In Memoriam: Fr. Robert J. Levis (1921-2016)
Regis Martin

The Commodore” was not a moniker one would dare address directly to the late Father Robert J. Levis, Ph.D., who died last May at the age of 95, but among those who first knew him as students at the Pontifical Center for Catechetical Studies, which he founded in June 1972, it was meant as an endearment. It was not an entirely inaccurate one either, inasmuch as he’d been official chaplain for years at the nearby Commodore Perry Yacht Club. While most students never actually sailed with him, it was always an exciting possibility to be invited on board.

I first met him at a gathering of “right-wing” Roman Catholics in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, back in the early seventies. The group was mostly middle age, along with a few young fogies like myself, and we were all pretty fiercely fired-up by the state of the Church in the United States back then. Evidence of growing secularization was everywhere, concerning which Fr. Levis provided no end of examples. From chancery office to classroom to local parish, he would routinely tick off a whole busload of heterodox idiocies. His was a well-stocked mind, to which wit and humor were added as the necessary spices.

I liked him at once. Afterwards, he and I fell into conversation, and before I knew it, he’d offered me a free ride through his Center in exchange for doing a bit of office work. I could hardly resist, having just been fired from a teaching post in a local private Catholic high school, where many of the teaching sisters had “gone off their rockers.” (Not too long after, the school itself would implode, leaving a couple hundred students in the lurch, but that’s another story.)

And I could certainly use an advanced degree, especially in theology, a discipline I’d recently become more and more dependent upon in my dealings with the sisters. (A recent year spent in Vietnam no doubt contributed to a sense of urgency as well.)

Once ensconced in Erie, I got to know Fr. Levis pretty well, becoming ever more admiring of not just the work he was doing, which was both impressive and far-reaching (for instance, the contacts he had with Rome, particularly the late John Cardinal Wright, who, as Prefect for the Clergy, had founded the first Pontifical Center in Middleburg, Virginia), but the character of the man himself, who saw things through the essential prism of his priesthood. In fact, by the time of his death, he’d been a priest with
the Erie Diocese for some sixty-seven years. As a landmark of service to Christ and his Church, I’d call that positively lapidary.

Since he knew who he was—in the order of what, in days gone by, nearly every Catholic understood as sacramental ontology—it became an almost natural outgrowth of his identity and sense of priestly mission to do all that he could to lend support and encouragement to other priests. To this end he started, and for twenty or so years sustained, an annual workshop for priests at Gannon University, where he long occupied academic and administrative chairs. Over 150 priests would come from all over the United States and Canada, in order to anneal themselves annually in the teaching and person of Jesus Christ, who entrusted the entire enterprise of salvation to his Bride, the Church. It was a heady experience even for those of us who were not ordained.

But the real feather in his cap was the Catechetical Center, which he raised up as a bulwark against the age, recruiting hundreds of students over the years to come and immerse themselves in the study of the Church’s faith and life. I owe a great deal to his largesse, including my first appointment as an Instructor in the Liberal Studies, which he arranged with Dr. Martin Larrey, who was then its Director, along with Dr. Joseph Scottino, who was then Academic Vice President and, like Fr. Levis, among those who helped catalyze into existence the Fellowship of Catholic Scholars.

He certainly made a splash, Fr. Bob did, and the ripple effect continues to this day.

Particularly telling, of course, were the many EWTN appearances over the years; in fact, both he and another fine priest, Fr. John Trigilio, together hosted a longstanding show called Web of Faith, in which they would take turns to answer tough questions that people would ask from the call-in audience. Also, lest I forget, there was a brief stint of a couple of years when he would travel from Erie to my own university—Franciscan University of Steubenville in Ohio—where, once a week without fail, he would offer a course in catechetics, a subject about which he knew everything, including how to impart it with humor and verve. He was also on the Board of Advisors of the Society of Catholic Social Scientists since it began in 1992.

May he rest in a well-deserved peace in the arms of the God whose Mother he loved so dearly, and to whom he gave so much of himself in spirited and honest defense.