

THEOPHILUS RIESINGER

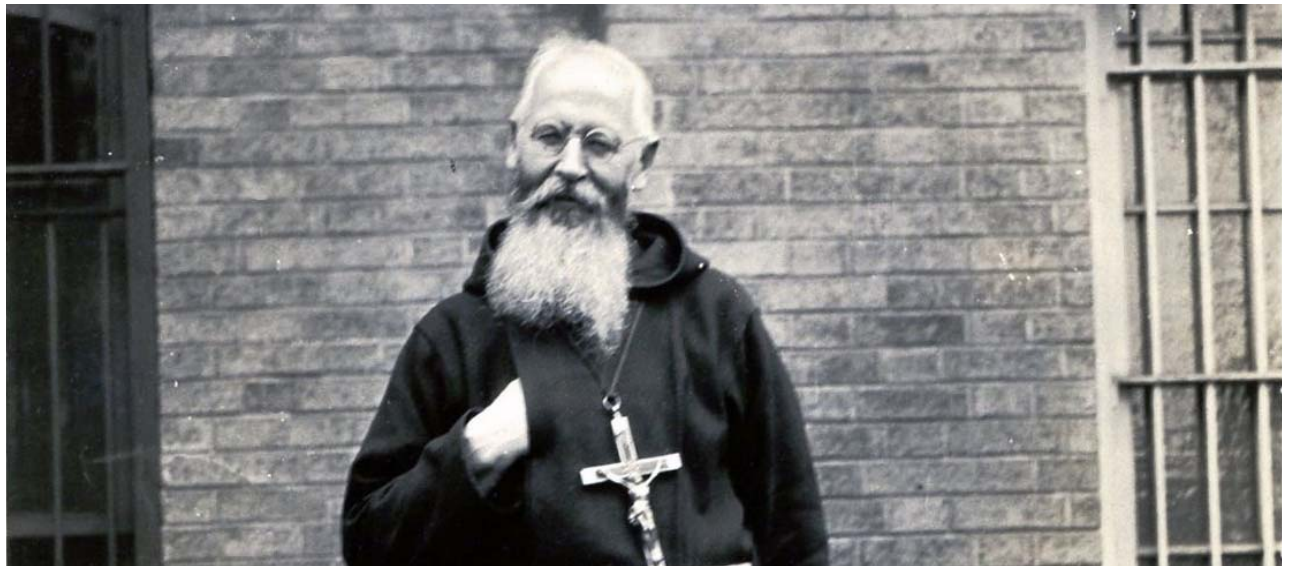
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OUR CAPUCHIN HERITAGE SERIES

Theophilus Riesinger, O.F.M. Cap.
Capuchin, priest, linguist, home
missionary, and exorcist—1868-1941



*"Stricken at the altar. Beautiful death for a priest."
"Died in the harness. Most fitting end of an intensely active life". "As a true warrior knight he died on the field of battle."* These were some of the comments elicited by the death of Father Theophilus.

"Warrior knight" is perhaps the best characterization of our deceased confrere. In his priestly activity he had chosen Saint Michael as his patron. Like the Archangel he fought the good fight valiantly and incessantly during all the years of his long ministry.

However, his whole life was, more than ordinarily, warfare. The struggle was in evidence at the very outset of his religious and priestly career.

Francis Xavier Riesinger was born at Stelza, in Bavaria, on 27 February 1868. He passed his boyhood and youth on the farm of his parents. The thought of consecrating himself to God came to him during a prolonged illness. He was then about twelve years of age. For some unknown reason he did not, or could not carry out his desire until years later. As far as we can ascertain he was twenty-one or twenty-two years old when he entered the monastery at Altoetting. It is stated that he met the sainted Brother Conrad there but no further details are given.

Theophilus' was therefore a belated vocation. As usual, it entailed more than the regular vocational struggles. It seems that he entered the Capuchin Order with the intention of becoming a brother. Soon after, he felt the urge to the priesthood. The Provincial, Father Victricius Weiss, did not accept him for the Bavarian Province. Nothing daunted, Theophilus departed for Salsbach, in Alsace, to take up his studies in a private school. At this new place he was a special student for one year, but attended regular classes in the succeeding term. He graduated on 2 February 1892. The reports extant in the archives are excellent. On the testimonial reads: *"Diligence and behavior always exemplary. Intellectual attainments gratifyingly successful."*

He is also commended for his linguistic talent. Another professor wrote a beautiful recommendation, stating among other things: *"This student distinguished himself by untiring diligence and inflexible energy [eiserne Energie] as well as by modest demeanor and holy enthusiasm for his future vocation. His moral rectitude no less than his gratifying achievements in the various branches of study, give every promise that, with God's help, his heart's most cherished desire will be fulfilled."*

Theophilus of Stelza

NECROLOGY BY CLEMENT NEUBAUER, O.F.M. CAP.



1903- St. Michael Friary in Brooklyn: seated - Willibald Kraus, Casimir Lutfring, and Theophilus Riesinger; standing- Pancratius Fischer, and Emil Stern

In that same year, 1892, he came to this country, in the pursuit of his *"cherished desire."* After a short stay at Saint Fidelis Monastery [in New York City] and at Yonkers, he continued his journey to Detroit and was invested as a novice on 30 August.

After an uneventful novitiate, he entered the clericate in Milwaukee. He pursued his studies in philosophy and theology with enthusiasm and success. At the same time he filled his heart ever more with a holy zeal for the salvation of immortal souls. Both the professors and clerics esteemed him as an observant and sincere religious.

On 29 June 1899, he was ordained a priest. The first assignment placed him in Saint Fidelis Monastery, New York. In 1904, he was transferred to Saint Michael, Brooklyn. The next year, Pitt Street claimed him for the parish of the ever-increasing number of Italians. He had mastered the Italian language either in the clericate or during the first years of his priesthood.



[Above] Circa 1905-06 Our Lady of Sorrows: seated – Cajetan Lorenz, Theophilus Riesinger, Timothy Grossmann, Anscar Schulteheerichs, and Venantius Buessing; standing- Raymond Romin, Otto Krismer and Seraphin Felsky

Another group which interested him was the Socialists. They were the extreme Marxists in those days. In order to combat their false doctrines and their influence on the laborer more successfully, he took a special course in Socialism at Fordham University. It was at this time also that, according to his statement, circumstances forced him to take up his peculiar work against evil spirits. In 1912, this effort brought him into conflict with the diocesan authorities. He was transferred to Wisconsin and for the next thirty years alternated between Appleton and Marathon. It was in the West and Middle West that he now engaged in his special work—the home missions.

He was eminently fitted for this type of work. Nature endowed him with a powerful, well-modulated voice, lively imagination, retentive memory, nerves of steel, and an iron constitution. By dint of diligent study, he acquired a remarkable fluency of speech, enriched his imagination, strengthened his memory and stored his mind with a fund of historical and theological learning. Add to this his solid priestly and Capuchin virtue and we understand why he was such a popular and successful preacher. Moreover, he loved his work. To the very end, preaching was his delight; offering sympathetic aid to sinners was his greatest joy.

A fellow missionary gives us the following description: *“I was on the missions with Father Theophilus for twenty-two years. He was always considerate of the failings and shortcomings of others. His correction was fatherly and sincere. He always had an encouraging word for his confreres and rejoiced in their success. He was ever ready to substitute for or take over the work of another.*

In his prime, he preached five or even seven times a day without complaint or fatigue. Nor did these duties prevent him from saying his breviary, rosary and stations every day. While traveling and in the rectory, he was a pleasant companion. He was an interesting entertainer and well-liked by priests and people.”

To this latter we must add that there were also some, both without and within the province, who could not see eye to eye with Father Theophilus. We think it true to say that the opposition was not due to the personality of the man but to the nature of some of his work, more specifically to his exorcisms.

Regarding these latter we think it best to follow the judgment of the deceased himself. In the course of a conversation, he once said to your chronicler: *“Father, as to my exorcisms, I have not published a single word. Nor have I asked any person to publish a single word for me. But I have sent a complete account of all that has happened to the Holy See. Rome alone is competent to judge. Until Rome speaks, I shall be silent.”*

So let it be. Until Rome speaks we too, prefer to be silent. When on 09 November 1941, his entire earthly struggle ceased, some expressed surprise that death came so quietly to Father Theophilus. Probably, in the last and most important hour. Saint Michael asserted his power on behalf of his faithful client. We hope and pray that the words of the offertory of the requiem Mass be verified: *“Sed signifier sanctus, Michael, repraesentat eum in lucem sanctam. But may Thy holy standard-bearer, Michael, lead him into the holy light.”*

The Messenger: Vol. 07, No. 12, June, 1942, pp. 454-456

DEATH AND BURIAL

From the Chronicles of Saint Joseph in Appleton, Wisconsin

The Messenger: Vol. 07, No. 11, March 1942, “Local Happenings” pp. 417-418

- ❖ **November 06**—Father Theophilus went to St. Mary, Menasha, for Confessions and to preach the Forty Hours Devotion.
- ❖ **November 09—The Passing of Fr Theophilus.** On the third day of Forty Hours, he finished Holy Mass and exposed the Blessed Sacrament, although he felt very ill; he was taken to the sacristy by the server and with their help removed his vestments and proceeded to the rectory.

There he was placed on a lounge and he requested the Last Rites. The Rev. Becker heard his confession and Msgr. Joseph Hummel anointed him.

Father Guardian was informed but was also told that Father Theophilus seemed to be improving, and plans were made to drive him over to Menasha after dinner. In the meantime, however, an ambulance was called to take him to the hospital in Appleton.



In Saint Anthony's Monastery of the Capuchin Friars at Marathon, Wisconsin last week, a wise and white-haired monk named Rev. Theophilus Riesinger went about his daily orisons and meditations, indifferent to the fact that he was being widely publicized among U. S. Catholics as a potent and mystic exorcist of demons.

Publicizers were the Religious Bulletin of the University of Notre Dame, and the Catholic Register of Denver, whose 300,000 subscribers last fortnight read the following story condensed from a pamphlet called *Begone Satan!*

17 February 1936

Religion: Exorcist & Energumen

In 1928, a certain 40-year-old woman was taken first to a church, then to a Franciscan convent in Earling, Iowa. Apparently an energumen, she had exhibited symptoms of diabolical possession for a dozen years: she could not pray, take communion or even pronounce the name of Christ. Doctors had examined her, found her neither mentally nor physically abnormal. With the approval of the Bishop of Des Moines, the woman was made ready for exorcism by learned Father Theophilus, who upon 19 prior occasions had successfully made use of the Church's ancient rite, canonically available to all priests, for casting out devils.

Strong-armed nuns bound her, placed her upon a bed. But soon as Father Theophilus began the long series of prayers and commands to the devils to depart, "with lightning speed the possessed dislodged herself from the bed and the hands of protectors, and her body, carried through the air, landed high above the doorway of the room and clinging to the wall with catlike grips." It was necessary to pull her down by force.

The demons in the energumen readily identified themselves. One was Judas. Another was the woman's dead father, named Jacob, who said he was damned for attempting unsuccessfully to induce her to commit incest with him. A third was Mina, the dead man's concubine, who said she had "murdered four little ones." Finally there were Beelzebub and hordes of imps who seemed to leave and reenter the energumen's body. The voices of all the demons issued from her mouth, with varying intonation, in English, German and Latin.

With the convent room full of noise and confusion, nuns and the local priests were obliged at times to leave it to rest. But the bespectacled old German-born Capuchin never stopped exorcising. For protection Father Theophilus, by special permission, wore a pyx containing the Blessed Sacrament. "Horrible excruciations, obviously preternatural in their volume and filth, were ejected by the possessed woman, as the devils' endeavored to hit the Blessed Sacrament (although they always missed it)." When the priest approached with a relic of the True Cross concealed under his habit, the reweres: "I cannot bear that! Oh, it is tormenting! It is unbearable!" The possessed recoiled at the mention of St. Michael the Archangel, protested at a relic of the Little Flower, cried "That burns, that scorches!" when holy water was sprinkled. A prayer to Mary the Immaculate Conception "caused a bloating of the woman's body." The woman appeared "emaciated at times, her face fiery red at others, her lips swollen to the size of hands, her abdomen so hard at one time that it bent the iron bedstead to the floor. Wise old Father Theophilus, who said he knew the energumen would recover, had to dissuade the others from having last rites given her.

In his surplice and violet stole, Father Theophilus repeated the prayers of the Church and loosed all the forces of the Lord at the devils' day after day for 23 days. Finally, the Iowa woman smiled and for the first time in twelve years said: "My Jesus, mercy! Praised be Jesus Christ!"

The story of the Earling exorcism, *Begone Satan!*, was written in German by a Rev. Carl Vogl, translated by a Benedictine named Rev. Celestine Kapsner, published at St. John's Abbey in Collegeville, MN with the official imprimatur of Bishop Joseph F. Busch of St. Cloud and the Nihil Obstat of Monsignor John P. Durham. Hence it was presumed not to err in faith or morals.

CHRONICLES DEATH AND BURIAL CHRONICLES

Continued from previous page

There, Fathers Guardian and John found him breathing heavily but entirely conscious and able to carry on a conversation. Father Guardian stepped out of the room for a few minutes, during which time the sick man chatted rather confidentially with Father John and suddenly turned up his eyes: he was dying. Father John called Father Guardian, who came in time to see him breathe his last very peacefully.

Father Kenneth went to Menasha to preach the closing sermon of the Forty Hours in place of Father Theophilus.

❖ **November 10**—The body of Fr. Theophilus lay in state at the Schommer-Melchin Funeral Home until Tuesday afternoon. This evening the Rosary was recited for him after Devotions.

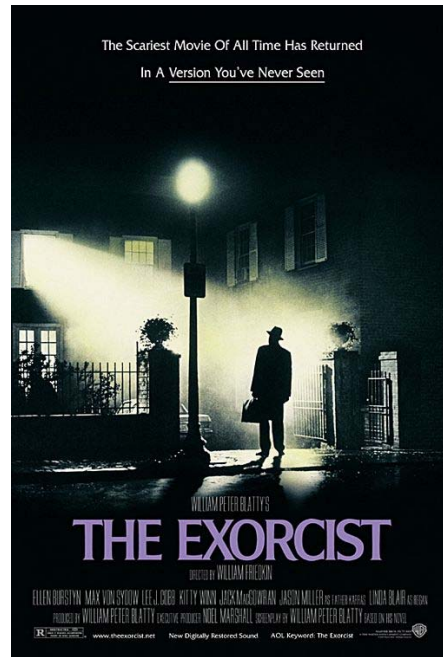
The Very Rev. Father Provincial [Clement Neubauer] arrived from Marathon for the Visitation. He and Father Lambert were accompanied by Fathers Dominic and Michael, who were on their way to Milwaukee. Father Provincial went out to Monte Alverno first for visitation.

❖ **November 11**—Father Provincial opened the visitation at Conventual Mass in the Choir. At 2:30 p.m. the body of Father Theophilus was escorted from the Funeral Home to Church by a Guard of Honor consisting of about seventy-five Holy Name men, who preceded the hearse on foot up College Ave.

The members of the Holy Name Society continued their watch until the church was closed at 1:00 p.m. The fact that this was Armistice Day made it possible for them to appear in good numbers.

❖ **November 12—Funeral of Fr Theophilus.** The Office of the Dead was recited at 9:30 a.m. Father Guardian was Celebrant at the Solemn Requiem, assisted by Fathers Josaphat and Fabian. Father Paul was master of ceremonies. The funeral oration was delivered by Very Rev. Father Provincial. The Final Absolution was imparted by His Excellency Paul Peter Rode, Bishop of Green Bay. Bearers were Fathers John, Louis, George, Brian, Kenneth and Flavian. The Absolution at the grave was given in the Chapel at St. Joseph Cemetery by Father Cyprian. The number of visiting clergy would have been larger if the observance of Armistice Day had not interfered with the delivery of the notices. Seventy-four priests signed the register.

The *Miserere* and *De Profundis* were recited while the body was brought from the chapel to its final resting place.



In 1928, a n exorcism was performed in a convent just north of the peaceful hamlet of Earling. It was one of the last exorcisms sanctioned by the Catholic Church. The case was reported in several famous pieces of literature. One is a 48-page booklet called "Begone Satan" by the Fr. Carl Vogl, a witness to the event. The second is a book, "The Devil Rocked Her Cradle," by David St. Clair. The third is a novel inspired at least partly by this exorcism and one other in Washington, D.C. The book is called "The Exorcist" by William Peter Blatty and it inspired a film of the same title, which is considered to be one of the most frightening horror films ever made.

Priest described 1928 possession of Iowa woman- The 23-day exorcism took place in a convent in Earling, Iowa

By Mary Nevans-Pedersen—TH STAFF WRITER

Telegraph Herald—Dubuque, IA- 31 October 2008

A sensational exorcism performed 80 years ago in the tiny western Iowa town of Earling is well-known throughout the paranormal community.

Details of the 23-day ordeal are so disturbing that some accounts caution readers to proceed at their own peril. The most complete account of the 1928 exorcism was written only a few years later by a Catholic priest who witnessed it.

The Rev. Carl Vogel wrote "Begone Satan!" a 48-page booklet about the tortured life of the woman he called Emma Schmidt. When she was 14, Schmidt's Aunt Mina (reportedly a witch who had a sexual affair with the girl's father), fed her bewitched herbs.

While some attributed her psychological dysfunction to her childhood sexual traumas, examiners noted symptoms that seemed to indicate "strange preternatural powers were at play." Schmidt understood languages she had never heard or read, foamed at the mouth when the priest blessed her in Latin, and blasphemed when presented with secretly blessed objects.

Therefore in 1928, when Schmidt was 40, a Capuchin priest, who had ministered to her previously, asked his superiors for permission to perform a full-fledged, official exorcism. The Rev. Theophilus Riesinger arranged for the ritual to be performed in a secluded Franciscan convent near Earling. The nuns there aided the priest for more than three weeks and, after their ordeal, many asked to be transferred far from the town.

Schmidt lay on a bed with iron springs while Riesinger and the parish priest prepared to perform the ancient Roman Catholic rite. As soon as the priests invoked the names of the Trinity, the woman flew up off the bed "and her body, carried through the air, landed high above the door of the room and clung to the wall with a tenacious grip," Vogl wrote.

When Schmidt was forced back onto the bed, the priest resumed praying.

"Suddenly a loud shrill voice rent the air. The noise in the room sounded as though it were far off, somewhere in a desert. Like a pack of wild beasts suddenly let loose, the terrifying noises sounded aloud as they came out of the mouth of the possessed woman. Those present were struck with a terrible fear that penetrated the very marrow of their bones," the witness recounted.

Over the next hours and days, news spread about what was going on in the convent and although church officials had tried to keep the exorcism secret, villagers gathered around the site after hearing unearthly howling and smelling hideous odors coming through the windows.

While the priests prayed over Schmidt and sprinkled holy water on her, horrible things happened: the woman's body contorted and swelled to nearly bursting; she exhibited super human power -- it took groups of nuns to control her; she vomited torrents of "unspeakable excrements" daily, although she did not eat; otherworldly voices and animal sounds emanated not from her mouth, but "from somewhere within her," Vogl noted.

The damned spirits within Schmidt identified themselves as Beelzebub, Judas Iscariot, her father Jacob and his mistress Mina.

On the 23rd day of the exorcism, while an exhausted Riesinger continued his prayers, the demons within Schmidt gave up. Her body jerked upright with only her heels touching the bed. The priest exhorted the demons to, "Depart, ye fiends of hell! Begone, Satan." Everyone in the room heard shrieking demonic voices fade away into the distance.

Schmidt reportedly led a relatively normal life after the exorcism, embracing her Catholic faith again.

For additional reading:

www.ewtn.com/library/NEWAGE/BEGONESA.HTM