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Irish native Father Hughes celebrates 50 years as a priest

Roxane B. Salonen

In his half-century as a priest, Father Peter Hughes has experienced everything from the high of Mass with Pope John Paul II to the low of a brush with what might have been an untimely and brutal death.

The high took place in 1984 when Father Hughes, a native of Dublin, Ireland, was just starting his 28-year time of service with the Diocese of Fargo. He'd had the fortunate experience of helping lead a three-bus caravan from North Dakota to Canada to meet and celebrate Mass with the former pontiff.

The low happened while on a missionary assignment in Nigeria. As part of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit Order known as the Holy Ghost Fathers, Father Hughes was helping introduce Jesus to Africa. But when a civil war erupted between Christians and Muslims, things turned unsafe, especially at night.

One evening, six militants broke through a dividing line and forced Father Hughes to drive them to the next town. "I put two in the front seat, four in the back, and one had a Tommy-gun to my head," he recounted. "It wasn't until later that I realized how it could have gone. When I got into bed that night I started to tremble. He'd had his finger on the trigger."

Despite the difficult end, he'll always remember that time as one of the most blessed of his priesthood.

"The church was thriving there at the time. I baptized about 2,000 children a year. I once did 133 baptisms in one go," he said. When it was time to leave, Father Hughes made the transition with ease. The pattern of going easily from one thing to the next seems to have been set during his earliest years as the youngest of six children.

"Of course, I always claim I was the neglected one," he said with a grin. In reality, it was a good life lived in a country rich in faith; a place in which the whole community worked to raise up the next generation. "You didn't just answer to your parents for misbehaving, but to the locals, too," he said.

An altar boy in his parish of St. Sylvester's, the young Peter was formed by parents who greatly respected the church and priesthood. One priest friend would come over every Monday night to eat dinner and play cards with the family. And music nearly always rang through the house.

"My mother was an opera singer . . . and we'd have a party every Sunday night at our house. If you wanted to attend you had to play or sing a couple songs." Eventually, his father, owner of a grocery store and tea business, moved the family to the coast eight miles from the city. There, the kids swam in the ocean several times a day and stayed active in sports. "We lived beside a castle," he said. "We had cricket, tennis, soccer — what a life, I tell you!"

Soon after his mother died of heart failure, a teenaged Peter shared his thoughts of joining the priesthood with a local pastor. He finished high school in the seminary while continuing to enjoy his beloved cricket game and bicycling around his homeland.

A year after his ordination on July 16, 1961, he left for Africa. Nearly instantly, he felt at home. "People say that it must be so different, but human nature is the same whether it's in white skin or black skin," he said. "And they gave us a great reception there. There were 306 of us Irish Holy Ghost priests in Nigeria."

As civil strife increased, the priests became "black-listed" from the area. "They maintained we prolonged the war for 18 months because our guys started airlifting food and medicine every night for the Christians," he said. Recently, the ban was lifted. After a pause back home, Father Hughes went to Zambia, where he spent another 13 years. In 1983, he came to North Dakota to help one of his fellow Irish priests and was swiftly snatched up by Bishop Justin Driscoll.

"I arrived on a Monday, went to a funeral on Tuesday, and I got a letter in the mail the next morning appointing me to Jamestown," he said. Though North Dakota was no Africa, he took to the prairie quickly. "I'm a bush boy at heart," he said. "I enjoy people no matter where I go, but I like North Dakotans and I like the pace here."

In his 50 years of priesthood, he's seen many changes within the church, but appears to have it all in perspective. "I went to Africa 49 years ago to bring them into Christianity, and now they're coming back to save our Christianity," he said. "It's all in Scripture. If God doesn't get the grapes in one vineyard, he'll go to another." That's not to say the lack of gratitude he's witnessed in "richer" countries doesn't concern him.

"You see people going to the lake, mowing the lawns, playing with their snowmobiles on a Sunday morning; that hurts me," he said. "The more we have, the less time for God. It's a material paganism." He added that though we're surrounded by goodness, we're not necessarily reaching those at the bottom of the steps outside.

"Are we reaching the people who are not (in the pews)? Are we only saving the saved?" Regardless, he still finds the attempt to bring Christ to others worth the trouble. "That's the joy of it, isn't it?" he said, with a sparkle in his Irish eyes. Father Hughes will celebrate his 50th anniversary of ordination to the priesthood this summer in his homeland, where he and a group of priest friends will convene for the first time in many years.

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