

7-24-2018

Hello, Mary, My Very Best Friend

Eric F. Spina
University of Dayton, efspina@udayton.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://ecommons.udayton.edu/president_blog_spina

eCommons Citation

Spina, Eric F., "Hello, Mary, My Very Best Friend" (2018). *President's Blog: From the Heart*. 118.
https://ecommons.udayton.edu/president_blog_spina/118

This Blog is brought to you for free and open access by the Office of the President at eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in President's Blog: From the Heart by an authorized administrator of eCommons. For more information, please contact mschlangen1@udayton.edu, ecommons@udayton.edu.

Hello, Mary, My Very Best Friend

udayton.edu/blogs/president/2018/07/hello_mary_my_very_best_friend.php



Tuesday July 24, 2018

By Eric F. Spina

“Ave Maria, amica optima!”

Father Norbert Burns, S.M., utters those simple Latin words — loosely translated as “Hello, Mary, my very best friend,” when he stands behind the altar and presides over Mass in a makeshift, second-floor chapel in his home on Sawmill Road that he shares with four other Marianists.

The spry 94-year-old priest, who is a legendary figure on the University of Dayton’s campus, gave Karen and me a glimpse into his life and ministry during an afternoon visit this summer — the summer of his 75th Jubilee celebrating 75 years as a Marianist, 65 years as a priest, and 50 years as a UD professor.

Though Father Norb left the classroom more than a decade ago, after teaching his popular “Christian Marriage” class to more than 27,000 students, he remains well-loved among our graduates — and countless others he touched during his days as a marriage counselor, radio host, and priest presiding over weddings and Masses in the chapel.

As we conversed in his comfortable, book-lined living room, I imagined what it must have been like to sit in his class, where he engaged students with provocative questions as he paced the room in the style of pioneer talk show host Phil Donahue. We had barely sat down when he began quizzing us on curricular changes in the MBA program and law school, the state of campus culture — and the hopes and dreams of our children.

At one point, he mused, “Is change a good word or a bad word? I think it’s a good word. Change can be an invitation.”

An invitation.

I realized that’s how Father Norb has lived such a rich, selfless life. He answered Mary’s invitation to join the Marianists, embarking on a faith-filled journey in service to others. Famous for bounding into class 15 minutes early, he personally greeted every student by name — and invited them into long, meaningful conversations about relationships and marriage. He often tucked his clerical collar in his pocket, not hiding his faith, but attempting to find common ground with young people.

“All of creation, we are one,” he told us. “We belong to each other, somehow or another. We’re all brothers and sisters, though I don’t even like to use that phrase anymore. I don’t like anything that divides people.”

Personable and engaging, Father Norb personifies Marianist spirituality and hospitality. He continues to invite others into relationships — the one word he says defines his life’s work.

“Call it love, communication, friendship, belongingness, whatever you want,” he said. “It’s the greatest gift you have.”