

[Opinion](#)  
[Appreciation](#)



Fr. Michael Himes (right) and Steve Miller stand outside the Boston Museum of Fine Arts in 2017. Himes, who taught at Boston College from 1993 to 2021 and previously taught at the University of Notre Dame, died June 10 at age 75. (NCR photo/Steve Miller)



by Steve Miller

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If you ever had the privilege to hear a homily from Fr. Michael Himes, or attended one of his lectures, you never forgot him. Just ask any student or faculty member at the University of Notre Dame in the late '80s and early '90s, or at Boston College in the last three decades. The insight and brilliance of his thought made an immediate impression.

However, long after the recollection of his words faded, you remembered how he made you feel: that you were loved beyond imagination, and you had something special to offer the world. My good friend passed away on June 10 just a few weeks after celebrating his 75th birthday and 50th anniversary of his ordination to the priesthood. I will never forget how he made me feel.

In the last few weeks, I had the privilege of spending three days at his bedside, sharing recollections from our 35-year friendship. "Ah, remember the glass of orange juice; never was there a more fateful refreshment," he remarked in his unique turn of phrase, both formal and friendly, tinged with what he admitted was the oddest of accents, sounding more as if it was from Britain than from his hometown of Brooklyn.

In September 1987, I left the practice of law and returned to Notre Dame, my alma mater, to pursue a graduate degree in theology. I had volunteered to lead an undergraduate weekend retreat. Late on the first evening, I snuck down to the kitchen to see if there might be something to eat or drink. I don't recall who came first to the fridge, but soon this newly arrived priest and I had rustled up two glasses of orange juice that led to a conversation â?? a conversation that lasted until his passing.

The singularly most brilliant person I have ever encountered, Michael obtained his doctorate degree in the history of Christianity from the University of Chicago. At age 30, he was named dean of the Seminary of the Immaculate Conception in Huntington, New York, where he taught, among others, the current bishop of Brooklyn, Robert Brennan. Teaching was both his passion and vocation.



Fr. Michael Himes presides at a home Mass in 2021. The longtime Boston College Catholic theologian and professor was beloved, with waiting lists for his classes and standing room only at his Masses. (NCR photo/Steve Miller)

I sense that Michael understood that his gifts could not be limited to the seminary but demanded a wider audience. He saw the opportunity to influence lay Catholic leaders — prompting his move to Notre Dame. During his years there, he quickly earned a large and loyal following among both faculty and students. In both 1991 and 1992, the graduating classes at Notre Dame voted him the most influential teacher at the university. His classes had long wait lists and his daily Masses were standing room only.

In 1993, Boston College enticed Michael to return to the East Coast, which provided him an opportunity to be near his aging mother to whom he was deeply devoted. The same phenomenon occurred at Boston College: beloved teacher, waiting lists for

his classes and standing room only at his Masses. Although he authored numerous books and articles and received four honorary degrees, teaching and preaching — the opportunity to share and converse — were his greatest loves.

For more than 25 years at Boston College, Michael was the keynote speaker for the orientation for incoming freshmen and their parents. His wit, erudition and incomparable ability to connect history, art and literature to theology inspired each incoming class. Upon the 150th anniversary of Boston College's founding in 2012, the faculty and Jesuit community asked him to give [the homily](#) at a celebration in Fenway Park. He created a series of videos on foundations of the Catholic tradition and faith that have been used for years by RCIA programs across the country. He was a confidant to bishops and was invited to address the United Nations.

There are certain friendships that just happen; without effort, you slip into them naturally. You marvel at what the other saw in you to warrant such love — when there are so many more deserving who would thrill to be in the person's orbit. I can imagine how a few stinky, grimy, uneducated fishermen from Galilee must have felt.

In one of Michael's earliest homilies or lectures, I can't recall which, he told the story of a young woman traveling to the New World with a female companion. The companion went above deck for some fresh air but the young woman stayed below deck to tend to an expectant mother. A rogue wave swept across the deck, washing the companion overboard and into the sea, where she perished. The young woman whose life was spared was Michael Himes' great-grandmother. He made the point that the trillion upon trillion upon trillion of circumstances, decisions and twists had to go just right for him to come into existence — and how "very extraordinary love" had made possible his life — and each of ours.

That "glass of orange juice" was one of those extraordinary twists. More than any person, save my parents, Michael shaped who I am, my belief in God, in Jesus, in the church and in humanity. He even made me a better trial lawyer: Every opening statement and closing argument is fashioned through the prism of a Michael Himes homily. I surely would not be the chair of the National Catholic Reporter Board but for Michael.

For Michael, that glass of orange juice represented a baptism — an entrance rite into the Miller family. Michael delivered the homily at my wedding to Susan, as well as the weddings of siblings — and the generation beyond. He stayed in our homes, baptized our children, shared meals, held our children as infants and taught them as college students. The most eloquent speaker I ever met sat on the living room floor of our home, blowing "raspberries" with my daughters.

As the oldest of nine children, my friendship served as portal to perhaps Michael's most significant friendship: the one with my youngest brother Rich. Rich came to Notre Dame in 1988 as an aspiring tennis player and undecided student. He resided in Sorin Hall, where I served as assistant rector. He fell under Michael's spell, dropped tennis and immersed himself in theology. While I returned to the practice of law after my master's degree, Rich took the road I had not. He followed Michael to Boston College where, under Michael's mentorship, he received his master's and doctorate degrees in theology. Today, he is a professor of theology at Creighton University.

Rich became the son Michael would never have — and later Michael welcomed Rich's wife Mariana as a daughter. (Mariana, herself a student of Michael's, received a master's degree in theology from Boston College and is now the assistant dean for Continuing Education and the Institute for Pastoral Studies at Loyola University of Chicago.) Michael served as godfather to all three of their sons, Sebastian, Alexander and Dominic — a role he cherished and took very seriously. They vacationed together, including a tour of the great sites of European Christendom.

Together, Michael and Rich hosted seven conferences, known as the Church in the Twenty-First Century, in which renowned theologians gave lectures on issues facing the church through the lens of Vatican II. Michael and Rich edited the papers, published them — and provided copies to the U.S. bishops.

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My brother Jim, a Boston College graduate who settled in the Boston area, opened his home to Michael over the decades, where Michael celebrated Christmas Eve Mass each year with a small group of neighbors and friends. Jim was a constant presence and source of support, especially in the last 10 months of Michael's life when he was confined to a long-term care facility. To Jim, Michael was a third parent

and a fifth brother.

Michael has been the heart, mind and soul of Catholicism for two generations of Catholics who have had the good fortune to know him. For so many of us, Michael's theology of self-gift has guided our lives and grounded our understanding of the God of Love.

Like inspirational guides such as Thomas Merton and Anthony de Mello, an oracle of profound wisdom has been silenced too early. I fully expect, however, for his influence to grow through the work of those he touched and inspired, and through the videos and recordings of his lectures.

In 2008, Boston College invited Michael to deliver an inaugural talk in what would become a series. He was asked to consider that he had one final lecture and to speak on "the issues that matter most and have been truest in life." In his "[Last Lecture](#)," Michael noted the great insight of Christian scripture: "God is love." For Michael this meant that "the foundation of existence is love — the gift of oneself to another." He noted that the mystery revealed in Jesus is that "if you hold on to your life, you lose it, but if you give your life away it becomes everlasting life."

Michael: Thank you for the gift of your life for your friendship. May you enjoy the everlasting life you so richly deserve.

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