

**The Rev. Fr. Dr. Prof. 'Alhaji'**  
**Joseph Peter Kenny OP, That I Knew**

by

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I am humbled and yet honoured to have been asked by the Nigerian Field Society (NFS) to write about this highly revered man of God, a 'human library' of the Dominican Order and, arguably, its most renowned intellectual and academician in modern times, Rev. Fr. Professor Joseph Peter Kenny, OP ('Fr. Joe' or simply 'Joe' for short).

**From the Dominican Records<sup>1</sup>**

According to our Dominican record, Joseph Kenny was born on January 12, 1936 in Chicago, Illinois, USA. He received his elementary school education through a Catholic parochial primary school in Chicago, he went to the Chicago Archdiocesan Minor Seminary for his secondary school where he learnt Latin and Greek. His seminary formation continued at the Chicago Archdiocesan Major Seminary. Two years later he realized that his calling for the Catholic priesthood was not as a diocesan priest but rather as a Dominican, leading him to join the Dominican Order in 1956. He was ordained a Catholic priest on April 15, 1963 after a Dominican Seminary formation that earned him a Bachelor in Philosophy and Masters Degrees in both Philosophy and Theology.

Before his ordination, he had listened to a fellow Dominican, the then Msgr. Edward T. Lawton who would later become the pioneer bishop of Sokoto Diocese, talk about missionary work in Nigeria. His openness to missionary work soon led his superiors to send him to Nigeria. Given his knack for languages and Msgr. Lawton's understanding that his missionaries should have a good knowledge of the Islamic religion as well as the strategic importance of the Sokoto Emirate in the scheme of

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<sup>1</sup> I am relying here on 'Biography of Rev. Fr. (Prof.) Joseph Peter Kenny, OP' as cited in the *Funeral Rites for Rev. Fr. Joseph Peter Kenny, OP, 1936-2013*, pp. 2-3.

things in the Nigerian politics and Islamic religion in Nigeria, his Dominican superiors sent him to universities in Rome and Tunis to specialize in Arabic Studies. These culminated in Fr. Joe earning his PhD in the same academic discipline from the University of Edinburgh, Scotland. Thereafter, he returned to Nigeria in 1970 and was assigned to the Dominican mission in Malumfashi in present day Katsina State where he learnt and became proficient in the Hausa. After working in Sokoto for a number of years and setting up a Christian-Muslim dialogue centre, he was transferred to Ibadan to join in the development of what would later metamorphose into the Dominican Institute at Samonda, Ibadan, Oyo State—as well as take up a teaching career that spanned more than three decades.

### **Meeting Fr. Kenny for the first time**

My knowing Rev. Fr. Joseph Peter Kenny began in November 1971 when I joined the Dominican Order in Ibadan. At first sight, he appeared to me more avant-garde than serious. He was most of the time dressed in short knickers and shirts, bathroom slippers, ever picking his beard with one hand and the other hand carrying a book. With time, I came to realise that I was sharing the same community with not just a man but a giant among men. By this time, he was already steeped into teaching Christian and Islamic studies at the S.S. Peter and Paul Major Seminary, Bodija, Ibadan. Two years later, following my arrival, he took up an appointment with the Department of Religious Studies of Nigeria's premier university, the University of Ibadan. There, he carved a niche for himself for the almost three decades teaching Christian and Islamic studies until his retirement, while also teaching at both the Dominican Institute and the Major Seminary.

### **Fr. Joe Kenny's spiritual/religious and social life**

A true son of St. Dominic, Fr. Kenny's was hardly found wanting in the demands of religious life which he lived out with a child-like demeanor and simplicity that were very disarming. For instance, he never saw his salary, having instructed his employers to pay it directly into the Dominican Community Account. He was just content with a roof over his head, food on the table—he loved Nigerian stews and soups, spiced with hot pepper!—and his simple motor-bike with which he moved around and came to be associated by all who know him in the Dominican community and beyond, especially the University of Ibadan. In his room, or 'cell' as we Dominicans call it, he had a reading table with a typewriter—later replaced

with a laptop computer — book shelves and a small foam mattress, stuck in the corner on the bare floor, on which he slept. Not many know that this great man chose to have no bed!

Three places one would possibly find Fr. Kenny, besides his office in the university, are in his room studying or sleeping, in the library researching and in the chapel for community mass and prayers. In accordance with our Dominican tradition, he neatly blended commitment to assiduous studies with regular prayer life, both of which informed what some have rightly remarked as his relatively brief ‘homilies which are no less enthralling as they are short.’<sup>2</sup> In terms of his fraternal relationships in the community, Fr. Joe is no ‘godfather’ to any, but just a simple brother to all and enemy to none. In the same vein, he avoided the limelight, never wanting to be popular. If anything, you know where he stands on any issue and until one presents a superior argument, he would stubbornly hold to his view regardless of what anyone would say or think.

It has been rightly said that Fr. Kenny was a lover of nature. In pursuit of this, he devoted much of his spare time. Worthy of note here, is Joe's many years of membership in the Nigerian Field Society, a volunteer-based international organization whose love and promotion of nature is well known across Nigeria. His contribution to the growth of this organization, as evidenced in the time he spent working on journal. In recognition of his selfless assistance, the society graciously reciprocated by organizing a lecture in his honour to celebrate the 85th Anniversary of the Nigerian Field.

In whatever Joe put his interest, he would also find a way to use it to benefit the Dominican Community. To this effect, Joe's love of nature and the NFS led to his interest in trees and tree-planting all of which culminated in his planting a variety fruit trees in the Ibadan community. Over and above this and obviously coming from the NFS mind set, Joe established several beehives, which not only produced lots of honey for the community's consumption, but also generated some income for the Dominican coffers.

### **The Golden Years of Fr. Joe Kenny:**

The years 1993 - 2013 can be validly argued to be the golden years of his ministry and missionary work as a Dominican. Two achievements stand out for this assertion.

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<sup>2</sup> cf. JudeMary O., Paul A. and Samuel O, "We Remember" *ibid*, p. 24.

First and foremost is his involvement in the pre and post permanent establishment of the Dominican Institute of Philosophy and Theology (DI) as we know it today. Following the decision of the Dominicans in 1993 to formally and officially establish the Institute, this author—a past student of Fr. Joe—was recalled home from Canada to be the pioneer president of the Dominican Institute and see to its actualization. Ever willing and ready to mentor and help me navigate through the rough waters, so to speak, of this exalted position was Fr. Joe. For those who do not know him well enough, he was one of those rare breed of scholars whose goal is not to be a lone star, rather he was always on the look out for potential shining stars to mentor to academic and scholarly greatness, believing in the saying, 'the young shall grow.'

To this effect he was solidly behind me or, better, to work under me to realize our common interest to set up an Institute that would be a class of its own in academic excellence in both Nigeria and beyond.

In those very early years of the Dominican Institute, Fr. Joe took me to places within and outside of academic circles to introduce me and the DI. Worthy of note was a trip to Rome to meet the officials of the Secretariat for Catholic Education and Non-Christian Religions both in the Vatican. Nearer home, he took me to the University of Ibadan, to its different offices and senior officers. Of note were the vice-chancellor, the dean of faculty of arts, the registrar, the heads of the Departments of Philosophy and Religious Studies, etc. In each case, Joe loved and enjoyed introducing me in the following words: "Meet our president, the president of the of the Dominican Institute of Philosophy and Theology, Ibadan."

Although, by this time, he was not officially a professor—a position the Senate of the university would later give him by popular acclamation! We were reliably told that he was already so highly revered and renowned a scholar/teacher in the university. All this rubbed off on the budding DI, implying that if Professor Joseph Kenny was behind the young institute, then it must be academically in good company and, therefore, worthy of trust and respect within the academia. Armed by such a reputation, it was not surprising that within the first year of DI's existence—in 1994 to be precise—DI became affiliated to the University of Ibadan through the Department of Philosophy for the award of the Philosophy Honors Bachelors Degree and combined Honor Bachelors in Philosophy and Religious Studies.

Meanwhile, Joe engaged himself fully as one of the pioneer teachers at DI, besides acting as its unassuming wise elder and, I should say, its unofficial president. On a specific note, as my former teacher, academic and administrative mentor and adviser

at DI, at no time did Joe try to take the shine away from me as president. To say this is not to suggest that he and I saw things exactly the same way. If anything, we clashed and disagreed on a number of policy matters, given our mutual stubborn and strong-willed characters. Yet, on such occasions, Joe would defer to me in the following words: "You are the boss, you do what you think best." And even in all this, he never held a grudge against me; we simply would agree to disagree and never allowed it to negatively affect our relationship and fraternity as Dominicans or to derail us from our common goal to make DI a pride to Dominicans in Africa and beyond.

On this note, I can say that Joe was a true professional and a major, if not the major, architect of DI's on-going success that has culminated into it now becoming a university, the Dominican University (DU).

The second achievement that marks Fr. Kenny's golden era of his ministry can be said to have begun in the year 2000. Almost following the author's departure as president of DI, Joe retired from the University of Ibadan. By this time he had, to his credit, taught and/or mentored hundreds of Christian and Muslim students several of whom rose to become bishops and priests (Catholic and non-Catholic), professors, revered Muslim scholars and public servants in the country. But he never retired with regards to his continued contribution to DI's development.

Besides his teaching engagement at DI, he initiated two projects that are connected with DI. The first is his establishment of a research centre, the Bishop Michael Dempsey Centre—named after one of the three pioneer American Dominican missionaries in Nigeria. The second was the effort to grow the DI into a university, the DU. Although Fr. Joe did not live to see this his dream mature into fruition, on November 2016 when the Dominicans received its licence for the university, it is a common knowledge among the Dominicans in Nigeria and Ghana that Joe's input towards this historic achievement cannot be overemphasised or quantified in monetary terms.

### **My last days with Fr. Joe Kenny**

In the summer months of the year 2012, Fr. Joe was in the US for his deserved holidays. We met at the assembly of Nigeria-Ghana Dominicans on mission in North America on August 8th, the feast day of our Father Founder, St. Dominic. He looked his usual vibrant self. With the brothers, he enjoyed the Nigerian dishes that were served and he said he missed since he left Nigeria. I had a good time with him

as he did with all the brothers present at the assembly. There was no sign whatsoever of any ill-health. This was about two weeks or so before his return home—meaning Nigeria, whose passport-carrying citizen he had become several years ago. He was telling us at that assembly how he was preparing for his return to Nigeria. I took a photo with him that turned out very beautiful—capturing him at his best in the Dominican habit (attire) as if he knew that would be his last photo with me. I left for my base in Canada on August 11th 2012 only to hear, about three weeks or so later, that Joe could not make the return-trip. He had gone for his regular routine medical check-up in preparation for his return to Nigeria only to be diagnosed to have brain tumour.

By late December 2012 his condition had become worse. On January 2nd 2013, I travelled to Washington DC to visit him. By this time he had been moved into the Home of the Little Sisters of the Poor in Washington D.C., where he was to spend the last days of his life. Obviously happy to see me throughout the three days I visited him. Notwithstanding his pain, he was able to carry on some discussions with me on a range of issues including academic matters, plans for the anticipated DU as well as my own academic plans. Strangely, on my last day with him, January 5th to be precise, he was thanking me for a paper I supposedly was to deliver at an upcoming conference he was billed to attend in Ibadan. Of course, I was not even aware of the conference, not to talk of presenting a paper for which he was thanking me so profusely. But then, his brain was failing him from the tumour. Yet, this is Fr. Kenny the academician, the assiduous scholar and researcher, the fluent speaker of six languages (English, French, Italian, Arabic, German and Hausa) and a reading knowledge of Greek, Latin and Spanish. Any wonder, he apparently arranged with the Lord Jesus to call him home to eternity on January 28th, the feast day of St. Thomas Aquinas, the Doctor of the Church—in whose trademark and footsteps Joe was never found wanting and always doing his best to emulate throughout his life. What a man and what a life !!