

In Memoriam - Fr David Rowan SJ, R.I.P.

He was 3 days short of his 69th birthday, and was approaching his 50th year in the Society of Jesus and his 39th year of priesthood.

Ort.....15 Jul 1952	Loc. Ingr.....Loyola Hall, Rainhill	Loc. Ord.....St George's College, Zimbabwe	Defunc.....12 Jul 2021
Loc. NatMufulira, Northern Rhodesia (Zambia)	Diac.....05 Apr 1982 (by Card. Pironio)	Grad.....Professed	Loc. Defunc.....Johannesburg, Gauteng, South Africa
Ingr.....07 Sep 1971	Loc. Diac.....Chiesa del Gesu, Rome	Dies.....15 Aug 1990	Prov.....SAP
	Ord.....30 Jul 1982 (by Bp Patrick Chakaipa)		



Born on 15th July 1952 in Mufulira in what was then Northern Rhodesia, the son of a Commissioner of Police and a mulier fortis of a mother, David Rowan was bound to turn out an interesting character. His early childhood was typical of British colonial families, with trips back to the UK from time to time, and much moving from station to station. David was educated at St George's College in Zimbabwe flying down from Zambia every term on an old Dakota. He never lost his love of flying and aircraft.

After school he spent a gap year at St Paul's Musami as a candidate for the Society with Gus Donovan whom he was quick to name 'Grumpie', in honour of Gus' notoriously bad mood. He entered the novitiate at Rainhill on 7th September 1971, with Michael Kyne. He did not care much for Michael or for Kevin McElhatton the socius, but he was chosen as the novice to take a donkey on the Caminos for a BBC film crew with a motley assortment of other pilgrims. He did his first studies at Heythrop (1973-1977), had a period of regency at St George's, followed by theology following at the Gregorian (1979-1982). He was ordained on 30th July 1982 by Bishop Patrick Chakaipa and returned to St George's where he gained a reputation as an accomplished teacher of physics, maths and chemistry. After tertianship in the Philippines in 1986, he moved to the South African Region and worked as university at both the University of the Witwatersrand and the University of Cape Town, where he enjoyed the usual South African police versus student confrontations, and got shot with a rubber bullet on the leg while beating a hasty retreat up the Wits Great Hall steps. In 1995 he became master of novices. In this role he is described as 'gentle but firm'. Certain things were done whether you liked it or not - even quirky things, such as his insistence that bed sheets be properly ironed! During this time he suffered a serious accident, breaking both shoulders whilst surfing in the ocean. He became Regional Superior in 2014, a position he held until shortly before the establishment of the new Southern African Province in 2021.

Mike Lewis, one of his predecessors as Regional Superior, comments on David's charming 'Hail fellow well met' attitude which served him well in parishes and ecclesiastical organisations. According to Mike, 'he liked parish work and he said his ideal retirement would be a small quiet parish in the Eastern Cape - if such a thing still exists. He ran the propaedeutic year of the National Seminary, and South Africa is dotted with devoted former students of his - some now ordained. He was elected President of the Southern African Leadership Conference of Consecrated Life (Religious Major Superiors) and was a popular choice. He did an enormous amount of good in the Engaged Encounter movement where he was much loved by many who either organised or experienced the events. He was good at short and sharp encounters in the pastoral field, and many recall the stories and jokes he used in his homilies. He had a caring heart for his parishioners and was always indignant at any abuse they had suffered at the hands of other pastors. He was known to drop everything to go and anoint someone in hospital at any time of the day or night.'

His pastoral care for seminarian and parishioners never translated itself satisfactorily into his work in the less personally rewarding responsibilities for leadership and governance within the Society. His tenure as Regional Superior in South Africa was amiable for some but never the most efficient, to the immense and growing frustration of many of the brethren. He was not given to sustained work and apparently too an often-announced position: 'Why stand if you can sit?'. Initial start-ups, short-term

assignments, and limited projects were his forte. When it came to answering letters, and the more tedious aspects of administration, he was somewhat lacking. With the immense amount of planning and restructuring required for the creation of the new Province, there were huge gaps in communication within the erstwhile Region. He detested conflict, and his main modus operandi seemed to be based on the principle that if one ignored the problem for long enough it would just go away. He also had an annoying habit of 'disappearing' and not telling anyone where he was - which did nothing for the union of minds and hearts. One co-university chaplain was heard to comment that 'David is always somewhere else'.

David did, however, live through some incredibly testing times - a point acknowledged by Fr General Sosa in his letter to Fr Leonard Chiti, the Provincial of the new Southern African Province, expressing his condolences at David's death. 'Even when he was experiencing diminishment he would still give his best to the common good. He was novice master in a context of uncertainties, rector and major superior in a time of change and the realignment of the Southern African jurisdictions. He listened well and sought the Lord's will.' As Russell Pollitt put it in his funeral homily with reference to David's pastoral work as university chaplain: 'Young people today seek an ear, they want to be recognised, heard and valued. They want to belong. David teaches us all a lesson: learn to listen to young people and give them the space they need to explore issues of life and faith without an agenda.'

Russell adds that he could be difficult to live with but was always hospitable and welcoming to guests. 'One of the things he commented on every year when he did his annual community visitation was the hospitality of the community. He reminds us that before all else we are invited to offer hospitality to others - "we never know," he once said to me at visitation encouraging hospitality in the community, "in what guise the Lord comes, don't forget that!". David's hospitality is an example to us all.'

He was a complex character. Mike Lewis ended his obituary for the new Province newsletter: 'I suspect the northern English blood, of which he had a good share, made for a stubbornness and a way of doing things which did not appear to take into account the sensibilities of the less hardy of his brothers. He was not averse to going into battle with Superiors. He went to South Africa after his tertianship in the Philippines as a result of a complicated contretemps with the then Provincial of Zimbabwe and chose to stay in the British Province when he took his final vows. He was never an easy man to approach about taking on a new job, mainly because he was a lot more insecure than many would have thought.'

David's last few years were punctuated with some fraught relationships within the Society. It seems likely that the cancer had somehow affected his life and personality earlier than he or anyone else ever realised. For all the extroversion he was a private individual and did not share easily what was happening inside him. He died on 12th July 2021 at Nazareth House in Johannesburg while recovering from an operation to remove a tumour and had recently tested positive for COVID-19.

He was just three days short of his 69th birthday. On 7th September 2021 he would have celebrated his Golden Jubilee in the Society.

Let the last words be those of Russell Pollitt: David's was a life "lived, despite his weaknesses, in relationship with the Lord Despite his humour he carried the burdens of life, the burdens of a man who had been in authority for a long time – which made it difficult when he was not in authority - his own personal burdens, which we all carry in one form or another, and finally the burden of pain and suffering as he bore illness. We can rest assured that David is free from all burdens, resting with the Lord, whose yoke is easy and burden light".

May he rest in peace.