

Sir Michael Quinlan

Thanksgiving Mass, 18 June 2009

Michael Quinlan's family, his numerous friends and colleagues were, I know, rightly consoled and encouraged by the many expressions of esteem, appreciation and gratitude which appeared in the obituary columns of our national newspapers in the days following his death on 26 February.

"One of the intellectually most brilliant and influential civil servants of his generation" said one. "The philosopher of defence" ... "The leading civilian thinker within the British Government on defence policy" said others.

While no doubt recognising him in these tributes to his professional expertise, there was still more of him to be seen in what was said about his personal qualities.

The administrative staff with whom he and Mary worked at Ditchley remembered "his warmth and humour, and the diligent precision with which he approached his work and which he gently encouraged in others around him". "He was", it was said in another tribute, "admired for his powers of analysis, respected for his integrity and liked for his infinite courtesy, his kindness and his generosity." There indeed is the Michael so many of us, to different extents and in many different contexts, had the privilege of knowing.

If his contribution to public life was in the major key, no less significant was his contribution to the Church. For eight years from 2001 until his death, he was chairman of the trustees of *The Tablet*, the weekly Catholic journal. He advised successive archbishops of Westminster on the formulation of Church policy in the area of defence, deterrence and disarmament. And, as I myself had reason to know, he was a staunch supporter of voluntary aided Catholic education from which, in its earliest stages, he had benefited so much.

But there is one obituary writer with whom I would take issue. He prefaced a paragraph on Michael's religious commitment with the words "in addition". There was no "in addition" about Michael's faith. As Sir Michael Palliser put it in his tribute in the journal of the Institute for Strategic Studies, "His whole life was inspired by a profound Christian faith... His faith was fundamental to all that he did."

But what was the character of that faith; what were the salient features of its landscape?

As provincial of the Jesuits, I was especially interested to see a number of references made to the influence which the Society of Jesus had had upon him. This was principally but by no means uniquely during the ten years Michael spent at our school in Wimbledon. I was later a pupil there myself

and for some years its headmaster, a time during which I had the pleasure of getting to know him. He maintained much contact with his school for the rest of his life.

“Big Q”, we learnt, was also nicknamed by some colleagues “The Jesuit” for “his devout Catholicism and intellectual acuity”, as some of my brothers were gratified and not a little flattered to see. His economical prose, with its famously precise use of words, was attributed to his Jesuit education, since, as fellow pupil William Keegan explained, “The Jesuits drummed the padding out of your style”.

It was just last November that Michael wrote me an email asking for information about the emblems and insignia of the Jesuits. He had to make suggestions for his coat of arms. This, he explained with typical modesty, was a necessity which membership of the Order of the Bath at senior grade forced upon him. He said he wanted to express his long association and deep indebtedness to the Society of Jesus in that coat of arms or by including St Ignatius Loyola, our founder, as one of its supporters. I was very moved.

What was it he owed the Society? Michael benefited from an education in a school founded at the turn of the twentieth century, along with a number of others, to provide children from Catholic families of modest means with an education that would equip them to play as much a part in society, to contribute as much to the common good, as any of their contemporaries. In the process, the Church was provided with a post-war generation of highly educated lay Catholics, able both to resource the Church and to challenge it. Michael’s life and work demonstrates to me just how worthwhile this educational project has been.

There are many streams that make up the river of faith in someone’s life and it is wrong in some ways to single out any one, but it is evident that there was something quite Jesuit about the faith that Michael professed and lived. “Dearest Jesus”, wrote Ignatius, “teach me to be generous, to serve you as you deserve, to give and not to count the cost”. That was a prayer he would have been taught as a small boy. In Michael’s case, it remained not only on his lips, it lived in his heart.

It’s a rule that OFSTED inspectors have never quite grasped, that the more idiosyncratic schools often have the most positive impact on their pupils. In his contribution to recollections of Wimbledon College under its notable headmaster, Fr John Sinnott, compiled by his brother Bernard, Michael remembered taking part in an end of Christmas term Greek play in 1945. It went in fits and starts because the characters had to speak their parts first in Greek and then in English translation!

Looking at the list in that same set of recollections of those who taught Michael and his contemporaries, I saw the names of many young Jesuits whom I knew in later years. Amongst them were some who had then just

emerged from a degree at London or Oxford, men well able to equip their pupils with a love of learning. Then there were others with a lot less learning who will have inspired in their charges a great passion for rugby and cricket. In his last years, Michael wrote a *memoire* of his early life. Of his school days he wrote, "I was mostly a round peg in a round hole".

But how might this have flavoured his faith?

Michael's cousin, Monsignor Nicholas France, in his homily at the funeral, rightly referred to the letters every Jesuit boy wrote at the end of every piece of work, LDS, "Praise God always", and to those which he would have written at the head of every exercise that he ever attempted at school, AMDG, the Jesuit motto, "All for the greater glory of God". In developing every talent and using every gift God is served and praised the common good can be promoted: this I suspect is the door to understanding Michael's faith.

For those who are daunted by the capacity of Ignatius' followers to travel to the ends of the earth or to stay nearer home and risk the rack and gallows, it is a surprise to learn that love born of gratitude for all that has been freely given by a God of abundant goodness, is for St Ignatius and those who follow him the well-spring from which all else proceeds.

That *memoire* of his early years which Michael wrote so recently shows the extent to which gratitude for what he had been given was an attitude set deep within him, one which shaped the decisions he took in life. His recollections of his family speak of the fragility of circumstances in which he was born and grew up. They struggled to make ends meet. He was aware of the sacrifice his parents made in allowing him to go to university at the age of 18 rather than insisting that he leave home to earn a living. Nothing could be taken for granted. People's goodness and kindness, their hard work and diligence for his good, deserved to be recognised and paid back in some way, and that he certainly did.

At Merton College, Oxford, for which, he wrote, he retained a warm affection, he maintained many links. He was civil service liaison officer, an honorary fellow and later president of the Old Mertonians.

At Wimbledon, he was one of four who three decades ago founded a society, the Sinnott Society, in memory of their headmaster, a society which still meets on a twice-yearly basis. His school benefited at the busiest time of his life from his years on the governing body and in his retirement as president of an appeal which, for what was by then a comprehensive secondary school, raised the impressive sum of one million pounds. This was not least because of esteem in which Michael was held amongst his fellow former pupils.

In that same *memoire* he pays a warm and glowing tribute to his parents. He writes of how they regarded it as a duty to be upbeat in the face of difficulties, not to cry over spilt milk or moan about setbacks. They were of conspicuous

integrity, with a powerful sense of duty and of standards to be kept. They were deeply committed to the well being of their five children, a commitment which some of us, he says, grew up feeling guilty at having accepted. One suspects Michael paid them back by modelling his whole life upon them.

If gratitude was one hallmark of his faith, maybe we would agree that his humanity was another, as it always should be, characterised not least by a breadth of interest, by humour and humility.

Michael enjoyed a brilliant career at Oxford but reading his memories of those years it is clear that this mattered far less than the opportunities this period of life afforded him to watch cricket, to try his hand for the first time at squash, and to enjoy the occasional game of soccer.

Professor Hennessy has recalled how in Michael's estimation the most dangerous day in the cold war came in the late summer of 1963 when England were on the verge of losing a test to the West Indies and all the monitors in the RAF early warning stations were switched to live coverage of the test match.

Though disappointed not to have been appointed permanent secretary to the Ministry of Defence in 1982, he admits, freely and touchingly, with great self-deprecation, that the successful candidate had the qualities needed by that Ministry at that time of the nation's history.

He could be fearless in speaking his mind as is evident from his critique of the Iraq conflict as failing to match the standards of a Just War. In conversation he excelled and I have reason to know how patient and gracious he was with those unable to match his sharpness of mind and keenness of intellect.

And perhaps it was also his regard for humility that led him to realise that those in public service had a duty to pass on to others that from which they themselves had benefited, hence he had no time for those who would replace Cabinet Government with decision-making by a coterie of close associates.

When I wrote back to Michael following his request for information about Jesuit emblems, I sent him an illustration of the Jesuit crest, a sunburst encircling the letters IHS, the first three letters of the name of Jesus in Greek.

This is the Jesus whose farewell words to his disciples we hear in our Gospel reading. He makes us a promise that takes away fear and all anxiety. He tells us that he goes away in order to prepare a place for us and that no matter what that place will be ours.

This is not so much a place in some place; this is more a share in a relationship, "that where I am you may be also". This is what I suspect Paul refers to as the "weight of future glory" which enables us to sustain hardships in the process of living the Gospel in the world today.

For the future, this promise gives us hope; for the present it sets us free, free to get engaged in the world, “to make a difference” as they say, to develop our gifts and talents, whatever they may be, for the service of others, for the service of society, for the service of the common good.

This faith, engaged thoughtfully and intelligently in the world, I would suggest, was above all Michael’s faith.

And it found expression most of all in public service. In his *memoire* he writes that of how he chose a career in the Civil Service after Oxford partly on the advice of his tutors and partly because his own family circumstances taught him to opt for security in employment. At the end of life he wrote that he had found its ethos and the great bulk of its work congenial and worthwhile. With that characteristic modesty he added, “It suited the abilities I possessed pretty well and did not overly demand those I lacked”.

In an article he contributed a little more than a year ago to *The Tablet*, he spoke of the opportunities which participation in public life gives the convinced Catholic. He wrote that our faith and its moral standards equip us to bring to bear in public service a sense of values to run through all we do. Values like straight dealing, committed effort with the gifts God has given, fairness too all, obedience to the law, proper stewardship of the natural world and the special concern for the poor, both at home and abroad, or those otherwise disadvantaged.

Moral accountability was for him a central part of what it means to be a human being. So why did his strong faith-informed ethical stance not bring him into conflict with his political masters?

Michael did not need to wear his religion on his sleeve. His understanding of a Christian’s engagement in the world was far from a matter of slavishly applying in a fundamentalist way scriptural principles fashioned in another time and for quite different sets of circumstances; nor was it a matter of adopting the opt-out stance of the prophet.

Rather, he regarded it as essential for the Christian to get involved with society and its problems, to make them his own, and then to make use, alongside all men and women of goodwill, of the highest gift that God has given, our reason and intelligence to improve the state of things, the state of things as they were, not as they might have been, and respecting the choices people in our democratic society have made.

Michael’s work on the question of the nuclear deterrent, to which he gave so much time in his professional life and in retirement, was a matter of maintaining peace, preserving human life and so exercising public responsibility. It no doubt appealed to him because of its complexity and abstractedness, because of its moral significance and because of its enormous

implications for the common good to which he was committed. Indeed, so significant an issue was it for the good of humankind that any and every argument proposed on either side, from outside or from within the Church, needed to be subjected to the most rigorous intellectual scrutiny. Forging an agreement that led to a whole class of weapons being taken out of service, it has been said, was his finest hour.

A striking theme of Michael's *memoire* is the frequency with which he says he had no regrets. Not about his time at school, not about his time at Merton College Oxford, and certainly not about his time in the Civil Service. Even his national service was a cloud with a silver lining in that it afforded him still more opportunities to play and watch cricket: two Test double-centuries by Len Hutton at the Oval, his hundredth first class century for Yorkshire against Surrey, and, under his captaincy, England's recovery of the ashes after a nineteen year interval!

If this is a time to express our gratitude and indebtedness to God for the gift that Michael was to so many of us, then it is also our time to express equal gratitude to God for his forty-four years of happily married life with Mary.

I recently asked Mary how Michael managed to do all he did and bring up a family of four children. Mary talked of how on Saturday mornings he would shut himself in the living room at home away from the children in order to work on his papers or how she would amuse the children in St James's Park, "pelican park", waiting for him to complete a Saturday morning at the Ministry of Defence.

Whatever influence his school, his college or his colleagues may have had upon him, we know that Michael's work for his country and for so many of us was built first and foremost upon the firm foundation of a family life founded on love.

That was no doubt the first object of his gratitude, the context which most of all shaped his humanity, his humour and humility and the place where he pondered, with deep affection, as St Ignatius would have us all do, "how much our good God has given us of what he possesses and how it is his plan to give us even himself".

"Lord, teach us to be generous, teach us to serve you as you deserve..."

Mary, Jane, Anthony, Matthew and Caroline, we all hope and pray that the appreciation, gratitude and esteem in which Michael continues to be held will support you and your family, until that day when, in the words of Thomas More, the patron saint of the Civil Service, you will all for sure meet again, merrily in Heaven.

Michael Holman SJ