HOMILY FOR GRAVESIDE FUNERAL SERVICE OF FR JOE MCGOVERN, RIP, 1/5/2020

Fr Joe was born in Knotty Ash, Liverpool, into a family of fishmongers, one of six children. At the age of 18 he carried out his National Service, and at the age of 20 goes into the Insurance Industry before applying to be accepted to study for the priesthood which he does at St Sulpice Seminary in Paris. In 1957 he was ordained and began his ministry as an assistant priest for a short time first at St Barnabas Cathedral and then at Holy Trinity, Newark, before serving at St Bernadette’s, Scunthorpe, St Mary’s, Grimsby and Holy Cross, Hucknall. As Parish Priest he worked in Holy Spirit parish, Dronfield, St Teresa’s Warsop, Corpus Christi, Clifton and St Pius X, Narborough before retiring, through ill health, in 1998. It was in 1975 while Parish Priest in Warsop that Fr Joe got a new housekeeper, Vera Murphy, who was to go on to remain as his housekeeper throughout the rest of his active parish ministry and into retirement, almost 45 years of faithful and generous service that I would today, on behalf of the diocese, like to publically acknowledge and thank her for. I know from visiting Fr Joe in Coventry, where after Warsop, they both retired to in 2006, how appreciative he continued to be for all that Vera did to look after him. I’m grateful too for the generosity and support of Vera’s family, particularly her sons.

What isn’t so well known about Fr Joe is his 7 years working as a priest in Nigeria between 1968 and 1974, and I’m grateful to Tim Connery for providing me with this fascinating account of those years in a tough posting called Wukari, to which access was difficult and where the 2 principal local tribes were sworn enemies. Fr Joe took on this challenge with his customary selflessness, diplomacy and commitment. A favourite saying of his was, ‘I will try m’ best. His parish was the size of Wales, with many out-stations scattered miles into the bush and accessible only on foot. Tim describes Fr Joe leaving the Mission House on a Monday morning, his old Datsun pick-up loaded with Mass equipment, gear for sleeping in local huts, other supplies, and often one or two passengers getting a free lift. The plan was to spend a week or ten days out in the bush saying Mass here and there and fulfilling all the other priestly roles, but often he would arrive back exhausted a little earlier, because the pick up had broken down or the road was impassable through flooding or broken bridges. Fr Joe, however, never complained but rather thought all this so worth- while because he could see the joy his visits brought to people deprived of Mass for so long. He established such a reputation as a wise and just man that all sorts of local disputes were brought to him for final arbitration. His quiet utterly modest manner won over many hearts and his legacy there in Wukari will always be remembered.

Fr Joe had asked that Fr Michael Eastwood preach at his Funeral Mass, and he will fulfil that promise at the Memorial Mass we will celebrate a little later in the year when we are able to gather again for Mass. I thought it appropriate however that, on this occasion, we hear a little of Fr Michael’s homily:

‘On an occasion like this, we have the opportunity to think about our faith, particularly to focus on areas of our faith that are so familiar to us. We have all seen a cross with the figure of Christ on it many times in our lives…A couple of years ago I was given a picture of the Cross drawn on a very delicate piece of paper. I treasure this picture because of the words written underneath the Cross, I DID THIS FOR YOU. I find these five words so moving because of what they are saying to us. Jesus didn’t die with a faceless mass of people in mind. He died with each one of us in mind – I did this for YOU. Before each of us was conceived in our mother’s womb, Jesus as the Son of God, knew, loved and died for us because He loves each one of us. That is THE point. Jesus would want us to remember all the pain and suffering surrounding his crucifixion and death, but he would want us to remember most of all His motive behind it all, the motive of personal love. If we focus on this fact frequently, it will surely prompt us to respond by leading our lives as Jesus wants us to lead them. Throughout his life Fr Joe tried to do his best and his last words to Vera who, when he had to go to hospital, was encouraging him to get well and back home soon, were these: ‘I’ll do my best.’ May I suggest that we remember Fr Joe’s words…and begin each day by giving genuine meaning to those words, ‘Lord, I will do my best TODAY. Please help me.’ If we live out those words each day, we can confidently look forward to being invited to enjoy the eternal life and happiness of our heavenly home, where we will be united with this Jesus of love, with Mary, our spiritual mother, with all the angels and saints, and reunited with those who have gone before us. I end by applying the words of this Hebrew proverb to Fr Joe, ‘say not in grief: he is no more, but live in thankfulness that he was’.

Eternal rest grant unto him O lord, and let perpetual light shine upon him. May he rest in peace. AMEN.