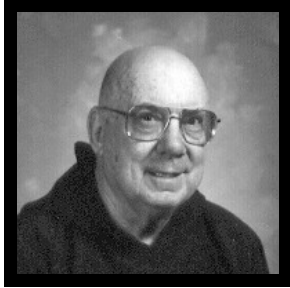


Neerology

Dimas Seward 1925 - 2012



In the funeral liturgy for Dimas Seward, the departure song was *Soon and Very Soon*. The opening line reads: “Soon and very soon we are going to see the King.” It was sung three times and was a fitting farewell to Dimas. Why? In his lifetime he sojourned to see the King daily. His southern Baptist heritage helped him promote that wonderful relationship to Jesus, which intensified when he became Catholic. Dimas would sit for hours in the St. Lawrence Seminary chapel, in an isolated corner, or he would walk in the chapel praying the Chaplet of Mercy. Secretly, Dimas harbored a certain jealousy or envy when younger friars preceded him in death to see the “King.”

But if Jesus was King, Mary was certainly the other love of his life. Occasionally, he referred to her as “Queen,” but more often as “Mother” or “Mama.” He loved making a pilgrimage to the *Schönstatt* shrine in Waukesha, Wisconsin and the winter carnival he dedicated to “Our Lady of the Snows.”

George (Dimas’ former name) was born in New Orleans LA on 21 July 1925; a southern lad who lived most of his life in the Yankee north. His parents were George Sr. and Alvina (Kaach). We do not know the religion of his parents. What we do know was that George Sr. was a stern father and Alvina a beautiful woman, whom George Jr. cherished. Alvina died in 1932 when Dimas was seven years old. She bore a second son, Edward.

Dimas’ father remarried a Ms. Foster, and the family moved to St. Tamminie, a Louisiana country town. It was during the depression, and it struck everyone. George Sr. had bought a farm of some forty acres. The garden helped keep food on the table, but the Seward family were poor. In fact, during the depression “my mother bleached fertilizer sacks and made underwear” for both Ed and Dimas. Their classmates laughed at them when they saw them in the common restrooms. Both Dimas and Ed attended the Nordsar Elementary School: each row was a “grade.”

Dimas recalled how stern his father was. On one occasion, because of some infraction, both Ed and he had to sleep out in the cold on the porch as punishment.

During his teens, Dimas attended Warren Easton High School in New Orleans. We know little of what his record was at the school or what activities he participated in. At 14, he

joined the Baptist Church. His pastor was dedicated and fine man. The pastor baptized him.

While in the Baptist Church, George was excommunicated for publically stating that priests do not have horns or hooves! As a shoeshine boy he accosted a priest and asked to shine his shoes. There and then did he discover that priests do not have horns or hooves. His testimony in front of the whole congregation caused his expulsion from the church. After that, Dismas no longer went to church.

The depression years continued in America. In other parts of the world Hitler, Mussolini and the Japanese caused all kinds of rumblings. Hitler annexed Austria in 1938; then followed Czechoslovakia. With Germany's invasion of Poland in 1939, World War II began. At the time Dismas was 15 years old. In the meantime, the U.S. armed itself and began the first peace-time draft in American history.

The war broke out in December 1941 when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. Young men were now being called to arms, and Dismas was drafted in the Army in 1943, at the age of 18. His army career lasted just under thirteen years.

Dismas' military career took him to Germany, the Philippines, Korea and Okinawa. However, before entering the Army, he converted to Catholicism. He was baptized on 19 March 1943 at St. Joseph Church in New Orleans. There he also received his First Communion. Nine months later he was confirmed at Ft. Sam Houston TX.

Dismas' first overseas assignment was Germany. The war ended in Europe in 1945. George spoke very little of his stay in Germany. One story he related was how he spent one Christmas Eve. Dismas rounded up a few Catholic GIs, commandeered a jeep and headed for the local village church to attend Midnight Mass. What a contrast that was when in Korea thousands of GIs congregated for Cardinal Spellman's Midnight Liturgy. Dismas later spoke nostalgically of that Christmas in Germany.

During his service in the Army, Dismas matriculated to a variety of schools. He studied at the Surgical Tech School, the Medical Tech School, the Leadership School and the Schicoge School of Nursing. All of this education stood him in good stead in Korea, the Philippines, Okinawa and later, both with the Capuchin Friars and the St. Lawrence Seminary students.

It was between wars that the National Guard promoted Dismas as staff sergeant. Some of the guardsmen became jealous when he was promoted. To spite him, they voted and sent him as a med tech with the Army's baseball team.

War broke out in Korea in 1950. It was during the war that Dismas showed his concern for his men. During one operation, when the enemy seemingly was overrunning the American GIs, Dismas, as medic, helped the wounded to evacuate their position, and brought them to

safety. Eventually, the Korean “police action” ended with the line between North and South Korea, drawn at the 38th Parallel.

From Korea Dismas repaired to Okinawa, which harbored a lot of military personnel. It was while he was in Korea that his thoughts revolved around a religious vocation. On the island there was an abundance of surgical technicians, thus the army appointed him as assistant to the Catholic chaplain.

Living quarters were not lavish. The chapel was a Quonset hut and George lived there in a small room. The chaplain lived there as well. Unfortunately, the chaplain had a drinking problem and caroused with some of the Army wives and women in the village. Dismas stood up to him and threatened to tell his superiors. The chaplain became indignant and vowed that Dismas would be transferred. He also accused Dismas of consorting with village women. Things got worse when, at times, the chaplain poured whiskey into the chalice for mass. When reprimanded not to do so, he replied: “Don’t tell me what to do.” Ultimately, the chaplain was reported and removed from the base.

On Okinawa there were a number of Capuchin Friars: Felix Ley, the future vicar apostolic of Okinawa; Valentine Thibedeau, Hilarion Tuller and Ermin (Charlie) Bantle. Their presence and influence nudged Dismas toward religious life. He had been a Third Order Carmelite, but this would be something much more daring and permanent. He consulted with and received approval from the military chaplains and his confessor.

At the end of 1955, as a master sergeant, Dismas mustered out of military service. Shortly thereafter, he tendered his formal application to the Capuchin Order on 25 January 1956.

Because of a canonical glitch, the order accepted him as a Third Order member. Dismas reported to St. Anthony Friary in Marathon WI. There, on 5 April 1956, Simeon Keogh, the local minister, invested him with the Third Order habit as “Brother Michael.”

Under the direction of Ambrose DeGroot, novice director, Dismas (now “Michael”) labored in the kitchen, the tailor shop and in the garden. He made simple profession as a Tertiary on 12 April 1957.

After his profession, the Provincial Council transferred “Michael” to Mt. Calvary as infirmarian to the students of St. Lawrence, and to the elderly friars at Holy Cross Friary. He was also appointed one of the class counselors.

Life was not dull as he fulfilled his duties. Present among the elderly friars was Pacificus Raith, a friar who railed against the Irish bishops in the U.S. and was displeased because his brother never became a bishop; Vitalis Ossusky from Czechoslovakia, who spoke very little and did odd jobs around the friary; and the diminutive Hugo Knappe from Germany, who late in life wanted to serve in the old German Army. While the student body was his major concern, Dismas tried to keep the elderly friars healthy and content.

On 5 April 1960, "Michael" made perpetual vows in the Third Order with provincial permission, and his confessor, Ralph Diedrichs. His tertiary vows could only be dispensed for grave reasons. Sometime during this decade, he officially changed his name to Dismas, the Good Thief.

While Dismas worked diligently for the students and friars, he battled a sense of insecurity. Even though he was living as a Third Order brother, he knew that within the order he did not have all the privileges and obligations of the First Order. Realistically, he was always an outsider and his southern roots in "Yankee" land did not help. It was a battle. Sad to say, some First Order brothers looked down on him as a "second class" citizen and a dumb southerner. It helped a little when the Third Order brothers received permission to wear the habit with cowl. Nevertheless, it bothered him that he could not vote in elections or fully participate in decisions of the order and the life he wanted to live. Dismas was impetuous and sought sanctity, which he thought would come instantly. However, he never lost faith or hope in his search for holiness.

In the year or two before 1969, the friars were contemplating building a new friary. With the growth of activities at the seminary, parking became a problem. It was resolved that the Holy Cross congregation would move to a new location below the hill.

Construction began. The parish church and friary were razed. By July 1969, the friary and the new student's chapel were dedicated. With the building of a new friary, and to forge a closer bond with the seminary, it changed its name from Holy Cross Friary to St. Lawrence Friary. It signaled a new approach for the seminary and the friars.

With the changes came new challenges. Dismas' job of being infirmarian to the friars and students ended; however, he continued in the office of spiritual director and the junior class counselor. That assignment lasted from 1969 to 1981, when he was promoted to dean of discipline and vice-rector under Joe Diermeier, the rector.

In his role as dean of discipline Dismas had a knack for ferreting out the truth. One of his favorite ploys was to have the student look him straight in the eye as he told his story. It usually worked as the "truth will out." Joe Diermeier related the story of "Forgive me, Jesus" in his funeral homily. It happened that a few students came late for chapel. Dismas warned them to let it happen again. But it did. This time Dismas wagged his finger at them and said "Don't let it happen again, Godd*** it. Excuse me, Jesus," as he berated the unlucky students. Nevertheless, the students found him just and fair. To do so he relied on a group of faculty members to judge the more serious infractions.

Dismas never gave up hope on admission to the First Order. With the help of Ron Smith and Myron Kowalski, the Holy See dispensed with the canonical impediment and Dismas was free to apply for acceptance to the First Order. The rescript with the dispensation arrived on the feast of St. Joseph, 19 March 1983.

Dismas was living in the Laurentianum when he received the rescript granting permission to enter the First Order. For his novitiate, the Provincial Council asked him to live with the Brindisi Community, now St. Felix Friary, at Calvary Station. The question was: who would be his novice director. Two former novice directors resided at St. Lawrence Friary: Vianney Thibideau and Elmer Stoffel. Elmer was somewhat miffed that he wasn't chosen; instead, the Provincial Council named Ron Jansch as novice director.

During his novitiate, Dismas slept at St. Felix and continued his work at the seminary. He made the daily commute back and forth every day.

On Saturday mornings, for about two hours, Ron and Dismas huddled for a conference. Ron had copied articles from the *Round Table* on various topics: Capuchin history, the vows and the saintly friars of the order. Following the sessions on Capuchin life, Dismas ordinarily went to confession. Since Dismas had already lived the Capuchin life for 27 years, it was easy and more of a review of life.

His evaluation of 25 February 1984 by the Brindisi Community turned out very positive. The friars lauded him for his love of the fraternity; his faithfulness to community life; his prayerfulness; his care of the chapel. "We really believe that he exemplifies our life in a warm and human fashion, has a great interest in the order...we are convinced that it would only be improved by a formal commitment to our life." It was signed by Paul Courchaine, Michael Gaffney, Peter Kutch.

Dismas' simple profession for three years was held on 18 April 1984, accepted by Ron Smith, provincial minister. It was witnessed by Jerome Campbell and Peter Stierman. (Note: The Provincial Council shortened the novitiate by two weeks.)

In a letter dated 19 April 1984, Dismas expressed his joy and gratitude to the provincial. Likewise, he especially thanked Myron Kowalski, who actually got the ball rolling. Shortly thereafter, on 1 May 1984, Dismas transferred back to the seminary to enable his ministry as vice-rector to be more visible and feasible.

His tenure following his novitiate was short-lived. Dismas turned over the reins of his office as vice-rector to Joe Diermeier; however, he remained on the staff and continued to support the new rector, Paul Craig.

Another canonical rule stymied Dismas once more. Ron Smith requested the general curia to shorten Dismas' three year period of temporary vows. Flavio, the General Minister, reported that it was in the best interest of the order that Dismas complete the three years of temporary profession. Flavio cited the new code of canon law. Dismas accepted the General Minister's decision and the three years sped by rapidly.

Dismas continued on the seminary staff, performing a variety of tasks. On 15 September 1990, the Provincial Council selected him to be the vicar to the local minister, Ed Dziedziejko, at St. Lawrence Friary.

With his new job, Dismas moved from the second floor in the Laurentianum to a room in the friary. He was still on the seminary staff, but in a less strenuous capacity. Ultimately, he was granted retirement status and moved to St. Paul Villa and lived out his last days until he died on 29 February 2012.

These are some of the chronological events of his life; but what about his Capuchin Franciscan life? As mentioned earlier, Dismas had a great love for the order, Jesus the King, Mary the Queen, people and God's wonderful creation of the animal kingdom.

Dismas demonstrated by patiently and persistently pursuing his goal to be a full-fledged Capuchin. Furthermore, Dismas spent hours before the Blessed Sacrament either in a chair by a window, or pacing the chapel floor. During his hours of prayer he recited the Chaplet of Mercy. He had read the life of Sister Faustina before she achieved sainthood and became fascinated with her life and her devotion to God's mercy. That's why the second Sunday after Easter meant so much to him. He recalled from scripture that Jesus gave people a second chance. Thus, he called the church "the church of the second chance." God's mercy and forgiveness were frequently on his mind. Dismas lived in the presence of God; so it was his joy that he spent time in the "King's" company.

If the "King" was important, so was his mother. In January 1976 the seminary students, bored because of the ice, snow and cold weather, proceeded to present their grievance to the rector: "We're bored. There's nothing to do." The rector presented the problem to Dismas who came up with the idea of a winter carnival: sports like snow soccer or football, races, and ice or snow sculptures. This would take up the weekend — a whole weekend of fun and entertainment. The last weekend in January was chosen and would be dedicated to Our Lady of the Snows. It began in January 1976 and has continued ever since.

His "Mama," as Dismas called Our Lady, entered his spiritual life in other ways. He was heavy into the *Schönstatt* movement and the Milwaukee members presented him with a shrine which he placed outdoor near the seminary water tower. Often, when he had the time and the urge, he would visit the *Schönstatt* Sisters and shrine in Waukesha, Wisconsin. He called the visits to the shrine "pilgrimages" and made them with Eddie Dziedziejko, another friar and friend. Invariably, on the way home, he had to stop at his favorite restaurant near Holy Hill.

Another apostolate Dismas fostered was his love for the rosary. Friends from Fond du Lac made hundreds of the plastic rosaries, which they presented to Dismas. He, in turn, offered the rosaries to Paul Schmitz, apostolic vicar of Bluefields in Nicaragua to distribute in the missions.

The “King” and “Queen” were important but Dismas, as infirmarian, dedicated his life to the friars like Pacificus Raith, Vitalis Ossusky, Hugo Knappe and to the students. The infirmary in St. Mary Hall was run in military style with efficiency. Dismas’ training as a military nurse put him in good stead.

Like a true Franciscan, Dismas’ gentle spirit had a great love for the animals of God’s creation. One of the first animals Dismas befriended was a baby raccoon, seemingly one who had lost its mother. The year was 1962. Dismas brought the raccoon into the recreation room and allowed it to roam on the friary’s billiard table. Dismas nursed it and eventually gave it away.

His next acquisition was a gerbil, which he kept in his room in the Laurentianum. The antics and playfulness fascinated him. In true Franciscan spirit he found the gerbil another home.

Birds (some type of canary) followed the gerbil. Dismas had a pair of the birds and trained them to fly around his room. On command they lighted on his finger or hand, and obediently returned to their cage. He parted reluctantly with them.

However, the love of his life was his little, white, wooly dog, Rags Ann. Dismas doted on her. She was free to roam and the students loved her and petted her, as she popped out of Dismas’ room while the students changed classes. Unfortunately, after a long life and much joy, Rags Ann succumbed to cancer and was put down. She is buried on the hill. It was a sad day in Dismas’ life.

With his dog’s death, Dismas no longer kept animals. People offered him birds, dogs, hamsters, gerbils, fish. But the love of his life was gone. She was a comfort to him and a sign of God’s love.

However, Rags Ann’s death did not end his love for animals. He nursed a robin whose wing was broken when it crashed into a friary window. He looked after a number of chipmunks. He fed them and was able to approach them. With Dismas retired to Appleton, all the chipmunks also left.

It took many by surprise when Dismas asked to resign as vice-rector and retire from active ministry. He said his time had come to devote himself to his full time ministry of praying for the school and the order...which he did.

The province granted him retirement status on 21 July 2005, his birthday. The Provincial Council, in a letter, hoped that he “will continue to be a very inspirational and positive influence on the St. Lawrence Community.”

Werner Wolf wrote that one of his most difficult tasks was to inform and assist Dismas of his need to transfer to St. Paul Home in Kaukauna. Over the years, the two friars had normal

disagreements. However, they appreciated each other's honesty and spiritual sharing. Dismas was proud of his southern roots. Thus, on the final evening together in his room, "We prayed and cried." At one point Dismas said: "Werner, I know you are right." The two embraced and experienced a profound reconciliation and blessing.

Dismas continued his prayer life at St. Paul Home. Visitors and many of his friends came to see him. In the summer of 2011, while friars David Hirt and Mark Romanowski worked with the retired friars, Dismas journeyed to Calvary to see some of his confreres and members of the seminary staff. At that time he was in a wheel chair and had grown a beard. There was a very happy reunion as the staff and friars surrounded and greeted him.

Dismas grew weaker. On the night before he died, Werner whispered in his ear: "Remember the many processions you led on The Hill and marched Mary and the Blessed Sacrament to the Notre Dame Sisters and through the village. Mary is now preparing you a big procession to lead you into the Kingdom!"

Dismas died on 29 February 2012. Nicole Brady signed the death certificate. Basically, he died of pneumonia and old age.

Dismas' body returned to Mt. Calvary for the evening vigil and the Liturgy of Christian Burial. Between 60 and 80- people turned out for the vigil. Fittingly, the closing hymn was the *Salve Regina*.

Over 200 friends, alumni and friars participated in the funeral liturgy. Present were men and women, old and young, friars, clergy and religious, primarily from *Schönstatt* and the Notre Dame Sisters. Joe Diermeier, a former rector of SLS, preached and recounted a number of stories relating to Dismas' life. After communion, Joseph Perry communicated a very personal message. Bishop Perry had been a student at St. Lawrence where he worked with Dismas. They formed a lasting bond. Later, Joe Perry served in the Milwaukee diocesan chancery, and Dismas told him that one day he would be a bishop...and so it happened. Joe Perry became an auxiliary bishop in the Archdiocese of Chicago.

Following the funeral liturgy, Dismas' body was carried to the courtyard between the chapel and the Laurentianum. In front of St. Lawrence of Brindisi's statue, a veteran chaplain looked on. As kindred spirits war veterans saluted him with military honors. It was a fitting send off for Dismas who had served his God, Mary, his country and flag, as well as the Capuchin Order and St. Lawrence Seminary.

In reflecting on Dismas' life it can be said that it was a life of service to God and country. He concerned himself with his fellow GIs; he nursed the friars and students in their illnesses; he cherished the animals of God's creation. If we want to place an epitaph on Dismas' gravestone, it would be: *he cared!*

— Ron Jansch, OFM Cap.