



Fr John O'Leary, S.J.

(1928-2016. In Zambia/Malawi 1962-2000)

1 February 2016

Fr John (Jack) O'Leary, the first child of John E O'Leary and Helen Boyle, was born in Mt Vernon, Washington, on 9 July 1928. He did his secondary school at the Jesuit Bellarmine Prep School in Tacoma. After completing secondary school in 1947 he entered the Jesuit novitiate in Sheridan, Oregon. His brother, Fr Pat O'Leary of Seattle University, followed him into the novitiate a year later.

Jack then continued with the regular formation of the Society. After his first vows he stayed in Sheridan for two years of juniorate studies; this was followed by philosophy at Mt St Michael's in Spokane. After completing his philosophy in 1954, he was assigned for regency at Gonzaga Prep School in Spokane. In 1957 Jack moved to Alma College in Los Gatos, California to study theology and was ordained in Spokane in 1960. After his fourth year of theology he did tertianship in Port Townsend, Washington.

In the early 1960's, the General Fr Janssens issued a call to the Oregon and a number of other Provinces, for personnel and financial support to the Lusaka Mission in the then Northern Rhodesia. The Mission, which was the responsibility of the Polish Province, could no longer be supported from Poland because of the Communist regime there. Jack and the late Fr Lou Haven were among the first to volunteer and be sent.

Jack arrived in Northern Rhodesia in 1962. After studying chiBemba at Ilondola, he was assigned to teach at Mpima Minor Seminary in Kabwe (then Broken Hill). Apart from his regular classes at Mpima, on weekends Jack would often go to Mkushi Mission for ministry. In 1968 Jack was appointed superior of Jesuit Community and headmaster of the minor seminary. For the Oregon Province scholastics who were missioned to Zambia for their regency, Jack was their primary contact person. He a welcoming presence, a good community person with a manner that treated others as equals rather than 'subjects'. During this time there were also a good number of lay volunteers at Mpima. Jack included them in the school and in the community. One of them, who is now a diocesan priest in England, put together a pamphlet with photos and recollections of that time called, "The House that Jack Built," a fitting title, as Jack did build a community there, where all felt welcome. Jack left Mpima in the middle of 1974 for a sabbatical.

In January 1975 Jack and two other Jesuits were sent to Kitwe to begin a Jesuit community there on Nationalist Way. Besides being the superior of the new community, Jack took a position at the Zambia Institute of Technology (ZIT) (which eventually became CBU) teaching technical English. He also began a chaplaincy for the students there. However, this was not to last long. Towards the end of the year, Jack was appointed Provincial of the Zambian Province.

Jack served as the second Provincial from 1975 to 1981. Apart from the normal administrative work of a provincial, Jack faced a number of challenges including efforts to protect and defend his men when they conflicted with the newly appointed Archbishop Milingo. Another was to continue uniting the province made up of many different nationalities. One way he tried to do this was with the monthly gatherings for the Lusaka area Jesuits at the Provincial House on Senanga Road, which included Mass, a social and a meal.

After completing his term as Provincial, Jack took a sabbatical break for a year. When he returned to Zambia in 1983, the Bishops requested that Jack lead a team to establish a programme of spirituality for the first year students of the major seminary. Since there was no building to house the programme, the first few years took place in Mpima Seminary. In 1987 Emmaus Spirituality Centre opened its doors and Jack was appointed by the Bishops as the first Rector.

Two years later the Episcopal Conference of Malawi requested the Jesuits to take over the responsibility of St Peter's Seminary in Zomba. With Peter Carroll as rector, John Moore as lecturer and librarian and Jack as spiritual director, the Jesuits began to give direction to the seminary at the opening of the academic year in 1989.

In 1999 the Bishops of Malawi decided that the Jesuits had done their work, and the Bishops would take over full responsibility for the management of the seminary. Jack was assigned by the Provincial to Kitwe where he was to do chaplaincy and retreat work. After a few months, however, health issues began to emerge. An earlier car accident in Malawi caused him frequent pain in his back and neck. But more seriously was the deterioration in his eyesight. He returned to the United States for treatment at the end of that year. The doctors decided that the eye problem would need continual monitoring. As a result, Jack did not return to Zambia.

While in the Oregon Province, the Provincial missioned him to a number of different apostolic works over the years: to Oak Harbor on Whidbey Island in Puget Sound to be an administrator of a parish (2000-2002); to the Jesuit St Leo's parish in Tacoma as a pastoral worker (2002-2004); on the Spokane Reservation in eastern Washington ministering to the Native Americans (2004-2008) and finally to St Joseph's parish in Seattle as a pastoral worker (2008-2013). His last years were spent in Bea House in Spokane and Sacred Heart Jesuit Centre in Los Gatos where he prayed for the Church and the Society.

Jack had a number of attractive qualities, as a person, a Jesuit and a priest. He was a warm person who made friends and kept them over many years. He had a wonderful sense of humour, being able to see the comic side of many situations. As a Jesuit he was a community builder, whether he was the superior or just part of the community. As seen by his various missions, he was available to be sent without complaining. Although he had a low opinion of his own gifts, he used them in a remarkable way and was effective in what he put his hand to. Jack also had a poetic side. When he preached this would come out in an enigmatic line or story; his letters were filled with allusions, often comical. The phrase or the statement would make his listeners pay heed and often stayed with them afterwards. Finally, Jack was a prayerful person. He did not wear his piety on his sleeve, but from the way he spoke and lived his life, it was possible to tell that this man was close to the Lord.