

Funeral of Michael Irwin

So often, when I come to say some words at a funeral I realize that all I can do is talk a little about the tip of the iceberg. It's important to keep in mind that most of what might be said often remains unknown to the speaker.

I met Michael Irwin for the first time in 1973. I was passing through Lima and another Columban, Peter Hughes said "Do you know Mick Irwin?" No! "He's an interesting character, we'll go over to see him" He was living in a *barriada* called El Montón, If I remember correctly it was a sort of satellite of the parish of *San Martín de Porres* where Peter lived. The whole sector was built over a partially flattened out city rubbish dump. Michael had, by his own request, gone to live in this higgildy-piggildy slum. Years later a thought occurred to me that if a monk from the ancient Irish Skellig monastery visited here the crowding might have been a bit of a problem for him but he'd have found the kind of lifestyle Michael lived to be fairly congenial.

Michael's house was made of very rough adobe or mud bricks, and was no different to all the surrounding shacks. A recent earthquake had opened a crack on one of the side walls through which thin slivers of light filtered in.

We drank some strong coffee made on a paraffin stove while we sat on benches that, at other times of the day or night, served for community meetings. He lived there for several years sharing the joys and sorrows of the people.

Michael was ordained a priest in 1961. Priests ordained at that time had some more difficult challenges ahead of them than those ordained say 10 years later. Back in the 1950s young priests could reasonably expect that the studies they had done in places like Maynooth or Dalgan would equip them fairly well academically, liturgically and theologically for the years that lay ahead.

But the Second Vatican Council began in Rome in 1962 a year after Michael's ordination. Pope John XIII knew that what so many of Europe's best thinkers were saying was true; the Church, through its failure to renew itself was badly out of touch with the modern world.

Over the next three years a very serious renewal and updating of Church structures, theology and liturgy took place. One small example. A strong teaching of the Council was that we should not reject but rather respect other religions and their thought and practice and accept them as possible paths of salvation for their followers. This didn't have a great impact on Limerick or Navan but it did have big implications for Columbans who worked

in countries where a majority of the people were Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim or Shinto.

Those ordained before the council had an important choice to make - try to stick with the old or get involved with the renewal the Holy Spirit was calling the Church to.

In a way, it was providential for Michael that, although he was a priest of Limerick diocese, he opted, in response to an appeal of Pope John XXIII, to volunteer for service in Latin America.

South America held its own mini-Vatican II in Medellin in Colombia in 1968 and here the bishops, most of whom had been at Vatican II, set about applying its teaching in a way that really would be 'good news' for the continent's Catholic majority that lived in poverty.

The key logo, if you like that came out of Medellín was 'the option for the poor.' This called on the Church to view the world through the eyes of the poor rather than through the eyes of the privileged or comfortable academics, politicians or ecclesiastics.

During his years in *El Monton* Miguel had a front row seat from which to observe poverty and its effects and to become involved in efforts to alleviate it. He personally knew people like Gustavo Gutierrez, and other founding figures of Latin American theology and often attended courses given by them. His bookshelf even up to now, I am told, bears witness to his efforts to keep up to date.

When his volunteer contract ended in 1975 he returned to Limerick and for a few years worked in different parishes. In about 1977 he applied to join the Columbans with the wish of course to return to Peru. People sometimes smile when they hear that the Cardinal in Lima, generally remembered as a good but cautious man, was unwilling to receive him back 'because he was 'a bit of a radical.' Padre Miguel had occasionally joined his neighbours from *El Monton* when they protested in the city centre or along the nearby and grandly-named Panamerican highway to draw attention to their poverty and lack of housing. A yellow card at least may have been in waiting since the day Michael was spotted and reported for taking part in a sit down strike on a city bridge.

In any case the Columbans assigned him to Santiago in Chile, in 1978, where I met him once again, and, as a member of the Columban administration team I was involved at times in his assignments. I occasionally helped him in one of the parishes, *Pedro Pescador*, where he worked. I'd have to admit that he was a radical, but not in ways Cardinal Landazurri had thought. His lifestyle

had a radical simplicity. He didn't own any luxuries expensive clothes or entertainments, or meals in good restaurants were not on his *to do* list. As the years passed the simplicity increased. His food was what I imagined an ancient Father of the Desert might have chosen. I remember Maria Pizarro, a cook in the Columban Centre House in Santiago confiding in me 30 years go that she believed he'd last no time on a diet like that. Still, to reach 86 isn't too bad and there is no hint that he died of malnutrition.

And long before people started talking about air or water pollution he was sounding warnings.

He was a lifelong practitioner of meditation of Yoga and related disciplines, and on occasion during our annual retreats, he could skillfully put us through our paces.

One of the ways his lifestyle differed from that of the ancient monks was that got interested in computers before most of us and kept himself up to date with what was happening in the IT world. This opened other doors for him - especially to news and alternative news sources. It also helped him to keep a tight eye on the local financial scene, not a minor detail since for a number of years he was our part-time regional finance manager; a job he handled very well.

As most of you know he was a quiet man and people could mistakenly think that this was because he hadn't much to say. He was extremely well informed about what was happening in the world of church and politics. He had plenty of interesting in insightful things to say when you got him going.

I had most contact with him during the 1980s, years when he worked in the Southern Zone of Santiago with an older Columban, Fr Barney Smyth. This Zone had a very alive Church with multiple activities. Those were years of military dictatorship, often with high levels of conflict, problems of arrests, torture, disappearance and sometimes deaths. Whenever the local Christian Communities sent around messages asking people to show up to support some activity - maybe an a protest or an emotionally charged or conflictive funeral, my memory is that Padre Miguel usually answered the call.

He did speak to me once during that time about his fear of death. This wasn't from the secret police, but the driving manouevers of his colleague and occasional chauffeur, Barney. I acceded to his request to persuade Barney to hang up the keys.

The ordinary people in Santiago parishes were never short of initiative. I have compared Michael in some ways to a monk, but he was a good pastor. As a parish priest he saw himself as an encourager and backer of what the people wanted to do. His Sunday sermons were, as far as I recall, fairly short and to the point. His parish functioned smoothly, was participative, and he was well liked.

At different times of his life, and especially between 2003 - 2016 he worked in various Limerick parishes - Ardagh Patrickswell, Ballybrown, Lourdes, Kilcoran, Pallaskenry - to mention some. Much as I would like to say something about those years I just don't have the background. In these days many former parishioners have expressed their appreciation for him.. I knew they'd say he was approachable, supportive and a good listener.

But other little things pleasantly surprised me He could communicate very well with the First Communion children - and he loved his winter games of cards with the neighbouring priests.

Spiritual writers sometimes talk of contemplatives in action. I think that's what we could say about Michael. Contemplatives and saints can of course have a single mindedness that occasionally can test the mettle of those who aren't. Less than three weeks ago I caught him as he was about to topple over on the corridor. I thought I had convinced him that a 4-legged Zimmer frame would give him much better support; four hours later I saw him motoring away again - with the walking stick

Michael didn't expect to go so soon, otherwise he wouldn't have recently brought up so many books from Limerick. But he would have found the loss of mobility which awaited him in the very near future difficult to bear. The Lord has called him and spared him from that suffering; his life's work is done.

On this Christmas Eve surrounded by the symbols of birth and light and new life we have gathered for a funeral. But for those who in life have tried to follow the light brought to us by the one born in Bethlehem a funeral too is a step into a new chapter of life. We could say that Michael's life was one of faithful following of a star. May the God he served now welcome him home. Michael may you rest in peace.