

Father Mike 'Catfish' Mireau left lasting lessons for us all

In the spring of 2001, I found myself facing some heavy-duty discernment. A former roommate had entered the seminary which had me wondering about my own vocation. I was also looking seriously at three different ministry opportunities, one of which would have required a significant move. My spiritual director arranged for me to spend a few days on silent retreat using one of the guest rooms at St. Joseph Seminary, where I'd be able to spend a lot of time in the seminary chapel listening for God's direction.

It was during these days that I recall meeting a seminarian who would leave a lasting impact on my life and on my ministry to young people – an impact that would go far beyond those days of retreat.

It's hard to believe that it's been five years since Rev. Michael "Catfish" Mireau went home to the Father, and I have to admit there have been a number of days over these years where I would love to have leaned on his counsel (and sense of humour).

The first thing I remember about Father Mike was that he had a poster of Albert Einstein sticking out his tongue taped to his door (most of the other seminarians just had their names on their doors).



Father Mike Mireau is seen with his puppy, Nemo. Grandin Media file photo

Like many things about Father Mike, what might seem at first glance to be out of place reflected instead something deeper about him which I didn't know: he held a master's degree in mathematical physics.

From the time he was ordained in 2002 until his passing nearly five years ago on September 22, 2014, this would be a recurring theme.

Whether it was his hair, his penchant for making *Star Wars* references during his homily, or the ongoing presence of his beloved puppy, Nemo, it was far too easy to miss the great gift that Father Mike was to young people and to the local Church.

It was my privilege to do youth ministry in similar circles, and there are three lasting lessons which continue to impact my own work with young people

today.

I admired Father Mike's ability to communicate – and, in particular, the ways in which he would seek a way to make even difficult truths accessible.

This is what St. Paul did at the Areopagus in Greece (*Acts 17:22-31*), when he explained that the Greeks worship of a God they had not seen and did not know was, in fact, the God proclaimed by Judeo-Christianity.

What Paul does in this moment is one of the first examples of what we call Christian apologetics, explaining that Christianity is reasonable and can hold its own with the best in human thought. His approach is to progress from the knowledge of God we can achieve naturally, to the knowledge of God that has been revealed to us – using things that the Athenians would see, know, and understand to help them explore things they hadn't seen clearly, didn't really know, and had no ability (yet) to understand.

And Father Mike did precisely this when he pulled out a reference from popular culture and used it as a bridge to tell us about Jesus. As I moved from parish ministry to working in the schools, I've found myself doing a lot of the same – and, at times, borrowing some of these examples from Father Mike for my own students.

If you ever heard Father Mike preach or speak, you'll know that every talk, every homily ended with the same three words: "God is love" (*1 John 4:8*). These words were printed on his ordination cards and are engraved on his tombstone in the cemetery at Lac La Nonne. Certainly, it's a passage from Scripture that is universally appreciated, but in my experience of Father Mike, it was the driving force behind all of his ministry.

This became very clear to me through discussions he and I had in my early years of youth ministry, and I was struggling with inconsistent attendance, trying to keep my volunteer team together, and wanting to see more spiritual progress in the lives of all I served. Father Mike took me out for lunch one day and gave me an encouraging – but firm – reminder that if my ministry was going to be like Jesus', this was how it would have to be. My task was to share the richness of our faith and to love whomever the Lord put in front of me – because they need to know and experience that God is love.

Father Mike's greatest lessons, though, may have come in the way that he suffered. In the winter of 2013, he announced that he was battling cancer – and over the next two years, his website became a virtual journal where he shared his experiences with radiation, chemotherapy, surgery, suffering, and questioning God's purpose for this journey.

He made this journey so public – but always seen through the lens of faith and his inherent belief that God really is love. This journey shared as it was, meant that many of the young people he served – whether they were religious or not – were praying for him. We may never know the spiritual fruits that came

from Father Mike's suffering and all of the prayer that went along with it ... but I'm certain they exist.

It's a bittersweet feeling to approach the anniversary of Father Mike's death. On the one hand, he suffered greatly and is now with Jesus. On the other hand, I would still love to have him in the trenches with me, not only creating those videos but also commenting on the ways we could better bring Christ to our young people. But I am grateful to have had the chance to learn the lessons, and to be one of those who continue to teach others that God is love.

- *Mike Landry is chaplain to Evergreen Catholic Schools west of Edmonton, and serves as an occasional guest speaker and music minister in communities across Western Canada. Mike and his wife Jennifer live in Stony Plain, Alta. with their five children.*

(Editor's note: Father Mike is a former chaplain to Edmonton Catholic Schools, which hosts an annual Father Mike Mireau Youth Faith Day, next scheduled for Feb. 3, 2020.)