

Fr. Colman J. WATKINS 82 USA TZA ETH

* Sept. 20, 1908 Ardmore, PA + Jan. 11, 1991, Usa River, TZA

An orphan, he grew up in St. Joseph's House, Philadelphia, and from there went to Cornwells in 1925 for high school and junior college. After pronouncing his vows at Ridgefield, CT, July 25, 1931, he entered the senior seminary of Ferndale, CT, where he was ordained September 7, 1936.

The following year he sailed on a cargo ship round the Cape to the Kilimanjaro mission in East Africa. He was destined to work there for over fifty years. We find him stationed at Tanga and Mashati. When World War Two led to the interment of Italian priests in Ethiopia, he was one of several Spiritans who went there in 1943 for the duration of the war to take care of the missions. To his surprise, he was able to keep in touch with his American confrere Fr. Eugene Lavery, a military chaplain, who ranged far and wide in that general area and even could arrange a visit to him in Eritrea.

His home leave after the war developed in a one year stay at his beloved St. Joseph's House, but in 1948 he could return to Kilimanjaro as director of the junior seminary in the Moshi vicariate.

From 1951 to 1960 he assumed the burden of being District Superior in addition to his regular work in Uru, Kibosho and being again seminary director. With the creation of the new diocese of Arusha in 1963 he found himself under Bishop Dennis Durning and devoted the remaining 27 years of his life to the development of that diocese with all the vigor and utter dependability that was in him.

He hated to be addressed as Colman and preferred the nickname Shorty. Though he was short, it did not give him an inferiority complex; a perpetual broad smile on his face amply made up for that deficiency. His

letters reveal that great sense of humor one finds in many saints. One would look in vain for any complaints from him; extra work was shrugged off as "that something I enjoy doing."

After serving for about seven years in declining health mainly as secretary to the district's superior, he had at last to admit that he could no longer carry on, but he was happy that he could spend the short time that remained in his beloved Kilimanjaro. He died peacefully in his sleep at the mission hospital.

Fax, telex and telephone spread the news of his death far off; drums, donkey-riders and word of mouth did the same in the areas where he had labored. On very short notice, three bishops, 120 priests, uncounted Sisters and a very large crowd of the faithful gathered for his funeral Mass two days later. The powerful singing of Swahili hymns must have sounded like heavenly music to Shorty.

After a simple burial in the Spiritan cemetery of the East Africa Province, everyone sat down on the grass in front of the church. Then various people stepped forward and told how Father Shorty had touched their lives, from the bishop of Moshi down to an old man whom he had baptized decades ago and who said that many people had come to follow Jesus because of what they saw in Shorty. A simple meal of bananas and meat closed the farewell to the valiant priest.

President Jimmy Carter once told the story of a man who was taken to court and accused of being a Christian. There is no doubt that, if Shorty had been that man, he would have been found guilty on all counts.