

OBITUARY FOR FATHER BENEDICT JOSEPH GROESCHEL, CFR

Famed author, speaker, psychologist, and spiritual director, Father Benedict Joseph (Robert Peter) Groeschel, CFR, 81, died at St. Joseph's Home for the elderly in Totowa, New Jersey on October 3, 2014, after a long illness. The eldest of six children, Father Groeschel was born in Jersey City, New Jersey on July 23, 1933 to the late Edward Joseph Groeschel and Marjule Smith Groeschel and attended Catholic schools in both Jersey City and Caldwell, New Jersey. Ten days after his 1951 graduation from Immaculate Conception High School in Montclair, New Jersey he entered the novitiate of the Capuchin Franciscan Friars of the Province of St. Joseph in Huntington, Indiana. Adopting the name Benedict Joseph in honor of St. Benedict Joseph Labré, he pronounced his first vows as a Capuchin in 1952 and his final vows in 1954. Father Groeschel completed his theological studies at the Capuchin Franciscan Seminary of Mary Immaculate in Garrison, New York in 1959, and on June 20th of that year was ordained to the priesthood in Sacred Heart Church, Yonkers, New York.

His first priestly assignment, that of interim Catholic Chaplain at Children's Village in Dobbs Ferry, New York, a residential facility for troubled children, was a post he expected to occupy only for a few months. However, he stayed at Children's Village for fourteen years, working with hundreds of troubled youths, quite a few of whom remained his friends for decades. He often described his years at Children's Village as "the happiest time of my life," and in many ways that period set the tone for the rest of his life, prompting him to begin graduate study in psychology to better serve the children in his care. After earning a master's degree from Iona College in 1964 and a doctorate from Teacher's College, Columbia University in 1970, he began lifelong work as a counselor who always endeavored to unite effective psychological methods with true Christian compassion and a vibrant spirituality.

In 1973 at the request of Terence Cardinal Cooke, Father Groeschel left Children's Village to become the founding director of Trinity Retreat in Larchmont, New York, a retreat house primarily for

Catholic clergy and religious. During his forty years there, he became known throughout the Catholic world for the depth of the spiritual and psychological direction he offered, as well as for the extent of his caring for all who came to him for help. During this period he was urged by colleagues and friends to try his hand as a writer, and so he began work on a manuscript that he called *Spiritual Passages*. Published by Crossroads in 1983, *Spiritual Passages* is still in print and has been read by people the world over. Known for his inexhaustible energy, Father Groeschel continued writing throughout the rest of his life, becoming popular among Catholic and non-Catholic readers alike. In all he published forty-six books, most of which remain in print, and was for years a much-sought-after author by Catholic and secular publishing houses. At the time of his death he was working on a memoir to be published by Our Sunday Visitor and entitled *The Life of a Struggling Soul*. He also wrote a large number of articles, which have appeared in various periodicals, including *First Things* and *Priest Magazine*.

Despite his many commitments, in 1974 Father Groeschel took over the Office of Spiritual Development of the Archdiocese of New York, at the request of Cardinal Cooke. In that capacity he organized widely attended classes, conferences, events, and symposia aimed at deepening the spiritual lives of Catholics, lay, clergy, and religious throughout the archdiocese and beyond.

In constant demand as a retreat master and a speaker, Father Groeschel, always in his Franciscan habit, traveled the globe for years, bringing the Gospel message to any who were willing to listen. His unique blend of prayerfulness, penetrating insight, scholarship, and gentle humor was as irresistible as the spellbinding power of his preaching was undeniable. He became for many a badly needed voice of orthodoxy, as well as of common sense in a world that seemed beset by shrill contradictory voices and uncertainty. His monthly “afternoons of recollection,” events held at various parishes throughout the Archdiocese of New York, drew large crowds for decades. Many people credit those afternoons of prayer, liturgy, and inspiring preaching with reviving their faith and teaching them

how to live a truly Christian life in an aggressively secular world. Despite his unfailing devotion to Catholic doctrine, he was deeply committed to ecumenism, speaking in both Protestant churches and synagogues and counting among his good friends ministers of several denominations as well as rabbis.

An invitation to conduct a retreat for the Missionaries of Charity in India was the beginning of Father Groeschel's long relationship with that community and his deep friendship with its founder, Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta, and in the early 1970's he was instrumental in helping her establish her first convent in New York.

In 1987, striving to live more faithfully the Franciscan life, Father Groeschel left his religious order with seven other friars to form a new religious community, of which he became the first Servant (Superior). The Franciscan Friars of the Renewal, based in the south Bronx and dedicated to the service to the poor, have grown from eight to 115 members, and in the same year a similar community for women, the Franciscan Sisters of the Renewal was formed, which currently has 35 members. Although he was deeply proud of his new community and always believed that its foundation was a "work of God," Father Groeschel often said that his separation from the Capuchins was the most difficult and painful day of his life. He never lost hope that a reunion might one day be possible.

Always eager to find new ways to spread the Gospel message, Father Groeschel took to the airways 30 years ago, appearing on EWTN television network, at the invitation of Mother Angelica. He became a regular on the network in various formats, the last of which was his *Sunday Night Live* show, which drew a large audience week after week, as people tuned in to listen to Father Groeschel interview guests from throughout the religious world or simply to hear him speak deeply and movingly about the faith that meant so much to him.

Father Groeschel's compassion for the poor and those in any kind of trouble was legendary. And it was never a compassion that was limited to words or even to prayer. It always overflowed into

deeds, and usually very energetic ones. For decades he distributed food to hundreds of people in the South Bronx who could not afford to buy their own. As the holidays approached, he would be especially determined to make sure that people who otherwise would have no Christmas, Thanksgiving, or Easter dinner would be given enough to have a small feast. He was a master at finding generous donors to help him purchase hundreds of turkeys and hams and other foodstuffs which he delighted in distributing with the help of a small army of volunteers.

In 1967, very aware that the needs of older adolescents could not be met by institutions such as Children's Village, Father Groeschel founded Saint Francis House in the Green Point section of Brooklyn. Its goal was to give some stability to the lives of young men who have no home to go to and no one to care for them. Since its first days, Saint Francis House has guided generations of young men as they made the difficult transition from a chaotic adolescence to a stable and productive adulthood.

Moved by the plight of young woman who were pregnant, alone and who had no place to turn, he along with Chris Bell, founded Good Counsel Homes in 1985, to give such women not just a safe and supportive place to live, but help in the care of their children and the tools to begin to build a new and better life.

Deeply committed to education, Father Groeschel, taught pastoral psychology for nearly four decades at St. Joseph's Seminary in Yonkers, New York. He also taught various times at Iona College, Fordham University, and the Maryknoll School of Theology. During the 1970s he and theologian Ewert Cousins organized a regular series of lectures at Fordham University featuring many of the most prominent thinkers in the Catholic world.

On January 11, 2004 Father Groeschel suffered a near-fatal car accident, leaving him with a shattered left arm and a number of other permanent injuries. He was in a coma for ten days and his recovery took many months. Most people expected that he would be an invalid for the rest of his days

on earth. Yet within a year he was at work again. He was somewhat bent over, and he walked slowly and with the aid of a cane from that point on. Yet his astonishing determination didn't waver nor did his profound faith. "God still has some work for me to do," he said, and in little more than two years, with remarkable resiliency, he returned to the same grueling schedule he had kept for years.

Over the past decade, despite his decline in health, Fr. Groeschel continued to serve the Church generously and with great fidelity. In 2012, after Fr. Groeschel experienced great difficulty in communicating, following a minor stroke and other health complications he officially retired from public life and was welcomed by the Little Sisters of the Poor in Totowa, NJ. There he realized the time had come to slow down and enter a new chapter of his priestly life. Daily visits of family and friends were the highlight of his days along with spending time in the chapel, concelebrating the Holy Mass and making his daily holy hour. To the very end, Fr. Groeschel exhibited his sincere care for others and great love for being a priest.

Father Benedict Joseph Groeschel is survived by his sister Marjule Drury of Caldwell, NJ, his sister Robin Groeschel of Glendive, MT, and one brother Garry Groeschel of St. Petersburg, FL and nine nieces and nephews. He was predeceased by his brothers Ned and Mark.