

## “Padre Luis” Quinn – Priest of the Poor (1928 - 2007)

(Details of the Funeral and Life of Padre Luis)

October 17<sup>th</sup> 2007 (Wednesday) is a day the people of San Jose de Ocoa, Dominican Republic will forever remember. They had come streaming down from the mountains to greet the body of their beloved shepherd, **Padre Luis Quinn**. His remains were being carried home to Ocoa in a simple, unvarnished pine coffin on the back of an open truck which led a procession of vehicles and was draped with a Dominican flag. They advanced slowly along the only road into town threading their way carefully through the thousands of people who openly mourned his arrival. Dressed in their Sunday best, the people offered their love with tears of affection and tossed bright flowers on the coffin. Men removed their hats, both men and women thanking God for this special priest whom each regarded as a member of their family or at least a close friend.

It took nearly three hours to get to the Church. There the body of **Padre Luis was waked** all that evening and the next day. Everyone who wished to pay his or her final respects for this Canadian missionary could come. And come they did – farmers, townsfolk, youth, teachers, religious, government officials – all were touched in some significant way by the persevering faith and extraordinary accomplishments of Padre Luis. Over the years he had inspired enormous hope among them resulting in a transformation of community life that reached every part of Ocoa.

“Padre Luis” as he was commonly known, served the parish of San Jose de Ocoa, a mountainous region near the centre of the country for 42 years. With seemingly inexhaustible faith and energy he wove pastoral sacramental ministry together with economic and social development aimed directly at improving the lives of his parishioners. His efforts and vision opened up a future of hope for their families and communities that is evident today in the bustling life of Ocoa.

Fr. Quinn inspired over **20,000 volunteers**, among them many Canadian Catholic high school and university students, to come to Ocoa to work for a short time with the people. Supported by a small but equally dedicated community of Canadian religious sisters and fellow Scarboro priests, their collective efforts helped radically transform the lives and well-being of thousands of families and whole communities throughout the area of Ocoa.

They in turn worked together with international partners, individuals and groups with specialized skills such as engineering, labouring successfully on a multitude of projects; building hundreds of kilometers of access roads, allowing remote communities to bring their produce to market; forming cooperative organizations for buying and selling produce; establishing extensive irrigation systems to carry water to isolated farms and farmers working to help each other; planting millions of trees to reforest vital watershed areas.

**The statistics** are amazing but true. Padre Luis was responsible for the construction of:

- some 600 kilometers of paved roads,
- 60 kilometers of irrigation systems,
- 2,000 new homes, 7,000 hurricane-damaged homes repaired,
- 12 million trees planted for re-forestation,
- 69 schools, 11 clinics and 13 community centres.

Other numerous projects were created to provide children in many areas with opportunities to learn practical skills in homemaking, carpentry, handcrafting artifacts, jewelry and clothing, in addition their schooling and religious instruction.

Over his years of service, Fr. Quinn received many **kinds of recognition** for his labours. Some were international: the Order of Canada in 1995, the Vatican’s Supreme Cross in 2005, as well as a nomination for the Nobel Peace prize. Following a variety of honors given to him over the years by the Dominican

government, he was designated '**Father Protector of Ocoa**' in 2002 at the inauguration of the new province of Ocoa.

Yet he lived simply throughout his life in Ocoa, receiving visitors in the same original board house connected to the Church as when he arrived there in 1965. Being buried in a simple pine coffin was his wish, for he saw himself on the same plane as his people. As he lay in his hospital bed in Ft. Lauderdale, Fla. failing to recover after open heart surgery, his last words were in Spanish, "I have to live, I love my people."

Perhaps the **finest tribute** is being bestowed on him in death. After a life time of shepherding his people, he is being buried in a simple wooden coffin, the kind used by ordinary *campesinos* for the burial of their loved ones. The funeral Mass, was presided over by his bishop, **Msgr. Freddy Breton**, on Friday morning, October 19, outside the parish Church in front of the plaza. The president had earlier declared this a National Day of Mourning. Over 25,000 people filled the plaza and area surrounding it to pay their final respects, and commend his soul to God.

**The highest dignitaries** of Church and state were there: the President, the Papal Nuncio, the Supreme Court Justice, and Canada's own present and former Ambassadors to the Dominican Republic. At the celebration of the funeral Mass, his bishop spoke warmly of the faith and commitment of this missionary priest who had become so beloved among his people. He cited his witness as servant of Christ who lived the Gospel concretely. How he served so well the needs of the poor, inspiring people to work together to transform their lives and communities. As he concluded his homily, he observed how the fresh scent of pine rising from the coffin was Padre Luis reminding everyone to take care of their newly planted forests and the ecology of the region.

His body was then taken into the Church and interred in **specially-built crypt** beside the staircase leading to the choir loft. Padre Luis having been a singer himself, it was a fitting resting place. There, each time the people of Ocoa and visitors will pass by this spot on their way in to worship. And their hearts will again be stirred as they remember the faith, spirit and dedication of this beloved Shepherd of his people, truly a '**priest of the poor**'.

Fr Lou Quinn, 'Padre Luis' a graduate of St. Michael's Choir School in Toronto, while a student in St Michael's College, felt the call to the missionary priesthood and entered Scarboro Missions' St. Francis Xavier Seminary. He was ordained in December 1952, and assigned in 1953 to the Society's mission in the Dominican Republic. He died in the presence of close friends and relatives, October 11, 2007 at 79 years of age.