

Remembering Father Ron Rieder: A Shepherd Who Loved His People

By Tim Johnson

When Father Ronald “Ron” Rieder, OFM Cap., arrived at SS. Peter and Paul Parish in 1984, few could have imagined the profound mark he would leave on Huntington over the next 33 years.

For generations of parishioners, he would become far more than a pastor. He would baptize their children, celebrate their First Holy Communion and Confirmation, witness their marriages, comfort them through illness and loss, and guide them in faith through every season of life.

Following Father Ron’s death on June 18, parishioners, friends, fellow Capuchins and community members shared memories that together paint a portrait of a humble priest whose greatest gift was making people feel seen, heard and loved.

“Everything would be fine.”

Greg Holzinger still remembers meeting Father Ron for the first time.

As a nervous 12-year-old altar server, he and two other boys stood waiting in the sacristy for the parish’s new pastor.

“Father Ron Rieder entered the room and the three of us looked up ... way up ... as this stranger towered over us,” Holzinger recalled. “Then came that warm, friendly smile we all know, love and will sorely miss. Everything would be fine.”

That first impression never faded.

The priest who welcomed a shy altar server would later officiate Holzinger’s wedding, baptize his three children and become one of his closest confidants.

A lesson in humility from Blessed Solanus

Father Ron often credited Blessed Solanus Casey with shaping his own priesthood.

As a young Capuchin novice, he was cleaning toilets when Blessed Solanus approached and said, “Oh, are you ever a lucky young man to be able to clean toilets for your brothers.”

He would later say, “One of the greatest graces in my life was to live with Father Solanus.”

As a young friar, Father Ron played the organ for daily Mass while Blessed Solanus quietly sang beside him. Those simple moments of service and humility became hallmarks of his own ministry.

His devotion to Blessed Solanus eventually inspired the preservation of St. Felix Friary in Huntington, helping ensure that future generations could visit the room where Blessed Solanus once lived.

“They are such good people.”

Although Huntington was not originally where Father Ron expected to spend much of his priesthood, it quickly became home.

During conversations over the years, he often spoke affectionately of the people he served.

“They are such good people,” he would say.

Mary Lou Snyder witnessed that transformation.

“Coming to Huntington was not a desirable choice for Father Ron,” she wrote, “but as time passed I saw him grow to love our church and community with his whole heart.”

Larry Bonbrake, who worked alongside Father Ron for 25 years as maintenance director, summed it up simply:

“Father Ron loved Huntington and Huntington loved him.”

Kelly Jennings, business manager at SS. Peter and Paul, echoed that sentiment.

“Father Ron was a people person and loved his community,” she wrote. “Huntington became his home.”

A Priest Who Became Part of the Community

Father Ron's ministry extended far beyond the walls of SS. Peter and Paul Church. While he faithfully shepherded his parish for 33 years, he also immersed himself in the life of Huntington, becoming a familiar and respected presence throughout the community.

Kevin Rupley, a lifelong parishioner who worshipped under Father Ron's entire pastorate, recalled that the Capuchin priest never hesitated to call Huntington home.

"He loved SS. Peter and Paul Parish," Rupley wrote. "He would be the first to tell you how much he loved the Huntington community also, and that it was his home."

Rupley also remembered Father Ron's practical leadership, noting that he possessed "a keen business sense" that helped preserve and maintain the parish's historic church and school properties for future generations.

Outside the parish, Father Ron became known across Huntington through his service as chaplain to the city's police and fire departments, his jail and substance abuse ministries, his service as state chaplain for the Indiana Knights of Columbus, and his involvement with numerous civic organizations. He also was honored as an honorary chief of the Miami Flint Springs Tribe in recognition of his service to the community.

For Rupley, however, the memories that endure are simpler and more personal.

"Of my personal memories, he had several personal stories that would tie in perfectly with certain feast days or Scripture readings and would share them in his homilies," he wrote. "Year after year, we would hear the same stories to the point that we almost knew them word for word, but they would always put a smile on our faces and joy in our hearts."

Those familiar stories, repeated over decades from the pulpit of SS. Peter and Paul, became part of the shared memory of a parish that grew up alongside a priest who quietly made Huntington his home.

A shepherd for generations

Current pastor Father Tony Steinacker reflected on the extraordinary length of Father Ron's ministry.

"Our community of believers have heavy hearts after learning of the death of our spiritual father," Father Tony wrote. "He was not only the pastor of SS. Peter and Paul, but he shepherded countless individuals with a listening ear and compassionate heart."

Because Father Ron remained at SS. Peter and Paul for nearly 33 years, Father Tony noted that in some cases he baptized parishioners, heard their first confession, gave them First Holy Communion, celebrated their Confirmation, witnessed their marriages and later baptized their children.

"This is absolutely remarkable and nearly unheard of," Father Tony observed.

A mentor and guide

For Brother Jerry Johnson, OFM Cap., Father Ron's influence helped shape a vocation.

“Father Ron was a mentor and was someone who was nice to talk to when I was making difficult and painful decisions in my young adult years when deciding whether or not to join religious life with the Capuchins,” he wrote.

“I always appreciated him and the other Capuchins that served at SS. Peter and Paul and how they seemed so respectful and grateful for people and tried to accompany them through hard times the best they could.”

Father Tony believes Father Ron’s influence extended to many others as well.

During his years in Huntington, seven vocations to priesthood or religious life emerged from the parish, and Father Tony believes Father Ron planted seeds of discernment in many more.

A wounded healer

Former *Our Sunday Visitor* publisher Greg Erlandson perhaps captured Father Ron’s spirituality best.

“When I think of Father Ron,” he wrote, “I think of him as the archetype of the wounded healer.”

“He had faced challenges in his life, and these challenges made him a better man and a better priest. He testified to God’s love for all of us, no matter our sins, no matter how often we fell.”

Erlandson recalled that Father Ron's favorite Scripture passages spoke of "the bruised reed that did not break" and "the smoking wick that was not extinguished," images that reflected his deep belief in God's mercy and compassion for those who struggled.

Those who knew Father Ron saw that conviction lived out every day.

Nick Miller remembered asking as an altar server whether Saddam Hussein would go to heaven.

“We hope he does,” Father Ron replied.

The simple answer changed Nick’s perspective forever.

“It taught me to not harbor hate and made me truly understand that we cannot cast judgment,” he wrote. “Father Ron taught me to have love in your heart, even for your ‘enemies.’”

A ministry of mercy

Bill Miller discovered Father Ron’s compassion through his own struggle with alcoholism.

He recalled that Father Ron shared aspects of his own earlier struggles and quietly ministered to countless people facing addiction.

“I didn’t fully grasp the depth of his ministry to addicts until my last visit with him this past April,” Bill wrote. “He told me he had ministered to hundreds—possibly thousands—of people struggling with addiction.”

Kelley Miller shared another deeply personal memory.

After her grandmother died by suicide, she called Father Ron in anguish. I called Father Ron. “He listened to everything I said,” she wrote, “and I remember him telling me that what my grandmother did was a sickness and that sickness is no different than any other sickness or disease that people die from.”

“He assured me that my grandmother would go to heaven,” she wrote. “I think of this conversation often and I know that had Father Ron not given me the gift of assurance regarding my grandmother’s salvation, I would wonder to this day.”

Making everyone feel important

Hospice social worker Paula Garrett witnessed Father Ron’s compassion firsthand.

Working with a frightened 10-year-old boy whose father was dying, she asked if Father Ron would speak with him.

“Bring him over,” he replied without hesitation.

The child left reassured and hopeful.

“To me, his legacy is the impression he has made on our three sons,” Garrett wrote. “Through example, Father Ron taught them that we show our love for God by how we treat others.”

She added simply:

“Father Ron made everyone feel important.”

Katie Spahr agreed.

“He had a way of making people feel seen, regardless of status or authority,” she wrote.

Before retiring, Father Ron told parishioners that once they got to know the next pastor they would think, “Father Ron, who?”

“He could not have been more wrong,” Spahr reflected.

A lasting legacy

For Larry Bonbrake, Father Ron was “one of the most influential people in my life, second only to my own father.”

“We became very close friends and I thought of him as my second dad,” he wrote.

John Miller perhaps summarized what many in Huntington feel today:

“Father Ron was truly an inspiration to not only his church but his entire community. He made everyone around him smile, and when he spoke, people listened.”

As the parish gives thanks for Father Ron’s remarkable life and priesthood, one phrase continues to echo through the memories shared by those who knew him best.

“They are such good people.”

He said it often about the people of Huntington.

Judging from the love expressed in return, they felt the same way about him.

May those memories continue to inspire all who walk through the doors of SS. Peter and Paul, just as Father Ron inspired generations through a life of quiet humility, faithful service and unwavering trust in God.