



Fr John M FitzGerald, S.J.

(1919 – 2012. In Zambia 1953-1978)

13 January 2012

Father John Fitzgerald was born in September 1919, entered the Society in September 1937, was ordained in July 1950, took Final Vows in February 1953, and died in January 2012. On completion of his tertianship and further studies he spent fifty-eight years in active ministry before assuming the ministry of praying for the Church and the Society in Cherryfield Lodge in January 2011. He spent twenty-four of these years as a teacher or trainer of teachers in Zambia and thirty-four as a parish priest, pastoral worker and hospital chaplain in the Seychelles, Australia, Papua New Guinea and Ireland.

John was a Jesuit through and through. As a schoolboy in Clongowes he was enormously influenced by the asceticism, Jesuit commitment and joyful holiness of the saintly Father John Sullivan. Throughout his Jesuit training, he absorbed the spirit of St Ignatius to such an extent that he sought always to live according to two of Ignatius' guiding principles: "that in everything God might be glorified" and "go where you see a need".

And so it was that John threw himself wholeheartedly into whatever teaching or pastoral assignment to which he was missioned, while at the same time showing an almost restless zeal to do more and to respond to the needs and challenges of those in other parts.

In all his diverse assignments John radiated love, gentleness, and kindness and brought out the same qualities in all those with whom he interacted. As the sanctity and mellowness of Father John Sullivan attracted him so strongly from the time of his boyhood, so his own holiness and graciousness attracted others, not just to himself but also to God.

Long before his death, people spoke of the way they were attracted to John. They spoke of the example of his life, of his generous service, of his uprightness and integrity, of his warm approving manner.

On completing his tertianship in 1952, John spent one year at the Institute of Education, University of London, preparing himself as a teacher trainer in Northern Rhodesia. There he was involved in running the training programme, at first within the physical and organisational structures of Canisius College and subsequently at the new Charles Lwanga Teachers' College.

In one notable respect Charles Lwanga College conferred on John a kind of immortality (his own words), since it was he who advocated that it be called "Charles Lwanga" and not just "Lwanga". The strength of John as a teacher trainer was brought out in a protest from the Zambia Ministry of Education UK-born and Oxford-educated inspector for teacher training. When John was redeployed from Charles Lwanga to teach at the government secondary school in Monze, the inspector tartly observed: "You Jesuits are supposed to be great educators. But here you are, taking the best teacher trainer in all Zambia away from the work in which he excels and relegating him to teach

in a secondary school.” Characteristically, John’s response on being told of this was to deprecate himself and to allege that the inspector had a misguidedly high opinion of him.

John served with great distinction in Monze for several years, and subsequently for short spells in Australia and Papua New Guinea and back again in Zambia at Canisius College. These latter interludes heightened his desire to be engaged in more directly pastoral work. In 1978, he was requested to accompany an elderly and infirm Jesuit whose condition required that he return to Sri Lanka where he had previously worked. The travel entailed a stopover in the Seychelles where John and his companion were hosted by the local Bishop, the first Seychellois to be appointed to this office. During their brief stay the Bishop painted such a graphic picture of the pastoral needs of his people that on his return to Zambia, John felt impelled to seek permission to exercise his apostolic ministry in the Seychelles. The permission was reluctantly given, though at first for only a few years.

John began an apostolic life in the Seychelles where, as the Bishop Emeritus of the islands stated at the time of John’s death, “over many years he gave great pastoral and spiritual service to the people of the Seychelles Islands”. There were a few short returns to Zambia, and one on health grounds to Ireland, but for the next twenty-three years John’s essential ministry was to the people of the Seychelles. His ministry extended to every person within the large areas where he served - La Digue, Mont Fleuri (Bon Pasteur parish), Baie Ste Anne and Victoria (the capital city). During these years he also gave greatly appreciated service to the formation of seminarians and to the guidance of members of religious congregations.

Throughout his life, John was an ascetic who lived as poorly as his situation would allow. But John’s asceticism took its toll on his health. His poor diet gradually led to his becoming physically run down, necessitating a visit on health grounds to Ireland and eventually to his final departure from the Seychelles and definitive return to Ireland in 2001.

John spent the last decade of his active apostolic life, first in the Crescent Sacred Heart Church in Limerick and, after this was closed, in Leeson Street, Dublin, from where he served as chaplain to the nearby Eye and Ear Hospital.

Early in 2011, his adverse health condition brought John to Cherryfield Lodge, where he died on 13 January 2012.