

Provincial minister brings experience, education to job

Fr. Celichowski involved in Capuchins' work nationally, internationally

By **Maryangela Layman Román**
Catholic Herald Staff

ST. FRANCIS — With Fr. John Celichowski's resume, it's no wonder his fellow Capuchins elected him provincial minister of the Capuchin Province of St. Joseph. A Capuchin who entered the order in 1987 and was ordained a priest in 1993, Fr. Celichowski is a lawyer, and member of the Franciscans International board. Yet, even though the Milwaukee native was the top vote getter during the chapter meeting held in June, his appointment came as a surprise to one person: himself.

"I went into the chapter and knew I had been nominated, but I didn't think I'd have much of a chance to be elected," said the 46-year-old priest during a recent interview with your Catholic Herald. "I was very happy where I was," he said of his appointment as pastor of St. Martin de Porres Parish, Milwaukee, a position he had held since 2004.

"They did a straw poll at the chapter and that's when I got scared because my name got to the top of the straw poll. Once we did the straw poll, we did actual balloting and after the first ballot, I almost had twice as many votes as the next guy and I really got scared," he explained, adding he was elected on the second ballot.

Difficult to leave Milwaukee

While Fr. Celichowski may have been a reluctant winner, now that he's had a few months in his new position as provincial minister, a role he described as "canonically the ordinary of the province in the same way as the bishop is of the diocese," he's looking for-



Fr. John Celichowski

ward to the challenges.

Leaving Milwaukee, and especially St. Martin de Porres, was difficult, he admitted. Many of his family members, including his mother, Camilla Meyer, brother, Tim and sister, Kerry McCue, live in the area.

"When I started at St. Martin, I was hoping for 10, maybe 12 years because I had never really been to a place any longer than four years," he said, calling his years at St. Martin "probably the happiest four years I've spent as a priest."

The Capuchin Province of St. Joseph, with 184 friars, is headquartered in Detroit, the city Fr. Celichowski now calls home. One of his main tasks during his three-year term, which can be renewed for another three, is to visit all of the Capuchin priors in the province and observe their ministries. Fr. Celichowski noted he plans to strategically schedule visits to Arizona and California during the winter months. He'll also be traveling to Minnesota, Montana, New Mexico, Indiana, Illinois and Wisconsin to meet with

Capuchins at ministries such as retreat centers in Appleton and in Marathon in the Superior Diocese or St. Lawrence Seminary in Mt. Calvary.

The trip to St. Lawrence will be a homecoming for Fr. Celichowski, who along with his twin brother, Chris and younger brother, Tim, is a graduate of the school. All three boys attended SS. Peter and Paul Elementary School in Milwaukee, and chose St. Lawrence Seminary at the suggestion of one of their father's patients. Dr. John Celichowski is a retired dentist now living in the La Crosse Diocese.

Eyes opened to priesthood

The minor seminary opened Fr. Celichowski's eyes to the idea of priesthood which he recalls discussing with his father.

"He told me, 'You probably need to get out of the Capuchin thing for a while and figure out if it's something you want to do, and if the Lord really wants you to do it, the call will still be there after you go to college,'" he said.

Fr. Celichowski and his twin headed to the University of Wisconsin – Stevens Point but during his junior year, he felt a strong tug toward the Capuchins and he transferred to the University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee and entered the novitiate program. He earned his bachelor's degree from UWM in political science.

Ironically, after college, Fr. Celichowski applied to be a postulant with the Capuchins, but was not accepted. He lacked maturity and didn't exhibit qualities that would allow him to live well in community, they told him.

Looking back, Fr. Celi-

chowski called it a good decision.

"I was not of a mindset where I would have done well in community. I was very idealistic and I didn't deal well with people who didn't deal well with my ideals," he said adding, "I was very hard on myself, too."

Getting a second chance

The Capuchins, however, gave him a second chance, asking him to work at St. Justin Martyr Parish, in Chicago. He spent a year at the inner city parish, tutoring children and working as the business manager of the school. After the year, he applied again to the postulancy program and this time was accepted. From 1986 to 1987, he lived with the Capuchins in Detroit. In 1988, he professed first vows at the former St. Elizabeth Parish, Milwaukee, which later became St. Martin de Porres.

After his vows, however, Fr. Celichowski saw patterns in his life that he knew needed changing. He went to Alcoholics Anonymous meetings and eventually was treated for alcoholism and an eating disorder.

"I was starting to use alcohol in a way that was not healthy," he said, explaining he was drinking on his own in secret. "I had seen enough in other areas of my life to not like the direction I was going so I decided to do something about it."

After successfully completing AA's 12-step program, he started studies for ordination at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago. He was ordained a priest in 1993 and spent his first few years in Chicago parishes.

Law degree useful

Three years later, he was asked by the Capuchins to consider pursuing an advanced degree. Thinking back to his college days, Fr. Celichowski chose law, something he had considered as an undergraduate.

He studied for three years at Georgetown University in Washington D.C. Because the law school was located close to the capitol, Fr. Celichowski served internships at Network, the national Catholic social justice lobby and at the Brady Center, which promotes handgun regulations.