

Dave Irwin: Our Friend, Friend of God, and Friend of Students

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- Stephen V. Sundborg, S.J.

In the gospel of this Funeral Mass for Dave Irwin, Jesus says, “I call you friends.” Indeed Jesus called Dave his friend and Dave was faithful to that friendship from birth to death. Dave also called us friends. How many friends he made, how much he reached out in joy and laughter and story and care to his friends! I think of him as one of the most friendly persons I have known... that smile, that sidling up to you, that joke or friendly, conspiratorial, political comment to you. Dave: the friend of Jesus; the friend of all of us and to so many more. But also as president of the Washington Friends of Higher Education, the unknown friend but the best friend of tens of thousands of students of this university and of many others who were able to have a college education because of Dave, our friend and theirs. How right that we celebrate his funeral, celebrate his life, in a university chapel made holy by the lives of university students.

The privilege of a priest or deacon at a funeral Mass is to speak to the faith of the person as illuminated by scripture and as an encouragement for all of us in our lives of faith. Dave’s daughter and son will speak more to his personal and family life and his public achievements. I’ll speak to his faith. I think I get the best of this deal because faith was the most important thing of his life, everything else flowed from that faith. Dave’s faith came from his mother who was a very devout and religious person. All of his education was in Catholic schools—elementary, secondary, and university. He and Dianne reared and educated all of their children in the Catholic faith and in Catholic schools. Dianne says he always had a rosary in his pocket till both the rosaries and the pockets wore out. He loved daily Mass whether at St. Joe’s or in later years here in this very chapel. In all of his work of public advocacy he would never support anything that was against his faith. Faith first, last, and always, and the source of everything.

Each of us in living out our life of faith shows an aspect of the God in whom we believe. Dave showed the joy of God. As Jesus says in our gospel: “All this I tell you that my joy may be yours and your joy may be complete.” Dave’s joy, as a gift from God, was indeed complete and running over. You know how he laughed before he told you a story or joke, laughed while he told it, and rolled with laughter more than anyone after he’d told it! That’s the revelation of the joy of God. God does not wait for us to be good in order to rejoice over us; he rejoices before, during, with, and after us. We are like God’s story, the kind of story told by Dave. Dave, this friend of God and friend of ours, showed the joy of God, the rejoicing God, the God who does not wait for the punch line of our goodness, but anticipates us with joy. Thanks, Dave, for this revelation.

All of us have a calling, a vocation, a ministry from God. Dave’s was the vocation to extend the extraordinary blessing of education to tens of thousands, as he had been blessed in his own education, and was proud of it. He saw it as his calling to make education possible as a gift to others. He especially loved his Jesuit education—first at Campion in Prairie de Chien in Wisconsin, and then at Loyola High School in Missoula, Montana. At Loyola he was taught by the young Mr. Pat O’Leary, in his regency or boot camp of the Jesuits. If you could keep order

among a wild bunch of high school boys, moderate a half dozen activities, drive the bus, coach sports you'd never played, get in a few minutes of prayer a day, and smuggle in just a bit of learning... then you were good to go as a Jesuit. Our august Fr. Pat O'Leary taught Dave... and survived! Dave used to say that Mr. O'Leary came to Loyola with black hair and left with white. From there Dave went first briefly to Gonzaga, then for a bit longer to Santa Clara, and finally several years to Seattle U. I call that climbing the ladder of Jesuit academic excellence! He made the most of it becoming vice president and then president of the student body, president of the Young Democrats, meeting and proposing to and marrying Dianne, and then so loving university education that he became our Director of Alumni. His vocation to the ministry of education and political advocacy for education was satisfied.

He worked in his Catholic faith in a unique way. Fr. Dave Leigh tells a story—but who knows if it is completely true like any of Dave Irwin's stories. At the time Dave Irwin was at Seattle U, Archbishop Connolly required that signs be posted on the residence hall chapels that attendance at Mass on Sunday in these chapels did not fulfill one's Sunday obligation but that students must go to Mass at the Cathedral. Well and good. Dave saw his opportunity. On a regular Sunday, without any foreknowledge of the priests at Seattle U or especially of the Archbishop, Dave canvassed and corralled all the students and had them all show up at once at the Mass of the Archbishop such that there was not enough room for them in the Cathedral. Archbishop Connolly relented in his injunction; Dave won his first, but not his last, political battle animated by faith. It set the pattern. His faith and his work merged for decades not as a "lobbyist"—he did not admit to the title—but as a "legislative liaison" on behalf of opportunity for higher education.

Our first reading says well how faith and wisdom become one. Think of these words as describing Dave in his dedicated and faith-filled vocation on behalf of the attainment of knowledge and wisdom.

How different the person who devotes himself to the study of the law of the Most High... His care is to rise early to seek the Lord his Maker, to petition the Most High, to open his mouth in prayer, to ask pardon for sins. If it pleases the Lord Almighty, he will be filled with the spirit of understanding; He will pour forth his words of wisdom and in prayer give praise to the Lord. He will direct his knowledge and his counsel, as he meditates upon God's mysteries. He will show the wisdom he has learned and glory in the law of the Lord's covenant.

There is a thread of faith and a thread of education entwined together throughout the whole of the life of this friend of God's, friend of ours, and friend of students.

Dave has died, mysteriously held tenderly by God these past many years when Dave lost his capacity to speak—Dave of all people not able to speak—and not able to comprehend. But God spoke to him and God knew him. They tell the story that whenever anyone said grace or a blessing in home or among friends or on public occasions, Dave—somewhat exasperatingly because of its predictability and regularity—always chimed in at the end to say "And may our souls and the souls of the faithful departed through the mercy of God rest in peace. Amen."

That's our prayer today: "May the soul of this faithful departed friend through the mercy of God rest in peace. Amen." And may Dave and God now rival one another in laughter and rejoicing.

The last words of our scripture reading of his Funeral Mass console us who have gathered by telling us of how our friend will be remembered.

Many will praise his understanding; his name can never be blotted out; unfading will be his memory, through all generations his name will live; peoples will speak of his wisdom, and the assembly will declare his praise. While he lives he is one in a thousand, and when he dies he leaves a good name.

That's it folks. Oh yes, and "May our souls and the souls of the faithful departed through the mercy of God rest in peace. Amen."