

13/2017

In memoriam

Xaverian biographical profiles



Fr. Thomas Welsh

16 January 1950 ~ 16 November 2017

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Fr. Thomas Welsh

Mossend (UK)
16 January 1950

Coatbridge (UK)
16 November 2017

In September 1972, the Novice Master, Fr. Piero Lazzarini, thus described the twenty-two year old Thomas Welsh, who was preparing to make his First Profession: «Although he may appear to be timid and reserved, Tommy is a very determined young man, who thinks for himself and does not give in to pressure. He can even be impulsive, with a touch of irritating stubbornness. It is therefor not easy for him to assimilate new ideas, but once he does we can sure that they are well-founded. He is sensitive, courteous and very helpful. He is a young man with a great sense of responsibility and he is very sensitive to social issues. I consider him to be a balanced, convinced and resolute person with a very strong character».

Tom Welsh was the first of eight children (four sons and four daughters) born to Pat and Elizabeth Welsh. He was born on 16 January 1950 in Mossend, Lanarkshire, Scotland.

After attending Holy Family Primary School and Our Lady's High School, Tom was employed as a clerk in the Post Office; in his free time he worked as a volunteer at the Wayside Club, which was founded in Glasgow in 1932 and

was run by the Legion of Mary to help the homeless and people suffering from addiction to alcohol and gambling.

At the Wayside Club he met Fr. Emilio Paloschi, who introduced him to the Xaverian Family, which Tom decided to join on 20 August 1971. The following month, on 8 September 1971, he began novitiate in Glasgow in order to dedicate his life to the Lord's service: this desire was not the expression of a youthful and fleeting enthusiasm. During novitiate, therefore, "he became aware of his personal vocation in relation to the Institute's charism in order to experience its lifestyle and form his mind and heart according to its spirit".

He made his First Profession 1 September 1972 and moved to London, where he studied philosophy and theology at the Missionary Institute London (1972–76), and obtained the STB MA. He also learned "to harmonize study, spiritual formation and the pastoral ministry according to the Xaverian charism".

He made his Final Profession in Glasgow on 3 September 1976. A few months before, on 2 May 1976, he had written to the Regional Direction:

It is almost five years ago that I applied to join the St. Francis Xavier Foreign Mission Society. Now in these days I find myself face to face with Final Profession ... and I am frightened!

I can't help thinking back over these five momentous years. I recall my initial enthusiasm and naivety: how simple and straightforward life seemed then! Of course the good times came to mind immediately but I also, well, remember the problems and personal failings, the crises and the misunderstandings ... when I think about it I realise that these five years haven't been a Utopia. Yet in spite of all the difficulties and problems I have discovered a most wonderful treasure: Jesus Christ, the Way, the Truth and the Life.

It's strange to say but I feel that only now am I capable of reaching beyond the tangible and the transient and experiencing what life is really about. Over these five years I have savoured the eternal: I have met the Risen Lord! If I were to sum up my feelings I think I can claim that I am at peace with the world and with God. I have experienced true happiness and fulfilment and I look forward to the day, hopefully not too distant, when I will commence my active missionary apostolate.

It appears from what I have written that there is an element of contradiction in my thoughts. Contradiction no, but perhaps there is paradox. My life with the Xaverians has taught me what it means to be happy and authentic but at the same time it has brought me to a keener realisation of my unworthiness before my maker.

My vocation is to be a witness to the Risen Christ for all those millions who have never heard of his name. People have to see in my person those

qualities of Love, Service, Humility, Commitment etc., which characterized the earthly life of Christ. This then explains why I feel frightened. Like Jeremiah I stand before God unprepared but willing.

God does not abandon me to work out my choice on my own. He reassures me that it is the weak and the poor who are chosen to confound the great and the mighty. It is especially in this Easter season that the words of the Risen Lord inspire me with confidence: “Do not be afraid, it is I!”.

Spurred on by these thoughts I ask to be accepted for Perpetual Profession in the St. Francis Xavier Foreign Mission Society.

He was ordained priest by Bishop Thompson, in Motherwell Cathedral, Scotland, on 25 June 1977.

He was assigned to the Glasgow community, where he worked in formation and vocation promotion (1977–80), two tasks that are “an integral part of the missionary service” of the Xaverians.

On 6 June 1980, Fr. Tom was assigned to the Xaverian Region of Sierra Leone, West Africa. He served as assistant priest in the Holy Martyrs of Uganda parish, Kabala, in the Diocese of Makeni (1980–84). We can safely say that Fr. Tom Welsh, in compliance with his missionary and religious charism, was “an active protagonist of a humble chapter in the history of God’s Kingdom”.



In August 1984, Fr. Tom, was assigned to the Central Delegation and, in agreement with the General Direction, moved to the Xaverian community of Chicago (USA), to do specialized studies in the fields of Formation and missionary spirituality. At the Loyola University of Chicago he also obtained an MA (1987) and Doctorate (1991) in Religion and Psychotherapy.

During his stay in Chicago, Fr. Tom worked as a resident psychotherapist at the Lutheran General Hospital and as a part-time chaplain at the Mercy Hospital. He also worked with the ecumenical group “Shalom Ministries”, which promotes dialogue and cooperation among the different cultural, religious and ethnic communities of Chicago. For Fr. Tom his studies and work carried were “a fascinating adventure and discovery.

On his return to the Xaverian Region of the United Kingdom in 1991, the Regional Superior wrote to him: «Welcome back to the Region, Tommy. I hope you will be happy among us. You will certainly be able to enrich us with your experience and knowledge, and your zeal in working for the Kingdom of God in the United Kingdom».

Fr. Tom served as missionary animator and formator, first in Preston (1991–97) — where he also worked with the Catholic Caring Services and Church Action on Poverty — and later in London, in the community of Holden Road (1997–99).

He then moved to the Coatbridge community, where he began to work in the fields of “Justice and Peace” and “Global Education” (1999–2004). He served as Regional Superior (1998–2006), parish priest of St. Alphonsus, Glasgow (2001–2009), Director of the “Conforti Institute” (2009–2017), where he helped to initiate many different programs, and as Director of Missio Scotland (2012–2017), the Scottish branch of the Pontifical Mission Societies, in which he put his considerable missionary experience to good use.

Fr. Tom dedicated himself to these commitments as “a good and faithful servant” (*Mt* 25:21), always mindful of the Lord’s teaching: «When you have done all you have been told to do, say: We are useless servants; we have done no more than our duty» (*Lk* 17:10).

Tom took part in the XVII General Chapter in Italy, in August 2017, but, after his return to the United Kingdom, his ongoing battle with his health problems continued. He was admitted to St. Andrew’s Hospice, where he died on 16 November 2017, the feast day of St. Margaret of Scotland.



On 15 January 2013, the Scottish Parliament invited Fr. Tom Welsh to address its members during its “Time for Reflection”:

A teacher notices a little girl scribbling frantically. The teacher asks the girl: “What are you doing?” The girl replies: “I’m drawing a picture of God”. The teacher retorts: “Don’t be daft. Nobody knows what God looks like”. The girl responds: “Well, they will do when I’m finished”.

We often need or meet people who show us the face of God, who let us know what God is like. One such figure is Martin Luther King, who was born on this day in 1929. Through his short life, which tragically ended on 4 April 1968, he has become celebrated as an icon of black emancipation and universal solidarity and justice.

King’s greatness was rooted in his faith. Overcoming years of “unrelenting doubts”, he concluded that the Bible has “many profound truths which one cannot change”.

At 20 years of age, he entered seminary and was ordained a Baptist minister. The impetus for King’s struggle for black emancipation and his hunger for universal justice and equality were rooted in the epic biblical narrative of the exodus. In the exodus event, Almighty God stands beside

the poor and the homeless, the marginalised and the vulnerable, in all places and in all times. God is saving his people in this world, in human history.

The struggle continues. As King reminds us: “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere”.

The banking crisis and the recession alert us to the limits of the market and the state to bring about the Christian vision of God’s reign of justice, peace and integrity of creation that is universal and inclusive.

King was an inveterate coalition builder. For him, science and religion were complementary: “Science investigates; religion interprets. Science gives knowledge; religion gives wisdom. Science deals with facts; religion deals with values. The two are not rivals”.

Benedict XVI, during his United Kingdom visit in 2010, asserted that faith and reason need each other to avoid the dangers of ideology on the one hand and fundamentalism on the other.

King was convinced that “we must live together as brothers or perish together as fools”. King dedicated his life to mobilise all people of good will to work together for fundamental changes to the political and economic inequalities and injustices that abound. On this day, he enjoins all people of good will to live his dream: “Free at last, free at last. Thank God Almighty we are free at last”.

Fr. Domenico Calarco SX

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