

PROVINCIAL NEWSLETTER NO. 119

Joseph Mika, OFM

1925-2009



In modern ecological terms, a *carbon footprint* is roughly the impact a person or organization has upon the physical resources of our planet. In analogous terms, we can look upon the gospel/Franciscan footprint that Fr. Joseph Mika made upon friars and people among whom he lived and ministered.

Joseph Mika, the son of Frank Mika and Angeline Latuszek was born on November 28, 1925, in the heavily Polish area of Northside Chicago, the home-ground of many of our friars. His dad passed away when Joe was only six leaving him as an only child to be raised by his widowed mother. He attended St. Fidelis School and in 1934 transferred to Holy Innocents School where he graduated just before the Nazi invasion of Poland in 1939.

The outbreak of WWII, an early vocation to the priesthood and his mother's poor health and financial condition all conspired to keep Joseph out of Quigly Minor Seminary as well as military service. The mother of former friar Mitchell Daszkowski steered Joseph and his mother to Theophane Kalinowski, OFM, rector of St. Bonaventure Minor Seminary and High School in Sturtevant, WI, who agreed that Mrs. Mika would pay whatever she could and Joseph would work at school including summers to pay for the rest.

Graduating from St. Bonaventure's, Joseph made the decision to become a friar and enter the Assumption B.V.M. novitiate in Pulaski, WI. Because Joseph was an only child and the sole support his mother, she signed a document relieving the province of any obligatory care for her. At the time Mrs. Mika withheld the fact that she was suffering from tuberculosis which was subsequently cured.

On August 14, 1943, Joseph entered the Novitiate being invested by Isidore Cwiklinski, OFM, the first Provincial Minister of the newly created (1939) Assumption BVM Province. He assumed the name "Salvatore", returning to his baptismal name of Joseph in the 1960's. Taking his philosophy at St. Francis College in Burlington, Salvatore enjoyed meeting the people who came to the friary grounds, grottoes and gardens—talking with them, giving tours, selling religious articles as well as the friars' legendary buttermilk. While at Burlington, Salvatore joined his fellow clerics (as

formation students were then known) in classroom, chapel and construction crews contributing to the many years of sweat and strain that transformed rural acreage into terraced gardens, shrines and peaceful, prayerful venues. In 1948 he moved to Lourdes Seminary in Cedar Lake, Indiana, to complete his theological studies. Following the practice of those years, he was ordained to the priesthood after the completion of this third year of theology. In similar manner, he received subdiaconate, diaconate and priesthood within a period of two months. He was ordained on May 19, 1951, by Bishop Stanislaus Bona in Green Bay,

After completing his final year of theology in 1952, he received his first assignment as assistant pastor of Assumption BVM Parish in Pulaski, WI. There was no parish rectory and the friars of the parish who lived in the motherhouse were expected to follow the friary horarium which frequently was in conflict with parish activities. It was here that Fr. Joe as he became known to many, developed his love for parish ministry. After five years in Pulaski he moved to Saginaw, Michigan where he began his second career as a high school teacher at SS. Peter and Paul H.S. Besides teaching, Fr. Joe also filled in as bus driver, a skill which he must have perfected in Michigan winter driving conditions. He spent a year as pastor of St. Mary's Parish in Mio, MI, where he encountered the Ku Klux Klan's anti-Catholic activities.

In 1967 Fr. Joe returned to Green Bay WI, where he remained until 1972 first as assistant then as pastor of St. Mary of the Angels Parish. It was during his term as pastor that the church was remodeled in accordance with the dictates of Vatican II. There were rumors that the colors of the carpeting were quite similar to the green and gold of the Packer football team while the altar when looked at from a certain angle, looked "football-oid."

In 1972, Fr. Joe's aging mother was becoming increasingly ill and dependant. To assist her, he received permission to become an assistant at St. Celestine Parish in Elmwood Park, IL, which was closer to her Chicago residence. In between his work at the parish, Fr. Joe found time to visit his mother two or three times a week, caring for her needs. After five years Fr. Joe accepted the pastorate of Resurrection Parish in Wayne, IL, close to Christ the King Seminary, our former Provincial theologate.

In 1987, the year of our Province's Centennial, Fr. Joe was assigned as associate at Immaculate Conception Parish in Elmhurst, IL, so that he could remain close to his mother. When his mother had to be transferred to Rosary Hill Nursing Home in Justice, IL, in 1989, Fr. Joe continued to visit her until she died in 1993. After his mother's death, Fr. Joe became chaplain at the Nursing Home until poor health forced him to retire to Queen of Peace Friary in Burlington, WI, in 2002. Deteriorating health forced him to seek the skilled care at St. Mary's Home in Manitowoc, WI, where he died on November 17, 2009.

Fr. Joe died in the 84th year of his life, the 65th of his religious profession and the 58th of his priesthood. In retrospect, Fr. Joe's footprint increased with the years of his age and the years of his service. He was a man for others—an activity which began with his widowed mother, spread to his fellow friars and in widening circles enclosed the countless parishioners and students he touched during his long and fruitful life. He had to bear the debilitating effects of diabetes in his final years, but his ready smile and generous gestures were never clouded over by the crosses he had to bear.

The Mass of Christian burial was celebrated at Assumption B.V.M. Church in Pulaski, Wis. on Wednesday, November 25, 2009 at 11:00 A.M. He is buried in the Provincial Cemetery.

May his sould and souls of all our departed friars, relatives and benefactors rest in peace. Amen.

Fr. Richard Tulko OFM
Secretary

*Special thanks to Bro. Jerry Tokarz,
ofm, for his biography of Fr. Joe
in the March 2003 issue of
Sandalprints.*