

Necrology

Bernard Wagner
1930-2021



Our brother Bernard Wagner died on March 15th, 2021, at age 90, after 65 years of religious life and 57 years in the priesthood. He was born on a farm near West Bend, Wis. on June 29, 1930, the son of Philip and Sophia (Thoma) Wagner, and baptized with the names Walter Paul. He graduated from the parish grade school and from West Bend high school. But because his older brother, the future Vernon, was already in the seminary, Bernie delayed his vocation some seven years after high school to help his dad with work on the farm. In his later sports life, his ample farmer hands made him great at catching baseballs and snagging footballs.

Finally, at 25 years of age, Bernie was able to take a year of college at Mt. Calvary, and move on to Capuchin novitiate where he was invested on Aug 31st, 1955, and given the name Bernard. After completing his philosophy and theology studies at Crown Point, Indiana and Marathon, Wis., he was ordained to the priesthood on April 20, 1963.

After a nine month pastoral course at St. Francis Parish in Milwaukee, Bernard's first assignment was as professor of mathematics at Mt. Calvary (1964 - '69). As a former student of Bernie there, Bill Hugo says: "*I, for one, can testify that he was a wonderful geometry teacher.... His classes usually began with a short discussion about the latest NFL or baseball game, which we all appreciated.*" After five years at Mt. Calvary, Bernie's next assignment was to the missions in Nicaragua where he served most of the rest of his active life (1969 - 2008).

Bernie prepared for his mission by taking a five month Spanish course at Cochabamba, Bolivia. Though some 30 Capuchins were already serving in the eastern half of Nicaragua, Bernie was assigned to our newer missions, in the Segovias, in northwest Nicaragua. There, together with the other friars, he eventually worked in just about all its principal towns of the area, principally Condega, Palacaguina, Jalapa, Jicaró, Quilalí and Wiwili.

The year was 1969 ... Instead of the pre-conciliar church limited to priests and nuns who sacramentalize, the focus shifted to mobilizing and forming the laity in Christian communities where each serves according to the gifts God has given them. That included the material needs like credit unions and courses for midwives and basic medical needs. It also included spiritual needs like retreats, youth pastorals and biblical pastoral workshops.

Bernie was in the Segovias during the revolution which overthrew the Somoza dictatorship (1979). As provincial delegate of the Segovia region, Bernie was one of the principal signers of our 13 page "*Matagalpa Document*" (June 1976).¹ The document, addressed to President Somoza

¹ Thirty five friars signed the document. See Campion Baer, OFM Cap: *Lady Poverty Revisited: A History of St. Joseph Province of the Capuchin Order*; (2005), pp.188ff.

and to the Nicaraguan Episcopal Conference, denounced the atrocities of the Somoza army and the extra judicial killings of 100s of campesinos in the vast Siuna parish. He was still in the Segovias during the anti-Sandinista contra revolution.

The last half of his mission life, Bernie was transferred to our Capuchin House in Managua (capitol of Nicaragua) to serve in various elective positions. Some years after his transfer, I had occasion to visit many of the towns where Bernie had served, for workshops for their lay ministers. When I'd asked people about their memories of Padre Bernardo, I was surprised how often they'd reply: "*Ah sí, Padre Bernardo, el beisbolero*". Bernie was remembered as the padre who played baseball on the local teams. He was especially famous for the longest home run in memory. A clipping from the local newspaper preserves the story : – It was a Sunday game against a town called Somoto. By the time Bernie got there after finishing his Sunday commitments, it was already the fifth inning. When Bernie, still in his clergy shirt, stepped up to bat, it looked like the pitcher wanted to walk him ... The count was 3 balls and no strikes... The crowd went wild, shouting: "*Pitch to him!!! Pitch to him!!! Don't let his size scare you!!!*" Ok, so the pitcher wound up and threw his hardest fast ball. Bernie swung his big, locally made bat, and ... POW ... connected. The ball arched high over the left field and dropped into the river beyond. – In 2013, Bernie's former manager was quoted as saying it was the longest home run in the history of that stadium.

Bernie was elected first as provincial representative of the Segovia region, then as religious superior of all of Nicaragua, and then to the vice provincial council for all of Central America. Well liked for his calm, common sense wisdom and charity, he was constantly re-elected.

At that time, our Managua house was like the Grand Central Station for the friars, not only of Nicaragua but for all of Central America, with friars and students in transit to and from the five countries of the Vice Province. Almost daily, Bernie and friar Joe Smetana, made early morning trips to the airport and to the various bus stations. I'd guess the house averaged 6 - 8 overnight guests per day, peaking at 30-40 guests when there were friar reunions in the area... all of whom had to be lodged and fed. Under the Sandinista government of the time, run away inflation caused the local currency (the cordoba) to devalue to the point where it was worthless paper. As a result, stores were empty, just about everything was scarce. So Bernie and Joe had to be constantly searching to find the essentials to cover the needs of their many guests. It was like a mad house for them, but an oasis of peace and hospitality for us. Bernie was always available.

After Managua, Bernie volunteered to accompany Hugh Heinzen (suffering from terminal cancer) in Waspam and replace him as pastor when Hugh died (1992). For Bernie, it meant learning the Miskito language. In 1993, he moved to Puerto Cabezas to administer that tri-lingual parish.

After 39 years in the Nicaragua missions, Bernie returned to the US for health reasons on July 1, 2008. After eight months at Mt. Calvary, Bernie retired to St. Fidelis Friary in Appleton. At first Bernie was able to take help-outs, driving a car specially rigged up with hand brakes and clutch on the steering wheel. But soon he was limited to a walker and wheel chair. Faithful to community services, he took his turn as presider at Mass from his wheel chair.

Bernie was a lifelong sports fan. Going progressively deaf , his recreation was the games on TV and the sports page. An avid reader, Bernie was especially alert for discrimination against

women in the church. In an Aug.30, 2020 letter to NCR, he argued for women ordination and their importance in the decision making processes of the church. Though we see women with authority and equality in much of modern society, he lamented that their culture, their views and experiences, are mainly ignored in our church.

Few knew that Bernie spent much of his life in pain. Early on, the pain in his back and hip, caused him to have a hip replacement in the US, which however was unsuccessful. Subsequent operations on the hip only increased the damage, leaving him with poor circulation in the leg and hard to cure infections, one of which caused septicemia. Eventually his toe, then his foot, and finally the remainder of his leg had to be amputated in unsuccessful attempts to control the infection. Foregoing further therapy, Bernie retired to St. Paul Elder Services in Kaukauna where he died on March 18, 2021. Bernie is buried in the friary cemetery at Mt Calvary.

~August Seubert