



## PROVINCIAL NEWSLETTER No. 101

### AUSTIN (JAMES) BUDNIK, OFM

1925-2009

Anne Lamott, a contemporary novelist, wrote: *Hope begins in the dark. The stubborn hope that if you just show up and try to do the right thing, the dawn will come. You wait and watch and work; you don't give up.* Austin was a stubborn man. Some will call his stubbornness principled ... committed ... dedicated, as he was all these ... to a fault. Even where others would give up and move on, Austin, true to his convictions, remained steadfast, come what may. Although his stubbornness oftentimes tried the patience of his superiors and brothers, they could, at the same time, admire the hope that sprung eternally from his strong and deep faith. He was a contradiction of sorts, perhaps seeing what many others were unable to conceive.

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James Budnik was born on May 29, 1925 in Winona, Minnesota, to James and Clara (Palubicka) Budnik. He was baptized at St. Stanislaus Parish in Winona on May 31, 1925, and later confirmed at the same parish on December 22, 1935.

He completed elementary education at St. Stanislaus School in 1939 and took his first three years of secondary school at Cotter H.S. in Winona. His senior year of high school was taken at St. Bonaventure M.S. & H.S. in Sturtevant, Wisconsin, from where he graduated in 1943.

In August of 1943, he entered the novitiate of the Franciscan Friars of the Assumption BVM Province in Pulaski, Wisconsin, and given his religious name, "Austin." The following year he made profession of temporary vows. From 1944 to 1948, he attended St. Francis College in Burlington, Wisconsin, where he was solemnly professed in 1947. His theological studies were done at Lourdes Seminary in Cedar Lake, Indiana (1948-50), St. Mary of the Angels Seminary (1950-51) and completed in Cedar Lake (1951-52). Austin was ordained to the priesthood on May 19, 1951, in Green Bay, Wisconsin, by Bishop Stanislaus V. Bona.

Austin's first and only assignment was to St. Anthony of Padua in Watkins Glen, New York. An auto accident in 2001 brought him to death's door. His injuries necessitated a year of recuperation at Holy Dormition Friary in Sybertsville, Pennsylvania, and then Queen of Peace Friary in Burlington, Wisconsin. It was hoped that this time of convalescence would persuade him to remain and retire. However, his unbridled spirit swept his 76-year old body back to the Lord's vineyard in New York. He still had work to do.

In 1952, Austin was appointed to the faculty of St. Anthony of Padua Minor Seminary and High School at Watkins Glen, New York, which the Province opened in 1949. He served the students as teacher, spiritual director, librarian and disciplinarian

and the friars as the community's last guardian. In 1960, he earned an M.A. in Latin from St. Bonaventure University in Olean, New York.

With the closure of the school in 1970, Austin requested that he remain and be allowed to work with local civic groups in ascertaining and providing for the needs of the rural poor, especially the culturally deprived in South Central New York State. His involvement eventually led him to attend Syracuse University and earn a doctorate (1979) in the area of adult education. Believing the vacant and still standing school building still capable of sustaining an educational environment, Austin, with the permission of the provincial leadership, opened a free university in 1983. The institution provided continuing education for adults by volunteer teachers in such areas as oil painting, scuba diving and sketching. When it too closed in 1995, Austin's optimism brought forth various suggestions for the use of the property. To his dismay, his persistence and creativity were the only energies astir. For many reasons, the Province was unable to transform his dreams into concrete solutions.

"I've always been interested in the field of education, interested in alternatives. The alternatives of today become the conventional tomorrow," he said in an interview with the Rochester Diocesan paper, the *Catholic Courier* (June 12-13, 2004).

In the same interview, Austin expressed a fondness for all that the Glen meant to him. After fifty-six years in a village of 2,000 residents, many, if not most, were known to him. The deep expressions of love and respect from a few of its citizens only leave to the imagination of those half a continent away the scope of his impact on the many, many lives he touched. He showed them God's love. In that same interview, he expressed his dying wish: "I'd love to live and die here." That fondness for the people and the place was as stubborn as it was sincere. Although the school closed 39 years ago and all the friars have long been gone, Austin wished to remain a Franciscan presence. "He was a Franciscan to the core," observed a close friend. Even when the property was finally sold in 2002, the new owner gave him use of the renovated guest house for as long as it suited him. The Good Lord saw fit to honor that stubborn, sincere wish.

Austin was taken to the hospital on Tuesday, May 26 due to severe dehydration. It was by chance that tests discovered the presence of cancer ... affecting most of his internal organs. He succumbed to its fatal embrace in the early evening of May 31, 2009 around 8:45 PM. He died in the 84<sup>th</sup> year of his life, the 65<sup>th</sup> year of his profession and the 62<sup>nd</sup> year of his ordination. He is preceded in death by his parents. He is survived by his sister, Clare Swegel of Watkins Glen, New York and his Franciscan brothers of the Assumption BVM Province.

Austin will be waked in St. Mary of the Lake Catholic Church in Watkins Glen during the afternoon and evening of June 3<sup>rd</sup>. The funeral Mass will be offered the following day, June 4, at 11:00 AM. Burial will take place immediately following the Mass in the priests' plot of the parish cemetery.

May Austin's soul and the souls of all our departed brothers, parents, relatives, friends and benefactors rest in peace!

Jerry Tokarz, OFM  
Secretary of the Province