

## FEATURE

# Priest puts his best foot forward to aid missions

By Mike Latona  
Staff writer

If you only visited your hometown once every five years, you'd probably want to sit down and chat with as many old friends as possible.

Father Bill Brown, OFM, is indeed catching up with old friends. But sit down? Not a chance.

The Franciscan priest, 61, has begun an extensive fundraising walk that will take him 650 miles over a 42-day period. The native of Wellsville, in the Diocese of Buffalo, is staging the walk to support his missionary work in Peru, where he has resided since 1959.

Father Brown undertook a similar effort in 1992, when he walked 600 miles through the dioceses of Buffalo, Rochester and Syracuse. His walk then raised \$55,000.

"I've received a lot of interest and a lot of love, and gotten to know more people," Father Brown said in an April 30 telephone interview with the *Catholic Courier* from his home parish, Immaculate Conception in Wellsville. "When you're back in the jungle and you have a bad day, you remember all the good times."

Father Brown began his current journey May 2 from Wellsville. The hike will conclude June 12 when he returns to Immaculate Conception. In between, he is walking alone 20 to 25 miles per day while staying overnight at a number of parishes. In addition, he is presenting lectures and

homilies at the parishes.

Father Brown has already visited St. Ann's Church in Hornell; St. Mary's Church in Bath; the Corning-Painted Post Roman Catholic Community; Eastside Catholic Parish in Elmira; and St. Patrick's Church in Owego.

Upcoming stops in this diocese are as follows: May 13, St. Mary's Church in Auburn; May 14, St. Mary's Church in Waterloo; May 15, St. Stephen's Church in Geneva and St. Mary's Church in Canandaigua; May 16-17, St. Rose Church in Lima; and May 18, St. Columba Church in Caledonia.

Much of the preparatory effort in this diocese for the 1992 and 1997 walks has been conducted through St. Ann's Church in Hornell, located 26 miles from Wellsville. Father Elmer Schmidt, the former St. Ann's pastor who still resides there, became involved with Father Brown's cause after observing his missionary work on a visit to Peru in 1991.

"Seeing it first-hand really impressed me, seeing how the missionaries brought joy and peace to the people," Father Schmidt said.

Father Brown, according to Father Schmidt, "is a tremendous guy. His spirit is catching. With a super-charged person, you're bound to catch on."

Although some people might think a walk of this magnitude could be too physically taxing for a man his age, Father Brown noted that his lifestyle in Peru is even more exhausting. Due to inadequate



Kerry Huller/Photo intern

The Hornell Color Guard, K of C Assembly 0744, were among the crowd greeting Father William Brown, OFM, (left, holding the key to city) as he arrived in Hornell during a cross-diocesan march to raise money for his mission in Lima, Peru. In 1992, the 61-year-old priest raised \$55,000 through a similar march.

road conditions, he explained that he must make long hikes through the Andes Mountains to reach the people.

"In the jungle, everything seems to be against mankind — all the bugs, all the animals," Father Brown said.

The threat of war hasn't made life any simpler. Fighting in Peru has often erupted over the years as terrorists have attempted to overthrow the existing government. Father Brown vividly recalls a liturgy he held in 1988, in a town where several people had recently been killed.

"Two hundred people showed up for Mass when you normally would have 15 to 20. They just looked desperate," Father Brown said. "I said, 'Oh God, help me! What can I do to lift these people up?'"

Although fighting is currently at a lull, Father Brown noted that many villages

have been nearly wiped out by the strife.

"There's hardly a family in Peru that hasn't been touched by terrorism. It's going to take a long time to get over this," Father Brown said. He added that funds raised from his walk will assist in these villages' recovery.

Father Brown says he is in excellent health. Although his work only allows him to take an extensive leave every five years, he is looking forward to making a similar walk through New York state in 2002.

"Oh, definitely. I'd always like to do it bigger and better," Father Brown said.

**EDITORS' NOTE:** Those wishing to donate to Father Brown's cause may send contributions to the Father Bill Brown Mission Walk, c/o Immaculate Conception Rectory, 6 Maple St., Wellsville, N.Y. 14895.

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