

Tonight we are gathered to celebrate the life of Ronald John Lewinski and to pray that the Lord will welcome his faithful servant into his heavenly kingdom. And we pray that the Lord will sustain us in our loss.

For the past week, I have felt a lot like Martha and Mary expressing their frustration to Jesus in the Gospel passage we just heard. You probably have felt likewise. How could something so wrenching, so unexpected, so seemingly unfair fit into the divine plan? And so we ask, “Lord, are you here with us or not?” But our path out of pain must be the same as Martha and Mary’s: faith that Jesus is the resurrection who brings his faithful disciples to everlasting life. And Rev. Ronald J. Lewinski was nothing if not a faithful servant of Jesus Christ who lived with this conviction. And tonight amid our tears, we must sprinkle in a healthy dose of faith, hope and joy that Ron is now with the Lord whom he loved so much and served so well for 45 years of priestly ministry.

I can truly say that Ron Lewinski was my best friend. We talked almost every day. I relied heavily on his wisdom, guidance, vision and companionship. I was a frequent recipient of his great generosity. I relished his wicked one-liners followed by that distinctive chuckle. Our relationship extends back more than 30 years, which puts me firmly in the middle of the pack of his countless friends! It amazes me that a man who almost bragged about being a painful introvert had more close friends – and I mean *friends*, not just acquaintances – than dozens of us added together! Ron’s relationships always had considerable substance, not just small talk. He had profound impacts on others. And somehow he kept in frequent touch with everyone!

As important as his friends were to him, his family was even more so. He loved the family holiday celebrations, get-togethers, and milestones. He told me several times how much he was looking forward to your gathering this past weekend. And I guess he still made his presence known on Saturday by the upside-down rainbow that appeared – as food was being served, naturally! And while I may not have met everyone in the Lewinski-Ciesielski clan, I still know you well because of how often your family was a feature of my conversations with UR – Uncle Ron.

Fr. Robert, Fr. Andrew (tomorrow’s homilist) and I have been discussing in recent days how much in our sorrow we are at a loss for words when it comes to talking about Ron and his profound influence in our lives. But we also observed that we could talk about him for hours on end and only scratch the surface of his life, talents and ministry.

Fr. Ron was a modern renaissance man who possessed many talents and who always had more concurrent jobs and responsibilities than anybody I know. He was an author and a visionary who help to shape not just the Church of Chicago but indeed the universal Church thanks to his

passion and expertise for the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, which he helped create. His affection for this topic even as a seminarian earned him the nickname of “Ron the Baptist.”

As head of the Office of Divine Worship, Ron was always proud that he organized the first-ever celebration of an RCIA rite by a pope when John Paul II celebrated mass in Grant Park in 1979. Over the decades he would literally travel around the world giving RCIA presentations to bishops and catechists alike.

Traveling to foreign lands, leading countless pilgrimages, and experiencing different people and cultures provided some unexpected lessons along the way. Once, when giving a talk in Australia, Ron spoke of the necessity for disciples to be rooted in Christ and the Gospel. After a while he noticed that every time he used the word “rooted” that his audience would smirk and chuckle. The bishop then explained to Ron that being “rooted” has sexual connotations in Australian English. Oops!

Fr. Ron also greatly enjoyed being a parish priest, and being a teacher and mentor for young priests. He appreciated the opportunity to share the love of God with people in the real world and to be part of their highs and lows, both in daily life and in milestone moments like baptisms, weddings and funerals. Of course, that could also lead to some interesting experiences.

Once when he was at St. Marceline’s, I believe, Ron was in the sacristy with the groom before the start of a wedding. A large, rough biker sort of gentleman stormed into the room demanding that the groom repay an outstanding debt. Being the large, imposing physical presence that he was, Fr. Ron tried to intervene and act as the peacemaker, suggesting that this could be handled later as the wedding was about to start. “Look, priest, there ain’t going to be no blanking wedding unless I get my blanking \$500.” When Ron tried to press for calm, the biker grabbed him, put him up against the wall and slugged him, knocking him out cold. After Ron regained consciousness, he proceeded to celebrate the wedding.

Once after another wedding, one of the groomsmen thanked Fr. Ron for his efforts and shoved three joints into his hand as tokens of gratitude. Ron was headed to visit someone in the hospital and didn’t want to have three joints in his pocket, so when he got to his car he just threw them in the glove compartment. As he sped along, you guessed it, Ron gets pulled over by an officer of the law. The policeman asked Ron for his license and registration. As he opens the glove compartment, three joints roll out. Ron starts blabbering an explanation that had to sound fantastical. The stunned officer just shook his head and said, “Father, I’m gonna pretend I didn’t see that. Just get out of here, but watch your speed.”

Of all the places he served, St. Mary of the Annunciation held a special place in his heart. With his special gift for envisioning and shaping the future, he nurtured this community through

great growth from less than 500 families to 1600 and the founding of Frassati Catholic Academy. The building in which we are gathered tonight has Ron's fingerprints all over it. This church, with its art and embedded spiritual symbolism, stands in testimony to his pastoral vision and love for the St. Mary community shown during his 18 years as pastor.

But his vision for St. Mary's and the Church wasn't focused on buildings and mortars. Over the years, he poured his boundless energy and talents into building a community of committed disciples, seeing parishes as (in his words) "greenhouses for growing saints."

Ron loved good food and the restaurant business is going to take a big hit with his passing. While he definitely enjoyed fine dining, Ron could take in more mundane eateries as well, as my next story will show.

Last month, my wife and I took a trip to Italy with Ron. Each night at dinner, he always posed some question that involved reflection and personal sharing. One night he asked, "What was your most embarrassing meal experience?" After Maryann and I told our tales, he shared that he once took his friend and mentor Sr. Agnes Cunningham to a supposedly nice burger place for lunch...only to discover part way through the meal that this restaurant/bar was holding a lingerie show! (He's gonna zap me for telling this one!)

The stories could go on and on. I'm sure each of you has a few dozen you could readily add. It is important that we always and forever remember how fortunate and blessed we were to have the great gift of Rev. Ronald J. Lewinski in our lives. He was a tremendous force in the life of everyone here tonight and countless others beyond these walls. And that's why we all hurt so much right now. The impact he had on me and my family is beyond words. I miss him terribly.

But I think Fr. Ron would remind us tonight that we must not wallow in our grief, as tempting as that might be. His life and ministry were a testimony to the transcending love and mercy of God and to faith in the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. He sincerely tried his best to be an energetic disciple of the Lord and a faithful servant of his people. I can't help but think tonight of the words spoken at the funeral of Fr. Ron's good friend, Cardinal Bernardin: "Didn't he teach us? Didn't he show us the way?"

Yes, he did. So let us pray tonight that the Lord will welcome Ronald John Lewinski into heaven: "Well done, my good and faithful servant. Come, enter your Master's joy."

Thank you so much, my friend. Until we meet again...