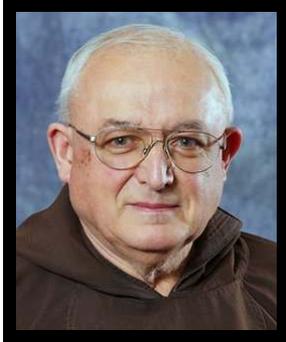


Necrology

John Benedict Willger

1948-2020



John was born in Rice Lake, WI on February 14, 1948. He was one of 13 children born to Joseph and Frances (Dostal) Willger. Working the dairy farm, the family evolved into a hardworking and close-knit unit. This was complemented by a deep love for the land and the environment; a love that John cherished throughout his life. His parents modeled for John and his siblings a strong prayer and faith life through regular Mass attendance, praying the rosary, and receiving the sacraments.

Prior to entering the Capuchin candidacy and novitiate, John graduated from St. Francis Brothers School in 1966. Even during his high school years, John showed many skills that would influence his career path. He excelled in both woodworking and architectural drawing, especially under the watchful eye of Edgar (Robert) Udulutch.

Following graduation, John was drawn to the Capuchin way of life by its simplicity and community. He was invested on April 29, 1967, made first vows on May 1, 1968 and perpetual profession on August 22, 1975. During his formation years his directors recognized his unique skills, and John was asked to pursue a degree in fine arts and technological education at the University of Wisconsin-Stout in Menomonie, WI. He graduated in May, 1973 and was assigned to St. Lawrence Seminary as an industrial education teacher, with emphasis on woodshop, drafting, and mechanical drawing. He also pioneered the driver's education program, and gradually moved into anchoring the art education field and humanities, as well. Ultimately, John taught for 45 years at SLS and mentored many students in those unique fields. Throughout those years he never lost his love for the family or the farm. He would use the summer recess or vacation breaks to return to Rice Lake and provide help with all of the work that a farm entails.

John brought a unique blend of skill, an ability to communicate, and a love of students to his career as a teacher. Many of the alumni developed skills in woodworking and art that are directly connected to his role as teacher and mentor. John's enthusiasm was contagious as he drew out the skills and creativity of his students. John also served as a dorm supervisor, supervised work crews, and was the advisor for the yearbook for many years. The 2014 edition of the yearbook was dedicated to John for his outstanding service to the seminary. He also was honored during Catholic Schools Week in 2019 for his 45 years of faith-filled service. In addition, he received the Brindisi Award in 2020 from the Alumni Association. All attest to the respect that we had for his diverse contributions.

John's patience was tested consistently in the driver's education program, as he taught many of his young charges about good driving practice and spent many hours with them behind-the-wheel. How many people could survive 45 years of being alongside teenage drivers and sharing the rules of the road with them? John's driver's education even extended to several religious sisters from Africa. He was very patient as he taught them and gave them road experience. He

enjoyed hearing about their culture and sharing their native meals. In turn, he was able to share his knowledge of gardening, composting, and farming with them.

John also connected with the students on Cultural Heritage Night as he loved to share his passion for lefse, a thin, potato pancake, a traditional Scandinavian dish. John embraced special projects in a big way. He frequently helped create the sets for the school plays. He spent countless hours creating and building them. He enjoyed watching the plays and seeing his sets "come alive!" John could talk to anyone! He always asked questions that would help the other person feel more comfortable.

John's abilities and influence did not stop with his role as a teacher. He cherished his community life with the Capuchins, bringing a joy for life to his relationships with the friars. He related well to the young and old within the community. He loved them as brothers, but was also able to chide them when he saw humor in any event. For example, he relished sharing the story of how this author, in supervising a work detail with the SLS students, had them cut down brush in the back of St Fidelis Hall. He came to my office in tears with a bundle of sticks that turned out to be seedling "black walnut trees"! (He will probably remind me of that detail in heaven!)

John was a modern mendicant friar, able to obtain countless donations of machines and wood for his industrial education shop. When it came time for the renovation of St. Thomas Hall, John's storage areas were a major challenge to the staff as every "nook and cranny" was jammed with wood. He had a *slightly* exaggerated view of lumber and its value. He would occasionally fake a "heart attack" if a student wasted a piece of wood. I remember working with John several years ago to clean out the shop, and I had firm orders not to throw out any piece of wood 3 inches or larger!

Frankly, John loved people! He had positive relationships with most people, be they staff and peers here at Calvary, neighbors in the village of Mt Calvary, or family and friends. He had life-long friends that he related to and connected with as was demonstrated at his funeral, when we had to move the church venue (even during the pandemic of 2020) to a larger church to accommodate the crowd.

With the diagnosis of Guillian Barre Syndrome in December of 2018, John's life changed dramatically. He lost the dexterity of his fingers and was not able to use many of the machines that he had been able to use throughout his many years of teaching. He also needed a rolling walker to insure stability. This did not slow him down though! He would roll out to the garden to supervise the friars in planting or harvesting the garden & produce. He even made the long trek from the friary to the St. Thomas Hall woodshop to assist with the student classes. Throughout his illness, John remained positive and hopeful despite the challenges of the disease. He related to his doctors, nurses, and care-givers in the same way he dealt with friars and friends. He had the ability to talk to all of them with a keen interest in their life without concern for his own well-being.

John needed oxygen for many months prior to his death, and was grateful when we were able to go with a more portable model. Despite this handicap he maintained an upbeat attitude and was always grateful for whatever service was provided. Even in his final months John maintained a lively interest in expanding his knowledge. He spent many hours with his family on his i-Pad so he could stay connected via zoom and also pursued a knowledge of Spanish. He thought it would be great if he could connect on the language level with the SLS Hispanic students.

John's deep faith led to a life which was balanced and dedicated to God. He loved his family and many friends and always wrote notes and sent birthday greetings to them. He also invited them to special events at the seminary and friary. He will ultimately be remembered as living out the values of St Lawrence Seminary and the Capuchin Franciscans as he embodied the spirit of a good, humble and faithful servant. May he rest in peace!

~ David Schwab