

Remembering a friend

Kneeling in the small parking garage at Catholic Review headquarters about a decade ago, Christopher Gaul and I went to work changing a flat tire on his small sports utility vehicle. Gaul, my former managing editor, confidently wielded an iron wrench to loosen lug nuts while I waited to help him remove the damaged tire.

After a few minutes, my keen journalistic powers of observation kicked in.

“Ummm, Chris,” I said, unable to contain a laugh. “You’re changing the tire that’s not flat.”

The metallic clank of a dropped tool echoed in the garage before Chris looked at me with a bemused smile. He was soon laughing with me at our automotive incompetence.

“Shut up,” Chris said in an urbane British accent. “You are not to tell anyone of this.”

Christopher Gaul was one of the great characters in the history of the Baltimore press.

Suave, intelligent, driven, funny and ambitious, Chris was a fixture at the Catholic Review from 1995 to 2005. He served in a variety of award-winning roles including senior correspondent, managing editor, associate editor and host of television and radio programs.

It will be a year Oct. 18 since Chris lost a nearly yearlong battle with lung cancer. His distinguished journalism career included stints as a reporter for The Sun and The Evening Sun, an investigative reporter and documentary film producer for WJZ-TV, and a medical reporter for WBAL-TV.

Raised in the Church of England, Chris became a Catholic as a teen a few years after his mother joined the church in the late 1940s. Gaul’s godfather was William E. Barrett, a Catholic writer whose novels include “The Left Hand of God.”

Chris long ago told me he was attracted to the romance of the Catholic Church –

stories of fantastic saints and martyrs, a theology that ran deep, and liturgy that inspired awe. I always had the sense that he was on a spiritual journey – sometimes stumbling, but always staying the course.

Chris was one of my greatest mentors. I learned more from reading his eloquent prose and sitting next to him at the Catholic Review than I did in any writing course. More than that, he became a friend.

Several times a year, I visited Chris and his wife, Pam, at their Essex home not too far from where I grew up. Sometimes we enjoyed a cookout or took in a football game. On his last Christmas Eve, I joined Chris' family for a dinner that featured his famous Yorkshire pudding. Another time, ushering in a new year, I watched the husband-and-wife team dance with their beloved Weimaraner show dogs at the stroke of midnight.

As Chris neared the end of his life, he began giving things away. He had already given me a copy of the Douay-Rheims translation of the Bible (which he steadfastly described as the most eloquent Catholic translation), an icon of St. Paul and a St. George medal from France that I wore until it broke free of its chain and was lost.

In those last months, Chris also gave me spiritual books and a bag of "holy dirt" he collected while on pilgrimage to one of his favorite shrines in Santa Fe.

Fulfilling a longtime dream, Chris received special permission to make his definitive promises as a lay member of the Secular Order of Discalced Carmelites just months before he died – even though he had not completed formation.

The day before Chris lost his battle with cancer, I visited him one final time. As a wet cloth perched on his forehead, Chris rested in bed while his beloved canines lingered nearby. On the wall hung a framed copy of Jean-Francois Millet's familiar painting of peasants pausing in a field for the Angelus – a retirement gift from The Catholic Review editorial department in honor of the tradition Chris started at the newspaper of praying the Angelus every day at noon.

Soft classical music hung in the air as I thanked Chris for being such a good friend and mentor. Within hours, he was gone.

I often wonder what Chris would make of the changes that have taken place in the church since his death – the stunning and humble retirement of Pope Benedict XVI and the election of the Argentine Pope Francis.

I suspect he would be intrigued by our new pope's emphasis on mercy, since one of Chris' favorite prayers was a soul-searching one he borrowed from the Orthodox: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner."

He would be pleased, I think, to know that some of the people he mentored at The Catholic Review are using the skills he honed in them to cover these exciting times with a sense of fairness, balance and perhaps even some of his style.

Yes, Chris is gone. His legacy is not.

Rest in peace, friend.

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