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Capuchins elect brother to Rome post

by John L. Allen Jr.

All Things Catholic

It is no secret to regular readers of this column that I have a special affection for the Capuchins, who had the Christian charity to put up with me in grade school and high school in Hays, Kansas in the late 1970s and early 1980s. (No further testimony should be required for an eventual *position* attesting to their heroic virtue).

One noteworthy aspect of the Capuchin character is the way they deal with disappointment. In 2002, the Midwestern province of the Capuchins elected a lay friar, Brother Bob Smith of Milwaukee, as their provincial, a result which was confirmed by the Capuchin leadership in Rome. The election was annulled by the Vatican, however, on the grounds that a layman cannot exercise authority over priests.

Had this been another community, one could imagine a media cause célèbre driven by theological critique and public expressions of anguish. Instead, the Capuchins lived to fight another day.

This week, the Capuchins elected another lay friar, Brother Mark Schenk, to serve for six years on the order's General Council in Rome.

Presumably the fact that he is not the order's superior will avoid raising Vatican hackles, but it is nevertheless a position of real authority. Schenk, previously the provincial vicar of the Province of Mid-America, is believed to be the first lay brother ever to serve in this capacity.

His election speaks as loudly as Smith's about the Capuchin commitment to treating members of the order as equals, ordained or not.

By not waging war over the Smith case, by the way, the Capuchins deftly avoided making him too hot to handle. That allowed Archbishop Timothy Dolan to name Smith the top education official in the Milwaukee archdiocese in 2004 without political complications.

As a footnote, Schenk is a graduate of the same Capuchin high school I attended, Thomas More Prep in western Kansas. By all accounts, he did not represent the same *via crucis* for the faculty that I managed to offer, and one prays that will be the case in his new role as well.

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