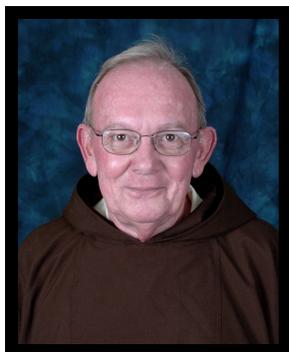


Neerology

Patrick Forton
1938 - 2012



Patrick Forton was born in Detroit, Michigan on November 2, 1938, along with his twin brother Michael. The son of Vincent Forton (a substation operator for the Detroit Edison Company) and Eleanor (nee Hintze), a housewife, he was baptized at Gesu Parish in Detroit on November 13, 1938 and given the name Gerard Patrick. They were a family of five, including his sister Patricia.

In an early letter inquiring about the Capuchins when he was 14 years old in his first year of high school at St. Ambrose, Gerard inquired if he would be able to bring along his collection of 15 puppets if he were to attend St. Lawrence Seminary.

In the end, "Gerry" (as his family called him) did not attend St. Lawrence. There is no record of what actually happened to the puppets, but one thing became clear throughout his life: "Br. Pat" was nobody's puppet!

The Capuchins had preached a parish mission at his Detroit parish of St. Ambrose, and that apparently led to Gerry's first contact with the order. While Gerry's first inquiry about a vocation regarded an interest in the priesthood, he ended up exploring that option by attending Sacred Heart Seminary in Detroit for his sophomore and junior year of high school. The studies were difficult for him, especially Latin, so he left the seminary and returned to St. Ambrose to finish his studies.

Already in his senior year of high school Gerry wrote to the Capuchins again to ask for information about a vocation as a lay friar. He explored other orders as well – but in the end decided on the Capuchins. On his application form, in answer to the question "Why do you desire to become a Capuchin?" he responded: "Because I think they do wonderful work and I want to be a part of them to save my own soul and to help others to save theirs."

Gerry entered the Capuchins as a postulant in August 1956 right after finishing high school. He was invested as a novice on February 10 1957 under the name of Patrick, and he made his first profession on February 11 of 1958.

Formation for lay friars in the province at that time meant formation in the roles typically assigned to them, and each brother was encouraged to get some experience in each area:

cooking and baking; tailoring; sacristy; carpentry, plumbing, electrical and other skills associated with general maintenance. In an early letter inquiring about the vocation of a lay friar he expressed his comfort with these tasks: "I would rather do the kind of work that a brother does. I would like carpentry and mechanical work best."

Indeed, carpentry was always one of his loves and talents. In his later years, if there was a carpenter shop in the fraternity he was in charge of it; and if there wasn't, he made sure he put one together!

But one area of preparation during those years of early formation served Patrick and the community especially well: printing. It later became a wonderful instrument for a life-giving mission he discovered in his vocation: evangelization!

Patrick's years of formation as a young lay friar were during an era of very strict hierarchy in the fraternity in which "the brothers" were on the bottom rung on the ladder and the end of the line. Even if they were solemnly professed, a young cleric friar just out of novitiate had higher seniority. Pat was not the only lay friar to come out of this pre-Vatican II clerical culture with deeply negative feelings about anything that would even hint at distinctions. One can only speculate about whether his own disappointment of not having succeeded in his own studies toward the priesthood in minor seminary may have colored his feelings and experience.

Following his perpetual vows in February 1961, Patrick had a quick succession of short assignments, with the longest being at Saint Lawrence Seminary in the print shop. In 1970 he began his preparations for what would occupy the greatest part of his Capuchin life: his work as a missionary in Nicaragua and other countries in the region, where eventually he would become a member of the new General Vice Province of Central America.

In Central America Patrick found an opportunity to balance his considerable "practical skills" he had developed in his training as a lay friar with his desire to engage more in the pastoral work of "building church" through the friars' pioneering work of the formation of Christian base communities and delegates of the word in Nicaragua. Pat was very much a part of that process, participating in the preparation of materials and helping to offer courses to the very simple but courageous lay men and women who stepped forward to lead their communities of faith in rural areas where the visit of a missionary might only be once or twice a year. This part of his ministry was carried out in the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua: Siuna, Rama and the Rivers of Bluefields.

Patrick arrived in Nicaragua during a critical time in its history after years of domination by the dictatorial government of the Somoza family, which was heavily supported by the United States government. There was growing support for a revolt by the Cuban-backed Sandinista rebels. Two years after his arrival the difficult political scene was complicated even more by a devastating earthquake that practically destroyed the capital city of Managua.

The work of the friars in Nicaragua was principally along the Atlantic Coast, as well as in the northern part of the Pacific Coast and in rural areas that were hotbeds of rebel activity and subsequent government repression. During most of these years before the downfall of the Somoza regime, Patrick was stationed in the Managua house which served as the central house for the North American missionaries when they came to the capital.

It was during this period that Pat confronted one of the demons that he would have to deal with for the rest of his life: alcoholism. He dealt with it with the same boldness and directness with which he would deal with other challenges. He was a life-long member of Alcoholics Anonymous, searching for a group any time he was transferred from one country or fraternity to another.

While working in the parish of Rama, Pat also accompanied one of the early candidates to the order. That led to a period of formation work in the vice province, starting in Costa Rica and then in Guatemala and Honduras. Finally he returned to Bluefields, where he helped Paul Schmitz at the chancery, especially in the print shop which served the work of evangelization. He helped in courses for delegates of the word and even took on the ministry of administrator of the Parish of the Rivers of Bluefields. During his years in Nicaragua, he developed a great deal of love for the scriptures, and he rooted himself in them as well as he could in order to help in the formation of the growing number of lay leaders.

One of the Capuchins who worked closely in those years when he administered the 45 chapels of the Parish of the Rivers of Bluefields wrote about Pat: "I often admired his tremendous patience and friendliness with the simple country folk. He enjoyed talking with them, laughing with them, sharing table with them at assemblies and missions. (I understand his workers also appreciated him when he was their "boss" in the construction of the novitiate in Nuevo Ocotepeque, Honduras.) Some of those boat trips were up to 8 hours long, sitting on two sticks for a "bench" in a dugout canoe, and I never saw him lose his patience."

While Patrick wrote as a young 15 year old of a spirituality of "saving souls," in these later years those who knew him would probably describe him as someone who couldn't quite tolerate "frilly faith" or devotions. Often times he could and would shock people with his comments on church and theology. In this period he was known to be a person who wouldn't take a lot of guff (to use a polite word, which he probably wouldn't!). There were fewer smiles in these middle years, and those who didn't know him well could have been put off by him. But those who stayed with him saw his wry smile often; and under his gruff exterior they encountered a gentle, generous, fraternal and very compassionate brother, especially with the people with whom he served and worked in his ministries.

By 2001 Pat had started to experience health issues that led him to question the wisdom of his presence in Central America. In 2002 he was diagnosed with Chronic Lymphocytic Leukemia; and he began to prepare himself to return to the province. He worked at Capuchin Retreat in

Washington, Michigan until his health required more attention. This led to his final fraternal experience at St. Bonaventure Monastery in Detroit, where he moved in 2011.

During these years he was a faithful presence in community prayer and Eucharist – always nurturing his love of the scriptures.

In the end, his physical stature seemed to shrink; yet in his transfer from the retreat house in Washington to St. Bonaventure's he seemed to grow in grace and even mellow. He suffered terribly because of his inability to breathe comfortably. He needed to use a portable oxygen tank which he faithfully wheeled around with him at St. Bonaventure's.

Pat's deteriorating health eventually led to the doctors recommending a heart operation. It didn't seem to help, however. In the ensuing difficult recovery the doctors convinced Pat, who had earlier asked not to have any extraordinary means used, to accept what they said would be a "temporary" tracheotomy. The recovery never came, and Pat would spend months in rehabilitation until another health crisis sent him back to the hospital. Finally, Pat finally asked that the tracheotomy tube be taken out and that he be allowed to return to St. Bonaventure Monastery to pass his last days.

In the midst of this difficult test the deep peace, gratitude, and courtesy that Patrick demonstrated with his health providers and caregivers were edifying. Unable to speak, he nevertheless recognized them with a smile and simply held out his hand so that they would hold it. It gave him, as well as those who surrounded him, comfort and peace in his last days.

If Pat had rough edges in his personality his suffering seemed to wear them off. He died peacefully among the brothers a day after returning home from rehabilitation. At his wake those who knew him, especially in his years in Nicaragua, could not help but notice that he was buried with a rosary in his hand. If he were able to speak he probably would have asked, in his own direct way, to replace it with a New Testament. But whether bearing a rosary or a New Testament, what was evident was that he had died as he lived: a man of deep faith, and at peace in the Lord.

— *Larry Webber*