

Reception of the body of Monsignor Michael McKenna

Michael McKenna came into my life just over twenty years ago when I was appointed to the Catholic Trust of England and Wales. Michael was instrumental in setting up the trust which brought together many small trusts and remnants of work of the catholic church in England and Wales as well as most importantly providing the financial and civil structures for the bishops' conference secretariat and subsequently the catholic education service.

You will be right in thinking this that is not the most the inspiring aspect of preaching the gospel. It takes a particular type of person to do this work and to do it with love. Michael was such a person. He was chair of the new trust and was an able match for the other trustees who were composed of wonderful professional people who gave freely of their time and expertise. Michael's priority was the person at the end of the line who was affected by the decisions regarding property and money. His concern was always for the employee or how individuals would benefit from the work engendered by a decision of the board. I followed Michael as chair and fortunately he remained on the board to restrain my more enthusiastic moments.

As I got to know Michael over the years, I learnt what a generous person he was. He had played an important part in laying the financial foundations of our archdiocese, structures from which we are still benefitting. After long hours over a desk, he would visit the priests to help them with their parish finances. But I haven't known him long enough to really know him or what he accomplished during his long life on this earth.

I can only share with you what I experienced. Michael understood the priesthood as service. The author of the first reading this evening, writing two hundred years before Jesus lays out the responsibilities of a good person. Ecclesiasticus belongs to a group of books in the bible known as wisdom literature – practical wisdom. Living like this with a generous out-going spirit will make you loved but also it will keep you on the right side of God. Living in this way should not be a matter of scoring points but our nature. And if it is not how we naturally feel then we can do something about it with God's grace. Michael reminds me of Ben Sira, the author, in many ways. He was full of wisdom.

Michael lived life joyously. He was a wonderful host who enabled those in his company to feel at ease and valued. Like many priests he had few material possessions, he lived simply, but his

natural warmth was contagious. He did not live in fear. St Paul tells us that is not the Christian way. We should not have the spirit of slaves but the spirit that make us children of God and heirs to his kingdom. Being in Michael's company was to me like getting a glimpse of heaven. No problem was too great to be overcome. He was someone to turn to for advice which was always helpful – and I don't simply mean professional help or advice about a whole range of things – he was a wise man whose advice I sought and took on personal matters as well as church issues.

Many of us came to rely on Michael in many ways: always as a compassionate and caring priest, certainly for advice but also a good and wise friend. He was a tall man blessed with a welcoming face and a broad smile, who we will miss as a priest and as friend. Friendship is at the heart of Martha's rebuke of Jesus that we heard in the Gospel. The point is first and foremost, above everything else Martha and Mary and Lazarus were Jesus' best friends, he spent his day off with them so to speak. Yes, Martha believed that Jesus was the Messiah, and they were also aware of the resurrection of the dead, nevertheless Jesus is moved to waken Lazarus from the dead. For Martha and Mary, it was a wonderful act of friendship for us it is an act of hope that we too will be raised from the dead one day.

Michael's mortal remains will rest this night in the church he loved so much. A church building that is a symbol of the people who worship here and whom Michael served and loved. But his work is not over: we must ask for his prayers as we pray for the forgiveness of his sins and for his eternal rest.

Lord thank you for the gift of Monsignor Michael McKenna, May he rest in peace.