The Life of Bishop John Robert Osmers, 1935 – 2021.

Bishop John Osmers, who died in Lusaka, Zambia on 16 June, was born in New Zealand in 1935. After university he worked on a sheep farm to raise enough funds to travel to South Africa, having been inspired by Fr Trevor Huddleston’s book “Naught for your Comfort”. In 1958 he spent 6 months travelling through the country by motorbike learning at first-hand about the apartheid system, and had his first meeting with the ANC. He stayed in Johannesburg with Fr Huddleston, who advised him to consider offering himself for the priesthood.

He moved to London for further studies and in 1959 he became an ordinand at the College of the Resurrection, Mirfield. His curacy was in the coal-mining and steel milling village of Rawmarsh, near Huddersfield, and from there he moved in 1965 to become a rural priest in Lesotho, then known as Basutoland, a small mountain kingdom enclosed by South Africa. There he became aware of apartheid in the church itself, and the need for the church to work for change.

He worked in two parishes in Lesotho. The first was Quthing in the far south where he was responsible for building a priest’s house and a new parish church building, plus establishing four other churches in his parish and taking over two other parishes. After eight years he was responsible for over 70 congregations, most only accessible by horseback. He became involved with the Student Movement in 25 secondary schools, and through that a member of the University Christian Movement in South Africa. This had three main thrusts: opposing apartheid, supporting women’s rights, and rural development.

He moved in 1973 to his second parish of Masite, a large and well-established parish and the home of the contemplative Sisters of the Society of the Precious Blood. The parish required monthly visits, half of them on horseback, to eleven large mountain congregations and eight church primary schools and a secondary school. He took nurses on tour with him from the church clinic started by the Sisters, establishing five outstations for primary health care for the under-fives.

In 1976 young South African exiles came into Lesotho in large numbers following the Johannesburg Soweto student uprising. Many needed to continue their education, and John found places for them in local schools. After South Africa attained democratic Government some would be cabinet ministers, ambassadors and leaders in Government institutions. Some would die in combat in the ANC army. They wanted political education, and he helped them with publications from the UK International Defence and Aid Fund, and the ANC magazine “Sechaba.” His support for the exiles was disliked immensely by the South African authorities, who saw him as a white priest assisting what they described as black ‘communist agitators’.

In July 1979 the South African security sent a bomb concealed in a parcel of 100 “Sechaba” magazines, which blew off his right hand and the front part of his legs. There were six people in the room when it exploded, but fortunately none were killed. He needed expert skin grafting in Queen Mary hospital in London on the extensive leg injuries he has suffered, and then returned to his work in Masite. The attack made him aware that the work he was doing in supporting the young exiles aligning with the ANC was important, important enough to be killed for it, and consequently he should continue even more strongly in the future.

The following year after visiting a Lutheran pastor friend in East Germany and friends in the UK he was told he could not return to Lesotho. To John it was much worse than being bombed, being totally unexpected, and overnight he lost the work he so much valued and enjoyed. Only much later did he learn from the ANC President Oliver Tambo that his expulsion came from pressure on Lesotho from the South African Government.

He was invited to stay with the CR fathers at St Katherine’s Royal Foundation in East London. Having few clothes to wear, he lined up with homeless people for second- hand clothes at the nearby “Crisis at Christmas,” being taken there by Fr Mark Tweedy, CR, always a good friend, as was Fr Aelred Stubbs, CR who gave him valuable counselling. He stayed also with Fr Peter Wheatley a former Mirfield student and vicar of Holy Cross church near King’s Cross station, and later Bishop of Edmonton. The ANC Headquarters in Penton Street was close by, and he enjoyed helping with their publicity work. He spent some months in New Zealand where he was invited to assist the mobilization against the Springbok rugby tour in 1981. Massive New Zealand opposition to the tour made a big impact on both white and black South Africans.

In 1981 he went to work in Botswana at the invitation of Archbishop Khotso Makhulu. The South African Government urged the Botswana Government to remove him, but instead they supported him, and he remained for eight years as a rural priest, mostly in the parish of Molepolole. He continued his support for the ANC and was the only member who did not go underground after a South African commando raid in 1985 killed a number of South Africans and Botswanans. In 1988 a South African death squad came looking for him, believing him to be responsible for ANC sabotage in the Transvaal. He had to leave at a day’s notice and moved to Zambia where he was welcomed as a Chaplain to the ANC by Oliver Tambo and other leaders. The ANC in exile had its headquarters in Lusaka with 3000 ANC cadres, the new South African Government-in-waiting.

His bombing in 1979 had led the ANC to see that the Church could be an ally in the freedom struggle, and the liberation movement set up the “Church Front”, with church activists working for democratic change. The leader was Thabo Mbeki, and another member was Fr Michael Lapsley SSM, a fellow New Zealander who suffered a letter bomb attack in 1990 causing him to lose both hands and an eye. John was part of the ANC Chaplaincy in Lusaka for five years, taking funerals of cadres at St Peter’s Church Libala, and at the Holy Cross Cathedral, some of them killed by enemy agents. He visited ANC cadres in prison, the sick, and families who came from South Africa to visit their sons and daughters.

When ANC cadres returned to South Africa after 1991 he remained in Zambia to assist the Zambian church, as the church had few senior priests. As Lusaka Diocesan Training Chaplain he often visited the remote rural region of subsistence maize farmers of Eastern Zambia, part of the diocese largely neglected. He held training sessions for the clergy and church leaders under the trees, and the Mothers’ Union worker and youth leader accompanying him also gave lessons. In 1995 the region of seven parishes with about eighty congregations became the new Diocese of Eastern Zambia, and he was asked by the people there to be their first bishop. He was the only person nominated, the election finished in about fifteen minutes, and he said it seemed God’s will that he should accept.

The new diocese had six elderly priests who had been former catechists on the Zimbabwean mines, and two deacons. There was no bishop’s house or office, and only an old Toyota Hillux that had to be pushed to start. Good progress was made, with eventually nine priests trained at the Seminary, and six evangelists, dedicated youth and Mothers Union workers, active church councils and yearly diocesan synods. They established boreholes and maize hammer mills at all church centres for the local communities, and congregational HIV projects. When John handed over to his successor in 2002 there were eleven parishes, with an average of nine congregations each, and a largely self-supporting diocese. His successor Bishop William Mchombo says “He was loved by all, and he never talked down to anyone, young or old, make or female. He was the epitome of selfless sacrificial leadership”.

As a retired bishop he spent five years as Rector of St John’ s Seminary Kitwe training twelve ordinands for a three-year in-house diploma course. He then became an assistant bishop in Lusaka Diocese, and an assistant priest at Lusaka Cathedral, with a ministry to refugees, especially those from Rwanda.

With the help of family and friends he was involved for over twenty years with refugee tertiary education, especially in the medical and education fields. It was a joy to him to be invited to the graduation parties of those he been able to help with their studies. At Rwandan refugee church events he was welcomed as their “father.” John said in 2015 that it was a privilege to be in Zambia for twenty-seven years, an oasis of peace in a former turbulent region.

In 2010 he was given the Companion of Merit of New Zealand by the Queen, equivalent to the CBE, for “service to the Anglican Church.” In 2012 the New Zealand Anglican Church paid his airfare to Wellington for a retrospect of New Zealand’s opposition to apartheid. He received the ANC Centennial Award, “to mark an exceptional contribution to the international campaign against apartheid.” In 2013 the South African Broadcasting Service broadcast a 45-minute documentary on his life, in which he was glad to pay tribute to Archbishop Trevor Huddleston. In 2016 Archbishop Thabo Makgoba decorated Bishop John with the ACSA’s Archbishop’s Award for Peace with Justice.

In an interview he described himself as a priest of the church “who wanted to work for individual salvation and also social transformation. We need to understand God’s love both personally and also as social justice”. As an example, he said that it had been hard to preach about ‘love’ in Lesotho when marriage and family life were being destroyed by the migrant labour system. He said that men worked almost their whole lives far from their families to produce the wealth of so-called white South Africa. He believed one needed to change the whole system, so human love, a sign of God’s love, could be become a reality.

The Diocese of Eastern Zambia named their newly consecrated Diocesan Centre the ‘Bishop John Osmers House’, and although its official opening had to be postponed from June 2020 because of the pandemic Bishop John was able to travel to Chipata for the revised date in April 2021. He was able to witness its commissioning by President Edgar Lungu and gave a speech which proved to be his farewell to the Diocese, in front of people from all around Eastern Province, other parts of the country, and Malawi.

Bishop William ended his eulogy at Bishop John’s funeral service in Lusaka with the words of St Paul in his second letter to Timothy, chapter 4, verses 6 – 8:

“Bishop John’s life was being poured out throughout his life, a life of sacrifice. He fought a good fight and finished the race. But like Paul, it is not so much that Bishop John has finished his race but that he had been faithful to his Lord”.

Bishop John’s ashes will remain in the Cathedral of the Holy Cross in Lusaka until such time as they can be taken to St Luke’s Cathedral, Msoro, in the Diocese of Eastern Zambia where they will be interred.

*With acknowledgement to Bishop John’s own account of his life “Fifty years’ challenge in Southern and Central Africa” written in March 2015; and to Bishop William Mchombo’s eulogy at Bishop John’s funeral service in Lusaka on 21 June 2021.*

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