

Father John Walbe

January 13th is the anniversary of the death of Father John Walbe. Benedict Walbe was born in Morriston Bluff, Arkansas, on February 11, 1916, the feast day of Our Lady of Lourdes and St. Benedict Aniane. Praying that her son would become a Benedictine monk, Mrs. Walbe named her child Benedict. He received his elementary education at Sts. Peter and Paul grade school in his hometown.

When Benedict Walbe was four years old, his father died. Two years later, three of his older brothers lost their life in a single drowning tragedy while they were swimming in the Arkansas River near their home. Benedict wanted to go to the river with them that day, but his mother and sister kept the youngster at home.

When he reached high school age, Benedict Walbe entered Subiaco Academy in 1930, but he had to interrupt his education due to illness. He later returned to the academy and graduated with the class of 1938.

His younger brother had already entered the abbey and Benedict wished to join him; therefore, he petitioned the abbot to allow him to enter the novitiate as a classmate with his brother. Permission was granted, and after completing the novitiate year, the two Walbe brothers professed their vows together as monks of our monastery on September 16, 1939, with Benedict Walbe receiving the name John Evangelist.

The two Walbe brothers were classmates throughout their years of seminary studies, and together they were ordained to the priesthood by Bishop Albert L. Fletcher at St. Andrew's Cathedral in Little Rock on Ascension Thursday, May 18, 1944. His younger brother, Father Aloys Walbe, died two years later.

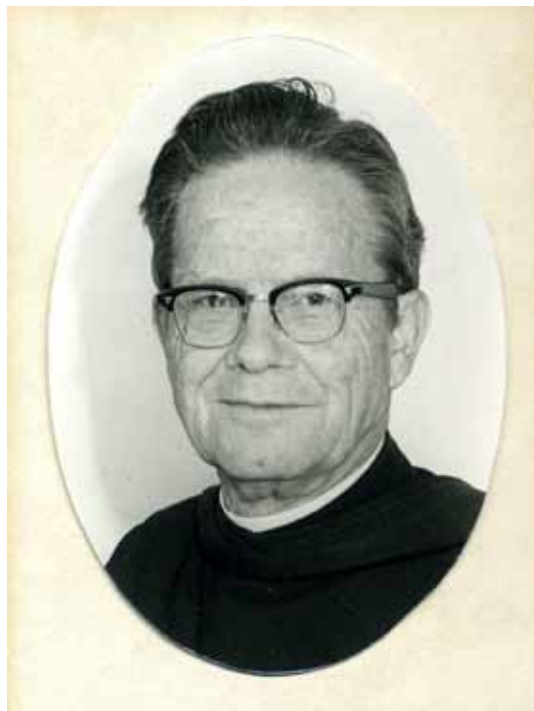
Immediately after ordination, Father John was a faculty member at Subiaco Academy. He was then appointed assistant pastor of Sacred Heart parish, Muenster, Texas, serving from 1945 to 1950. For the next three years he was a faculty member of Corpus Christi College in Corpus Christi, Texas.

In 1953 he was recalled to Arkansas where he served for one year as pastor of St. Scholastica parish in Shoal Creek. From 1954 to 1955 he was pastor of St. Mary's parish in Altus. He then returned to Texas for a four-year pastorate of St. Joseph parish in Rhineland where he had a school and rectory built.

He was recalled to Arkansas in 1959 to be pastor of St. Boniface parish in Fort Smith, serving until 1961. He then returned to Texas for his last two pastorates in that state: St. Peter's parish in Lindsay from 1961 to 1969, and St. Mary's parish in Fort Worth from 1969 to 1974.

For the last two decades of his parish ministry, Father John served in Arkansas as assistant pastor of St. Edward's in Little Rock, and as pastor of St. Scholastica's in Shoal Creek, St. Mary's in Altus, and St. Benedict's in Subiaco.

Father John said that "the priesthood was the greatest gift God gave him," and he both enjoyed and sacrificed himself in a lifelong ministry of love. He retired to the abbey in 1992, but continued to substitute at nearby parishes as needed. He remained active during periods of declining health, suffering from a heart condition and prostate cancer.



Born on the feast of Our Lady of Lourdes, Father John had a lifelong devotion to the Blessed Virgin; during his retirement years at the abbey, he often gathered garden flowers, placing them in the Einsiedeln Chapel. In his private prayer life, Father was particularly devoted to the passion of Christ, frequently making the Stations of the Cross in the abbey church.

In 1998 he took up residence in the monastic Health Center, serving as chaplain to his confreres there. He visited each daily, bringing the sacraments to those able to receive; on occasion, he would drive the monks to doctor appointments.

He also had a personal practice of blessing each of the health care workers and their families during their shifts. His gentle spirit endeared him to all.

As his own condition weakened, Father John was bedfast the final weeks of his life. Strengthened with the sacraments and the prayers of his brother monks, Father John died peacefully in his room in the monastic Health Center of congestive heart failure at 3:00 p.m. on Wednesday, January 13, 1999.

On Saturday, January 16, Abbot Jerome Kodell was celebrant and homilist for the 10:00 a.m. Mass of Christian burial and performed the final obsequies. Bishop Andrew J. McDonald of Little Rock was present in the sanctuary where he eulogized Father John at the end of Mass.

At the time of his death, Father John was 82 years old and in the 59th year of his monastic profession, the 54th of his priesthood. He is buried in our cemetery.

NOTE: One of Father John's sisters joined the Benedictine Sisters of Fort Smith, Arkansas: Sister Elaine Walbe, OSB.