

Fr Michael Power RIP HOMILY

My first contact with Michael goes back to 1944, when we found ourselves in opposing cross-country teams: Michael running for Shrigley, and myself running for Thornleigh, Bolton. It was a very amicable contest: there were no words exchanged, no surreptitious tripping of opponents, and Michael's team won the day. That was the first and last time that Michael and I found ourselves as rivals, or opponents.

Tributes to Michael have come from far and wide, and I hope to share some of them with you, as I recall my own memories of him. I am aware that we are doing this in the context of the Mass, when we thank God for the gift of Michael's life, we offer him back to the Father who gave him to us, and we pray for him as he now sees God face to face and begins a new life with him.

Salesian life began in earnest for him and me and several companions in August 1948, when we went to spend our novitiate year at Beckford. Michael had been there before as a young boy in Lower Elements as we used to say. Because of the Monastic silence that we had to observe in the house, it wasn't the ideal place to forge new, personal friendships. Michael and I did once get into hot water by breaking the silence, but we survived to tell the tale.

I saw in Michael right from the start that there was a deep undercurrent of commitment; a single-mindedness; an inner strength of mind and a readiness to do everything well. I was struck whenever I saw him praying on his own in the chapel. It was as though there was something going on between Michael and God that was of huge importance. He was also a man not to waste a moment of time. My special image of him was seeing him churning the farm butter: if his right hand was churning, his left hand was holding a book; if his left hand was churning, his right hand was holding a book. I often passed him at his work, but didn't dare say a word lest we got in trouble for breaking the silence. And that would have been serious!

Novitiate wasn't a time for frivolity and fun, so I only had occasional glimpses of the other, lighter side of Michael. That emerged much more after we took our vows and moved on to Shrigley for a two-year course in Philosophy and do secular studies to prepare for a University degree. There I got to Michael much better and to enjoy his more expansive personality and discover that impish capacity he had for Rory Bremner-type impersonations.

Shrigley was a wonderful place to be. It was where Michael had lived and studied before his novitiate. One of our companions from those days, Fr John Coleman, makes the following comment: he says: *'It was in the rugged surroundings of Shrigley that Michael would have learned much of his resilience, simplicity of lifestyle and his ability to communicate these qualities to young people'*. We were, of course, part of a larger group, and during those two years many good, lasting friendships were forged, and a youthful team of clerics eventually joined the Shrigley teaching staff. Michael was an immediate success. Efficient, painstaking, and well liked by the boys, as he always would be in a school, both in and out of the classroom. I remember him telling me the motto he suggested to his form: was 'Miles Christi', 'Soldier of Christ', and I was delighted the other day when Fr John Coleman also added: *'I still remember the enthusiasm Michael aroused in those young lads to be in the service of Christ the King.'*

Whilst most of us stayed on in Shrigley to continue our teaching, , Michael went to Thornleigh, in Bolton.

Three years later, Michael and I and two other companions went to Melchet Court in Hampshire for our four years of Theology. I have to admit that our spirits were rather low after we arrived: we'd been teaching for four years, now we were doomed to sit at a desk and BE taught. So the day after we arrived, we went for a long walk; and we vowed we'd go for a long walk once a week, come what may. Strangely, by the next week we'd forgotten our vow and were beginning to enjoy what were to be some of our best years in that lively, international community.

But for Michael there were some dark clouds looming and times of great sorrow. First, he lost his Mother; then within a short space of time, also his father. After that second loss, an uncle of Michael told him that he would take the place of his father, and his home would be Michael's home. But in a third, bitter blow, this uncle also died. Michael and his brother and sisters must have been utterly devastated. I still don't know where Michael found the spiritual, emotional and physical energy to carry on. It's a tribute to the depth of his faith and his courage that he could come back yet again, resume his studies, and to our amazement seem to have peace of mind. The Lord must have been very close to him, at the same time preparing him to show the Lord's great compassion to others as a Salesian priest.

The joy of our Ordination in 1959 was shared with twelve other Salesians from across the Salesian world. Those of us from this province then spent a year of pastoral theology at Shrigley which we combined with teaching. After that came the diaspora, as we spilled out around the province. Michael and I went to Farnborough where Michael remained for ten years before taking up his first major post as Rector in Shrigley from 1970 to 1976. Fr Brian, his nephew was a senior boy there. He admits that could have been an awkward situation, with his uncle Michael as his rector, but he says that was NOT the case, as Michael was always very fair.

After a sabbatical year in Maynooth, Michael eventually came to Scotland for two years, to promote vocations and renew contacts with Salesian Cooperators. I called to see him in Hamilton Road, and he told me he had been in a place called Easterhouse, and he said with great emphasis: 'That's where we Salesians ought to be'. It would be ten years before his words became a reality.

The sudden death of Fr Joseph Fairclough led to Michael being called upon to take up his second major post of responsibility, this time as Provincial Bursar. It was a post he was to hold for the next eight years. Few of us are in a position to know the full story Michael's work in that area, but one who does know is Fr Charles, who eventually succeeded him. I quote just some of what Fr Charles told me: *'Thanks to him I inherited a well organised and flourishing system. Michael engaged lay people with expertise in this area; set up a Finance Committee, and we are still benefiting from their professional and practical advice; he also set up a fund for the missions, and for the elderly Salesians, so it's thanks to his work that we now have two residences, one in the north, the other in the south of England for elderly Salesians.'* We have much reason then to be grateful to Michael for this great work of administration.

Michael came back to Scotland in 1987, still nurturing the dream he told me about nine years before, and so a year later saw him as Parish Priest here in St Benedict's, and I'm sure the memory of his presence here is still vivid in your minds. For Michael, It was the beginning of parish ministry that would go on for the next 21 years.

Michael brought into parish ministry not only the wealth of experience acquired over the years, but more importantly the fruit of his own deep, personal faith and closeness to God. He brought his natural, easy manner of relating with people, and a spirit of optimism and joy that must have uplifted many hearts.

Fr Kieran Anderson, who spent some of those years alongside Michael, says : *'Michael was a wonderful Salesian and priest to have lived with. Much of what I try to do as a Salesian priest in parish ministry is greatly influenced by the memory of Michael's pastoral approach. His heart and soul were completely given to God and in turn he gave himself totally to the people of Easterhouse.'*

All told, five parishes were blessed with Michael's presence and ministry: in addition to St Benedict's, they were St Mary Magdalene and St Stephen's in Mitchell's Plain, S. Africa, St Richards in Liverpool, and finally the parish of St John Bosco in Robertsham, near Johannesburg.

Of his time in St Richards, Fr Francis Preston, who was Provincial at the time writes as follows: *'Not only did Michael agree at once to become parish priest at St Richard's where he did an excellent job, but, at the end of his three year appointment, he made possible the very smooth transfer of the running of St Richard's parish back to the Archdiocese of Liverpool. Only a man of real faith, a man of prayer, like Michael, could have coped so well in such challenging circumstances. He was a great Salesian, one of the very best.'*

The last parish that Michael served in was that of St John Bosco in Robertsham where he lived and worked with another Salesian priest, Fr Canice Dooley. It was Fr Canice who gave the homily at Michael's Requiem Mass, and summing up Michael's life, he said: *'Michael's life gave great joy to so many. He loved life and he knew how precious the Gift of Life is, and he made it his business to honour other people's lives, to give them dignity and to uplift the lives of the many poor, the marginalized, the elderly and sick, and in a special way the young, to whom he gave the greater part of his life of service as a Salesian.'* The Provincial in South Africa, Fr Francois Dufour, also expressed his gratitude for Michael's years in South Africa, and he singled out those last years in Robertsham: he spoke of Michael and Canice as *'forming a fabulous duo of priests to serve that parish'*, and went on: *'They provided us priests and religious with proof that it is possible to work, pray, play, minister, and serve, together, in unity, in mutual respect. ... to not only just get along and put up with each other, but to give witness to harmonious community life.'*

And of Michael himself, Fr Francois said: *'We will miss him, not only for what he did, but especially for his splendid modelling of Salesian consecrated life.'*

So far I've spoken only of Michael as a Salesian, one of our own companions, who spent most of his life in one of our communities. But Michael also has a family –his brother Tom, his sisters Margaret and Eileen, his brother-in-law Pat, nieces, grand-nieces and nephew – a large, extended family. And though Michael was with them only intermittently over the years, I know he was much loved by all of them, as we saw when he celebrated his Golden Jubilee here. They will miss him as much as, if not more than anyone, and they will treasure all the memories they have of him.

As Brian says, his parents' house was always home to Michael whenever he came to Glasgow, and as a boy he would always serve Mass for Michael. And reflecting on him now, Brian says: *'I came to appreciate what a sound character my uncle was. He had a great sense of humour, was great company, but was always a priest and a man of God. I learned a lot from him about dealing with people, something he was very good at'*. And Brian adds that everyone in the family loved him and had a great respect for him.

Our heart goes out to all of them at this sad time. I'm sure they, like all of us, take comfort in the words of Jesus: 'I am going to prepare a place for you, so that where I am you may be, too'.

Sr Margaret was told some comforting words about the hours before Michael died: when Fr Canice anointed him, as the prayers ended Michael said: 'Now I'm ready for the journey.' Later, they prayed the Rosary, and as they came to the end of the 'Hail, Holy Queen' and said the words 'O clement, O loving, O sweet Virgin Mary', Michael breathed his last. What a beautiful moment to go to God – in the company of Mary, who had been close to Michael all through his life.

Now Michael has made that journey: gone to be at home with the Lord he loved and served so well.

So I say to Michael, the man, the priest, the Salesian confrere, the brother, uncle, great uncle, and friend of many, many people far and wide: Michael, your work is done, the work of a good and faithful servant, may your reward be great, and your joy be full, in the company of Mary whom you loved so dearly; may your joyful laughter ring around the vault of heaven in the company of Don Bosco and all the saints of heaven, in the presence of our loving God. May you rest in peace and rise again in glory.