



Father Johannes [Jo] GELISSEN
(1934 – 2013)

*Died 29 August 2013, in Leuven (Belgium)
aged 78, with 57 years of Religious Profession.*

On Thursday 29th August seven people had gathered around Jo's bed in hospital as was planned beforehand, to attend the sacrament of Extreme Unction. Jo seemed to be asleep but now and then he reacted in one way or another. There was a serene atmosphere. Ten minutes later he 'left' quietly; it was as though he had been waiting for us.

Jo was born in Heerlen (NL) on 27th December 1934. After primary school he went to secondary school in Schimmert and afterwards to D'Hoppe (B) to do his noviciate with the Montfortians. He made his first profession on 8th September 1955. He studied philosophy and theology in Oirschot (NL) and was ordained priest on 12th March 1961.

He longed to become a missionary. With this idea in mind he went to Schimmert and all through his scholasticate he cherished this wish. And yet, after his ordination, he was asked to do the 5th year in Leuven, to settle in Rotselaar and to remain at the disposal of the Montfortian Seminary as it was called in those days. The community used to assist on Sundays in the neighbouring parish Wilsele-Putkapel. From 1961 onwards Jo was in charge and he enriched himself with experiences that became very important later in life.

From 1962 onwards Jo was subsequently a teacher of Latin and religion, class tutor and dean of KAJ (Young Catholic Workers) and supervisor in the school. Although he explicitly expressed his wish to do more typical priestly work in 1973 or to do missionary work – he suggested the Congo or Brasil – he was asked to become principal of the boarding school. School and boarding school were in the midst of a reorganization process and he appeared to be indispensable. As always when someone appealed to him Jo put all his personal longings aside. All sorts of new initiatives grew and were put in place; those were the golden years. A new, bright future lay ahead for the school and boarding school.

But he kept longing for more priestly work. Father Vrebos in Putkapel, who very much appreciated Jo's weekly help and who held him in high esteem, saw him as the perfect person to replace him. He pushed him a little and Jo finally made up his mind. In 1982 he resigned as principal, but it took another two years before they finally accepted his resignation. On 2nd August 1985 Cardinal Danneels appointed him parish-priest. With a lot of enthusiasm he started his new job. His silver jubilee in 1986 was a fine evidence of the warm welcome he received from his parishioners. It had taken him 25 years before he finally could devote himself to priestly work! On 1st July 1989 he was appointed dean in Herent but he remained in Putkapel. This extra job was a real challenge to involve others, lay-people, in pastoral work. The parish choir flourished as never before, the group of proud altar boys grew steadily, catechists did a wonderful job, the interior of the church got a face-lift. In other words: a strong parish team was established and kept things going. Round and about the church some alterations too took place, among others a genuine carillon was installed.

The year 2000 was special. The chapter of 1999 elected him at the last minute as superior; now he had a double task: superior and parish priest.

It was part of his character to take initiatives and Jo was a 'builder' but then he had little choice: it was the time that difficult choices had to be made. I just mention a few of them: he and his council had to put an end to the work in Le Carrefour, the Montfortian retreat house and finally sell it; he had to return the parish church Our-Lady-Mediatrix to the diocese; to end all responsibility of the Belgian Montfortians in the Congo; he was responsible for the transfer of school and boarding school in Rotselaar and finally at the end of his mandate he prepared the transition of vice-province to general delegation. But what saddened him most was that there was no successor for his parish in Putkapel when he had to retire at the age of 75. He, a builder, had to put a lot of energy into managing the end of a number of initiatives that were once thriving, but now declining. But here too he could remain who he was.

Jo, claiming he was no theologian or a man of theory, had a great heart, a heart that could listen and find the right words. Speaking the language of the heart he opened many doors, literally and figuratively. He had a weakness for poor people and painful situations. With his warm heart he brought relief; no miracles happened but he was there and it meant a lot to many people. He gave flesh and blood to the well known saying: 'shared happiness is happiness doubled, shared grief is grief halved'.

And yet he was full of energy; just remember the numerous activities in Rotselaar, e.g.: for more than 10 hours a day he was overseeing, he cut the lawns, built a sheepshed and a sportshall, coached young football players, animated youth camps, and so on ... He used to travel a lot and enjoyed being in other countries, nearby or far away. And yet, he also had his still moments, close to the Lord. Already at an early age Montfort had led him to Mary. He never missed an opportunity to participate when something which had to do with Montfortian spirituality was organized. In everyday life Mary often was his refuge, which doesn't surprise anyone who knew Jo as someone who spoke in simple words from heart to heart. As such he was really happy when he had the chance of doing a pilgrimage, either as a guide or as participant; there was hardly any difference. It was all about meeting: meeting the Lord, meeting Mary, meeting fellow men.

Jo's life was built on friendship, strong ties with his family nearby and far away, ties with his confreres, ties with fellow workers both in the pastoral field and the social field. Jo was very grateful, he surely would have liked me to express his gratitude today. In his name I would like to say thanks to everyone who supported him. And no one will be jealous when I mention Agnes Dewolf particularly, it was she who surrounded Jo with so much care even in the most painful situations till the end.