



**Fr Roland Lesseps SJ**  
**(1933-2020. In Zambia 1988-2009)**

**27 March 2020**

Roland Lesseps was born in New Orleans, Louisiana to Alexander Lesseps and Mary Reyer, on 13 August 1933. His father refused his request to do his secondary schooling in St Benedict Minor Seminary and so he went to Jesuit High School. His deeper yearnings continued to grow and he entered the Society on 30 July 1951 at Grand Coteau. After Juniorate at St Charles College, Roland went on to study Philosophy at Spring Hill College, where he earned a BSc in Biology in 1958, as one of the many young Jesuits of his era studying the sciences at Spring Hill. Instead of doing a high school regency, Roland was sent on immediately to Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, where he earned a PhD in Biology in 1962. From Baltimore he made the short trip to Woodstock College - to study for four more years, this time Theology. He was ordained to the priesthood on June 7, 1965 at St Joseph's Church in Mobile. He then proceeded to Vienna in Austria for tertianship 1966-67.

Roland's apostolic history is quite simple: he began work at Loyola University in New Orleans in 1967 as an Assistant Professor of Biology and, with two brief interludes, taught there until 1990, finishing as a full Professor in 1981, with a stint as Chair of the Department of Biological Science. As teacher-researcher, he was involved in cellular biology and published, often in collaboration with others, a total of 28 research papers on embryology. He received ten funding grants for his research during his time at Loyola University.

In 1973-1974 he was a Visiting professor at the Katholieke University in Nijmegen, Netherlands, and in 1987-1988 he was a teacher of biology and agriculture at the University of Zambia and Kasisi Agricultural Training Centre in Lusaka. He came by chance to Zambia in 1988. He had applied to go to Nairobi but things did not materialize there. Then he heard about the work being done at Kasisi Agricultural Training Centre and came here for his sabbatical.

His year in Zambia was clearly an influential experience for him, for after another year at Loyola, and some brief study, he returned to the KATC Lusaka in 1990 and worked there until 2009, when health problems forced him to retire home.

In the *Southern Jesuit Notes* newsletter of May 1993, there is an article about Roland which gives a quick summary of his education, mentioning that he spent the Fall of 1989 at the University of Arizona studying agriculture, and then departed for Zambia. The article describes some of the needs of the rural part of Zambia, and how Roland was "involved in several agroforestry projects, i.e., using trees and shrubs in a farming system combined with food crops and/or animals." He worked with others to introduce a fast-growing tree called "sesban" which was useful for firewood and could be harvested as firewood after two years. It also improved the fertility of the soil and its leaves could

be used for cattle fodder. The Spring 1995 number of *Company* magazine recounts how he introduced the “moringa” tree from India, which can produce edible and nutritious leaves even during the dry season. He played an important role in the KATC team in its support of the Government policy of opposing the importing of GMO food and GMO seeds. As early as 1994, Roland wrote that he and another Jesuit had written a postulatum for General Congregation 34 requesting that the Society “make a priority in our mission today the promotion of the integrity of creation.” Who would have guessed that Roland, a quiet man, was speaking such a prophetic word? At Kasisi he had ample opportunity to keep up his interest in bird watching.

He was a quiet and unassuming person who got on well with everyone. He was superior of the Jesuit community at Kasisi for two terms and experienced little difficulty in working under one of the community who was the director of the Centre. Although coming from a sophisticated academic background, he had no difficulty in fitting into a center which focused on the basic needs of farming in Zambia. He adapted easily and applied his many academic talents to the local situation.

On the eve of his going on leave in 1990, he had a fall at Kasiisi. He retired to Ignatius Residence in New Orleans and then to the St Alphonsus Rodriguez Pavilion in Grand Coteau. He was called to eternal life on Friday 27 March 2020. He was 86 years old, a Jesuit for 68 years and a priest for 54 years.