

Legendary city pastor, caretaker of 'homeless park,' reflects after 48 years as active priest

By Erik Zygmunt

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"It's been fun," said Father Richard Lawrence, describing his 43 years as pastor of St. Vincent de Paul Parish in Baltimore.

Emanating from the visage of the white-haired, white-bearded, 74-year-old priest – once described by a parishioner as the likeness of Moses – the glib declaration might seem uncharacteristic.

Then again, experience dictates that such figures often serve to shatter preconceived notions.

Father Lawrence, a legend in social justice circles who heard the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s 1963 "I Have a Dream" speech in person and led St. Vincent de Paul Parish to the forefront of the push to end the death penalty in Maryland, has always had a sense of fun.

Bridget Jones, niece to "Uncle Rich," remembered her late father's nearly daily phone conversations with his priest brother.

"He would pick up the phone and just laugh," Jones remembered after Father Lawrence's retirement Mass Feb. 26. "They didn't say 'Hello.' They just told jokes."

In an interview with the Catholic Review at FutureCare Homewood, a Charles Village rehabilitation facility where he has been recovering from injuries following an Oct. 7 fall, Father Lawrence revealed his affinity for a well-executed insult.

"I'd just as soon be the target as the perpetrator," he said. "If the line is good, the line is good."

A man of words, he has led a parish of action. Populated with the homeless and transient, the park adjacent to the church and fronting Fayette Street at Front Street has become a symbol of St. Vincent de Paul's solidarity with the downtrodden.

The parish offers more than a haven on Friday evenings, when, with help from Our Lady of the Fields Parish in Millersville and other suburban partners, parishioners serve an early evening dinner to all who are hungry or lonely, homeless or not.

The parish has long engaged urban problems at the structural level, as well, involving itself in programs such as BRIDGE, the Baltimore Regional Initiative for Development of Genuine Equality, and Beyond the Boundaries, an archdiocesan initiative to attack concentrated poverty by working toward inclusive housing.

According to the parish website, stvchurch.org, the parish contributes six percent of its offertory as well as its share of the Archbishop's Annual Appeal to tuition assistance for the inner-city children educated at Ss. James and John Catholic School, a pre-kindergarten-to-grade-8 school in East Baltimore. Parishioners also serve on the school board and run an ecological program on a volunteer basis.

Through it all, Father Lawrence has been able to have fun, at least in part because he hasn't had to carry the whole operation himself.

"If it's a pastor and staff doing it, it's not a church," he said. "If it's a pastor and staff leading the people to do it, then it's a church."

"There is an expectation," said Colleen McCahill, pastoral associate of St. Vincent, "that all of us are to participate in the life of the parish."

McCahill, who Father Lawrence has lauded for "stepping up" in his absence and upon his retirement, directs the day-to-day ministry and activities of St. Vincent de Paul, and she credited her pastor for giving her and other parishioners the space and support to do so.

"If you had an idea or initiative for the parish or the city that was right and just and good, he had your back," McCahill said. "As somebody who has worked for him, when we didn't have perfect agreement on everything going on, he was still very respectful and willing to engage, and he had my back."

Parishioner Michael Jacko acknowledged “a temptation to think there is some sort of cult of personality around (Father Lawrence).”

“That’s really not the case,” Jacko said. “It’s not about Dick – it’s always been about the Gospel and the church. ... It’s not at all about looking up at him; it’s about raising up a whole group where everybody has a place.”

“He has a great way of getting out of the way and letting people use their gifts,” said parishioner Geraldine Fialkowski, who started attending Mass at St. Vincent in 1989.

She was teaching theology at Loyola University Maryland and a colleague had urged her to check it out.

“It’s very much an intentional community,” she said, noting that parishioners come from all over and include “people with theological degrees, medical doctors, lawyers and normal working-class people.”

“(Father Lawrence) attracts diversity because of his love,” Fialkowski said.

Parishioners also praised Father Lawrence’s consistent commitment to the city over the life of his ministry.

“You talk about Cal Ripken being here for a long time – here’s a guy that devoted his entire life to his faith and for his people,” said Dr. Raymond Bahr, a longtime parishioner and distinguished cardiologist who founded the nation’s first “early heart attack care” unit at Baltimore’s St. Agnes Hospital more than three decades ago.



Father Richard Lawrence celebrates his farewell Mass at St. Vincent de Paul in Baltimore Feb. 26. (Olivia Obineme/Special to the Review)

Formation begins at home

Raised a parishioner of St. Charles Borromeo in Pikesville, Father Lawrence cites his parents, one of his first pastors and a theologian in his decision to pursue the priesthood.

His parents, he said, taught him that faith and critical thinking do not have to be mutually exclusive. In his homily at his retirement Mass, he revealed that they also imparted a lesson on contemplation in the presence of God.

He and his brother, Gene – who would go on to become a beloved principal of Merganthaler Vocational-Technical High School in Baltimore before his death in 2001 – would finish their homework, Father Lawrence said, and come downstairs to the living room.

“My father would be in his big old chair, reading his paper. My mother would be on the couch, reading a mystery story,” Father Lawrence said. “Even at our age, we could sense they were not alone – they were profoundly aware of the other’s presence, and it would have been profoundly different if one of them had not been there.”

Father Lawrence also noted the influence of Father Joseph Connolly, who went from his ordination to St. Charles Borromeo, as associate pastor.

“He was a leader in the civil rights movement, the liturgical movement and the ecumenical movement, before any of them were popular,” Father Lawrence said.

In his retirement, he added, he may write about Father Connolly, as well as other deceased archdiocesan figures, such as Cardinal Lawrence Shehan and Archbishop William D. Borders, the 12th and 13th archbishops of Baltimore, and Monsignor Martin J. Gamber, who also celebrated Mass at St. Charles Borromeo during Father Lawrence’s formative years.

Finally, Father Lawrence cited his experience reading Jesuit Father Pierre Teilhard de Chardin’s “The Phenomenon of Man” as a teenager as instrumental to his own vocation.

His parents, who “never assumed what their children couldn’t do,” gifted him the book when he was a senior at what is now Loyola Blakefield in Towson.

“It integrated the theory of evolution with the mystical body,” Father Lawrence said. “I kept going to the dictionary to look up words, and they weren’t in there because Teilhard was coining them as he went along.”

His thirst for knowledge was never quenched. Father Lawrence earned a master of sacred theology from St. Mary's Seminary in Roland Park, and later an M.B.A. from what is now Loyola University Maryland.

"(Monsignor) Porter White told me, 'If you're going to have the ship at sea, you had better go to navigation school,'" Father Lawrence said, recalling his role in handling the Archdiocese of Baltimore's finances, which he did while continuing his pastorship at St. Vincent.

Father Lawrence also earned a doctorate in spirituality from the Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C., in 1991.

Constant presence



St. Vincent de Paul Church in Baltimore was established in 1840. (Olivia Obineme/Special to the Review)

Father Lawrence served as a transitional deacon at St. Gregory the Great in West Baltimore from 1967-68, and, after his ordination in 1968, as associate pastor of Church of the Blessed Sacrament in north Baltimore.

He landed at St. Vincent de Paul in 1973 and never left.

"When I got there, I found St. Vincent to be small and poor, but with a great spirit and a great liturgy and a tradition of involvement in social action," he said. "I looked at it and said, 'These are my kinds of people.'"

Always happy to roll up his sleeves, he did so on many occasions, advocating, for example, for the mixed rowhome development that would replace the infamous Flag House high-rise housing projects east of St. Vincent de Paul.

Perhaps most memorable was his 2008 row with the city over the homeless in the St. Vincent park. After the city threatened to make arrests, he promised to be the second in handcuffs.

"I said, 'Can you imagine how much fun the press would have with that?'" Father

Lawrence remembered of a meeting that included high-ranking city officials and Bishop Denis J. Madden, then-auxiliary bishop of Baltimore.

“They looked at Bishop Madden and said, ‘He can’t say that,’” he continued, “and he just sat there with that beatific smile on his face.”

Looking toward his retirement, Father Lawrence said he will miss “people, preaching and presiding,” but he is not worried about the future of St. Vincent.

“What we’ve seen over the past five months has been very encouraging,” he said in his retirement Mass homily. “We’ve reached the point where I’m not needed anymore.”

After thanking his parishioners “for all you’ve done for me and with me,” he offered a final exhortation: “Keep it up.”

Also see:

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