

The Very Rev John Canon McAllister

Canon John McAllister was well known for his firm commitment to life as a priest, as well as his warmth, wit and generosity.

He was thirty years old when he was sent to the Diocese of Calabar in East Nigeria in 1961.

He was one of several priests from the Archdiocese who volunteered to serve in Africa after Archbishop Gordon Gray generously responded to an appeal from Pope Pius XII for priests to go on mission.

It was a fruitful time which he enjoyed, helping build a church and ministering to the local people.

But it ended in violence.

Prue Maxwell-Stuart was living in the area in 1966 with her husband, a civil engineer, and their two young children.

She recalls: "We attended Mass at the Catholic mission run by Fr McAllister, who became a close friend and spiritual adviser.

"The area was beautiful, quiet and idyllic.

"This was about to change when we heard that Fr McNally, the priest in Bauchi, had been forced to sit on his veranda and watch his parishioners being killed.

"Inevitably, our Mission in Gombe was attacked and burnt down.

"Fr McAllister was ordered to leave by the bishop but refused to go until he had the remainder of his flock safely on trains heading back to the east, paying the fares with his own money.

"Only then did he return to Edinburgh, exhausted and traumatised."

Fr John's sister Margaret said: "I remember looking out the window of our family home at Moira Terrace in Edinburgh and seeing a tramp get off a tram and cross the road towards the house.

"He was wearing a t-shirt, shorts and sandals and had no bag.

“I called my mum and she was horrified to see it was John. He had to flee for his life.

“Today, thankfully, the church is still standing in the village.”

Priesthood

John McAllister was born in Leith on 11 January 1932 and baptised at St Mary, Star of the Sea.

He was the second child of Bernard and Catherine, and brother to Theresa, Ronnie, Marie, Desmond, Margaret and Monica.

He attended Holy Cross Primary in Edinburgh (1938-44) before heading to St Mary’s junior seminary at Blairs (1944-51).

John studied alongside two others who would become priests of the Archdiocese – and great friends of his – Canon Philip Doherty, (who died in 2021) and the late Monsignor Tony McNally (died 2007).

Together they attended Saint-Sulpice seminary in Paris where he received a baccalaureate in Theology (the three men would regularly return to visit Saint-Sulpice later in life) and became fluent in French.

The three men were ordained to the priesthood by Archbishop Gordon Gray at St Mary’s Cathedral in Edinburgh on 2 July 1955.

Fr John, who became known fondly as ‘Fr Mac’ throughout his priesthood, was appointed to St Francis Xavier’s in Falkirk and would serve there from 1955 to 1960.

Upon his return from Nigeria, Fr McAllister served in St Mary’s Cathedral in Edinburgh (1966-69) before being asked to become the founding parish priest of St Paul’s parish in the city’s Muirhouse. He was based there from 1969 to 1979.

He then served the parishes of St Machan’s in Lennoxton (1979-87), St Ninian’s in Edinburgh (1987-91), St Peter in Chains in Inverkeithing (1991-2010), and Ss Peter & Paul in Rosyth and Ss John & St Columba in Rosyth (2005-10).

Lourdes

Fr John inherited a love for Lourdes from his father, who first took him there on pilgrimage when he was 15 years old.

Throughout his life, he was a faithful pilgrim, so much so that he was made an Honorary Chaplain of the Lourdes Sanctuaries. He also served as president of the Association of British Lourdes Pilgrimage Directors.

He spent a lot of time and effort ensuring the success and smooth running of Archdiocesan pilgrimages and was well respected in that role.

His dedication to Our Lady and St Bernadette never dimmed even in his most difficult times as a supported pilgrim and struggling to the altar on his crutches to concelebrate Mass.

Bernadette Barry of the Archdiocesan Lourdes Committee said: "He was fully committed in encouraging young people to experience the joy of helping in Lourdes.

"He was our counsellor, confidante and friend.

"Fr Mac exuded joy, from his warm smile and words of encouragement to his loud and infectious laugh.

"He is a huge loss to the Pilgrimage but he will always be in our hearts."

Fr John enjoyed good liturgical music. While based at St Paul's, he became aware of parishioners Helen and Trish, young twins who were talented singers. They made a special recording of a Hymn called God is Everywhere that was played prior to the Funeral Mass.

He bought them guitars and encouraged them to play at Mass, which they did for many years.

As adults Helen and Trish moved to the States but kept in touch. In the weeks before his death they sang for him in a Facetime call, much to his delight.

For many years Fr John hosted American seminarians to give them experience of running a Parish. Many of them kept in touch with him throughout his life.

As well as having a passion for music, he enjoyed photography, reading and golf.

He loved to travel, frequently going on pilgrimage to the Holy Land and visiting friends in the Netherlands and the US.

Margaret said: "John had a very fulfilled life and also spent a lot of time with the family.

"He baptised all the nieces and nephews and cared for mum and dad very well as they got older, visiting them every week on his day off."

Retirement

John suffered health issues over the years and survived cancer.

Upon retirement he was resident in Musselburgh before finally moving to Leys Park Nursing Home in Dunfermline. He died peacefully in his sleep on Saturday 10 December 2022.

Archbishop Leo Cushley said: "John was priest who always greeted you with a smile, behind which was much courage, experience and determination.

"He served in some very difficult, even dangerous, circumstances early in his priesthood and his tenacity and bravery there earned him much respect.

"He worked in many places in the Archdiocese too, always with energy and commitment.

"He was very faithful to Lourdes throughout his life, and rarely missed a chance to join the diocesan pilgrimage."

Canon John McAllister's Requiem Mass took place at St Margaret's in Dunfermline on 6 January 2023 and he is buried at Hillend Cemetery.

In the homily at the Funeral Mass, Canon James Tracey said: "John was a faithful and loyal friend, a wise and trusted confidante, a man who exuded joy with a warm smile and a loud and infectious laugh. He was a good man and a good priest.

“He lived for the Lord and died in the Lord and now goes to the Lord and can rest from his labours, his good deeds going with him.”

“Thanks be to God,” said Canon McAllister following his Jubilee Mass at Inverkeithing in 2015.

“It is only by His grace, by the Grace of God, that we have made it this long and he’s helped us all the way through.”

The Very Rev John Canon McAllister, 11 January 1932 – 10 December 2022.