

Michael Dillane RIP
Funeral Mass
Rathdowney Church
Wednesday 1st of June 2022

Michael Dillane, Johnstown Road, Rathdowney, Co. Laois and formerly Asdee, Co. Kerry, May 29th 2022. Peacefully, at his residence. Former Principal of St. Fergal's College, Rathdowney. Sadly missed by his wife Kitty and his sons John, Peter and Dominic, daughters-in-law Linda, Jeanne and Agnes, grandchildren Colm, Shauna, Louis, Anna, Julia, Chloe and Isa, relatives, neighbours and friends.

Readers: Isa and Louis

Prayers: Anna

Bread and Wine: Agnes and Julia

I think it is fair to say that all of us are very much defined, shaped, and influenced by the family we are born into, the people we meet on the journey of life and the place where we come from.

The man we honour with Christian burial today is no exception to that. While he was to spend most of his life living outside Kerry Michael Dillane was truly proud of his roots in the kingdom.

For that reason, I'm going to take the word KERRY and use it as an acronym to reflect on and celebrate Michael's life. Each of those letters in KERRY represent some very important aspects of Michael's long life.

The letter 'K' represents two very important parts of Michael's life, K is for Kerry and K is for Kitty.

Kitty, I will come back to you later.

Michael Dillane was born in the parish of Asdee in North Kerry on Thursday the 28th of August 1930. Incidentally, he is one day older than another great son of The Kingdom Mícheál Ó Muircheartaigh who was born on the 29th of August 1930. Michael was born into a small farming family and his love of farming and his sensitivity to farming life and farming families would influence his work in education particularly here in Rathdowney. The death of his mother when Michael was only ten was to have a profound effect on Michael's young life and on that of

his younger brother and of course their father. Michael remained at home to help his father but later had an opportunity to go to the Agricultural college in Pallaskenry. From there he would win a scholarship to University College Cork graduating with a degree in Rural Science. After graduation Michael's first teaching job was at The Vocational School in Hackettstown Co. Carlow. After some years there he applied for the job of Principal or Headmaster at the Vocational School here in Rathdowney or The Tech as it was known locally. That in a way brings me to the 'E' in Kerry but before I leave the Kingdom, I just want to quote something I came across in the Irish Times from some years ago.

In January of 2016 The Irish Times published a collection entitled; The Wit and Wisdom of Kerry- an immodest selection. I am reminded of one of the quotations from that article as we say farewell to Michael today.

The quotation is taken from a speech given by the late John B. Keane to the Kerry Association in Dublin some years ago and he says:

Being a Kerry person, in my opinion, is the greatest gift that God can bestow on any human being. When you belong to Kerry, you know you have a head start on the other fellow. In belonging to Kerry, you belong to the elements, to the spheres spinning in the Heavens. You belong to History and Language and Romance and Ancient Song. It is almost unbearable being a Kerry person and it is an awesome responsibility.

I'm not sure if Michael saw being from Kerry as an awesome responsibility but he certainly loved the Kingdom and went there every year with Kitty and the boys to reconnect with family and friends and to recharge the batteries for the academic year ahead.

That 'E' in Kerry represents the absolute commitment which Michael Dillane had to EDUCATION particularly in this community. Recently in another context I came across two quotes from two men who have had a profound effect on their own countries and beyond, Abraham Lincoln and Nelson Mandela. They were both speaking about education. Lincoln said:

"Upon the subject of education ... I can only say that I view it as the most important subject which we as a people may be engaged in."

A few hundred years later Nelson Mandela commented:

"Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world"

I'm not sure if Michael Dillane was familiar with either quote but he absolutely agreed with the truth enshrined in both. It may be important here to share with you a little about what was happening here in the Rathdowney Vocational School when Michael Dillane arrived in the late 1950's. The Vocational Act of 1930 made it possible for the establishment of Technical Schools in Ireland. In Rathdowney, opportunities for those wishing to move beyond Primary Education were limited and so many locals agitated for the establishment of a Technical School here in the town. After a number of years at various temporary premises The School in the Conoboro was built and opened in 1936. Back then it was a three-room school. Initially the school flourished but during the 1950's a decline set in, and it began to lose numbers for various reasons. Not being able to offer education beyond 15 and The Group Cert was a significant factor. Michael Dillane arrived here in Rathdowney in 1958. The total pupil population was in the low twenties and the school was being earmarked for closure. Some of the local influencers of the time were supporting the closure of the school but others argued against it and believed that this new young principal from Kerry should be given a chance to see what he could do to turn things around. The simple statistic to note here is that when Michael started as principal there were 23 students and three staff members, just over thirty years later when he retired in 1991 there were 30 staff and more than 550 pupils. Michael himself would be the first to say that the transformation was not all down to him but as I have come to learn over the years the leadership of a principal in a school setting is the key factor in how a school progresses. Let me digress here slightly by sharing with you a little story which I believe is kind of relevant.

It is the story of a young man who decided to clean out his fish tank. The first problem was where to put the fish while he did the cleaning. He decided on the bathtub. He transported the fish, dumped them in their luxurious temporary quarters, and went to work cleaning the tank. It took hours, but finally there was fresh water, new algae, and stones along the bottom. When he went back to the bathtub for the fish, he was startled to find what they were doing in their large tub. They were not swimming its length and breadth. In fact, they were occupying the exact amount of space they had left behind in the tank. He was fascinated. He tried to get them to move out of their self-imposed prison. He ruffled the water. No response. He poured their food way down at the opposite end. No response. He created waves with the water. They stayed put. He finally gave up, took them back and dumped them into the clean tank, and began to wonder: Do I live like those fish? Do I limit myself by past experiences and knowledge, content to stay safe where I am? Have I been moved up to a huge bathtub, but I still swim around like I'm in a small tank?

There are a number of different levels which that story can be applied to what Michael Dillane found when he came here and then what and how he set about transforming it. Greatly influenced by his background and love of farming Michael reached out to the farming community. He established with the help of his colleagues an early version of The Winter Farming School which allowed local farmers to come into the school at night to upskill themselves in many areas including for example repairing their farm machinery. They could also learn skills around woodwork, metal work, building construction and even basic accountancy. If the farmers were coming in the evening Michael also used his powers of persuasion to get them to send their sons and daughters during the day. New subjects were introduced, teachers with varied skills arrived, the school could now offer the intermediate cert and later even the leaving Cert. Despite some early scepticism from parents and others the Tech in Rathdowney began to produce exam results as good as many of the neighbouring long established secondary

schools. And so success built on success. But of course, there were obstacles along the way. I'm sure not everyone may have bought into Michael's pioneering enthusiasm. As numbers grew the management of both staff and pupils became a bigger challenge. The area of discipline and how best to approach it was an issue in all Irish schools in the sixties and seventies and beyond and I'm sure Rathdowney Vocational School was no different. As I have said earlier Michael would be the first to say that the development of the Vocational School which would later become known as St. Fergal's College was a team effort. From all I have heard and read I feel I should mention the name of Martin Phelan. Martin had I think been employed as the gardener before Michael came, that role later evolved into caretaker, and some might say even unofficial 'Dean of discipline'. That role I believe extended beyond the pupils to staff and visitors alike, including the clergy whom he was also likely to challenge if they stepped out of line, and particularly if they stepped on his grass! Through Michael's leadership the Vocational school was also placed at the service of the wider community, and he encouraged local organisations like Macra Na Feirme and The ICA to use the school as their meeting place and for their gatherings and functions.

To sum up Michael's commitment to education I go back to Abraham Lincoln and Nelson Mandela, Michael absolutely believed education was the most important thing to be engaged in and it was the most effective weapon to change people's lives. But for Michael education was not just a cold concept, it happened in a context. For Michael that context brings me to the first R and the Y in Kerry. That first R is *Rathdowney* and the Y represents the *youth*, the *young* people of this town, this parish and its hinterlands from where the students came to the Tech. I think Michael's approach to education was greatly influenced by his belief that young people should be given the opportunity to achieve their full potential. Like the Fish they should be allowed to swim outside the narrow confines of the fish tank. Sometimes they needed to prodded, encouraged and challenged to see that there was a bigger

world out there for them. Some yes would excel in academics and go to universities and get degrees and contribute to society in that way. But equally important were those whose skills were more to do with their hands. Michael believed there was a place for both in the school he led, and he endeavoured to facilitate and get the best for all of them. From what I have heard in recent days and indeed before, Michael Dillane left no stone unturned to ensure that each pupil had every opportunity to reach their full potential. And his interest in them continued long after they had graduated from the school. Through all of that experience Michael grew to love his adopted home here in Rathdowney.

That second R in Michael's Kerry represents his very strong Religious Faith. Again, it was a faith nourished in his family home and parish of Asdee. From a very early age and particularly with the death of his mother while he was still a child, he could identify with those words in the First Reading today from The book of Wisdom, God had put him to a test and proved him to be worthy to be with him. It was a faith which he brought with him to Rathdowney, and it imbued and influenced his work and career. At a personal level, Michael had great devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. The purpose and meaning of devotion to The Sacred Heart is encapsulated in the first lines of today's second reading: *'Hope is not deceptive, because the love of God has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit which has been given to us'*. The month of June is dedicated to devotion to the Sacred Heart and for many years during the month of June Michael would go to Mass regularly perhaps even daily. It is more than appropriate then that his funeral takes place on the first day of the month of the Sacred Heart. But Michael's religious faith also influenced his approach to education. Providing the best educational context for young people to reach their full potential not only involved the academic, vocational and sporting opportunities but also included nourishing the spiritual dimension of students lives. Because of this Michael encouraged local clergy from different denominations to visit the school and provide opportunities for religious education and

formation. Through his time, he also employed a number of religious sisters who taught various subjects including religion.

As I come near the end of this reflection on Michael's life I want to return to K and the K that is for you Kitty. When Michael moved from Hackettstown, County Carlow in the late fifties and arrived here in Rathdowney, his life was not only to change professionally but also personally. You had arrived from Kilkenny a few years before him, but I think it is fair to say that ye shared the same view about the importance of education. Michael saw in you a kindred spirit and so it was no surprise that your relationship would blossom. You were married in August 1962 which means that Michael has died just a few short months before your Diamond Jubilee. The fruit of your love has been your three sons, John, Peter and Dominic. Our sympathies go out to you all today. I also want to acknowledge here, Kitty your extraordinary care for Michael particularly in the last years of his life.

I would like to finish today by sharing a reflection which was written by Archbishop Oscar Romero who was shot dead in El Salvador in 1980 while he celebrated Mass. He was recently canonised a Saint. In a very different context, Oscar Romero too dedicated his life to allowing people to become the best versions of themselves. He wrote these words while reflecting on his life's work and I think they are also appropriate for Michael as we say farewell to him today. (I should note here that kingdom referred to here is not Kerry but something even greater....if that is possible!)

It helps, now and then, to step back and take a long view.

The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts,
it is even beyond our vision.

We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction
of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work.

Nothing we do is complete, which is a way of saying
that the kingdom always lies beyond us.....

This is what we are about:

We plant the seeds that one day will grow.

We water seeds already planted,
knowing that they hold future promise.

We lay foundations that will need further development.

We provide yeast that produces far beyond our capabilities.

We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation
in realizing that. This enables us to do something,
and to do it very well. It may be incomplete,
but it is a beginning, a step along the way,
an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest.

We may never see the end results, but that is the difference
between the master builder and the worker.

We are workers, not master builders; teachers, not messiahs.

We are prophets of a future not our own.

Amen.

Michael May your soul rest in peace.