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In Memoriam: Father Bill Lewers

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IN MEMORIAM

Father Bill Lewers

“If you want peace, work for justice.”

— Pope Paul VI

There is an old and famous Irish blessing, the last line of which runs: “And may you be in heaven half an hour before the devil knows you’re dead.” If anyone ever deserved to be happily ensconced in heaven for the proverbial half-hour, it is Bill Lewers. I have no doubt that Bill put this half-hour to good use. He probably spent the first few minutes catching the Cubs game, and then a couple more sipping a glass of Chilean wine. But then he looked around, found some corner of heaven that needed changing, and, with lips pursed in whistling disapproval, set about making the necessary improvements.

For the last fourteen years of his life among us, Bill spent his considerable energy improving our understanding and awareness of international human rights. It became Bill’s great passion. In 1983, Bill was appointed as Director of the Office of International Justice and Peace for the United States Catholic Conference. When he returned to Notre Dame in 1988, he took over as Director of a dormant Center for Civil and Human Rights. Bill built the Center into a unique program that awards masters’ and doctoral degrees to foreign students that are committed to the practice of international human rights in their native countries and elsewhere around the world. Although you will search in vain for major books, articles, or treatises that Bill wrote about the subject of human rights, he was the driving force behind the recent translation and publication of a lengthy volume documenting the human rights abuses of the Pinochet regime in Chile. In the main, however, Bill preferred to work retail, instilling in his students his own sense of passion and commitment. Then he sent them out into the world, where many have spent time working as interns or prosecutors for the United Nations war crime tribunals and some have returned home to teach the next generation of human rights lawyers and activists.

Bill regarded these last fourteen years as his most important work. His prior fifty-five years would have been full enough for most people: a law degree from the University of Illinois, graduate work at Yale Law School under the renowned internationalist Myres McDougal; professor at the University of Kentucky Law School, the University of Illinois Law School, and (after his conversion and ordination to the priesthood) Notre Dame Law School; participant in the civil rights marches in the South and Cesar Chavez’s farm workers’ movement in California; novitiate staff member for persons contemplating a life of priesthood; Provincial of the Indiana Province of the Congregation of Holy Cross; a contemplative period at a monastery in Chile; and a Fellow of the University of Notre Dame. These years were full of interesting stories, such as the time that Bill (undoubtedly making good use of his infrequently-worn Roman collar) smuggled through Chilean customs briefcases full of papers that

documented the Pinochet regime's abuses. Yet, at the age of fifty-five, Bill had one last grace to give, and despite a series of health problems that would have forced most of us into retirement, he gave that grace with full measure.

Bill's love of international human rights brought him into touch with the *Journal of Legislation*. During the latter 1980's, when the *Journal* faced one of its occasional budget crises, the *Journal* began to receive a stipend from the International Law Society, for which Bill eventually became the advisor. As a result, Bill also became an advisor to the *Journal of Legislation*. During the time that I have also served as advisor to the *Journal*, Bill essentially functioned as the "advisor's advisor." When *Journal* students came to me for advice, and when the problem was too hard for me to handle alone, I went to Bill.

Bill was a wise man, and a warm, loving, and generous friend. He was a true statesman, to whom many of us on the faculty turned for conversation, advice, and support. Today, nearly a year after his death, a day rarely goes by when I do not think of Bill and realize the thousand small ways in which our school misses him. Heaven is better off, but we are poorer for his loss. He was the best of the best.

Jay Tidmarsh
Faculty Advisor