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Appreciation

He daily served a disguised God

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Michael Kirwan had a double identity. Among the secure and spruced of Washington, he had name recognition. Among the ill-housed and unhoused, he had face recognition.

By the time he died of cancer at 54 in Washington Nov. 12, Kirwan's name had become synonymous with safe charity. Donate money, food, clothing or sundries to him at his three-story, century-old home in Northwest Washington and you had all but divine certitude he would get it to people in need. No skimming. No scamming.

Kirwan was a member of the Catholic Worker community, which was double security for the givers. Those who toil in Catholic Worker houses of hospitality aspire to voluntary poverty. Catholic Worker houses -- Kirwan's was one of three in Washington and one of more than 100 nationally -- are spiritually tied to the lines in the Acts of the Apostles: "All believers were together and had all things in common. And those who had possessions sold them and divided to each according to need." They were "of one mind; not one of them spoke of the property he possessed as his own; but everything they had was in common."

Among those on the receiving end of donor largesse -- Washington's sick, hungry, broke and broken -- Kirwan had a face known to thousands he had helped since 1978. The mile-long swath between the White House and the U.S. Capitol is the National Homeless Belt, with some half dozen shelters and soup kitchens serving the destitute. For this population, Kirwan's face was instantly recognized.

In December 1996, Wanda Bailey, who was sleeping then in an abandoned garage near the Capitol, caught sight of Kirwan a few blocks from St. Matthew's Cathedral, where he had just been to noon Mass. She asked if he would take her to the drugstore for a new supply of colostomy bags. Years

before, Bailey had part of her lower intestine removed and now required the devices. In 1986, she had two liver transplants. The first didn't take, the second did. She had bad legs and her eyes were failing. She was 32.

During a 10-block ride to a super discount pharmacy, Bailey, wrapped in a tightly buttoned overcoat that reached to her lower shins, ran through her list of recent miseries. Kirwan listened as if it were all new. Traipsing off to get colostomy bags was the most important thing in his life at that moment. At the pharmacy, Bailey changed her mind about the bags. She'd get them next time. Instead, she wanted something for her cold.

In the checkout line, with Kirwan paying and half wondering what God had in store for him next, Bailey said that her friend "is one of the Lord's greatest. He takes me places; he buys my medication. He gave me these pants I'm wearing."

In a 1,000-word farewell letter sent to friends and benefactors in September, Kirwan reflected on his faith-based service to the destitute of Washington: "We cannot by ourselves lift the burden of racism, economic and social disparity, suspicion and mistrust. But we can begin to lighten it. Dorothy Day said that it was only through breaking bread together, changing ourselves, that we could create a society where 'it would be easier to be good.' The love of God and love of neighbor do not mix comfortably, and God is forever coming in unwelcome disguises."

House of Hospitality

The disguised came daily to Kirwan's residence at 1305 T Street NW -- the Llewellyn Scott Catholic Worker House of Hospitality. Over the years, tens of thousands of meals were served to the hungry and homeless. Tons of clothing and other supplies were dispensed. At times, as many as 20 or 30 men and women were given space, some for a night or two, others for long stretches, and always in the company of Kirwan, who lived in a third floor cubicle not much larger than a monk's cell. It was a book-lined room, his haven from an often frenzied and harried daily routine.

Beginning in the early 1980s, I was still another needy person cadging favors from Michael Kirwan. "Would you talk to my students?" I asked. Sure, he always said. Regularly -- one semester after another -- I brought my high school, college and law school students to his home to learn of his work and philosophy. His living room seminars were a mix of stories about Catholic Worker founder Dorothy Day -- whom he met as a child when she stayed with his parents on her Washington jaunts -- tales of people living in the house with him, accounts of his early awakenings as a college student to the suffering of homeless people, and a rallying cry for the students to figure out how they should use their intellectual and spiritual gifts either to decrease someone's pain or increase his or her joy.

Many students, coming from homes and backgrounds of bounty, and fully expecting more of the same for themselves, were all but disbelieving of a man who lived in voluntary poverty and even saw beauty in it.

"It is in community that we find love, and in love there is no ending," was

Kirwan's constant message.

Those field trips unsettled students in different ways. My high school classes wondered why they couldn't get out of school one day a week to join Kirwan and others like him in their toil. The college audiences absorbed Kirwan's ideas and returned to their books with a bit of experiential knowledge, as hastily acquired as it was. In Kirwan, my Georgetown law school students found someone who had deliberately aligned himself with people the law had forgotten, people who lived beyond law, people for whom laws represented the failure of love. More than a few of my former Georgetown law students remember their visit to Michael Kirwan's house long after they've left school. Those visits woke them up and shook them up and stirred some to leave behind the yen to go into banking law, real estate law, loophole law and instead to take up public interest law, where they are needed.

In addition to direct service to poor people, Kirwan, a pacifist who believed nonviolence was the essence of Christianity, went to the Pentagon once a week at dawn to walk around the concrete behemoth praying the rosary. Like Dorothy Day and Martin Luther King Jr., he often spoke of the link between militarism and poverty. And like Day, he, too, had low regard for big-bucks building programs promoted in the name of religion.

Affront to the destitute

In July 1997, Kirwan was among the street protesters when construction began near The Catholic University of the \$60 million Pope John Paul II Cultural Center. Scheduled to open in July 2000, it will house papal memorabilia, Vatican art, museum pieces and rooms for scholars to research churchly cultural issues. Kirwan saw it as a waste of money and an affront to the destitute whose pain he witnessed daily.

In the tradition of total independence espoused by Catholic Worker houses, Kirwan never accepted money from any governmental agency nor sought tax-exempt status for his work. He was choosy in other ways, too. Some years ago, as he told the story, a Catholic bishop showed at Christmastime to bless the assembled poor. On leaving, he offered a donation to Kirwan. Thanks, but no, he said: Instead of a check, do the harder work of persuading parishes around the city and suburbs to open their halls to the homeless. The bishop wasn't heard from again.

Like his grandfather, the former Rep. Michael Kirwan, a labor Democrat from Youngstown, Ohio, and a member of Congress from 1935 to 1970, Michael Kirwan the Catholic Worker knew how to deliver for his constituents. After giving a talk at a Catholic parish in the early 1980s, he received a letter from a woman and a check for \$30,000. He bought a house for homeless people and moved in with them. Another time a physician read an article in *The Washington Post* about Kirwan's work and sent \$50,000. Kirwan bought another house, this one for women. Kirwan's longtime ally, Connie Ridge, has been running the Mary Harris Catholic Worker House for more than a decade.

In 1988, a Charleston, W.Va., philanthropist heard about Kirwan's desire to purchase a farm near Anderson, W.Va. She donated \$350,000 for a 16-room house and a barn. Over the years, hundreds of homeless and unemployed people

have stayed there for rest and recovery.

In the winter of 1978, Kirwan was a graduate student in sociology at George Washington University. One freezing night, he passed a homeless man keeping warm on a heat grate near the State Department. The man asked for food. Kirwan ignored him and kept walking to his campus dorm room. There, unsettled, he had second thoughts and took back a bowl of soup. So began a life's vocation.

At his funeral, much of the talk focused on whether Kirwan's work would be carried on. The same was heard at Day's funeral in 1980. It kept on going then and it's likely to continue now.

One of Kirwan's final labors involved Sholl's Cafeteria, a downtown eatery at 20th and K Streets N.W. He had joined the campaign to save the 71-year-old operation whose existence was threatened by higher rent. Last March, Kirwan wrote in *The Washington Post* of the extraordinary generosity of Sholl's management toward the down-and-out. Years earlier, Kirwan had given \$5,000 to the cafeteria to handle the future tab for homeless patrons to whom he had issued \$12 meal tickets. "Somehow that \$5,000 check never seemed to run out," Kirwan recalled. "The stories I've heard from people on the streets, their quiet moments of dignity, respect, warmth and a full and nourishing meal at the hands of this wonderful cafeteria could fill a book of essays."

At Sholl's, the poor became the down-and-ins. The same at Kirwan's houses.

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