

My friend had cancer and found his peace in pisces

Credo
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Memorial services are out of fashion in these post-Covid days, but a sparkingly original one was held last Monday in honour of Mick May OBE (obituary, April 2, 2022) at St Luke's Church, Chelsea in west London.

The first address was given by a former bank robber. Mick's six children, nieces and nephews performed his favourite poems, readings and songs, the last ranging from Bob Dylan to Van Morrison via Handel. The pièce de résistance, which brought a standing ovation from the 600-strong congregation, was a laughter-and-tears tribute from his widow, Jill. Her final line was: "Mick taught us how to live ... and he taught us how to die".

I understood, perhaps more than anyone outside of his family, the profound truth of those last seven words. For I was with Mick in hospital when he was given the news that he had been stricken by mesothelioma, the cancer linked to asbestos exposure. It is invariably fatal and usually kills within six months. Mick lasted for more than nine joyfully action-packed years. This was one of the longest ever survival periods for a mesothelioma patient. How did he do it?

The factors behind Mick's extended life span were a mixture of the complicated, the simple and the spiritual. His medical team were brilliantly innovative in trying experimental immunotherapy drugs and treatments, which came tantalisingly close to defeating this rare and still incurable cancer. Love of

family and of fishing seemed to play a mystical role in slowing down the growth of Mick's tumour, as he recounted in his charming memoir *Cancer and Pisces*, which will continue to be a beacon of encouragement to cancer sufferers. Another key factor was his effervescent, joke-cracking, ultra-optimistic personality. And as Mick gratefully and repeatedly acknowledged, the power of prayer played its part in his survival story.

"I asked you to come and see me in hospital because you are my only friend who knows the first thing about God and I think I need Him," Mick said to me back in May 2013, when his cancer was diagnosed. Feeling hopelessly inadequate for whatever he was asking of me — I was not even thinking of ordination in those days — I responded: "You need prayer support. When I was in bad trouble one or two friends used to come round and pray for me once a week. Would you like me to do the same for you?"

"You bet!" said Mick. So we started meeting regularly for a chat and a prayer. I thought I was making a short-term commitment but it lasted nearly a decade.

Our meetings were not pious encounters. As always with Mick there were laughs, stories, eccentricities and many fishermen's tales. He liked to call me his "confessor", and we became such deep prayer partners that I called him my "professor" because I learnt much wisdom from him on how to pray for the terminally ill.

Mick's priorities were to pray for Jill, their teenage children and for the time to see them grow up. This was a prayer well answered, as were our prayers to move the charity he had founded, Blue Sky, into the hands of another offender rehabilitation charity, the Forward Trust. We regularly prayed for his

doctors to be given special skill: "After all, I have become their prize bull," Mick said as his longevity extended the frontiers of immunotherapy treatments for future patients. And we asked for the gift of perseverance, often using the famous prayer of Francis Drake: "Grant us also to know that it is not the beginning, but the continuing of the same unto the end, until it be thoroughly finished, which yieldeth the true glory."

Mick persevered with his spiritual life so devoutly that he attended evening prayer every day at his local church, St George's, in Campden Hill, west London, where the vicar, James Heard, became a close friend.

As the end came nearer, Mick became frailer yet increasingly contented. When by some strange coincidence my wife Elizabeth lay dying in a hospital room almost adjacent to Mick's, he prayed for both of them to have good endings. They did.

Mick fought to get home and left this world peacefully in the presence of Jill and his family. By some minor logistical miracle, on the morning of his death I reached his bedside in time to give him the last rites.

Mick left behind many inspirational legacies in his charity work, his family life and with his beloved ex-offenders. Here is one more. I learnt far more from Mick than I gave to him. So much so that it gradually dawned on me that he might be giving me a vocation of pastoral care and prayer for those offenders and ex-offenders we both cherished. Had it not been for my prayer partnership with Mick, I do not think I would now be an ordained priest and prison chaplain. God moves in a mysterious way.

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