

Kevin O'Byrne, RIP - scrum-half for Kenya

A short obituary in the Irish Catholic newspaper on a Galwayman who played a key role in the beginnings of Opus Dei in Kenya.

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In 1958 racial tensions were running high in Kenya, then a black African nation ruled by whites. A state of emergency was in place. In the classrooms of upper secondary schools, there were no native Africans.

That same year, St Josemaría Escrivá asked Kevin O'Byrne if he would like to play a part in starting Opus Dei in Kenya, and in particular to help set up what was to become Strathmore College, the first multi-racial college in East Africa.

Born in Galway in 1934, and educated at the Patrician Brothers' School and St Joseph's College, Kevin O'Byrne graduated from University College Galway with a first class honours degree in civil engineering. He joined Opus Dei in 1955 and worked with the ESB and with British Reinforced Concrete, before leaving for Nairobi in 1958.

The inter-racial school he started with other members of Opus Dei in 1961 grew over the years to become Strathmore University (www.strathmore.edu). Great was his delight last April when Kenyan

President Kibaki awarded a charter to the university.

An unusual feature of Strathmore University is the contribution it makes to the rehabilitation of prisoners. With the help of Harambee (www.harambee-africa.org), a European NGO established on the occasion of the canonization of Saint Josemaría in 2002, the university has set up training programmes in basic accountancy for 140 prisoners.

Kevin O'Byrne was an outstanding all-around sportsman in rugby, football, golf and tennis. He represented Kenya and East Africa as scrum-half from 1960-65. Diagnosed with cancer in 2007, he accepted his condition serenely, with full trust in God. He was buried in Nairobi on 4 June.

In Rome in 1958, St Josemaría Escrivá exchanged the scapular

medal of the Blessed Virgin he wore around his neck for the one Kevin O'Byrne was wearing. From that moment on, that medal was a blessing that accompanied Kevin O'Byrne for the rest of his very fruitful life.

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