RONALD D. LAWLER, O.F.M. CAP.
A saintly priest, dedicated scholar, superb friend

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On November 5, 2003, one of the holiest priests I have ever known, Ronald Lawler, died. He was not only a saintly priest but he was also a magnificent and dedicated scholar and one of the best friends I ever had.

Father Ronald was born in Cumberland, Maryland in 1926, and as a young man entered the Capuchin Friars in the mid 1940s and studied for the priesthood at St. Fidelis Seminary in Butler, Pennsylvania. He was ordained to the priesthood in 1951 and after his ordination studied philosophy at St. Louis University, receiving his doctorate in 1958.

He devoted his life from then on to teaching, writing and spreading the good news of our redemption through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. I got to know this wonderful man first in the mid 1960s when I was working as an editor for the Bruce Publishing Company, for we published one of Father Ron's first books, an excellent volume called Analytic Philosophy and Ethics in a series of philosophical works under the general editorship of Jude Dougherty. In this fine book he gave an excellent critique of the ethical views of such influential figures as A.J. Ayer and R. M. Hare.

I really got to know Father Ron well after I began teaching moral theology at The Catholic University of America, where this great priest was also teaching from 1976-1980. We soon became fast friends, and in him I found a person who could strengthen me in my efforts to show that the Church's teaching on moral issues is not only true but also liberating. Father Ron, who was so filled with love of God and neighbor that he radiated goodness, wanted to help everyone realize that the Church's moral teaching is in no way the imposition of arbitrary rules meant to burden us and keep us from having fun, but that to the contrary it is a sure way to live a good, rich and happy life.

He had by that time served as rector of his alma mater, St. Fidelis seminary, where he had had as students Charles Chaput and Sean O'Malley, to whom he had succeeded in communicating his love for the Church and for the truth. He had also been dean of theology at the Josephinum in Columbus Ohio and had taught for a spell at Oxford University in England, where he became a close friend of people like Elizabeth Anscombe, Peter Geach and John Finnis.
Later, after leaving CUA, he was to become the first director of the Center for Thomistic Studies at the University of St. Thomas in Houston, then Msgr. George A. Kelly’s stalwart associate at St. John’s University in Jamaica, NY, still later rector of Holy Apostles Seminary in Cromwell, CT, and then ending his years in Pittsburgh, PA, doing wonderful work in religious education for Bishop Donald Wuerl.

In 1977 Father Ronald became the founding president of the Fellowship of Catholic Scholars, a wonderful organization that came into being primarily because of dedicated Catholic scholars like Father Ron, Msgr. Kelly, Germain Grisez and others. He gave himself unreservedly and unremittingly to the task of presenting, defending and explaining the truth of the Catholic faith, and to do so in a cheerful, friendly way. In order to carry out this commitment he did a lot of great writing. Among his most notable works is *The Teaching of Christ: A Catholic Catechism for Adults*, which he wrote with the help of Donald Wuerl, his brother Tom, and others. It was first published in 1976 and in the years to come he revised this marvelous work several times and produced as well a shorter and more compact catechetical work, *The Gift of Faith*.

I had the great privilege of cooperating with Father Ron and Joseph Boyle in writing *Catholic Sexual Ethics: A Summary, Explanation and Defense*. This was a truly collaborative effort. Joe and I drafted chapters on topics in which we had some competence because of our work, and Father Ron then submitted these drafts to careful scrutiny, offering excellent criticism and great suggestions for improving them, while writing a wonderful chapter of “pastoral” reflections. He in effect served as the supervising editor of the volume, and a demanding editor he was. Whatever value the volume, originally published in 1985 and revised in 1998, has owes much to his criticism, insights and contributions.

Father Ron was the only American named by the Holy Father to the prestigious Pontifical Roman Theological Academy, a group of some 30 experts. He was appointed to this Academy in 1982 along with Henri de Lubac and Hans Urs von Balthasar.

During the final years of his life, in addition to his scholarly and pastoral work, Father Ron was appointed by the Holy See as a “spiritual assistant” to the Poor Clare nuns, visiting 13 monasteries to assist them in their life. The Holy See could not have appointed a better “spiritual assistant.”

To me the most memorable thing about Father Ron was his radiant joy in being a Christian. He had a wonderful appreciation of the glory that is ours because we have become, through baptism, brother and sisters of Christ, children of God, members of the divine family, given the wonderful mission of carrying on Christ’s redemptive work in the world in which we live, summoned to become saints by loving as God loves us in Christ Jesus. He was truly a saintly priest, dedicated scholar, and the best friend one could have. May he rest in peace!!

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