

by Fr. Bill O'Shea

Next Friday, 29 June, Fr. Michael Fallon would have celebrated the 44th anniversary of his ordination to the priesthood. His family, fellow-priests, and his large number of friends and admirers were shocked and saddened to hear of his sudden death last week. Michael had undergone extensive heart surgery a few months ago, and he expressed his disappointment that his recovery was not proceeding as quickly as he had hoped. It was only in the past couple of weeks that he seemed to be improving, he was driving again and getting around more, but it was not to be. He was 68yrs of age. and we have lost one of our best.

Michael was one of 4 children born to Patrick and Joan Fallon in 1944. His brother James died in infancy. Michael exhibited very early signs of a vocation to the priesthood. His brother John and sister Trish remember him at the age of 7, draped in an eiderdown quilt, and going through the motions of celebrating mass while they were allotted their roles as altar boy and member of the congregation.

He spent 12 years in boarding schools — at Nudgee Junior and Nudgee Senior colleges. He did not pretend to have enjoyed it all, but on the whole he regarded those years as a positive influence. He certainly maintained a great respect for the Christian Brothers.

At Banyo Seminary, which he entered straight from school, he displayed a solid, unsentimental but deep piety — in the best sense of the word - and a stability and maturity beyond his years. Michael remained a very prayerful person all his life. After his ordination in 1968 his first appointment was as a curate or assistant priest to the formidable Monsignor Owen Steele in Beaudesert. Michael spoke with humour about some of his experiences at Beaudesert with the Mons, but typically, always with affection for his parish priest.

Michael's 44yrs of priesthood are a good illustration of his multiple talents. After his Beaudesert initiation, Fr. Barney O'Shea, Director of Catholic Education, hand-picked him and the late Sr. Desley Robinson to be a Religious Education Support Team for Catholic schools in the archdiocese. It is possible that Fr. Barney had ear-marked him as his successor. He worked in education from 1975 to 1981 and during that time studied at the Catholic University of America where he gained his Masters in Religious Education, but to Fr. Barney's disappointment Michael chose a different direction.

From 1982 to 1984 he filled in as Spiritual Director of students at Banyo Seminary, and then took charge of his first and only parish, St. Joseph's Corinda, where he served for nearly 8yrs and had a lasting impact. After he left Corinda, Archbishop Rush appointed him to the important role of what was then called Director of the Continuing Education of Clergy in the archdiocese, a position he filled from 1992 to 1996. Already a very impressive CV, but for Michael the best was yet to come.

While at Corinda, he came into contact with the Movement for a Better World, an international renewal movement that was founded by an Italian Jesuit Fr. Riccardo Lombardi, after the Second World War. Michael had invited this group into the parish to present a week of spiritual formation for the people, and then to introduce a model of pastoral planning based on the communitarian spirituality which the group promoted.

Michael was a thorough-going Vatican II priest. The emphasis which the MBW group placed on the centrality of the Kingdom of God, the Trinity, the nature of the Church as communion, and the importance of dialogue and participation resonated deeply with him. It would be too much to say it was a life-changing experience for him, but it provided renewed inspiration at a time when he admitted he needed a spiritual lift.

With Archbishop Bathurst's blessing, in 1997 he obtained leave of absence from the diocese to take on the role of full-time director of the Movement for a Better World in Australia. From then until the end of last year he carried on a remarkable apostolate which took him to many cities and country towns, mainly in the eastern states of Australia to the Solomon Islands, and as recently as February of this year, to New Zealand — as well as several trips to Rome for international conferences at the group headquarters.

There were frequent successes and causes for rejoicing, but inevitably there were some failures and disappointments. What was constant was Michael's enthusiasm and dedication and the way he inspired those who worked with him. One can only speculate about whether all this travel and outpouring of energy might have shortened Michael's life, but for him it was time and energy well spent. His closest collaborator during this period was Ms. Jill Gibbs, whose death just 6mths ago affected him deeply.

During his time as national director of MBW and his absence from Brisbane, Michael never lost sight of the fact that he was a priest of this archdiocese. He made it a rule that he would return for a couple of months each year to do supply work — which he did every November and December — in recent years in the parish of Caboolture. On completion of his term as national director at the end of 2011 he returned to Brisbane with the intention of making it permanent. The tragedy for the archdiocese is that we have lost someone who at the age of 68 still had so much to offer, with the preaching, teaching and pastoral skills he had honed over his years of missionary activity.

Michael was obviously a man of many parts. His family describe him as a raging introvert, his close priest friends described him as very gregarious. He gave the impression of a very serious disposition, but he had a keen sense of humour. Both family and friends describe him as a marvellous listener, one whom they felt they could approach easily and be sure his response would be non-judgemental. He had an uncommon gift of being able to discern what the real issue was in a situation and of responding to it appropriately.

He was passionate about social justice issues, and in his own quiet way would write letters to people in high places, including archbishops, when he thought an injustice had been done. He valued the many friendships he made. I am told that just about all the letters, cards and small gifts received over the years have been kept and are neatly arranged in various boxes. He threw nothing away. He was a highly organised person. He was above all a man of faith and prayer.

We remember especially his family today, to whom Michael was so devoted, but who had to share him with so many others. They loved him as a simple, down-to-earth person who did not like a lot of fuss or pretence. Our sympathy goes to Trish and John and their families, including Michael's much loved nephews and nieces, Adam, Jane, Esther, George and Louis, and other members of his extended family. We mourn his passing with you today.

We will miss his deep sonorous voice as he preached about the coming and the nearness of the Kingdom of God. We believe that, through the mercy of the God he served so faithfully, he now has a full appreciation of what life in the family of the Trinity and communion with Christ — about which he spoke so often — are really all about.