

Fr John McEvoy Celebrates Fifty in Fiji by Fr Donal McIlraith



“Do this in memory of me.” Following Christ’s command, on Easter Sunday, April 2, 1972, Bishop John McCormack of Meath ordained John McEvoy and his nine classmates into the priesthood of Christ as Columban missionary priests in Dalgan Park Navan. Later that year, Fr John left for Fiji and plunged into the study of the Fijian language. Then came a series of parish appointments. The first one was in the Columban parish of St Agnes in Suva. His friends from that parish still rally around when he needs them. This was the honeymoon but got him ready for a few tough years in his next Suva appointment, Tamavua. During this time, he had many side trips, at Christmas and Easter, to the outer priestess islands of Kadavu and trips to Peru and Manila to participate in Liberation Theology courses.



One of his most taxing parishes was Vanuakula. This stretches for miles along the Wainimala river Fr John recalls crossing the river – by foot, of course - about 100 times each time he did his parish visitation of the villages. They are all scattered along the river. It would take a week to cover all the villages up the Wainimala.



He first stint as Parish Priest was at Vatukoula, a parish with a large gold mine. These were among his happiest years, he claims. The miners went on strike, and they found a good friend in their parish priest and a home in the presbytery though he was constantly threatened with having his power and water cut off by the Australian mining company “Emperor Gold Mines”.

Then in the 80s, as often happens with Columbans, Fr John was invited to do promotion and vocation work in Ireland for four years. The success of this can be gaged by the fact that the current Parish Priest of Ba here in Fiji, Fr Pat Colgan of Belfast, was recruited by John as was the current Philippine Director, Fr Paul Glynn as well as the current Columban spokesman in Pakistan – Fr Tomas King.



He has the distinction of having been to prison! After the Fiji Coup of 1987, he and fellow Columbans, Frs Paul Tierney and Tom Rouse, happened to be at an anti- coup rally in Suva. Eighteen were arrested and imprisoned in the central Suva Police barracks. This led to about 13 Court appearance during the next 12 months. The verdict was that the 18 involved were guilty of unlawful assembly but then the judge dismissed the case.



It was while he was Parish Priest of the huge parish of Ba that I recall visiting him. It was just after Cyclone Kina had come through Fiji in Dec-Jan 1992-93. This was the second largest cyclone to hit the country, (with 23 deaths) after Cyclone Winston in 2016. Unfortunately, it swept through the main island resulting in the damage or destruction of the two major bridges in Ba and Sigatoka. Most of the damage was done in early January 1993. A few weeks after this, with a Marist sister, I travelled to Ba to see how John was faring. The

bridge was down but small boats were ferrying people across the Ba River. When we reached the parish house, it was a mess, presided over by Fr John who was trying to organize help for those in need in the parish. We were his first outside visitors. He was very happy to see us, and we experienced good Irish hospitality despite his having no light or water. We got a rundown on the damage done to the various villages near the river. After few hours we were ferried back to our car and left him to get on with the organization.

Then in 1996 he was appointed the Columban Director the Fiji Region. He held this job for two terms, 6 years in all. During his 1st term as Director, he purchased a site from the Archdiocese and organised the building of our present Columban Central House here in Nasese, where we moved from the parish of Tamavua to this house in 1997.

At the end of his 2nd term of office as Director it was Ireland again in 2001, first to be the Farm Manager in Dalgan Park where he oversaw the installation of a most modern computerized milking parlour capable of milking 32 cows at a time instead of the old machine that could only accommodate 8 cows at a time. Farm tractors and machinery were also updated to meet the changing farming needs of the day.

He then returned to pastoral work and was the resident priest in Mucklagh for the next 8 years. Mucklagh is apart of Rahan Parish outside Tullamore. He not only organised the re-roofing of the St Colman's church Mucklagh and clearing the debt (Half a million Euros) in about 2 years, but he also had major renovations done on the other two churches in the parish, St Carthage Church Rahan and The Island Church. While in Mucklagh he was able to spend time with his mother in her final years who died in 2013 in her 99th year.

In 2015 he came back to Fiji. He was appointed to St Pius X Church Raiwaqa, the Suva Columban Parish. He did extraordinary work, renovating the parish, physically and spiritually. Once more he was chosen to be Director for the third and fourth time. He is one of few Columbans who was Director or leader four times.

He refused any fuss, so we quietly celebrated his Golden Jubilee at the Columban central house. We had Mass and a small celebration with the Columbans in the Suva area. May the Lord give you many more years of fruitful labour in his vineyard, John- even after you finish this job on the 23rd November next. *Ad multos annos.*