***Funeral Mass for Fr. Michael Cawley***

***St. Muredach’s Cathedral, Ballina***

***Tuesday, July 2nd, 2019***

We gather to commend Fr Michael to God's mercy, to thank God for the gift of life to him and the gift of his life to so many people during the past three quarters of a century. And we gather to thank Fr Michael for his fifty years of service in the priesthood; part of which was spent on the missions in Brazil and the remainder in this diocese and in the neighbouring diocese of Achonry.

Michael was a missionary at heart. Five years after his ordination he went to Brazil and despite his return to Ireland for service in this diocese and ultimately for his battle with Parkinson’s, his heart was in Brazil. In all, he spent twenty two years there, well over half of his active priestly ministry. I caught a glimpse of his missionary spirit soon after I came to this diocese. In an effort to ensure that he was properly cared for, I wrote to him in Brazil. His reply in a number of letters captured his missionary spirit. "Working on the mission in Brazil has been no sacrifice for me, so natural and compelling have I found it since 1968 when Miracema's first bishop visited Maynooth".  And the place he was happiest in was Goiatins, one of the most remote and poorest areas in the diocese. Describing it he said; "Bishop Burke asked me to the PP of this remote place. The nearest tarred road is 2 hours away. The parish is about 3 times the size of Co Sligo; this fact alone is a warning about comparisons. Population about 20,000, scattered villages and skimpy structures."  Reflecting in one of those letters on the years he had spent working in Ireland he said; "Yes, priests in contemporary Ireland have a tough mission; for me it was too soft and secure. Personally I like circumstances that call for strenuous efforts and original solutions." And on the specific point of financial support from both bishops, Miracema and Killala, he said; "I think the role of a missionary is to become 'incarnated', accepting local conditions and culture as afar as possible. Foreign money, I'm convinced, should be a later resort even in poor parishes. Many communities, in my opinion, are spoiled by funds from abroad."

Those letters that I quoted give us a glimpse of the Michael that we all knew; fiercely independent, simple in his living conditions, principled, idealistic and forward looking in his views. They also confirm the closeness of his thinking to the modern, forward thinking of Pope Francis; whose vision of priesthood is missionaries who are 'free and light, without support and without favours, secure only in the love of the one who sends them.'
And Michael's missionary mind was not confined to Brazil. When he worked in Ireland he was a missionary at heart. The 'incarnational' approach which he outlined to me in those letters was his guiding principle here also. For example, he saw the needs of young people in this area during his early years in Ballina and he strove to have them fulfilled. He founded the Ballina Basketball Club, which went on to win the National Senior Basketball Cup in 1991 and 1996. In 2010, when commenting on 1991 victory, Fr Michael was singled out for honourable mention by Terri Kennedy in the Mayo News.

And the independent spirit of a missionary stayed with him to his last breath as we all know; each of us with our own memories to support this and stories to tell.
And for all of this he was a man to whom family, friends and former parishioners were intensely loyal. He didn't demand loyalty, he engendered it. Friends he made in Ballina, back in the days when he was a Chaplain in the VEC, remained loyal to him and were of great support to him in his illness all these years later. Friends he made later in Crossmolina, Dromard, Templeboy, Ballisodare and Bonniconlon were equally loyal to him when he retired due to illness. And during these last few days family and friends were able to gather round his bedside, accompanying him on his journey in a peaceful calm.
Unfortunately, his independence and freedom were cut short about eleven years ago with his diagnosis of Parkinson’s disease. Gradually over the years his physical condition deteriorated, while his sharp mind continued to flourish within an ever restricting cage. But within those confines he was able to lead his own rich intellectual life. Armed with his laptop, he dabbled with translations from Portuguese into English and vice versa. Highly intelligent, he quickly learned Portuguese, spoke it fluently and loved it as a language.

Christ never promised that life would be easy for those who based their lives on him. Michael had a good life, a happy life and, for the greater part, while he lived with few creature comforts, his life was free from suffering. However, the Cross entered his life over a decade ago with the news of his diagnosis. With the support of family and many loyal friends in particular, he carried this Cross with dignity, courage and without a hint of self-pity.
Christ's repeated warning to all those who would become his followers was; "If you want to be a disciple of mine, renounce yourself, take up your Cross every day and follow me". The hard lesson of being a Christian, and in particular of being a genuine Christian in today's world, is that suffering always walks by our side and the Cross is never that far away. No matter how much we try to, we cannot separate suffering from our Christian calling or try to understand suffering except in terms of our Christian vocation. While we wrestle with the why of illness and for the greater part fail to understand its meaning in our own individual lives, only our Christian faith can cast any shadow of understanding over this 'why'. And that shadow of understanding is the promise of eternal life given to each one of us by Christ. It is our belief in the promise of the Resurrection that has us here today. It is our belief in the promise of the Resurrection that will carry us through these dark days into a brighter future.

Michael certainly carried the cross of illness during the past eleven years. But he did so with an acceptance, a care and a courage which was truly inspirational. And so, on Saturday evening, he could make his own the words of St Paul; 'I have fought the good fight'.
I will give the last word to Fr Michael, which he would appreciate or perhaps even tap his finger and demand. A number of years ago he ended one of his letter to me with the sigh of a missionary; "At this stage though, I feel my type is nearing extinction in the change of culture." Yes, Michael, the culture has changed and your style of Irish missionary is probably nearing extinction, as you said, for the present at least. You may have gone from us but your missionary spirit will not be forgotten.