

# Anscar Parsons, O.F.M. Cap.

## 1911-1945

"I would like to write something before I die. I mean something beautiful, something creative. The old message 'Look into your heart and write' comes to mind. Following its suggestion I would write the story of my life. Is that egotistical? It can be. Have I done anything at all that mankind will think worthwhile remembering? I suppose that's the wrong standard. Have I done anything God will think worthwhile? That's the test. How about it?"

Thus wrote Anscar on a small sheet of paper that was found on his desk after his death. Neither date nor occasion for the soliloquy is indicated. God did not want him to write his own biography. The only record of things accomplished in his short period of life "that God would think worthwhile" is the record in the Book of Life.

John Parsons was born 08 April 1911 at Yonkers, NY. His parents were then members of St. Joseph's parish. When John was about four years old his parents became members of Sacred Heart parish and he entered the parish school not much later.

Since the eastern Seraphicate was then very close to the parish school, the thought of studying for the priesthood easily presented itself to John Parsons. He often asked the director Theodosius Foley, how soon he could apply for admission. In view of his eagerness and his talents he was admitted after finishing the seventh grade in school. That was in September, 1923. The next spring saw the transfer of the Seraphicate to its present home at Garrison.

In the Seraphicate young Parsons easily maintained the record he had made for himself in the grade school. He seemed to have a natural talent for every branch. There was only one activity of the college in which he could not aspire to anything like leadership, namely athletics. His physical constitution was not made for that. That did not detract in the least from the universal esteem the students had for him. John was highly respected and well liked by his superiors as well as by his fellow students.

He entered the novitiate at Detroit, 22 July 1928 and was given the name of 'Anscar' in memory of Fr. Anscar [Schultehenrichs] who had died as pastor of Sacred Heart parish in 1925. He was the youngest of a class of 12 novices. The novitiate was transferred to the newly opened St. Felix Friary 20 March 1929. A newly opened friary generally implies pioneer day conditions in many respects. Such was also the case in the new home of the novitiate. The environment of the friary had to be transformed into the proper setting of a monastery. That meant daily toil with shovel, pick, wheelbarrow, etc. Anscar's class was the first to pronounce vows in the new monastery.

From Huntington the class proceeded to Marathon to begin the last lap of the long journey towards the priesthood. It saw some further changes or innovations in the regular course of studies. His class—at least a part of it—was the first that had the three years course of studies in philosophy as demanded by the Constitutions of the Order. It likewise was the first to enjoy the privilege of receiving ordination to the priesthood at the end of the third year of theology.

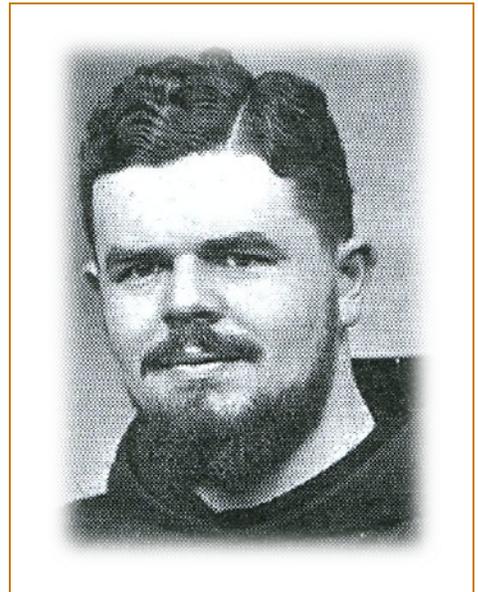
The study of philosophy and theology offered no difficulties for his talents but were rather an intellectual and spiritual pleasure. To keep him occupied his superiors had to provide other activities and interests for him. He wrote his first article for publication for the *Orate Fratres* magazine on a liturgical subject. This branch engrossed his attention very much at the time. He was ordained to the priesthood 16 June 1935, by Bp. William Griffin, of La Crosse, WI. It was the bishop's first ordination.

During the summer months four of the newly ordained were employed—at the request of Father Philip—to take up a religious census among the black population of Milwaukee. Anscar wrote an article on the experiences and results of the work which was published in the *Messenger*. The work at St. Benedict's was more than a novel experience for him. He went back to Marathon determined to make the most of this his last year in the clericate.

He had been told repeatedly during his years of study that he was destined for postgraduate work after completing the regular course of studies in the clericate. It would be either Rome (the International Capuchin College) or Washington. The condition of his health made his superiors decide for Washington. They feared that his weak lungs would fare badly in the Roman winters. The course chosen for him was Canon Law.

During his three years' course at the Catholic University, Anscar lived in the Capuchin friary at Washington. His brilliant talents won for him admiration and respect, but it was the genuine simplicity of character that won for him the love of his confreres. The dean of the Canon Law Department stated that Anscar was the most brilliant student they had had in their professorship of many years. He secured the doctorate in Canon Law on 15 June 1939.

The thesis of his dissertation was Canonical Elections. The greatest tribute paid to the proficiency in his studies at the Catholic University came a year later when the Rector of the University approached Father Provincial to secure Anscar for the Catholic University. Father Provincial left the decision to the faculty at Marathon. They voted against the proposal perhaps mainly to retain the services of the young lector for the department of homiletics.



As professor his talents and especially his facility in grasping truths and principles did not render him incapable of sympathizing with those whose minds worked more sluggishly. Nor was he impatient. He generally tried to find some grain of truth in a wrong answer and was ever ready to encourage the student. He was not "bookish" in his teaching. His object was to help prepare the mind of the young religious for the values of spiritual life and the activity of a priest. That was the message of most of his remarks, stories and illustrations that he used in the class room.

His career as teacher was to be short lived. Early in the school year, 1942-1943 it was discovered that he had high blood pressure due to sclerosis of the arteries. He had to relinquish some of his classes. About the middle of January, 1945, Father Anscar contracted another cold. It was feared at the time that he had pneumonia.

Anscar was sent to St. Mary's Hospital in Wausau. He was considered a model patient and that is indeed a tribute when one has to spend months and months in bed.

The last week he was partly in a coma. He was appreciative of the smallest service and welcomed spiritual thoughts suggested to him. His last words were, as far as it is known, an expression of thanks to the chaplain of the hospital who had given him his blessing. He passed away without any visible struggle shortly before 7:00 a.m. on Sunday, 17 June 1945. His brother, Father Myles, was at his bedside when he died.

The funeral was on Wednesday morning, 20 June 1945. Anscar's brother Myles was the main celebrant, assisted by Fathers Allan [O'Brien] and Gall [Higgins] as Deacon and Sub-deacon. Father Kevin [Smyth] preached on the theme of the pain of loss. God shows us in His inspired Word that we should be consoled and have hope even in our sorrow. The words were addressed particularly to the mother of Father Anscar, who was present.

The day had been threatening. It was cloudy and looked as though it might rain. Yet as the strains of the Benedictus rose solemnly from out of the pines, the sun broke through the clouds in a fierce brightness to break the spell of cloudiness and darkness—a fitting symbol of the meaning of the funeral services in human life.



## Friar remembered 64 years after his death

By Dan Crosby, Capuchin



It's a long time between 1945 and 2009. On 23 June 2009, St. Anthony Retreat Center had the unique opportunity to remember a precious event of 17 June 1945: the death and burial of Anscar Parsons. For 64 years Anscar has rested, with eleven other Capuchin Friars, beneath the cross in the retreat center cemetery. His grave is visited not only by friars who remember him (fewer and fewer!), but also by friars who never knew him but came to value and appreciate him through Dominic Meyer's mimeograph biography of him: "God Is All That Matters".

On 23 June, Anscar's sister, 84-year-old Rose Marie Parsons Quilty, achieved one of the goals of her life: to finally "make a pilgrimage" to St. Anthony's to visit this place he helped to make holy, and to pray at his grave. She was 20 when he died, but because the Second World War was still going on, only her widowed mother was able to come from Yonkers NY for the funeral.

Rose Marie and her husband Ed flew from their home in South Carolina to Missouri so they could make this "pilgrimage" with their daughter Kathleen and her two teen-age children. They had told St. Anthony's about their visit. To make it more special for them, Dan Crosby (retreat center director) contacted Bea Schauer in Wausau, a 90-year-old nurse who volunteered many years at St. Anthony's. She had been one of Anscar's nurses at St. Mary Hospital during the painful six month period leading to his death (at 34) of hardening of the arteries. She had never forgotten Anscar and his beautiful spirit, convinced that in serving him she really was looking at and serving Christ himself. Bea was delighted to come out to meet his family, celebrate Eucharist and a meal together and share stories.

And so it all came together on 23 June, the 74th anniversary of Anscar's first mass at Sacred Heart Church in Yonkers. St. Anthony's was conducting its annual five-day preached retreat, so at mass, the retreatants were immersed in some of the history being remembered: the gospel life Anscar lived so beautifully. Dinner came later as well as a tour and visit to the cemetery — and presenting Rose Marie with her own copy of Dominic's book (she said that even after he became secretary to Padre Pio, Dominic never forgot Anscar, writing frequently to Mrs. Parsons). The family was thrilled. Rose Marie's husband, Ed, later wrote:

*"Words escape us to know what to say in thanks for your kind and gracious reception in our visit to St. Anthony's. Rose Marie has long waited for the opportunity to visit Father Anscar's grave site, which meant so much to her. But she never expected to experience the love and affection that continues in memory of her brother, Anscar...We really left with a sense of being part of the Capuchin Order."*

Rose Marie (Anscar's sister) is in the front row (center). On her left is Bea Schauer, and on her right is Lois Olson, a former volunteer and friend to St. Anthony's. Rose Marie's husband is on the top row next to Dan Crosby.

