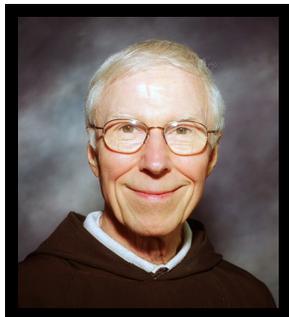


# Neerology

## Ellis Zimmer

1929 - 2011



James J. Zimmer was born in Menasha, Wisconsin, on 24 June 24, 1929, the third child of Jacob Zimmer and Edith Mary Schwalen. Jacob was an inspector in the repair shop at a Ford dealership.

The following year the family moved to DePere, Wisconsin for a two-year stint and then to Appleton in 1932, where James attended Saint Joseph Parish Grade School. The members of his family were a great influence on him, and he treasured his relationship with them to the end of his life. His father was widely known as a punster and a collector of jokes. He was also known for his deep practical spirituality. Years later, Ellis would repeat the story of his family's walking home from midnight Mass at Saint Joseph Parish and meeting a poor man, possibly homeless. Ellis's father invited the man to come home with the family and gave him something to eat and a place to sleep.

James accompanied his father to the daily 5:30 morning Mass at Saint Joseph Parish. When he was in 6th grade, he said to his brother, "I'm going to be a priest and a Capuchin. I can do that."

His high school years were spent at Saint Lawrence College from 1943-1947. Even as a high school student, he was renowned for his singing voice. During the summer James was employed as a sign painter and then as a laborer in the Wisconsin Wire Works Company.

James was invested with the Capuchin habit on 21 August 1947 at Saint Felix Friary in Huntington, Indiana and was given the name Ellis. On 1 September 1948 he made his simple profession and moved with the rest of his class to Mary Immaculate Seminary in Garrison NY, where he studied philosophy from September 1948 to July 1952. Then he went on to the study of theology at Saint Anthony Friary in Marathon, Wisconsin from July 1952 to June 1956. He was ordained on 8 September 1955. Throughout his years in high school and college and as a theology student he was known for his singing voice

and for his prowess in make-up games of football and basketball, the latter because of his quickness.

His first assignment after completing the study of theology was as teacher and disciplinarian at Saint Francis Brothers' School in Calvary Station from June 1956 to June 1957. From there he was assigned as retreat master to Saint Lawrence Retreat House, later named Saint Clair Retreat, in Saint Clair, Michigan from August 1957 to June 1959. He then spent a year as an assistant pastor of Saint Benedict the Moor Parish in Milwaukee before being assigned to Saint Bonaventure Friary in Detroit as a chaplain for six months. In September, 1960, he was transferred to Saint Fidelis Friary, Marquette, Michigan where he served as hospital chaplain and Third Order director for three years. During this time he earned a master of arts degree from Northern Michigan University. He also taught at Bishop Baraga Central High School.

In June 1963 Ellis began a seven-year assignment at Saint Anthony Friary in Marathon, where he served successively as lector, registrar, and dean of studies. During his years on the faculty at Saint Anthony's in Marathon, he earned another master's degree from Catholic University of America, presumably during the summers. He was a good student. He knew he was not good at teaching, and his students often felt tortured in his lectures. They in turn could sense how tortured he felt giving the lectures! At one point he told the students that they could have the option to attend his lectures or simply to read the material and submit a paper on the topic. No one showed up for the next class.

He returned to the ministry of preaching, a ministry with which he felt more comfortable, with a three-month assignment as assistant retreat master at Queen of Angels Retreat House in Saginaw, Michigan.

In 1970 the theology program at Saint Anthony Friary in Marathon was phased-out. The theology students began taking their courses at Saint Francis De Sales Seminary in Milwaukee. Those in the last year of their studies moved to Capuchin College in Washington DC. Ellis accompanied them from January to May 1971. He is listed as one of their professors. His chore – *and it was for him a chore* – of teaching continued from September 1971 to June 1973 at Saint Mary Seminary, Crown Point, Indiana, where he served as professor and registrar.

Finally relieved of the office of teaching, Ellis was assigned as superior and director of Monte Alverno Retreat Center in Appleton in June 1973. He held those positions until September 1975.

He was granted a sabbatical from September 1975 to July 1976, which he spent in hermitages in Madonna House in Combermere, Ontario, the Benedictine community in Pecos, New Mexico, the Spiritual Life Institute in Sedona, Arizona, and Shantivanam near Easton, Kansas. He wrote to Lloyd Thiel, the provincial minister, "I've wanted for some years to explore and experience a life-style that is committed to a radical simplicity and poverty. I have chosen places for my sabbatical where this is found, in a combination of community and eremitical settings. The hermitage, at least in a limited way can, I believe, say something very special to our Capuchin way of life." He supported himself during his sabbatical year with Mass stipends and by giving some sisters' retreats.

After his sabbatical, he returned to Monte Alverno Retreat Center, where from October 1976 to June 1981 he served as superior, business manager and retreat master. In 1978 he oversaw the building of a hermitage on the property. The project was completed with the help of his brother, Dan, and many other volunteers. The province publication *KIT* for February 1979 reported: "One by one various contractors and benefactors came forth to offer their time and/or materials *gratis*." The project cost the province nothing.

In May 1980, he joined a group of friars of the province on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land and to Franciscan spots in Italy. He recorded daily both the events of the days and his thoughts in a journal which he typed in 64 pages when he returned to Appleton. The thoughts and sentiments in those 64 pages give what is probably the greatest insight we have into the person, Ellis Zimmer. They include his wish for more time to reflect during the rather hectic tour – "eleven hotels in twenty-five days." Several times Ellis separated himself from the group and ate an evening meal in a café by himself, just so he could have time to contemplate what he was experiencing.

Another experience evident in the journal is Ellis' manner of engaging the people he encountered. He was especially sympathetic to the Palestinians he met in the Holy Land and saddened by the tension he experienced between them and the Israelis. He reported conversations he had with people on trains, in cafes, in the streets, on the plane. He found engaging even the children he encountered hawking merchandise in the Holy Land. His companions told him he was a "soft touch" for the children.

His singing abilities found an outlet in his preaching. In the middle of a talk he would sometimes say, "That reminds me of a song," and he would bring out his guitar and sing the song which had come to mind. He made several tapes of his singing and guitar playing. At the time of his death in 2011, some people still asked if there were any of those tapes available for purchase.

Beginning in June 1981 he was relieved of the offices he held at Monte Alverno, and while remaining a member community he began to live in the hermitage. He took up the work of an itinerant preacher until October 1983. During 1983, Ellis spent a great deal of his time on the road and in caring for his family, to which he had always been very much attached. His father was suffering from dementia, and Ellis was concerned about him and his mother. His absence from the community caused some consternation within the community. In October 1983 he moved to the Franciscan House of Prayer in Cedar Lake, Indiana, where he remained until July 1985. He lived there as a hermit with occasional forays into the public as an itinerant preacher, primarily to women religious.

He left the Franciscan House of Prayer and moved to the province's house of prayer, San Damiano Friary in Madison, Wisconsin, where he spent a year. In July 1986 he moved to the Dwelling Place in Milwaukee, where for five years he helped provide retreats for the poor of that city, as well as for those who worked with the poor. During his time at Dwelling Place, he had the first of two angioplasty procedures; the second occurred in 1996.

Because of his work in giving retreats and as an itinerant preacher, understanding spirituality came to be very important to him. From the Dwelling Place in Milwaukee, he moved to Saint Charles Parish Community in Detroit, where from September 1991 to August 1996 he engaged in retreat ministry as an itinerant preacher and served as a chaplain and dishwasher at the Capuchin Soup Kitchen. He prepared for those ministries by spending a stint of three months in Christiana House Hermitages in Pevely, Missouri.

If the word "flit" can be used without a pejorative connotation, it could be said of Ellis that he would flit from one ministry to another, sometimes at rather short intervals. He did so with the grace of a song bird flying in a summer breeze from the branch of one tree to that of another, apparently effortlessly. While willingly accepting the assignments he was given by his superiors, he seems always to have gravitated toward the contemplative dimension of Capuchin life, as exemplified by his occasional forays into time spent in houses of prayer, chaplaincies to contemplative groups of women religious, and the building of the hermitage at Monte Alverno. He seems to have excelled at the ministry of preaching. Whether or not he excelled at his other assignments, he was faithful to them all. And he was grateful for them all. He wrote on 18 May 1980: "For the way you have led me, Lord, in various ministries: much gratitude."

In September 1996, Ellis moved back to Monte Alverno, not as the director or retreat master, but to reside in the hermitage. Later he wrote of the experience: "I quickly found it to be a place readily embracing the deeper instincts of my being."

Because of his bouts with heart trouble he followed a very strict dietary regimen, practically eliminating the consumption of fat of any kind. He would walk from the hermitage to the kitchen in the retreat center and carry his meal on a tray back to the hermitage. On occasion he would share a meal with the rest of the community. He also contributed to retreats by helping with dishes and resetting the tables. He continued to reside in that hermitage until he retired in August 2005 and moved to Saint Fidelis Friary. During his hermitage years he did some itinerant preaching, and served as chaplain to a contemplative community of Trinitarians of Mary in Mexico from November 1999 to January 2000. He had a large clientele for spiritual direction as well.

Ellis began to show signs of Alzheimer's disease in his last years at Monte Alverno. The disease progressed until in November 2005 it was necessary for him to stop living in his beloved hermitage and move to Saint Fidelis Friary. Almost daily he walked from Saint Fidelis to spend time in the hermitage. He was advised to discontinue doing spiritual direction, which he did. However, he continued to carry on a correspondence with some of his clients. He showed some of those letters to Mary Hague (Wellness director) prior to sending them, and they were remarkably coherent and inspiring. He continued to reside at Saint Fidelis until his progressive dementia made it impossible for him to survive without constant supervision. In March 2010, he moved to Saint Paul Elder Care in Kaukauna, where he died on 3 January 2011.

The constant, at least in his later life, was a quest for a deeper understanding of spirituality, both for himself and to have something to share with others. This led him to explore many spiritual traditions other than Christian ones. Spirituality had become his specialty.

A classmate from his cleric days remembers Ellis as "a cut above" because of his humility and gentleness. "Ellis had the heart of a poet, and, indeed, seemed to express so much of his romantic/idealistic-but real spirituality in lyric words and song." This description of him as a student became ever truer of him throughout his life. In the mid-1990s he wrote a 12-page essay which he titled *Hermitage Life at Monte Alverno*. Lyrical, romantic, idealistic but real it is; and so insightful into the beauty and benefit of solitude.

His cleric classmate wrote of him in his younger days, "He was a joyful contemplative." That remained a fitting description of him throughout his life. If

inwardly he ever felt sad or frustrated or troubled, his face seemed seldom to have gotten the message; his smile was almost constant.

— Keith Clark