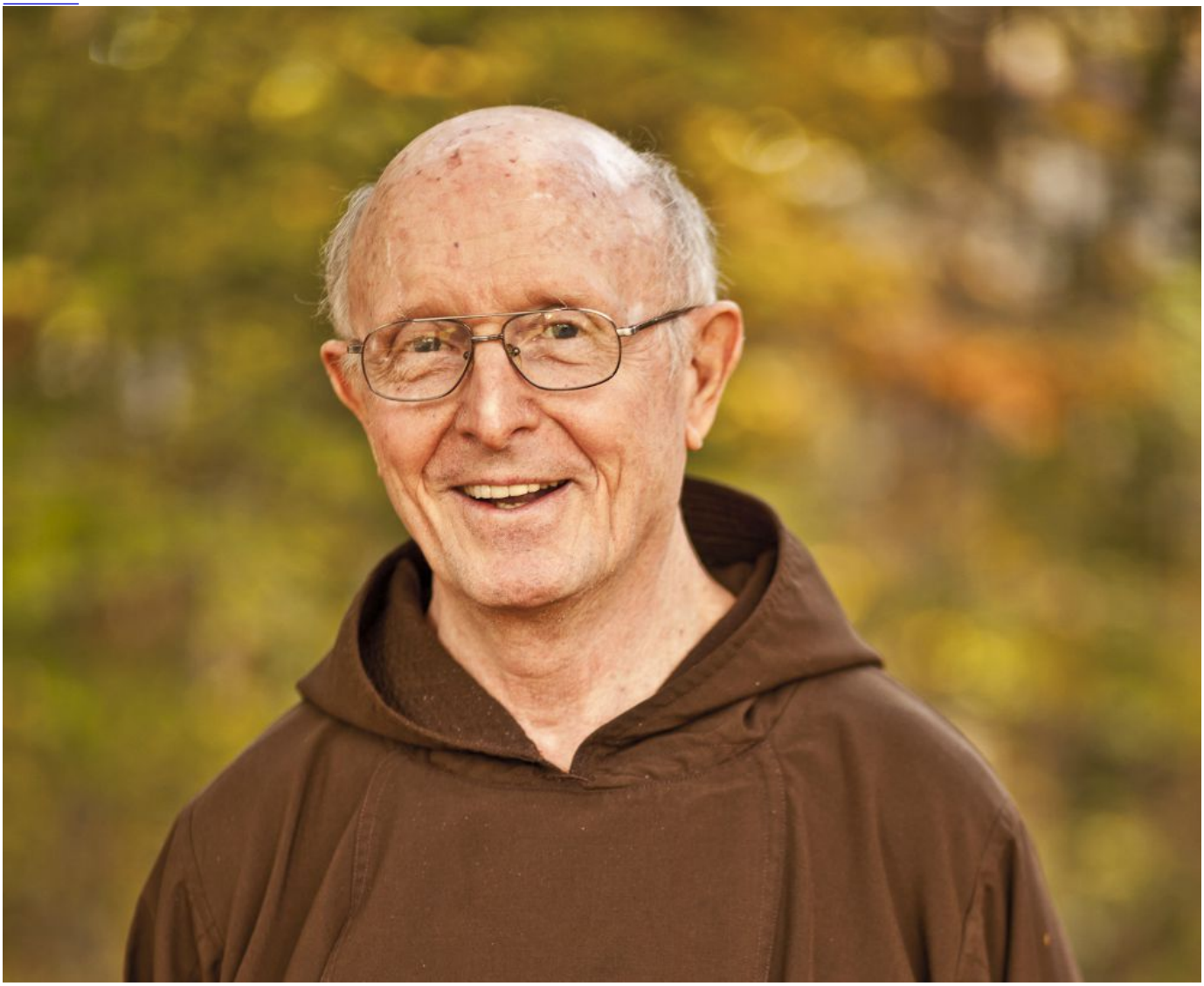
News



Capuchin Fr. Michael Crosby, author of 19 books and advocate for church reform and corporate responsibility, died Aug. 5, at the age of 77. (Marlo Williamson)



by Brian Roewe

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In his five-plus decades as a Capuchin friar, Fr. Michael Crosby talked and walked the language of conversion wherever he went, whether within the Catholic Church, the corridors of American industry or individuals' spiritual lives.

While Crosby's books and lectures on church reform and biblical discipleship made his name known to Catholics across the country, he proved a familiar and formidable figure in the boardrooms of corporate America through his dogged pursuit of socially responsible practices. For 44 years, the Capuchin went toe-to-toe with CEOs of some of the nation's biggest names in the oil, tobacco, food and retail industries.

Crosby died Aug. 5 at age 77, following months of battling cancer of the esophagus. Despite receiving that diagnosis in December, Crosby continued in the work that became one of the cornerstones of his ministry as a priest until June, corresponding with colleagues and corporate executives by email and phone.

"He was always attempting to make the connections between what we believe in our heads and how we live and relate to each other in our everyday lives. There must be a connection if our faith is genuine," his brother and fellow Capuchin friar Fr. Daniel Crosby told NCR.

Mike Crosby spent his final weeks with his brother at St. Bonaventure Monastery in Detroit. The time together meant a great deal to both of them, Dan Crosby said. The location was also special as it was where Capuchin friar Solanus Casey lived and is buried; Fr. Solanus, for whom Mike Crosby served as collaborator for his canonization cause, was named "blessed" by Pope Francis in May.

Services for Michael Crosby

Visitations will be held Aug. 10 at St. Bonaventure, and Aug. 11 at St. Francis Parish, in Milwaukee, both beginning at 5 p.m., local time.

A liturgy of Christian burial will take place Aug. 12 at St. Lawrence Seminary, in Mt. Calvary, Wisconsin, at 10:30 a.m.

"Mike's death leaves both a large hole and a huge legacy," said Franciscan Sr. Jan Cebula in an email. Her Clinton, Iowa, congregation has known the priest since the 1970s and hosted several of his retreats. "So many people have been touched and changed by his retreats, writings, and work in the area of socially responsible investing."

Mike Crosby was born Feb. 16, 1940, the third of four sons, in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin. He entered the Capuchin order in August 1959 and was ordained a priest on Oct. 6, 1966.

Initially serving an inner-city Milwaukee parish, St. Elizabeth Church, struggling with racial integration, he began his ministry of corporate social responsibility in 1973, a decade after professing his final vows in the Capuchin order.

He was greatly influenced by the 1971 Synod of Bishops' document "Justice in the World," which he later said summarized in a way he had not before encountered the globalized social injustice that he had witnessed at St. Elizabeth. He committed himself to bringing the good news to the poor in solidarity with their struggle for justice.



Founding staff and members of the Interfaith Center on Corporate Responsibility. Fr. Michael Crosby is pictured in the center of the group, third row from the front. (Interfaith Center on Corporate Responsibility)

Eventually, he turned his attention to institutions and systemic change, becoming one of the first members of the Interfaith Center on Corporate Responsibility. In June the 300-member organization announced he and Dominican Sr. Pat Daly would receive its 2017 Legacy Award, crediting Crosby for his work recruiting additional Catholic institutions and four decades of work engaging companies on social and environmental concerns.

"He just brought incredible creativity and really demanded integrity and truthfulness in a company," said Daly, who worked with Crosby on countless shareholder initiatives throughout the years.

"We live in a different world because of him," she added.

Engaging corporations in relationship

The Capuchin friar believed deeply in the prospects of engagement over other strategies, such as divestment, that maintaining, and building, a relationship with companies over time could lead to positive results. He stressed patience and persistence, and had a reputation for viewing those across the table from him as people, not just the corporation they represented.

Crosby, who held a master's degree in economics to go along with a doctorate degree in sacred theology, developed mutual respect with many executives and sought to explain in business terms how behaving morally was good for long-term sustainability. During their numerous encounters at shareholders meetings, former ExxonMobil CEO Rex Tillerson, now U.S. Secretary of State, was known to address him as "Father Mike."



Capuchin Fr. Michael Crosby speaks during a shareholders meeting in 1977. (Interfaith Center on Corporate Responsibility)

Frank Sherman, who succeeded Crosby as executive director of the Seventh Generation Interfaith Coalition for Responsible Investment, said it was not uncommon for Crosby one day to be sharing a meal with the homeless at St. Benedict the Moor Parish, in Milwaukee, before leaving the next to meet with the CEO of a major corporation.

"But for him, they were both children of God, so they each had their perspective and he could learn from both," he said.

Crosby recognized that shareholder advocacy would not provide quick or easy results. At times he faced pushback from resistant executives who suggested he first address injustices in the church before making requests of them, and criticism from other activists who questioned engagement as a strategy as opposed to full financial separation from companies. But his persistence and that of numerous colleagues would yield important victories at some of America's biggest companies.

"He didn't try to hold everybody to a gold standard," said Sherman. "He recognized that people, everybody, including institutions, were on a journey, so he met them where they were and tried to take them to the next level."

Coalitions and change

As part of various interfaith investment coalitions Crosby worked to end apartheid in South Africa, enact at Boeing human rights and worker protections in China and Tibet, address wage disparity between CEOs and minimum wage workers at retail and fast-food chains, address the marketing and pricing of pharmaceutical drugs, end the marketing of infant formula in developing countries, and reduce deforestation in supply chains, among many, many other efforts.

In 2013 he founded The Human Thread, a Catholic advocacy group for garment workers and ethical clothing, in the wake of the Rana Plaza garment factory disaster in Bangladesh.

Throughout the years, a prominent arena was smoking.

His engagement with the tobacco industry began after a trip to Nicaragua in 1980, where Crosby witnessed the struggles of tobacco farmers. Later that year, he asked his order to purchase stock in both Philip Morris and R.J. Reynolds, the nation's largest tobacco companies, in order to address concerns as a shareholder.

In 1980 Crosby and other religious shareholders began lobbying Philip Morris to place warning labels on its cigarette packages. Twelve years later, the tobacco giant agreed to add four health warnings from the U.S. Surgeon General on all its cigarettes sold overseas.

Crosby, who for two decades was the ICCR tobacco program coordinator, was also part of shareholder resolutions that helped lead to McDonald's restaurants going smoke-free; sought for the 1980s tobacco-food merger RJR Nabisco Holdings Corp. to unravel itself; and challenged numerous movie studios to cease depictions of smoking in films, particularly those aimed toward youth.

He was also part of efforts to end the "Joe Camel" advertising campaign, which did in 1997.

That same year, Crosby introduced at the oil giant Exxon (before its merger with Mobil) the first resolution requesting a report on climate change's impacts on company policies and practices, including what steps it could take to reduce carbon emissions.

Advertisement

It was on the issue of climate change that the faith-based investors and Crosby saw some of its most substantial achievements. In February, Crosby withdrew a resolution seeking a climate expert nominated to ExxonMobil's board of directors after the company appointed climate scientist Susan Avery to the board.

"We've been at it for almost 20 years, and with ExxonMobil on this issue we really did have a breakthrough," Crosby told the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel.

Three months later, he and other shareholder advocates scored another major victory when ExxonMobil shareholders voted overwhelmingly in support of a resolution for the company to produce an annual report on the long-term impact of international climate policies, primarily through the Paris Agreement, on its oil and gas reserves.

Shareholder activism was but one portion of Crosby's ministry, with the friar viewing a majority of his work focused in his writing and lectures on contemporary biblical discipleship. He regularly explored Jesus' Gospel of the "kindom," as he described it, and a Trinitarian understanding of God.

He viewed the Beatitudes as the core teachings of Jesus, and the pathway to authentic Christian discipleship. In 1977, he wrote *Spirituality of the Beatitudes*, which sold well over 25,000 copies and proved to be one of his most popular of his 19 books. He traveled the world speaking and leading retreats on the themes he

unraveled in his writings.



Capuchin Fr. Michael Crosby speaks with other members of the Interfaith Center on Corporate Responsibility in this undated photo. (Interfaith Center on Corporate Responsibility)

Calling the church to constant conversion

His books and lectures also expressed the change he thought necessary inside the institutional church, as well. Crosby was especially critical of the church's patriarchal system and clericalism — what he viewed as "at the heart of abuse in the church" — telling a 1993 church reform conference in Toronto that it is "at the heart of the problems that are finding more and more people unable to trust what is going on in this 'family.' "

Books of his that addressed church reform included *The Dysfunctional Church* (2011), *Do You Love Me? Jesus Questions the Church* (2000), *Rethinking Celibacy, Reclaiming the Church* (2003) and *Repair My House* (2008). Crosby also wrote

numerous articles for National Catholic Reporter.

"I have discovered that this call for justice in my own church is usually much harder to proclaim (and even harder to see accepted by its leaders) than any work I have done to bring about greater justice in the corporate and political worlds," he wrote in NCR in October.



Capuchin Fr. Michael Crosby poses with President Bill Clinton and two other activists during an anti-tobacco rally in the mid-1990s. (Interfaith Center on Corporate Responsibility)

Crosby believed that the institutional church, like all individuals, was not yet fully converted to Jesus and thus in need of constant conversion, his brother Dan said. He explained that for Mike reform whether in boardrooms or basilicas was not segmented pursuits but part of ripples from the singular aim of living out and being true to the Gospel.

"He intensely believed in Jesus' Gospel and its implications for every part of our existence, and constantly tried to be more and more open to what that was asking of him in his personal life and what it was asking of all of us who follow Christ," Fr. Dan Crosby said.

He added that his brother "didn't just talk the talk, he walked the walk. … All that he said in his books and all that he talked in his talks, he meant it, he lived it. It wasn't

just words, and it made a difference in how he died."

When in June doctors informed Crosby that their attempts to control the cancer in his body were failing, he described himself in a letter to friends as "surprisingly am embracing" the diagnosis that he only had several months left to live.

"I have no fear of dying; in fact I must admit … I actually prefer to depart from this form of my life sooner than later; I believe in heaven. I am at peace and very thankful for this peace.

"I've tried to follow Jesus all my life as a Capuchin, and you have been part of this journey; for you I am so grateful," Crosby wrote in a letter to friends. "I wait in joyful hope what is in store for me. Pray that I'll be faithful."

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