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Remembering Fr Mattie Grogan: A Man of the Soil

Gerald Fitzgerald

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A Man of the Soil

Mattie Grogan, like Jesus before him, was someone whose thoughts, memories and plans never strayed far from the earth. Both were well-rooted, down-to-earth men.

In his teachings, Jesus constantly came back to husbanding the earth. We all remember the great stories he told: “The sower went out to sow his seeds ... There was a farmer who had two sons ... The owner sent men to

Gerald FitzGerald CSSp

work in his vineyard.” We remember the enemy who sowed weeds in a wheat field. We remember Jesus’ frequent references to the harvest, including the story about the farmer who built bigger barns to store his bumper crop.

Jesus never lost his Galilean roots. He was firmly rooted in its landscape, its history, its people. The wheat, the olives, the grapes, the sheep, the goats were the things he thought about and the material from which he wove his wonderful parables.

And as he returned to his place at the right hand of his Father, he remains ever present with us in the Eucharist – “fruit of the earth and work of human hands.” A wonderful reminder to us of where all our food comes from! We must never forget God’s instruction to Adam and Eve – as he cast them out from his garden – to protect, nourish and grow this wonderful planet he has left in our care.

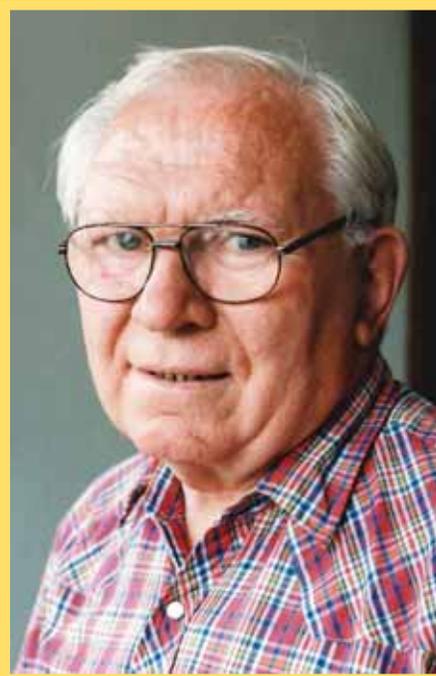
A son of Tipperary

Mattie heeded this instruction. He was born on a farm outside Bansha, a beautiful village in County Tipperary, Ireland. He was a farmer’s child, a son of Tipperary, who remained rooted in this rich heritage until the day he died. And what a cultural heritage this was – as rich as the soil in the famed Golden Vale from which he sprang.

In the twentieth century this environment produced the missionaries, religious sisters, brothers and priests who would spread around the world sowing the seeds in “far foreign fields.”

One of the greatest of these was Bishop Joseph Shanahan CSSp, also a product of a Tipperary farm in Glankeen – “just up the road from Bansha” as Mattie would proudly say. Joe Shanahan, the apostle of the Igbo people, and his handful of Spiritan colleagues sowed the seeds of Christianity on fertile soil. Waves of missionaries, including Mattie and his brother William Pat, watered the fast-growing crop and God gave the increase.

And what an increase! Those little seeds have grown to twenty four dioceses with over seven million Catholics



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and catechumens. Mattie loved Nigeria – its people, the children, the red soil. Wherever he was stationed he soon created a garden, loving the challenge of the unfamiliar plants, the unfamiliar soil, the unfamiliar climate. By trial and error his gardens bloomed as did his parishes in Umuahia with hundreds of newcomers being welcomed into the Christian community. When Mattie, his brother, and all his fellow ex-pat missionaries were expelled during the Biafran war, forbidden to return by the victorious federal government, they left behind a living monument to their hard work in the Lord’s vineyard. The strong flourishing church of Eastern Nigeria is rooted in the rich loam of Tipperary.

The solidly rooted faith of their fathers

The stock from which Mattie and Bishop Shanahan and hundreds of other

missionaries sprang was solidly rooted in the faith of their fathers. This unwavering faith was the foundation on which their rich spiritual life and fruitful ministry was built. The Mass, the Breviary, the Rosary were the spiritual tools they used to develop their close relationship with God. But it was never marked with outward signs of piety. These were hardnosed practical men who let their deeds do the talking. Down-to-earth in every sense of the word!

This quality of Mattie was equally demonstrated during his second career – his ministry in Canada. Parishes flourished and gardens grew in Alberta and Ontario. And when the twilight came, as it comes for all, he retired to Laval House on Victoria Park Avenue.

This retirement house was recently built on a half-acre site which was gone to bush. Mattie got his spade and rolled up his sleeves. Soon, in the words of the great Jesuit poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins, “Sheer plod made plough-down sillian shine.” Flowers blossomed, trees bore fruit, a verdant lawn appeared. A living metaphor for Mattie’s fruitful life!

Jesus tells us that unless a seed falls into the ground and dies there is no bearing of fruit. Mattie’s time has now come – harvest-time for the Lord, the gatherer of sheaves; time to return Mattie’s body to the earth he loved so much. Now Mattie is gathered up with his family, with Bishop Joe Shanahan and with all his fellow missionaries who planted and watered in the gardens of the Lord. May he and they enjoy eternal rest and may the souls of all the faithful departed rest in peace. Amen. ■