

Br. Patrick Titus Coffey. (1922 - 2014) by Br. B. D. Sassi.

Patrick Coffey was born on the 20th of December 1922 in Shanaway House, Ballineen, County Cork, Ireland. He was part of a large and loving family as he describes in his own account of his early life. This is an abridged version:

‘I am one of a family of ten children, six boys and four girls – Jim, Eily, Kit, Denny, Mary, Peggy, Ted, myself, Dan and Sean. Eily became a Dominican Sister and spent much of her life in South Africa, but also in Liberia, England and Rome. Peggy became a nurse and served in Monty’s desert army during the war. Mary also was a nurse and served with the R A F in Karachi. Her husband Bartle later became a close fishing companion of mine. Kit married Bart Crowley (whose brother, Declan, was a Christian Brother in England). Their eldest daughter, Sheila, became a Sister of Jesus and Mary. Denny worked in England during the war and had a family and farm in Bandon, Cork. Ted stayed in the home farm and raised a family, one of whose daughters – Anne became a Presentation Sister, (who helped with this necrology). Dan inherited their uncle’s farm in Knockmacool and raised a family. Sean worked in agriculture and management in Carlow and raised a family.

My mother’s brother and a nephew were Christian Brothers the latter- Michael Mark, worked in South Africa and the former, Giles, and was a C. B. pioneer in New York. She was Helena Hallissey and though her husband had a farm in Enniskeane when they married in 1912, in 1922 they borrowed money to buy a farm in Shanaway previously owned by a Protestant family who fled when the Treaty was signed establishing The Irish Free State. My father died five years later aged 49, leaving my mother to bring up a family of ten. My mother, though devastated, decided to carry on and with the help of the very devoted foreman, Johnny Donovan, managed to keep us all going. There was plenty of work to be done before and after school- tending to the cattle, horse, pigs and fowl and working on the root and cereal crops. I did not get to know my father deeply but remember him as very loving and caring. He had an easy authority. My mother was a small, healthy, active woman, very versatile at cooking, decorating and knitting.

When my father died and soon after England’s ‘economic war’ put heavy tariffs on Irish produce, it was difficult to service the debts incurred from loans on the farm. Many farms went out of business. But, when World War II started in 1939, prices soared and good profits were made on the land.

My earliest memory is of nearly dying of pneumonia aged two with the cure being a large poultice of linseed across back and chest. It was like being boiled alive and I passed out but recovered later. My mother died aged 90 in 1973, having never needed a doctor in her life. After primary school which was preceded and succeeded by many farm duties, one had to go to Dunmanway (7 miles away) or Bandon (10 miles) for secondary education. For several years we wore ‘Blue Shirts’ to school and continued to do so in Collins country, even after they were banned by De Valera. I learned to serve Mass and was taught Latin though this did not mean much to me- I always thought too much time was given to Irish and not enough to English.

My mother was very religious and ensured that we took a full part in all the parish Holy Days, missions, sacraments, etc. Daily rosary and trimmings were a must. The

teachers were zealous in promoting the faith under the watchful eye of Canon O'Connell. We were encouraged to support the Missions and I had a vague notion of being part of this Church Mission but knew little of the orders involved. However, Br. Dan Richard Donovan, the son of Johnny Donovan, our foreman, gave my name to Br. Mark Mc Carthy, the famous postulator, who visited my home and signed me on in 1937. I left home on 11th August and travelled to Dublin via various stopping points where the number of postulants swelled to sixteen. That weekend, my sister, Eily, was due home before going on her first mission as a Dominican Sister to South Africa. So, I missed her and did not meet her again for some 25 years.'

Patrick opted for the English Mission and entered the Juniorate - St. Joseph's College, Ledsham, Cheshire on the eleventh of August 1937. He entered Carlett Park, the Novitiate, on the fifteenth of August 1940 taking the name Titus as his religious name. However, this idyllic house set in sylvan surroundings was near the River Mersey and the canal connecting to the Manchester Ship Canal, a main target for enemy bombing in 1939 and 1940. Titus mentions regularly spending the nights in air raid shelters, sitting on hard chairs, in seniority. Food was severely rationed with little sugar or meat and dry bread. Moreover, the army requisitioned the house and built barrack huts for the troops in 1942. The Brothers had to return to Ledsham until after the war. How indelible such dramatic events must have made their mark on Titus is seen in his vivid depictions in necrologies of his peers such as that of Br. Macartan Duignan.

However Titus was able to escape the worst of the war when he was assigned to continue his studies in Dublin. Ireland was a neutral country during World War II thus avoiding the horrendous bombing meted out to the U. K. Titus did his Matriculation exams in English, Latin, Maths, Chemistry and French in 1940 at University College Dublin of the National University of Ireland. He added more science subjects and got Honours in his Teaching Certificate by 1943. In 1944 he did First Arts in Latin, Maths, French and History. However, he was well into his second year of an Arts Degree when he was told by the Superior General to change to Science for which he received a B.Sc. One can see how dedicated Titus was to his vocation as a teaching Religious Brother. This great determination and mettle was a harbinger of his life as a teacher, headmaster and Provincial Leader. Titus had an eight-day holiday at home in September 1945, his first for eight years.

His first mission as a teaching Brother was at St. Joseph's College, Blackpool. This breezy Lancashire holiday resort was a healthy place and had been spared the ravages of war but there had been various difficulties in the school throughout its history and difficulties over its place in diocesan plans were to see a hastened withdrawal of the Brothers in 1975. Titus says there was a great shortage of science teachers so, being the only science teacher in St. Joseph's, he had to teach Physics, Chemistry and Applied Mathematics at Ordinary and Advanced level. He had no free periods and had no time for Religious Education or Games. Since the Headmaster was reluctant to spend money on textbooks, Titus had to prepare notes for his classes.

Br. Andrew Rock was one of Titus's pupils and describes him thus: 'I first met Titus when I was a boarder at St. Joseph's in 1947. The boarders were quick with nicknames, so he was called "Rufus" from his red hair before we even knew his

name. He taught Chemistry well and was meticulous about correcting our homework and our practical notebooks each week. Chemistry was my favourite and best subject’.

In 1949, Titus was changed to St. Edward’s College, Liverpool. His calibre was recognised by his being appointed to the position of sub-superior in 1953 and eventually as superior in 1961. Br. Jim Catterson remembers Titus in 1957 when he was only eleven years of age. This was when the eminent Br. De Sales Foley was headmaster and Titus was his deputy:

‘He taught science in the senior part of the school so I never had him as my teacher. However, he was of a practical bent and used to construct the scenery for the school plays. He asked for volunteers to help him and I was one. We got to know him quite well – in a more personal way than in the classroom. He used to reward us for our voluntary work with a snack or a film. There are many reasons why I decided to join the Brothers but that relationship with Titus was certainly an important factor. I always found Titus to be a good friend throughout my life’.

Another former pupil and eventual colleague was Mr. Tony Edwards. He benefited from Titus’s Chemistry lessons and after graduation was accepted on the staff of St. Edward’s by Titus when headmaster. Tony remembers Titus as a great cross-country coach but his rugby refereeing was not always unbiased. He was a tough man and straight-talking but he was kind under the exterior. He had a unique teaching method. He would get the notes of the class ahead when they were leaving and give them out to the following year group to write up in a week before returning them. It was economical as it saved on textbooks! You then had to learn them verbatim! Tony’s critical views are all made up for by his admiring summary: ‘He was a man of his time. He was honest and caring, with a complete commitment to his pupils and to his community’.

Another former pupil Peter O’Hare writes:

‘In the recent past, there was a Government advertisement campaign aimed at getting more graduates to enter the teaching profession, using the slogan-“You always remember that special teacher”. For me, and I suspect, for very many others, Br. Coffey was that teacher. He was the Brother who had the most influence on me. This was in two areas- Chemistry and Athletics. In Chemistry, he engendered in me an interest in the subject and the need to keep an enquiring mind. All of us Chemistry students were inspired by him and were relatively successful in life. Even though few of us were still in the scientific field, the rigour he had imposed stood us in good stead in our myriad careers. His repute was “firm but fair, and with a smile”. In the field of Athletics, Br. Coffey expanded track and field events at St. Edward’s so that every shape and size of boy could compete in the discipline best suited to him. He even did much manual work which involved building jumping pits and a hammer-throwing base. It is often said-“we shall not see his like again”. In P T C’s case there is no argument.’

Joseph Chamberlain was another pupil of the 1950s:

‘The fact that I made my career in Chemistry must be put down to Br. Coffey’s influence. I worked in research and development in the pharmaceutical industry for most of my career, with the last ten years (1990-2000) as editor of the prestigious academic journal - *The Journal of Pharmacy and Pharmacology*. A piece of advice he handed out early on was to encourage questions, no matter how silly they might

appear. "Better to look a fool for two minutes than to remain ignorant for the rest of your life" he said. He also had two favourite expressions that have stuck with me. The ultimate put-down was "You Goose" to someone who had done something silly and "Is this a joke?" on coming across scenes of disorder. Both phrases were imitated by his pupils. I do not recall a nickname at St. Edward's but he was called Teapot at St. Mary's. For quite a hard disciplinarian and sports promoter Br. Coffey was surprisingly against Boxing. "It could not be right to have a sport where one beats one's opponents' brains out," he said. I think most countries are coming round to the same conclusion.

In 2007 the remnants of the 1950 intake in St Edward's used the occasion of the Old Boys Annual Dinner to celebrate the 50th anniversary of our leaving the College. Thirty former pupils made it and we invited former form masters to be our guests- Brother Aidan Brennan, Mr. Bob Allen and Br. Coffey. We were graced with the presence of the former two but Br. Coffey declined out of "being old, dodderly and deaf". A group of us took the opportunity to visit him in St. Anselm's community where he then lived and found that these conditions had been grossly exaggerated. We spent a couple of pleasant hours reminiscing about teachers and pupils.'

Mr Sean Murphy has the following thoughts on Titus:

'Br. Coffey imparted the essentials of Chemistry in 1955. He would vividly illustrate his lessons with spectacular experiments, which he said, somewhat ruefully in his old age, are all now banned by the idiots of the health and safety brigades. His first love was Physics but he was not blessed with the understanding of Higher Maths to continue his Physics studies. When going on to Advanced Level studies he explained his opinion about the uselessness of Arts subjects and bullied us into the Science Sixth Form. Two of my fellow pupils dared to ignore his advice yet later studied medicine and both became professionals. He was surprisingly liberal in his religious views. He said the Bible needed to be interpreted and St. Thomas Aquinas's proofs for the existence of God were not iron-cast. Br. Coffey was liked and respected by his pupils and we considered ourselves lucky to have been taught by him.'

Mr. William Lomas is another grateful former pupil who met him in 2007 in Birkenhead after the 50th anniversary celebration:

'Being a member of the Athletics and Cross-Country teams between 1951 and 1955, I had a lot of contact with Br. Coffey and found him to be a kind and understanding person for whom I had a great respect. I quote my contemporary, Tony Edwards, who was then acting Headmaster of St. Edward's in 1992 writing to say that Br. Coffey was still going strong as Principal of St. Francis's School, Makeni, in Sierra Leone, despite malaria attacks, deafness and innumerable operations. Tony said "they don't make them like that anymore. In fact, they don't make them like that at all". I can only agree with Tony's assessment. Br. Coffey will remain in my memory as a great man who honed my natural talents and instilled in me the qualities necessary to face the difficulties of life. I am proud to have encountered him'.

Mr. Bernard Nevin is another of that vintage group. He was pleased to make a tribute to Br. Coffey because of his inspirational personality and actions while Headmaster of St. Edward's:

'Br. Coffey was an early adopter of sports achievement as a means of improving a school's reputation, not just for the physical activity and positive thinking that it

engenders, but also as a means of developing the whole person and how to work as a team. There are two particular personal memories of Br. Coffey that I would like to add. My father died suddenly aged 53 when I was in the Lower 6th Form, aged 17. My father was an old Edwardian himself and had especially wanted me to go to his former school. Br. Coffey recognised the former St. Edward's student by arranging a "guard of honour" at his funeral, where boys in their distinctive purple blazers lined the steps of the church as my father's coffin was carried down the steps- a very moving tribute indeed. On returning to school after this sudden shock, Br. Coffey asked if I would like some work in the college to help myself and my mother during difficult financial times. He gave me a job of cleaning the new swimming pool, an hour before school, three days per week, paying me generously for the work. This was a kind and thoughtful thing to do when I needed support the most.

I have been involved in education publishing all my working career and have visited hundreds of schools around the country. One thing that stands out when assessing a school for achievement and standards is the over-arching influence of the Head teacher. In relation to Br. Titus Coffey, I would say that he was an outstanding man with vision and humanity, who exemplified the ethos of the Christian Brothers and who gave his life for the education of others'.

Mr Francis Nugent Dixon says that Br. Coffey was his guiding light for many years. He stood out as an inspiring leader along with Br. Hooper and Br. Foley. Mr Nugent Dixon is a distant relative of Monsignor James Nugent, the founder of the original St. Edward's College.

Mr. Tony Linford, writing from Australia, says he will always remember Br. Coffey for his massive contribution to Athletics in St. Edward's besides his outstanding role in Science teaching and as Headmaster.

Mr. Brian Ludden remembers the gentle guidance he gave him when he was pondering a possible vocation to the religious life. Titus explained how important it was to work out what seemed right and not to fudge issues even if choices seemed difficult.

Titus was renowned for his energetic development of St. Edward's facilities. He had new changing-rooms and showers in 1961 and in 1964 had a swimming pool erected costing £29,000. The loan of £20,000 was to be paid off over five years mainly through the enthusiasm and hard work of the Parent Teacher Association. A School Chapel costing £12,000 was consecrated by Archbishop Beck in 1967. The school dining room was developed in 1962 costing £35,000. In 1965 a new organ costing £1,150 was part of a refurbishment of the School Hall with a redesigned stage and new chairs. In 1962-63 the grounds were improved- drives, flowerbeds and car parking. A running track and all-weather tennis courts followed. The college's success caused a 90% return rate to the Sixth Form which required increased accommodation costing £35,000. The college became famous for its sporting achievements- especially in Athletics and Rugby. The School Choir and Orchestra were also of great repute. In 1967, Br. Coffey left St. Edward's to great acclaim for his outstanding work at the College.

In the 1967 School Magazine, there is a memorable appreciation of Br. Coffey by Mr. Bob Allen, one of his senior teachers and colleagues over many years. Some major extracts follow:

‘Br. Coffey was at St. Edward’s College for eighteen years, during six of which he was Headmaster. In that period, St. Edward’s underwent profound changes and Br. Coffey, deeply involved as he was in the life of the school, played a most significant part in its development.

While so strongly marked a personality as Br. Coffey’s will have made different impressions on the various people who knew and worked with him, nevertheless, certain characteristics of his were so outstanding as to be obvious to all. For instance, it is clear that he had many of those qualities, which, if not essential to a man in his position, are at least valuable assets. He had strong nerves, great determination, and was, for all practical purposes, unflappable. These must have been a considerable help to anybody shouldering the responsibilities and dealing with the problems with which Br. Coffey had to cope over the last few years.’

Mr Allen adds later: ‘Br. Coffey took a big interest in the boys. Not only did he know the boys individually but he was familiar with their home backgrounds and their personal problems; and his patience, understanding and sympathy in dealing with them seemed virtually inexhaustible. Furthermore, his interest was not confined to the star performers but included all pupils impartially.

One of the most impressive things about Br. Coffey was the extent to which he trusted those about him. He was firmly of the opinion that one of the main aims of education was to produce people who were mature, responsible and self-reliant. He realised too that to achieve this it was sometimes necessary to pay a price when, as was inevitable on occasions, he was let down. In all this, as in all else, his personal feelings and interests were subordinated to the interests of St. Edward’s and its pupils.’

Titus was not only a great manager in school. He was a very human and community man. He had the persona of one who was comfortable in his own skin. He smoked a pipe and trusted his Brothers by leaving the cabinet available for the occasional drink. Many holidays were organised on the Continent – travelling by minibus and camping in France and Spain. Many campsites saw ‘mine generous host’ surrounded by his Brothers in convivial celebration at the end of a long day’s sight-seeing and pilgrimage. He not only thought of his own community but had an eye out for others less fortunate. Br. Chris Brown remembers with fondness and deep appreciation how Titus realised that some student Brothers were the poor relations on one holiday in the Galway area. He went out of his way to take them around to see the beautiful sights – some of these young Brothers were in Ireland for the first time.

One of the human traits of Titus in his later years was his love of fishing. Br. Dennis O’ Halloran gives us a flavour of this:

‘The energy that Titus put into his work and charitable giving was also evident in his recreation. When he went fishing during the holidays he was never satisfied with only one rod. He always had three- one for fly-fishing and two for trolling- one on each side of the boat. His object was to clean out The Corrib! Magnanimity in him was matched by equanimity. One blustery day on Lough Conn, his bait was taken by a big fish. He played that fish for half an hour till the fish tired and was brought to the

surface within three feet of the boat. It was easily twelve pounds in weight and all that remained was that it be netted. The nets-man who was in the middle of the boat was so fearful for his own safety that he was unwilling to put the net under the fish in case he might slide off his seat. The result was he poked the fish and it burst suddenly into new life, broke the line and escaped. A lesser man would have exploded in recrimination at the timidity and gaucherie of the nets-man but Titus simply smiled wryly and muttered, "Ah well, you win some and you lose some" '.

Another fishing incident which may be apocryphal has it that Titus was almost thrown out of the boat, much to the consternation of his fellow Brothers who shouted to save him lest another Brother, known for his avant guard views might supplant him as Provincial Leader!

It is interesting that in 1964 Titus applied for a British passport. Although he was a patriotic Irishman and supporter of Michael Collins, he realised how useful a British passport could be for travel purposes. This was to stand him in good stead when he became Provincial leader in 1978 with the need to travel widely.

In 1967, Titus moved from Liverpool to Prior Park College, Bath, a Catholic Public School, where he was sub-superior and bursar. Anyone who has been on the staff of a boarding school knows how onerous it can be to teach in school and also look after the boys in their free time and at night. Titus must have found this period challenging. He had been offered the role of President of Prior Park but he declined, saying he was not the right man for the job.

In 1969, however, he moved to St. Anselm's College, Birkenhead as Superior or Leader of the Community and Headmaster. As Titus said: "It was nice to be back on Merseyside". His qualities were recognised when he was voted in as Consulter or member of the Provincial Leadership team under Br. Feargal O' Brien.

Br. Andrew Rock remembers driving with himself and Br. Placidus Hooper who was averse to air flights, to the 1972 General Chapter in Rome in a Ford Cortina:

' Titus was a tower of strength on the journeys to and from the Chapter as well as during the Chapter. We visited Lisieux and Paray-le-Monial on the way to Rome and Lourdes on the way back. Titus had arranged to buy refreshments cheaply in Italy for the return journey as a sociable aperitif in the bed and breakfast lodgings. In Lourdes we met other Chapter delegates and Placidus Hooper , the Deputy Provincial, was surprised to find a dozen Brothers occupying his room for a drink before dinner'.

In 1975 Titus was asked to help out in St. Joseph's, Stoke-on-Trent and in 1976 he volunteered to go to St. Ninian's Home for boys in care in Fife, Scotland. This was a brave thing to do for a man who had been in academic and administrative positions most of his life. The mission in Falkland was a difficult one. Not many Brothers were happy to be appointed there. As well as the usual onerous duties of teaching and care of boarders, the needs of the boys in St. Ninian's were special. Many had come from difficult backgrounds of deprivation – dysfunctional families, truancy from school or even minor infractions of the law. Titus must have had to use all the magnanimous qualities he had in his experience of ordinary academic pupils to an even greater degree in Falkland. However, his human qualities came through in his management, with room for some shooting and fishing in the beautiful Scottish country estate surrounding the "Big Hoose" where the boys lived. Maybe it was the selfless example

of this period that persuaded the Brothers to vote him into the office of Provincial Leader in April 1978.

Titus had shown some impatience with the lack of resolute governance in the Province in latter years. He was critical of the lack of decisiveness in closing some of the Province's schools at a time when there was a lack of vocations and the Brothers were tightly stretched. As Br. George Gordon says:

'During his time as Provincial, he reviewed and evaluated the school and ministry commitments of the Province. He saw that, as a result of falling vocations and an ageing Brotherhood, rationalisation was necessary. Several schools and institutions were marked for closure. These closures were judged by a few Brothers to be a step too far and they publically criticised Titus- mounting opposition which could be judged as intimidating and harsh. Titus was deeply hurt by this response- a hurt he carried with him beyond his time as Provincial Leader. Titus held to his decisions and acted at all times with vision, generosity, compassion and justice.'

Titus himself alludes to this period:

'I had been at all the English Provincial Chapters from 1960 –1984. I had been a member of the Provincial Council for 12 years before becoming Provincial for 6 years. I had attended three General Chapters – all in Rome. It was a time of great change, and not all for the good, as time showed. But, I suppose that is good old human nature! My period of Provincialship was difficult. There was much division and many false prophets. Vocations were drying up and our manpower was ageing and decreasing. Our workload was to be reduced. Some schools, houses, and ministry sites had to be closed. This was not easy and met with much opposition. I suppose it was natural that people opposed the closure of the mission in which they were engaged. Rightly, there was much talk and vocal support for the work with the poor and underprivileged, but the loudest talkers were the ones who took least part in this work. I think of our Irish expression –“Hurlers on the ditch”. They meant well but gave much hurt and caused much division. So, I was glad to relinquish the office of Provincial after six years.'

A dramatic and tragic incident occurred during his time- as Br. George Gordon describes:

'As Provincial he was called on to manage the aftermath of a tragedy in the Community House at Woodeaves, Hale Barns, in which the property was damaged by fire and blackened by smoke. Some Brothers were hospitalised for a time and tragically Br. Baptist Doyle lost his life. Titus, being a man of fortitude and with an energetic personality, took control of this demanding situation. He quickly saw what needed to be done and acted promptly and decisively in finding temporary accommodation for the community and ensuring the continued leadership of St. Ambrose College.'

Br. Augustine Anthony was the Provincial Secretary at this time and he saw at first hand the anguish and shock experienced by Titus at the initial news of the tragedy. However, Augustine recounts an incident which shows the cool self-control of this great man:

'Titus was returning to the Provincialate in Bath after a visit to the north of England. He had given a lift to a hitchhiker and was driving along the motorway, when he saw the young man furtively take out a narrow blade from his pocket. Titus was afraid he

would use it to try and steal the car. With great presence of mind, he kept calm and feigned that the engine was giving trouble. When they got to the nearest service station garage, Titus managed to push his unwelcome guest out of the car and drove off speedily, knowing that he might have just enough petrol to reach the next service station which he succeeded in doing.'

Titus was magnanimous and generous in his dealings with the Liberian mission. The ideals of living simply and trying to survive on few resources in the first few years of the mission were found to be unrealistic. So, Titus made sure there was adequate finance to support Carroll High boarding school in Grassfield, Yekepa and later in St. Martin's High School in Gbarnga. There had been road deaths among missionaries at that time owing to poor roads, bad drivers and poorly maintained vehicles. Titus made sure that the Brothers had good vehicles to serve their mission. He also put them on a solid financial footing for the good health of the communities and their mission. Carroll High School became one of the best schools in Liberia and had the then President, William Tolbert, gracing its Graduation Day in 1974 in no small way because of Titus's support and advocacy as a member of the Provincial Council.

On one of his visits to Liberia, Titus met Bishop Azolini from Sierra Leone. Br. Ignatius Chincotta describes this inspirational encounter:

'It was Titus who gave further impetus to the involvement of the English Province in West Africa. We had been in Liberia for fourteen years working in two communities without any persevering Liberian vocations, when the Holy Spirit saw that it was time to expand. It so happened that Titus was visiting our community in Gbarnga which was running St. Martin's High School on a campus adjacent to the major seminary for Liberia, Sierra Leone and Gambia. Bishop Azolini of the Makeni Diocese was attending a meeting at the seminary and contacted Titus to ask him to send Brothers to Makeni. He explained that the Brothers of the Immaculate Conception (from Holland) had run a much-loved school in Makeni but they had left five years previously. Titus said he had no Brothers to spare but he was willing to train any young men that the Bishop would send. Three years later Titus had relinquished the office of Provincial Leader and volunteered to open the first community in Sierra Leone in Makeni.'

Ignatius adds:

'When I was a young Brother, Titus was my hero. He was a "big man" in every sense of the word. He worked hard, prayed hard and played hard. He was courageous, compassionate and generous. He trusted people. When he gave someone a responsibility, he allowed him to carry it out in his own way. He hated (s)mothering people. If I were able to canonise three Brothers I have known in my lifetime, Titus would be one of them.'

Br. George Gordon describes Titus in Sierra Leone:

'When his term as Provincial came to an end, he set off for ministry in Sierra Leone, thereby spurning his well deserved and well earned sabbatical. In Makeni he took charge of the large St. Francis Secondary School which needed new direction and leadership. Titus was just the man to provide the school with the leadership and consolidation it badly needed. The school quickly gained good public exam results and gained a reputation for quality education across the country.'

Br. Dennis O' Halloran adds the following:

‘I cannot speak with any great authority about Titus’ time in Makeni but it was clear that he made an immense impression there. The improvements he achieved in the school had considerable repercussions in the town; so much so that he was made an honorary chief by the local elders. Our efforts in Birkenhead to get him to talk about this were ignored and we never succeeded in persuading him to dress in his regalia. The regard in which he was held was evident when Bishop Francis came especially to present him with the papal decoration- Pro Ecclesia et Pontifice. His work for the school did not stop after he returned from Africa. St. Anselm’s College, Birkenhead, took St. Francis, Makeni under its wing, sending money and equipment and immersion parties of Staff and boys on several occasions.

A favourite phrase of his, and one that summed up his temperament was the Irish expression: ”Tog go bog e” (Take it easy= keep calm). Apparently he used it frequently and many an exited young man was exhorted to “Tog go bog e”. His students would shout after him as he drove through town: “Tog go bog e”.

His heart, like his body, was big. It took in not only the poor of Sierra Leone but the poor of Birkenhead. His hearing towards the end of his life was not particularly good but he was always conscious of the doorbell at lunchtime and was invariably the first to get up from the table to provide food for the regulars, and irregulars, who came for something to eat’.

Br. Noel Bradshaw has been in West Africa for many years, even during the civil war in Sierra Leone, when he resolutely stayed with the people despite Makeni being in the hands of the revolutionary forces. He knew of Titus’s reputation:

‘Titus was seen as the “Paramount Chief of Makeni”, a big man in all respects- physically, but also with a big heart that could embrace all. Students loved him, teachers, parents, priests, Sisters and N G O s- he had time for all. Justice and generosity for all. The young African Brothers loved and admired him and were amazed at him – how he could identify with them and the people. All over the country, I constantly find past pupils of St. Francis School who want to know how is Br. Coffey- that is the constant question.

They will mourn far and wide. There will be a gathering of Old Boys. There will be a memorial Mass here, a forty day ceremony for the life of their hero, their Chief. But, not today. People will carry Titus in their hearts, will only lay him to rest when the Ebola crisis has run its course and people are allowed to assemble and celebrate. Because that is what they will do – celebrate the life of a great man, a great Christian Brother. Long before it became fashionable to speak about Child Protection Policies, parents’ rights, Justice and Advocacy, Titus was implementing them – they were instinctive, natural to the prophet, always ahead of his time.’

After his African mission, Titus went to St. Anselm’s Community where he was well loved and respected by that aged and traditional community. He was happy here doing many useful jobs and acting as a ‘father figure’ among like-minded Brothers. In 1997 he was asked to be part of a new Brothers’ community in Gorton, Manchester. However, there was little place for his many strong talents and he gladly went back to Birkenhead after a few months. When, in 2008 it was made known that the community was to be closed down, he was among the first to relinquish his role and agree to retire to the Brothers’ Nursing Home St. Patrick’s, Baldoyle, Dublin.

Even in his later years with health problems, especially poor eyesight, Titus was a generous respondent to pleas for contributions to necrologies of deceased Brothers. He had not kept up with computers but he either typed or wrote laboriously by hand passages that were most enriching for the necrologies of Brothers. He only finished this when his eyesight made it impossible. In his retirement, he was patient and put up with the challenges of the nursing home during its refurbishment and the lack of daily Mass that he had been devoted to all his life. When Brothers from England visited him, they found him deteriorating in body but wonderfully alive in spirit- able to sustain a lively conversation and interest in affairs.

The writer of this necrology has a complimentary description of him in his last years:

‘Titus had faults like the rest of us. We are all flawed human beings. He could be stubborn; being a high J on the Myers Briggs scale, he liked getting his own way. But Titus was never vindictive, never “out for himself”. He was very much a Christian Brother. He loved our Congregation, was proud of it and was an excellent ambassador.

Titus had many gifts. He was a big man, not only physically but in character too. He was generous, kind, big-hearted, and inclusive. Some might say he was generous to a fault. He received a sum of money from his late sister, Peggy’s bequest and he asked me to send it all to West Africa for the poorest of the poor. There are many students celebrating educational success because of Titus’s generosity. And today, some of his money is being directed to the poor who are suffering from the Ebola virus.

On visiting Titus in August of 2014, I found him mentally alert in spite of failing eyesight, loss of hearing and being confined to a wheelchair. I asked him how he was and he said: “ I am ready to die. There is nothing to stop me going to God. I look back on my life and give thanks to God for the gifts he has given me. God has given me many gifts, but they don’t make me proud because I know they all come from Him I think I understand what Mary meant in the Magnificat –He who is mighty has done great things for me. Holy is his name!”

Titus’s niece, Sr. Anne, made a generous effort to seek tributes from his many relatives. Here are a few of the many lovingly submitted:

Sr. Maelisa, O P. (Eily) remembers his thoughtfulness in bringing gifts to her mission in Liberia although it entailed an arduous journey in overcrowded taxis.

His nephew, Paschal, noted his belief in education as empowerment.

His niece, June, admired his calm, intelligent and caring ways – he had the serenity born of a free heart.

His nephew, William, noted his love for family and Church.

His nephew, Denis, noted his global vision in conversation and his love of his family and roots.

Sr. Anne, his niece, admired his pride and love of his Edmund Rice heritage.

His nephew, John, saw him as practical, determined, a peace-maker and one who could ‘read between the lines’ of the received news.

His nephew, Donal, enjoyed his sociability and concern for others even though unwell himself. He admired his calm on going to Africa in his sixties.

His niece, Marie, found him kind and thoughtful.

His nephew, Michael, knew he wanted to be part of all but without fuss.

His niece, Elizabeth, knew he was keen on politics but could not be riled. He appreciated help but eschewed gratitude for his own good deeds. He was a ‘soft giant’

who would leave Cork early to avoid emotional scenes. She quotes the famous saying- 'Ni Bheid a leithead aris ann' (We shall not see the likes of him again).

The love and esteem Titus evoked was demonstrated by the many relatives who attended his funeral in Baldoyle on November 6th, 2014.

The warrior who was born during the Irish civil war died in the centenary year of the First World War. A man big in body, heart and mind, he strove all his life as a faithful son of the Church and as a champion Christian Brother. He used the talents God gave him generously and in his last years showed patience and forbearance. He died peacefully aged ninety-one on the 28th October 2014. May He rest in peace in union with the God he served so faithfully and generously.