News

Jerry Filteau, seen during a congressional hearing on human cloning on Capitol Hill in Washing

Jerry Filteau, in focus at bottom left, seen during a congressional hearing on human cloning on Capitol Hill in Washington in 2001. (CNS file photo/Nancy Wiechec)



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Jerry Filteau, one of the premier reporters on the Catholic Church for more than 40 years, died April 4. He was 78 and had suffered from esophageal cancer.

Filteau covered the church for National Catholic Reporter from 2007 to 2013, when he retired for the second time: Before that, for 37 years, he worked for Catholic News Service as a reporter, foreign editor and Rome bureau chief.

Colleagues who worked with Filteau at NCR and CNS praised him for his knowledge, professionalism and compassion.

"Jerry's exceptional expertise on theological issues and matters of canon law made him, to my mind, the most valuable member of the CNS staff in my 38-plus years at the news service," said Jim Lackey, former national editor, general news editor and social media coordinator at CNS.

"His stories on the landmark U.S. bishops' pastoral letters in the 1980s on modern warfare and economic justice — and his reporting on the clerical sex abuse crisis in the late '90s and early 2000s — made him a deserving winner of the Catholic Press Association's highest honor, the St. Francis de Sales Award."

Filteau won the St. Francis de Sales Award in 2003, "for a career of uncompromising journalism in the service of the Catholic press." In a tribute to Filteau at his second retirement, Dennis Coday, then-NCR editor, noted he was only the second reporter to ever receive the award since its establishment in 1959 — others had been editors, publishers or advertising directors.

"Filteau has been an invaluable resource, not just for his reporting skills but for his deep knowledge and experience of so many facets of American Catholicism, from the trivial to the profound," Coday wrote. "One call to Jerry gave me the background and context on many contemporary issues. More times than I can count, when I had to dig deep into the CNS archives to research some aspect of church life or the issuing of a document, I would inevitably find Filteau's byline attached to the material for which I was searching."

Filteau earned philosophy and theology degrees from The Catholic University of America, which helped aid his reporting on those issues. He also reported on public policy concerns, as well as the Vatican theological investigations into Frs. Hans Küng, Edward Schillebeeckx and others.

John Carr, founder of the Initiative on Catholic Social Thought and Public Life at Georgetown University, attended the same seminary as Filteau — the Crosier Fathers & Brothers Seminary in Onamia, Minnesota. When Carr served for 20 years as director of the Department of Justice, Peace and Human Development at the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, parent company to the independent Catholic News Service, the two men met again.

"Jerry brought thoroughness, depth and knowledge to his reporting. He offered clarity, nuance and accuracy in his coverage of key Catholic issues over decades," Carr told NCR.

"He was a tremendous example of a Catholic lay person who brought together faith, intelligence, skills and hard work in carrying out the vocation of journalism in ways that strengthened the church and enriched his readers."

"Before there was a lot of talk about lay leadership, Jerry was an example of it," Carr added.

Jerry Filteau, at right, interviewing the late Archbishop Pietro Sambi, then apostolic nuncio to

Jerry Filteau, at right, interviewing the late Archbishop Pietro Sambi, then apostolic nuncio to the United States, at the Vatican Embassy in Washington in April 2006. (CNS file photo/Paul Haring)

Tony Spence, former director of Catholic News Service who served as Filteau's boss for a decade, recalled he "was a relentless, thorough, fair reporter, but brevity was not his … strong suit. One day his editor assigned him a 600-800 word story. He worked all day on it. When time to get it on the wire came, he appeared before my desk ([the] editor nowhere to be found). 'I got it down to 4,000 words and can't cut it anymore. Can you see what you can do?' I collapsed on my desk, just lying there. It was my only defense."

Lackey said he also "saw firsthand how Jerry's copy could be hard to edit. He had the singular ability to turn in a 1,200-word story that at first glance you'd think should be no longer than 900 words. But good luck finding those 300 extra words to excise! Within them you'd find such insightful reporting that often you'd just give up and send the whole thing to the copydesk."

Spence recalled some of the issues that affected Filteau.

"The clergy sex abuse scandal was inarguably the most important issue to be covered for years. No one, secular or Catholic journalist, did it better than Jerry. But it took a toll," Spence told NCR. "One day, he came to me and pleaded that he couldn't do it anymore. One can only cover the despicable crimes and cover-ups [for so long] before it sends you to a dark, soul-sucking place, and he knew that's where he was headed. I changed his beat, and he turned his considerable talents elsewhere. Jerry knew when it was time to move on."

Filteau joined the news service, then called National Catholic News Service, in 1970, working as a researcher before transferring to the reporting staff in 1972. His first big story was the U.S. Supreme Court's *Roe v. Wade* decision in 1973. As Rome bureau chief from 1978 to 1981, he covered the early years of Pope John Paul II's papacy.

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Several former colleagues also cited Filteau's generosity and compassion, including in mentoring younger staffers.

Nancy Frazier O'Brien served with Filteau in the CNS Rome bureau as well as in Washington.

"Jerry and his wife, Pat, really helped me get acclimated in Rome and helped to make it the great experience it was for me," she told NCR. "He was always a great source of information on complex topics, not only for me but for many of the Vatican correspondents for newspapers around the world."

Joshua McElwee, current news editor of NCR, called Filteau "a reporter's reporter" and recalled an incident when Filteau guided him as a younger staffer at NCR.

McElwee said he believed that, in 2012, Filteau was the first reporter to get wind of the Vatican's then-pending notification against Mercy Sr. Margaret Farley's award-winning book, *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics*. McElwee and Filteau were on a planning call together.

"I embarrassingly tried to inch in on his scoop and suggested I could help with his report on the notification," McElwee said. "Instead of getting territorial, Jerry politely suggested another angle I might take on: reading the book and writing a piece that would summarize or explain its main concepts to readers. That moment taught me so much. How to work with others. How to flip a story on its side and look for a different angle. How to be kind."

Tom Lorsung, who worked with Filteau for 35 years, including as director of Catholic News Service, told NCR: "In the last year or so, cancer reduced his voice to a whisper, but he inspired ... ex-CNSers when he attended alumni events."

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