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## Spiritans for Today: Willie Jenkinson, C.S.Sp. Portrait of a Missionary

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Brendan Carr, C.S.Sp., previously spent seventeen years in Angola and Southern Africa where he worked in pastoral and community development, adult faith development, directing a minor seminary, and area co-coordination for relief of displaced persons during the civil war. He served as pastor in the Kimmage Manor parish in Dublin for seven years; he was on the last Spiritan provincial leadership team in Ireland. He is a Board member of the Immigrant and Asylum-seeker Support Service (Spirasi) and of Misesan Cara (Agency for funding of missionary development). Until recently a chaplain at Mountjoy prison in Dublin, he awaits a new assignment following a sabbatical.

*To live is to change, and to be perfect is to have changed often*

## Spiritans for Today: Willie Jenkinson, C.S.Sp. Portrait of a Missionary.

*“Then learn from that harmless barrage that whatever is given  
Can always be reimagined, however four square,  
Plank-thick, bull-stupid and out of its time  
It happens to be.”*

The Irish poet, Seamus Heaney,<sup>1</sup> in “The Settle Bed”<sup>2</sup> images an old piece of furniture. It may be a family heirloom or a symbol of the past that seems somewhat out of place in our present, yet had served a family faithfully. It carries an emotional attachment but is a burden too, an “un-get-roundable weight.”

Heaney doesn’t suggest jettisoning it, but carves that resonant line “whatever is given can always be reimagined.” It is a metaphor that might be used by a psychologist attempting to lead a client to accept the “given” while reshaping life’s narrative around it. Or by a preacher who continuously tangles with the Scriptures to reimagine and refresh the Gospel message to a reflective community. Or by a missionary who stokes the embers of cultural traditions to rekindle a fire for contemporary heat.

For Heaney, steeped in the culture of small farming stock in his native Co. Derry with a reverence for its people and traditions but having grown through his own education and decades of religious and political conflict, it was a poetic allegory for his experience of embracing inevitable change while remaining true to one’s roots.

### A Fellow Companion



William Aloysius Jenkinson, C.S.Sp., (1923–2016), known as Willie and as Bill to family and friends, trod a similar path – as a man and a Spiritan – engaging change, not poetically but spiritually and theologically. He continually sought to reshape and rethink *Missio Dei*<sup>3</sup> as lived in the communities and communion of the church, in Religious Missionary Congregations, and in his personal life. He was drawn to John Henry Newman as he recognized in him a kindred spirit - one who sought to give meaning to the evolution of thought and praxis that is not only necessary but inescapable in a human life and in the life of communities and institutions. “To live is to change, and to be perfect is

to have changed often”<sup>4</sup> or “to live well is to have changed often,” he would say shunning any attempt at perfection. This was quoted in the homily by Brian McLaughlin, C.S.Sp., at Willie’s funeral mass in Kimmage Manor on 26<sup>th</sup> November 2016.<sup>5</sup>

Like Newman, Willie was motivated by a sense of mission that had at its core a truth-telling about the reality of the human person and the relationship with God as grasped through what has been given or already experienced. He would have seen in Newman an integrity and care for what he spoke about. Faith talk cannot be cheap or populist but must be disciplined, honest, and reasonable: “we can believe what we choose. We are answerable for what we choose to believe.”<sup>6</sup>

### **A Time to be Born**

The new Irish State came into being in the early 1920s just before Willie’s birth in a small market-gardening community in the rural hinterland then supplying Dublin city’s fruit and vegetables. Ireland had just gone through a decade of turmoil in which so many of its young men had fought and died in Europe in World War I. Their sacrifice generated little popular sympathy at home coinciding as it did with the push for Irish independence which culminated in insurrection and an independence war, a treaty of partition of the island of Ireland, and the establishment of a new State followed by a short but bitter civil war. Dealing with conflict and division is not far from the psyche of any Irish person.

Reflecting on Willie’s life gives us, Spiritan missionaries in the Spiritan Congregation, an opportunity to see, through the life of one, what might be appreciated by all in our life and mission.

*The tensions between the interests of the home community and the impulse to cross boundaries and seek a new reality of mission through intercultural community living*

Willie is but one tile in the mosaic of the Congregation and its Province of Ireland that enriched the lives of many people and contributed to shaping our Spiritan reality. Many others could be identified and focused upon, as Seán Farragher, C.S.Sp., did so well in *Irish Spiritans Remembered*. The attraction is that the Spiritan life of Willie Jenkinson spanned that of many of the living members of the Province of Ireland and that he was a principal witness to changes that shaped the reality of Irish Spiritans today. Also, the context of division that the Province of Ireland faced in the early 1970s is repeated today in many of the new circumscriptions. The tensions between the interests of the home community and the impulse to cross boundaries and seek a new reality of

mission through intercultural community living which is the challenge of today, is reflected in the challenge of that time in Ireland.

Willie saw the “winds of change” that swept away colonialism and brought independence to the African continent. He accompanied closely the Second Vatican Council that brought momentous change in the church ushering in dialogue with other religions, the evolution of the mission of the laity, the implementation of liturgical reform, and the growth of the congregation on African soil.

Change was the heartbeat of peoples and events when he was in his prime. It was liberating and enriching for many parts of the developed world, but much of the geo-political and economic change would be disastrous for others in the developing world. In Europe the hardship of war and its frugal aftermath gave birth to the revolution of the 1960s, a rejection of old formality and codes, and a desire for a liberty of spirit in education, politics, sexuality, and music. This revolution would impact the church. With Vatican II as a motivation, Christians, including religious and seminarians, would seek new ways to be authentic and to answer the call of the age. Willie Jenkinson viewed all this with a keen eye, not in condemnation but with a sense of challenge to understand “the signs of the times.”<sup>7</sup>

### **The Formative Years**

Completing his secondary studies at O’Connell’s Christian Brothers’ School in Dublin’s inner-city, Willie set out from his home for Kilshane to enter the Spiritan Novitiate in September 1943. He brought with him his simple and grounded lifestyle with its practical faith of “loving the God he cannot see in the people he can see” (cf. 1 John 4:20).

Willie was the third of seven children. His only sister Marie followed him as the fourth child, and they remained very close all their lives. In his latter days in Marian House Nursing Home at Kimmage, he would speak to her almost every evening while he was able. The second last child was Joseph who was born with Downs Syndrome and the youngest of the family, Noel, was born deaf and Willie observed his parents adapt to these unexpected realities in their lives. He, as part of that family, lived its dynamic, cooperating in attentive sensitive ways to ensure that those who were in need, or whose needs were more obvious,

*This sensitivity to the vulnerable was demonstrated in many later circumstances when dealing with needy or powerless individuals*

were protected, loved, and cared for. This sensitivity to the vulnerable was demonstrated in many later circumstances when dealing with needy or powerless individuals.

In the experience of early family life, Willie captured the skills of loving interaction and was instilled with the values that would remain with him and determine his interpersonal and professional relationships all his life. He learned the ways of responsibility and care in helping his parents with the shared tasks of family life. The experience of those early years was the training ground for all that was to follow - dependability and care for the wellbeing of others. It stayed with Willie and marked his ministry and leadership. Trustworthiness with creative initiative and good humor he saw as the hallmark of good community, something he learned in his home from his first experience of community.

### **A Cherished Uncle**

His many nieces and nephews paint a picture of their “Uncle Willie” as an interested and compassionate guide and companion to them from childhood to their own adult and family lives. Ann, his niece, would say “it is not what he said but how he was with us.”

In moments of sadness he was the first to appear or be in touch and shared as many of the extended family’s joyful moments as he could. He was an integral part of the backdrop to their lives and an essential figure in their family narrative. He had a lovely singing voice and graced every occasion with a rendition of “The Hills of Donegal.”<sup>8</sup> He captivated them with stories of his time in Kenya during the Mau-Mau rebellion<sup>9</sup> and the country’s transition to independence. They remarked on his great pride in the work of Spiritans worldwide that he witnessed as Provincial of Ireland and later at the generalate in Rome and through his work in SEDOS.<sup>10</sup> He conveyed to them the image of a missionary, content in his life and passionate about the remarkable network of missionary outreach around the globe that lightened the burden of vast populations by communicating a God of love. They would say that, as children, when the emphasis of school and family was on religious practice, moral virtue, and compliance with rules, Uncle Willie always insisted that “God is love” and that this took precedence over all other considerations of God’s relationship with humanity. He understood God as a loving and compassionate God whose patience with human weakness was unlimited, and this impressed them so much

*Uncle Willie always insisted that “God is love” and that this took precedence over all other considerations of God’s relationship with humanity*

as young people. He would engage with their questions and their doubts about faith and practice and defend them in discussions with their parents. No topic or issue was off limits.

Willie also imparted to them a social conscience and spoke of social justice as an essential aspect of Christian life. He sensitized them to treat everyone with equanimity, acknowledging the needs of others on the road of life, and that “a good turn never goes unrewarded.” Sport was a great interest for him. He played Gaelic football<sup>11</sup> as a young man and never lost his interest in the football and hurling<sup>12</sup> seasons in Ireland. Later he would play and follow rugby which gave him great delight in Rome with his French, English. and Scottish confrères.

For his family, Willie was a cherished ally and confidant, an anchor they greatly miss. Nieces, nephews, and the generation that followed were lovingly attentive to him in his last years when life was ebbing, giving him a great celebration at his Ninetieth Birthday in Kimmage Manor, where they shared the Eucharist and family tables, full of story, song and gratitude for the mystery that weaves lives together in the human encounter, through family, friendship or work, and is the threshold of the spiritual.

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### **Character moulded by early Experience**

Every life is multifaceted and consequent on multiple influences, constituting its own unique character. Christianity notably celebrates the uniqueness of the individual and its connectedness to the other. Spiritans have as good a claim as other groups to the cliché, “we’re all different.” There were realities that shaped Willie Jenkinson’s character and his relationship to the fraternity he joined and became part of.

From his earliest years Willie was adventurous, curious, and a risk-taker. Being an avid reader and a good student, he sought always to know the parameters and context of concepts and issues he was dealing with. History was a particular interest and he absorbed the how and why of events and their outcomes. Confidence in taking risks and being innovative gave him the courage to embrace new ideas and try new paths. This led some to recognize leadership qualities while others thought that he had advanced before the majority of the group was ready. He would be impatient to respond to situations, perhaps recalling Newman’s “A

man would do nothing if he waited until he could do it so well that no one could find fault.”<sup>13</sup>

It was often noted, particularly in the era of serious tension between “colleges and missions” as it was labelled, that Willie had not attended a Spiritan school. The schools did indeed make an enormous contribution to the missionary personnel of the Province right up to the 1960s and early 1970s and for some confrères a Spiritan education was a significant mark of approval and acceptance. However, in later decades it became insignificant as candidates for membership of the congregation came from differing age groups, backgrounds, and experiences. It may even have been viewed as a hindrance to capturing the vision of contemporary mission.

*Another aspect of Willie’s personality was a determination to see plans through*

Another aspect of Willie’s personality was a determination to see plans through. Some may have called it a stubborn streak. Certainly, tenaciousness in his work with the IMU<sup>14</sup> and with SEDOS in Rome proved very successful and people saw it as effective leadership which broke new ground in establishing creative institutions for cooperation and solidarity among missionaries.

The provocative or sardonic quip was not beyond Willie who might use it to invite response or humor, to deter an expected verbal attack, or to swiftly get to the point. Many enjoyed the style, but some experienced it as inappropriate or disrespectful.

Those in formation for Spiritan life identified mostly with others of their novitiate year, their years in the study of philosophy (now called First Cycle) or theology (Second Cycle) or with colleagues of their ordination year. Willie had a very unusual formation path. He entered the novitiate twice, the second time in 1943 when he was 20 years of age and a little older than the others. He was based in St. Mary’s College, Rathmines and not part of the student group at Kimmage while doing his university studies. For theology he was sent to Fribourg in Switzerland but would be separated from his colleagues when he contracted TB and was sent to Montana in the Swiss Alps for treatment and recuperation. Joining new colleagues, he went on to be ordained in Fribourg in 1952. So, although a Spiritan who went through the formation program, perhaps he didn’t have an embedded group he could claim as “his.” Indeed, this may have anticipated the experience today of many younger confrères, especially if newly appointed to a circumscription

of a different and dominant age-group or cultural background. One may feel isolated but, as in Willie's case, this can offer great freedom of accessibility and objectivity.

The Irish writer Ruth Fitzmaurice, in her recent book entitled *I Found My Tribe*, something of a populist journal, says that we need to be intentional about seeking and valuing the people who nourish and inspire us in life. She says of her experience in life:

Some stay a while, but most are passing through.  
Some stay longer.

Some people understand that the small things make a difference. A nice pen to write with that slides perfectly on the page. Hot coffee in a particular cup. These things matter when your soul is on the edge. It fills you full of holes, this life. Great love has brought me to the sea and I am trying to be brave. It's important, when your soul just might need saving.<sup>15</sup>

*He had very loyal and supportive friends, confreres, and others who were close when his soul needed saving*

Willie found his tribe through experiences when his "soul was on the edge" in the rough seas of discord and conflict in the Irish Province. He had very loyal and supportive friends, confreres, and others who were close when his soul needed saving.

These traits were simultaneously advantageous and disadvantageous in his engagement. They facilitated his taking of initiatives, leadership, and consistency in achieving goals and at the same time could invite suspicion, opposition, or lack of cooperation.

### **A theological Perspective**

In an article looking back over his life,<sup>16</sup> he indicates a spirituality that began when he was very young and developed with him and grew to shape his theological perspective. He reflects on the celebration of Christmas throughout his life, beginning with a vivid memory when he was a boy in his home parish serving midnight mass. He had the task of carrying the baby Jesus to the crib. He captures the atmosphere and "magic" of that night which never left him.

The village was in darkness. No electric lights, just the windows of the houses and the candles to welcome Mary and the child ... We were the altar boys and I had been chosen to carry the infant Jesus to the



crib ... It was a magic night. And I wonder if it was not on that night that the first faint touch of a love relationship with the infant Jesus began in my life. So the Word became flesh; he came to dwell among us.<sup>17</sup>

He recalls midnight mass in the Swiss Alps, in the various missions in Kenya where he served, in Rome, and finally as an elderly retired Spiritan in Spirasi.<sup>18</sup> He contemplates how the message of the vulnerable Christ-child is constant, but received and celebrated distinctly in those different contexts throughout his life. He says:

The years have passed. The world has changed they say. It is now 2005 and I am living at Spirasi. It was founded a few short years ago to welcome asylum seekers. Today it has become a Centre for refugees and especially for survivors of torture ... It is a busy house. Soon it will be Christmas and the house will be quiet. On Christmas night the image of the infant will be placed in the small oratory ... The world has indeed changed. But the greatest change that ever took place was the coming [of God] to dwell among us. And we saw his glory, full of grace and truth.<sup>19</sup>

*The gaze of the Christ-child on a world full of potential. The vulnerability of the child with a message to a fragile world in need of grace and salvation*

This spiritual connectedness of the feast of Christmas with the various communities and cultures in which he worked shaped a theology of incarnation and mission for him. The gaze of the Christ-child on a world full of potential. The vulnerability of the child with a message to a fragile world in need of grace and salvation that can only be realized through human agency. This being the meaning of incarnation. So “the Word made flesh” becomes the mission of the church to make present in the context Christians find themselves to be “light in the darkness” and “joy to the world.”

On his ordination card Willie had a picture of the Christ-child, a window into his personal spirituality and theology.

### **Mission in Kenya**

The two primary destinations for Irish Spiritan missionaries in the 1950s were Nigeria and Kenya. The early Spiritans were sent by Libermann in 1842 to the island of Reunion to liberate slaves, form communities, and evangelize through social and educational works. They later established a mission on the island of Zanzibar (1860) with

a view to an outreach in East Africa founding Bagamoyo (1868), Malindi (1881), Mombasa (1892), and Nairobi (1899).

A statistic from 1972 records 160 Spiritans serving in Kenya (*Go Teach All Nations p.178*) so when Willie arrived in 1952 it was still a growing mission of first evangelization. He initially went to Bura in the Taiti Hills in the Diocese of Mombasa, later to Voi, a hot, remote place which owed its existence to a stop on the railway line from Mombasa to Nairobi and a junction road climbing the 200 km to the foot of Kilimanjaro.

He immersed himself in mission life focusing on development and education for the communities he served. He was soon recognized as a man of initiative and a strategic planner. He was requested to take up the onerous task of Education Secretary for the Diocese of Mombasa and set about developing a network of primary and secondary schools with teacher training colleges to supply personnel for them. He was convinced of inclusion of lay people, women and men, in the decision-making committees and boards needed for successful outcomes. Essential to his vision was valuing the crucial role of women religious in mission and he would not begin a project without seeking their collaboration and that of the laity. What was emerging from the Vatican Council in the early 60s resonated with his vision for an inclusive church and he became an advocate for the participation and responsibility of the laity in all mission and church activity.

He witnessed the struggle for Independence that came in 1964 and assisted the church to find its place in the new reality. His confreres and colleagues recognized his talent and leadership, relied on him for direction and his skills in negotiation and dialogue with church and government authorities. He would be chosen to represent them at congregation consultation and chapters.

### **Return to Ireland as Seminary Rector**

In 1966, fourteen years after his ordination, Willie was appointed back to Ireland as director of theology in the Spiritan Seminary at Kimmage. He was now a passionate proponent of the vision and reform emanating from Vatican II in Rome, and had seen the beginnings of its implementation in Kenya by the local church, motivated by many of the missionaries of various congregations.

*a passionate proponent  
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in Rome*

In his four-year tenure he would bring to the seminary a program of education and practice that would reshape and reimagine *Missio Dei* in the understanding of young future missionaries. With Heaney's metaphor in the "Settled Bed" manifest Willie would undertake to give new meaning to something that had become archaic, stale and fixed.

Willie's students would attest to how he organized seminars, debates, and workshops, and invited guest speakers to inculcate the exciting new vision of the church: Catholic social teaching, ministry of the laity, ecumenism, inter-religious dialogue, liturgy, and above all, inculturation of church rather than replanting. He introduced courses in anthropology, sociology, and communications. It was not his intention to minimize or cushion the reform that had happened, but to prepare missionaries for new situations in Brazil, Ethiopia, Papua New-Guinea, the traditional Spiritan missions of Kenya and Sierra Leone, and new situations in Ireland.

Perhaps Willie had given all that he could or maybe the pace of change in the seminary was becoming a worry to some; after four years in 1970, he took up a new challenge.

### **The Irish Missionary Union (IMU)**

It was a creative and bold initiative. In the late 1960s, missionary congregations in Ireland were meeting at leadership and formation levels to explore paths of co-operation and sharing experience. In 1970 the Irish Missionary Union (IMU) was formed with Willie Jenkinson as its first Executive Secretary. At his insistence it was to be a union of numerous male and female congregations and lay missionary organizations many of which had young, energetic, and professional students in training. The outreach of Irish missionaries was to countries on five continents. In a time of heightened awareness of global poverty and its structural causes, missionaries had a platform for advocacy and they impacted greatly on public awareness, even effecting church and government policy on relations with the countries of the developing world. In 1974 the IMU, with representatives of other churches and through the Agency for Personal Service Overseas, negotiated funding support for Irish citizens serving in the developing world with church organisations or NGOs. This funding to Irish missionaries has continued until today through *Misean Cara*<sup>20</sup> while *Trócaire*<sup>21</sup> was established by the Irish Episcopal Conference

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in 1973 to channel support from the church in every parish in Ireland to development work because of the witness and advocacy of missionaries.

The IMU also consolidated its cooperation in establishing joint programs of formation and training for novices, missionaries on sabbatical and those returning to offer service in the Irish Church. Willie Jenkinson was at the forefront of many of these initiatives. He showed creative leadership and saw the IMU become a substantial voice in Irish society for forty years until its recent amalgamation with the Conference of Religious in Ireland to become AMRI (Association of Leaders of Missionaries and Religious in Ireland).

### **Provincial**

*The reputation for competence and leadership that his name gained among Irish missionaries surely indicated the choice of Willie Jenkinson to become Provincial of Ireland in 1973*

The reputation for competence and leadership that his name gained among Irish missionaries surely indicated the choice of Willie Jenkinson to become Provincial of Ireland in 1973, to succeed Fr. Christy O'Brien, C.S.Sp., who had led the province for the previous three-year period, one that had seen some of the most difficult and challenging times in the history of the province. The Nigerian Civil War (also known as the Biafran War), from 1967 until early 1970, caused a horrendous humanitarian crisis for the civilian population in the separatist state of Biafra. The Spiritans had been serving as missionaries in Nigeria since 1885 with the arrival of Frs. Joseph Lutz and John Horné and Brothers Hermas Huck and John Jacob; they had “a humble start” but laid “solid foundations” according to Henry J. Koren C.S.Sp.<sup>22</sup> With the arrival of Joseph Shanahan in 1903, the mission took on a new and soon flourishing impetus into the interior via the Niger river. Shanahan became the head of the Spiritan mission in 1905 and made his momentous decision to concentrate on education.<sup>23</sup> In time a vibrant local church and a remarkable education, health, and social structure were established. Confrères were inserted into the life of the Igbo people and were not going to abandon them in their hour of need. Heroically, they strove to feed the starving masses through an airlift that is well-documented in publications such as *Airlift to Biafra* by Tony Byrne C.S.Sp. Some 300 Irish Holy Ghost Fathers were serving in those years in Biafra and, when it fell to the overwhelming might of Nigeria's Federal Government, they were expelled.

The crisis did indeed spawn opportunity, as many Spiritans relocated to Ghana, Ethiopia, Malawi, and

Zambia, creating new foundations of Spiritan life in those African countries. However, others, because of age or circumstance, could not continue in Africa. A number would retire, but for many who were still relatively young and active, the Province in Ireland faced the challenge to find meaningful work and ministry. A large number went to the USA, serving in dioceses and forming regional groups which offered refreshing impetus to pastoral plans in many dioceses. The crisis also allowed for collaboration with the new foundations in Africa through fundraising and it helped the Irish Province as it began to plan for the care of those who were retiring. This influx of Irish Spiritans to random places in the US did cause concern and tension with the two established Provinces of the USA and it took many years to find common understanding. These communities of Irish Spiritans, spread all over the globe, needed management and leadership, direction and resourcing. This was the situation in which Willie was called to lead when he assumed the role of provincial.

### **A Storm Erupts**

*There was a clash of theologies and this resulted in deep division in the Irish Province*

The winds of change or, if you prefer, the taste of revolution, hit the Irish Church especially in its seminaries and religious communities. There was a clash of theologies and this resulted in deep division in the Irish Province. The reform of teaching and discipline of Vatican II had reached Ireland. The missionary congregations were very much the conduit of new thinking and they served to pilot implementation. The Holy Ghost Seminary at Kimmage became a locus of the clash. The fifty-three students in 1972 who were studying theology and the somewhat smaller number then studying philosophy and taking university degrees saw the new perspectives of a church engaging with the world as an exciting new time for them. For others it seemed a time of confusion and the lowering of standards in discipline and community life.

This period in the life of the Irish Province was a painful experience and has never been adequately processed by those who lived through it. The province suffered greatly from events of this time and, though they have healed, wounds are still easily opened when confrères revisit those experiences. It is a period of our history that invites and merits greater focus and attention. It would require a skilled and dispassionate researcher to comb the ample material available of the 1970 and 1973 chapters and the time between, to offer an accurate record of what unfolded - the context, influences, decisions,

and personalities that determined its outcome.

Willie Jenkinson was provincial and seen by both sides as central; as either the one giving leadership to guide a community of missionaries in resetting their vision and negotiating a changing world or as the one who led to an accommodation with the world that had allowed destructive dynamics enter religious life under the guise of personal responsibility.

*The Spiritans' involvement in schools and colleges in Ireland had always been a contentious issue within the Irish province*

In his book,<sup>24</sup> Patrick Ryan, C.S.Sp., describes well and sensitively the background and historical facts that created the tensions. The Spiritans' involvement in schools and colleges in Ireland had always been a contentious issue within the Irish province. The mission was often not seen as a single entity but as, on the one hand, an overseas mission, and, on the other, the schools at home in Ireland. The schools had originated as a source of vocations to serve the mission of the congregation and they achieved this goal for many generations. At the same time, they became large and successful works in themselves. When free secondary education was introduced in Ireland by government in the 1960s, Spiritan schools opted to remain in the fee-paying sector.<sup>25</sup> This deepened the strain between those dedicated to education in Ireland and those who believed that managing fee-paying schools in a country where free education was now the norm was not in accord with the congregation's charism or mission. Many would have been urging their provincial to end the anomaly by initiating a move of Spiritan schools from the fee-paying sector or even of a complete disengagement by the province from the schools. A great deal of the province's energy during Willie's mandate was taken up with this issue.

Much of the division and unease about whether the schools in Ireland were part of the mission of the congregation arose from the general chapter of 1968 which focused on the primary aim of the congregation being first evangelisation. It was at this juncture that educational apostolates in Ireland and other European Provinces began to feel marginalized. Many provinces had struggled with the rigid governance of Mgr. Lefebvre who, as a significant participant of Vatican II, had voted against many important orientations of the chapter and who, as superior general of the congregation, intervened in the provinces, especially in the formation program and changed a number of directors of formation and teachers. He had kept the congregation out of the new mainstream of "renewal." The 1968 Chapter

came as a liberation for many, but at the price of a conflict with its superior general who even accused the chapter of betrayal of its charism. Father Joseph Lécuyer, C.S.Sp., who was a confident personal theological adviser to Pope Paul VI, accepted to become superior general and so saved the unity of the congregation but it left a number of provinces divided. This period is covered extensively by Fr. William Cleary, C.S.Sp.<sup>26</sup>

*The General Chapter of 1968 with its focus on first evangelization, the preferential option for the poor, and justice and peace, challenged the provinces, like Ireland, that had a long history of works of education*

The General Chapter of 1968 with its focus on first evangelization, the preferential option for the poor, and justice and peace, challenged the provinces, like Ireland, that had a long history of works of education. They felt excluded from newly and narrowly defined concepts of mission. It happened in several provinces that the young no longer accepted to be appointed to prestigious colleges and were enthusiastic about the new orientations of the general chapter.

In fact, Willie appreciated the work of the schools and their contribution to Spiritan Mission:

In the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and indeed throughout the century many Spiritans never saw overseas missions. But it was the mission sentiment that inspired them in their commitment to the Congregation to its ideals and all its varied works. . . . In the Irish context, the educational stream flowed abundantly as a result of the founding French confreres. . . . providing generations of missionaries.<sup>27</sup>

Much of the cause of the conflict was projected on to Jenkinson. Sides lined up like two football teams for whom victory was the only result. However, Willie believed that he was seeking compromise and solution where co-operation might provide pathways for the schools to move towards non-fee-paying education in alignment with the congregation's mission to the disadvantaged. When dialogue and opinions became entrenched and ideological, his role as problem-solver was lost. It is customary to blame the referee. After a single three-year term, a new provincial was elected. The provincial administration led by Jenkinson offered new directions to the province in the crucial polemic areas of formation and education, but the chapter of 1976 reached an impasse with little option for him to continue.

*The claim is often made that Willie Jenkinson was a man before his time, that he was too progressive, and that the province was not ready for that*

### **Before his Time?**

The claim is often made that Willie Jenkinson was a man before his time, that he was too progressive, and that the province was not ready for that. Rather than continually put the focus on the leader, projecting on him the division of the province, could it not also be claimed that the province started out, in a time of crisis but also of opportunity, on a journey of discernment which stalled after three years out of fear or insecurity? “Every country has the government it deserves,” also “In a democracy people get the leaders they deserve.”<sup>28</sup>

### **Dark Night**

Willie described the year after his term as provincial as his “Dark Night of the Soul.” Despite his strength in confronting problems and his determination in executing decisions he was, as many would attest, a sensitive and mellow man. He felt the pain of rejection, a sense of not having accomplished a mission, experienced failure. He spoke of feeling lost, dispirited, and for the first time since his student days of re-evaluating his place in the world. He went on a sabbatical program in Berkeley, California where he found rest, space to think, new interests and new perspectives on faith and church. He undertook a programme in theology and was awarded a Master’s Degree. He could reflect on a text from Libermann:

Don’t look at things in an imaginary way but consider everything calmly and practically. Never be over-elated by success, or depressed by the possibility of failure. Don’t build imaginary castles in the air, nor afflict yourselves with unreasonable fears. Work as faithful labourers in the Lord’s vineyard, with neither complacency nor discouragement before, during or after your efforts. Whether you are successful or not, your reward will be great.<sup>29</sup>

When Fr. Frans Timermanns, the then Spiritan superior general, invited him to Rome at the end of his sabbatical in 1980, Willie was ready to embrace a new time and new challenges.

### **SEDOS**

When Willie arrived in Rome most congregations had gone through their “chapters of aggiornamento” and there was great openness to renewal. Most leaders of the



orders and congregations were new, and a number of the ancient orders, like the Jesuits, the Dominicans, and the Benedictines, had prophetic leaders, like Fr. Arrupe, Fr. Quesnongle, and Abbot Weakland. In the missionary congregations much new thinking was happening, new paths were explored, and the old mission territories in Africa, Asia, and Latin America were in the middle of civil society struggles for a new future as independent nations – and churches.

*Missionary congregations came together to form a resource centre of information, documentation, and communication of experiences and initiatives in mission*

Missionary congregations came together to form a resource centre of information, documentation, and communication of experiences and initiatives in mission around the globe. SEDOS (*see note 10 above*) was established in Rome as a result of Vatican II. When Willie was nominated as its general secretary, the organisation had been growing for over a decade having begun in the years of the Council. Under Pope John Paul II there was a strong tendency to control the religious congregations, and Cardinal Tomko, the Prefect of Propaganda Fide, persistently tried to get a seat on the board of SEDOS. The religious congregations, however, were protective of their independence. They defended their freedom of reflection and strategy, keeping communion with the church at the structural level of the USG (Union of Superiors General) and UISG (Union of the Superiors General of the sisters) in relations with the Vatican.

Willie thrived at SEDOS. All his experience gave him an insight for the patterns and direction of mission globally. He forged friendships with congregations and influential missionaries and missiologists across the world and found his place as a missionary of the margins from Rome.

He followed his twelve-year service at SEDOS by accepting to be superior or, as he preferred, community leader of the generalate community in Rome where he is renowned for having offered warmth, welcome, friendship, and good humor to all who passed that way, regaling confrères and visitors in English, French, and Italian. He would reflect with his mentor, Newman, that “growth is the only evidence of life.”<sup>30</sup>

### **“Supposing Him to be the Gardener” (John 20:15)**

For all who knew Willie Jenkinson it is no surprise that the gospel text chosen for his funeral mass at Kimmage Church in Dublin on Saturday 26<sup>th</sup> November 2016 was from John’s resurrection narrative, where Mary of Magdala

mistakes the risen Jesus for the gardener. It is one of those Easter texts where the narrators, curiously and repeatedly, insist that the disciples did not recognize him, even though they had lived closely with and beside Jesus for the previous years. Are they telling us that they weren't really expecting to see him or were so overcome with grief they were closed to seeing him? Commentators suggest that the Easter message is that we recognise him now, not in physical recognition, but in his word, when he spoke and when Mary recognized him, or in the breaking of the bread when the disciples at Emmaus recognised him, or in his wounds where Thomas recognised him.

*He served as community leader, but with no particular role in the refugee service other than being available to listen to and engage with many lonely and distressed migrants*

It was so in keeping with his life that Willie chose to live at the Spiritan Centre for Refugees and Asylum-seekers (Spirasi) in the inner-city of Dublin for his last active missionary assignment. He served as community leader, but with no particular role in the refugee service other than being available to listen to and engage with many lonely and distressed migrants. But he loved the little garden there and worked in it, giving guidance about shrubs and flowers to those who looked after it. He was often taken to be the gardener and when asked one day by a woman migrant, "Are you the head gardener?" he was delighted to claim the title and would later describe himself as such!

The scriptural allusion was not lost on Willie; not that he saw himself a messiah figure, rather the human encounter is most spiritual and most real in its most simple. He would have seen that the most honest exchanges about life and faith occur when people honestly tell their stories without titles or status complicating the encounter. In that role as head gardener many broken people confided their stories to him. It was a very happy and fulfilling time of his life, even though he was then already in his eighties.

*His ministry in his later years reflected his whole life's ministry. It was always person-centred, a dialogue in respect of the other*

His ministry in his later years reflected his whole life's ministry. It was always person-centred, a dialogue in respect of the other, exposed and not flinching from real human problems, exchanges to achieve healing and always in simplicity. Like the Master.

The challenges of today in church and society are quite different, almost a reversal from those of Willie's time; the world of the 1960s and 70s sought reform, global connectedness, and communication; today culture is pulled towards protectionism, populism in tribe and race, and reductionism. Church has experienced two decades of

punishing criticism for its lack of governance and credibility and cannot find the new wineskins for this time. Perhaps what is common is a crisis that is also an opportunity. In this Willie would surely repeat that “the world has changed, they say!” but rely on the incarnate God to gaze on a new time and await human agency to respond. We can only be grateful for his simple, powerful presence in the Spiritan and church community and in his family too. He exemplified the words of Schillebeeckx, a theologian close to his heart: “Christianity is not a message which has to be believed, but an experience of faith that becomes a message.”<sup>31</sup>

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### Abbreviations

- AG Vatican II Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church, *Ad gentes*. In *Documents of Vatican II: Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, edited by Austin P. Flannery O.P. Dublin: Dominican Publications, 1996. Vatican documents are cited from this edition.
- GS Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et spes*.
- ND *Notes et documents relatifs a la vie et a l'oeuvre du Venerable François-Marie-Paul Libermann (1802–52)*. Paris: Maison-Mere, 1929-1941. 13 vols. + Appendices.

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### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup>Seamus Heaney (1939–2013), Irish poet and winner of the Nobel Peace Prize in Literature, 1995.
- <sup>2</sup>Seamus Heaney, “The Settle Bed,” in *Seeing Things*, 128.
- <sup>3</sup>AG, no. 2.
- <sup>4</sup>Newman, *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, 41.
- <sup>5</sup>The Church of the Holy Spirit, Kimmage Manor, Dublin is the central church of the Congregation in the Province of Ireland, where Provincial event and liturgies, including funerals, are held.
- <sup>6</sup>Newman, Sermon 26, in *Sermons Bearing on Subjects of the Day*.
- <sup>7</sup>GS, no. 4.
- <sup>8</sup>A popular Irish folk song; Donegal being a County in Ireland.
- <sup>9</sup>The Mau Mau Uprising, also known as the Mau Mau Rebellion, the Kenya Emergency, and the Mau Mau Revolt, was a war in the British Kenya Colony between

the Kenya Land and the Freedom Army (1952–1960).

<sup>10</sup>SEDOS (*Service of Documentation and Study on Global Mission*), a forum established in Rome as a result of Vatican II and open to Institutes of Consecrated Life, who commit themselves to deepening their understanding of global mission.

<sup>11</sup>Gaelic football, commonly referred to as football or Gaelic, is an Irish team sport played on grass between two teams of 15 players.

<sup>12</sup>Hurling is an outdoor team game of ancient Gaelic and Irish origin. The game, with pre-historic origins, has been played for 4,000 years. One of Ireland's native Gaelic games, it shares a number of features with Gaelic football, such as the field and goals, the number of players, and much terminology.

<sup>13</sup>Newman, *Lectures on the Present Position of Catholics in England*, 385.

<sup>14</sup>IMU, the Irish Missionary Union. A Union of Missionary Congregations in Ireland founded in 1970.

<sup>15</sup>Fitzmaurice, *I Found my Tribe*, 3

<sup>16</sup>Jenkinson, "The World has changed, they Say!" 15.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid.

<sup>18</sup>Spirasi, Spiritan Initiative for Refugees & Asylum Seekers in Ireland, founded in 1999.

<sup>19</sup>Jenkinson, "The World has Changed," 15.

<sup>20</sup>Misean Cara is an international and Irish faith-based missionary network working in developing countries. The movement is made up of 91 member organisations working in over 50 countries.

<sup>21</sup>Trócaire was established in 1973 by the Irish Episcopal Conference with the dual mandate to support vulnerable people in the developing world and raising awareness of injustice and global poverty in Ireland.

<sup>22</sup>Koren, *The Spiritans*, 531.

<sup>23</sup>*Go Teach All Nations*, 122.

<sup>24</sup>Ryan, *Kimmage Manor – 100 years of Service to Mission*.

<sup>25</sup>NB: a very successful Spiritan secondary school was founded in 1966 in the non-fee paying sector; the congregation undertook the shared governance of another secondary school in 1981 with the Presentation Sisters and local Vocational Education Authority.

<sup>26</sup>Clery, *Spiritan Life and Mission*, chaps. 2 & 3.

<sup>27</sup>Jenkinson, "Mission Outreach of the Irish Province," 118.

<sup>28</sup>The remarks are popularly misattributed to better-known commentators such as Alexis de Tocqueville or Abraham Lincoln, but actually originated with Joseph-

Marie de Maistre, a French philosopher of the counter-revolutionary period.

<sup>29</sup>ND, VII, 191-195: Libermann to Père Briot, 8th June, 1845. In *Spiritan Anthology*, 266.

<sup>30</sup>Newman, *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, 43.

<sup>31</sup>Schillebeeckx, *Interim Report*, 50.