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Father Norbert Burns, S.M., ushered out the end of an era when a lecture hall full of upperclass students listened to his words of wisdom about marriage and love for the last time on April 24.

"Come on in. It's an honor to have you. Make yourself at home."

The 82-year-old priest has taught his popular "Christian Marriage" class to more than 27,000 students, about a third of all University of Dayton alumni, since 1963. In all, he's spent more than 60 years in the classroom.

Burns, his priestly collar tucked into his pocket, bounds into the classroom 15 minutes early and personally greets every student by name — all 112 of them. He knows who's contemplating marriage, who's going to Iraq, who's a high jumper on the track team, who's already lined up a job after graduation.

"At the end of this class, I'd like to give each of you a hug because we've gone from acquaintances shaking hands to friends hugging," he told the students.

Although the course is an elective, students flock to register because this priest, who's older than many of their grandparents, makes them forget about any generation gap. He rarely refers to notes and runs the fast-paced class in the style of talk show pioneer Phil Donahue. Students don't sit in the first two rows of the tiered lecture room because Burns "doesn't like to look down on anyone."

The class enjoys "a good reputation on campus," said Dan Ptak, a senior. "It's got a good buzz going. It's interesting and engaging."

Adam Buckman, a graduating operations management major who's getting married in February, described the course as "eye-opening" and the best he's taken at UD, a common refrain.

"We don't get to take too many classes where we get to talk about life and find out who we are as people," offered senior Brandon Artis.

With the divorce rate skyrocketing and young people waiting longer to get married, Burns reassured the students that they should risk loving another person. "Those of you who've met someone, those of you who've decided to go your separate ways and it was excruciatingly painful, you know you are capable of love," he told the class. "You take a risk when you open yourself up, but know you are capable of loving."

Bill Frapwell, a Dayton attorney, 1977 School of Law graduate and friend, attended the last class because "I wanted to come and watch him in action," he said as Burns asked the students to stand for a moment of silent prayer before kicking off his lecture. "He zooms around, talks to everyone, has an upbeat word for everyone. This is what keeps him young, to be around young people."

As the well-loved priest prepared to give the class a final quiz, he offered some parting words.

"Life is out there to be lived," he said. "There will be mountains on the way. Climb up and celebrate. There will be valleys, too. I hope you have the faith to get through. A loving God loves us more than ourselves. Know that I'll be praying for each one of you.

"And all of you graduating seniors, mission accomplished."

With that, the students — 112 of his friends — rose in unison and gave him a long, heartfelt standing ovation.