

Obituary of Friar Richard Jeske, O.F.M. 1932-2018

“All I ever wanted to do was help people!”

On the west side of Cleveland, Ohio, in the first half of the last century, was Jeske Construction, a very successful construction company, owned and operated by Gustav Jeske. Married to Paula Friedl, Gustav, and his wife, lived a mere 3 blocks from their Franciscan parish: Our Lady of the Angels Church. It was into this work environment, and this Franciscan community, that Gustav and Paula would bring up their family; first, three daughters: Gertrude, Paula, and Monica, and then, three sons: Tom, Ralph, and, finally, Richard, who was born on July 20, 1932.

After his grade school years at Our Lady of the Angels, Richard went to St. Joseph’s Minor Seminary in Westmont, Illinois, for his high school and first two years of college. On July 4, 1952, Richard was received by Provincial Eligius Weir, O.F.M., into the Franciscan novitiate in Teutopolis, Illinois, and was given the religious name of “Celsus”. Simple Profession was celebrated one year later on July 5, 1953. His solemn profession was received at OLA in Cleveland by Provincial, Pius Barth, O.F.M., on July 5, 1956. Completing his years of theology back in Teutopolis, Illinois, he was ordained by Bishop Henry A. Pinger, O.F.M., on June 24, 1959. The parish bulletin for OLA Parish in Cleveland, Ohio, on June 28, 1959, celebrated the newly ordained: “Our Lady of the Angels welcomes home another of her most favored sons; this morning at 9:30 am, Fr. Celsus Jeske, a Franciscan Priest-Son of the Parish, offers his First Solemn Mass in the surroundings of his youth – back home! We congratulate sincerely the happy father and mother, the brothers and sisters, and dear relatives, who are privileged to see their very own at the Altar of God.”

Article #46 of our Franciscan General Statutes advises us: “The friars are to dedicate themselves to the task of evangelization wherever they may be and whatever work they may be doing so that they may announce the coming of the Kingdom of God through simple Franciscan presence, witness of life, words and deeds.” These words took shape in a variety of ways in the life of the newly-ordained, Fr. Celsus Jeske, O.F.M.. He began his priestly service by accepting a call to the missions in Brazil from 1960 to 1964. Returning in 1964, he was an assistant pastor at St. Patrick’s Parish in Lincoln, Nebraska (64-67), and then at Holy Trinity Parish in Dubuque, Iowa (67-69). From 69-72, he returned to Cleveland, Ohio, and Our Lady of Angels Friary, while completing Clinical Training at Hawthornden State Hospital; from 72-77, he lived at St. Anthony Friary in Cleveland while serving as a chaplain at Western Reserve Psychiatric Rehabilitation Center in Cleveland. During these years, Richard completed a Master’s degree in psychology from Ashland University in Ashland, Ohio.

In the mid-1970s, the Sacred Heart Province made a decision to enter a new mission area in Zaire, West Africa, working alongside our Belgian friars. A call went out from the province for friars to volunteer for the new mission. Richard was one of those who responded and, in 1977, he, along with Jim Hoffman, O.F.M., Val Messerich, O.F.M., and Cyril Wagner, O.F.M., was sent to the new mission endeavor. Unfortunately, for them, the endeavor was short-lived, as a rebel invasion made it too dangerous to remain in the region. Richard returned home within the year to live at St. Jude’s in Cleveland and work as a chaplain at Sunny Acres Hospital and Matt Talbot Inn. With a call to mission still alive in his heart, Richard returned to Brazil in 1979, and was there for the next 6 years, completing a total of 10 years in Brazil. His ministry was always as a parish priest, visiting rural communities around Mojui dos Campos and Itaituba, and at St. Anthony Parish in Belem. Family members speak yet today with fond memories of how his

home visits were occasions for family reunions where they would hear the stories of his mission experiences. One niece, who went to O.L.A. Grade School, talked “about both their pride, and sometimes fear, as their uncle, Fr. Richard, would come into their classrooms and regale their classmates with stories from life in Brazil as a Franciscan missionary”. Another niece said: “he had a quick, very dry sense of humor and wonderful story-telling ability ... we loved listening to him. He was ... larger than life.”

Richard returned to the States in 1985 and ministered as parochial vicar at both Our Lady of the Angels Parish in Cleveland, and then, later, at St. Anthony Parish in Parma. From 86 to 88, he was chaplain at Oak Forest Hospital while living at St. Roch’s Friary in Oak Forest, Illinois. Beginning in 1988, he moved to Quincy, Illinois, and, for the next 20 years, was the Catholic chaplain at the Illinois Veterans Home in Quincy, while living at Holy Cross Friary there. He retired from the Veterans Home in 2008 and, semi-retired, he moved to St. Anthony’s Friary in St. Louis, Missouri, and served as a senior associate at the parish from 2009 to 2013.

In 2012, while enjoying his usual bike ride around the south side of St. Louis, Richard was in an accident which resulted in a serious brain injury that would remain with him for the rest of his life. He was able to move out of the Lansdowne Nursing Home to live with the friars at St. Germain Friary in Dittmer, Missouri for a year, but, eventually, was asked, in 2014, to move to the retirement community at Blessed Giles Friary in Manitowoc, Wisconsin.

In Manitowoc, Richard became famous as ‘The Walker’, as he walked 6 to 8 miles a day, all over the town, all year long, rain or shine. Introducing himself to people he would meet as ‘Richard the Lion-Hearted’, this is how many people in town came to know ‘the Franciscan who walked.’ While walking in February, 2017, Richard fell on the sidewalk and was taken to Holy Family Hospital to be diagnosed with a ‘fractured pelvis’. Other complications followed and Richard’s last year was spent at St. Mary’s Nursing Home in Felician Village. During a summer visit with several of his nieces from Ohio, Richard summed up his Franciscan life for them: “All I ever wanted to do was help people.”

Almost a year to the day he fell, Richard began to decline and died on Tuesday, February 13th, at St. Mary’s Home. His funeral was held on Saturday, February 17th, at the Blessed Angela Chapel in the Village. Joining his brother friars were three of his nieces from Ohio: Luann, Lois, and Laura (daughters of his brother, Ralph), the Felician sisters, staff from the Village and neighbors. Vicar Provincial, Fr. John Eaton, O.F.M., presided and preached (scriptures were from Wisdom 3:1-6, 9, Romans 8:14-23, and Luke’s Emmaus Story) about how Fr. Richard belonged to God, how he knew God as his “Abba”, and how the Emmaus story provided for him a framework for Franciscan life and ministry. Following the Liturgy, Fr. Richard’s body was buried in the friars’ plot in Calvary Cemetery in Manitowoc.

In your kindness, please consider making a donation in memory of Fr. Richard Jeske, O.F.M., to the Development Office of the Franciscan Province of the Sacred Heart. Please send your charitable contribution to: St. Anthony Friary, 3140 Meramec St., St. Louis, Missouri, 63118-4399.