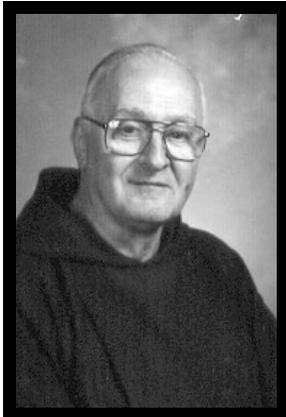


Neerology

Francis Mary Sparacino
1934-2015



One thing Francis Mary never let people forget was his Italian heritage. Garrulous and gregarious, he fulfilled the popular stereotypes, yet like every person born into this world he was also unique. His father, Lawrence Sparacino, born in 1891, was among the countless Italians who emigrated to the United States from Sicily around the turn of the century and eventually came to work at Allis Chalmers in Milwaukee. His mother, Julia Pera, came from a Tuscan family in Lucca that, according to Francis Mary, had known St. Gemma Galgani. His mother was a dressmaker, and if there is such a thing as a gene for tailoring, she must have transmitted it to her son.

Francis Mary, the oldest of three boys, was born January 25, 1934. He was baptized Anthony Lawrence at the “little pink church” of Our Lady of Pompeii in Milwaukee’s Third Ward. This church, home to the city’s Italian immigrants, was the same church where his parents had been married in 1932. The following year a mission outpost, St. Rita, was established for Italians on the East Side, and it became the parish of the Sparacinos, who lived on Holton Street.

The second son, Andrew, was born in 1936; the youngest, Raymond, was born in 1938. Like his oldest brother, Raymond would enter the Capuchins, but he stayed only a short time and later joined the Augustinians, keeping his religious name, Lawrence. The two brothers, Capuchin and Augustinian, always remained close to each other.

In 1940, Francis Mary’s parents enrolled him in the recently established Saint Rita Grade School. Since it was an Italian parish, the student body naturally consisted of a large number of Italian-American pupils. From the very beginning, the Sisters of St. Joan Antida had cared for the needs of the parish children and by 1937 were operating a school. Francis Mary recalls that Italian was among the subjects taught by the sisters, many of whom were Italian-Americans themselves. Francis Mary graduated from eighth grade in 1949; he never attended high school.

Not far from Saint Rita’s lay the neighboring parish, built to serve some of Milwaukee’s many German-speaking Catholics. The church was dedicated to St. Francis of Assisi and was staffed by the Capuchins. It is not known just how Francis Mary first became acquainted with the friars at St. Francis, but it turned out to be a major event in his life, as he himself attests. Interestingly, the names he singles out for mention were all lay friars: Bertram Grismer, Conrad Hermann and

Lawrence Rouse. He says that Lawrence, who was porter at St. Francis at the time, was a special source of inspiration in the growth of his vocation.

On May 12, 1949, Anthony Sparacino applied for admission to the Capuchin Order as a lay friar candidate. Although he writes that he had been thinking of religious life since the age of three, it is nonetheless amazing to think that he was still only fifteen years old. His reasons for wanting to become a Capuchin are the standard reasons of the time: to save his soul, to become a saint and to pray for others. In a letter of recommendation, the pastor of St. Rita's commends the boy for his fidelity to the church and his regular and frequent reception of the sacraments.

Young Anthony was received as a candidate and invested with the Third Order habit in September 1949. Provincial practice at the time was to maintain separate novitiates for cleric and lay friar candidates, and so it was at the lay friars' novitiate, in Detroit, that Anthony was received. Cosmas Niedhammer was the novice director. Because of his age, Anthony could not be officially invested as a novice until March 1951. This was because, according to Canon Law, he would need to be at least twenty-one years old at the time of his first profession. From now on he would officially be known as Brother Francis Mary of Milwaukee. Neither of the other two novices invested with him remained in the order, and his novice director left to go East after the division of the province in 1952. On March 19 of that year Francis Mary made his first profession as a Capuchin.

According to custom of the time, newly professed lay friars were sent for additional formation to the so-called professorium. This formation program was situated in one of the clericates or novitiates. There, under the supervision of a priest director, they were given classes in Capuchin and religious life and, equally important, training and practice in the various ministries performed by the lay friars. Thus it was that Francis Mary's first years were spent as tailor, cook and baker at Marathon, Baraga and Huntington.

Those who were cleric novices in the late 1950s remember his cooking skills, which were sometimes expressed in Italian dishes such as pan pizza, still something of a novelty at the time. And on fast days they were sometimes greeted with large trays of baked halibut, accompanied by a bread-and-onion dressing. Later, Francis Mary was one of several lay friars who spent time with the Carmelites in order to learn more about preparing fish. Always open to acquiring new skills, he willingly built upon his already budding talents.

Since Francis Mary enjoyed good food, it is no surprise that he continued to cook as a hobby throughout most of his life. Even when tailoring took up nearly all his time, he would still prepare an occasional Italian meal for the local community, complete with sausage, spaghetti and spumoni for dessert. One friar tells how, after one such meal, he went back to the kitchen to see if there was any left-over ice cream, only to find that Francis Mary had packed it up and taken it home with him. Another of his favorite Italian specialties was pizzelle, waffle-like anise-flavored cookies that he gave as gifts to friends and benefactors. Nor was this Italian cook above charming a certain superior, who was of German background, by preparing the latter's

favorite meal of sauerkraut and spareribs, all in an attempt to persuade him to grant evening recreation. Another friar, pastor of a small parish and living alone, would be visited each summer by Francis Mary, who would cook for him and restock his freezer with meals for the months ahead. Blessed with an exceptional culinary talent that he willingly shared, Francis Mary stands out among the many cooks who have served the province.

If one of the corporal works of mercy is to feed the hungry, another is to clothe the naked, Francis Mary is remembered above all for his ministry of sewing and tailoring. It began with his appointment as provincial tailor at Huntington in 1965 and ended twenty-one years later at Mt. Calvary, where the provincial tailor shop had been moved when Huntington closed. As provincial tailor Francis Mary made over 7600 habits, a record that will probably never be matched. During that time, not a single member of the province who wore the habit remained untouched by his work. Nor was his habit making limited to the members of St. Joseph Province, for at one time or another he also made habits for Capuchin provinces that had no provincial tailor of their own. Indeed, he once complained that the habit worn by another province was of a different style and cut, but no doubt he got it right, no matter what the particular specifications. His native skill coupled with his years of experience resulted in habits that were perfectly sewn down to the last stitch. From taking a novice's first measurements to hemming the finished product, Francis Mary's preferred system was one of mass production. He seldom, if ever, made just a single habit at a time. There always seemed to be at least a dozen unfinished habits hanging on the rack in the tailor shop, and the table would be stacked with cowls, sleeves and pockets in various stages of completion.

The provincial tailor's task was not only to furnish the habit, but also the cord. The famous cord machine was a Rube Goldberg contraption, said to have been invented years before by Berthold Ascher. Consisting of pulleys, spindles, shuttles and weights, it had been machined and crafted largely by hand, a situation that made repairs or replacements always difficult. Francis Mary understood it perfectly. It was a noisy contraption and would compete with the music he always had playing in the background while he worked. When he was running it, he never sat still for more than five minutes, constantly checking to replace an empty spool or make sure that the yarns were not becoming tangled or knotted. He was rightly proud of the cord machine and treated it with kid gloves, always glad to show it off to visitors who happened to drop by the shop. Generous when it came to making habits for other provinces, Francis Mary was also generous in providing them with needed cord. Nor were groups of sisters excluded, especially the Poor Clares. Friars and nuns who had been reduced to using cheap cotton clothesline, were delighted with this strong and stout cord made of white wool. By the time he retired as provincial tailor in 1985, he had stockpiled enough rolls of cord that his successor never had to operate the cord machine again.

Francis Mary often delivered his habits and cords in person, especially in the early days. From time to time he would visit the Poor Clares in Kokomo, Indiana, where he loved to hold court, regaling them with story after story about himself. Then, on the way home, he would complain about how exhausted he was, that the nuns tired him out from all the talking he had to do. Yet

those who were with him in the car could see no signs of tiredness; he continued to talk all the way home.

Being a tailor, he was perhaps more aware than others of clothes and fashions. This, coupled with his talkativeness and tendency to say exactly what was on his mind, could lead to humorous situations. Once, when he was with three young friars at the mall, they were walking by a store that displayed women's fur coats. With his booming voice, Francis Mary said, "I wouldn't be caught dead in something like that!" Some women, who happened to be walking by, heard him, and the look on their face was priceless. His companions could not stop laughing for a whole hour after this incident.

Though it may be hard to imagine, habits and cords were not the only products of Francis Mary's sartorial skills. He took a course in tailoring and learned how to tackle such challenges as making men's trousers. Over the years he also made countless quilts for friends and benefactors. These were sometimes original designs and might include Italian motifs, for example, a green boot-shaped map of Italy in the center, surrounded by decorative designs in red and white. During the off-season for habit making, he set up his quilting frame at one end of the tailor shop.

After more than a dozen years in this ministry, Francis Mary began to explore other possibilities. A letter to the Provincial Council, dated June 13, 1978, begins with a one-line statement, "I hereby volunteer for ministry in Australia." He was becoming a bit tired of tailoring, he says, especially since he worked alone. Now he wanted to engage in a more direct ministry to people. The Australian Province had been looking for help, especially with their formation program, and a few friars from St. Joseph Province were already there. Given the large number of Italian immigrants in Australia, Francis Mary felt that his ability to speak the language fluently would be a great asset. He was also exploring the possibility of working in the Vice Province of Central Canada, in the Downsview area of Toronto, where there were also many Italian immigrants.

By the end of the year, however, his hopes for a change in ministry had vanished. Writing to the Canadian vice provincial, Francis Mary apologetically explains why he could not accept ministry at the Downview parish. He was concerned that fraternal life in such a setting would not be sufficient for his needs. Moreover, since his father's death his mother had become more dependent on him for moral support (although in the end she lived another eight years). Finally, and most interestingly, Francis Mary writes that he has 52 customers on his list who are depending on him for cord. This was a commitment he felt he absolutely must honor.

There were a few other brief assignments after that, but it was not until six years later, in 1984, that Francis Mary finally retired from making habits and cords. After enjoying a well-deserved sabbatical, he was sent to Appleton in 1985. Save for the three years (1992-1995) he spent as cook and member of the parish staff at St. Patrick's in St. Paul, he would remain in Appleton the rest of his life. For the first six years he was part of the parish staff at St. Joseph's. At the same

time, he had always been interested in working with the elderly, and so in January, 1991, he volunteered to be part of the staff at St. Fidelis, the new residence for senior friars in Appleton. Six years at St. Joseph's, he said, was long enough, and the new type of community and ministry appealed to him. He could drive the senior friars to their appointments, shop for the community, do occasional baking and perhaps even put in a small vegetable garden. He had been a member of the Senior Life Committee that year and was commended by the Provincial Council for his valuable service. But life in Appleton was becoming increasingly difficult, and in September 1992, he was officially reassigned to St. Paul. This move, complicated and seemingly unexpected, caused him considerable pain.

Upon his return to Appleton in 1995, Francis Mary was given permission by the Provincial Council to live alone. He rented an apartment in Menasha and soon got himself a job as bagger at a local Copps Food Center. He had just turned sixty-one, and for an Italian who loved to talk and be around people this was a big change. Yet this simple job became a ministry for him, his friendly banter adding a note of cheer to the thousands of customers he served over the course of the next nine years. He was also able to continue his outreach to seniors by forming a small sewing circle, teaching the members how to make small craft items, which had always been one of his hobbies. He enjoyed his apartment in Menasha and was sad when he realized that the time had come to give it up.

Francis Mary suffered from diabetes, and by 2004 his health was such that he asked to be transferred to St. Fidelis. It would be his last assignment. He was now seventy years old and officially eligible for retirement. Being in a larger community helped to satisfy his natural love for being around people, which had always one of his characteristic traits. When his need for care eventually become too great for him to remain at St. Fidelis, he was moved to St. Paul Home in Kaukauna, where a number of other infirm friars also resided. An old friend who came to visit him there remarked that although his movement and speech had now become much slower, he still had the charm that his friend remembered from when they first met.

Increasing restrictions along with the complications of diabetes had taken their toll, and in April 2014 doctors decided to amputate a toe and place a stent in his leg in an attempt to improve the circulation. Eight months later he entered hospice care and died a few days later, January 19, 2015, less than a week before his 81st birthday. Francis Mary left no specific funeral requests, just whatever the community wanted to do. His simple funeral was held in Appleton, and he was buried in the friars' plot in St. Joseph Cemetery. His life and ministry had been that of what was called the traditional lay brother. Once, when asked what he would like to be said about him, he wrote: "That I tried in whatever work I was given—that's all that God expects."

—Edward Hagman