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Fr. Joe: The Gift of Lightheartedness

THISDAY online has published an article by Sonnie Ekwowusi, a member of the Editorial Board, about Fr Joe Guzman, a priest in love with Nigeria and Nigerians, who recently died.

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By Sonnie Ekwowusi

The death of Fr. Joe Guzman aged 62 saddened me. “We have just got the news this morning that Fr. Joe died in Chile of a sudden heart attack. He

was taken to the Los Andes Teaching Hospital but it was already too late”. When this text message came to my phone it knocked me below the belt. Fr. Joe was priest of Opus Dei, a personal prelature of the Catholic Church. He died in the morning of July 8 2020. He had lived in Nigeria since 2000. He ate Nigerian food especially roasted yam and roasted plantain. He cracked Nigerian jokes. Simply put, Fr. Joe fell in love with Nigeria. About early last year he fell ill. As a result, he was placed on medical treatment in Nigeria. He was responding very well. At a time he was advised to travel to his home country Chile for further medical follow up. He did. But unfortunately on July 8 2020 he succumbed to a heart attack and died in Chile.

I have a very fond memory of Fr. Joe because I taught him a bit how to be a true Nigerian. One day I received phone call from Fr. Joe. At that time

he was still carrying out his pastoral work in Ibadan. He was actually in need of a legal advice from a lawyer. Knowing I was a lawyer, he placed a telephoned call that reached me. What was amiss? .He had had a car accident with his car.

Apparently his car collided with a car coming from the wrong direction. He narrated how despite obeying all the traffic rules including putting on his car trafficator lights yet the vehicle coming nowhere still rammed into his car and damaged it. After listening to him and consoling him a bit, I then gave him a small lesson on how to be a true Nigerian. I told him that beyond obeying the traffic rules any person driving on Nigerian roads must constantly be on the watch out for recklessness from reckless and inconsiderate drivers who do not have regard for other road users. I also told him that to successfully drive on Nigerian roads one must

assume that all motorists around one are mad drivers and treat them as such. I am sure my lesson sunk deep.

While alive, Fr. Joe was many things to many people. He had a contagious and inviting smile. He was optimism personified: he always looked at the optimistic side of life no matter how difficult things may be; he a former chaplain of Whitesands School, Lekki, Lagos; outstanding orthodox Catholic priest; a promoter of the sacredness of human life; a dedicated promoter of perennial values that give authentic meaning to life; a peace maker and a cultivator of true friendship. Fr. Joe had rare gift for friendship. He loved being in company of his friends especially his priest and seminarian friends. Like a garden, friendship needs to be nurtured and cultivated. In order to cultivate a deeper friendship among his friends, Fr. Joe organized a series of excursions for his friends

especially for those of them training to become priests.

Convinced that his friends needed to rest their tired bones from the hustle and bustle of city life, Fr. Joe organized excursions for his friends. He took them to quiet country homes and villages where they could play some sports, games and have nice meal in order to regain their lost energies. In the course of these excursions, Fr. Joe spent time giving spiritual direction to those who demanded for it.

I think Fr. Joe will be most remembered for promoting the culture of life in contrast to the culture of death. His value for the sacredness of human life knew no bound. Over the twenty-five years that I knew Fr. Joe there was no subject matter under the sun pertaining to the sacredness of human life that we couldn't talk or

discuss freely and honestly. And no matter the topic both of us ended up agreeing that life begins at conception and must not, under any circumstances, be terminated in the womb. Each human life is unique. Abortion is the greatest violence to women. There is something special about human beings-you cannot treat them as objects. Every human being matters. So we must respect every human life. Everyone is entitled to equal freedom. The foundation of this is dominion. Everyone is a dominion of his or her life. Inanimate objects are not responsible but human beings are responsible. Everybody is equal before God. Every unborn child should be given a chance to live because God is the one bringing the child to the world. Human rights without respect for right of the unborn who is completely defenseless mean nothing. Fr. Joe was convinced that the gospel of life

would not be embraced in its fullness if it had not been reduced into simple Question-and-Answer catechism.

This was why he co-edited two books with the following titles- On Marriage and Family: The Teaching of the Catholic Church and On Human Life: From conception to natural death.

Fr. Joe was a man of astonishing energy. It was rare to see a stationary Fr. Joe. Like a locomotive combustible engine, he was always moving and moving. He had the ability to organize and marshal out diverse activities in a common cause to the benefit of all. Simply put, he was ever willing to render selfless services to others. I later came to understand that it was precisely in selflessly serving others that Fr. Joe derived his joy and contentment. Call it a deepening serenity or whatever, beneath the tireless energy for rendering service to others, Fr. Joe

always acquired a new inner peace. He exuded overweening confidence about man and his pilgrimage on earth. If you ran into Fr. Joe even for a second all your sorrows would have disappeared. How? Fr. Joe would have beamed his contagious smile to your face, tapped your shoulders and beckoned on you to conquer the world with hope.

In an overwhelmingly secular world, Fr. Joe's friendship with his friends simply demonstrates that ordinary friendship with one's friends that is built on the very foundation of culture can keep the society together. As Lord Devlin puts it: "If men and women try to create a society in which there is no fundamental agreement about good and evil, they will fail: if having based it on common agreement, the agreement goes, the society will disintegrate. For society is not something that is kept together physically: it is held by

invisible bonds of common thought. If the bonds were too far relaxed the members would drift apart. A common morality is the part of the bondage. The bondage is part of the price of society; and mankind which needs society, must pay its price”

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