

Neerology

Ulric Buening 1927-2006



“...I have been receiving so many cards, letters, calls, and prayers that it makes me truly humble. So many frati and others have written or called, and I see more clearly than ever before the beauty and blessings of being a Capuchin.” (Ulric Buening, Capuchin, June 21, 1996, after serious cancer surgery).

Robert Marion Buening was born May 13, 1927, in Grant County, Wisconsin, the son of John Buening and Blanche Shereda. His father was a cheesemaker, who eventually owned and operated the Fennimore Cheese Company. The couple had four sons: Bill, Robert, Jerry, and Joe.

Robert attended elementary school at St. Mary Catholic School, Fennimore WI. After graduation he attended St. John Catholic High School, Muscoda WI for two years. Then at the suggestion of the local pastor, Charles Surgis, an alumnus, he applied for entrance to St. Lawrence Seminary and was accepted as a junior in 1943. His attraction to a Franciscan way of life was immediate and spontaneous.

Having been raised during the Great Depression and immersed in the uncertainties and sufferings of the Second World War, Robert was already aware of the importance of religious values in life. As a senior at St. Lawrence he applied for admission to the Capuchin Order. “Because I feel that in religious life I would have a better opportunity for self-sanctification.”

He was invested in the Capuchin habit in the novitiate then located in St. Felix Friary, Huntington IN, March 2, 1945. There he was given the religious name Ulric. The formation years followed the traditional course of studies at the time: four years of philosophy at Mary Immaculate Seminary, Garrison NY, (1946-1950) and four years of theology at St. Anthony Seminary, Marathon WI (1950-1954). Those years also produced the personal experiences, anecdotes, and fraternal interactions that would emerge as memories to enrich his spiritual life and enliven his biography. Stress was eased by fishing, card playing, an occasional cigar, and the camaraderie that bonded classmates together. Ulric was ordained on August 27, 1953, and finished his studies the following year.

The structure of his ministerial assignments is straightforward. He spent almost eight months at St. Elizabeth Parish in Milwaukee as assistant pastor (June 25, 2004-February 11, 1955). He spent the next three and a half years at St. Joseph Parish in Appleton as assistant pastor and Third Order director (February 1955-July 1958). Finally, he was transferred to St. Francis Friary in Milwaukee where he remained until

his official retirement, June 18, 1999. Those 41 years helped to create a legend of Franciscan fidelity.

Ulric's association with Secular Franciscans began on a local level, and expanded to national and international positions. The titles sometimes differed but the dedication remained the same. He served as the Federated Spiritual Assistant for the Secular Franciscans of the USA and Canada. He was also chosen as National Spiritual Assistant for the Executive Council of the Secular Franciscan Order of the USA. He spent several years on the International General Council of Capuchins working with Secular Franciscans, and was also elected to the World International Council of Secular Franciscans. (Thanks to Timon Costello for providing those details).

In his official capacities he made several trips abroad: to Rome, to Croatia, to Brazil, and to Poland.

On a personal level he made headlines in Milwaukee papers in January 1991 when he was robbed at gunpoint and his car stolen. The following day the police drove him to Chicago to recover the car and to identify the assailant who had been arrested there for another crime.

In May 1996 he underwent major cancer surgery, followed by a series of chemotherapy and radiation treatments. He returned to his active schedule until his retirement and transfer to St. Fidelis Friary in Appleton WI. An ongoing danger of falling required his final move to St. Paul Home in Kaukauna WI. He adjusted well to the home, making new friends and welcoming visitors. Ulric Buening died peacefully on November 16, 2006, seeing more clearly the beauty and blessings of being a Capuchin.

At the funeral a classmate, who had shared Ulric's religious life for more than 63 years, provided an assessment of his personality and spirituality:

"Human beings tend to be celebrity hunters. Football players, actors and actresses, powerful politicians, the rich and the famous all draw crowds wherever they go. Autograph seekers abound, paparazzi surround them, name droppers subtly influence a conversation. However, the real value of a person depends on how God assesses him. To the world Ulric was not a celebrity, except to those of us who revered him. Yet, if we search the scriptures, we will find Ulric mentioned by anticipation in many of the good people, non-celebrities, who illustrate the very values that Ulric lived by.

"Joseph: The gospel calls Jesus a righteous man. No word he spoke is recorded, but his fairness and integrity are illustrated by his concern for Mary and the child Jesus. At Bethlehem, the flight into Egypt, the years at Nazareth all reflect his sense of responsibility. Ulric accepted responsibility for the Secular Franciscans with remarkable consistency and fervor. His years as spiritual assistant deepened his own Franciscan values. He was a gentle confessor and reliable advisor.

“Nathaniel: (John 1:45-50) When Jesus saw Nathaniel coming toward him, he said, “Here is a true Israelite. There is no duplicity in him.” Nathaniel responded to the invitation of Jesus and became one of the apostles. Ulrich had an appealing simplicity in the perception of his vocation and Franciscan heritage. Grumpy at times, he still spoke openly about his beliefs with openness and sincerity. We all know what he believed and how he lived. Here is a true Franciscan. There is no duplicity in him.

“Simon of Cyrene: (Matt. 27:32) As they were going out, they met a Cyrenian named Simon; this man they pressed into service to carry his cross. Who knows how many people Ulrich helped to carry personal burdens of fear, guilt, uncertainty, or doubt? He never pretended to have all the answers to the problems of life, but he did radiate compassion and encouragement. His help is not measured statistically, but spiritually. He prayed often and wrote simple notes of consolation at times of death and sympathy during personal crises.

“Joseph of Arimathea: (Luke 23:50-53). Now there was a virtuous and righteous man named Joseph. He came from the Jewish town of Arimathea and was awaiting the Kingdom of God. He went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Taking the body Joseph wrapped it in clean linen and laid it in a new tomb that had been hewn in the rock. Under his innate shyness Ulrich maintained a spiritual courage to stand up for justice in society. He made known his political views without apology and his loyalty to the church without qualifications. To paraphrase Dr. Suess, he could say, ‘I meant what I said, and I said what I meant. (Ulrich) is faithful one hundred percent.’

“Timothy: (I Cor, 4:17) I am sending you Timothy, who is my beloved son in the Lord. St. Paul also called him, Timothy, my brother. In our Capuchin fraternity we can truly speak of Ulrich, our brother. The card games he enjoyed, the fishing trips that rejuvenated him, the stories he loved to tell, and even the teasing that characterized fraternal life were as much a part of his religious life as were the daily Mass, the rosary, and the divine office. Throughout his life Ulrich preached a Franciscan homily without words: responsibility, integrity, simplicity, compassion, and fidelity.”

If I am to be a name dropper, let me say it now. “Meet my good friend, Ulrich Buening, rich in faith, simple in life style, and humble even in his sanctity.”

— Matthew Gottschalk