

Fr. Francis Mulligan R.I.P.

Reflections on the Life and Death of a great Salesian Missionary.

Death came like a thief in the night to Fr Francis Mulligan, and yet, if Fr Mulligan himself could have chosen the place and the manner of its coming, I doubt if he would have chosen differently. His family and friends say he had always wanted to be buried in Ireland, but the odds against this must have been very great. Fr Mulligan had faced death many times in many difficult and dangerous situations in Iran, that strife-torn country where he laboured so generously and heroically for most of his life.

**"No one has ever
seen God. But if we
love one another,
God will live in us
and his love will
be complete in us."**

— John 4:12

He arrived in Ireland on the afternoon of Friday 4th August, and after calling to see some cousins, he had gone to visit old friends Niall and Felicity Holahan. He had shared many trials and dangers with them in Iran where Mr Holahan was Irish Charge d'Affaires. It was in their home that he collapsed and died about 10.00 p.m. that Friday night. It seemed fitting, somehow, that he should end his days among friends who represented the link between Ireland and Iran, the two countries he loved so dearly.

The sudden nature of his death must surely have been as he would have wished it to be, for he was such an active no-stop person that it would have been very difficult for him to undergo a long and debilitating illness. His cross had been his work and the perils that accompanied it. He has borne it heroically and cheerfully.

Fr Mulligan was born and reared in North East England, but his roots were in Monaghan. He loved Monaghan dearly and felt very much at home among his many cousins there. Whenever they suggested to him in fun that he wasn't "really" an Irishman, he was quick to assert his Irishness, in his strong Geordie accent! He was on his way back home to Monaghan when he was called to his true home.

Francis Mulligan went to Shrigley as an aspirant in 1934 at the tender age of 12. He did his novitiate in Beckford 1938-39, and after a few months in Cowley, went to the Holy Land, together with two other young Irish Salesian missionaries, James Cummins and Kevin Byrne. This hazardous war-time journey across the channel and down through France to Italy, then by ship from Trieste via Cyprus and Greece to Haifa in Israel, was the forerunner of many perilous missionary journeys by

land, sea and air. St Paul must be proud of him, if not a little jealous! Fr Mulligan was ordained in Bethlehem in 1946 and, apart from a restless year or so in England, the remainder of his life was spent in the Middle East, most of it at Abadar on the Persian Gulf. His ministry was mainly to expatriates working with oil companies in the gulf. He plane-hopped around Iran, celebrating Mass for small groups of Catholics, officiating at weddings and baptisms. In 1980 all catholic Missionaries were expelled from Iran, but since Fr Mulligan was at home on holiday at the time, he blandly presumed that the expulsion did not apply to him! He went back and continued to serve his people, even though he knew very well that by doing so he was putting his life in grave danger.

He carried on for another six years during which time the authorities made things progressively more difficult for him. Eventually he was compelled to leave when they tried to force him to work as a spy for the police, but he always nourished the hope of returning to Iran. After a visit to Ireland and England and a short period working at the catacombs in Rome, he went back to the Middle East, this time as chaplain to a hospital at Damascus in Syria. Fr Mulligan was one of those people who are always on the move - "a hundred miles an hour man" was how one of his nephews described him. Those two years as hospital chaplain seemed to slow him down a lot. He became much more reflective. Perhaps it was the Lord's way of preparing him for death.

He left Syria early in July of this year and spent a month in England with his family. One of his three surviving sisters was celebrating her golden wedding anniversary. It made him very happy to meet all the family assembled for that occasion. He had looked forward to meeting the Irish-based half of the family but it was not to be, though they all assembled in Warrenstown for his funeral.

The funeral mass and burial service were simple and impressive. Archbishop William Bardon, O.P., formerly Archbishop of Teheran and now retired in Tallaght, a life-long friend of Fr Mulligan, gave a most inspiring homily. He spoke of Fr Mulligan's fearless faith, his unwavering trust in Divine providence, his priestly zeal and his devotion to Our Lady. Those who knew Fr Mulligan recognised the man, and those who had not met him felt they knew him, so beautifully did Archbishop Bardon portray him. Twenty-three priests concelebrated and the Warrenstown chapel was filled with his many friends - a remarkable tribute to a man who had never lived or worked in Ireland! He was laid to rest beneath the Calvary in the Warrenstown cemetery, and his sisters and relatives couldn't help but recall that his first mass was celebrated on Calvary 43 years ago. Again, he couldn't have planned it better!

May God be good to his faithful and loyal servant!

Michael Smyth SDB

Know that I am with you always:
yes, even to the end of time.

Matthew 28:20