

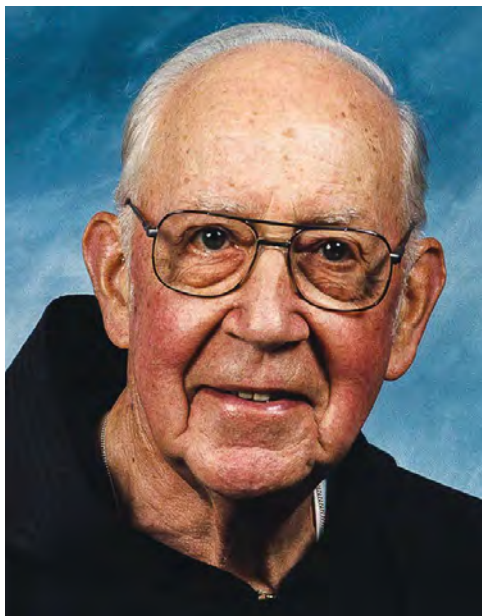
# FATHER BERTIN ROLL, OFM CAP., CHAMPION OF CHRISTIAN MOTHERS

James K. Hanna

*Mothers rule the world. They guide the destinies of homes. This is why God is relying on mothers to keep Christ in the world by keeping Him in their hearts and homes.*

— Bertin Roll, OFM Capuchin

The shortest employment resume in the history of modern-day religious priesthood may be that of late Pittsburgh native, Bertin Roll, OFM Capuchin (1916-2015). Following ordination in 1942, he was appointed Assistant Director General of



**Father Bertin Roll, OFM Cap.**

Source: Archives of Capuchin Friars, Province of St. Augustine

the Archconfraternity of Christian Mothers. The following year, Father Claude Vogel, minister provincial of the Capuchin Province of St. Augustine, promoted him to Director General, a position he held until his retirement more than sixty years later, the longest term of any friar in one ministry.<sup>1</sup> When asked about this, Father Bert, as he was popularly known, told the present writer, in a response betraying his well-regarded sense of humor, “I guess the home office lost my paperwork!”<sup>2</sup>

Of course, no paperwork was lost. Quite the opposite, as Father Bert was known for keeping and maintaining meticulous records to which all his superiors had ready access; any of the eleven succeeding provincials over the years could have assigned him elsewhere, but none did, recognizing his extraordinary gifts. The Capuchin website has paid homage to this continuance: “Father Bert began his work with the Christian Mothers as a young man of 26, while the Archconfraternity itself was celebrating 61 years on American soil. It’s uncannily providential that this young man was to steer the ship for its next 62 years of life.”<sup>3</sup>

Father Bert retired in 2006 at age 89 and enjoyed nearly a decade of leisure as director emeritus living at the St. Au-

gustine Friary in Pittsburgh’s Lawrenceville neighborhood, where he often asked fellow friars, “Who in the world has it as good as we do?”<sup>4</sup> Though he spent most of his career on the road, St. Augustine’s was his formal residence for more than 71 years. Officially, he spent only two days, the last 48 hours of his life, “outside” the friary.<sup>5</sup> Father Bert was ninety-eight when he died in hospice care on January 5, 2015.

## The Archconfraternity

Founded in France, the Confraternity of Christian Mothers was brought to the United States through the German Capuchin friars who came to America to escape Germany’s *Kulturkampf*, which had been hostile to the propagation of the Catholic faith within families.

The Capuchin priests of Pittsburgh had witnessed the Confraternity’s success in Bavaria and recognized that American mothers had the same zeal and concern for their families.<sup>6</sup> In 1877, the second year of Bishop John Tuigg’s tenure, the Confraternity was canonically established in Pittsburgh. Four years later, on January 16, 1881, His Holiness Pope Leo XIII raised the Confraternity to the status of Archconfraternity with the right to affiliate chapters wherever the ordinaries approved. Each affiliate shares a fundamental aim:

Christian Mothers are encouraged joyously to undertake the important task of training and sanctifying the young souls entrusted to their care. They are instructed with ways to edify one another by word and deed, to support one another by fervent prayer and in this way become the mainstay of the spiritual life within their own family, and a fruitful source of blessing to the community in which they live.<sup>7</sup>

## Father Roll’s Family Life and Early Education

The youngest child of William and Nora (O’Brien) Roll, Father Roll was born October 5, 1916, and baptized “Raymond Roll” at St. Athanasius Church<sup>8</sup> in Pittsburgh’s West View neighborhood. His siblings included sister Helen, and brothers George and Bill, all of whom preceded him in death.

His father, who died in 1973 at age eighty-seven, was a long-time official of the Oliver Iron and Steel Corporation. His mother, a homemaker, was a member of the Christian

Mothers at St. Athanasius; she passed away at age fifty-four in 1939.

As a youngster, Raymond was known for his athletic ability, excelling at baseball, and having been scouted as a potential major-leaguer. However, it was the game of golf that he embraced, a sport he enjoyed playing well into his senior years, one he learned much about as a young caddy at his neighborhood course.<sup>9</sup>

He attended the parish grade school at St. Athanasius, and in 1936, graduated from St. Fidelis High School Seminary<sup>10</sup> in Herman, Pennsylvania.

### **Enters the Capuchin Franciscan Order**

Soon after graduation from St. Fidelis, at age nineteen, Raymond entered the Capuchin Franciscan order on July 13, 1936, taking the religious name Bertin.

Brother Bertin professed temporary vows in 1937 at SS. Peter and Paul Monastery in Cumberland, MD, where he had lived his novitiate year. He studied for the priesthood at St. Fidelis Monastery in Victoria, Kansas and at the Capuchin College in Washington, D.C. He professed his perpetual vows in 1940 and was ordained in Washington on May 28, 1942, at the National Shrine of the Immaculate Con-



**The future Father Bertin Roll as a lad.**

Source: Archives of Capuchin Friars, Province of St. Augustine

ception. Returning to Pittsburgh, the site of the friary and provincial offices of the Province of St. Augustine, he was immediately assigned as assistant director of the Archconfraternity of Christian Mothers, a position he held for a brief time before becoming director.



**Father Bertin Roll (right) as a young friar.**

Source: Archives of Capuchin Friars, Province of St. Augustine

### **A Nomadic Ministry**

Though his home base was the Pittsburgh friary, Father Bert's vocation was a travelling ministry. "It's great to be a Capuchin, Franciscan priest," he wrote in 2007. "With permission of trusting Father Provincials, helpful local Superiors, and with the prayers of my family, friars, and friends, most of my priesthood was spent 'on the road.'" He wore out automobiles regularly, never had an accident, and was proud to be "a Chevy man." When he was ready to trade in, he always went to Sullivan Chevrolet<sup>11</sup> across the Allegheny River, a few miles north of St. Augustine Friary.

He estimated he averaged 30,000 to 35,000 miles per year, and the only state he never visited was Alaska.<sup>12</sup> A recent search on the website Newspa-



**Father Bertin Roll with Catherine Burger, who served for many years as national secretary for the Archconfraternity of Christian Mothers**

Source: Archives of Capuchin Friars, Province of St. Augustine

pers.com, using the Publisher's Extra feature, returned nearly 1,000 newspaper articles published over six decades in thirty-five states covering Father Bert's visits.<sup>13</sup> One paper reported, "This speaker is a combination of Billy Graham and Ann Landers."<sup>14</sup>

His friend and confrere, the late Father Bonaventure Stefun (1928-2017), captured the essence of this nomadic calling in poetic form:

If Bert were a salesman, he would have carried top honors every month. He recorded 3000 miles in driving each month, addressing parish women's groups, convincing them of the spiritual benefits of the Christian Mothers Archconfraternity, the mothers praying for one another, and always for the children, and often, determined that prayer and example would imprint what God was making available.<sup>15</sup>

Father Bert was meticulous in tracking his travels. The provincial archive in Lawrenceville maintains volumes of his typewritten reports. Use of the typewriter was a necessity, as according to Father Bonaventure, he was notorious for scribbling when he was not printing and he quoted his father as often saying to him "write bigger, son."

Father Bonaventure also recalled that Father Bert's travels around the U.S. every year were punctuated by finding a fellow priest or parishioner with a membership to a golf course. His car was packed with boxes of *Mother Love*, the 308-page prayer book.<sup>16</sup> Still, there was always plenty of room for the golf clubs.<sup>17</sup>

### Radio and Television Pioneer

In addition to his use of traditional printed material, including pamphlets and the Archconfraternity newsletter, Father Bert was a pioneer in radio and television evangelization. In 1950, he addressed the National Catholic Conference on Family Life in Detroit where he advocated for the integration of Christian principles into radio and early television programming directed to parents. "The world today is what mothers are and it will never be any better than the mothers. Our problem is not the training of children in the Christian way but rather training their parents." He deplored what he called the trend of mothers to permit the sacred things to be crowded out of the home by the things of the world and estimated that 60 percent of the children entering the first grade in Catholic schools cannot make the sign of the cross, but they can describe Superman.<sup>18</sup>

He took to the airwaves, beginning with radio in 1950. He maintained a radio presence throughout the fifties, and later in the decade was heard throughout the Midwest on Sunday mornings on KMOX, the 50,000-watt St. Louis radio station's "Church of the Air" program.<sup>19</sup> Always the innovator, he turned to vinyl, recording record albums. In 1957 he introduced a series titled "Talks on Record." The initial recordings consisted of four fifteen-minute talks, two to a record. The topics were family-focused and wide-ranging: "A Mother's Influence," "Modesty in Dress," "Training Preschool Children," and "Teenage Problems."<sup>20</sup> The parish chorale of St. James in Wilkesburg, Pennsylvania, under the direction of Mrs. John Wolfe, provided the music.<sup>21</sup>

In 1953, one year after Bishop Fulton Sheen appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine accompanied by an article calling the Buffalo bishop "the first televangelist," Father Bert made his television debut. He presented a program on "The Catholic Hour," as part of NBC's "Frontiers of Faith" series. Directed at Catholic men and titled "Living Room Retreat," the National Council of Catholic Men (NCCM) sponsored the half-hour program.

The Catholic Hour will bring a retreat master into American homes, through television, on the five Sundays of March. Father Bertin Roll, O.F.M. Cap., will conduct the “living room retreat” over the NBC-TV network on Sundays at 1:30 p.m. (EST), beginning March 1. The program is carried by 47 stations on a coast-to-coast hookup. Father Roll is the director general of the Archconfraternity of Christian Mothers in Pittsburgh. Well known for his work with mothers and children in home life problems, he has given many family retreats.<sup>22</sup>

Father Bert’s format included interviewing Catholic stage and screen personalities. On his debut telecast he hosted actors Robert Gallagher, who had just completed a successful run with Bert Lahr in “Two on the Aisle”; Pauline Drake, character actress and former member of “The Jack Benny Show”; Frances Peter, television actress; and David Anderson, who some years earlier was one of the children in the stage production of “Life With Father.”<sup>23</sup>

Each episode focused on a particular virtue and its practice. The topic of his first installment was “prayerfulness” and he and his celebrity guests discussed solutions to challenges such as “I am distracted when I pray” and “My prayers are never answered.”<sup>24</sup>

The following year, 1954, he connected with CBS as the television network first launched its “Look Up and Live” series on Sunday mornings. Along with a confrere, Father Simon Conrad, then-professor and librarian at St. Fidelis Seminary in Herman, Pennsylvania, he hosted a half-hour program directed at leading teenagers closer to the Church. The eight-week program, filmed at the CBS studios in New York City, was termed a “television mission.” Father Bert told the *Pittsburgh Press* that he was using the term “mission” in two senses. “First, it’s to show that teenagers should plan now for proper work in years to come, and secondly that the series will offer a mission in Christian living.”<sup>25</sup> During the program he interviewed influential

For dashboard  
**SAFETY PLEDGE**  
**I will drive carefully, courteously and not endanger my life nor the life of others.**  
*God says:*  
**“THOU SHALT NOT KILL”**  
 Order from  
 © Christian Mothers—220-37th Street, Pittsburgh 1, Pa.

Catholic personalities such as James A. Farley, postmaster general, and journalist and author, Bob Considine.<sup>26</sup>

The same year he appeared on the Sunday morning ABC radio program, “Christian in Action,” sponsored by the National Council of Catholic Men and titled “The Family with a Future.” His talks included “Fathers in Action,” “Mothers in Action,” “Fellows in Action,” and “Girls in Action.”

One of Father Bert’s favorite mementos was a 1955 message from Pope Pius XII on the 75th Anniversary of the archconfraternity. It read: “The invaluable assistance you provide to mothers in the all-important work of education of their children is a source of great consolation to Holy Mother Church and certainly to our Divine Lord, who so loved children.”<sup>27</sup>



**Father Bertin Roll on air in NBC studios.**  
 Source: Archives of Capuchin Friars, Province of St. Augustine

In 1958, he went to Harrisburg in support of State Welfare Secretary Harry Shapiro who rejected the suggestion of the Pennsylvania Board of Public Assistance that voted 4 to 3 in favor of authorizing relief workers to recommend birth control clinics to persons on relief rolls. Father Bert said the board’s recommendation would cause persons on relief “to die spiritually by advice contrary to the natural and divine laws of God.”<sup>28</sup>

**Central Office Staff**

Over the years, Father Bert had a support staff in Pittsburgh at the Archconfraternity central office for which he was always grateful; indeed, it was mutual admiration. In 1982, when the Archconfraternity was celebrating its

40th Anniversary, the staff collectively wrote that Father Bert “treats us, his helpers, and all Christian Mothers with thoughtful kindness and is confident that we can take care of his office while he is away visiting parishes.”<sup>29</sup> The staff at that time included Jill Turok, who began helping as a high schooler and continues to work in the office today. Jill recalls how she looked forward to hearing the stories Father Bert would bring home from the road, and how he frequently recited the admonition, “Patience!” and his life-long motto “All for the greater glory and honor of God!” Jill’s mother, Jane Bienemann, worked for Father Bert for over forty years, as did Stella O’Such; both women worked well into their late eighties.<sup>30</sup>

### Legacy

Asked in 2007 to summarize his vocation, he replied, it was about “the dignity of motherhood, virtues and vices, and training children to be good Catholics.”

The results? “In the hands of God!”

And his inspiration? “Mary the Sorrowful Mother, Christian Mothers, and a wonderful office force who mothered me over the years and advised me to come home sane, sober, and single!”<sup>31</sup>

Father Bonaventure recalled that Father Bert quoted his father as often saying, “If you are going to do something, do it right or not at all.” Father Bertin Roll did it right. He died January 5, 2015, at the age of ninety-eight and his mortal remains are buried in the friars’ lot at St. Augustine Cemetery in Millvale, Pennsylvania. *Mother Love, A Newsletter to the Christian Mother* reported, “He died peaceably as he had lived for 98 years. He was a humble friar, a priestly priest, a gentle man with a delightful sense of humor.”<sup>32</sup>

### Endnotes:

- <sup>1</sup> “Fr. Bertin Roll, 1916-1925,” Capuchin Franciscan Friars, accessed March 23, 2022, <https://capuchin.com/index.php/deceased-home/111-2015/352-2015roll>.
- <sup>2</sup> Father Bertin Roll, in discussion with the author, c. 2010.
- <sup>3</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>4</sup> “*Mother Love*,” *A Newsletter to the Christian Mother* 73, no. 1 (Winter 2015).
- <sup>5</sup> “Roll, 1916-1925.”
- <sup>6</sup> “A Medal for Mother,” *Capuchin Challenge* Winter 1962, 5.
- <sup>7</sup> “The Christian Mothers: Mothers Rule the World,” Archconfraternity of Christian Mothers, accessed August 10, 2022, <https://www.archconfraternityofchristianmothers.com/about-us>.
- <sup>8</sup> Bishop Regis Canevin founded St. Athanasius Parish April 25, 1907, naming Father Alphonse M. Yochum the first pastor. The first church-school building was dedicated on June 6, 1909. The new parish quickly outgrew its facilities necessitating the building of a new church and school. Source: “St. Athanasius History,” Our Lady of Mount Carmel Parish, accessed December 10, 2020, <https://mountcarmelpgh.org/st-athanasius-history>.
- <sup>9</sup> The now-defunct Highland Country Club.
- <sup>10</sup> St. Fidelis closed in 1981 due to low enrollment. Capuchin Franciscans staffed the high school and college seminary for 103 years from



**Father Bertin Roll, OFM Cap., traveled the country, bringing his ministry — and his prayer book *Mother Love* — to the people**

Source: Archives of Capuchin Friars, Province of St. Augustine

- 1877-1980.
- <sup>11</sup> Roll discussion.
- <sup>12</sup> Father Bertin Roll memorandum, April 13, 2007, Archives of the Capuchin Franciscan Friars, Province of St. Augustine.
- <sup>13</sup> Newspapers.com Publisher’s Extra.
- <sup>14</sup> Roll memorandum.
- <sup>15</sup> “Roll, 1916-1925.”
- <sup>16</sup> The Christian Mothers manual written by German Friar Pius Franciscus, OFM Cap. whose English version was edited by Father Bertin Roll.
- <sup>17</sup> “Roll, 1916-1925.”
- <sup>18</sup> “Catholic Urges TV and Radio Programs on Family Life,” *Journal Herald* (Dayton, Ohio), March 16, 1950, 27.
- <sup>19</sup> “The Dead Sea Scrolls,” *St. Louis Dispatch*, June 16, 1957, 100.
- <sup>20</sup> Catholic News Service, Newsfeeds, July 1, 1957.
- <sup>21</sup> *Pittsburgh Catholic*, October 10, 1957, 11.
- <sup>22</sup> “Through Television Series at Home Catholics Will Have Chance to Make Retreat at Home,” *Catholic Advance* (Wichita, Kansas), February 27, 1953, 7.
- <sup>23</sup> “Plan Living Room Retreats on TV, Catholic Hour Program Featuring Meditation Begins March 1,” *The Tablet* (Brooklyn, New York), February 28, 1953, 5.
- <sup>24</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>25</sup> “Capuchins to Conduct TV Mission,” *Pittsburgh Press*, March 6, 1954, 5.
- <sup>26</sup> “Bob Considine on TV,” *Catholic Advance* (Wichita, Kansas), April 9, 1954, 10.
- <sup>27</sup> “A Medal for Mother.”
- <sup>28</sup> Catholic News Service, Newsfeeds, December 29, 1958.
- <sup>29</sup> “Roll, 1916-1925.”
- <sup>30</sup> Jill Turok, in discussion with the author, August 23, 2021.
- <sup>31</sup> Roll memorandum.
- <sup>32</sup> *Mother Love*.

# THE PRINTED WORKS OF FATHER BERTIN ROLL

Source: Archives of Capuchin Friars, Province of St. Augustine

