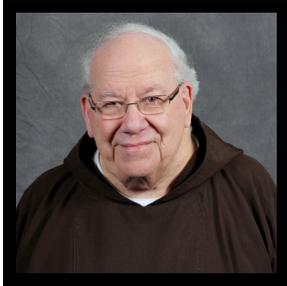


Neerology

Pius Cotter
1928 - 2018



Our brother, Pius Cotter died on March 3, 2018. He was 89 years old. He died because of cancers which caused him immense pain, though he died in peace early in the morning at 3:45. His sister Ann, a friend, and friars who were with him when he died, report that his eyes opened wide, his arms went up, and he seemed to behold his heavenly hosts; and he peacefully breathed his last.

At one point Pius had asked God to allow him to have more pain in his life (before he had a clue that he had cancer). He felt like he had not suffered enough physically in his life; and God answered his prayer almost immediately!

Pius was firm in his commitment to redemptive suffering. He prayed for the ability to suffer for the love of Jesus Christ and with the sufferings of Jesus the Crucified. He was faithful to that purpose and mission during the final years of his life especially. But it was not a new idea for his last years; it was a lifelong commitment. Suffering had meaning for him. He sensed how, when he embraced sufferings, it benefitted the entire Body of Christ and the world.

Pius was someone who very much believed in the intercessions of Solanus Casey. He was a friar who not only lived with Solanus, but considered him a friend. In fact, Solanus was a mentor to him. One can see the connections between them: both of them served as porters in our Capuchin communities, and worked together as porters. Pius was a lay friar; Solanus was a simplex priest. Pius was a faithful porter, even though this duty pulled him away from community prayers at times, which he found difficult. Yet he was committed to God's designs and plans for him. "Blessed be God in all of His Designs." So he spent many years as a lay friar serving as porter in our friaries, especially St. Francis Friary in Milwaukee for 24 years. He was with Solanus in Detroit at St. Bonaventure's and in Huntington, Indiana, at St. Felix Friary. He worked with Solanus for five and half years. He also served as a local minister in Milwaukee and assisted in parish ministry as a deacon.

One of the things he learned from Solanus was "to thank God ahead of time for all the things God is going to give you." Once Pius asked Solanus why he said that, and he told Pius it was "a way to put God on the spot." In all ways having confidence in God and his divine loving providence was a core belief that sustained Pius through the years.

I noticed in talking with staff here at St. Fidelis Friary that one of the things they appreciated about Pius was his down to earth and simple way of explaining our Catholic faith. It was, I believe, something he learned from Solanus: to be always humble and simple in living the faith and witnessing to one's faith. In the hours I spent with Pius, I immediately learned that Solanus was constantly in his thoughts and certainly in his intercessions.

Pius seemed at times, in faith, to have an idea to whom he was offering up his cancer pain.

Pius wanted to suffer with Christ. He was reluctant at first to seek pain relief with anything besides Tylenol. He learned that the intense pains across his whole abdominal area required more than that, and eventually allowed stronger pain medications. Still he was very committed to suffering with the Crucified Jesus and remained faithful to that goal to the end. He was a good student of Solanus.

In his final weeks he had less pain, physically. Just the weakness and fatigue common to those suffering from cancer. It was hard to tell, in the final week or so, how conscious he was. Yet there was an experience a number of us had on the day before he died. We all realized that he was not going to make it to celebrate St. Patrick's feast day on March 17. So on the afternoon of March 2, Nurse Alisha planned an informal St. Patrick's feast day celebration right in his room. Pius was alert enough to inform us that there was a bottle of Jamison's Irish Whiskey in one of the cabinets. So with Irish music playing, especially "Danny Boy," we toasted Pius' Irish heritage (so dear to him), and Pius was alert to all that was going on in the room, and even took a tiny sip of the beverage. After the music died down, Pius went back to his usual calm and peaceful demeanor, his eyes barely open.

After many years serving as a lay friar, Pius was ordained in 1988. He was already a deacon when he began his seminary studies. He therefore was able to preach to his classmates in the seminary. Preaching and hearing confessions were two loves of his life. We enjoyed his homilies here at St. Fidelis Friary in the later months of his life when he still had the energy. Pius served the diocese of Green Bay in a number of parishes; he served longest at St. Francis and St. Mary Church in Brussels, WI. Pius was very fond of talking about his years at Brussels, in the middle of the Belgian community. And the people grew fond of him, judging from the numbers who visited him in his final illness and those who came to his funeral at St. Joseph Parish in Appleton by chartered bus. His was a listening ear and a loving heart. He was dedicated to the poor and suffering in his parish. He was always happy to serve his people with communion, the Sacrament of the Sick, confession and at the end of life, the apostolic blessing.

We made sure that he received the apostolic blessing in his final days, along with all the other prayers that brought comfort and peace to Pius. Friars prayed the Office with him in his room where he received communion each day as well. Many rosaries were prayed and chaplets of Divine Mercy too. Pius joined in as he was able; some days he had no energy or strength. He listened attentively as best he could.

Pius had the dream of being an ordained priest all of his life. As a child at St. Mary's parish here in Appleton (Pius always treasured his years at St. Mary's) Pius already had the idea and inspiration to become a priest. Somehow that dream was deferred. Because Pius was committed to listening to the Holy Spirit and always seeking God's will as it was revealed to him in prayer, spiritual direction, reading, and the circumstances of his life, he decided to go Detroit for the formation one received for the lay friars in those days. Solanus met him at the door and invited him into the friary for "cookies and milk." He came to treasure his many years as a lay friar in the province, along with his lifelong friendship and fellow traveler, Leo Wollenweber. Many years later he was ordained a priest, especially serving God's people in parishes. Leo was in complete support of his ordination to the priesthood.

At age 85 he made the difficult decision to retire from ministry, and later the decision to no longer offer liturgy, as his energies and his physical weakness made offering Mass impossible. He served as a priest for 30 years.

I felt honored to get to know our brother Pius in his later time of life, and his family too. He was grateful for the care given him by hospice people, always attentive to his needs and working so well in coordination with our staff here at St. Fidelis, especially our hard working nurses.

Our brother Pius is buried in St Joseph Cemetery, Appleton, WI.

~ Ronald Smith