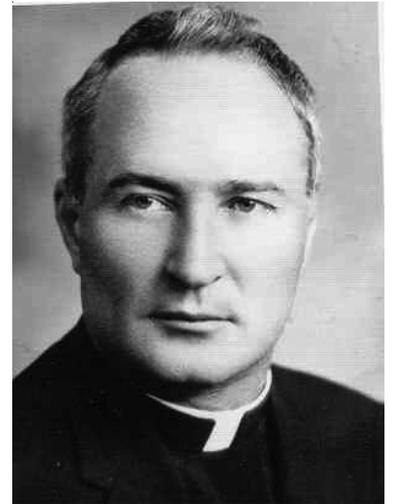


(Written by Fr. Michael Grey, C.S.Sp.)

The 1930's needed sports heroes in an age when uprightness of character was supposed to matter in the face of seemingly impossible odds. Babe Ruth's homeruns and Seabiscuit's win over War Admiral on November 1, 1938, inspired common folks dealing with the effects of worldwide Depression. In 1930, a comic strip featured a good-natured prize fighter who didn't like to fight, a defender of little guys, a gentle knight named Joe Palooka. Joe's manager and support was a regular, short, stocky, straight-talking guy named Nobby Walsh. Nicknames are a common feature of any gathering of men. In the case of Father John "Nobby" Walsh, someone saw right through to the core of his being. He was rightly named. His life of service and concern for the 'little guys' confirms this. Fr. John Joseph Walsh, C.S.Sp, Spiritan missionary priest, finished his earthly safari on Friday, June 27, 2008, and entered into the eternal embrace of Jesus, Our Lord.



*Rev. John J. Walsh, C.S.Sp.
Nov. 4, 1920 - June 27, 2008*

John Joseph Walsh was born in Philadelphia, PA, on November 4, 1920, to Christopher and Mary (Grant) Walsh. He had two brothers, Christopher and Fenton, and a sister, Mary Catherine. He was the proud uncle of many nephews and nieces with whom he kept closely in touch.

After a year at West Catholic High School, John entered Holy Ghost Missionary College in Cornwells Heights, PA, in 1936. Following Novitiate at Ridgefield, CT, he pursued his Theological studies at St. Mary's Seminary in Ferndale, CT. Fr. John Walsh was ordained to the priesthood on June 10, 1948. With his Consecration to the Apostolate, he was assigned on October 15, 1949 to the Spiritan District of Kilimanjaro, in Tanzania.

Fr. John served in various missions in the district. He always described the spirit of the mission in very vibrant terms where the relatively large number of American Spiritans (51 in 1960), were serving with scant resources but a superfluity of creative energy and commitment to sharing the Gospel and building the Church on firm African roots. Fr. Gregory Mallaya, C.S.Sp., who recently celebrated his 25th priestly anniversary, and is assisting at St. Joseph Church in Conway, AR, remembers Fr. John well. He recalls how Fr. John helped in his own and in others' school tuition payments. Parents who were not able to pay were asked to gather and bring in a gallon tin of coffee beans which Fr. John would trade and leverage for school necessities. Fr. Walsh's creative efforts at encouraging people to work cooperatively for family and community needs was a core principal that he developed in Africa and carried with him to his ministry in Louisiana and Texas.

Eventually, health reasons forced Fr. John to return to the US. He always looked with great fondness on his years in Africa. In speaking of this time, one cannot help but make a connection with the spirit of Catholics in general at the time of the Second Vatican Council. The same sense of being in a place at a special time in history pervades the telling of the story! Fr. John and all of the men who served in Africa at this time were aware that they were part of a new era in mission, a new development of the Church and of the Congregation. Some of the men, like Gene Hillman and Vince Donovan, had the talent to put their experience and insights into books, but it is clear that all of the men were important to the development of the insights and pastoral initiative that characterized this period of Spiritan mission in East Africa.

In 1965, Fr. John was assigned to St. Monica Parish in New Orleans. St. Monica's was a 'daughter' of Holy Ghost Parish in the Uptown section of the city and home to some of the larger and more difficult housing projects. He served at St. Joseph House in Philadelphia for one year when he helped his family work

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through the death of their mother, Mary. In 1967, Fr. John was assigned to Holy Ghost Church in Opelousas, LA, for many years known as the largest African-American parish in the US.

Spiritans had served in African-American parishes in Louisiana since the founding of St. James Parish in Alexandria, LA, in 1912. By the 1970's, the twenty-two Spiritan parishes and mission churches founded in Louisiana were mature and lively communities of Black Catholic faith. The 1960-70's were a powerful time of social change in the US, and Fr. John was present to assist as Black Catholics took the reins of leadership and worked for justice in Society and in the Church.

Fr. John had a keen insight for the needs of the family. Concerned that the poorest be given a fair shake, he began his own, not-for-profit, version of what Sam Walton was already putting together in Arkansas (Walmart)! By cooperating, members in Opelousas were able to buy food, clothing and household necessities in bulk, the products being sold individually and at a considerable savings. He would later put his self-learned sales and marketing skills to work keeping the parish schools open for the mostly African-American children at Sacred Heart in Lake Charles, Holy Ghost in Marksville and at St. Philip Neri in Houston. Long before superstores were a common feature of our landscape, a Spiritan substitution for Nobby at Mass in Marksville could open the freezer when meal time arrived, and sample a wonderful frozen Langostino & Angel Hair pasta entrée. Later on, inquisitive and threadbare Spiritans substituting at Mass in Houston could sample any number of the finest cut-rate black two-piece suits from "Nobby's Off the Rack!"

Fr. John's concern that the poor person have a fair chance, found expression in two lawsuits he was instrumental in forging against policies of the Diocese of Lafayette involving the integration of the Catholic schools in Opelousas and purchasing agreements for school uniforms and supplies. Nobby's sense of justice and of obligation to care for the poor led him to make many difficult decisions. At no time did he grandstand and make a show of himself. He and his confreres in Africa seem to have learned the spirit of respect and collaboration that opened communities to know, and celebrate in real terms, the presence of Jesus and the power of His Kingdom message. Work for justice, work for peace, was truly Gospel work.

In 1982, Fr. John was concerned about spending his advancing years in an assignment that would challenge him in new ways. He finally made it, by the grace of an All-Provident God, to Texas! He was assigned as pastor of St. Philip Neri Church on the Southeast side of Houston. He served there for six years, once again using his pastoral experience and basic economic skills to bring the parish and school back to life from some incredibly difficult financial years, compounded by the Gulf coast "Oil Bust" of the early 1980's. In 1988, a spry, 68-year old Nobby was appointed chaplain at the Texas Southern University Newman Hall. During this time, Fr. John moved into Spiritan Hall and served as mentor to the students in the pre-novitiate program.

Fr. John approached the Catholic campus ministry at TSU as a missionary to the students and the faculty and staff. He made TSU Newman Hall a welcoming place with Sunday and weekday liturgy, counseling, as well as a place to meet and spend some safe, good time together. Students, particularly from the nearby Law and Pharmacy Schools, found Newman to be a welcome place for study. A community of students, faculty and friends daily served a very welcome lunch and provided a welcome place of refuge and spiritual support. As the century came to a close, Fr. John's eyesight began to fail him and he advanced into retirement at Spiritan Hall. It was a busy retirement spent with plenty of visitors. Fr. John was well cared for in his later years.

In early June 2008, Fr. John was taken to the hospital and later to St. Dominic's Village in Houston, where he passed away June 27, 2008. Fr. John Walsh, C.S.Sp. was buried at St. Matthew Cemetery in Conshohocken, PA, on July 9, 2008.
