

America

I REMEMBER MICHAEL

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November is the month for remembering the dead, and with cold weather rendering the lives of homeless people even more difficult, my own remembrance of the dead focuses on a Catholic Worker named Michael Kirwan. The anniversary of his death from cancer was Nov. 12.

I met Michael two decades ago at the home of a community of religious women in Washington, D.C. He had stopped by to pick up soup they had prepared for him, which he would take to the various places where homeless men and women congregate in the nation's capital.

Michael's ministry came to him virtually from birth—his parents met after World War II while they were volunteers at the Catholic Worker house of hospitality in New York City. He himself spent a year there later, learning, so to speak, at the feet of Dorothy Day, the movement's co-founder. His parents by then had moved to Washington, D.C., and Dorothy Day often stayed in the family home during her travels.

It was in Washington that Michael founded two houses of hospitality, and later a farm in West Virginia where homeless men and women could find respite from the streets. The donors who made this possible saw in Michael's Gospel-oriented approach to life an embracing of values radically contrary to the values of the world. In one of his newsletters, he hints at how his embracing of these values led to leaps of faith on behalf of those for whom, he knew, God has a special love. On

a freezing cold day at one of the city parks he visited regularly with sandwiches and hot tea, he met a shivering homeless man who said he wanted to go to the farm—280 miles away. Michael said he would be going that day and would pick him up later. “I had no intention of going that day,” he wrote, “I needed to get the newsletter started, but again my heart overruled my head and I went.” This was the hallmark of his life—a heart so united with Christ’s that it often overruled what others would have called common sense.

The actual beginnings of his work came while he was engaged in graduate studies at George Washington University in the late 1970’s. Aware of the homeless people seeking warmth on the heating grates of the nearby State Department, he began preparing food for them. But then one night a man asked if he could shave and shower at Michael’s university-owned apartment. Little by little he let others come there. Not all were ideal guests. One day the bank called to say that someone was seeking to cash five checks with Michael’s forged signature. Should they call the police? No, said Michael, “just give him the checks back and tell him to come home.” The man did so, stayed and stole nothing more. It was Michael’s heart that informed such a level of trust.

Eventually, the university found out what he was doing and evicted him, but by then his mission was clear. He acquired a small, boarded-up house and moved in with 15 homeless people. The house was broken into the very first night. Writing in *The Catholic Worker* newspaper in 1991, he described what happened: “In confronting the guy who was climbing in the kitchen window, having pried the boards off, I told him he needn’t have gone to all that trouble; the front door was broken anyway.” Basic Michael. He later moved to a larger house on T Street in northwest Washington, closer to the downtown area where homeless people moved about, and named it the Llewellyn Scott House—after an African American who had taken homeless men into his home near Union Station in the 1950’s.

The T Street neighborhood was beginning to be gentrified, and neighbors sometimes complained, but Michael stood his ground. Later he started another house, for women, called the Mary Harris House after an elderly black woman who provided meals for homeless people in the neighborhood of his first house. He felt it important to honor people like her and Llewellyn Scott, who had gone

before him in serving homeless people at a time when they received scant attention. Through the work of family members and volunteers, both houses continue to this day, along with the farm, providing food, shelter and a level of respect that helps those who live there regain their dignity as well as their health.

One of the most remarkable of Michael's heart-over-head acts concerned Sholl's Cafeteria, a longtime institution popular for its modest prices, good food and varied clientele. In 1996, a check for \$5,000 arrived in the afternoon mail. Having recently seen an old man struggling with frozen hands to eat soup Michael had brought, Michael resolved that if enough money came his way, he would make it possible for street people to go into a restaurant and sit down at a table with real silverware.

His plan could now take shape. He went to Sholl's and ordered a full meal with dessert to see what the bill would come to: \$11.90. He then approached the owners, a married couple, to ask whether they would print up \$12 meal tickets. They agreed, and Michael began handing out the tickets.

A few weeks later, he met a bag-laden homeless woman to whom he had given a ticket. How, he asked, had she been treated? Describing the encounter in an op-ed piece in *The Washington Post*, he reported her answer. "They treated me like a queen!" she told him with a broad smile. "If nothing else had gone right after that," he added, "that moment alone would have been worth it." He began to hear other stories, of such large portions that ticket holders brought in friends and acquaintances to share them, "because all were able to eat off one ticket."

Clearly, the owners' hearts were touched by Michael's own. He had still further proof of their generosity later, when, assuming that the \$5,000 must have been used up, he went by Sholl's to ask whether he owed them anything. He was amazed to learn that not only was no money owed, but that \$1,600 remained in the account. What the owners had done, he found, was to subtract from the face value of the ticket the actual price of what an individual had ordered, and credit the remainder to the account. This is an example of what might be called Gospel accounting, rather than profit-oriented business accounting. The owners had chosen to be part of Michael's undertaking, despite their struggles to stay afloat in the face of rising costs. Donations continued to make the tickets possible right

up until Sholl's—a victim of relentless rent increases—finally went out of business last year, less than a month after Michael died.

I felt fortunate in being able to visit Michael at his sister's home just outside Washington shortly before his death. A nurse, she ensured that his pain was at a minimum. The weather was warm enough for us to be able to sit on the porch. His mood was peaceful, his confidence in God's plan for him total. Despite increasing weakness, he had continued with the preparation of the daily soup at the T Street house until the last few months, strengthened then as always by the sacraments. Daily Mass whenever possible was part of his regular schedule. After the funeral Mass at his longtime parish, St. Stephen Martyr near George Washington University—where his vocation first became apparent to him—a mutual friend said of Michael: “He taught us how to live, and in dying he taught us how to die.” How appropriate that the anniversary of his death should occur in the same month as that of Dorothy Day, his original mentor.

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