

Br. Leo Baert (Canisius)

Br. Leo Baert was born in Beveren Roeselare, Belgium on April 18, 1914, the youngest son of Emiel Baert and Mathilde Willaert. It is not known what the example of an uncle who was also a Capuchin friar, Br. Pascal Baert, had on Leo. He entered the Capuchin Order on September 15, 1932 taking the religious name of Canisius. He took simple vows on September 17, 1933, the Feast of the Stigmata of St. Francis and solemn vows on February 2, 1938. Br. Leo was subsequently ordained to the priesthood along with 16 other young friars on June 3, 1939.

Military service being a requirement of every Belgian citizen, Br. Leo was mobilized into the army on August 25, 1939. After being released on June 13, 1940 he was appointed professor in his Province's minor seminary in Aalst. He would remain there but a short time since he was sent on July 24, 1941 to pursue higher studies at the Catholic University of Louvain. He was then re-appointed to the minor seminary in Aalst where he taught for the next 24 years. Many friars who were his students during this time fondly remember him as a good and dedicated teacher who paid great attention to his students.

As was often the case with the friars in Belgium, Br. Leo applied to become a missionary in Pakistan. However his request was refused. After the closure of the minor seminary in Aalst he proceeded to the Benedictine abbey of Loppen in Brugge, the capital of West Flanders, for a sabbatical year beginning on July 4, 1966.

On June 9, 1967 he was appointed to parochial ministry in the Custody of Central Canada. At the time he was quoted as saying that "there was no work in Belgium and I preferred Canada to the Congo." He began his ministry as associate pastor in Blenheim Ontario and would serve there from 1967 to 1971. On August 1, 1971 Br. Leo was appointed Pastor of Sacred Heart Church in St. Boniface, Manitoba which was known as "the Flemish parish of the west". He remained there until the parish was closed by the Archdiocese on August 1, 1993. Sacred Heart Church also had a small mission church attached to it called St. Francis Church.

The year 1993 was to mark the end of his active life as a friar. Retiring from work, he moved to St. Alphonsus Parish where the friars were also present. The friars were amazed that this man who had lived by himself for many years adapted to community life quite easily. He would continue to be involved with the Belgium Club, and the Knights of Columbus.



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He had other hobbies that kept him busy such as regular laps around the swimming pool, bingo at the Belgian Club and he developed a passionate interest in a few soap operas such as “The Guiding Light!” Later Br. Leo had to deal with the loss of his drivers license and the deterioration of his eyesight and hearing so his poor health forced him to move to a nursing home operated by the religious sisters of St. Boniface.

At the ripe old age of 94, the end would come fairly quickly on November 19, 2008. His funeral mass was attended by a large number of the faithful who had known Br. Leo as well as a good representation of friars. Bishop John Corriveau, a friar who had known Br. Leo well as his former provincial, was the main celebrant in St. Alphonsus Church for the funeral mass. Leo was laid to rest in Sacred Heart Cemetery alongside other friars of the Province.

