestic at the time. Booker was the fourth of six children. After the war, the family moved to Evanston IL where Booker entered the eighth grade at Nicholas Junior High. He then attended Evanston High School for a year until he transferred to St. Malachy's in Chicago. He was baptized a Catholic on 26 June 1948, at St. Mary's Church in Evanston.

In his application for the Capuchin Order, Booker wrote, "I like it [the order], and want to save my soul, and work for God on this earth."

Booker Ashe was accepted as a candidate for the Capuchin Order on 24 June 1951, at St Felix Friary in Huntington IN. He formally received the Capuchin habit along with the name Agathangelus, on 1 February 1952, at St. Bonaventure Monastery, Detroit MI. In spite of some initial reservations, the scrutinies during his novitiate year in Detroit mention his cheerfulness, his respect for the priesthood, and his punctuality at religious exercises. He did have some difficulty observing the rules of silence. He pronounced his first vows on 2 February 1953, along with classmates Mark Rehlinger, Isidore Herriges, and Paul Hanisko. To this day they have "Booker stories" to tell about those early days. Some of these stories are recorded in an interesting narrative by Timon Costello entitled "The Booker Ashe Story."

The following three years were spent at St Felix Friary in a formation program called the professorium. During this period he became the secretary to Solanus Casey. As an African-American in an all-white setting, Agathangelus often had additional stress in community living. Many studies have shown that race has a profound effect both on self-identity and community perceptions. Looking back years later, Booker said, "I am the first black member of the Capuchin Order in the United States and I think that he [Solanus] was ahead of his time in the way he treated me. At least I felt nothing of the racial character in the way he treated me or the way he accepted me. He saw all persons as human beings, the image of God; their physical characteristics were mere accidents that he would pay no attention to — whether it would be

race, color, or creed." (Crosby, *op.cit.* p 119) The relationship between the two was compatible and even comfortable, beneficial to both. Booker mentions how he was able to translate Solanus' thoughts and insights into hundreds of letters of acknowledgment. Solanus, in turn, made the prophecy, quoted above, that would be fulfilled in the years ahead. While at St. Felix Agathangelus made perpetual profession on 2 February 1956. ("*He told me that I would make solemn profession...*")

Booker entered the second stage of the brothers' professorium at St. Anthony Friary, Marathon, WI. His official assignment there lasted from December 1956 until March 1959. He received training in the multiple skills expected of a brother in those days before Vatican II; among them was cooking. In one of the most delightful ironies of his life, he once wrote to Gerald Walker, the provincial minister at the time, "...It is true that I do not like cooking, and I always try and get out of this job if I can....I might as well tell you the truth: I don't like cooking now, and I know that I will never like it." This came from a friar who would later become one of the premier chefs in the province and who would truly enjoy preparing meals for many organizations and guests.

Having completed the six year formation program, Agathangelus was ready to begin an active ministerial life. On 1 April 1959, he was assigned to St. Elizabeth Friary in Milwaukee as sacristan, porter, and cook. St. Elizabeth, at that time, had reached its statistical peak. More than 3,700 parishioners were registered in the parish; some 1100 students attended the school. An active youth program, a busy bowling alley and recreation center, and numerous parish societies made an interesting contrast to the relative isolation of Marathon. "Br. Aggie," as he was universally called, displayed his social gifts as well as his magnetic personality. After more than forty years, former parishioners still recall his exuberance, his smile, his dramatic skills, and his ability to make friends. Here, too, he went through a conversion experience concerning cooking. He received permission to call his mother in Chicago whenever necessary for guidance in cooking for the Capuchin community. A telephone in one hand and a stirring spoon in the other, he learned to enjoy what he once abhorred. While he was at St. Elizabeth, the racial composition of the parish began to change. Aggie, no stranger to prejudice, learned personally of the dynamics of that change, an experience that would affect the rest of his life.

In 1962 Agathangelus was transferred to Holy Cross Friary, where he was assigned to be secretary to Roger Zach, the rector of the seminary, and to be involved in vocation work. He became immensely popular at the seminary, but an internal struggle developed in his spiritual and vocational life. He felt separated from the African-American community. Timon Costello in his notes has a poignant section that reveals how the turmoil in society over civil rights had affected the seemingly happy-go lucky Br. Aggie. "His highest superior was visiting the property for the celebration of jubilees one summer. Booker saw him alone for a moment amidst the celebration and said, "I feel a need to be with my black people. Would you honor my wish to leave the *Hill of Happiness* and go to Milwaukee?" (Costello, *op.cit.* p 5)

This wish was granted in July 1967 when Aggie, now known as Booker, was transferred to St. Francis Parish, Milwaukee, effective 4 July. He was at St. Francis less than a month when a riot broke out in Milwaukee, Sunday night, 30 July. The city was put under martial law for almost a week. The turmoil of the sixties touched every segment of society.

On 31 December 1967, the St. Francis Parish bulletin announced an exciting new venture soon to take place in a small vacant storefront at 1835 W. Walnut St.: "In the planning is an experiment extension of the parish. In the near future, a small, accessible community will be established in an area which is comparatively remote from established parishes." By consensus Booker was named director of the new center. The aptly named House of Peace opened the week of 25 February 1968. From then on, the House of Peace and Br. Booker became synonyms. Innovation, collaboration, and cooperation with the community broadened Booker's world. Relocated to 1702 W. Walnut after the widening of Walnut Street demolished the original center in 1973, the House of Peace continued to expand. One addition was added after a fire on 9 September 1983, and another expansion completed in 1991. The full history of the House of Peace has yet to be written.

What started as a storefront offering emergency assistance eventually became a true community center with a wide variety of services, including health, education, counseling, and social justice programs. *"He told me...that I would help to bring about a lot of changes in the province..."*

The strength of his personality, his communication skills, and his spiritual vision soon became apparent as Booker entered fully into the complex worlds loosely defined as church and state. Two years after opening the House of Peace he was elected as provincial councilor, the first brother to serve as such in modern times. He served two terms, 1970 to 1975. He also represented the province at an ecumenical gathering at Taizé, France.

In 1982 he introduced the Knights of St. Peter Claver into the Milwaukee Archdiocese. He had a key role in the publication of *Lead Me, Guide Me*, the African American Catholic hymnal. He was president of the National Black Catholic Clergy Caucus, board of directors of the National Office for Black Catholics and National Catholic Conference for Interracial Justice, and he influenced every organization he joined. Never ashamed either of his religion or his race, he helped to make being a Catholic acceptable in a predominantly Protestant community. Through music, art, and drama he helped young African Americans and many visitors to the House of Peace recognize their personal dignity.

In the secular world he served on the boards of almost every social service agency in Milwaukee, including an extended term as chairman of the Milwaukee commission on community relations. A powerful speaker he was on constant demand for talks throughout the state and beyond. Charismatic he certainly was, but he never failed to identify himself as a Capuchin, an order committed to serving the poor. *"He told me that I would do things no other brother had done."*

Public recognition was frequently given to Booker. He was awarded at least four honorary degrees from universities and colleges. The Jewish community presented him the B'nai B'rith award, the Archdiocese of Milwaukee a Vatican II award. A housing development has been named the Booker T. Ashe subdivision. Other awards, plaques, and citations fill several boxes and cover the walls at the House of Peace. Publicity in newspaper and magazine articles and frequent television exposure made him, after Solanus Casey, one of the most visible Capuchins in provincial history.

During the early 1990s Booker's health began to deteriorate. Long overweight and a heavy smoker, he suffered from diabetes and its accompanying disabilities. A series of cerebral-vascular episodes brought about mild dementia and an inability to make good decisions concerning his life and ministry. On 23 October 1995, the province transferred Booker to St. Fidelis Friary, its retirement community in Appleton. Although he came to Milwaukee frequently, the physical and emotional distance from the African American community with which he was so strongly identified became very difficult. As a result, he was moved into Family House, a community based residential care facility in the heart of Milwaukee's African American community, where he could receive visitors and be brought to the House of Peace for Mass each Sunday. He lived at Family house from 29 April 1996 until 27 December 1996. Shortly before Christmas that year he had suffered a serious stroke that left him paralyzed on his left side. He was admitted into St. Mary's Nursing Home on 30 December 1996 for rehabilitation and more intensive care. Three years later on Christmas Eve 2000, Booker Ashe died peacefully at 6:14 p.m. He was 68 years old.

In spite of a major snowstorm on 30 December, the day of the funeral, St. Francis Church was crowded. Three bishops (Rembert Weakland, Richard Sklba, and Joseph Perry) attended. Dan Fox, the provincial minister, presided. Black clergy and religious from around the country were present. A choir of some sixty singers provided the music. The wake, the night before, was just as impressive. Representatives of the many organizations he served, as well as civic and religious leaders, gave tributes. The steady flow of visitors was proof of the esteem in which he was held by every level of society. The Ladies of St. Peter Claver provided refreshments throughout the visitation period.

"He told me that I would see my twenty-fifth jubilee..." The twenty-fifth anniversary of the founding of the House of Peace consisted of a three day celebration— September 1992 — including a street festival, a formal liturgy, and a brunch at MECCA, (Milwaukee's largest convention center). One of the speakers provided some insights into the personality and complexity of Booker.

Booker has maintained a universal appeal for the past 25 years. Everyone seems to have been touched by his warmth; his giving heart; his devotion to justice; his zeal for dancing, singing, acting, and laughing; his ability to evoke loyalty from hundreds of volunteers; his humanitarian values, obvious in his collaboration with dozens of agencies and faith traditions, and his fidelity to his Capuchin vocation.

We would all be blessed if we could have the joy of knowing all of the facets of Booker's personality, but, alas, that is not always possible. Which Booker do you know? If you are his mother or some of his relatives, you may remember the infant Booker. As an infant, Booker was cradled by his mother who gently sung lullabies to this new life. Once not expected to live, little Booker absorbed her music and the dreams of an unknown future. If you grew up with Booker, perhaps you remember the adolescent Booker. Stalwart, idealistic, gifted in the performing arts, he early decided that he was not suited for his father's business. He went into the Capuchin novitiate as into the Temple, listening and asking questions as he prepared to follow his vocation.

If you are a resident of Milwaukee, you may know the healing Booker. This is the Booker who travels the streets of the inner city, touching the lives of thousands with bread, clothing, food vouchers, Christmas baskets — and love. This is the Booker who feeds the hungry, counsels the doubtful, and instructs the ignorant.

If you are a Capuchin, you may have been impressed with Booker the leader. He is the first non-priest in modern times to serve as a provincial councillor, to travel to Taize, France, to represent the North American Capuchins at a world-wide conference, and to serve as a board member of an alphabet soup of agencies.

If you have worked with Booker as a volunteer, then you must be aware of the charismatic Booker. He is well noted for conveying enthusiasm to his volunteers and sharing his values across racial, gender, and age boundaries.

If you have listened to his preaching and teaching, then you must know the faith-filled and committed Booker. With carefully articulated sentences, with a sense of timing and drama, and even with song, he has proclaimed a gospel of salvation throughout Milwaukee, around the State of Wisconsin, and far beyond geographical lines. When Booker speaks, his expressions of joy in living mingle with sorrow and frustration at the prejudices of society.

If you have attended the plays at the Performing Arts Center, then you cannot forget the dancing Booker, singing and cavorting across the stage, all in the interests of the young people with whom he shared so much. When he is not on the stage, he is the director, the choreographer, and producer. Most importantly he is a mentor who sends forth his disciples into a modern world. Through his plays and music, Booker has helped the young to proclaim a message of hope and good news to a world so much in need of both.

If you have lived in community or worked with Booker, perhaps you recall the singing and reciting Booker. Maybe you can still hear him, humming snatches of songs that soon become unforgettable, spilling forth lines from plays and poetry at the breakfast table in amazing profusion.

How few understand the suffering Booker, his body bent with pain about which he will not speak, afflicted with ailments he is reluctant to reveal. How few know the crucified Booker. Despite his impressive successes, he has been misunderstood and even rejected by some he

served. He has been hurt by the insensitivity of some; he has felt the terror of the drawn gun; he has sometimes wept tears of suffering and frustration.

If you knew all of these Bookers, you would still not fully comprehend the inner spirit of faith, known only to God, the driving force that has given his life its meaning. Booker has not only acted, preached, danced, laughed, suffered, shared, sang, and listened — he has done so to follow one even greater than he, who once said to him, "If you want to be perfect, go and sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me." (Mt 19:21-22)

— *Matthew Gottschalk*