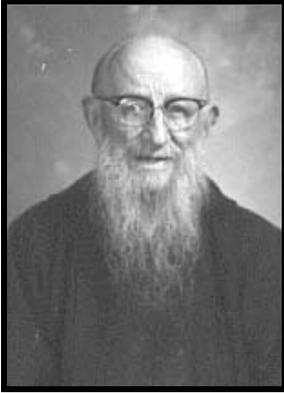


Neerology

Patrick Berther 1902 - 2001



Patrick Berther was not your typical Capuchin in any way, shape or form.

Along with Gabriel Diefenbach, Pat was the only Capuchin of our province to reach the age of 99. His father, Martin Berther, lived to be over 100. Pat was proud of his unique background. His mother, Maggie Wadden, came from an Irish family and died fairly young. His father was born and raised in the small Romanish-language section of Switzerland and until he died, prayed in his native language.

Except for Paul Craig, Pat was the only Capuchin of our province born in South Dakota. His father became a banker in the town of Madison, South Dakota, building a home there in 1901, the year before Pat (who was baptized Joseph Vincent) was born. Pat was followed by two sisters, Mary and Agnes. The three siblings remained extremely close throughout their lives. Mary and Agnes both became teachers but never married. They were not spinsters, however; only “ungathered roses.” They lived all their lives in the home their father had built, the home that was always available for “our brother, Father Pat” and any other Capuchin who would be traveling to or from Montana.

Joseph never finished high school, but the Jesuit-run Creighton University in Omaha gave him credits for the years of high school he had completed. He enrolled there as a sophomore and graduated in 1924, only 22 years old. Throughout his life he maintained a deep loyalty to his alma mater, attending alumni meetings whenever he could. In 1967 he received an “Outstanding Alumni” award from the university.

After graduating Joseph traveled to Detroit, having taken a teaching position at a Jesuit school, the University of Detroit High School. One of his students there became the future Capuchin provincial minister, Gerald Walker. Joseph taught English and history there for two years and for two years more at Holy Name Institute, another Jesuit high school in Detroit, connected to Blessed Sacrament Cathedral.

During this time he came to know the Capuchins at St. Bonaventure’s on Mount Elliott, felt the stirrings of a religious vocation and asked to join the order in 1927. He took the name of Patrick at his investiture on 18 August 1927. Sixty years later, he was asked by a Billings, Montana journalist why he had become a Capuchin. Never one to divulge his intimate motivations and feelings, Patrick said, “I liked the whiskers.” Once when the pastor of his home parish in Madison, South Dakota, began to grow a beard, Pat told him that men who

grow beards are not lazy but take time in the morning to pray — and that makes them closer to God than others. Patrick's long, flowing and white (at least in later years) beard was one of his life-long trademarks, together with his habit which he wore almost constantly.

Clement Neubauer was novice director for Patrick and his companions, the "Twelve Apostles," in Detroit (the novitiate in Huntington was not yet a reality). After first vows in August 1928 he went directly to St. Anthony's in Marathon. The province had not yet established its house of philosophy on the Stuyvesant-Fish estate in Garrison, so for six years Patrick studied philosophy and theology at Marathon. He was ordained at St. Mary's in Marathon, on 17 June 1934.

His first assignment was at St. Fidelis Friary as assistant pastor, in New York. (This was the former name of the friary attached to St. John Parish in downtown Manhattan.) He was there for only one year when he was asked to take a "temporary assignment" at St. Labre Friary in Ashland, Montana. This temporary assignment became the only other assignment in his entire life, making Pat the only Capuchin (indeed the only priest) to ever live and minister in the Diocese of Great Falls-Billings for a total of 61 years.

He ministered among the Northern Cheyennes and ranching people in the Birney and Colstrip area but soon was fulltime at St. David's Parish in Broadus. The parish covered 6000 square miles of southeastern Montana, with one mission church in Stacey and twelve stations in five counties. For years he lived in the back of the sacristy until the parishioners insisted they build a rectory. He took his vow of poverty very seriously, hardly spending a penny on himself. Some years later when he was going to celebrate his twenty-fifth jubilee, his father wrote him, "You should have all that is needed in clothing — *new* if necessary or practical, and in keeping with the occasion. Send to me all bills, and do not skimp for anything fit for the celebration." He knew Pat well!

Pat ministered in the Broadus area for over 40 years. When he left to go to Ekalaka in 1975, parishioners discovered that in his thriftiness he had never thrown away one issue of the diocesan and local papers. He had every issue from those 40 years. Even the diocesan archives couldn't say that! There was no road in southeastern Montana which didn't see Pat driving over it in all kinds of weather and gumbo. Reminiscing later about it with a journalist, he said, "You'd get stuck a lot in snow banks and mud holes, so I carried my bedroll and slept out with the rattlesnakes, coyotes and prairie dogs." Ranching families still tell stories about the masses he would celebrate in their out-of-the-way homes, gathering together all the neighbors. Eldon Schuster (bishop of Great Falls-Billings) once referred to Pat as "one of the last missionary circuit riders."

Of course, all those trips were not just ministry-related. Pat was an avid fisherman, and stories abound about that, too! He loved this prayer: "God grant that I may fish until my dying day. And when it comes to my last cast, I then most humbly pray, when in the Lord's safe landing net I'm peacefully asleep, that in his mercy I be judged as big enough to keep."

Pat took his prayer as seriously as he did his fishing and his ministry. On his frequent visits to see the Ashland friars (or “crappers,” as he would call them!), his first and last stop would always be to the Blessed Sacrament. His breviary contained page after page of names of people — living and deceased — whom he would pray for every day. In his hundreds of home masses he certainly had to bend more than one liturgical rule. But later on, after Vatican II, he would frequently rate the liturgical performance of others — including the bishop. One time he wrote to the provincial minister and mentioned, “Had Bishop Murphy Monday night and for mass yesterday. His rubrics are about as poor as yours!” People like Murphy became used to being rated like this — and then almost immediately after, hearing the request, “Do you want to play cards later on?” Pat would always tell you directly what he thought about what you were doing, but it would never get in the way of his relationship with you as a person.

In 1975, at the age of 73, he left Broadus and became the pastor of an even more remote part of southeastern Montana, St Joan of Arc Parish in Ekalaka. Chester Poppa, who took Pat’s place in Broadus, tells the story of the time the provincial minister, Myron Kowalsky, came for visitation. Chester drove for the two hour trip to Ekalaka. Pat took them both to the “Old Stand Bar” for lunch, but insisted that they not order dessert because he had it at home. After lunch they returned to Pat’s house for dessert: a piece of cake for each of them (which he had saved from the senior citizens’ dinner) and a scoop of ice cream.

One of the highlights of his life came in 1982, when he took his golden jubilee trip — at the age of 80. He had always wanted to visit his father’s birthplace in Switzerland, and now he had the opportunity. Ron Smith, the provincial minister, asked Leo Wollenweber to accompany him and Leo remembers the trip fondly. “Pat was enthralled with Rome and snapped photos right and left. But, everywhere we went, people wanted to take his picture. He was a natural, always in his habit and with his flowing, windswept beard he became part of the scenery. Among the Capuchins at the canonization mass of Crispin of Viterbo, he looked the most venerable of all.”

Leo describes the scene when they arrived at a Benedictine monastery near Martin Berther’s birthplace: “A cousin of Pat’s with a small car picked us up and drove us through winding roads to meet Berther relatives. Pat was delighted with the people, speaking German with them so familiarly, and absorbing all their history that was his own history too. It was fascinating to learn about the Romanish language and Swiss culture and Pat reveled in it all. And of course, all the relatives were just as excited to know their famous Capuchin relative from the wild Indian country of America. For me it was a joy and a blessing to have such a great Capuchin brother and friend as was Patrick Berther.”

Once Pat’s golden jubilee of profession rolled around, there followed in quick succession other jubilees: 50 years a priest, 60 years a Capuchin, 60 years a priest, sixty-five years a Capuchin, etc. He loved the celebrations — and he had many of them: at Mt. Calvary, in Ashland, in Broadus/Ekalaka, in South Dakota. But again, never wanting to give a hint of how much he enjoyed them, he would say at the end of the festivities, “Well, thank God

that's over with!" Probably no Capuchin in our province had as many jubilee celebrations as Pat.

After talking about it for a good number of years, Pat finally decided to retire from active ministry at the age of 89, in 1991, leaving Ekalaka and going to live at St. Labre Friary in Ashland. "I thank the Lord and the people for the time I've been here," Pat said, and ask their pardon and forgiveness for what I've done or didn't do." At St. Labre he continued his life of prayer and hobbies of photography, stamp collecting, genealogy work, fishing and tatting. He was probably the only Capuchin who knew how to tat. He made presents of doilies for scores of couples he had married over the years, often giving them a second or third one for their silver or golden anniversaries. He actually wrote to the new provincial minister, Tony Scannell, "I'm in good hands; retirement is great!"

But he was getting older. "For sixty years I have been independent. Now I've got to go to live with the bums back in Wisconsin." In October 1996, he made the decision to move to the retirement home of St. Fidelis Friary in Appleton. The Montana friars helped him pack his few belongings, but he — at the age of 94 — drove himself the thousand miles from Ashland to Appleton, stopping on the way, of course, to visit his sister Agnes (Mary had already died) in South Dakota.

The provincial minister, as well as some of his cousins, were very concerned about his driving. Shortly after arriving at St. Fidelis, the local minister told him that because of this concern, the provincial minister was asking him not to drive anymore. After having driven nearly a million miles in his day, Pat made no complaint, never again asking to drive.

His hearing wasn't good and his eyesight was failing, but for as long as he could, he kept up his stamp collection, his large correspondence, his reading and his tatting — as well as periodically sending the Capuchin general minister, John Corriveau, his latest pictures. After several happy years at St. Fidelis, the staff found it hard to admit that Pat needed care they were unable to give. The decision was made to transfer him to St. Paul's Nursing Home in Kaukauna, where he received excellent care. There, in the habit he had loved and worn for seventy-two years, at the age of 99, on Monday, 10 December 2001, Patrick Berther gave back his spirit to the Lord.

His life with all of us "bums and crappers" was over with. Now the real celebration — and fishing — could begin. May he bask in the delight of that celebration forever.

— *Written by Daniel Crosby*