



- MEET A TOWNIE -



A VISIT HOME FOR FR. MICHAEL FROM SIESTA KEY

Shortly after his appointment in 2015 as the new pastor of St. Michael the Archangel Church in Siesta Key, Florida, Letterkenny man, Fr. Michael Cannon, was the subject of an article in an edition of the 'Siesta Sands'.

In it he was described as "a man with a light Irish lilt, a hearty laugh and a longtime devotion to the Lord".

A truly fitting description and one that is reinforced in any meeting with him. Since, initially 1990, when he went to the United States as part of a recovery from illness, and then in 1993 where he has been serving his church ever since, the Irish lilt has not deserted him and neither has that hearty laugh. And his devotion to his religion, the Church and God is patently clear from any conversation with him. And equally so his commitment to helping his parishioners and aiding them through any difficulties.

Back in his home town for several weeks to visit family and friends, he settles down in the dining area of Dillons Hotel on Main Street with a glass of water and lists a long and varied pathway to his present pastoral calling.

Born in Glasgow on December 10th, 1957, to John and Catherine Cannon – she sadly passed away in January 2016 - he wasn't around long to acquire that distinctive Scottish accent, his parents and family returning to their native soil of the Donegal Gaeltacht, and specifically, Gortahork, when he was just two years old.

His attendance at the local national school meant a fluency in the Irish language but when the Cannons relocated to Curraghlea in Letterkenny – he was five then – due to his father's work, the native tongue was Michael's sole mode of communication. "Neither my brother, Charlie, or I had any English then."

They spent two years at Illistrin N.S. where the Principal was a Gaeltacht native, Charlie McGinley.

The family moved to the High Road in 1971 and eventually to Carnamuggagh where they have been domiciled ever since. Seven of them ultimately arrived into the world – Charlie, Michael, Seamus, Patrick (Pat), Eileen, Brian, and Joe.

Priesthood

Five years at St. Eunan's College followed for Michael – and all the time thoughts of the priesthood were uppermost.

"It's something I wanted to do for as long as I can remember. I had this inkling of wanting to work in the missions – I never really wanted to work in Ireland."

His parents were hugely supportive of his decision and in 1975 he departed for Maynooth to study for the priesthood. "I was ordained in St. Eunan's Cathedral along with Declan Nee on June 21st, 1981. And a week later on the 28th, Charlie Byrne and Gerry Doherty were ordained."

His first appointment was as chaplain to Loreto Milford with pastoral responsibility for Kerrykeel before he was transferred to Golan, Milford. "I had pastoral duties then in Golan and Coole in Cranford. "At that stage, I was content enough and liked what I was doing." At the end of the summer of 1983 another move – this time to Fintown while also serving



Fr. Michael Cannon

as chaplain to the Comprehensive School in Glenties and Ballinamore all Irish school. "I spent three years there before moving to Donegal Town as curate in the parish and taking up the role of chaplain to the Abbey Vocational School."

Such frequent relocations were difficult, he admits. "It's hard to leave a place when you have established links with the local people and families.

"You share so many significant times with them including funerals and weddings and other events. And you build up a rapport and a close connection."

He had volunteered to go on a missionary project to Peru but ill health forced that ambition to be side lined. But in June 1989 he was released from his assignment in Donegal Town and for the first time found a vacancy in his priestly career. "All assignments were

filled and there was nothing for me."

However, a friendship with Bishop John Nevins, Auxiliary Bishop of the Archdiocese of Miami – the latter's mother hailed from Kilcar – would prove a turning point in Fr. Michael's life and location.

"He invited me to his Diocese in Venice, Florida, and that's where I ended up in January 1990. The Bishop thought several months of rest would do me good but the only thing is the days were so long and I was doing just about nothing."

That all changed when he was asked to help out in St. Patrick's parish in Sarasota, Florida. "I spent a year and a half there and I absolutely loved it."

A taste of things to come but first it was back to Letterkenny and a chaplaincy at the General Hospital and St. Conal's Hospital.

It was a tough ministry but rewarding. "I was

living in the hospital and that was difficult."

But the United States and a parish ministry continued to beckon and in January 1993 he was given permission by then Bishop to return there. "Though probably on the understanding that I'd be back," Fr. Michael smiles. He took up duties at the Annunciation Catholic Church in Altamonte Springs in Orlando and five years later went to San Antonio, Texas, where he was attached to Our Lady of the Lake University. At that point he started a Masters degree in social work, graduating in 2000, and commenced duties as a paediatric counsellor in the Santa Rosa Catholic Hospital. It was a move that was to help in his day-to-day dealings with problems of his parishioners.

Following another university chaplaincy, he returned to the Diocese of Venice in Florida, based at the Epiphany Cathedral.

And his travels continued – settling into the role of pastor at the San Antonio Church in Port Charlotte, Florida before serving for seven years at St James' parish in Lake Placid as parish priest.

In November 2015, he became pastor at St. Michael the Archangel Church in Siesta Key in Sarasota.

Apart from the location – and no doubt the weather! – Fr. Michael finds the main difference between the church in his home country and that of his adopted abode is lay involvement. "There is much more of that in the States – a greater emphasis on the social dimension. Definitely the biggest difference is the involvement of the laity."

It he, he insists, been a "life giving" experience for him. "And, I hope, for them as well..". It helps too that he's within easy distance of Siesta Beach, voted the number one such facility in the U.S. and the fifth best in the world. "We get a lot of visitors and every Sunday I would ask for a show of hands at Mass and 80 to 85% of them would be visitors."

He warmly welcomes guests himself and particularly when they hail from his own corner of the globe. "Declan Nee and his wife Cathy and their children have been here as well as Kevin and Anne Barron. And my cousin Charlie Cannon, the Principal of the tech in Letterkenny, and his wife, Catherine, a nurse at the hospital, have also come to visit."

Fr. Michael also worked together with fellow Letterkenny man, Fr. Charlie Deeney in the Annunciation Church and is acquainted with Falcarragh native, Dan Gallagher, a former boarder at St. Eunan's College, who resides in Sarasota.

During his return to Letterkenny to visit family and friends –he tries to get home every summer – Fr. Michael acted as a concelebrant in the Episcopal ordination of the new Bishop of the Raphoe Diocese, Alan McGuckian.

"It was a beautiful ceremony and I wish him every blessing in his new ministry." As for himself, he continues to thrive. "I just love the work I do."

Which means that while we will continue to see him back in his home town in the summer and at Christmas, it may be not be, at least in the foreseeable future, in any pastoral role. "I've travelled a lot between here and the States but you always get so much out of each ministry and the people you serve. It's a vocation I wouldn't swap for the world."

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