

'Holy Ghost' Fathers Finished In Biafra, Rev. Shelly Opines

By JOAN WHEELAN
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CHEYENNE — An Irish missionary priest who spent 16 years in Biafra believes all his fellow priests now detained by Nigerian troops will eventually be allowed to leave the country but that none will ever be allowed to return.

"I think they will all get out. They're practically all out now," said the Rev. Donn Shelly, a member of the Irish Holy Ghost order now assigned to St. Mary's in Cheyenne, and formerly of Our Lady of Fatima Catholic Church in Casper.

He said only 25 Holy Ghost fathers now remain in Nigeria out of about 400 stationed there when the secessionist nation of Biafra collapsed.

"I believe this is the end of the Holy Ghost fathers in Nigeria," he said. "Nobody can get back. In the eyes of Lagos we are pro Biafran."

The order has operated a mission in Nigeria for over 100 years.

The Nigerian troops jailed many of the Holy Ghost fathers and some were subject to summary trials on charges of entering the country illegally and smuggling in arms.

"They said we were mercenaries — us, in our soutanes," he said. "Nigerian jails are no Hilton hotels either."

Stories about priests in jail sleeping on chairs is understandable, he added, considering the unsanitary conditions of the beds.

Father Shelly knows the Rev. Leo Horkin, an American priest with the Holy Ghost order who complained recently on his release of the failure of the American embassy to come to

his aid. He credited the Irish embassy with obtaining his freedom.

In addition to being blocked from returning by the Nigerian regime, Father Shelly believes his order will not locate again in the African country because the natives have taken over the hierarchy of the Catholic Church there.

Four of the five dioceses now have native bishops appointed by the Pope, he said. The last caucasian bishop, the Rev. Whelan of Owerri is reported to

be safely out of the country and on his way home to Ireland. He will be replaced by a native bishop, Father Shelly said.

When he first went to Nigeria in 1950 to work with the Igbo tribe in Biafra, there were only two dioceses, Owerri and Onitsha. Now there are five, Enugu, Onitsha, Owerri, Umuahia and Port Harcourt.

Although the Holy Ghost fathers have been evicted, there are still priests of other orders in Nigeria. When Biafra seceded from Nigeria, the two groups

were split by the war boundaries he said. There are also other missions still being operated by the Church Missionary Society, a Protestant Scotland-based organization.

The Irish missionary is still concerned about atrocities being perpetrated on the people of Biafra by the Nigerian Troops "who cannot be controlled" because they are so far from headquarters.

"These men (the troops) have just won a war and that means power and pulling that trigger if anyone questions your authority."

The slaughter might be prevented, he added, if some newsman or other observer could report to the outside world "but they're getting fewer and fewer."

"In the ultimate analysis the Biafran war was an economic war," he said. "It was a war on one hand for the control of the oil wealth of Igboland, and on the other for the continued entry into the lucrative market-center of West Africa, one of the greatest consumers of British and European produce."

Father Shelly added that British and European interests have instituted a strong monopoly on shipping from the West Coast of Africa.

The Irish newspapers he receives are full of stories of returning Irish missionaries and of appeals to high level diplomatic officials for the release of those still detained.

"They are slipping in quietly in small groups without any great fanfare of trumpets," Cardinal Conway is quoted as saying, "but we would all like them to know there is a fanfare of trumpets for them in the hearts of the Irish people."

The newspapers also contain vivid eyewitness accounts of starving Biafran troops turning to cannibalism. General Ojukwu, the Biafran leader who later fled when the republic fell, was reported to have ordered eight civilians and two officers executed at Nkwasi for selling human flesh in a roadside market place.

Father Shelly left Biafra in January, 1967 for a trip home to Ireland and was not allowed to return to the mission.

With the end of the Holy Ghost order's Nigerian mission, the organization's largest, the 1,000 or so priests will now be sent to other missions in Africa, South America, and on the island of Mauritius. The order still maintains missions at Kenya, Nairobi and Sierra Leone in Africa as well as one in Brasilia, South America, among others.

Father Shelly says his assignment at St. Mary's is only temporary but he doesn't know at present which mission he will eventually join.



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