

PROVINCIAL NEWSLETTER No. 98

HERBERT (BERNARD) SILKO, OFM



The Green Bay Packers had no greater fan than “Herbie.” Ever since he grasped the fundamentals of football, he became a passionate backer who stood by his team whether they won or lost, crossing verbal swords with anyone who dared speak ill of them. He was just as adamant about, and faithful to, the lessons he learned along his life’s journey. Herbie was full of spit and vinegar ... in a good sense. He had strong convictions about life and everything in it, and no one told him otherwise. He knew what he wanted from life, and he aimed vigorously to attain it. He was hard on himself and others as a means of preparing and encouraging them for

the struggles, challenges and problems that the future was sure to bring. When failing health forced him to leave active ministry in 1995, he grew more reflective, recognizing (perhaps even accepting) the changed circumstances of his life. As more care was required, in 2006 he was moved from Queen of Peace Friary in Burlington, Wisconsin, to St. Mary’s Home in Manitowoc, Wisconsin. His health continued to slowly deteriorate over the next three years until Sister Death called him to his eternal home in the early morning of March 22, 2009.

Bernard Silko was born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, to Joseph and Stefania (Wasielewski) Silko on May 20, 1929. He attended his parish elementary school, St. Casimir, and received his secondary education at St. Bonaventure High School & Minor Seminary in Sturtevant, Wisconsin, graduating in 1947. With several classmates, he entered the novitiate of the Franciscan Order (Assumption Province) in Pulaski, Wisconsin, later that fall. His investiture with the habit and sandals of St. Francis included receiving the name “Herbert.”

Physically, Herbie was solid and robust. Aside from his seminary studies taken at Burlington, Wisconsin, and Cedar Lake, Indiana, he kept busy with projects aimed at beautifying the spacious grounds at both sites. Herbie was not afraid of those tasks requiring some muscle and elbow grease. Both places had grottos that Herbie helped construct or worked arduously at maintaining or improving their appearance.

Upon completing his seminary program, he was ordained to the priesthood on June 4, 1955, at Cedar Lake, Indiana, by Bishop Leo Pursley of the Gary Diocese. As this time neared, Herbie was asked to choose ministry in teaching, preaching or the mission field. Following his ordination, he was assigned to the Province’s secondary

school, St. Anthony of Padua Minor Seminary & High School, in Watkins Glen, New York. Fresh out of the seminary, his responsibilities at the school included teaching math, managing the student store and coaching baseball and soccer. Although the buildings were old and in constant need of repair, the campus and the environs beyond were, in his words, "... beautiful ... my kind of place." A life-long hunting and fishing enthusiast, there was plenty available for the avid sportsman. "I thought I was in heaven," he added.

The following year he was transferred to his alma mater, St. Bonaventure, in Sturtevant. Over the next ten years, he spent almost an equal amount of time teaching, coaching and disciplining the more wayward students.

In 1967, he was asked to consider parochial ministry, specifically as assistant at St. Sebastian parish in Sturtevant. Learning the ins-and-outs of parish life over the ensuing four years opened Herbie to another world. He loved education, but he grew to love this ministry just as much. The pastoral skills he gained were then used in his new assignment as assistant at Assumption Parish in Pulaski, Wisconsin. After a year, he was appointed pastor.

Need made this a short-term assignment. Three years later, the pastorate at St. Sebastian opened and Herbie was asked to take the reins. Despite the fact that this parish recently built a new church and rectory, Herbie was reluctant to leave Pulaski. Bowing to obedience, he accepted the appointment in Sturtevant. Coming with his Pulaski co-assistant, Gerald Prusakowski, Herbie was ready to attend to the needs of this growing parish.

Provincial needs often determine where and in what capacity a friar engages ministry. The provincial leadership always appreciates the more flexible friar who welcomes an imposition and makes the sacrifice. Herbie was one such friar. After a four-year pastorate, he answered the call to work in the printery in Pulaski. Feeling that "family" needs superseded those of his own, he accepted an offer from Franciscan Publishers. During the next ten years, he used his talents in the offset department, then in printing pamphlets and booklets and finally in the position of production manager. As usual, he gave with unreserved commitment.

With the death of Cornelius Liss, pastor in Lewiston, Michigan, and a slowdown in production at the printery, Herbie was approached to consider this pastorate. Willing to give it a try, he arrived at Lewiston in January, 1989. After ten years "in community" and two weeks in Lewiston – grounded by cold and a blizzard – Herbie found the isolation unnerving. On the brink of leaving, he reconsidered after many parishioners asked him to give them and himself more time. He remained for the next six years.

In 1995, over a six-month period, Herbie suffered a series of small strokes. His condition necessitated more care than he could provide for himself living alone. Agreeing to leave parochial ministry, for now, he took up residence in Queen of Peace Friary in Burlington, Wisconsin. Instead of getting better, his situation slowly worsened. Intestinal surgery was followed by the amputation of his right leg.

Irving Berlin said, *Life is 10 percent what you make it, and 90 percent how you take it.* Although Herbie's ministerial years were prematurely shortened by infirmity, he remained accepting and positive. He expressed gratitude for his vocation and the many years he did spend in service to God's people. "I have more to remember than to regret," he said.

Since 2006, he has been a resident at St. Mary's Home in Manitowoc, Wisconsin where he died in the 79th year of his earthly life, the 60th of his religious profession and the 53rd of his priesthood. He was preceded in death by his parents and his sisters Margaret Kato and Sylvia Brewer. He is survived (?) by his sister Irene Fenske, a niece and nephew and his brother friars of the Assumption BVM Province.

The funeral Mass for Herbert Silko will take place on Wednesday, March 25, 2009 in Assumption BVM Church, Pulaski, Wisconsin at 11:00 AM. There will be a viewing in the church preceding the Mass at 10:00 AM. Burial will take place in the provincial cemetery in the spring.

May his soul and the souls of all our departed parents, brothers, sisters, relatives, friends and benefactors rest in the peace of Christ. Amen.

Jerry Tokarz, OFM
Secretary of the Province