



Fr Michael J Kelly, S.J.

(1929-2021. In Zambia 1955-2021)

**15 January 2021**

Fr Kelly was born on 19 September 1929, the fifth of seven children to Michael J. Kelly and Agnes Sheehy of Tullamore, Offaly, Ireland. He followed his elder brother into the Society of Jesus and was himself later followed by a younger brother. All three who became Jesuits were outstanding men but in different ways. After his novitiate he did an M.A. in Mathematics & Science.

He began teaching in Canisius Secondary School and later, after his ordination in 1961, he returned there and soon became headmaster (1963-70). The boys called him ‘Smiler’ because of his ever pleasant appearance. Soon after Independence he became a Zambian citizen, like a dozen or so of his fellow Jesuits. He had found his vocation as a Jesuit – to be an educator.

By 1974 he had completed a Ph.D. in psychology and child development in Birmingham, UK and entered the School of Education at UNZA. Within a few years he became the Dean of Education and professor in 1989. His administrative ability was appreciated and he rose to be Deputy Vice-Chancellor (1979-83). During his tenure he helped the fledgling Copperbelt University to stand on its own. In the midst of all of this, he could be seen in the early morning working with his hands to enable his community to have plenty of fruit and vegetables, before he headed across the Great East Road to his office on the campus.

In the 1980s and 1990s he continued to teach and do research. Gradually he became an established educational consultant and worked on many national and international committees, making presentations and frequently facilitating conferences. He was the coordinator for the new Educational Reform Implementation Policy for the Government from 1984-86 with the production of *The Provision of Education for All*. This report is widely referred to in current international writings and still exercises great influence on government and donor agency strategies.

In the later 1990s he became involved in the social issues facing the developing countries arising from the AIDS/HIV pandemic. On retirement from UNZA in 2001 at the age of 72, he began to apply his considerable talents and vast educational experience, to helping policy makers become aware of the wider implications of the AIDS/HIV pandemic – with the growing orphan problems, the lack of education for the girl child, the woman often left ‘holding the baby’ in the crisis and the lowering of immunity among the poor due to the lack of proper food and adequate health care.

He was part of the Mobile Task Force to advise ministries of education in Southern and Eastern Africa. He undertook work for UNESCO, UNICEF and World Bank in these matters. He became a well-known consultant on the issues of AIDS/HIV – Education and participated by making presentations or chairing over thirty national gatherings in Zambia as well as ten international conferences. Overall he made presentations in 19 African countries and in 21 other countries outside the continent.

It was largely for this work, taken up later in his life, that he received public recognition across the world. Some of the awards he received were:

- 2003: Symons Award from the Association of Commonwealth Countries
- 2004: Doctor of Science (honorary) from the university of West Indies
- 2006: Doctor of Law (honorary) from University College, Dublin
- 2011: Zambian Presidential award
- 2011: The Irish Government established the Fr Michael J Kelly Lecture on HIV on World AIDS Day
- 2012: Doctor of Science (honorary) from the Royal College of Surgeons, Dublin.

The conferring in the University of West Indies was made 'in recognition of the eloquent efforts of this enthusiastic and evangelical educator, the pure passion of this powerful priest, the sheer humanity of this humble man of God'.

His written publications include: over 20 books and reports; contributions to about a dozen books; almost 100 articles in journals; and over 230 conferences, power points and other works.

As we look back on his life, we see a person who used his considerable talents in the service of education with his focus on Zambia, spreading to the whole third world. His years of lecturing, administration and research led him to become a recognized expert on third world education in modern times. In his later years, his practical bent of mind, led him to apply all his experience and expertise to the wider social consequences of the problems of AIDS/HIV to the field of education.

From his professional performance and personal ability, he had all that was needed to analyse and reflect on the social and educational consequences of the epidemic, as it impacted on a country like Zambia. What began as an academic analysis took on a more humanistic approach, for there were no longer statistics and policies but actual people suffering especially the orphans, the women and the poor. He now became passionate in his appeal to wider audiences to play a greater part in alleviating the pain and suffering of a whole segment of the population.

The Jesuit motto of being a 'man for others' released great energy in him at a time in life when many are quietly withdrawing into retirement. So, in many ways, the latter part of his life beginning in the late 1990s and his retirement from UNZA in 2001, were perhaps the most fruitful and fulfilling of his life as a Jesuit. He came across as a clear thinker and a good speaker, filled with a great desire to help all he lectured to, to face the issues of AIDS/HIV – not so much as a problem but as an approach to reaching out to our neighbours who suffer. As he had spent most of his professional life in Luwisha House, he came to dominate many daily decisions that diminished the role of the superior and the minister as well as the scholastics in the community.

Michael died during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2021 of the corona virus.