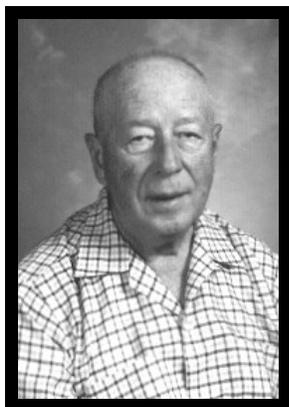


# Neerology

Chester Poppa  
1927-2011



The grandparents of Chester Poppa immigrated to the United States from Poland. They brought with them a strong commitment to family and the Catholic faith. His paternal grandparents, Anton and Mary (Guczman) married in Poland in 1888 and arrived in Chicago in 1889. Their firstborn son, Stanislaus Joseph Poppa, was born in Chicago on May 10, 1892. His maternal grandparents, Albert and Agnes (Szymaniak) Andrzejewski arrived from Poland in 1907, settling briefly in Antigo, WI and then moving to Chicago. Their daughter, Agnes Anna, born on January 3, 1897 in Pienczkowo, Poland, came with them.

It was in the community of Polish immigrants located in Chicago that Agnes Andrzejewski and Stanislaus Poppa were to meet and eventually marry on June 1, 1921. By this time Stanislaus was employed as tailor at Hart, Shaffner, & Marx. The young couple welcomed their first born son, Chester Joseph Poppa, on February 19, 1922. His brother Robert Stanislaus Poppa (later known as Chester Poppa) was born five years later on February 27, 1927. The following March 10<sup>th</sup> his parents and brother took him to be baptized at St. Wenceslaus Church. His grandfather Anton Poppa and Mary Kowalski were his godparents.

Tragedy struck the young family when Stanislaus Poppa suddenly died a year later on October 9, 1928. After his death his wife Agnes and two sons moved in with her parents. In order to help support herself and her sons she began work at a women's lingerie shop. Eventually Chester and Robert grew old enough to begin attending St. Stanislaus Bishop and Martyr Catholic School.

Sometime after Robert finished fourth grade his mother took him and his brother to Munising, MI. On May 13, 1936, Robert received the Sacrament of Confirmation at Sacred Heart Church in Munising from Joseph Plagens. The following year his mother married George Edward Gravel. He worked as a laborer in a local paper mill. A year later on October 28, 1938 a son, George Peter Gravel, was born. Robert would finish out the next four years of grade school at Sacred Heart Catholic School in Munising. He graduated on June 8, 1941.

The following fall Robert entered St. Lawrence College at Mt. Calvary, WI where he would spend the next four years gaining his high school education. Impressed by the spirit of the Capuchin Friars, Robert made the decision to become a Capuchin as early as 1942. One of his classmates, Matthew Gottschalk, had this to say about him, "We met for the first time on Labor Day, 1941, as we began our studies at St. Lawrence Seminary. We shared the acceleration program during World War II, when we had no extended vacations because of the military draft."

On August 7, 1944, Robert filled out an application for admission to the Capuchin Order of the Province of St. Joseph. In responding to the question: “Why do you wish to become a religious?” he wrote: “because I see in religious life a greater opportunity to attain to perfection.”

On January 24, 1945, Gerald Walker, rector of St. Lawrence Seminary at the time, had this to say about him in his letter of recommendation to the provincial minister:

It is a distinct pleasure for me to recommend the reception of Robert Poppa into our novitiate as a candidate for the holy priesthood in our order, because he is one of the three best, if not the best, of the nineteen whom I am recommending for acceptance in February. He has a beautiful character, esteemed by Fathers and students alike. His will to be a Capuchin priest is deep and firm as well as supernaturally motivated. God has blessed him with gifts of soul...of mind and body, which eminently fit him for the Capuchin priesthood.

Robert is a real man of character and principle, habitually doing the right thing, and doing it with such cheerfulness that he is admired and loved even by those fellow students for whom his life is a condemnation of their own. He is above all human respect when it is a question doing what is pleasing to God and, instead of losing the respect of the less worthy, he has completely won it that he has been one of the most powerful influences for good in the school...

He is not a lumen in talents, and yet his usual report card is a straight “A” or very close to it. That is the result of honest and constant application.

By nature he is inclined to be quiet and serious, but one cannot help but admire how among the students he tries to be all to all, making a positive effort to adapt his feelings and thoughts to this one and that one, as he happens to be with one or the other. He tries hard to be pleasant and kind and the boys recognize that and appreciate it.

I hope that you will not feel that I being too enthusiastic, because I could not describe Robert Poppa otherwise. He is excellent material for a holy and effective Capuchin priest....

At the conclusion of his recommendation, Gerald wrote, “At present Robert feels that he would like to some be assigned to work in our mission field, but the will of the superiors regarding his work as everything else he will make his own.”

Matthew Gottschalk remembers: “We were invested with the Capuchin habit on March 2, 1945. In those days we were ranked by seniority in age. Chester was just one month older than I. We sat next to one another at every meal, shared the same teachers, the same academic program, the same recreation periods, and the same spiritual and social activities for nine years.

“He represented for me the holy simplicity often associated with the Franciscan tradition. We never had an argument. Of course, we laughed at the antics that often characterized cleric life,

complained about the work load, papers to write, and tests to take. However, we always respected each other and even enjoyed the companionship of fraternal life.”

On March 2, 1945, Robert entered the novitiate at Huntington, IN. He was invested with the Capuchin habit, receiving the name Chester, perhaps chosen because of his affection for his older brother who was baptized with that name. He completed his novitiate and made his simple profession on March 3, 1946.

The next day he traveled to Mary Immaculate Seminary at Garrison, NY where he would continue his college studies graduating on June 19, 1950. While completing his studies at Garrison, he made his perpetual profession of vows on March 3, 1949.

After his graduation at Garrison, he went to St. Anthony Seminary, Marathon, WI to spend the next four years completing his studies in theology. On August 27, 1953 he was ordained to the priesthood at St. Mary’s Church, Marathon, by William P. O’Connor. The following June 20, 1954 he was assigned to Holy Cross Friary, Mt. Calvary, WI where he was asked to prepare to be either a biology or physics teacher at St. Lawrence Seminary. He chose physics.

Once he learned the will of God through his superior, Chester applied himself to its fulfillment. During the summer of 1954 he took courses in Physics at the University of Notre Dame. During the school he worked at St. Lawrence Seminary as teacher and dorm prefect. In a personal notebook he wrote himself this reminder:

Always be pleasant and smiling in the class, but firm. Never take your ill will out on students. The type of teacher students like is one who teaches them something..., but will go off the subject occasionally; who can take a joke good naturedly; who cracks a joke once in a while and his classes are lively and interesting; who prepares well for his classes, who sees some good in each of the students, even the less talented.

As one of his students I can testify that he lived by this maxim. He classes were always interesting. As students we enjoyed his relaxed style of teaching and his ability to laugh with us when one of his demonstrations failed to work.

Chester continued to educate himself for the assignment he accepted as a teacher, taking summer courses in science and methods of teaching at St. Norbert College, DePere, WI and Northern Michigan College. From 1960 to 1962 he became a full time student at the University of Colorado, Boulder, obtaining a master’s degree in basic science. During the summers of 1963 and 1964 he returned to the University of Colorado for courses in education. And in the summer of 1965 he attended the University of California for courses in physics and chemistry.

Besides being a dedicated science teacher, Chester served as a dorm prefect in St. Mary’s Hall. There students experienced his fatherly warmth, goodness of heart and ability to keep order. His door was always open for any student to enter and confide in him. He wrote in his personal notebook: “Don’t be too formal with students either in the classroom or outside; however never

be too chummy or free them either, for the students then lose respect for you; students want their professors to be friendly and kind, but also want to hold them in respect.”

Chester ended his teaching career at St. Lawrence Seminary in 1970 when he was assigned to St. Labre Indian Mission, Ashland, MT. On August 15, 1970 he became pastor of Blessed Sacrament Church in Busby on the Northern Cheyenne reservation. His desire to serve in the missions was fulfilled. Two years later he was sent to serve as pastor at St. Charles Mission on the Crow reservation where he gave himself with the same diligence as he had elsewhere. In the meantime, he kept in close contact with his own family. His mother and step-father had moved to California in 1963. His step-father died there in 1966. His mother remained in California until 1972 when she came to live with her son in Pryor.

In July 1975 Chester was asked to become pastor at St. David’s Church in Broadus, MT, a rural community in southeastern Montana. He was to replace retiring Pat Berther, who had been the community’s longtime and much-loved pastor. Chester and his mother moved from Pryor to undertake this new assignment. Both Chester and his mother quickly endeared themselves to the people of the Broadus community. On February 28, 1980 his mother passed away at Sacred Heart Hospital, Miles City, after a short illness. The son to whom she imparted the example of her faith and the gift of herself returned that gift in the kind of care he provided for her during the final years of her life.

While carrying out pastoral ministry at Busby, Pryor, and Broadus, Chester never neglected staying in contact with his Capuchin brothers who enjoyed his fraternal spirit. He enjoyed participating in the give and take of the bi-weekly gatherings of the Capuchins in Montana. He joined in their prayer and relished a good meal with occasional a brandy Manhattan before the main course. It pained him that after he was forced to go on dialysis three times a week that he could no longer attend the provincial gatherings, because he enjoyed reconnecting with those brothers with whom he had spent time in the clericate and during his teaching ministry at Mt. Calvary.

“Chet” (as his brothers called him) enjoyed the freedom he had out west to hunt and fish. He supplemented his diet with whatever hunted or caught. He lived a very simple life style and shared with others whatever he could. He also enjoyed doing wood work and listening to classical music.

On November 7, 2006 Chester was admitted to St. Vincent’s Hospital in Billings, MT for kidney failure and heart problems. He remained in the hospital until December 7<sup>th</sup>. During that time learned that in order to live he would have to go on living he would have to undergo kidney dialysis three times a week. Arrangements were made for him to have an apartment in Billings so that he would be close to the hospital for the four hour dialysis treatments on Monday, Wednesday and Friday.

However, because of his love for the people at St. David’s Parish in Broadus, he arranged to make the three hour drive from Billings to Broadus every weekend, a one hundred sixty mile round trip, so that he could offer Mass and provide for their spiritual care. He continued this rigorous and wearing routine for four years.

In the summer of 2010 Chester's health finally forced him to retire after having served the people at Broadus for 35 years. In his homily on his last Sunday at St. David's Church, he referred to the congregation as "family" and himself as their "father" in all things spiritual. One of his parishioners commented that he was much more than that. "He healed our flagging spirits and renewed our faith in both church and humankind." Another parishioner described Chester as a man of "absolute gentleness, faith and friendship, as well as a man with a great sense of humor which brings smiles to everyone around him."

In his homily at Chester's funeral, Provincial Minister, John Celichowski, mentioned that he and Randolph Graczyk had visited Chester in his apartment in Billings just three weeks previous and that one of the things he could not help noticing was that Chet's breviary lay open on the kitchen table ready for him to begin evening prayer after they left.

In his personal notebook, Chester copied this quote from a letter St. Therese sent to her co-missionary, Abbe Bethire: "Dear little brother, as the point of appearing before the good God, I realize more than ever that there is but one thing necessary, to work solely for Him [underlined by Chet] and do nothing either for oneself or for creatures." Chester seems to have taken these words to heart. John ended his homily saying this about him: "He never forgot that he was a seed. He was not afraid to die to himself. He now leaves behind the fruit of a faithful life."

—James Antoine, OFM Cap.