

Bro. John Phillips FMS – January 1, 1932 – August 31, 2014

Brother John was born on January 1, 1932 of William and Annie Phillips and entered the Marist Juniorate in Dumfries on 28 August 1944 – so he was a Marist Brother for 60 years and 2 days. He studied French and Spanish at the University of Glasgow and then started a teaching ministry that took him from Wolverhampton, through Enugu, Nigeria (during the Biafran War) to Bamenda.

He got to Sacred Heart College, Bamenda in 1969 and became Principal the following year – a post he was to hold until 1987 when he re-turned to the UK. During his 17 year as Principal supported by out-standing staff, the soul of which was the Marist Brothers, he built an institution of scholarship and youth formation that stood out for the consistency of results and the character of the school - in Archbishop Paul Verdzekov's words "a synthesis of faith and life". Sa-He-Co came to epitomize excellence through endeavour. Students were challenged to try things not because they were possible but because no-one had done them. Records began to fall, first 100% pass, then the highest scores in specific subjects, then straight As in all subjects - first in the sciences, then across disciplines.

Excellence was not limited to scholarship and the school fostered a love of learning and endeavour in all disciplines always with the intention of being the best one can be. One could hear that in the choir that was the reason for many a pilgrimage to the school chapel, or the plays ("Joseph", and "Oliver"), or football (soccer), basketball, volleyball, athletics, general knowledge quiz, and yes, "House Feast", that annual opportunity to meet and celebrate with our sister school, Our Lady of Lourdes Secondary School. The intent was always the education of the whole - body, mind and spirit - and the development of a life-long curiosity and yearning for knowledge.

Brother John recognized that a meritocracy like Sa-He-Co could quickly become self-selecting to the class of society that could afford it with a number of intolerable consequences - (a) the less well-off need education, arguably more than the well-off and so good education should not be denied them; (b) reduced diversity in the student population inevitably leads of a diminution of the quality of education for all. They worked hard at this, with the result that a school that might naturally have become homogeneous, was on the contrary, very diverse. Within the school we had Catholics, Presbyterians, Baptists, Muslims. People from virtually all provinces in Cameroon and different social strata - the children of businessmen, ministers, civil servants, governors, teachers, farmers, tailors and seamstresses... the 1% and the 99%. I was part of the 99% and would naturally not have gone to Sa-He-Co but through outreach and the support of scholarships, I too could attend. We all wore black, white and red. Same dorm, Same refectory. Same games. Same classes. Same struggles. Same victories. This diversity benefited all students giving each one the opportunity to mingle and collaborate with people they would otherwise not get to know and in the process resetting expectations and ambitions and benefiting all. He was a brilliant French teacher who could unlock language faculties in students who had long given up all hope; a disarming sense of humour that he used with comic timing to get serious points across in

class and a Religious Knowledge teacher like no other... one that welcomed rather than dismissed doubts and accepted that just sitting in front of the Eucharist was prayer enough.

After 18 years he decided he loved Sacred Heart College too much to feed it “a diet of stale bread” and he returned to the UK handing over as Principal to Brother Joseph McKee, with Bro Norbert Simms as Assistant Principal. The Fon of Mankon awarded him the Title of Tabufor. On his return to the UK, he was awarded the MBE Medal (Member of the Order of the British Empire) for services to education in Cameroon.

He subsequently spent time in Uganda with an Irish Catholic Relief organization called Concern, charged with the education of orphans whose parents had died of AIDS. Following that he went to Kumasi, Ghana to help educate future Marist Brothers from several countries for three years before being summoned to Rome to serve as Superior of the Generalate community there and perform Spanish-English translation. Three years later he was sent to Belgium to coordinate communications for the Marist Province of Britain, Ireland, Belgium, Holland and Germany, before returning to Glasgow where he lived until his passing away on 31 August 2014.

He summed up his time at Sa-He-Co thus: “But I want you all to know that I still stand by what I have said above - that the happiest days of my life have been the years I spent in Sacred Heart College, Bamenda”. The last line of his send-off speech from Sacred Heart College was from a song we sung often together: “All I ask of you is for-ever to remember me as loving you”.

Today we remember a teacher, leader, pastor, friend for years of self-less service and dedication to Cameroon and to us. For encouraging, and inspiring us to set challenging targets and then to raise the bar again once we hit them. We are grateful for the ways in which he touched our lives, and that we were part of the 18 happiest years of his life, and we will always remember fondly the music and musicals, especially Joseph which he loved so much, and we’ll think about him each time we hear the number: “there’s one more angel in heaven”.