

Father Basil Rechenberg, O.S.B., 86

At 11:40 P.M. on November 1, 2014, just as All Saints' Day was to yield to All Souls' Day, Father Basil Rechenberg, O.S.B. of Saint Benedict Abbey, Still River, Massachusetts, died peacefully after a long struggle with Parkinson's disease, with Father Anthony Kloss, O.S.B. at his bedside.

Harry William "Bill" Rechenberg was born on June 27, 1928 in Memphis, Tennessee, the son of Harry William Rechenberg and Louise (Meacham) Rechenberg, and raised in the Episcopal faith. His family subsequently moved to Dallas, Texas, where, in 1945, Bill graduated from Woodrow Wilson High School. Three years later he received his B.A. with high honors from Southern Methodist University. He then spent a year at the University of Chicago in the Department of Classics, where he cultivated an abiding appreciation of Latin and Greek. In 1949, he decided to pursue theological training at Seabury-Western Theological Seminary in Evanston, Illinois, where he received the Licentiate in Theology and the Bachelor of Divinity. It was during this time that a significant additional field of interest began, one that eventually became a specialty. In 1950, he began clinical training at the Psychopathic Hospital of the State University of Iowa at Iowa City. Following graduation from Seabury-Western Theological Seminary and ordination to the diaconate in the Episcopal Church, Bill felt an inclination toward the monastic way of life and chose to enter the Episcopalian Benedictine monastery, Saint Gregory's, at Three Rivers, Michigan. In 1953, after a year as a novice, he left, and shortly after, was received into the Roman Catholic Church.

Upon his return to secular life, Bill accepted the position of psychologist at the Iowa State Penitentiary at Fort Madison, Iowa, from 1953-57. During this period, he renewed his studies at the University of Chicago, this time in the Department of Psychology. He worked as research assistant on a study of the dynamics of small groups for the Air Force, on the development of the Children's Insight Test at the Psychosomatic and Psychiatric Research and Training Institute of Michael Reese Hospital, and as research fellow on a study of infantile autism at the Child Guidance Clinic of Children's Memorial Hospital, in collaboration with the Institute for Juvenile Research. He also collaborated in the publication of two studies: Fiske, Howard and Rechenberg, "The EPPS Profile Stability Coefficient," *Journal of Consulting Psychology* (1960), and Engel and Rechenberg, "Studies in the Reliability of the Children's Insight Test," *Journal of Projective Techniques* (1961).

Bill's internship in clinical psychology led him from 1960 until 1964 to serve on the staff of the Des Moines Child Guidance Center, while working on his dissertation research on hypnotic age regression, in addition to providing clinical services to the Polk County Juvenile Court, the Younker Rehabilitation Institute and the Social Security Administration.

Then, in 1964, Bill decided to pursue monastic life once again – this time as a Roman Catholic. He entered the Benedictine monastery of Conception Abbey, Conception, Missouri, taking Basil as his name in religion. The three years after his profession of simple vows in 1965 were taken up with the study of theology, and working in the seminary as a staff member of Psychological Services and lecturer in moral theology.

Life begins at forty, quipped Father Basil, for it was at that age, in 1968, that he both took his solemn vows as a monk and was ordained to the Sacred Priesthood. He then was employed during the school year in Conception Seminary College, teaching Latin and chairing the Psychology Department. He also served as socius (assistant director of formation) to the abbey. In 1972, he was elected to Outstanding Educators of America. Among his other credentials at this time were associate of the American Psychological Association and a member of the American Orthopsychiatric Association, the Society for Personality Assessment, the American Classical League and the Classical Association of the Midwest and South. From 1968 to 1985, Fr. Basil had no fewer than thirty-five extended or special temporary assignments outside Conception Abbey including thirteen different assignments as assistant or acting pastor in parishes in Missouri, Iowa, North and South Dakota, Kansas and Tennessee. In addition, he also gave retreats and workshops for religious sisters throughout these same states, and did three stints as hospital chaplain.

Father Basil's life took a dramatic turn when, in 1985, he was assigned by Abbot Jerome Hanus, O.S.B. abbot of Conception Abbey and Abbot President of the Swiss American Congregation, to help the community of Saint Benedict Priory, Still River, Massachusetts, become an autonomous house of the Congregation. He served as superior there during the summers of 1986 and 1987, after which he was appointed Formation Director and Vocation Director (1987-1996) by Prior (later Abbot) Gabriel Gibbs, O.S.B. Father Basil found the Priory's extensive use of Latin in the liturgy more in line with his own preferences, and in 1989, he transferred his stability from Conception Abbey to Saint Benedict Priory. Beginning 1998, he served as chaplain to the nuns of the Abbey of Regina Laudis in Bethlehem, Connecticut. Because of health issues, he returned to Still River in 2001 where he served regularly as porter, until his increasing poor health made him unable.

Father Basil was a Southern gentleman of the old school. Conservatism was in his veins, and, if his attraction to both Tridentine Catholicism and modern psychology seems incongruous, at least he was, despite later trends in psychology, staunchly Freudian. Related to his conservatism was an insistence on correctness, from matters liturgical to grammatical. Anyone answering his *How are you?* with *Good*, might expect to hear: *I'm not asking about your moral state*. To the question *Can I go to confession?* he might reply, *I know that you can and I trust that you may*, making the penitent contrite even before confession started.

While the monks of our community are not allowed to smoke, we made an exception for Father Basil. And smoking - in fact, life in general - was most enjoyable in close quarters. (*Nature*, he said, *was meant to be observed from a window*). An ideal afternoon was sitting in an easy chair in his cell, working on a crossword with one hand, stroking a cat with the other, occasionally flicking his cigarette ash into a nearby tray, interrupting these diversions for anyone willing to endure the nicotine haze for the sake of counselling or confession. He was, in fact, a valued confessor and counsellor for many, both inside and outside the community. He was also continually writing letters, especially in his role as Vocation Director. He kept up an unflagging correspondence with many prospective candidates, and even after relieved of his duties in recruitment and formation, remained solicitous for the spiritual well-being of any young man who was here searching for God, from inquirer to junior monk.

In his last years, as Father Basil's health increasingly required care that we could not give, we had to place him in a nursing home, where one of the monks visited him each day. He mellowed somewhat in his weakened state, letting each adverbial *good* go unchecked, and actually enjoying his confreres' wheeling him outside in the sunshine. He survived several ambulance rides to the hospital, until developing pneumonia, from which he never recovered.

The Monks of Saint Benedict Abbey deeply appreciate all who were attentive to Father Basil in the years of his infirmity, especially his primary care physician, Dr. Paul D'Ambrosio, as well as Dr. William Heinser, who, together with the nurses and staff at Life Care Center, both provided him with professional and loving care, and who enjoyed Father Basil as a patient and a friend. Besides his monastic community, Fr. Basil is survived by his niece, (and God-daughter), Ann Grimes, his sister Elizabeth's daughter, whose love for her uncle sustained him especially in his last years. We also gratefully acknowledge Father Basil's other God-daughter, Courtanay Gemmill who, together with her sisters and mother kept Fr. Basil in their prayers.

Following the Office of the Dead on November 5, the monastic community celebrated Fr. Basil's Funeral Mass on Thursday, November 6. Burial was in the Abbey cemetery. The community was blessed with the presence of retired Archbishop (and Fr. Basil's former abbot) Jerome Hanus, O.S.B. and several priests who joined us in offering Mass for the repose of the soul of our brother. We now ask you who read this please to remember our Father Basil in your prayers. May he rest in peace.

Abbot Xavier and Community
Saint Benedict Abbey
Still River, Massachusetts