

# Neerology

Giles Soyka  
1923 - 2010



A defining moment in the life of John Nicholas Soyka (later “Giles”) happened in 1937 when he was fourteen years old. He was a student at Marquette High School in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. In mid-term of his first year he asked his father if he could attend St. Lawrence Seminary at Mt. Calvary, Wisconsin for his sophomore year with a friend whom he had gotten to know at Marquette. John had some vague notions about becoming a priest, but when he made a request to his father he was told that he should first finish high school at Marquette.

John wrote in his pre-Capuchin life history:

*Some weeks later I had a vivid dream one night in which I saw myself in strange school-like surroundings, and one of the teachers was a brown-robed bearded man. It may have been wishful thinking or association of ideas for the priest in my dream resembled the picture of Fr. Stephen Eckert which appeared in the religion text that we used at Marquette. Nevertheless, after that I felt calm and it seemed like a matter of course when a short time later my father called me aside and told me how a friend of his had convinced him that the seminary was the only place for one who wanted to become a priest. The following September 1937 found me and my friend at St. Lawrence Seminary, Mt. Calvary.*

What attracted John to stay at St. Lawrence for the next three years was the family-like atmosphere he found there. The Capuchin teachers who had the most impact on him were George Henssler, Wilfred Bieberstein, and Ephraim Hertle. In fact he liked the school so well that during one summer vacation he could not stay away. He wrote: “With another student from Milwaukee I pedaled my way by bicycle to Mt. Calvary for a visit with the Fathers and to see the Hill of Happiness again.”

While a student at St. Lawrence and always attracted to the religious priesthood, he toured the Trappist Abbey in Dubuque, Iowa with his family one summer. But eventually, the example, the devotion and the happiness of the Capuchins moved him to apply to enter the Capuchins.

John Nicholas Soyka was born on 28 July 1923 of Anthony J. Soyka and Adeline N. Ehr. He was baptized on the following day at St. Francis Church in Milwaukee by Capuchin

Justine Haussmann. He was baptized so soon after his birth because a cousin of his mother who was previously chosen as a sponsor had plans to return home to Duluth, Minnesota.

John was the second of three boys. Daniel Edwin had been born 19 months earlier and Anthony Michael 15 months later. Their father, Anthony was born in Cudahy, Wisconsin and their mother, Adeline in Milwaukee. Anthony entered the U.S. Army when World War I broke out, and he was struck by a piece of shrapnel on a French battlefield. As a result his left arm had to be amputated. Having met each other at Holy Hill previously, Anthony and Adeline married on 21 October 1919 at St. Francis Church, Milwaukee. His father found a job as a clerk in the Seaman Body Corporation, maker of the Nash automobile, and kept it until he retired in 1955.

In second or third grade John began taking piano lessons from the sisters who taught at Holy Angels School. He continued these lessons throughout grade school and, he later wrote, "thus unconsciously shaping the course of my future activities in the seminary and my work as a priest." He further noted that after the family moved near St. Catherine Church, "What stands out vividly in my memory from these years is the privilege I had of serving Mass. All three of us Soykas were broken in as altar boys early and it was not unusual for at least two of us to be on duty in the sanctuary for regular Sunday and weekday appointments."

Giles received the Capuchin habit at St. Felix Friary, Huntington, Indiana as he began his novitiate on 31 August 1941. He summarized the following years this way: "From novitiate through eight years of seminary formation I advanced, assembly line fashion, with my classmates without any serious doubts." He studied philosophy at Mary Immaculate Seminary in Garrison, New York (1942-1946) and theology at St. Anthony Seminary, Marathon, Wisconsin (1946-1950). He was ordained on 12 April 1950.

For the next two years he was assigned to St. Lawrence Seminary at Mt. Calvary to teach music. He wrote: "I profited greatly from my association with Irvin Udulutsch. His liturgical knowledge and expertise prepared me for the liturgical changes of Vatican II." Giles perfected his knowledge and skills in music by being a music student at Alverno College in Milwaukee and then acquiring a B.A. in Liturgical Music at St. Joseph's College in Rensselaer, Indiana. He was trained in piano and organ in both classical and church music. This solidified his favorite activities for relaxation. He wrote: "I didn't always have instruments or time to play for pleasure. But I enjoy listening to choral and instrumental music."

Leaving St. Lawrence Seminary in 1952 he was assigned to be professor of music, history and English for one year at St. Felix Friary in Huntington which had become the house of studies for philosophy students as a result of the division of the province. Before he went to St. Felix he was told that he would be in charge of the music and would teach the novices of the Victory Noll sisters whose mother house was adjacent to the property of St. Felix

Friary. He arrived by train at 9:00 PM on a Sunday. "In my room a note on my desk said: 'Teach these two subjects and be in the classroom tomorrow!'"

Giles remained at St. Felix for two years and then was assigned to be assistant novice director for three years at St. Bonaventure Monastery in Detroit, Michigan and then one year at Sacred Heart Friary in Baraga, Michigan. For the following two years he was chaplain at St. Michael Hospital in Milwaukee while living at St. Elizabeth Friary and St. Francis Friary.

In the fall of 1958 Giles returned to teaching Capuchin students at St. Felix Friary for one year. A cleric friar who was also one of Giles' students later remarked:

*Giles succeeded Carmel Flora as a professor of music at Huntington, not an easy task because of Carmel's charisma and popularity. Giles was of a more reserved and melancholy nature, much better as a kind confessor and spiritual director than as a teacher. He was a dutiful and prepared professor, teaching whatever was assigned to him (including biology without a lab)...*

After that one year, he was sent to the newly constructed St. Mary Seminary at Crown Point, Indiana, where he was a faculty member for twelve years (1959-1971). He continued his post-graduate work and acquired a M.A. in Sacred Studies at St. John University, Collegeville, Minnesota. While at Giles was stationed Crown Point in 1962 his father died.

Later Giles reports that during this time...

*...when I was teaching and acting as registrar at Crown Point and struggling to write a graduation essay for my M.A. a strong desire to pursue eremitical contemplative life overtook me. The provincial told me to arrange a retreat with the hermits. I did. After that retreat a tremendous peace came over me with the clear reassurance that I was to remain a Capuchin – a very obvious answer to my prayer of searching.*

When asked to name some of his favorite people, he wrote that "Gerald Walker was a friendly and understanding brother" – perhaps the provincial who encouraged him to make a retreat with the hermits.

Ken Smits, a student of Giles at Crown Point, wrote:

*As a musician, his previous experience at Calvary with Irvin Udulutsch ensured a continuity of liturgical principles and performance. He chose me as his assistant choir director, a large role because of his frequent absences on help-outs and summer school. I appreciated the free reign he gave me... We numbered between 40 and 60 TTBB voices for some very good liturgical and choral repertoire during those years.*

Another student, Ed Foley, reported:

*As a choir director Giles was very generous in letting me or others direct. He did not seek the spotlight for himself. He knew it was not about him, but it was about the music and the worship that resulted. He was very happy to allow others to do what he normally would do. Giles knew that he had many bright students at that time, and he allowed others to be up front. He was much more concerned about the harmony of the voices than about showing off his own talents.*

It was also reported that Giles “was quiet and unassuming, He developed long standing relationships with some of his students in the order and some who left the order. This is above all a testimony to his capacity to form spiritual relationships.”

In 1968 Provincial Minister Rupert Dorn gave Giles permission to attend a Capuchin music convention in Oxford, England. Rupert also suggested that he should visit Rome, and Assisi. Giles also included Ireland on the same trip. Giles stated of Rupert: “That was brotherly graciousness!” Perhaps that is one of the reasons why he listed Rupert as one of his “favorite people.”

After finishing his ministry at the Capuchin Seminary, Giles returned to chaplaincy work. In 1971 he joined two other Capuchins who lived in a province-owned house in Warren, Michigan and ministered as a chaplain to hospitals and convalescent homes in the Warren-Centerline Vicariate of the Archdiocese of Detroit.

After two years there, he began twelve years of ministry to the Secular Franciscans as their spiritual assistant, residing first at St. Francis Friary in Milwaukee from 1973-1980. One difficulty that confronted him was the burden of hearing priests’ confessions which fell upon him completely when another friar took a leave of absence. In 1980 he moved to nearby St. Fidelis Friary (31<sup>st</sup> Street). During his five years at St. Fidelis he also served as the local vicar of the community. During this time in Milwaukee he was especially happy to be close to his aged mother who was confined to a nursing home and died in 1985.

In 1976 Giles was granted permission to travel to Europe with the Bel Canto Choir of Milwaukee. He sang with the group in Italy at St. Peter’s in Rome, St. Mark’s in Venice, and at Spoleto for the closing of the Festival of Two Worlds. He remarked that this trip included visits to Italy, Austria, Germany, and Switzerland.

In 1985 Giles was sent back to Huntington where he served as chaplain to the Victory Noll Sisters for the next three years and he resided at Ss. Peter and Paul Parish. Again he took up the ministry of spiritual assistant to the Secular Franciscans with the members of St. Charles Fraternity in Fort Wayne, Indiana. He reported that during this time the sisters “made a deep impression on me through their childlike faith and religious practices and their dedication to the elderly and sick sisters.”

Giles reflected that one of the principles of Capuchin life that always meant a lot to him was our contemplative tradition. In August 1988 he was assigned to San Damiano Friary in Madison, Wisconsin to steep himself in this tradition. He had already asked to be involved in the House of Prayer ten years earlier but others were officially appointed. After being assigned he was also appointed local vicar a year later.

Giles was disappointed with the way that he saw the life of contemplation structured at our House of Prayer in Madison. He spent much time researching the history of this provincial effort and the reports from the evaluation meetings. He read materials written by Bernard Haring and Thomas Merton on the history of the house of prayer movement. He also made a retreat at another house of prayer in Texas. In general, he believed that the way that life was being lived at San Damiano had drifted away from the original guidelines established in 1973. He asked the Provincial Council to review those principals and have them reinstated in spirit and practice.

After the provincial minister, Ken Reinhart, visited San Damiano the council decided to appoint a task force to evaluate the house of prayer in light of past goals. The conclusion was that no major changes to the prevailing practices should be undertaken—much to Giles' disappointment.

In his homily for Giles' funeral mass, Provincial Minister John Celichowski suggested that disappointment in the realities of Capuchin life was a frequent theme in Giles' life. John stated:

*In the midst of his work as an assistant novice master, teacher and hospital and convent chaplain, he often struggled to reconcile his dreams with the realities of ministry and community life; and he wasn't shy in sharing those struggles with provincial ministers and vicars in long, heart-felt and sometimes pretty opinionated letters! What he encountered after entering a ministry or joining a community rarely measured up to what he expected.*

John compared Giles to the disciples on the road to Emmaus who were trying to reconcile their dreams of "hoping that he (Jesus) would be the one to redeem Israel" with the reality of his brutal death. In February 1990 Giles was assigned to the front office ministry as counselor and confessor at St. Bonaventure Monastery in Detroit. Reflecting on his experience in this ministry Giles wrote in his autobiographical information form provided by the province:

*All the forms of ministry that I was assigned to were somewhere between tolerable and pleasurable mostly because I never felt completely prepared for them – and they were very varied. However, my last assignment to the front office and confessional ministry at St. Bonaventure was different. It seemed as though my past experiences (confessions of religious and clergy and dealing with 3<sup>rd</sup> Order folks) accumulated to give me self-confidence.*

In August 1993 he officially retired and was assigned to St. Fidelis Friary in Appleton, Wisconsin where he continued to offer ministry to local parishes and sisters' convents.

After he arrived at St. Fidelis the staff noted how often people whom he had met in his previous ministries would write to him and telephone him. Many times these same people wanted him to return to officiate at marriages and baptisms. Occasionally people would send him money for plane fare or plane tickets for his travels to these events. Even when he began to suffer with Alzheimer's Disease friends from Detroit would call to ask how he was doing.

Slowly it became evident that Giles was getting confused. People noticed that he could not recall what time of the day or day of the week it was; but he cooperated with the advice of getting a notebook in which he could write down things that he should remember. He seemed capable, though, of fulfilling some ministerial tasks. However, it was also reported on occasions that he had driven in the wrong direction for help-outs. It once took Giles over four hours to drive home to Appleton from Milwaukee.

Friends from Detroit gave him a new car, a Chevy Cavalier, which he promptly named "chastity" since it was pure white. However, he was able to use the car only a short time before it was decided that he should not be permitted to drive any more.

Conrad Heinen recalls that when he drove Giles to give a day of recollection to the Manitowoc Franciscan Sisters, Giles became very confused about what direction to travel even though he had been there many times before. These "fainting spells" (words that he used for when he became more confused) became more frequent.

Giles, in a letter to the provincial, reported that he had experienced nine such "fainting spells," the most serious happening when he was giving a retreat to the Poor Clare Sisters at Kokomo, Indiana. Conrad Heinen went there to drive him back to Appleton and the sisters reported to Conrad that Giles appeared to be lost in the monastery, entered rooms that he should not have, and had moments of confusion with the sister sacristan. A serious event happened during his Sunday homily when he shouted, "I can't go on this way!" and fainted. A lay nurse was present for the Mass and rushed up to help him. An ambulance was called, and Giles was taken to the hospital. Luckily, Conrad Heinen was also there and he concluded the service for Giles by offering communion to the people attending Mass. Giles was released a few days later to return to St. Fidelis with the diagnosis that he had suffered from minor strokes.

At this time, Giles began to see a doctor at the memory center in Oshkosh, Wisconsin to receive tests to determine how his memory loss was progressing. Eventually tests revealed that the area of his brain known as the hippocampus was shrinking—an indication of the initial stages of Alzheimer's Disease.

The friars at St. Fidelis noted that after Giles learned of his diagnosis he spent a lot of time on the internet to try to understand Alzheimer's, since he wanted to know what was going to happen to him. He wrote to the provincial: "Since I found out the doctor's opinion and their manner of helping me, I'm finding myself more accepting of my situation. ... The medication which I take seems to be very helpful in keeping me in good health and disposition." The friars at St. Fidelis always found Giles to be pleasant to be around, frequently smiling and positive about things.

In 2000 Giles was given permission by Provincial Minister Daniel Fox to travel to Poland with a young friend as a way of celebrating his fiftieth sacerdotal jubilee. This was his third trip to Europe. Giles had stated much earlier that, besides music, travel was one of his favorite activities.

In a letter written on 29 November 2001, Giles told Dan Fox that the discovery at age 78 that he had Alzheimer's was a "block buster." He wrote about some of the helpful medical treatments he had received and he also stated that, "I do not ask for special privileges because I have that detestable disease hanging over my head." In another note that he intended to send to a friend he said: "I'm sure you know that doctors have not come up with a cure for Alzheimer's. I'm not happy when I imagine what can become of me if a cure doesn't show up soon."

In 2002, when Giles attended the provincial chapter at Plymouth, Michigan many friars commented that Giles appeared very confused about how to find his way around the strange buildings, and it was decided that he should be taken back to St. Fidelis before the chapter ended.

By January 2003 it became evident to the staff at St. Fidelis that Giles needed more care than they could provide, so he was moved to the Alzheimer's unit at St. Paul Home in nearby Kaukauna. He seemed to be in good humor when he went, thinking that he was being sent there for ministry. A keyboard was placed in his room for his personal entertainment. On one occasion he provided a piano concert for the staff and residence; but slowly he gave up piano playing.

In 2005 Giles was diagnosed with fluid on his brain, and a shunt was placed in his head to drain the fluid. He showed improvement in balance and memory but only for a short period of time. Giles could feel the implant but he couldn't figure out why it was there. He told some friars, "The Jesuits put something in my head!"

In 2007 Giles needed to be moved from the more active section of the dementia unit to a unit with greater security. He could no longer benefit from the programming that was offered in the former unit. Friars who visited Giles at St. Paul's noted that he always seemed happy and could offer momentary quips in short conversations. When music was played he joined in, occasionally silently directing it with the movements of his hands. By November

2007 he lost his ability to walk and needed to be in a wheel chair. Shortly after that much of his active care was stopped and he received only comfort measures.

At the end of June 2010 Giles suffered a stroke and suffered paralysis on his right side. Mary Hague, the province's director of wellness, noted that when friars would come to visit him and pray with him, his face brightened. After sixteen years of declining health Giles died on Saturday, 3 July 2010 at the age 86. Mary Hague commented, "Giles was a joy to be with even though he had no idea of who or what." His funeral was celebrated at Monte Alverno Retreat and Spirituality Center on 8 July 8, and he was buried in the friars' cemetery at Mt. Calvary.

In his letter to Giles in 1992 Provincial Minister Ken Reinhart congratulated Giles on his fifty years of Capuchin life and recounted the various ministries to which Giles had been assigned over that time. Ken concluded: "It is these contributions and your flexibility over the years in various ministries that have made you a valuable member of the community and a real contributor to the ministry of the church."

— *Perry McDonald*