

Neerology

Gabriel Diefenbach 1901 - 2001



One of the realities of religious life is that, sometimes, we are the last to see the greatness of our brothers because we do not experience them in their role as ministers, but rather as companions with all the give-and-take of communal living. That is especially true in the case of a brother who has concentrated his ministry outside of the normal fraternity outreach in an apostolate not shared with other Capuchins. This was certainly the case for our brother Gabriel Diefenbach, whose work, as a retreat director, took him on constant travels so that he was not often available to relate to the friars in the communities in which he was stationed, over the many years of his religious life. His chosen ministry meant that Gabriel was far more likely to make friends outside of the province than among its members. Consequently, many of us did not know him well, if at all. And so we lack the perspective to judge the scope of his accomplishments.

Shy and reserved, Gabriel was not one to share his inner life deeply in community. He usually communicated on the intellectual level and kept his inner life private. Therefore, it can come as a surprise to us that, outside of the Capuchin community, he was seen as a brilliant retreat director with a strong leaning toward mystical prayer.

I personally had never even met Gabriel until I was stationed at the Monte Alverno Retreat Center in Appleton, Wisconsin, where he was in residence as he enjoyed his retirement; his “semi-retirement”, as he was prompt to point out, since he still maintained a yearly month-long help-out which was the highlight of his year. I was given the task of meeting him at the airport to drive him home and I was wondering if I would even be able to identify him among the passengers, neither of us knowing what the other looked like. Luckily, he wore clericals, so I could spot him easily enough among the crowd that debarked the plane.

Over the eleven years that I shared community with Gabriel (Gabe, as we called him), I found him to be knowledgeable in national affairs, staunchly Republican in his politics, and with deep insights in many subjects, when he chose to converse above the level of day to day experiences. By that time, his impact outside the immediate community was greatly diminished. Only a few friends continued to keep in contact with him. Among them, there was a woman religious who called him occasionally for advice. He never looked forward (so he said) to her calls, since she was wont to converse at great lengths. Once she came to visit him and, after she left, he was asked how the visit had gone. With a sigh, Gabriel answered:

“She talked and talked and talked. And I just listened.” That is certainly the core of good counseling ministry.

During the long years of his active ministry, Gabriel’s fame was as a retreat director for priests and for religious men and women, especially those whose lifestyle was contemplative since the focus of his retreats tended to be the contemplative life. He also received fame through the book he authored, *The Common Mystic Prayer*, which was considered, by some, to be one of the best expositions of mystical theology in the country at the time. He was also reputed to be an expert on *The Divine Comedy* of Dante, and lectured on that subject on occasion.

Gabriel was born John Frederick Diefenbach in Redwing MN in the first year of the twentieth century, and his long life took him to the first year of the twenty-first century, just weeks short of his hundredth birthday. His father, also known as John Frederick, was of stern German stock and Gabriel was never close to him, even though he described him as a kindly man. From Gabriel’s reminiscings, it can be deduced that his father was not one to be lenient toward childish misbehavior. That may explain the lack of closeness between father and son.

Eda Bakke, Gabriel’s mother, died of tuberculosis at the age of 26 when he was five years old. Gabriel liked to reflect on the fact that his mother was born in the same year as the famed French Carmelite, Elizabeth of the Trinity, and died at the same age as the latter. Since Elizabeth of the Trinity was famed as a contemplative, this parallel would have been significant to Gabriel who also had a strong leaning toward contemplation in his spirituality.

One of the incidents of his early childhood that Gabriel shared in his memoirs was the fact that his father owned a whip with which he administered discipline when necessary. One day, the family dog stole the whip ;and hid it, saving young John Frederick from another ordeal. Gabriel assured that his love for dogs stems from that early incident.

After the death of his mother, John Frederick, Jr. went to live with his grandmother where he remained until he went off to the Saint Thomas college. He had a younger sister who married and became the mother of four children. Gabriel kept in contact with one of his nieces over the years and was still in communication with her when he lived at Monte Alverno.

Eventually, Gabriel’s father remarried, but there seems to have been little closeness between the younger John Frederick and his stepmother. He mentioned her only once in his memoirs, and that was concerning an incident during his rebellious youth when she was the messenger of his father’s displeasure with him. Gabriel’s father died before reaching the age of sixty.

The shaping of Gabriel’s vocation was not simple. His youth was turbulent and subject to much inner searching for his life’s calling, sometimes with a frustration that fringed on

depression. He entered the diocesan seminary for one year, but then left for a year of wandering around the American West in a youthful adventure that included riding a freight train across the United States. That adventure, which he shared with a friend, did not improve his relationship with his father, as he himself confessed. He then enlisted at the University of Notre Dame. Throughout his life, he retained fond memories of that experience.

Young John Frederick spent a summer as a lifeguard in Minnesota, spending more time reading books than saving swimmers. He then moved on to the New York-New Jersey areas where he worked mostly on the docks. He very much lived from hand to mouth for a couple of years. He was fond of mentioning that, one time, he had just enough money for a meal or an evening at the opera. It was much in character for him that he chose the opera over the meal.

Gabriel had a knack for making friends in high places, and he was fond of mentioning some of them. In New Jersey, at one time, he had a meal with Babe Ruth who was in the hospital at the time. He also made a few important friends at Notre Dame. Highly intellectual in his interests, he tended to bond with intellectuals, and that served him in good stead during his long career in retreat ministry to priests and religious.

While he was working in the New York area, John Frederick took to going to mass at a Capuchin parish. By and by, this experience of Capuchin ministry would influence his choice of religious life. His work on the New York docks was not particularly steady nor monetarily very rewarding so that he often had to struggle with shortages of money. He decided to enlist on a merchant marine ship for a journey across the world to the Orient. Among other places, he visited Japan and China. In China, he ran into a fortune teller from India who had come aboard the ship to ply his trade among the sailors. John Frederick was skeptical but allowed the guru to tell his fortune. He became convinced that the guru had been right about some of the things he said, especially concerning a mystical experience that was still in John Frederick's future. However, the guru also assured the young sailor that he would not live to the age of eighty, a fairly safe prediction for a man at the time. But the guru proved to be wrong by twenty years, a fact that always puzzled Gabriel.

During his merchant marine experience, John Frederick began to get interested in *The Divine Comedy* of Dante in which he was going to become proficient over the years, to the point of lecturing to intellectual groups, on occasion, on this subject.

Returning to the New York area, John Frederick settled in Hoboken NJ for a while, continuing sporadically to work on the docks, whenever he found himself in need of money. He was now searching out his vocation with growing concern. This was a time of great emotional and spiritual unrest for him and a time of much inner suffering.

On the twenty second of July following his return from his sailing journey, John Frederick was to have a profound spiritual experience that changed the course of his life and was to

eventually lead him to the Capuchin Order. It was a time of poverty, aimlessness, and depression for him. Here is how he explained it:

I was down and out in spirit and money. My shoes needed soles and I was so devoid of will power that, if a hundred dollar bill lay in front of me, I doubt if I would have bent over to pick it up.

That was his mood on 21 July when he finished his day with a glass of wine and a free ride home in a taxi.

Gabriel goes on to explain what happened the next morning:

When I awoke, I knew at once that a great thing was taking place within me. It was not a vision, not something to be explained in the senses. But it was a tremendous joy that overflowed into tears for three days. Several things took place that have never left me. One was a great desire to die and see God. Before this happened, I would enjoy music, but now I lost all taste for music or for anything else that was not God Himself. It was as if God took over my full consciousness and all my desire. No created thing, no amusement, was accepted or enjoyed by me. This lasted for a period of some years, going into my time of theology at Marathon. At this time, I felt, when at mass, as if the angels were present.

After this mystical experience, John Frederick decided to resume his priestly formation. He opted not to return to the diocesan seminary. Someone suggested that he join the Benedictine Order, probably because of his contemplative leaning. But his experience at the Capuchin parish in Hoboken convinced him to seek admission into the Capuchin Order.

On 2 August 1929, John Frederick began his novitiate as part of the first novitiate class to be held at the newly built St. Felix Monastery in Huntington IN. He now became officially *Gabriel Diefenbach*, and no longer John Frederick. Following his novitiate, Gabriel spent two years at St. Anthony in Marathon WI. Then he studied philosophy in Garrison NY for one year, being again part of the first class to be helped in that monastery. He seems to have had difficulty molding himself to the discipline of studying once again after the years he had been away from school. He carried a "B" average nonetheless, which was very sufficient. The assessment of one of his professors at that time was not particularly encouraging: "He seems a vacillating type. Probably not much hope for him." Whatever the professor was, he was no prophet.

Gabriel returned to St. Anthony in Marathon in 1933 and remained there until 1937. He had happy memories of Marathon. In spite of the very strict Capuchin lifestyle of the time, there were many wonderful experiences for him and his class in those days. He was ordained on 14 June 1936, at the age of thirty four, in the Marathon parish church of the Nativity of Mary.

One of his first assignments outside of Marathon was in Appleton WI at the retreat center. But he stayed there only a week before being sent to St. Felix in Huntington where he had spent his novitiate year. As a young priest, he was kept busy with helpouts here and there, with teaching positions at St. Mary Parish in Huntington, then at the Catholic High School in Ft. Wayne. He spent a year as assistant and teacher at St. Mary parish in Menasha WI (1939-1940), then returned to Huntington.

In 1945, Gabriel was appointed local minister at St. Felix, finishing the term of Clement, when the latter was called to Rome as general minister of the order. At that time, Gabriel suffered from bleeding ulcers so severe that he landed in the hospital and expected to die, as he announced joyfully to a shocked visitor, on one occasion. But he recovered nicely in spite of his assumption, and does not seem to have suffered from this health problem again in later life.

Gabriel made many friends in Huntington and there are several persons there who still remember him fondly. As was his custom, he also managed to get acquainted with a few important people such as Bishop Noll, Bishop Sheen, and Otto Hapsburg (the last heir to the Hapsburg Dynasty).

Gabriel had become quite comfortable in Huntington when, in 1946, he was assigned to the Capuchin Mission Band, with residence at St. Fidelis in New York. This does not appear to have been to his liking, at least at first, and he admitted to having been depressed about the move. This matter of depression that had plagued him before was to continue to be a problem for him, even during his years of retirement at Monte Alverno Retreat Center.

Gabriel was now launched in the ministry to which he would devote the rest of his active life in the Capuchin Community. That ministry took him to all parts of the United States and Canada. He was so seldom at home that he began to be called the "Celestial Gallaventer" by his confreres.

If he became more and more a stranger to his brothers, it was not so with the wider community. At Gethsemani Abbey in Kentucky, he got acquainted with the famous Thomas Merton with whom, naturally, he discussed the contemplative life. He also met the French philosopher Jacques Maritain and the former community, Louis Bedenz.

Gabriel's main topic for his retreat talks was the contemplative life. He made friends with several contemplative sisters, some of whom he was still visiting on occasion during his years of retirement.

It was while he was residing in New York that Gabriel wrote his book *The Common Mystic Prayer* which was published in Huntington. The book is still in print through the Daughters of St. Paul. Gabriel was asked to write another book to elaborate on the subject of mystic prayer, but he demurred, not considering himself a writer by profession.

Gabriel's career as a retreat director lasted from 1946 until 1969. After his three years at St. Fidelis, he was transferred to St. Bonaventure in Detroit, then to St. Francis in Milwaukee, and back to St. Felix in Huntington. In 1969, Gabriel was transferred to Monte Alverno in Appleton where he remained in retirement until 1997.

During his retirement ("semi-retirement," as he was fond of reminding people), Gabriel was actively interested in getting acquainted with that little city. He was well known in most restaurants of the area, and he knew several waitresses by name. He bicycled around town constantly until his health began to break down in the late 1980s. He also was fond of canoeing on the Fox River. Eventually, the community acquired a schnauzer dog named Smokey who became a special friend of Gabriel, brightening his otherwise lonely days as his robust constitution began to give in to old age.

In those days of retirement, Gabriel was something of a recluse. He did not easily make friends, and was selective about whom he was willing to chat with. He had a special love for the kitchen staff and spent many hours in the kitchen, talking with the women and watching them work. As for the visitors, he tended to avoid most of them, including some of the friars whom he did not know well, when he knew them at all. Even in old age, his shyness remained evident. Generally quiet and smiling, and with a mischievous light in his eyes, he was a familiar and well loved presence to the Capuchin Community and the lay staff of the retreat center.

The first major change in Gabriel's retirement routine came in the late 1980s. He had been at his usual yearly helpout in California when he became disoriented during liturgy and found himself unable to finish. On his return home, he never again drove a car, and presently, he even gave up on bike riding after he got lost in the center of Appleton, a town he had lived in for a quarter century.

In his last years at Monte Alverno, Gabriel's contemplative side became more and more evident. He communicated little and sat in silence for long hours, his mind lost in private thought. Eventually, his bones became so brittle that he would break suddenly and fall. The situation became serious enough for him to be confined to a nursing home in 1997. There he spent his last four years of life, confined to a wheel chair, and waiting the last transfer of his religious life, the richly-deserved transfer to eternal life, after 72 years of faithfulness to his Capuchin vocation, a life that brought him renown among some of the most illustrious Christian personalities of his time.

— *Written by John Guimond*