

10-25-07 - G. Renner; Respected Journalist
By RINKER BUCK, Hartford Courant Staff Writer

Gerald Renner, who won international recognition for his pioneering reporting in The Courant on allegations of sexual abuse within a Roman Catholic religious order, died Wednesday after a battle with cancer. He was 75 years old.

Renner joined The Courant as the religion writer in 1985, after serving as editor and director of Religion News Service in New York and vice president of the National Conference of Christians and Jews. Earlier, he worked as a reporter in the U.S. Navy, at a newspaper in Pennsylvania and for United Press in Washington, D.C.

Until his retirement in 2000, Renner wrote hundreds of Courant news and feature stories on religious topics.

Around The Courant newsroom, Renner, who was raised as a Roman Catholic, was known for his encyclopedic reach on topics touching all faiths, whether profiling a Bloomfield rabbi returning to his native Belarus to provide a proper burial for Jews massacred by the Nazis or chronicling the growth of Islam in America. Interfaith issues, attempts at canonizing new saints and the acceptance of gays and lesbians in churches were recurrent themes in Renner's work.

He reached his widest audience with a series of articles and a book he co-wrote about the Legionaries of Christ, a secretive and conservative Roman Catholic order whose American headquarters is in Connecticut.

Renner learned of the Legionaries while traveling in Rome for The Courant in 1989, when Archbishop John F. Whealon of Hartford pointed out the headquarters of what he called "that controversial, conservative religious order that has a seminary in Cheshire."

Intrigued, Renner, after returning to Connecticut, began researching an article about the rapidly growing order, which was founded in Mexico in 1941 by the Rev. Marcial Maciel Degollado and enjoyed close relations with the Vatican. He published his first Courant article about the order in 1996 and teamed with writer Jason Berry of New Orleans, the author of an early book about sexual abuse by Catholic priests, to produce an in-depth story on Maciel in The Courant the following year. The article documented how, after decades of silence, nine former seminarians from Mexico and Spain accused Maciel of abusing them in European seminaries from the 1940s to the 1960s.

"I did the reporting from Mexico, while Jerry did the reporting in the U.S. and dealt with Rome," Berry said. "Jerry was particularly a delight to work with because he was trained like a laser to get the facts, but never at the expense of being unfair to people."

Renner and Berry teamed up again to write a book, "Vows of Silence: The Abuse of Power in the Papacy of John Paul II," which was favorably reviewed after it was published in 2004. The book argued that Pope John Paul II had protected Maciel and that

the church covered up other reports of sexual abuse by priests. "Vows of Silence" was credited with helping to force the Vatican to remove Maciel from the active priesthood in 2006.

The Rev. Richard McBrien, a University of Notre Dame theologian, who was interviewed by Renner several times, said: "Renner, Berry and The Courant blew the whistle on the priestly pedophilia crisis way before anyone else in a really groundbreaking way. The Legion people were very upset but they couldn't lay a glove on Renner because the facts were so solid."

Before the 1997 story ran, The Courant was under great pressure from the Legionaries and its law firm.

"Jerry had incredible resolve and was always focused and argued for his story in a gentlemanly way," said Stephanie Summers, who edited the 1997 piece. "During all these conferences with Courant lawyers and editors, he was both the iron man and the wit."

That wit came in handy when Renner was assailed by sources unaccustomed to tough reporting on the religion beat. In the late 1980s and early '90s, Renner worked on a series about Brother Julius Schacknow, a cult leader from Connecticut, who proclaimed that he was Jesus Christ reincarnate, and had also amassed a real estate empire.

"One day, while Renner was interviewing Brother Julius in the New Britain bureau, the cult leader asked Renner, 'If I blinded you right now physically, would you believe that I'm God?'" fellow reporter Dan Jones recalled. "Jerry didn't miss a beat and said, 'No, I'd have you arrested for assault.'"

Among friends, Renner was known as a doting grandfather who loved telling stories about his offspring and who wrote a heartfelt and often hilarious Christmas letter every year.

Renner, a native of Philadelphia, served in the U.S. Navy from 1951 to 1955, part of that time aboard the battleship USS Missouri. He was the recipient of the Templeton Prize awarded by the Religion Newswriters Association and was also recognized by the Connecticut Society of Professional Journalists for investigative reporting.

He lived in Norwalk with his wife, Jacqueline Breen Renner. In addition to his wife, he leaves behind four daughters, a son and 10 grandchildren. Magner Funeral Home in Norwalk is handling arrangements, with calling hours Friday from 5 to 8 p.m., and a service at St. Thomas the Apostle in Norwalk on Saturday at 10 a.m.