

# New book highlights Capuchin's 'golden' life story

## After 50 years, social activist priest retires to Kaukauna

By Joyce Schubring  
For the Times-Villager

Father Timon Costello, O.F.M. Cap., believes timing is everything.

In recent years, as the Capuchin contemplated retiring from a long, full life in his chosen religious vocation, he felt a "need" to preserve his unique personal story.

"It all seems unbelievable," Costello, 77, said of his half century of service to God through the Catholic Church, "so that's why I thought it should be written down."

The story of this self-described "dreamer, optimist and social activist" is quite unusual. His assignments took him to parishes throughout the United States, including Appleton, as well as to dangerous foreign service. During his ministry, he touched the lives of thousands of needy people. He extended a helping hand in faith and offered them hope.

Costello suffered a stroke in 2007 that put an end to his public ministry but not his desire to record his memoirs. After he regained his health sufficiently he moved to St. Paul Villa in Kaukauna, where he began the creative process.

Now, that book, featuring his life story in two parts, has been published and is available at St. Patrick's Bookstore in Appleton.

"I'm very pleased with the book for two reasons," Father said. "I wanted to write my story because I've had a very interesting life. And then it came at a good time because I'd had a stroke, which ended my career (and freed up time to devote to his story), so this book also finishes up my career. It's good timing."

Author and longtime Costello associate Tim R. Garvey wrote in his introduction to Part I of Costello's book, titled "From Farm Boy to Friar," that Father's story "needs telling — and retelling — about sermons delivered, masses consecrated, babies baptized, marriages performed and folks sent off to their eternal lives. ... For Fr.

Timon there were these plus many more, i.e., homes for the homeless, care for the addicted, hope for the imprisoned, and justice and peace for the victimized."

Garvey interviewed many others for the biography while Fr. Timon's personal reflections, "Autobiographical Sketches," offer additional insight.

In the second part of the book, called "Golden Years ... Golden Jubilee," Father recounts his life story in detail to writer William Nomit. Fr. Timon celebrated his Golden Jubilee on Sept. 18, 2008, and that milestone brought not only his ministry but also the book to a close.

### Choice of vocation

Father's choice of vocation is rooted in his childhood. Born William Costello in 1932 to parents of Irish descent, Fr. Timon was one of 10 children raised on the family dairy farm near Fond du Lac during the Depression. Despite difficult economic times, Costello said his parents accepted whatever life handed them as "an act of faith."

The Costello children didn't realize they were poor: "We didn't know the difference at the time," he said. What they did know was that their mother, a former teacher, gave them an invaluable gift — a love of reading — that served as a foundation for their education and professional lives. One child became a doctor, one a nurse, one a priest and the youngest a nun.

William's desire to be a priest was influenced by his third-grade teacher, who prepared her students for First Communion. In William's case, however, she did much more than that; she impacted his career choice.

Costello joined the Capuchin community, noted for its frugal lifestyle and tradition of joyful service, in 1950 at the age 18. He was cloistered at a monastery where he sported a red beard, wore a heavy wool habit year round, and spoke just one day a week. "I had a very simple life and that's what I liked. People ask if it was hard to give up things and I said I didn't want them. ... I wanted just the blessed simplicity of the gifts that I had," he said.

After ordination in 1958, Costello worked with the youth at an inner-city parish in Milwaukee. Four years later, he was transferred to Detroit to fill the order's newly created position of public relations director.

His job was to raise funds so the Capuchins could expand their facilities. He visited wealthy and influential families. Although he was good at fundraising and marketing, Costello was uncomfortable hobnobbing with the rich and famous. He felt his ministry was better suited to working with the poor, homeless, and people addicted to alcohol and other drugs.

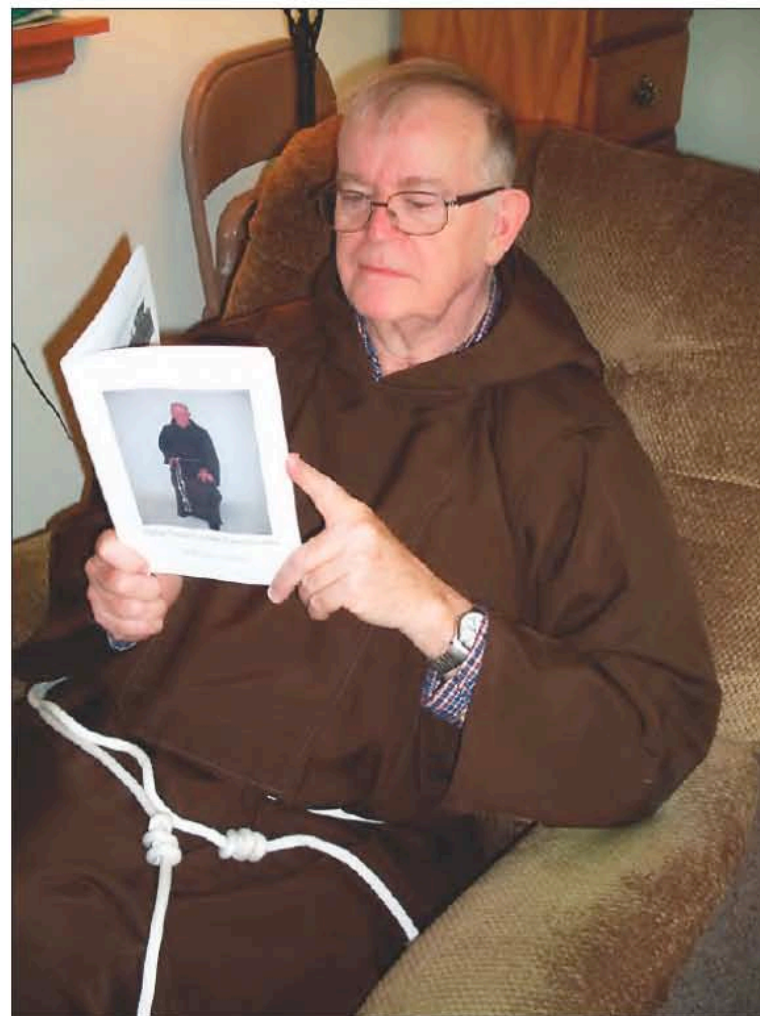
The order agreed and sent him to St. Joseph Parish in Appleton, where he founded the halfway house movement.

### Social activist

First, however, Costello revived the parish youth program by finding a place for teenage students to gather and socialize. He turned the basement of the old parish school into a college-age coffee house, The Cavern, and opened another coffee house, the Shangri-La, for high-schoolers.

While fulfilling his parish duties, Father visited the poor and down-trodden parishioners who lived in an unsavory part of Appleton, Koehnke's Woods. He was appalled by their living conditions. One night one of the residents froze to death.

That death motivated him to take action. Costello asked his order if he could start a halfway house and live with the poor. "My highest superior who lived in Detroit came to see me and said, 'I understand you want to start a halfway house.' 'Yes,' I



Joyce Schubring photo

**Father Timon Costello, OFM Cap., examines a copy of his recently published biography. During his career with the Franciscan Capuchin Order, he ministered to the poor, homeless and needy people in Appleton and most often is remembered for starting the halfway house movement there. Now retired, he lives at St. Paul Villa in Kaukauna.**

replied. 'What's a halfway house?' he asked, and I said, 'I don't know.' He said, 'Do it!'"

So Costello turned the upper floor

of an old hotel into a halfway house called Villa Hope in January 1970. The facility was to be a stopping off

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## Sherwood examining Town of Harrison conditions on water metering station

By Tom Collins  
For the Times-Villager

A closed session in a committee-level meeting draws immediate attention. It's not the usual matter one sees on municipal agenda. And when it involves a discussion about the Appleton to Sherwood water pipeline, it definitely became an item to research.

Sherwood not only had a closed session on the matter at its July 20

project.

While delineating some conditions is not unusual, the number and length of the conditions (running into five pages) has called into question whether the matter will be a bump in the water pipeline construction process or will lead to a blockage of the potential water flow.

The project already has permits in place from such varied sources as the state Public Service

village that such a condition of certified survey map approval is beyond the town to impose and is illegal," wrote Sherwood attorney Richard Carlson recently.

The attorneys will work to resolve the numerous issues and conditions being imposed by the Harrison officials. And the village leaders in Sherwood are keeping an eye on the final outcome, tapping into the Appleton water source.

**Book**

*continued from page 1*

place for men halfway between institutional treatment and independent living; a refuge; a place of dignity and respect; a bridge to future life; and, more importantly, a home where all were welcome.

"I'd always heard people say, 'We have no poor in Appleton,'" Costello said, "so rather than argue with them, I took the poor and needy in so they saw and understood. If you never saw it (poverty), you didn't know it existed."

As the first live-in director, Fr. Timon was at Villa Hope 24/7. The men released from prison and abandoned by society came to live with him, and they needed all kinds of help. Only once was Costello assaulted by one of the men he was trying to help; he was beaten and choked by a drunk. The incident did not deter him, however: "I had him

**Fr. Timon's book**

A book detailing the life and ministry of Father Timon Costello, OFM Cap., is available for \$7.95 at St. Patrick's Bookstore, Appleton.

arrested and just went on" with his ministry, he said.

He recalled a resident once asking him, "Why do you live here when we are no good?"

"Isn't that profound?" Costello marveled. "Why did they come there? Because they were beaten down. Halfway houses were needed back then, and still are today, although they are much more accepted today."

The need for additional housing prompted Costello to found Villa Phoenix in 1971. "The houses were accepted (by the neighbors) because there was live-in help," said Fr. Timon, who called himself "lucky" to have had a handful of dedicated young men assist him.

"The directors were the residents' family; we spent time together at night so they weren't spinning their wheels outside. The fact that these houses are still going on means I started something important."

Social change occurred slowly at first, and then built momentum. The community finally acknowledged that there were poor and homeless people who needed help and started to support Costello's

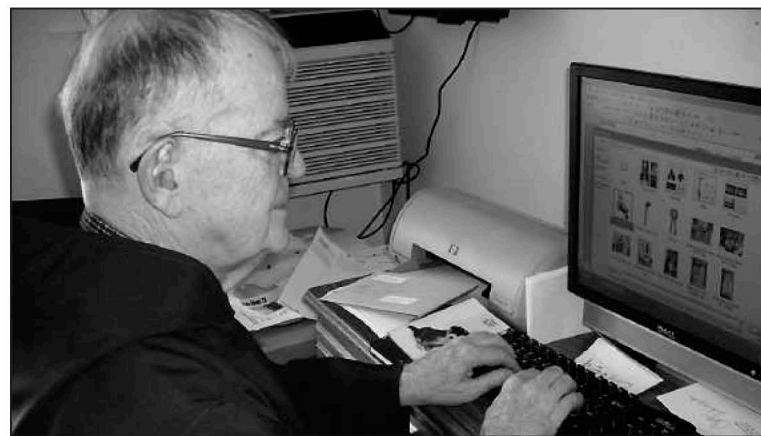
efforts to bring about reform. With this backing and encouragement, Father helped plan and found other halfway houses for men and women in the area.

He realized that Villa Hope and Villa Phoenix needed financial support in order to succeed. "Fr. Timon started St. Patrick's Bookstore, a non-profit store, in July 1976. The store, located today inside the Northland Mall, Appleton, has grown into one of the largest Christian gift and books stores in the Valley, with profits going back into various community organizations each year," Patricia DeMarco, store manager, said.

The bookstore offers distinctive gifts of books, including Fr. Timon's, as well as statues, music, jewelry, wall decor, sacramental gifts, and more.

**Dangerous foreign mission**

Costello left Appleton in the late 1970s to embark on a dangerous foreign mission. The church sent priests to the Middle East in disguise to minister to the Catholics living in the region. Any priest who was found out was dealt with harshly. Father went to the region



Joyce Schubring photo

**Father Timon Costello uses the computer in his apartment at St. Paul Villa to keep in touch with old friends and to publish a monthly newsletter for and about his fellow Capuchins.**

disguised as Mr. Timon Costello, a "special teacher." For two years he carried out his ministry undetected, and then one day he was summoned by the police chief and ordered to leave the country.

"I was lucky," Costello said. "I was just thrown out of the county. We had a priest who was caught and put in prison, a dark dungeon, for a month." It took a big diplomatic effort by the Vatican to get him released.

Several years later Father learned that he was expelled because he was suspected of being a CIA agent.

**Back to Appleton**

After his return to the U.S., Costello took a sabbatical and then served various parishes from Montana to Guam before returning to Appleton in 1988 to serve as a community resource for the halfway house movement and to develop new monetary sources of funding for his initiatives.

His new projects included the relocation of Villa Hope from the old hotel to a new facility, the implementation of the multi-use mixed housing concept at Pioneer Village on the campus of the former Institute of Paper Chemistry, and the establishment of COTS, a low-cost housing facility for men.

"COTS is a descriptive word; no one has to wonder what's there," said Father, who served as the first live-in director. "That (facility) got full and they needed a place for homeless women, so we put women there and the men over at Pioneer Village."

Costello left Appleton in 2005. He felt he'd done his best and it was time for others to carry on his work. "One of the reasons I didn't mind leaving was I often thought of what Henry Ford had said: 'When the founder stays on, it destroys the institution.'"

He completed several short-term assignments before he went back to

parish ministry in New Mexico on a semi-retired basis. There Father suffered a series of mini strokes that prompted him to return to the Capuchins in Milwaukee.

He had a full-blown stroke in September 2007 and it took him almost a year to recover his health. During that time he retired from his pastoral ministry, made his home at the St. Paul Villa in Kaukauna, and marked his Golden Jubilee.

**Fr. Costello's legacy**

As he reflected on his life and career, Costello said he hopes to be remembered as a social activist. Back in the 1970s, "a priest did not do that. You had to have that spunk to put up with the opposition. I was an originator of things. If you are going to be an activist, you have to be convincing and keep right on going."

Costello is proud of his life's work. "It gives me a feeling of accomplishment, especially when youths join the monastery and say from (age) 18 on, 'All I want to do is give my talents back to the Lord.' And you just do it. All of a sudden you get a whole bunch of people who are helping you accomplish things. The more I was at it, the more I was able to do because it began to be accepted."

As the social reform movement grew, it encouraged people to treat others, especially the needy, with dignity and Father sees that as his legacy. "I think that we will get more and more understanding about the dignity of people and we won't categorize them as to how poor they are. It'll take away that stigma. ..."

Now that his story has been told, Father feels a sense of fulfillment. "... I am proud of what I did. ... I've no regrets. I've written my book, I've lived my life and I've had a stroke. I don't fuss about anything. I say to myself that at 77 if I die tomorrow, I'm so darn curious as to what it's going to be like."

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