

“My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my savior!” On Tuesday, Our Lady’s university community lost a great and beloved man who exemplified these words of Mary. O’Neill professor of economics Timothy Fuerst was a good friend, a brilliant economist, an energetic teacher, a wonderful colleague and a dedicated and loving father and husband. But that doesn’t capture it. There was something different about him. “Special” would understate it: There was something noble, something holy about him. To me, he was almost a sacrament: a visible sign of Christ in our community, and a true instrument of God’s grace.

If you had asked me a year ago to describe Tim, after “saint,” I would have given you “joy” and “grace.” With regard to joy, Tim was — quite simply — the most upbeat person I’ve ever known. He was pro-life in the fullest sense of the word. He loved people, and he loved life. His smile, bellowing laugh and whistling lightened up every room. His op-‘Tim’-ism helped carry him through his illness, and he was joking even in his last days, trying to ease the concerns of those who loved him.

Tim was unwaveringly kind and gracious. He cared for everyone he encountered, and I can’t recall him saying an ill word about anyone. Instead, he was a person who encouraged, consoled and inspired. Like Our Lady, Tim’s gracious attitude toward others reflected a strong awareness of God’s grace in his own life. Like Mary, Tim was graced, but not with a life devoid of sorrow. Tim lost his father during childhood, and his mother as a young adult.

His 10-month battle with cancer and the knowledge of leaving his wife and children behind was his greatest trial, however. His body broke and, at 6-foot-6, resembled a skeleton toward the end, but it only made his great soul shine through even more. During the time when he was in and out of the hospital through intense chemo regimens, Tim continued his job of research, publishing, teaching, and advising. It was heroic; the normalcy of his life was a way of coping, but it was also a testament to the fact that Tim had always lived his life the way that God had called him. He acknowledged his suffering as any honest human would, but his real concerns were only for his wife and children. He adored them, even giving his wife flowers for Valentine’s Day in his last week of life.

It is ironic that the only time I ever knew Tim to make someone unhappy was when he suffered with cancer and eventually died. It is a trial of faith, when good people suffer. Jesus conforms every saint, canonized or not, into to his image in a unique way, and we all share in some way in the sufferings of Christ. The great ones experience this acutely though, through martyrdom or severe suffering. At such times, reason fails us, and our Lord's own death on the cross is our only consolation and hope.

In this light, we receive Tim — his mere existence — as a gift of grace. We will miss him, but we appreciate his life and his beautiful soul. Amidst our loss, Tim's steadfast faith and joy is a reminder that suffering is not the final word. God pours his grace upon us, and he wants us to be happy.