

Christopher Gaul, former managing editor of the Catholic Review, dies at 72

By George P. Matysek Jr.

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There were countless angles a journalist could have taken in writing a preview story about Pope John Paul II's historic visit to Baltimore in 1995. Christopher Gaul, then the senior writer at the Catholic Review who later became the newspaper's managing editor, decided to examine what others ignored: the source of the 80,000 Communion hosts that would be consecrated during the Oct. 8 papal Mass at Oriole Park at Camden Yards.

Gaul traced the story all the way back to a Kansas wheat field, where grains were harvested and shipped by railcar to New Jersey to be stone-ground into whole wheat flour. The flour would eventually be taken to the Sisters of the Good Shepherd in Washington, who made it into simple dough.

Gaul's prose matched in tenderness the love the sisters put into making the Communion wafers, and would win him a journalism award from the Catholic Press Association in 1996 – one of many he received in his 10 years at the Catholic Review.

Daniel Medinger, former editor/associate publisher of the Catholic Review, said Gaul's treatment of the story was typical of the tenacity, care and thoroughness he brought to his job.

Gaul, 72, died Oct. 18, after a nearly yearlong battle with cancer. He worked at the Catholic Review beginning as a writer in 1995 before becoming associate and then managing editor. He had also produced and hosted Catholic News Radio and Catholic Review TV. Gaul retired in 2005, but continued to make freelance

contributions to the newspaper.

“There are many people who are good journalists and there are many people who are good Catholics,” said Medinger, head of Advertising Media Plus Inc., “but there are very few who are good Catholic journalists. He brought that sense of mission to his work in everything he did.”

Born in Wallasey, England, Gaul attended English boarding schools before coming to the United States in 1953 and later serving in the U.S. Army. Raised in the Church of England, he converted to Catholicism as a teen a few years after his mother joined the church in the late 1940s. Gaul’s godfather was William E. Barrett, a well-known Catholic writer whose novels include “The Left Hand of God.”

In Baltimore, Gaul worked as a reporter for The Sun and The Evening Sun from 1961 to 1968. He was an on-air investigative reporter and documentary film producer for WJZ from 1968 to 1974.

From 1974 to 1978, Gaul worked as a producer, writer and on-air correspondent for the National Public Affairs Center for Television in Washington, D.C. , covering the White House from 1976 to 1978 for national public television.

Gaul was executive producer for public affairs and chief script writer for WQED public television in Pittsburgh from 1978 to 1982. He was an independent documentary film producer from 1992 to 1995, and, for 10 years, was the on-air medical reporter for WBAL-TV.

Gaul’s soothing English accent was a familiar one to Baltimore television and radio audiences, also gracing the Catholic Review’s website when Gaul recorded Catholic prayers that could be used by Web visitors.

While at the Catholic Review, Gaul won the coveted Eileen Egan Award for his coverage of Catholic Relief Services’ outreach to earthquake victims in Turkey. He also covered Pope John Paul II’s visit to Baltimore and the Catholic-Orthodox dialogue in Emmitsburg. He teamed with Medinger to research and write a seven-part series called “Inside the Vatican,” and also reported from Israel.

For most of his years at the Catholic Review, Gaul wrote a column about parish life.

Colleagues remembered him for being an honest reporter.

“One thing that stands out about him is that he had courage,” Medinger said. “He put his name on his work and sometimes he had to ask uncomfortable questions. He always had the courage to do it.”

In a 2005 interview with the Catholic Review, Gaul said working for the Catholic press was the “most fulfilling” experience of his storied career. Readers of Catholic publications “expect you to give them the truth about the faith and people of faith,” he said.

“Working for the Catholic press is about finding the truth and telling the truth in a way that respects the dignity of everyone involved,” he said.

Gaul was highly respected by younger journalists at the Catholic Review for serving as their mentor. He often spent hours working with them one-on-one.

“He was a guy who expected quality and held high standards of himself and of others,” Medinger said.

Jennifer Williams, Catholic Review Web editor, said Gaul demanded the best of her from the day she arrived at the newspaper as a staff writer.

“He wouldn’t sugarcoat the fact that he wasn’t pleased with something I’d written,” she said, “and he ended up becoming the greatest mentor of my career as well as a friend.”

Joseph Kirk Ryan, editor of The Dialog and former managing editor of the Catholic Review, said Gaul was “born to be a journalist – whether in newspapers or broadcasting.”

“In addition to being one of the fastest writers I ever worked with, he was very quick to find the heart of a story, an issue or a personality and capture its main points on paper in straightforward, classy prose,” Ryan said.

Ryan noted that as a convert, Gaul wore his Catholicism on his sleeve and often personified “‘high dudgeon,’ an indignation about the state of things that masked his

love and concern for friends and the world.”

Gaul, a father of six and grandfather of eight, had a deep devotion to Carmelite spirituality and had begun the process of becoming a lay member of the Secular Order of Discalced Carmelites. His work at the Catholic Review interrupted his formation process. He recently began the process again and received special permission to make his definitive promises as a Carmelite this summer at the Shrine of St. Anthony in Ellicott City even though he had not completed formation.

“It meant the world to him,” said Sister Maria Veronica of the Holy Face, a hermit and longtime friend who supported Gaul in his Carmelite devotion. Gaul was proud to share the May 16 birthday with the feast day of St. Simon Stock, Sister Maria Veronica said. St. Simon was an English saint to whom the Blessed Virgin Mary is said to have appeared with a brown scapular. Gaul wore a scapular and almost always carried his rosary.

“He had a wonderful sense of humor and a deep spirituality,” Sister Maria Veronica said.

Monsignor James Farmer, pastor of St. John in Westminster, remembered his friend as a “very jovial man” who had a passion for golfing and raising champion show dogs with his wife, Pam.

“While he would laugh and kid around, he was also a very holy man,” said Monsignor Farmer, one of Gaul’s golfing buddies. “His faith deepened as he grew older. As his faith increased, he saw his writing at the Catholic Review as a form of ministry.”

Medinger said Gaul will be deeply missed by many.

“He was happy about his life and lived it to the fullest,” Medinger said.

Friends may pay their respects Oct. 22 from 9 to 10:30 a.m. at Bruzdinski Funeral Home in Essex. A funeral Mass will be offered at 11 a.m. the same day at Our Lady of Mount Carmel, Essex. In lieu of flowers, donations may be made to the Discalced Carmelite Friars, 2131 Lincoln Road NE, Washington, D.C. 20002-1199.

