



## Called to be servants of God, lay friars form a band of brothers at St. Fidelis Friary Retirement Home in Appleton

By Cheryl Anderson • Post-Crescent staff writer  
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People often ask Brother Rob Roemer how to tell the difference between a brother and a priest since they both wear the same brown habit and long capuche (hood) for which the order is named.

The simple answer is no one's supposed to know.

"St. Francis of Assisi called all his followers brothers. He didn't distinguish whether you were ordained or not ordained. You are first and foremost brothers, and so that's kind of been our motto as capuchins at least in this province. We are all equals. We are all brothers," said Roemer, director of the St. Fidelis Friary Retirement Home in Appleton who also offers spiritual direction.

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Funded by the Capuchin Province of St. Joseph in Detroit, the home is for self-sufficient members of the centuries-old Catholic religious order who no longer function in full-time ministry but may need help with daily care.

Roemer is what's called a lay brother, a member who provides practical support to run a monastery or friary. Lay brothers are tied to religious orders only by their solemn vows of obedience, poverty and chastity.

One of the comments lay brothers dislike hearing is "why didn't you go all the way" to the priesthood. Being a lay brother is its own vocation and so is the priesthood, which requires another four to six years of study in theology, the sacraments and preaching.

"I would get really mad when people would say, 'Oh, a brother. You could change your mind, right? We need priests. Why don't you want to be a priest?'" Brother David Hirt said. "I felt like people were degrading my vocation. But lately I realize I want to be just a brother. It's about simplicity, it's about walking with people."

"I did go all the way," Roemer added. "I went all the way to what I want to be."

In-house there are three lay brothers at St. Fidelis: Roemer, 46, Brother Conrad Heinen, 85, and Brother John Gau, 71. Hirt, 32, and Brother Mark Romanowski, 51, are post-novices who will live at the house this summer.

Let's take a look at why some of these men were called to the ministry of lay brother.

### Brother Rob Roemer

The origin of lay brothers, according to [www.newadvent.org](http://www.newadvent.org), can be traced to about the 11th century. Just as today, lay brothers were devoted entirely to the secular needs of the house.

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Caring for others was a trait Roemer, a native of Madison, and his 10 siblings learned from their father.

"We didn't always have a lot, but he said be grateful for what we have because there are a lot of needy people out there, too," he said. "We learned to share and take hand-me-downs and not expect a new bike or new jeans but to take what you had."

When Roemer's dad died, his family received a plaque featuring the peace prayer of St. Francis, which begins "Lord, make me an instrument of your peace." The prayer struck a chord in his heart, so in high school he joined Mount Calvary seminary, which he attended for a year until his mother needed his help back at home.

"I told God, 'OK, I'm off the hook. I tried it and now I can go,'" Roemer said.

But the urge to enter ministry didn't go away.

Roemer received a college degree from a secular university and spent his formation years in Milwaukee and Mount Calvary, completing six years of theology training in Milwaukee and Detroit. His first assignment was at a soup kitchen in Detroit where his job simply was to wipe tables and talk to people. Getting into the lives of others is why Roemer made the decision to become a brother.

"I didn't feel I was called to be preaching in front of people and leading them," he said. "But as a brother I am called to walk with them. That's how I distinguish a priest from a brother. A priest is looked at as the role model, the leader. A brother is someone who walks with the person. That's been my concept as a brother."

### Brother John Gau

A native of St. Cloud, Brother John Gau is celebrating 50 years as a lay brother.

He was among the first class to graduate in 1958 from the then-new St. Francis Vocational High School outside Mount Calvary.

"I'm the only person that graduated from that school's first class that's in the order," Gau said.

Born and raised on a farm, Gau remembered one

particular Saturday when a pickup truck came driving out onto the field where he and his brother were picking stones. The man talked of the new school and left some literature at the house about the Capuchin Brothers of St. Joseph.

Gau took his vows at St. Bonaventure in Detroit in 1959 and has served all over the country as a cook and baker, performed indoor and outdoor maintenance, cleaned, repaired vehicles, filtered well water, served as porter and tailor, did laundry, shoveled coal into boilers, led auto maintenance classes for the province and did nearly any other odd jobs one can imagine.

He came to St. Fidelis in 1997. Although Gau is technically retired, he still has his hands in many areas of the friary, always offering his help and knowledge. Using his skills is why he also became a lay brother rather than a priest.

"Ordination didn't appeal to me," he said.

### Brothers David Hirt and Mark Romanowski

The post-novitiate program of Capuchin Formation begins with the profession of temporary vows and is the time brothers live what they have learned in postulancy (a year of intense ministry experience) followed by novitiate (a year of reflective reflection). Both Romanowski and Hirt have two to three years of school left before becoming full-fledged lay brothers.

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While most of their time in fall and winter is spent in studies at the Capuchin Theological Union in Chicago, students are assigned to different ministries, such as St. Fidelis, during the summer.

"Since the province extends from Detroit to Wisconsin all the way to Montana, it's a way for us to get to know other friars in the province and to see other ministries in the province that we wouldn't get to do while we're in school," Hirt said. "Mark and I got to come here this summer to see the older friars, learn their stories and help take care of internal ministry. We were both very eager to come."

Romanowski, a native of Chicago, and Hirt, a native of Terre Haute, Ind., are two of seven men currently in the post-novitiate program at the theological union. Only three are on the road to ordination. Romanowski is working on his master's in pastoral studies, and Hirt is earning his master's in divinity.

Becoming a brother is a second career for Romanowski, who formerly was in finance and started the journey at 47.

"But I always felt another call," he said. "But I kept putting it off and said later."

Later finally came when Romanowski saw a blurb about the capuchins in a Sunday church bulletin. He couldn't be more content.

"God tempered the steel, and then when he was ready he said, 'OK, now it's time,'" Romanowski said.

Hirt was on his way to becoming a theatrical scenic designer but instinctively knew he was in the wrong place. God, he said, kept talking.

"Like a lot of people I think most Catholics think you're either a priest or a monk," he said. "I had no idea the lay brotherhood existed, and I knew I wasn't called to be a priest."

When Hirt came across the capuchins and heard about lay brothers, he knew it was where he was supposed to be.

"I am very happy and find fulfillment to be in a religious life," said Hirt, who feels called to be a spiritual director like Roemer. Romanowski is open to work anywhere he is needed in the province.

### A final word

The brothers we spoke to never were called to preach or be public figures. But they, like 25 percent to 30 percent of brothers in the Capuchin Province of St. Joseph, were called to be lay brothers.

With time, the authority of lay brothers has changed. They are allowed to be in charge of friaries and can serve on the provincial council.

"If we're really all brothers, what's to say one brother can't be just as capable as a priest," Roemer said.

"I can do anything a priest can do except administer sacraments," Romanowski said.

Being a lay brother is God's call to their lives.

"I wouldn't be anywhere else," Hirt said. "I know it's where I'm supposed to be."

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Brother John Gau, Brother Mark Romanowski and Brother Rob Roemer pray before lunch at St. Fidelis Friary in Appleton. (Post-Crescent photo by Sharon Cekada)

### Capuchins at a glance

Capuchins are a religious community of both lay brothers and ordained priests. Yet, in the spirit of St. Francis, friars — lay and ordained — see themselves as brothers, as equals, with no one greater or less than the next, respectful to one another and to all of creation.

Capuchins can remain brothers, vowed members of the religious community who commit themselves to Christ, serving in a variety of ministries but not in the ministry of priests or deacons.

Capuchin friars who are ordained priests can administer the sacraments of the Catholic Church; friars who are not ordained cannot. Outside of that, any friar is eligible to minister in any work of the Capuchin Order.

Source: <http://capuchinfranciscans.org>

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