

Remember Brother Paul Scanlon, C.F.X.



This article was originally published in a series of reflections based on the lives of Xaverian Brothers who have played influential roles in the life and development of the Congregation in America. They are written in commemoration of the Xaverian Brothers 150th Anniversary of their arrival in America in 1854.

Written by Brother John F. Kerr, C.F.X.

In an historical survey entitled THE XAVERIAN STORY IN ZAIRE, written on the occasion of the 50th anniversary in 1981 of the Xaverian Brothers in the Congo (Zaire), Brother Jan Devadder speaks of Brother Paul Scanlon under the heading, “The Vision of a Quiet American.”

I cannot attest to the fact that Brother Paul was “a quiet American,” but my research and reflection lead me to conclude that he indeed was a man with a congregational vision. In that regard, I would like to focus essentially on these areas: the missionary and international character of the congregation, and the call to the service of the poor and the marginalized.

Peter Scanlon was born in Lawrence, Massachusetts on March 3, 1864. In his youth, the family moved to Lowell, Massachusetts. He entered the congregation in early 1885, four years after the Xaverian Brothers opened in 1881 their first school in the Archdiocese of Boston, St. Patrick School in Lowell. One can surely conclude that it was the life, zeal and example of the Brothers at St. Patrick’s, which influenced Peter’s decision to join the congregation.

Peter received the habit and was given the name Paul on August 15, 1885. In 1888, just one year after his profession, he was appointed director of St. Joseph School in Baltimore, Maryland. This was followed by stints as Novice Master (1891-1898), founder and director of Old Point Comfort College, Virginia (1898-1903), original faculty member and later director of St. Joseph Agricultural School, Rutherford, California (1903-07), and director of St. Mary Industrial School in Baltimore (1907-25). These latter 22 years of ministry among the poor and the marginalized at St. Joseph Agricultural School and St. Mary Industrial School had an obvious impact on the direction of Brother Paul's life.

Brother Paul was appointed provincial of the American Province in 1925. The following year he opened three high schools in what today we would call blue collar or working class communities: Keith Academy, Lowell, Mission Church High School, Roxbury, Massachusetts, and St. Michael Diocesan High School, Brooklyn, New York. The decision of Brother Paul to have our Brothers staff schools in these three areas is an indication of his commitment to the education of the poor and the marginalized. I might add that there were a significant number of vocations to the brothers and to the priesthood from these schools. Today the alumni of the three schools remain faithful, grateful and generous to the Brothers, in particular, Mission High School through Xaverian Brothers High School in Westwood and St. Michael High School through Xaverian High School in Brooklyn.

On the death of Superior General Brother Bernard Gregson in 1928, Brother Paul was elected as the fifth superior general at the Extraordinary General Chapter held in Bruges, Belgium that year. He was the first American to be chosen for this office, and it was said that he also was the very first United States citizen to hold the position of superior general of an international congregation of men religious. His experience as superior general would enhance his knowledge and understanding of the missionary and international character of the congregation.

Just one month after his election, Brother Paul received two letters with requests for teaching Brothers in the Congo. In the autumn of 1929, he made a three-month visit to the Congo in order to explore the possibility of responding to these requests. Two years later on August 17, 1931, the first four Belgian Brother missionaries arrived in Likasi, Congo. Sacred Heart Institute, today known as Institut Tutazamie, opened one month later with an enrollment of 60 students. Thus began the first missionary endeavor of the congregation since the arrival of the Brothers in the United States some 77 years earlier. This historic move is a very clear indication of Brother Paul's vision of the international and missionary character of the congregation.

In the spring of 1978, when Brother James Clifton, superior general, and I first visited the Congo, there were just two Congolese Brothers, Brother Victor Kazadi-Lenge-Kikupo and Brother Placide Ngoie- Munanga. During the course of our visit they talked with us about their desire and their dream of reinstating a formation program. We supported their vision and said we would talk to the

leadership of the Belgian Province upon our return to Europe. We met that summer with Brother Trudo Sabbe, the then Belgian provincial and former missionary in the Congo, about the proposal. He, along with the provincial council, supported the idea. In 1979 a new novitiate was begun under the direction of the Congolese Brothers.

Today there are 29 Congolese Brothers: 7 final professed, 13 temporary professed, 6 novices and 3 postulants. This past August, seventy-three years after the establishment of the Congolese mission, the Xaverian Brothers in the Congo have sent forth their first two missionaries, Brother Patrick Fumbisha-Kakusu and Brother Zacharie Kyungu- Kolala, who are assisting in the formation program of our Brothers in Kenya. I am sure that Brothers Paul Scanlon, James Clifton and Trudo Sabbe from their place with God rejoice with us in these historical developments of our Congolese Xaverian Brothers.

Brother Paul continued the process begun under Brother Bernard Gregson of moving the congregation from diocesan to papal status. On January 12, 1931, the Congregation of Religious approved the Xaverian Congregation as a papal institute. This historical achievement is another significant instance of Brother Paul's commitment to the vision of the international character of the congregation.

I believe these words from the Fundamental Principles of our 1989 Constitutions aptly describe Brother Paul's life as a Xaverian Brother and his vision for the congregation.

"Go then to all peoples everywhere and make them my disciples."

These words of the gospel stand at the heart of the vision of your Founder. Within them is contained the mission and ministry of your congregation.

Beyond this Theodore James Ryken chose Saint Francis Xavier as the patron of the congregation so that "the name of this insatiable laborer for souls will indicate in one word what is intended for the congregation."

Study and reflect also upon the history of the congregation, for this history is the actual lived expression and development of your Founder's charism. It will reveal to you the mysterious ways of God in the cycle of death and rebirth that has been the life of the congregation.

Like Ryken, foster an attitude of openness to the needs of the Church and your world, and a willingness to follow Christ wherever He leads.

Brother Paul went home to God from Old Point Comfort College (Sacred Heart Novitiate), at the age of 86 on June 18, 1950. "Well done, my good and faithful servant...Come, share your master's joy." (Mt 25:23)

We invite you to reflect on Brother Paul's story and consider leaving a comment about someone (a Brother, a colleague, a friend) who embodies similar qualities to Brother Paul Scanlon. Share with us that individual's special qualities, so that as a community we can share in your gratitude!