

# Keeping up a strong Capuchin tradition

## Personal Profile



Ruadhán Jones

**F**r Jim Connolly OFM Cap. first arrived in Zambia in December 1970, one of around 50 Irish Capuchins based in the country. Almost 52 years later and one of the last two Irish Capuchins remaining, Fr Jim continues to keep up their great tradition.

Fr Jim, who grew up on a small farm in Cavan, left secondary school before completing the equivalent of the Junior Certificate. He moved to Dublin and it was there that Fr Jim came into contact with the Capuchins at their parish on Church Street. He was attracted to them, but didn't think he had much hope due to not finishing school.

### Friaries

"But a nun I met told me there was a way in for people who hadn't completed their secondary schooling," Fr Jim explains. "She put me in contact with the Capuchins. I wrote, I was interviewed in one of the friaries on Church Street. Eventually I got a letter of acceptance, technically a late vocation at the ripe old age of 17!"

Having completed his studies, Fr Jim got the call to serve on the mission in Zambia in 1970. He explains that there was a "favourable climate" in the country for the Church when he arrived.

"The missionaries had by then made their impact, especially in the area of education," Fr Jim says. "Schools, primary schools were established in what was then the diocese of

Livingstone. From the time the Capuchins came in 1931, something like 220 primary schools were established by the missionaries in the area of the western province. And of course medical facilities, some of them were Church clinics and some hospitals.

"All of that created a favourable climate towards the Catholic Church. That has continued. In more recent years, sometimes the relationship would be strained at times because of the bishops speaking out on social issues and respect for the rights of people and against corruption."

Fr Jim's main focus on arriving in Zambia was evangelisation and pastoral work, he tells me, particularly in rural parishes. He spent the first 15 years of his mission dedicated to this

cause, giving the example of the Mangango township to exemplify his work.

"It would have about 30 out-churches, outlying communities," Fr Jim says. "At the beginning, the first few years, our apostolate centred on schools. In my first years in Mangango, we had 27 schools in the management. I would have visited all of them. I would have had Mass in the school... and seen if children were prepared for the sacraments, especially Baptism."

After the schools were handed over to the government in 1974, the shape of Fr Jim's work changed. He and the Capuchins began to set up churches and centres apart from the schools, which led to more adults coming to church.

"The school apostolate was kind of

limited to the children," Fr Jim begins. "Sometimes a whole class might be baptised. When they would go back home, because the environment was not Christian, they would maybe fall away from the practice of their faith. Many of them who passed through our schools were important people in the government and civil society.

"But there was a definite change when schools were handed over. We concentrated on evangelisation of the adult population. That led to the establishment of small Christian communities. It has been an overall success. Some of these places have grown into parishes."

**“There are around 50 local Capuchins and just two Irish. Fr Jim reflects with pride on the vocations that have sprung up from the community”**

Reflecting on his missionary life, Fr Jim says there were a number of phases to it: "Number one was many years in pastoral work in rural areas, 15-20 years. The second stage, I was in the vocation scene, director of postulants for six years. Then came leadership, I was the first vice-provincial in 1992. I was in that role for six years too.

"Then I was back to pastoral work or parish work, sent to the north-western province. In a sense, it was like being dipped into cold water, it was a whole new start. I didn't know the language. People were greeting me, I was looking at them and they were looking at me. I had to get a crash course.

"I was there for six of the happiest years I had, very happy years. The people there were quite responsive faith-wise. In some places they weren't, especially in one of the missions I was on. But it was life-giving, the response in many places. It gave me energy."

Having arrived to a community of 50 Irish Capuchins in 1970 and no Zambians, the situation is reversed today. There are around 50 local Capuchins and just two Irish. Fr Jim reflects with pride on the vocations that have sprung up from the community.

"I look back in amazement and I say, we've come thus far with the grace of God. In the 1970s, when I came out, in a sense we were sitting comfortably because every year there came out three or four from Ireland. Then about 1977 or so, we had a provincial come out – the late Fr Brendan O'Mahony, who was professor of philosophy in UCC – he addressed us, saying: 'You guys are doing great work. But you have to wake up, you think that you are going to get vocations from Ireland every year. It's not going to come. You have to become more serious about the implantation of the order.'"

So the Capuchins in Zambia had their first mission chapter in 1979, and from that two key priorities emerged, Fr Jim explains. One was getting the structures and personnel in place to promote vocations; the second was caring for people with disabilities. From this meeting, the fruits of their labours have slowly but surely been realised.

"It has been uphill. We are about 50 now, but the challenge to us here is to become more self-reliant, and in supporting ourselves financially. That's the thrust and the focus we have at the moment," Fr Jim says.

**Do you know someone who we should profile? Send an email to [ruadhan@irishcatholic.ie](mailto:ruadhan@irishcatholic.ie)**

## Living Laudato Si'

Jane Mellet



## Practical steps to respond to the first *Laudato Si'* goal

**I**n November 2021, Pope Francis launched the *Laudato Si'* Action Platform, a seven-year programme for the Church to live out the call to care more deeply for God's creation.

The platform is based around achieving seven *Laudato Si'* Goals across seven Church 'institutions' over seven years – a jubilee for the earth. The institutions include: families and individuals; parishes and dioceses; educational institutions; healthcare institutions; organisations and groups; businesses; and religious orders.

As the ecological crises and its effects continue to worsen around the globe, we are invited as individuals, families, parishes and schools to engage with this *Laudato Si'* platform. But what does this involve?

This week let us look at *Laudato Si'* goal number one: 'Response to the Cry of the Earth.' This is a call to protect our common home for the wellbeing of all, as we address the climate crisis alongside bio-

diversity loss, and try to live more sustainably. The big actions for this goal include switching to more renewable sources of energy, in the home, school and parish and introducing energy saving measures. These are the big asks for

'Goal 1'. However, each *Laudato Si'* Goal has a low, medium and high ask so we could begin to look at energy use simply by conducting an energy audit in our parish buildings and see what might be realistically possible from there. Installing more efficient appliances when they are due to be replaced is another possible action.

*Laudato Si'* Goal 1 also includes the call to protect biodiversity and perhaps for families and parishes this is a good place to start.

As spring approaches, we can look at the land around our churches, graveyards, schools and our homes and consider planting pollinator friendly flowers and plants, which can replace a boring lawn. We can all engage with local groups to plant

Irish native trees where appropriate, restoring them to the landscape.

Hosting workshops locally on litter and recycling comes under Goal 1 as a means to address what *Laudato Si'* calls a "throw-away culture". Inviting the wider community to such workshops can be a means of sharing Church teaching on care for creation and seeing where local groups could collaborate with the parish or school.

Most of us are overwhelmed when it comes to the environmental crisis. But the *Laudato Si'* Action Platform is a way forward, a roadmap, a gift. As we begin this new year each of us can discern where we are called to act and we can begin by becoming familiar with this platform. Go to [www.laudatosi-actionplatform.org](http://www.laudatosi-actionplatform.org)

Perhaps your family, school or parish could consider signing up?

"Your unique 'culture, experience, involvements, and talents' are needed on our journey towards greater love for our Creator, each other, and the home we share. (LS 14)" – *Laudato Si'* Action Platform

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