History as Thanks
Remembering Bob Lockwood

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His hallmark was gratitude.

Bob Lockwood recognized that he was on the receiving end of many gifts — and that the chain of givers was long, extending through many generations and ending only with the infinite, omnipotent God he knew from the Baltimore Catechism.

So he pursued history as an intensely personal matter. He wrote it to fulfill a debt of justice. And he made it entertaining.

Bob died March 4, 2019, at age 69 in Fort Wayne, Indiana. He was an author, a Catholic journalist of great renown, and a board member of the Catholic Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania.

He was born December 21, 1949, in Yonkers, New York — Christ the King Parish, to be specific, where he served Mass and was taught by religious sisters and gained the experiences that would be his stock in trade through a long career in print media.

It was the first wave of the Baby Boom, and Bob was witness to everything. In his early years every parish seemed to be opening a school, and classrooms were full. Teachers in full habit drilled the questions — Who made the world? Who is God? Why did God make you? — and students were required to provide the correct answer verbatim.

Bob recalled the sudden shift he experienced in high school. Students took their seats and learned that the year’s religion curriculum would be based entirely on the movie West Side Story.

He was wholeheartedly part of the moment, he said, grateful for what he knew would be an easy A. Yet he knew, even then, that the change wasn’t entirely for the better.

He attended Catholic grade school and high school and then college, earning a bachelor’s in history from Jesuit-run Fairfield University in 1971. After graduation he took odd jobs — country-club tennis pro by day, bartender by night — and sent out resumes. He expected to be drafted for service in Vietnam. But the call for his number never came. What arrived instead was the offer of a job with Our Sunday Visitor (OSV) newspaper, then the largest-circulation Catholic periodical. Offices were in Huntington, Indiana, a long way, geographically and culturally, from New York.

At twenty-two he joined OSV as a reporter and was soon promoted to youth editor. (His byline, for that gig, was briefly changed to Bobby Lockwood.) At twenty-six he was editor of the newspaper, a major American weekly. He was its first lay editor and its youngest ever. Eventually he would take on additional duties with the company’s book-publishing division, and then be promoted to editor-in-chief, director of periodicals, and finally to publisher and president.

He also met and married Christiana (Cindy) Nowels, with whom he had twins, Ryan and Theresa.

Under Lockwood’s leadership, expanded its family of publications, launching The Catholic Answer (on apologetics), Catholic Parent, The Priest, and Catholic Heritage. He loved them all, but that last title, on history, was his favorite. He also brought on U.S. Catholic Historian, a scholarly journal, and New Covenant, a magazine of Catholic spirituality. He published the annual Catholic Almanac, an essential reference book, loaded with facts and statistics, indispensable for libraries, churches, researchers and media.
He had similar success with OSV’s book line, which published several shelves’ worth of standard dictionaries and encyclopedias during Bob’s tenure. The publications not only tracked the changes in America’s Church; they helped shape a better future by grounding it in the past.

I met Bob in 1988, when I was working for a tech publisher. I found myself on a quality-control check at the very press that printed Our Sunday Visitor newspaper. After staying up all night for the job, I made it a point to meet the man I had been reading since I was a boy. He was exactly as I expected: sitting at a typewriter, a cigarette in his teeth as he waved me into his smoky office. We struck up a conversation that led to a correspondence, and he invited me to do some reporting for the newspaper. It was my first venture in Catholic media.

Eventually, I got into the business full-time; and later, in 1996, Bob hired me to edit New Covenant magazine from my base in Pittsburgh. He asked to see a draft of my first editorial, which I sent off. I thought it was clever for its classical allusions. Bob sent it back with a single sentence marked above: “Where are you?” He wanted New Covenant to be personal, practical, and anecdotal, and from the start he made sure I was fulfilling the mission. I needed to write, not as a journalist, but heart to heart.

A year later Bob suggested that I write a book about the early Church Fathers. He sensed a need in this particular area, and he suspected there was a real market of history buffs out there. But I think even he was surprised by the book’s sales. It is still in print after more than twenty years. It’s now in its third edition, and it remains my top-selling book. Bob’s suggestion determined the course of my life from that point.

And I am the least of those he mentored. Among the greatest are Greg Erlandson, now editor-in-chief at Catholic News Service, and David Scott, vice-chancellor for the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, and many others.

Bob did his job well, but it was a difficult time to be working on the print side of the business. While his fellow Baby Boomers remained readers, the generations afterward preferred other media. The Boomers, meanwhile, were dropping off in church attendance as they aged. The pool of readers for Catholic publications was draining, and periodicals went into steep decline in the late 1990s.

OSV’s board concluded, at the turn of the millennium, that a change of leadership was in order. Bob left and spent a year working from Fort Wayne as director of research for the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights. He confessed to me that year that he was going crazy at home – away from the constant hum and blur of a busy newsroom. For the first time since college he began to look at available positions in Catholic media. The Bishop of Pittsburgh, Donald Wuerl saw this as a windfall opportunity. Bishop Wuerl had, decades earlier, worked for Bob as OSV’s Rome correspondent. He had authored bestselling books for the house when Bob was publisher.

In fall of 2001 Bob arrived in Pittsburgh as diocesan director of communications and general manager of the Pittsburgh Catholic newspaper. He was again in his element. He was no longer running a corporation, so he had more time to write. He produced two books. The first he conceived, he told me, as a “Boomer catechism.” It reached print in 2004 as A Faith for Grown-Ups: A Midlife Conversation about What Really Matters. His second followed in 2009: A Guy’s Guide to the Good Life: Virtues for Men. Both were filled with faith as ordinary Catholics experience it. That was his dominant passion. But his other passions were also in abundant evidence: baseball, for example, and history.

Bob found immediate kinship here in the Catholic Historical Society and was soon serving on its board.

He continued in these vocational and avocational commitments till cancer forced his retirement at the end of 2013. Surgeons removed his larynx the month afterward. He adjusted to life with a prosthetic voicebox and continued to hold court at his favorite diners. In 2015 he and his wife, Cindy, returned to Indiana.

Bob continued to write, churning out his syndicated column every other week, even during his final hospitalization. He chronicled the inner life of his (our) Boomer generation as it passes into history.

Gratitude was his defining characteristic, and it was the subject of his last column. He wrote a sweeping historical overview of the cultural institution we know as the hospital. It was, of course, a Catholic invention from the first millennium. He was thankful to his ancestors for inventing the health care that was then – that very week – his benefit. He was thankful for all the blessings the faith had given him, through history, and he was writing about them to the end.