

Homily for the Vigil Mass for the late Father John J. Moore SJ

Sunday 23 September 2018 at 7:00pm

Chelston Parish, Lusaka

Charles Searson SJ

Readings:

Isaiah 6:1-8 – Whom shall I send? Who shall be our messenger?

Matthew 6:25-33 Look at the birds in the sky. They do not sow or reap or gather into barns. Yet your heavenly Father feeds them..Think of the flowers growing the fields; they never have to work or spin. Yet I assure you that not even Solomon in all his regalia was robed like one of these. Set your hearts on God's Kingdom first and his righteousness and all these other things will be given to you as well.

Fellow mourners – and also because this Mass is a celebration of the life of Father Moore, fellow celebrants. I welcome all of you who have gathered here to pray with us for John. We also connected with the Moore family back in Ireland, especially with his brother Rory in Dublin and the other family members. We are delighted to welcome Rory Moore, John's nephew, who is with us this evening having just travelled to Zambia from Ireland for the funeral.

John was born in Kilmovee, Co Mayo, in the North West of Ireland on 22 April 1927.

At the age of 10 because of his father's work the family moved to Dublin. John was sent to a Jesuit school called Belvedere College to finish his primary school and for this secondary education.

John's father was a civil servant and his mother a teacher, a fact that became apparent later in John's life. His brother Rory lives in Dublin. John's two nephews came to visit him in Zambia last year. Many years ago John was able to visit one of his sisters who lived in Seattle, and more recently he visited his other sister in Australia before she died. Both were academics.

John suffered serious burns when he was about 6 months old. None of us ever saw the scars – John was not one to go swimming. One Jesuit wrote: "I often wondered if this episode contributed to the determination which was an important part of him and which was I think transformed by love, by the Magis."

During a school retreat in which the Retreat Director spoke about the work of the Jesuit missionaries in Hong Kong. John immediately got the notion that he himself would become a Jesuit. At first he wanted to shake off this feeling but the idea persisted. At the age of 18 he entered Society of Jesus on 7th September 1945 aged 18 - lived in the Society for 73 years!

At University College Dublin John began to study Latin and Mathematical Physics. However, in his second year he moved to Science and graduated with a BSc 1st Class honours in Botany

He was ordained a Priest on 31st July 1958

In 1959 he was sent to do his Tertianship (a third spiritual year) in Munster, Westfalen, Germany; he spoke fluent German.

In 1960 John was invited back to University College Dublin to be a Lecturer in Botany. During University breaks he worked for the German Institute for Vegetation Mapping

He made his Final Vows in the Society of Jesus on 15th August 1963.

In 1967 Elected Secretary of the Irish section of the International Biological Programme (IBP)

In 1971 John was awarded a Doctorate of Science due his published work mainly on Vegetation Science. His main work was on the Bogs of Ireland. This work on Vegetation and Botany led him to one of the crucial areas of scientific research and concern in our time. John was a Pioneer in what we now call Ecology and Environmental Science. The recent Papal Letter from Pope Francis called "Laudato Si" was greatly welcomed by John. He said the Science in it was excellent (high praise from Professor Moore). He studied it deeply, taught it when given an opportunity and has made summaries of it which are available for those of unable to read the full document.

In 1972 he was appointed to the Chair of Botany and Head of Department at UCD

In 1974 He was appointed Rector of the Jesuit Juniorate in Monkstown, Co Dublin. This was a special time for him and for the generation of scholastics of that period including people like Jim Culliton, John Dardis, Pdraig Hume and many others.

Right through his academic career in Dublin John showed himself to be not only an outstanding academic and professor but a priest with a keen interest in helping young people on their journey to priesthood.

A fact that is not so well known was that John was also a member of a Catholic Group called Teams of our Lady which support couples in their married life. This side of John was another fitting balance for his academic work and his life in the Jesuit community.

In 1980 he became Superior of Espinal Community in Gardiner Place, inner city Dublin. He spoke fondly of this time in his life which speaks of his concern for the poor and maybe a clue to his next move.

In 1983 John took the surprising step of giving up his work in UCD and volunteering to the Zambia- Malawi Province. At aged 56 John was neither young nor old to make such a move. But he was giving up a lot to move to University of Zambia (UNZA) in Lusaka, Zambia.

When he first arrived at UNZA John showed considerable patience during a lengthy wait for an appointment, meantime happily teaching elementary courses to hordes of undergraduates. His computer skills were also in great demand from PhD students at UNZA who were trying to put together the fruits of their research.

After two years he was appointed first Lecturer and then Professor of Biology at UNZA.

In those days one of my abiding memories is to see John (Professor John Moore) riding his bicycle along the Great East Road from Senanga Road to Kamanga to celebrate Mass in ChiNyanja on a Sunday for the local church. This again speaks volumes of the different concerns in John's life and the radical consistency between his beliefs and his life style.

John in those days lived at St Francis Parish in Thornpark and then at Senanga Road with the Provincial. The Jesuits had been asked to send three men to Malawi to help run St Peter's Major Seminary in Zomba. Two men were identified and sent straight away.

John recounted how Jim McGloin in 1992 as Provincial would talk at breakfast about how he needed to find a third Jesuit to go to St Peter's. John gently suggested a number of times that he could fit the bill before the penny dropped. And so began more than 10 years at St Peter's where he seemed to us like the last Universal Man. He began by teaching Scripture (Old and New Testament) which he sometimes suggested was what he had wanted to devote his time to rather than the biology/botany in which he achieved such eminence.

Little by little, as need arose, he also taught moral theology and then fundamental and systematic. He stepped in a crisis to bring order to the seminary finances creating simple computer programmes suited to the purpose. He also took over the library, quickly reducing it to order. He was much in demand as a spiritual director and on one occasion, with the hastily obtained permission of the bishop, confirmed a candidate in his office on the morning he was ordained deacon!

Normally John did not travel anywhere except for purposes of work. Nevertheless his scientific pursuits brought him to some remote parts of the world. Quite typical was his story of how in exploratory mood he wandered away from base camp somewhere in the Arctic Circle and caused consternation among his companions who set out in search of him fearful

he would be devoured by wolves. In somewhat similar circumstances he was arrested as a spy by gun-toting soldiers at Tezyi-tezyi.

In 2003 Arrupe College which is the Jesuit College of Philosophy and Humanities in Harare was looking to the Province of Zambia-Malawi to send more staff. The Province at the time offered John Moore.

Father Stephen Buckland, the Dean at the time, protested that they were not looking for a septuagenarian but the ZAM Provincial assured him that John was no ordinary 75 year old. And so it proved. John spent 6 very happy years at Arrupe College.

John's computer expertise together with his care for students (especially those who were struggling) not to mention his devotion to teaching and his quiet presence in the community quickly endeared him to everyone. John had been working with computers since the 1960s when he was engaged on the research for his Doctorate.

In 2009 he was missioned to Xavier House which is the Jesuit Novitiate in Lusaka to work as the Province Library and as assistant Province Archivist.

In addition to his work in the Library and in the Archives John delighted in saying Mass for the Novices, for Chelston Parish and for religious communities in the area. A number of people sought out John for Spiritual Direction. He was also popular as a Retreat Director to groups. He also gave the full 30 Day Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius to a number of retreatants over the years.

John was active up to end. When admitted to Coptic Clinic last week most of us were sure that he would soon be out. It was not to be. On Thursday 20th September the Lord called him home.

In this Vigil Mass we are meant to do two things: to pray for John and remember his life. We also -- and this is something John himself would be quick to remind us -- are meant to proclaim our faith in God and the life and death of Jesus Christ.

With John this double task becomes easy. He himself is a living witness to the fact that God calls people to serve him as we heard in Isaiah 6.

We broke into song: "Be Still and Know that I am God. Whom shall I send, O Lord send me...." The whole congregation broke into song thank God for John life.

John lived out in his life this evening's Gospel:

"Think of the flowers growing the fields; they never have to work or spin. Yet I assure you that not even Solomon in all his regalia was robed like one of these. Set your hearts on God's Kingdom first and his righteousness and all these other things will be given to you as well."

May he rest peacefully and joyfully in the arms of Jesus whom he served so well! May John pray for us that we serve each other, the Church and the world as he did.