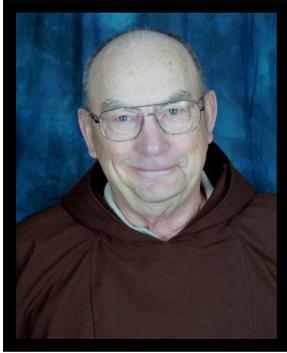


# Neerology

Bertin Samsa  
1930-2018



Bertin (Lawrence Patrick) Samsa was born on 12 November 1930 to John Patrick Samsa and Leona Delores DuRocher in Kingsford Heights, Michigan, the fourth child of a family of six (Lavern, Donald, Veronica, John and Margaret).

Our family was of moderate means, never lacking in the essentials of life, but like most middle class families of the time, always making sacrifices and cutting corners to make ends meet. Our father was employed as a foreman at the Ford Motor Company in Kingsford, Michigan until his retirement in 1955. Our mother dedicated her life to homemaking, and only later in life, after our father's retirement, did she seek out employment to help with the meager retirement benefits that he was receiving. She became the "Doughnut Queen," making doughnuts at Kresge's Five & Dime Store in downtown Iron Mountain, Michigan. The "crippled doughnuts" always came home with mother to the Samsa household.

Lawrence had a normal childhood upbringing, having very devout parents who instilled Catholic values and traditions in the home. And church was a big part of Lawrence's life, often attending daily morning Mass with his father before going to school. At an early age, Lawrence entered the ranks of "altar boy" with the rest of the neighborhood Catholic gang. I remember — to my mother's embarrassment — how, on several occasions, she witnessed Lawrence serving on the altar with his hair all messed up and sticking up in back.

Lawrence was a product of public school education, receiving minimal catechism instructions from the pious ladies in the parish and from some nuns who would come for two weeks every summer for summer school, robbing us of our precious vacation time.

Lawrence was quite sickly as a child. On the occasion of his ordination to the priesthood, my mother writes: "I still remember when you were a baby and very sick. I prayed all night for God not to take you away from me, and now he took you anyway and I am very proud of that. I pray now that he will keep you."

Lawrence also had a bout with rheumatic fever when he was a youngster. It left him with a very weak eye. As a result, he had to wear a patch over his good eye to strengthen his weak eye. When he went out to play the patch covered his good eye until he rounded the corner from the house and then it came off for the rest of the day until he got a block away from the house upon his return. In no way was he going to become known as the one-eyed "pirate" in the gang.

My brother Lawrence was never very active or well-coordinated in sports, maybe because of his vision problems. He was more of a tinker, an inventor, and always fixing things, even if they weren't broken. Whenever he got something new, a toy or fishing reel, whatever, he always had

to take it apart first to see how it worked. "If it is not broke, don't fix it" was not a rule that he lived by.

Lawrence was always an avid reader. He loved reading the *National Geographic* magazine while growing up and dreamt of traveling the world as a photographer. Part of his dream did eventually become true. Although he did not become a photographer for *National Geographic*, his ministry in Saudi Arabia — as well as his career as a military chaplain for 24 years — brought him to the far reaches of the world.

Lawrence was sort of a leader in the neighborhood gang, along with his good friend Jack Chartier. Growing up during the years of World War II, we played war games more than sports. Lawrence and his buddy Jack, of course, were the generals and the rest of us were privates doing their bidding.

I remember one of their crazy adventures was to attack the camp of the neighboring gang in the Ford Woods. The plan was to burn them out. Lawrence concocted a Molotov cocktail, which consisted of a bottle filled with kerosene with a rag stuffed into it to serve as a wick. He launched the bomb onto the roof of the camp as we all fled the scene when it burst into flames.

When my father came home from work that afternoon he said that some crazy kids set the Ford Woods on fire, and factory service from the Ford Motor Company had to rush to the scene to put it out, and if they ever catch those kids they are going to get a severe punishment. Lawrence agreed with every word his father said.

As eighth grade was coming to a close, the pastor was sending some boys to St. Lawrence Seminary at Mt. Calvary, WI. He asked Lawrence if he would also like to go to the seminary. Lawrence said: "Why not" and decided to give it a try.

When the report cards started arriving at home to be signed by the parents, my mother began to wonder what the remark "disorderly" meant that was always printed in bold red ink on his report card. When she finally got around to asking Lawrence, he replied that was because he was not neat and did not always make his bed. Mother believed him because she knew that he was not neat and did not like making up his bed. Little did she realize that the "disorderly" remark referred to his general misconduct and not to his lack of neatness.

Upon graduation from St. Lawrence Seminary High School in 1948, Lawrence decided to join the Capuchin Order. "I liked their spirit," he said. "I read an awful lot about St. Francis while at St. Lawrence Seminary and I got this idea I wanted to be a Capuchin".

Lawrence entered the Capuchin novitiate and was invested in the Capuchin habit on 31 August 1948, and was given the religious name Bertin. The following year he made profession of his simple vows on 1 September 1949. He made his final vows on 1 September 1952 and was ordained to the priesthood in Marathon, WI. on 10 October 1956.

Bertin's first assignment as a newly ordained priest was as associate pastor at St. Joseph Church in Appleton, WI. After three years in this position and enjoying some success in organizing the CYO youth group of the parish, the provincial minister, Gerald Walker, asked Bertin to assist in working with the youth in the Montana Indian Mission.

In Montana, Bert — as he was affectionately called now — was stationed at the St. Labre Cheyenne Mission in Ashland, about 150 miles from Billings. As Bert recalls his time spent in Montana, he said: “Montana was beautiful country, lots of fresh air and no pollution out there. We lived on the reservation and I taught school for a while and drove the school bus.” Bert recalled also how he helped build the plastic factory so the people who lived on the reservation could make a living for themselves. “The factory we built put people to work and got a lot of people started and they did well.” Bert continued: “The people on the reservation lived in little houses that had electricity but no indoor toilets. Somebody came by one time to visit and said, ‘How come they all have phone booths by their houses.’ We got a good laugh out of that.”

After ministering three years in the Montana Indian Missions, Bert’s next big assignment came in 1963 when he was assigned to the oil fields of Saudi Arabia where he spent the next seven years ministering to the spiritual needs of the families of the workers for the Aramco oil company.

He especially enjoyed the experience of working among the many different nationalities and cultures working for the oil company, and the opportunity to serve as their spiritual guide on pilgrimages to the shrines of Europe and the Holy Land. A high point during Bertin’s time in Saudi Arabia was when his mother spent an entire year with him now that she was alone and a widow. This was a time of great bonding between the two of them.

Bert’s ministry in Saudi Arabia prepared him for his next great adventure in life which was a 24 year stint as an army chaplain. The early 70s found Bertin serving a one year tour of duty in Vietnam. He said of his experience in Vietnam that “the soldier desires two things: to survive and to get home. The closer they get to going home the more nervous they are. They bond closely together and when they lose their friends, it affects them psychologically. The chaplain has a lot of work to do to try and help them survive mentally and spiritually. We chaplains get scared too, but we’re there to help the troops, not to push the war.” Bert was never in favor of the Vietnam War. As a matter of fact, I found in his files a copy of a letter of protest against the Vietnam War that he wrote to the president of the United State while still serving as an active army chaplain.

Bert never talked much about his ministry as a military chaplain, mainly because he felt very hurt and misunderstood by many of the friars during those Vietnam War years. He was particularly hurt at one provincial chapter when many friars stuck the two-fingered peace sign under his nose and hollered out “peace.” However, he found great satisfaction during his career as a military chaplain preparing many young couples for marriage, patching up many other failing marriages, and was noted for the many annulments he secured so that these young people could start over again and find happiness in life.

Among his many army assignments was to work as pastor and chaplain at the Fort Leavenworth military prison in Kansas. He said that was probably one of his hardest jobs, but that he gained a broader understanding of human nature there. The one thing he did pride himself on was the prayer group that he started in the Fort Leavenworth prison, which continues to function to this very day in his name.

On one occasion, when Bert was sharing his experiences as chaplain of Fort Leavenworth with a friend, she said to him “there must have been a lot of bad people that you met there.” Bert’s

reply was “no, not bad people, just people who did bad things.” This friend went on to admit that she never forgot that conversation with Bertin and it actually changed her way of thinking.

Bertin also spent time as a military chaplain in the American military installations in Europe at Camp Darby in Livorno, Italy, about 60 miles southwest of Florence and five miles south of Pisa; and also in Manheim, Germany. Regarding Camp Darby, Bert said that was “the coldest winter he ever experienced. Everything was marble and there was no heat. The floors, the walls and everything were so cold. You just couldn’t get warm.”

Bert said that he had many happy memories of his time in Manheim, Germany because several friars from the province came to visit him there and he enjoyed taking them on trips down the Rhine River and showing them other sites of interest. He became known as a great tour guide.

Another interesting antidote in Bert’s military ministry was when he was called to Guam to set up a program for the many Catholic refugees that were arriving after the fall of Saigon. On the wharf, he spotted a lost lonely nun. After discovering she was a Carmelite Sister, he whisked her away from all the formalities and bureaucracy of processing incoming refugees and brought her directly to the Carmelite Monastery of nuns on Guam. Some 35 years later we heard that there was a Carmelite nun — Jane — a refugee from Vietnam, that was stationed in the Carmelite Monastery in our home town of Iron Mountain, MI. Bert and I decided to pay her a visit. When Bert asked her to tell her story, she revealed how a priest came to her rescue when she was lost and lonely on that wharf in Guam. There was an outburst of emotional tears when Bert said: “I was that priest.”

After retiring from the army in 1996, Bertin wished to be close to his mother who was in residence at St. Paul Home for the elderly in Kaukauna, WI. Bert found work in Weyauwega, WI. and served there as pastor, as well as in the neighboring parish of Manawa for the next 15 years until his retirement from active parish work in 2011. He then took up residence at St. Fidelis Friary in Appleton, WI.

When Bert was asked: “Where is the best place you have ministered?” he would answer: “It is where you are. Human nature is the same all over. One of my joys of being a priest was to be able to work in all those different countries helping people. That is what it is all about, helping people help themselves.”

There is no doubt that Bert was a “people person,” or better yet, a “people’s priest.” When Bert was transferred from St. Fidelis Friary to St. Paul Home in 2014 because of his failing health from uncontrolled diabetes and the onset of dementia, a big box of letters flooded in from all parts of the world: from Ireland, France, Germany, Italy and from many corners of the United States, testifying to that fact. All expressed the same kind words of gratitude how they would never forget how Bertin touched their lives as a kind and understanding priest.

For example, Maggie Zimmerman wrote:

“I had always exchanged Christmas cards with Fr. Bertin after I left Saudi Arabia and I was thrilled when he showed up at my door after I was married and living in Florida. My husband was a Methodist and I had not been allowed to marry in the Catholic Church because of some archaic rule in the Virginia Catholic churches. And when I shared that sorrow of mine with Fr. Bertin, he went out to

his car and got his missal and came back in my house and blessed my husband's and my marriage while we stood in the living room. I was so deeply touched by that and have held it dear in my heart ever since."

From this we can see that Bert was a 'people's priest' way ahead of the time of our present Pope Francis.

Maggie Zimmerman continued:

"I can still distinctly hear Fr. Bertin's joyful laugh. I can tell you, with no reservations and with total heartfelt honesty, that he will always be an important part of my life experience. Fr. Bertin made a tremendous difference in people's lives. He was, and still is more than just a parish priest. He was and is, a friend. He never wasted time judging any of us. He accepted us for who we were and what we were. He never pretended to be better than any of us. He was capable of being as irreverent as we were. He was funny, told tall tales, and was just one of the guys. The children adored him because he made those dull catechism classes fun. Laughter was not only permitted, but encouraged."

It is true that we lost Bertin as a brother and friend sometime before his actual death, as he had begun to shut down and withdraw within himself because of many years battling diabetes and the onset of dementia. May he now rest in peace in the loving embrace of his God and Creator and be remembered for who he was in the fullness of life: a dedicated priest and faithful Capuchin friar who enjoyed life and people to the fullest.

~ John Francis Samsa