

Neal D. McNanna, O. Carm., 1933-1977

Obituary

It was in the Fall of 1947 when this writer first met David (later Neal) McNanna. I was a member of the junior class at the Carmelite Junior Seminary of Our Lady of the Brown Scapular in Hamilton, Massachusetts. "Mac," as he was soon dubbed, was a freshman in the class of 1951 and hailed from Providence, Rhode Island, although he was actually born in Pawtucket, Rhode Island on 30 October 1933. Before enrolling in the third class as CJS, he had attended both Assumption School and St. Michael's School in Providence.

Neal was a sturdily built young man who enjoyed sports and making friends. He put great energy into athletics and studies and was popular with his fellow classmates and the other CJS students. His Rhode Island accent, a variation of the standard New England (Boston) accent, set him in well with the many New Englanders, especially Christopher McElroy, a native of Providence, Rhode Island, who spoke the same way.

During his years at Hamilton, Neal participated in all of the social, religious, academic and athletic activities of the seminary. He was well-liked by most, and enjoyed such activities as the hikes we took to such places as Ipswich and Manchester-by-the-Sea, and the many outdoor days of skiing and sledding, and playing ice hockey.

He was also noted as a devout student who participated well in all the scheduled Masses and devotions which were a part of seminary life in those days. His one drawback seems to have been some difficulty in speech.

On the second Sunday of each month, Hamilton had a Visitor's Day for all the area students. Neal's parents, Mr. and Mrs. Raymond and Katherine (Benson) McNanna, visited him on a regular basis, along with his brother, Raymond, and his sisters, Jocelyn, Katherine and Eileen.

As a senior at Hamilton, he received what was then called the Third Order habit and the religious name of "Brother Neal."

In June of 1951, Neal and his class became the graduation group of the Carmelite Junior Seminary, and in August they went to the Carmelite Novitiate at New Baltimore, Pennsylvania, where they met the segment of their class who had attended Mount Carmel Prep Seminary in Niagara Falls, Ontario. The group formed one class, and as novices were known as "fraters."

On 3 September 1952, Neal and his classmates professed their simple vows in New Baltimore, and then headed for Mount Carmel College in Niagara Falls, Ontario to continue their education. Here, again, Neal was noted for his devotion to studies, athletics and the Carmelite way of life.

On 15 September 1955, Neal and his classmates professed their solemn vows at Niagara and completed their college studies.

Just before this time, Mount Carmel College became affiliated with St. Bonaventure University in Olean, New York. Carmelites were required to attend the St. Bonaventure campus in upstate New York for at least two summers to obtain residence credits. It was here that Neal again excelled in academics, and received his B.A. degree in English from St. Bonaventure. He continued summer school studies there and later received his M.A. degree in the same subject area.

He would later add an M.A. degree from Loyola University in Chicago, Illinois to his academic resume. He also did graduate work in education at the University of Arizona, in journalism at Marquette University in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and in psychology at the University of Rhode Island.

After completing his college studies, Neal and his class went to Whitefriars Hall in Washington, D.C. for theology studies and eventual ordination to the priesthood. Neal continued his dutiful fulfillment of the requirements, and was ordained to the priesthood on 23 May 1959, at the chapel of the Carmelite Junior Seminary at Hamilton, Massachusetts. It was a happy day for the group and their families, along with their First Mass celebrations back home. Neal returned with his family to Pawtucket, Rhode Island for the great celebration.

After a year of further theological studies at the Hall, as "simplex" priests, Neal and his classmates received their first assignments in the Province.

Due to his academic background, and the large number of high schools then conducted by the PCM Province, it is not surprising that Neal would be assigned to Salpointe Catholic High School in Tucson, Arizona to teach English and journalism.

It was during this time that our paths crossed again at Marquette University when we spent a summer together as fellowship students of the Newspaper Fund sponsored by the *Wall Street Journal* newspaper. This writer had received a fellowship the year earlier, and alerted Neal to the possibility. He not only received the fellowship in 1962, but the following year was named one of the nation's outstanding journalism teachers by the Newspaper Fund. It was a joy to share the summer with him at Marquette.

It should be added that Neal not only taught journalism well, but was also an excellent writer. Unfortunately, as he continued teaching and parish work, he wrote less and less.

From 1964-67, Neal taught at Mount Carmel High School in Chicago, Illinois, before returning to his beloved Carmelite Junior Seminary in Hamilton, Massachusetts, where he

remained until 1970. He then was assigned to teach at Mount Carmel in Niagara Falls, Ontario, where he remained until 1974.

In 1975 Neal received his first parish assignment at St. Joseph's in Bogota, New Jersey. And the following year he began a four-year stint at Mt. Carmel parish in Tenafly, New Jersey.

In 1979 Neal was assigned to the staff of St. Therese Chapel in the Northshore Shopping Center of Peabody, Massachusetts. In addition to being on the Shrine staff for Masses, confessions and counseling, he did work as the local vocation director. He had long shown an interest in this area. Neal remained on the staff until 1990.

In that year he began a series of parish assignments in various parts of the PCM Province. His first brief assignment was at Mt. Carmel parish in Newport News, Virginia, and then to St. Anastasia parish in Teaneck, New Jersey (1991-92), and the following year to St. Bernadette parish in Houston, Texas.

In 1994 Neal received what was to be his final assignment to Mt. Carmel parish in Fairfield, California, where he became an associate pastor to fellow New Englander and Hamiltonian Kevin McBrien.

On 4 November 1997 Neal collapsed and died at Mt. Carmel Priory in Fairfield, California. Efforts to revive him proved futile, and plans were made for his funeral and burial.

On 7 November 1997 a wake was held at Mt. Carmel for Neal from noon to 7:30 PM. The following day a Requiem Mass was offered at Mt. Carmel at 10:00 AM, with many area Carmelites concelebrating. Ronald Oakham, Western Commissary Provincial, was the presider and Kevin McBrien was the homilist.

Neal's remains were then shipped back East for burial. A second Requiem Mass was offered on Monday, 10 November 1997 at the Convent Chapel of the Discalced Carmelite Nuns in Danvers, Massachusetts. Burial followed at nearby St. Mary's Cemetery in Salem, Massachusetts.

During much of his apostolic life, Neal struggled with the disease of alcoholism; sometimes successfully and at other times not. His disease sometimes blunted his desire to serve God and His people, to work for the good of the PCM Province and the Carmelite Order. Although the struggle against the disease wasn't always successful, Neal's desire to do the Lord's work never slackened. He is to be remembered as a true Carmelite; intelligent, spiritual, talented and caring.

*Kevin Shanley, O. Carm.
St. Simon Stock Priory
Darien, Illinois*

Homily

I have returned once again to Fairfield for a sad occasion! In July I was here to preach the eulogy for Bill Travers. Now I perform the same task for your priest and our brother Carmelite, Neal McNanna.

When I was asked to speak and sum up Bill Travers' life, I did not know where to begin. So many adventures! So many tales of ministry and military exploits!

With Neal I have the same task but the opposite problem. Where is the drama? Where is the "stuff" of Neal's life? Bill and Neal could not be more opposite in personality! Bill regaled us with his jokes, amazed us with his adventures, commanded our attention, inspired us with his never-say-die willingness to minister!

I lived with Neal David McNanna these last four years. But I cannot remember one joke he told. I cannot recall an adventure he told me about. I never saw him demanding a spotlight on any occasion! A mysterious man in many ways, because of so much that he kept inside himself. Where do we discover the element, the "stuff" that made up Neal's life, his life of 45 years as a Carmelite and 38 years as a priest? As Bill basqued in the center state, Neal longed for the backstage! Neal gave new meaning to the phrase, "he plays his cards close to the vest."

But in Carmel there is always room for the "center-stagers" and the "back-stagers"! The flamboyant friar or the quiet contemplative -- both have a right to be part of Carmel because our spirit is based on a complex man who embraced those opposite qualities of extroversion and introversion -- Elijah, the fiery prophet who was also the brooding solitary. Carmel has always attracted to itself these two opposite human character traits.

Was it the brooding solitary side of Elijah that attracted Neal, appealed to him? Perhaps. There is precedent for that.

For me, as you know, a cross would be to keep my mouth shut, to be cut off from the excitement of the city, to be prevented from exploring the color of people's lives!

For Neal a heavy cross was to be thrust into the public arena of any type! He would prefer not to speak, if given the chance. City lights were blinding to him, not enticing. He preferred the desolate beauty of Point Reyes on our rocky coast over the bustle and business of San Francisco! Neal preferred the porch at the priory with his newspaper over "mixing it up" with the folks! To engage people was a difficult and sometimes painful experience for him. He had to bite the bullet to do so -- but he never refused to do so! I remember him telling me upon his arrival at Our Lady of Mt. Carmel that "I don't have much to give, but what I will give you is 110% of what I have." That is exactly what he did!

It was easy for Neal to compose a homily. He carefully constructed what he would say. It was painful for him to deliver that homily. After a Sunday Mass he was spent! A pool of sweat, red-faced and exhausted, but he never balked. He never made excuses for himself. He was always faithful to his ministry of Eucharist. It was an easy task for Neal to read voraciously in the *National Catholic Reporter* about the theological insights and the latest ecclesiastical wrestling in the Church, but quite another thing, and difficult for him, to talk about his own feelings. He fled from the exposing light of center stage, but quietly embraced his ministry to you, his people! He gave it his all.

He gave it his all -- from Sunday liturgies, to nursing home visits, to the bedside of the sick and the dying at the hospital. And he did this not out of a sense of posed sympathy, but for those who were down and out, he approached them with heartfelt concern. He truly had compassion more than sympathy. He suffered *with* an "injured" person, not just for them! Perhaps only the suffering really know what suffering feels like.

His shyness brought him relief from "the crowds", but it also isolated him from the shoulder of another.

Somehow he managed to turn his shyness into gain. So many in this parish benefitted from his presence, his attention, his compassion.

To some, Neal seemed so simple, even foolish. But as with Paul in our reading this morning, we so many times see that God chooses the simple to shame the wise, the weak to shame the strong. Parishioners felt God's strength through Neal's weakness. In many ways, Neal was like a shy child in a man's body. But God best reveals himself in the child-like. And so Jesus can say to Neal, the child today: "Come to me, you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest."

But we are saying much too much about our brother Neal. This is contrary, as you know, to his nature. All this talk about him! I am surprised he hasn't left, as he had done on many an occasion when any gathering lasted more than an hour! He would be most embarrassed about all we have said and done so far on his behalf.

So I will end this eulogy, much to his delight and relief, even now, I am sure! I will end with the words of another solitary, a cloistered Carmelite Nun and poet, Jessica Powers, who penned these words, which I think so aptly capture not just what Neal was but where he is. In her poem, "The Homecoming", she writes:

The spirit, newly freed from earth
is all amazed at the surprise
of her belonging: suddenly
to see herself, to realize
the heritage that lets her be
at home where all this glory lies.

By naught foretold could she have guessed
such welcome home: the robe, the ring,
music and endless banqueting,
these people hers, this place of rest
known, as of long remembering
herself a child of God and pressed
with warm endearments to His breast.

*Kevin McBrien, O. Carm.
Our Lady of Mount Carmel Priory
Encino, California*