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Remembering Fr. Michael Doyle

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A Priest of Far-Reaching Influence

Joe Kelly CSSp

The life and death of each of us has its influence on others (Rom. 14:7)

So said St Paul in the passage from his Letter to the Romans that we read just now. He then goes on to write about the life and death of our Lord Jesus Christ, which brought about our salvation. But everyone, you and I, influence the lives of those around us. Father Michael Doyle's influence was far-reaching.

In a little book of memoirs that he wrote, Michael acknowledges the influence of his parents. He says that his father taught him about truth and honesty and justice, and that from his mother he learned about concern for the poor. She, as a well-read Catholic, accepted the changes introduced by the Second Vatican Council, but thought that the church should change even more.

"Be kind to them"

I liked Michael's description of an incident in the seminary. As a newly-ordained priest going out to hear confessions for the first time, he went to the office of the director to ask for advice. He refers to the director as Father Mike but the

the third-level students at Centennial College, to the parishioners at St Joseph's, to the people of Papua New Guinea.

Here perhaps I could insert a little story of my first meeting with Father Michael on my arrival from Ireland, where I had just completed my seminary studies. He told me I should register for courses to prepare me for teaching at Neil McNeil High School, but said that, having registered, I should take the train to Montreal. He said, "Here is some money. I am arranging with our confrères in Montreal that you can stay with them for the rest of the week and visit Expo 1967. It will be a good introduction to Canada and to what it is to be a Canadian. Then you can come back and start your courses." On the train, I realized that I had come to a place where people cared about me.

Centennial College

Of course, there was much more than kindness in this man. His insightful thinking and administrative abilities were recognized by the Ontario government when in 1965 they

asked him to be a member of the board of the yet non-existent Centennial College. His important role in setting up that community college is well attested by the other board members. As Director of Student Affairs, he had contact with students of every religion and of no religious attachment, and he recounts that, far from being a hindrance as some said it would be in a secular college, his priesthood drew people to his office because they knew they could confide in him.

Empowering others

Later, he was to empower people in Papua New Guinea to run their own Catholic schools, people who told him that previous pastors had made all the major decisions. That wasn't Michael's way – he empowered others. We read of his far-flung parish of Malol, comprising fourteen villages and of his wading through rivers to reach remote places, and we

He will be remembered for leading Neil McNeil High School during a critical period of growth in our board. His commitment to combining the virtues of our Catholic faith with academic achievement had a deep impact on thousands of students.

*Angela Gauthier, Director of Education
Toronto Catholic District School Board*

description fits Father Michael Doheny perfectly. He was a man who exercised his authoritative position with an informality uncommon at the time. Father Doheny is sitting in his office, looking as if he has been having a nap in his chair, with his feet up on the desk. The young Father Doyle asks his advice about hearing confessions and the older Father Mike simply says "Be kind to them and you won't go far wrong." Mike Doyle remembered that – our Father Mike was kind to people, to staff and students at Neil McNeil High School, to

marvel at his courage and tenacity. But he loved it – he loved the people, he loved the challenge, he loved the call.

Michael never sought privilege, no matter what position he occupied. He cared about everyone, especially the disadvantaged. In this connection, I should mention the major role he played in setting up and helping out at Sancta Maria House. This was an apostolic work of the Legion of Mary. I have been told that Fr Doyle founded the praesidium of the Legion in this parish of St Joseph. Of course, the people here remember him fondly.

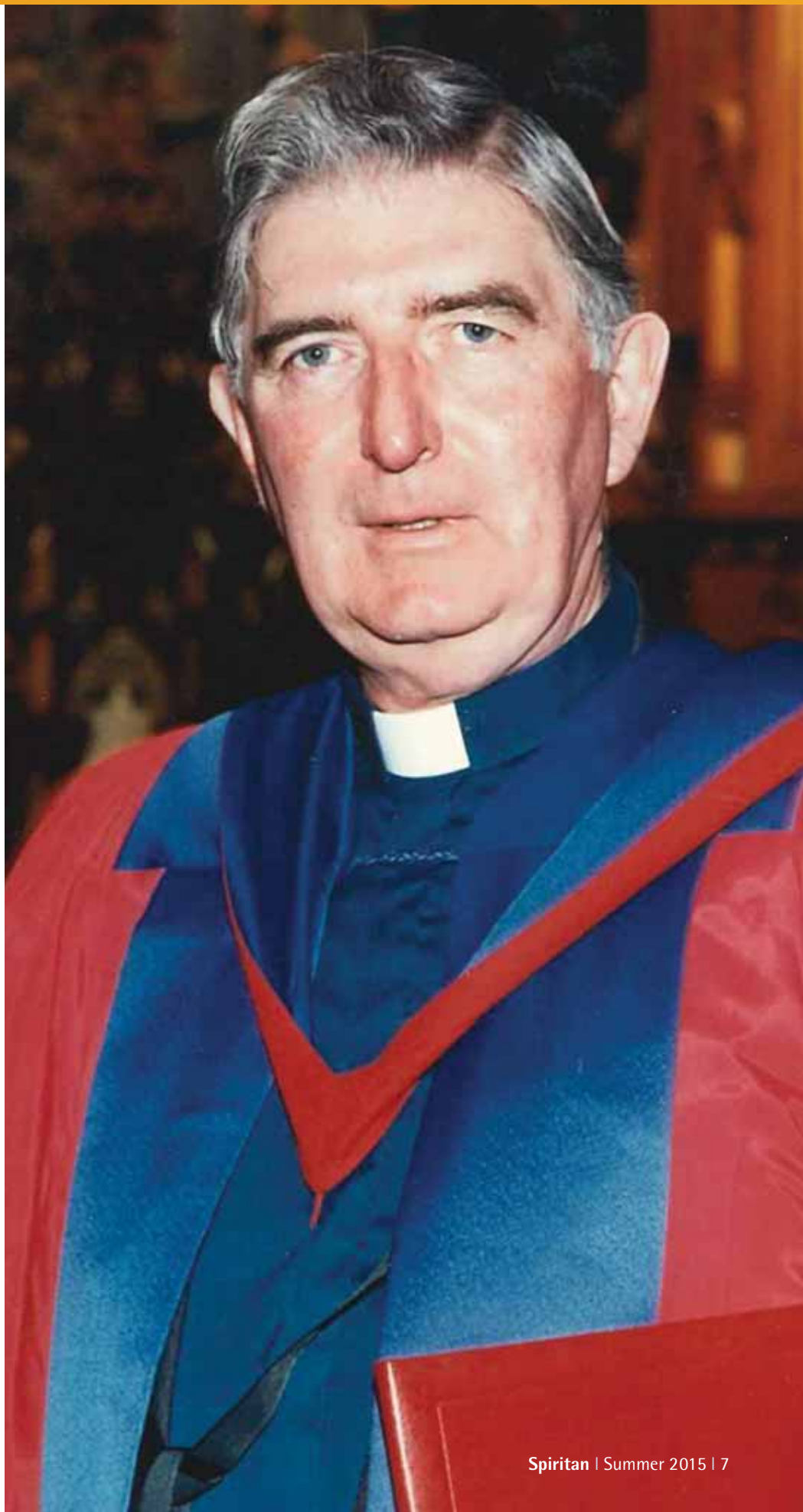
St Joseph's Parish

He had two periods of ministry here, so I don't have to tell you about his time with you, but I will tell you what he wrote about you and his time here: "A marvellous experience, so much good will, so many deeply spiritual people, such extensive commitment to the less fortunate in our society; sixty-seven different nationalities working together in harmony and creating a miniature example of a peaceful world in this corner of the 'little blue dot.'"

When he was in Papua New Guinea in 1986, we Spiritans were planning a General Chapter Meeting in Rome. Michael was disappointed that there would be no delegate from Papua New Guinea and Australia. He let the General Council know of his disappointment. They said it was too late to change this but, as these confrères would not be electing a delegate, the General Council invited him along as an observer. Well, he so impressed them in Rome that he was elected first assistant to the Superior General. So it would be years before he could return to Papua New Guinea and Australia.

Spiritans Leader

Michael was forward-looking and innovative, inclusive and inviting, cheerful (in a quiet way) and positive. He also challenged the status quo in the Church, on such issues as the role of women. Of



REMEMBERING FR MICHAEL DOYLE



course, I have already said that his mother taught him to put forward these challenges. His nine years as our Provincial Superior here were marked by a number of innovations. He and the Provincial Council made the courageous step of separating our group from the Irish Province – which up to then had provided the personnel – and setting up a province of our own, the Province of Trans-Canada. This again showed how he wanted people to take ownership and to face the future with optimism.

Lay Spiritan Associates

The General Council in Rome had decided to look into new forms of Spiritan membership, and Father Michael was the one who invited Dermot and Deirdre McLoughlin to search with us for an answer to their own desire for Christian and missionary commitment, and so there came to be in our Province of Trans-Canada the Lay Spiritan Associates, who have enriched our lives and extended our outreach in so many ways.

Final poignant years

“The life and death of each of us has its influence on others.” I have spoken of Michael’s life. But his death, too, has its influence on us. Remembering his leadership qualities, and his achievements in education, makes our reflection on his death, and on the last few years of his life, all the more poignant. Seeing him sitting there, unable to respond to us, teaches us

that we can never say for certain what the future holds for us, or how much we will accomplish. Ultimately, we can only rely on God to sustain us. We make the effort but never fully know the real outcome. Leaving that to God, we continue to make the effort. We hope that we can do it with some of the enthusiasm that Father Mike brought to what he did.

His final years gave others the opportunity of ministering to him, and that was a blessing for those who did. On them, his gradual passing has had an enormous impact. In this connection, we Spiritans thank Josie Whelan for her continuous care of Father Michael. We also thank the staff at Providence Centre and at La Salle Manor.

This day will come for each of us. We have really no say in the way death comes. The people we meet every day are people for whom Jesus lived and died and rose again, so let each of us have a positive influence on them, treating them with kindness and concern and the dignity that is theirs. I think that the way Michael lived should reinforce that resolve in each of us.

Our sincere sympathy goes to Michael’s sister, Olivia, and to his nephew, Clive, who are with us today, to his sisters, Oonagh and Mary, and to all of Michael’s family in Ireland, Australia and elsewhere. You were with him from the beginning and you have learned from him and he from you. May the Lord comfort you in your loss. ■

One does not often meet people of the calibre of Michael: persistent in his vision that all people have the opportunity to develop the ability, passion and imagination to pursue their dreams and to contribute to the human community.

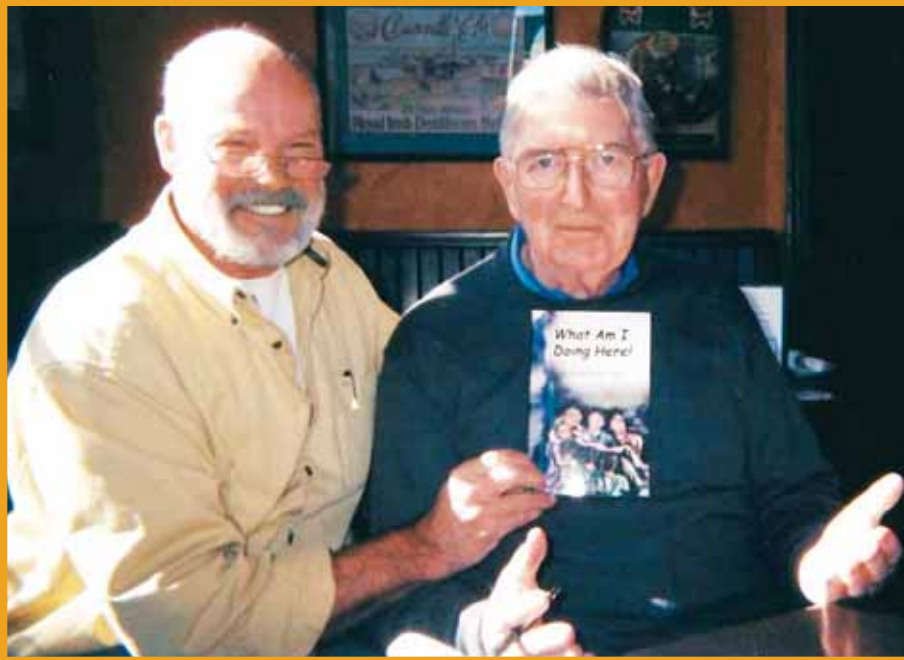
Springing out of his Irish roots, Michael was a delightful man “of the old school”. He had a great gift for telling stories, and a lifestyle that was community centred, simple and unencumbered. A genuine goodness radiated out of Mike in the most unexpected ways and at the most unexpected times.

No pretenses, no masks – people naturally gravitated towards him, wanting to somehow tap into his energy, strength and faith. Each person walked away feeling special, refreshed and revitalized for the journey ahead.

This was most evident for us at Becoming Neighbours in his compassionate concern for what was happening with refugees.

We will hold Michael in our prayers. But in reality, Mike doesn't need our prayers, does he? We need his.

Peter McKenna SFM, Becoming Neighbours



Excerpts from
Fr Mike's book
*What Am I
Doing Here!*

Seeking pastoral advice

Michael Doyle CSSp

I HAD FINISHED the course, passed the exam, been granted “faculties” to hear confessions and was now about to head out into one of the parishes of the Archdiocese of Dublin.

Panic gripped me. Despite ten years of training I was terrified that insoluble problems would be dropped on my lap or that I would make a horrendous mess of the whole process. I needed a word of advice, in a hurry.

Our Director at that time was a man who had spent many years in the African mission field. He also held a doctorate in Canon Law so I surmised that both his experience and education would amply equip him to share a few words of wisdom with a jittery neophyte confessor.

I went to his office, knocked timidly on the door and entered on invitation. Father Mike was seated in a swivel chair with his feet resting on his desk. This was not the usual deportment of superiors at that time, but Father Mike had brought a breath of informality to the position.

I explained, a little nervously, my problem and asked what advice he would give to a young priest about to enter the confessional for the first time. Father Mike’s eyes were heavy – indicating that I had disturbed a catnap. He looked at me sleepily for a long minute and then said, “Be kind to them.”

I continued to stand there expecting some elaboration, or at the very least, some reference to canonical and theological norms.

But Father Mike’s eyes were drooping and it was clear that I was about to lose

him. I coughed and asked hesitantly, “Is that all?”

With obvious effort he blinked away the glaze that had begun to resettle on his eyes and said, “Yes, that’s all. Be kind to them and you won’t go far wrong.”

It was one of the best pieces of pastoral advice I have ever received. ■

From What Am I Doing Here!, Fr Michael Doyle CSSp. Welland, Ontario: éditions Soleil publishing, inc., 2006. Reprinted courtesy of the Publisher.

He knew the issues and he knew what was going on. We recruited him to be a board member and Fr Mike was on our board for four years and chaired our social justice and advocacy committee. He was able to supply that on a larger scale by helping us to address the needs of those who are oppressed and marginalized.

It was just terrible to see such a strong intellect and somebody so full of life have this terrible disease – he is home and I think that is a good thing.

Michael Fullan, Executive Director of Catholic Charities, Archdiocese of Toronto



A Knock on the Door

Michael Doyle CSSp



A KNOCK ON THE DOOR. It was 11:30 p.m. “Fata, yu stap? Mipela i gat bikpela wari.” (“Are you there, Father? We’ve got a big problem.”) In any part of the world a knock on the door close to midnight would probably indicate a serious problem – more so in Papua New Guinea since it wasn’t customary for the villagers to travel around much after dark.

A sleepy missionary at the door listened to the villagers pour out their concerns: a woman in childbirth was having serious difficulties; the midwives had done all they could, but by now she needed more expert help. If she didn’t get to hospital, and quickly, she might lose the baby – indeed her own life was also at risk.

In the First World the solution would have been simple: dial the emergency number, order an ambulance and in no time the woman would be on her way to the nearest hospital. But this was Papua New Guinea – there was no phone, no emergency number and, even if a number existed, there was no ambulance. The only reliable truck in the village was that owned by the mission.



woman in labour comfortable on a bumping trailer?)

Then it was off through the bush on a mile and a half ride to the banks of the Yalingi River. The mission truck was on the far side and the only way to reach it was by wading through its turbulent waters. This river, about 80 metres wide, had no bridge, no ferry. Debbie had to be carried across. Since it was forbidden for men to approach a woman in labour, this task was to be accomplished by women. The men generously suggested that since the taboo didn’t apply to “Fata”, I could give the women a hand. It was pitch dark. The river was about chest high, swift flowing and quite scary. I went across first to turn on the lights of the truck and then returned to help the women.

As I waded through the water which tugged at my legs and chest, struggling to keep balance while at the same time helping to keeping the pregnant woman out of the water, I couldn’t help thinking that in ten years of seminary training no one had ever mentioned this kind of enterprise. What on earth was I doing here?

We reached the far bank and hoisted our soon-to-be mother as gently as we could into the 4x4 Toyota Hilux. Then we were off through the bush, another 25 kilometres, on a dirt road pock-marked with craters

and protruding rocks. It must have been agony for the poor woman, but she never even groaned. Finally at about 2 a.m. we arrived at the local hospital, a very modest affair compared to our sophisticated western health centres, but, nevertheless, adequate to the occasion. The doctor, a lay missionary, was summoned from his bed and very quickly Debbie’s problems were brought under control.

For me it was back again through the bush across the river and on to the mission, this time

I wasn’t in the same parish as he was in Papua New Guinea, but I can tell you that all the people there – his parishioners and the Sisters with whom he worked – thought the world of him. He was really concerned about the individuals he was dealing with. He always tried to include people in the church.

Paul McAuley CSSp



“O.K. I’ll bring her in.” And so started an extraordinary journey.

First it was necessary to collect Debbie from her village some distance from the mission house. Luckily the mission had a tractor-trailer, which coughed and wheezed and rattled and banged, but at least it moved.

The driver was roused from bed and we were on our way to Debbie’s house. We loaded her on to the tractor trailer and made her as comfortable as possible (but how do you make a

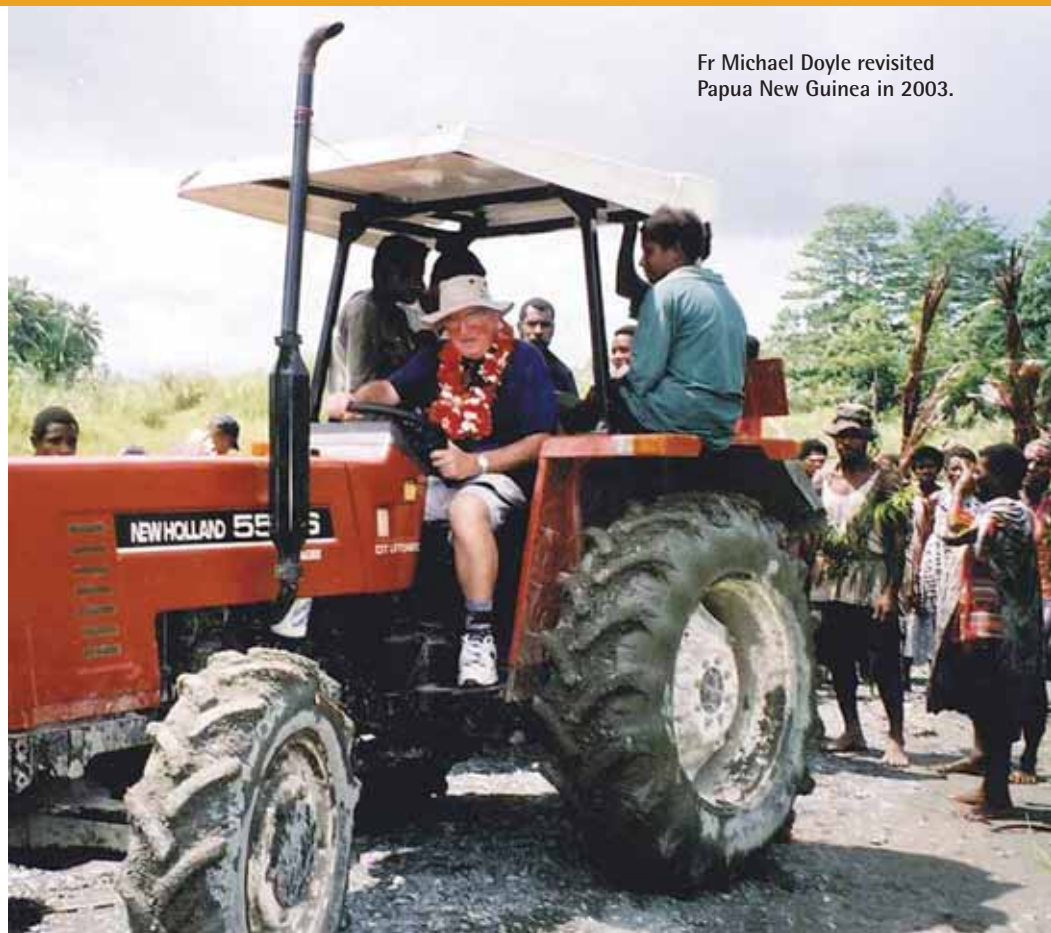
on foot because the tractor driver had put away his machine for the night. Next morning, the “sked” (the short-wave radio system used by the mission) brought us the good news that mother and child were doing fine. A few weeks later it was a real joy to baptize the newborn child and to be able to thank God for using me as an instrument to help save his young life and that of his mother.

This experience was repeated often, sometimes because of difficulties with birth, sometimes because of other life-threatening diseases or accidents. More often than not, these unexpected emergencies often disrupted well-laid plans. But it must be said the mission team (sisters, catechists and myself) never hesitated. We were convinced that this was evangelization by example.

Two men and their two dead cows

On one occasion the 11 o’clock knock on the door revealed two men from a neighbouring parish whom I didn’t know. They too had a “wari”, not a woman in labour or the victim of an accident – but two dead cows. What! That’s right – two dead cows they had slaughtered on a model farm some way up the river with the intention of bringing them to town to put in the freezer and later to process and sell the meat.

This was a government project shared in by a number of the villagers who had received training in animal husbandry at an agricultural institute overseen by the mission. The graduates were each given a cow and the fencing necessary to keep the animals from straying. The two dead cows were part of the fruits of this project and were on their way to town to generate income for the villagers. But, as often happens, their plans had come unstuck. As a result of engine trouble, the boat which was to bring the dead cows from the farm had been delayed and the two men, who were actually officials from the Agricultural Department, had



Fr Michael Doyle revisited Papua New Guinea in 2003.

reached the river Yalingi late in the afternoon, long after the truck driver scheduled to meet them had given up and gone home.

Now here they were with two dead cows, which would certainly spoil by the following morning. Would I bring them into town and save the day?

“O come off it, you must be kidding. Pregnant women or accident victims – OK, but two dead cows!”

They were persistent and with the tenacity of their race gradually wore down all opposition. They conjured up images of the people who were depending on this farm for their livelihood; those who had worked for months to develop the project; the people who would be deprived of meat if these cows spoiled – and on, and on, and on. Besides – the Agricultural Department would fill my truck with diesel (no small consideration in a country where fuel prices were sky high) and if ever in the future I needed a favour ...

And so we were on our way following

much the same routine as with pregnant women: a tractor to bring the cattle through the bush to the banks of the Yalingi, then across the swift flowing waters in pitch darkness, the legs of the cattle tied together with a pole slung between them. This time, taboo or not taboo, I didn’t get involved in the crossing.

Following a rough journey through the bush with eight bovine legs sticking up in the air, we reached town where the cattle were dumped into the freezer of the Agricultural Department.

The two officials were good to their word and filled the truck with diesel. They also sent back the story to the grateful farmers with the result that the prestige of the mission rose several percentage points. I guess, as St Francis loved to point out, proclaiming the gospel does not always need words. ■

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