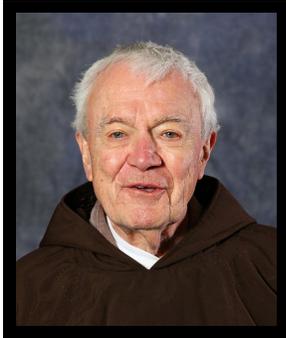


Neerology

Brian Braun
1934-2017



There's an old saying that "You can take the boy out of the country, but you can't take the country out of the boy." It has been commonly applied in a *Beverly Hillbillies* kind of way to people who keep many of their rural values, habits and customs even when they move to urban areas (e.g. the swimming pool becomes the "cément pond").

One would apply it in a more nuanced way to our brother, Brian Braun. Though most of his life and ministry as a friar was in cities, he never forgot his roots as a farmer from Eden, Wisconsin. He spent many years clearing fields (rocks, weeds), planting, cultivating, watering, fertilizing, building, fixing, tough times and good harvests — sometimes metaphorically, and at other times quite literally.

Brian's early education was typical of his peers. Unlike many friars of his era, however, he did not attend St. Lawrence Seminary for high school. He received his education at the local Catholic School and graduated from St. Mary's Springs High School in Fond du Lac, where he was a member of a group of friends who called themselves "The Filthy Four" because of their love for fun and some occasional and relatively innocent mischief. In the midst of all of those experiences, he found a vocation to the priesthood and religious life.

His formation as a Capuchin was typical for his era. Over the course of nine years (1953-1962) he did his novitiate at St. Bonaventure Monastery in Detroit, studied philosophy at St. Felix Friary in Huntington, Indiana, theology at St. Anthony's in Marathon, Wisconsin, and then spent a pastoral year at St. Francis Parish and Monastery in Milwaukee. He made his first profession in 1954 and was ordained a priest in 1960.

From the beginning of his full-time ministry Brian was, in the words ascribed to Henry II about St. Thomas Becket, "a troublesome priest." He would enter places and pastoral situations other friars would rather avoid. He ministered to, with and for those who were on what Pope Francis calls the "existential peripheries" of society and the church. He devoted a lot of time and energy to rebuilding and renovating churches and communities, often with limited resources.

He spent a year in Detroit at St. Bonaventure Monastery, where his focus was on youth ministry. His fondest and most vivid memories were of doing retreats and catechetical events with the tough "greasers" in a city that was undergoing racial and social change. In Gary, Indiana, inspired by the civil rights movement, Brian worked for three years to integrate a parish during a time of tremendous radical change. He met some resistance, but he also made some lifelong friends.

In 1966, Brian continued that mission with the Capuchin Community at St. Joseph Parish, where they strove to realize Vatican II's vision of a more enculturated church and liturgy while also

contending with many of the social and economic challenges that faced Saginaw and other cities in the industrial Midwest. It was sometimes a bumpy journey.

Brian earned a master's degree from Loyola University in 1973 while studying the transformation and struggles of Chicago's North Lawndale neighborhood. Some four decades later, he lamented the fact that this part of the city—and so many other neighborhoods in cities like Milwaukee, Gary, Detroit and Saginaw—continued to struggle with poverty, violence and institutionalized racism. In the ensuing years, he increasingly found himself a lonely New Deal Democrat as our nation's social compact frayed, neoliberalism dominated the economy and long-standing racial, ethnic and class divisions burst into open view.

Following his studies at Loyola, Brian brought his experiences of urban ministry to a seemingly unlikely place: Mt. Calvary, Wisconsin. At St. Lawrence Seminary, Brian especially devoted himself to the African-American and Hispanic students at a time when they were a relatively small minority of the student body. He supported the formation of the People's Union. Through his area studies, political science and sociology classes, he tried to raise the consciousness of his students to the realities of life beyond rural Wisconsin. Brian brought a different perspective to faculty meetings and was an advocate for students. This occasionally put him in conflict with others, including some of his Capuchin brothers.

Over the course of some 25 years, Brian would lead SLS seniors on "sociology trips" to Milwaukee, Gary and Chicago. He also led trips to Central America, including to our missions in Nicaragua. As he drove the van—not always keeping his eyes on the road—he invited students to reflect on the economic and social realities they witnessed. He challenged them to consider what they could do about them.

At Calvary Brian also dedicated himself to the needs of families and was especially devoted to Marriage Encounter. He invited seniors to help on the retreats, which were held in the guest house across the lot from St. Francis Hall. Along the way, he inspired countless vocations, not only to the priesthood and religious life but also to community service and church ministry as married and single laymen. Years later, as our province's first director of the Cap Corps program, he would similarly inspire other men and women to build on their experiences as volunteers in the Midwest and overseas into lifelong commitments to serve others.

Gary Wegner, a friar and former student of Brian's at Calvary, shared this reflection on Brian's gifts and legacies:

When I was in college one summer I had a job at the Fond du Lac County Fairgrounds. During the county fair I spent the morning picking up trash on the ground. Our supervisor had not given us anything to use to pick the wrappers and papers off the ground. The first day Brian's dad, Oscar, was at a booth having coffee with some other old farmers when he saw me.

The next day when I came by [Oscar] had a pole that he had fashioned with a sharp metal end. He thought no one should be doing the job that I was doing without the proper tool. That was Oscar and in a small way explains for me Brian.

That story Gary recounted also helps to explain a Christmas gift that Brian sometimes gave to the friars in initial formation who lived with him, particularly in the parishes where he was stationed. Brian believed that every friar worth his salt should have his own toolbox with a basic set of tools that he could build upon and, more importantly, use regularly. Whether at SLS, in Cap Corps or the wider province, Brian believed that formation was about building a spiritual and intellectual toolbox—and a physical one. He admired people who worked hard.

After a sabbatical in 1982-83, Brian returned to Chicago. At St. Justin Martyr Parish in the city's Englewood neighborhood (1983-1989), Brian brought a farmer's practicality and work ethic as well as a passion for more fully embracing the gifts of black Catholics, particularly in the church environment and liturgy. He led the resistance to a plan to merge and consolidate parishes and schools. He maintained that the Catholic Church could not and should not abandon the neighborhoods that so many other social institutions had abandoned.

In 1989 Brian initiated 23 years of Capuchin ministry at Our Lady Gate of Heaven Parish on Chicago's Southeast Side, where he renovated another church and supported the church's strong tradition of community engagement. He later supported a similar thrust at St. Martin de Porres Parish in Milwaukee (1999-2004), his last full-time ministry assignment. A lasting physical testament to his creativity and practicality is the Parish Hall or Great Room at St. Martin de Porres, which was inspired by the hall at St. Joseph Parish, Appleton.

In 1993, Brian accepted the call of the provincial minister and council to begin the Capuchin Franciscan Volunteer Corps or Cap Corps Midwest. He served as its director until 1999. During those years, he laid the foundation of a program that would initiate a generation of young men and women into church ministry and community service in Milwaukee, Detroit, Chicago and overseas, especially in Nicaragua and Peru.

Brian never fully accepted retirement. For him, it was being "put on the shelf." He much preferred his feet on the ground, so he continued ministering to everyone from the inmates at the Milwaukee County Jail and Milwaukee Secure Detention Facility (2004-2011) to the Agnesian sisters in Fond du Lac (2011-2014). He drove himself to work, even when his health dictated otherwise. He was part of that generation of friars who were formed and determined to "die with their boots on."

While he expressed great gratitude for his life as a friar, Brian also felt that who he was and what he did weren't always appreciated by others, including his Capuchin brothers and particularly those in authority. He could brood about such things and had no compunction about keeping a friend up late into the night recounting them...episode by episode and year by year.

Like all of us, Brian had his shortcomings, and these didn't always make it easy to work with him. Once he had an idea about something, it was hard to dissuade him. In consulting with others—Capuchin brothers or parish councils—his capacity to listen was often overridden by his desire to get what he wanted or what he saw as essential. Brian didn't have much patience for guidelines or procedures. He could be opinionated and sometimes used colorful language to express those opinions. He could be mistrustful of authority...unless it was his own.

A child of the Great Depression, Brian could be frugal almost to a fault. He strongly believed in squeezing the life out of every penny he spent. Sometimes that meant trying to do things with volunteers that probably should have been left to professionals. At other times it meant looking the other way when pesky things like city permits or permission from the chancery office were required.

Brian was never much for paperwork, but he was always for *people*. Even though he spent much of his life and ministry as a friar in cities, he never lost the spirit of community he first learned on the family farm in Eden, Wisconsin. He was generous with his time and he made an extraordinary effort to attend the funerals of his Capuchin brothers. In our digital age Brian was an unabashedly analog man. He would much rather communicate face-to-face over coffee or a beer. In the last weeks of his life one could detect in him a greater mellowness and gratitude.

Yes, Brian Braun was “a meddlesome friar” — but only in the sense that the Gospel can also meddlesome; only in the sense that prophets and dreamers are sometimes meddlesome; only in the sense that imperfect but utterly dedicated disciples of Jesus are called to be meddlesome.

Brian died from complications of pneumonia on December 29, 2017 — the day on which the church celebrates the memorial of Thomas Becket, bishop and martyr. He is buried at Mt. Calvary.

— John Celichowski