

In the dark before dawn on a Friday in Lent, Michael Ernest Putney, fifth Bishop of Townsville, slipped peacefully into eternity. He became the first Bishop of the See to die in office. Terence McGuire died as Archbishop of Canberra and Goulburn; Hugh Ryan died in retirement; Len Faulkner and Ray Benjamin are still with us – in fact Archbishop Faulkner is with us today and we welcome him most warmly. The end, when it came for Michael, came quickly. It came as a surprise. In December 2012, he had been told that his cancer was terminal. He was told it would be months, not years. That wasn't just a surprise; it was a shock. The prognosis was right, but death was many months in coming – fifteen to be precise.

Through that time – indeed to the very end – Bishop Michael showed a sense of surrender to God and a buoyancy of spirit which made a deep impression on all. As he himself said in interview: “People’s prayers are like the air I breathe, and I am carried along by the grace of God, so I have nothing to worry about”. Michael saw his illness as the final phase of his earthly ministry and as the most fruitful time he had ever known as priest and Bishop. He was determined to remain as Bishop of Townsville until, as he said, “I can no longer say Mass in the Cathedral”; and that’s how it was.

There were many memorable moments in the fifteen months – last year’s visit to Townsville of the new Apostolic Nuncio, Archbishop Gallagher, and the Bishops of Queensland when Michael could not travel; Michael’s last visit to Brisbane in January when he could travel; most of all perhaps, the launch of his book, “My Ecumenical Journey”, just before he entered hospital for the last time. But none of these was as memorable as the way in which Michael Putney stood as a man of faith before the mystery of death. It was the last and greatest of the tests he faced, and he faced it magnificently as only a true Christian can.

There was nothing merely stoic about his stance; it was serene and even joyful. Only Easter can do that.

In 1963, the sixteen year old Michael Putney entered Pius XII Seminary as the youngest, tallest (though not the sportiest) but probably the brightest of an interesting and talented group of men, some of whom are here today. He took to theology like a duck to water and was always destined for the higher studies which took him to Rome and Louvain. The Louvain days were a clouded time for Michael, and he didn't complete his work there. But he eventually resumed his doctoral work in Rome, where his ecumenical vocation was sealed for ever. This was something that had been growing within him since his seminary days – the sense that God was calling and equipping him to work in the vast field of ecumenism which had opened up since the Second Vatican Council. His temperament was well suited to dialogue; his education equipped him for specifically theological dialogue; his broad humanity enabled him to see things from the other's point of view; his gift for friendship opened doors in unexpected ways. Michael Putney was passionate about ecumenism, but he was never a zealot or ideologue. His was a broad and deeply human vision, a passion of mind and heart which became a true wisdom, the wisdom which comes from on high.

Chiefly because of his ecumenical work, Michael became a well-known figure both nationally and internationally. That's why, when his fatal diagnosis was announced, a flood of good wishes came from far and wide. Michael was genuinely surprised and moved by this, which suggests the humility of the man. In the days since his death too, messages have come from many parts. This for instance from the Pontifical Council for Christian Unity in Rome: "We have been blessed to have the wise counsel and constant encouragement of one whom we knew and admired as a beautiful human being, a gifted and faithful

priest and bishop, a person of deep and contagious spirituality”. In a sense, then, the whole of the Christian world gathers with us here today in Townsville, because the one whom we farewell made a contribution reaching far beyond this city, this state, this country; his was a profile reaching far beyond the Roman Catholic Church, in whose life he was so immersed, the Church he loved so deeply. For Michael, to be Catholic was to be ecumenical; to be genuinely local was to be global. This takes us into the paradox which lay at the heart of his life.

He was appointed Bishop of Townsville in January 2001. This was hardly a surprise after his years as Auxiliary of Brisbane. But some who knew him well wondered how he would cope with the pressure of being a Bishop with a Diocese of his own. In fact, he flourished in Townsville in ways that surprised even him. At the time of his appointment, it was thought that Michael would spend a few years in North Queensland before heading south for some supposedly grander appointment for which his gifts seemed to destine him. But in Townsville he stayed; and that was just the way he wanted it. This was another surprise. He’d been born in Gladstone and spent time in Charters Towers, so he had North Queensland in his DNA. But in the meantime he had become very much an urban man. The DNA prevailed however: Michael put down deep roots in Townsville and learned to love not just the Diocese but the place. He loved the city and the towns; he loved the Never-Never stretching away to the west; he loved the islands, especially perhaps Palm Island, with its Indigenous people who always seemed the apple of his eye. Michael made his home in this Diocese and had no interest in going anywhere else. Townsville became part of him and he became part of Townsville.

Not long before he died, he rang Michael McCarthy, Bishop-elect of Rockhampton, who is with us today. He offered Michael not only

congratulations but also some advice. He urged the Bishop-to-be to learn to love his Diocese. These were the words of a man who had learned to do just that; they were also the words of a dying man who knew what really matters. They were the words of a man who knew better than most that a Bishop is responsible for the Church in Australia and around the world. But he also knew that this wider engagement had to be built upon a deep, even nuptial engagement with the particular Church and local communities entrusted to his care. “Think globally, act locally”, the slogan goes. Michael Putney was a Bishop who thought and acted both locally and globally. He put down roots and raised antennas. That’s what made him so much a man of the Church.

Michael was a man of peace not conflict, a man of harmony not discord, a man of communion not division. He was a gentle giant who wasn’t afraid to stand and fight if he had to, but who preferred to work hard at peace instead. To this work he brought to bear the intelligence which begets true wisdom and the sense of proportion which begets humility and good humour. He brought to the work his gifts as priest, pastor, teacher, preacher, writer and friend. But most of all and in all, he brought to the work the gift of faith. I had seen this through the many years of our friendship. But I saw it at a new depth when he first told me of his terminal cancer not long after the diagnosis. I was more rattled in hearing the news than he was in telling it. I saw it at another depth again when he was with me in Brisbane from Boxing Day last year till 15 January this year. We spent long hours chatting on the verandah of Wynberg or walking along the Brisbane River. Now he startled me by wanting to talk about his funeral, and he did this as serenely as when he’d told me he was dying.

When we parted, I decided that, if at all possible, I would go to Townsville to say farewell and thanks to Michael on his death-bed. But it was not to be. When he entered hospital for the last time, I was on pilgrimage in

Jerusalem. He was very much on my heart, so I texted him. He texted back these words: “The cancer is progressing and so am I. Pray for me in the Garden of Gethsemane. I hope to see you whenever”. After our visit to the Garden, I texted him back to say that the pilgrims had prayed for him there and were very moved as we did. Then came the text which were his last words to me: “Thank you”, he said. “I am immensely grateful. I am still in hospital on all kinds of drips. One day at a time. God is good”. Those were his parting words: “God is good”. From another or in another context, they might sound trite, but not from a man on his death-bed. They are the words of a man whose surrender is total and whose faith is complete; and they are typical of a man who combined simplicity and sophistication in a rare way. Unusually, he didn’t sign off the last text with “Michael” or just plain “M”. I like to think that it’s because the text isn’t really finished and that our conversation will continue.

There were so many wonderful conversations through the years – usually at a meal table: intelligent, amusing, interesting, encouraging – all suffused by faith and enriched by wine; story-telling, merriment, insight, analysis – all suffused by faith and enriched by wine. As we gather today at the altar of sacrifice which becomes the table of the feast, we pray that Michael will now enjoy the eternal feast, the Banquet of the Lamb, and that all of us who have loved him will sit down with him finally at that same table – not in Townsville or Brisbane or Rome, but in the better place that Scripture calls “the new Jerusalem” where there will be no more cancer and the loss it brings, no more tears nor even death, but only the peace and joy of which Michael Putney gave us a glimpse as he sat with us at the tables of this world and walked with us the paths of this life.

I couldn’t say it as you died, but I say it now: thank you, Michael, for everything. The only grief you ever caused us was in your going, and you gave

us so much joy. We wanted you to stay longer, but it was not to be. It wasn't God's angle on things, nor in the end was it yours. God is good, and so were you. Eternal rest, give unto him, O Lord, and let perpetual light shine upon him. May he rest in peace. Amen.