

## FEATURE



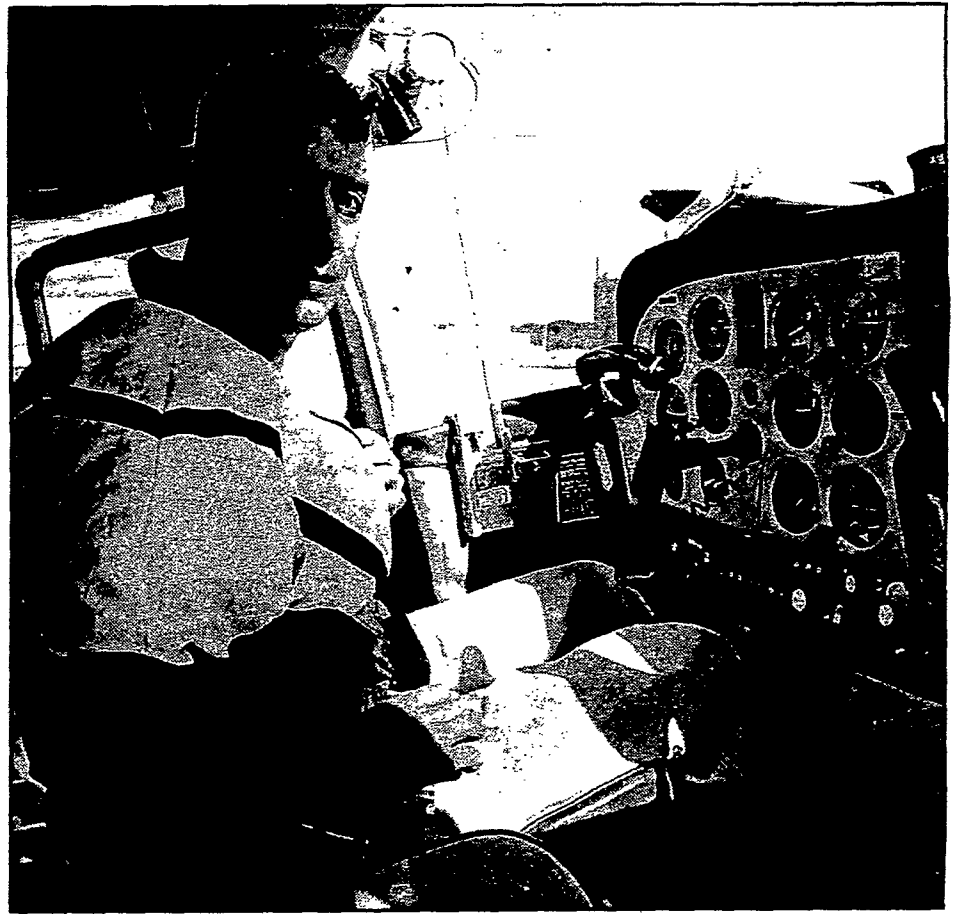
Karin von Voigtlander/Staff photographer

Father Tim Brown, pastor of St. Charles Borromeo Church in Greece, takes off from Rochester International Airport Aug. 23. Father Brown received his pilot's license last year.

## Flying through the air with Father Tim Brown



Before taking off, Father Brown completes a check of the plane.



Father Brown fastens his seat belt as he prepares for his flight.

By Rob Cullivan  
Staff writer

On the afternoon of Aug. 23, Father Timothy T. Brown, pastor of St. Charles Borromeo Church in Greece, prepared to fly me aboard a single-engine Cessna he had rented for one hour at the Greater Rochester International Airport.

I was a bit nervous, as we had rescheduled our flight from another day because Father Brown told me that the plane we were going to use had engine trouble.

"Unfortunately, these things happen when it comes to flying," his phone message said that day.

I thought about his words as he checked the wings, the engine, the oil, the propeller and other features of the craft before we flew. There was still time to chicken out, I thought to myself. I could always interview him afterward, right?

However, the morning before our flight, a Monarch butterfly had seemed unusually attracted to me as I was getting into my car before going to work. I thought this could be a sign of a good flight later that day.

Then again, it could have possibly been a bad sign since butterflies sometimes symbolize the afterlife.

Either way, I had a story to file, and since I was flying with a priest, at least I had a good shot at proper last rites. And if anything went wrong, I wouldn't have to worry about deadlines anymore. It was a somewhat comforting thought — somewhat.

Father Brown obtained his pilot's license last year, after four years of study. He's a member of the National Association of

Priest Pilots, some of whom use their piloting skills in their ministry to remote regions of Alaska, Africa and Mexico. Father Brown, however, noted that flying is strictly something he does for fun, on his days off, and that he wouldn't be landing in the parking lot of his parish anytime soon.

Father Brown told me he had been inspired to learn how to fly by his father, who took the family on a discount trip aboard an aircraft flown by the now-defunct Mohawk Airlines. A native of Chili, he added that he grew up near the airport, and had liked to watch the planes take off and land.

"I've always had a general interest in aviation," he said.

He said that his longest journey was to the Thousand Islands, but that he dreams of flying all the way to Dayton, Ohio, where the Wright Brothers grew up. The priest pilots had their convention there one year, he said, adding that it's home to the U.S. Air Force Museum. He had seen such planes as the Air Force One aircraft on which Lyndon Johnson had been sworn in as president following John Kennedy's assassination, he added.

As we taxied down to the runway Father Brown turned to me and said: "Is your door locked?"

"Yes, it's locked," I said, as I pushed against it several times, trying to convince myself I hadn't screwed up, locking it in some weird way that would cause the both of us to be taken out of the plane when it suddenly opened midair. Should I open it and close it again? Nah, I thought. It's locked, really, it's locked.

I had flown in several jet airliners before, and in a few propeller-driven com-

muter planes to the Big Apple, but nothing prepared me for the sensation I felt as we took off from the airport. If you've ever swung back and forth on a Ferris wheel cart, that gives you some idea of how I felt. Except you can scream at the Ferris wheel attendant to stop if you get too scared. I knew I couldn't scream at Father Brown. So, as I tried to hide the fact I was terrified, I glanced over at Father Brown, who was talking like a pro to the air control tower.

"Do you think about anything up here, or just concentrate on flying?" I asked. "Just concentrate on flying," Father Brown answered. Good thing, I thought. Papal encyclicals are better pondered when one is not driving a tin box through the air.

"What do you like the best about flying?" I asked. "The view," he replied.

And then everything changed. I suddenly relaxed as I pondered his words. As we flew 100 miles per hour at 2,500 feet, we could see the Genesee River winding through Monroe County; the University of Rochester; the crowded neighborhoods of the city; the swimming pools of the suburbs that looked like little blue contact lens cases below us. Lake Ontario and the sky be-

came a sheet of blue separated by a border of clouds. He's right, I thought. This makes all the bumpiness of the ride worth it.

"Is that Hamlin Beach?" he asked me. I studied the shoreline for a moment, and said, "I think so." As we turned back toward Rochester, I noticed a traffic jam on a road below.

"There's a traffic jam up here," he said, as our radio filled with reports of various aircraft of all sizes trying to land. We had to actually do a circle before we landed because a larger plane had unexpectedly come in ahead of us.

Father Brown decreased our speed as we began to descend. Even though we were going 70 miles per hour, it felt more like we were dropping slowly, like a balloon drifting from a child's hand to the ground. We had a fairly smooth landing, and by the time it all ended, I was thinking of becoming a pilot myself.

"Maybe we can do this again sometime," he told me as we parted ways. "Definitely," I said. On the way home, I uttered a prayer of thanks for meeting a priest with his heart in his church and his head in the clouds.