

# Legacy and mission of 'Father Catfish' live on for next generation

The life and legacy of Father Michael 'Catfish' Mireau, who used pop culture references and Star Wars lightsabers to teach the faith, continue to stir hearts of young and old.

It's been six years since Mireau, affectionately known as Father Catfish, died of cancer at age 42 – a battle he documented himself.



Father Michael "Catfish" Mireau used pop culture and superhero themes to reach out to young people. Grandin Media file photo

Father Mireau never shied away from bringing his energetic personality or his love of pop culture into his priesthood. As a chaplain to Edmonton Catholic Schools, he would often show up for school masses in a Roman collar and Superman T-shirt, with his dog Nemo by his side. It was not unusual for Mireau, a huge Star Wars fan, to pull out a lightsaber during his homilies.

Although his life was cut short, Mireau's unique ministry has left a permanent impact.

His popular YouTube videos are still used in classroom lessons. His homilies continue to inspire young Catholics to take an interest in their faith. And with the shouts and prayers of more than 4,000 Grade 8 students in the Edmonton Convention Centre, his mission to bring Christ to young people continues.

The Father Michael 'Catfish' Mireau Youth Faith Day is held each year for staff and students from Edmonton, Greater St. Albert, Elk Island and Evergreen Catholic schools.



Anica Martinez

"The way he brought excitement and his personality into his homilies – I found it really inspiring," said Anica Martinez, a Grade 8 student at Father Michael Mireau School. While she never had the chance to meet Mireau, watching his homilies in class has forever changed her.

"Sometimes homilies are boring. But his actually inspired me to go to Church more. He's hilarious. He relates the faith to his life, even to his dog. He's not just talking about Jesus and God, it's also our everyday life and problems. So I related to that. It made me realize that learning about God is great.

"Honouring that is what makes this day so important."

The fifth annual Father Michael 'Catfish' Mireau Youth Faith Day was a celebration as loud and animated as Mireau was. As the Star Wars theme song blared through the convention centre, students raced down to the front stage, waving flags and carrying a cross.

Catholic speaker Steve Angrisano provided music and testimony, and the event culminated with Mass celebrated by Rev. Glen McDonald and Rev. Julian Bilyj, the Edmonton Catholic School Division's chaplains.

"Father Catfish always envisioned this day for our Grade 8 students," said Heather Kaup, a longtime friend of Mireau and principal at St. Francis Xavier High School in west Edmonton.



Heather Kaup

“It’s an exposure to their faith that’s different from a church or a classroom. You’re in this convention centre with so many people and so much energy – all in the name of evangelizing for Christ. (Father Catfish’s) biggest call was to remind everyone that God is love, and he asked us to impart that love to each other. This event really shows that.”

Much like the event’s dances and performances, Father Mireau always imparted the faith in a larger-than-life style. The light side of the Star Wars “force” became a metaphor for God or the power of the Holy Spirit. Through superheroes, Mireau saw Christ in everything. He let his personality shine through his priesthood, and that’s what continues to inspire students today.

“He really connected with the kids because he honoured who he was. He showed that it’s OK to be yourself, to not fit into a mould,” said Kaup. “He was quirky and out there; he didn’t do things by the book. As a teacher, he taught me that it’s OK to be loud, make a joke, and meet kids where they’re at, because that’s where our work has the most meaning.”



Students turn on their smartphones lights during songs of worship. Lincoln Ho, Grandin Media

It’s a source of pride for Martinez to attend Father Michael Mireau School, the elementary and junior high school named in his honour. Mireau is also memorialized with an Edmonton Catholic School Foundation endowment fund and is buried at Camp Encounter, the archdiocesan summer camp on Lac La Nonne where Mireau ministered most summers. It was at Camp Encounter that Mireau earned his Father Catfish nickname, based on his childhood hobby of drawing cartoon

catfish.

“Every day I am happy, because I go to a school where a single man made a difference in the world because he loved God,” Martinez said. “He made that his goal – to make God be out there. To me, it’s an accomplishment just to be a part of that.”



Father Michael "Catfish" Mireau, seen with his dog Nemo, died of cancer at age 42. Grandin Media file photo

Mireau did not live to see the Faith Day come to fruition, though he often talked about the need to bring students together and experience their faith in an energetic and communal way. It’s that message that Edmonton Catholic Schools has worked to implement since his passing.

“It sets the tone for a pivotal time in the life of our students,” said Susanna Kaup, a religious education consultant with the school division. “Mireau saw Grade 8 as an in-between time for students. It’s an age where they are starting to come into their own, and discerning where they want to go in their life. This day really shows them that God is there for them. They have gifts and talents, and through God’s message of loving one another they can use those gifts and talents.

“It gives them this message at the time they need it.”



Sydney Gauthier

Sydney Gauthier knows this first hand. The St. Francis Xavier school student says Grade 8 was a time when she questioned her faith. But two years later, it's only been strengthened. She attributes that to the message that Mireau so often emphasized: God's love and his commandment to love others.

“He showed me the importance of being loving and open to everyone. That message of kindness, to honour God through loving one another, is something I've always connected with,” said Gauthier, who knew Mireau since she was a child.

“Father Mike really wanted to affirm that belief in young people. He always tried to show the faith in a way we could understand.”

Father McDonald says Mireau's life reveals the impact that one person who loves Jesus, and shows that love to others, can have.

“This is one person who was committed to kindness, goodness and mercy. In that, he has transformed countless lives,” McDonald said, who met Mireau when he was a student at St. Joseph Seminary.

“The fact that his legacy continues on today is a witness to what all Christians are called to. As chaplains, we always feel we have the spirit of Father Mike accompanying us in our work with young people.”