

Homily at the Requiem Mass for Brother Michael McKeown RIP

Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

We gather this morning to pray for the repose of the soul of Michael Adrian McKeown who lived his vocation as a professed Presentation Brother for 63 years until he slipped gently to his heavenly home on Thursday 3rd March in Abbeylands nursing home in Killdorrery where he received exceptional care for his debilitating illness during the past four months.

Michael began his life's journey in the McKeown family in Tamnavally, Ardbo, Co Tyrone with his parents Michael and Mary Josephene, his six brothers: Brendan, Con, Columba, Joe, Peter and Eugene and his four sisters: Colette, Maura, Patricia and Pauline. Michael always credited his family for nourishing his Catholic faith. The Vatican Council stated, 'In what may be regarded as the domestic church, the parents by word and example are the first heralds of the faith with regard to their children'. Michael knew this from his personal experience in his own family. We sympathise with all of you. We know he dearly loved every one of you.

While he was a young boy, Michael had what he called 'his theophany': meaning his encounter with the living God. It happened during a parish mission in Ardbo, given by the Redemptorists. He saw one of the mission priests walking down the road. He had an overwhelming experience that directed him to dedicate his life to God: to be like the priest who captivated his gaze. Jesus said, "I bless you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, for hiding these things from the learned and the clever and revealing them to mere children." The God of heaven and earth communicated something profound to Michael on that particular day.

This theophany led him to come to the Presentation Brothers Juniorate in Cork for his secondary education, from 1952 to '56. Then he entered the Presentation Brothers here in Mount St Joseph.

On the 3rd August 1957, the group of novices were on a day outing at the seaside in Crosshaven. Some of them including Michael got into difficulty in the water. One of the novices, Brother Lorcan levers, a good swimmer was drowned. Michael was saved. He told me that his death was reported in Ardbo. This experience would have a lasting influence on him. There is 'a time to be born and a time to die', His time had not come.

Michael went on to qualify as a teacher, a musician, and a catechist. He taught for a few years in Cork and then in 1967, he returned to his native county to teach in St Patrick's Intermediate school in Dungannon. He lived and worked through the experiences of shootings, bombings, injuries and deaths. In that environment, he did everything he could to 'raise his students to the status of men' as was said about Blessed Edmund Rice.

- Michael was proficient at judo. With Mr Harry McGuigan he formed a judo club that became extremely popular.
- Under his influence, his students produced Shakespeare's Macbeth which was televised by the BBC.

- His choirs had phenomenal success. One of the choirs was invited to sing for the Queen but he used to say mischievously that 'he spurned the royal command'.

Michael moved from Dungannon in 1992, and he began work on his book 'An Cór Gaelach' which is a collection of his choral arrangements that has won much recognition among musicians.

In 2015, Mary Kennedy introduced his music at a packed National Concert Hall in Dublin, where - over three nights – 1000 children sang his special composition of Mairseáil Ūi Neill. Michael was given a special recognition and it was a fitting tribute to his musical genius.

In 2007 Michael, along with Vincent Costin and Sean Bonner, took up residence in Slovakia to support the ministry of the Presentation Sisters with the Roma people. This was a significant ministry for him as he saw it as the fulfilment of the missionary dimension of his theophany. Michael spoke Slovak but he used his musical talents, his artistic gifts and his horticultural skills to communicate with the Roma adults and children. He was grateful for those years on mission with the Presentation Sisters in Spisské Podhradie.

Michael had been to Poland, with his friend Andrew O'Connell, for Pope John-Paul's final visit to his homeland in August 2002. As Pope John Paul, Michael knew that the way to resist an occupying power was by strengthening the culture of the people. He admired Pope John Paul who had faced down Nazism and communism. Michael had happy memories

- of being among the huge crowds in Krakow,
- of being the first Presentation Brother to visit the church of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary where Pope John Paul was baptised,
- of visiting the shrine of the Black Madonna,
- and especially of visiting the convent where St Faustina received the Divine Mercy devotion, of which he was a fervent devotee.

Michael returned to Cork, to the Maiville community, in September 2018. Sometime later he was diagnosed with dementia. He couldn't have been in a better place as he received excellent care from the nurses, carers, and every one of the Maiville staff. Eventually, Mercedes Cunningham convinced him that he needed more specialist care, and she drove him to Abbeylands. He was greatly missed by the Brothers and the staff who shared community with him in Maiville.

St Paul writes 'The life and death of each of us has its influence on others.' We are blessed to have known Michael and been influenced by him. He lived a dedicated life. He knew what he was about. He brought his own inimitable personality to his ministry. He was a man of many talents: music, poetry, painting. These, he brought to the service of God who called him on that day when he was a young boy in Ardbo. He will make his return journey to Ardbo later today. He returns to his Divine Master who will welcome him to his heavenly home.

Ar dheis Dé go raibh a anam.

