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## Michael Costanzo, A Genuine Mentor

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## Michael Costanzo, A Genuine Mentor

### Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"Where the priests feed the flock committed to them both by their word and by their example the people are preserved from many errors."

From Defense of the Catholic Priesthood by St. John Fisher (1525; translated by Philip Hallet, 1934)

Father Michael Costanzo was a man who wore his learning lightly. He was constantly reading and reflecting. I had many fascinating conversations with him over the years regarding his views on such figures as Edith Stein, Vincent Van Gogh, Oscar Wilde, and Simone Weil, all of whose complete works he had immersed himself in. He was eager to share what he had learned from them, and encouraged me to read them as well.

## Appreciations

### *Michael Costanzo, A Genuine Mentor*

“Where the priests feed the flock committed to them both by their word and by their example the people are preserved from many errors.” From *Defense of the Catholic Priesthood* by St. John Fisher (1525; translated by Philip Hallet, 1934).

Father Michael Costanzo was a man who wore his learning lightly. He was constantly reading and reflecting. I had many fascinating conversations with him over the years regarding his views on such figures as Edith Stein, Vincent Van Gogh, Oscar Wilde, and Simone Weil, all of whose complete works he had immersed himself in. He was eager to share what he had learned from them, and encouraged me to read them as well.

But Mike was never one to put on airs or try to dazzle people with his erudition. Instead, he was fully other-directed: he always wanted to know what his friends were reading, watching, or thinking about. And the number of his friends were legion, and I am honored to say that I was one of them. He welcomed me to St. John Fisher College when I first arrived in 2004 and it was as if we had known each other for decades. When he learned that my eldest brother John was a priest he was delighted, and always asked me about him. John, a member of the Congregation of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate order, based in Belleville, Illinois, came to visit the campus in 2008 and Mike concelebrated mass with him at the Coleman Chapel. Like myself, John was devastated to learn about Mike’s untimely death, and has nothing but fond memories of their time together.

Mike’s office in Pioch Hall was a genuine sanctuary. Everyone who entered there felt welcome. He would insist upon your having espresso with him, and would have a hurt look in his eyes if you didn’t also take a cookie or a chocolate as well. He was the perfect host. I once tried to reciprocate by inviting him to my office for coffee. He demonstrated true Christian charity by praising my coffee-making abilities, but also made it clear that there was no need to do so again—he was perfectly happy to act as host (and he no doubt realized how much better his espresso was than my Tim Hortons mix!).

There was usually a flock of faculty, staff, and students coming in and out of Mike’s office. Everyone felt welcome, and knew that they could drop in at any time and engage in the various discussions going on without feeling presumptuous. Egos were checked at the door. There was a real communal feeling in Mike’s office. This reminded me of my visits to my grandmother’s home when I was a child. I knew that, no matter what turmoil may have been going on in my own home or in school or anywhere else I’d been, I could go over to her house at any time. I’d find a flock of cousins, aunts, uncles, church friends, and sometimes perfect strangers there, gathered around the kitchen table where my grandmother held court, always making sure our coffee or tea cups were filled as the conversations continued until, properly replenished, we ventured back into our hectic lives. My grandmother and Mike were *simpatico*—both understood the importance of sanctuary places.

I often observed how much Mike loved interacting with his students, and how he made it clear to them that he was learning as much from them as they from him. His genuine interest in their lives and their aspirations was fully evident. He was a mentor to them in the true meaning of that term.

Mike was also a superb colleague and a mentor to me as well. To give just one example, In the Spring of 2015 he and I realized that we were each teaching a course at the same time and in the same

building, and we talked about guest lecturing in each's other class. Mike was teaching a Religious Studies course on "The Problem of Evil" and I was teaching "Introduction to Philosophy." Since we were both going to be discussing Voltaire's famous work *Candide* around the same time, we "switched classes" for the day. Mike taught my class about the theological implications of the Problem of Evil, and I taught his class about the influence of the philosopher Leibniz on Voltaire's book. This was highly successful and well received in both classes, and we continued to coordinate our schedules in subsequent semesters. In fact, the last time I saw him was when I lectured to his "Problem of Evil" class in the spring of 2017 about Oscar Wilde's work *De Profundis*. This was right before Spring break—when we returned, Mike was scheduled to come to my Introduction to Philosophy class to talk about the Book of Job. Sadly, he went into the hospital before then and died shortly thereafter. I still miss our cooperative interactions.

One other way in which Mike was a mentor to me was his constant encouragement that I should contribute articles to *Verbum*. Over the years I wrote on a variety of topics, including *The Need for Civility in Contentious Times*; *A Philosopher in the Locker Room: Sportsmanship and the Honorary Coach Program at St. John Fisher College*; *O Captain, My Captain: Teaching Empathy*; *Remembering Marshall McLuhan (1911-1980): The Medium and the Message*; *Developing One's Character: An Aristotelian Defense of Sportsmanship*; *You're a Good Man, Charles Schulz* and *What was Sherlock Holmes' Alma Mater? Elementary: St. John Fisher College.* Some of these were serious, others more tongue-in-cheek, but writing them helped me to develop my ideas and to get feedback from those who read the pieces, quite a few of which I later expanded into book chapters. I can attest that many others also benefited from Mike's encouragement to put their thoughts on paper, and from his sharp but charitable editorial eye.

It's not surprising that Mike was so enthusiastic about *Verbum*, since he was a writer himself. He was at heart a poet, and I believe that the creation of poetic works was central to his sense of self. He was rightly proud of the poetry collections he published over the years. Here is just one example of his creative talents:

*Sunrise*

Inevitable as this morning's sunrise  
And the evening's melancholy sunset,  
My spirit's longing for a misty dream  
Hides in the curves of wavering clouds,  
White in their beauty as they come and pass.  
What happened to the delicate flowers  
Some hand had placed on my writing desk?  
The vase is empty and shrouded in mist.

*(From Water Lilies, FootHills Publishing 2010)*

Father Michael Costanzo was an inspirational figure. I very much miss my conversations with Mike, and the sense of sanctuary he provided me, but I am comforted by the knowledge that his influence lives on in the hearts of all of us who had the privilege to know him and to call him "friend."

*Tim Madigan PhD  
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