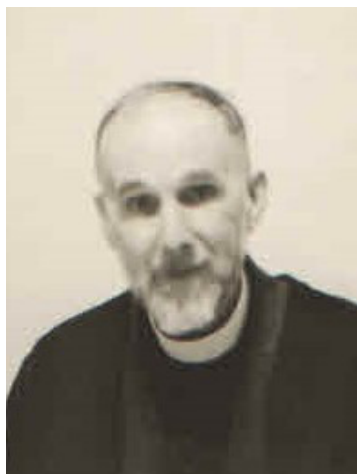


June 7

## Fr JOHN WITHNELL

25 January 1874 – 7 June 1956



Born in Ormskirk in Lancashire in NW England, John Withnell was from a well-known Catholic family in the area. Eight of the family of 13 became either priests or nuns: three Jesuits, one diocesan, three Benedictine nuns and one Carmelite. Educated at Stonyhurst, he had a passion for billiards and spent any money he had on booking a table, an hour a penny.

Joining the Jesuits in 1891 (aged 17) he transferred his passion to fishing once he reached philosophy at St Mary's Hall, there being no billiard table there. He confessed later he would slip away with a book of philosophy under his arm to a shed where he hid his fishing rod. Once out of sight of the Hall it was the book on philosophy he hid. He did his philosophy in Dublin where he was ordained in 1908.

In 1911 he was at St Aidan's and in 1920 he was sent to Gwelo (Gweru) to 'fill in' for someone who was away. He stayed for thirteen years and built St Teresa's Church, the forerunner of the present Cathedral. In 1933 he moved to Que Que (Kwekwe) where he stayed for 17 years. All the time he was living on his own and he later said this made him 'cranky' and intolerant when living with others.

His last years were made up of brief stays at Umtali (Mutare) and Kutama and he ended up in the Dominican novitiate in Avondale. By 1954, he was going deaf and blind and was riddled with arthritis. As a sick man he loved the visit of the children from the school (St John's), but when Jesuits came to see him, he'd set an alarm clock and dismiss them after half an hour; 'I think you'd better be going now.'