

Priest goes extra mile for missions

Mike Latona/Catholic Courier

PITTSFORD — Father Bill Brown protects his ailing back by no longer using a backpack while walking. His 67-year-old legs and feet, on the other hand, are seemingly in as fine shape as ever.

"People into walking and jogging, they'll tell you there's a physical, mental and spiritual benefit. It's almost like my feet are happy when I start walking," Father Brown said.

The Franciscan priest has had very happy feet this month. He's in the midst of an extended hike through four New York dioceses, raising funds for the missions in Peru where he has resided for 44 years.

If anything, his remarkable regimen seems to be toughening. Father Brown expects to have totaled 700 miles by the time his journey ends June 10; that's an even greater distance than his two previous treks through New York. He walked 500 miles in 1992 and 600 miles in 1997.

His current walk began May 1. He passed through Tioga County the first few days of his trip, then returned to the Rochester Diocese May 19-23 when he spent time in Cayuga, Ontario, Seneca, Wayne and Monroe counties. Walking mostly along major routes, his trek also includes parts of the Syracuse, Albany and Buffalo dioceses.

Averaging 25 to 30 miles each day he walks, Father Brown often goes up to eight hours straight at a clip of three to four miles per hour. Supporters may join him for a few miles, but for the most part he travels alone. Passing motorists offer rides that he politely declines, while state troopers who are aware of the hike occasionally check to make sure he's doing all right.

Father Brown travels lightly, arriving at his overnight destination with only a few extra clothes. "I'll be asked 'Father, what do you want?' I'll say, 'A washer, a dryer and a shower,'" Father Brown remarked during an interview May 22 at St. Louis Church in Pittsford, one of his

many host parishes.

He stays at rectories and with family members, occasionally taking days off for visiting. At some parishes he celebrates Mass and preaches, gratefully accepting donations for his missions.

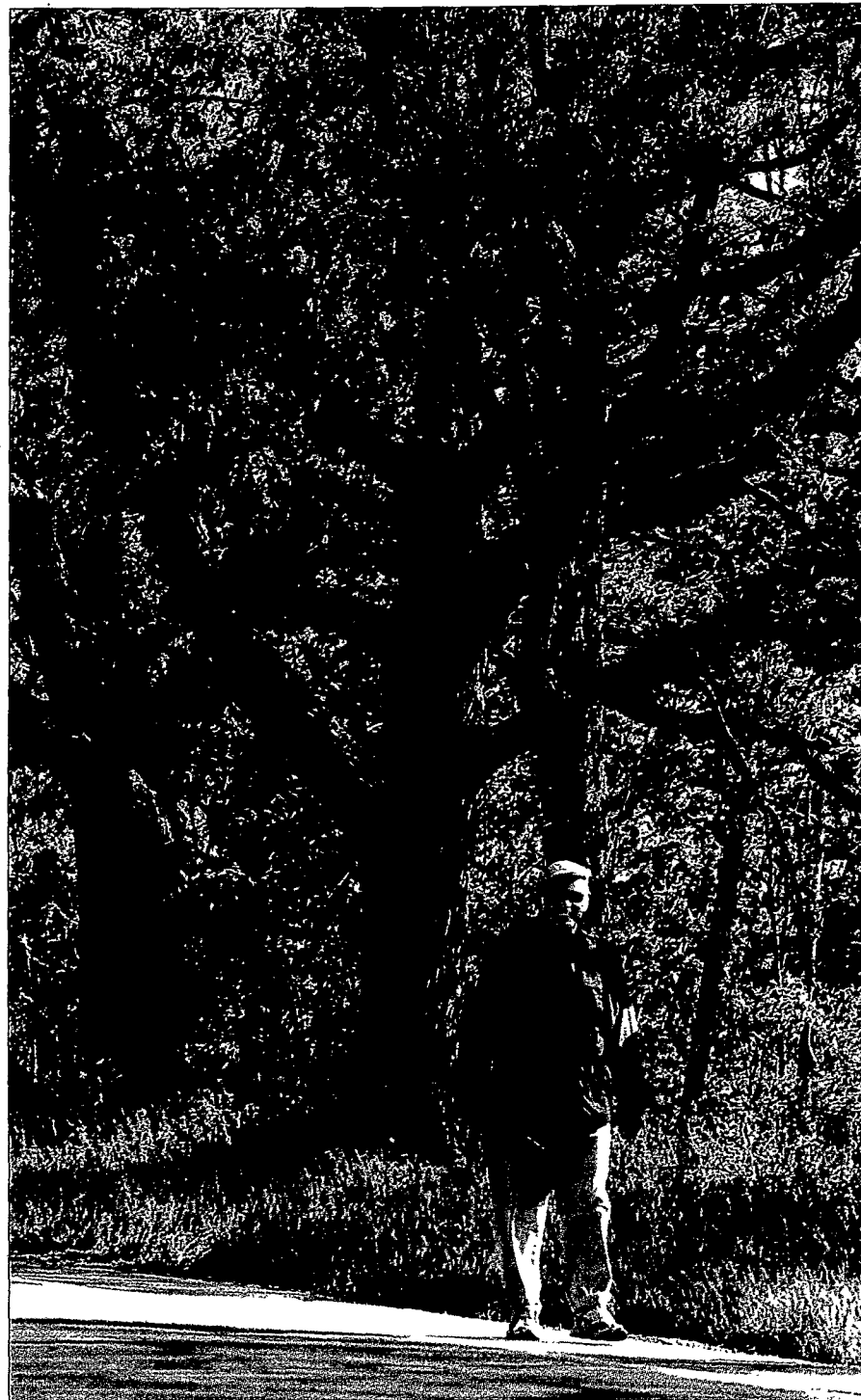
Father Brown raised approximately \$50,000 from each of his previous two walks. He noted that Father Elmer Schmidt, a retired diocesan priest, was instrumental in getting the walks established after Father Schmidt — then the pastor at St. Ann's in Hornell — visited Father Brown in Peru in 1991.

The walks are coordinated by people from Father Brown's home parish of Immaculate Conception in Wellsville, where his 2003 walk is due to conclude. Volunteers from the Allegany County parish, in the Diocese of Buffalo, also raise funds year round for Father Brown's missions. He relies heavily on this support, saying that donors from his home state are "the ones who keep me going."

As much as he cherishes their help, the priest said he'd rather not ask folks for money. "Some millionaire is going to see me on the road someday and say 'Here's two million dollars, send the fool back to Peru so he doesn't bother people,'" Father Brown said.

Yet he pointed out that donations are badly needed for the town of Satipo, where he lives. Residents have been crippled by global competition to their chocolate and coffee industry: People live hand to mouth, the water quality is poor, and young people have dwindling educational opportunities. Another major challenge has been Peru's political unrest over the years; many villages in Father Brown's region have been targets of terrorism.

Father Brown's legs and feet have been conditioned by his many long walks through the Andes Mountains. He also travels by Jeep, canoe and small plane to reach remote parts of the jungle. He observed that people in these scattered communities often go months, perhaps even years,



Karin von Voigtlander/Catholic Courier

Father Bill Brown walks from Brockport to Bergen along Route 19 May 23 as part of his trek through New York to raise money for missions in Peru.

without seeing a priest. In his region there are 10 missionary priests, or one for every 80,000 people in this predominately Catholic country. Many times, he said, he begins Mass late or has it interrupted so he can perform baptisms — to people of all ages — or hear confessions.

The priest will return to South America soon after attending his 50th-anniversary reunion from Wellsville Central High School in late June. He is only granted leave once every few years but is already considering a fourth walk — and perhaps even a fifth — in his home state.

"It's in the back of my mind," Father Brown said. He noted that he once envisioned walking across the United States, and if he were to do

two more walks around New York, that would add up to about 3,000 miles — the distance from one coast to the other.

Though he'd be well into his 70s by the time he met that goal, Father Brown said he plans to keep plugging right along.

"As long as I'm living and breathing, I'm going to be walking for my people," he stated. "Missionary priests, we just go until we drop — there's no retirement in sight. I knew it was a lifelong commitment and I've never regretted it."

EDITOR'S NOTE: Those wishing to support Father Brown may send checks to the Father Bill Brown Mission Club, 6 Maple Ave., Wellsville, NY 14895.



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