Beginnings: John was born at home in Ballydaff, Borrisoleigh, County Tipperary on February 18, 1943, the youngest of 4 children, Rita, Michael and Sr. Teresa, who died young. Baptised in Ileigh church where he would celebrate his first Mass and 50th Anniversary of Ordination.

School: He went to Ileigh National School for his Primary Schooling, then became a postulant in the Pallottine College Thurles at age 12, attending Thurles Christian Brothers Secondary School.

Pallottine Community: He entered the Pallottine novitiate in Thurles, followed by a degree in Latin and Metaphysics at University College Dublin and then Theology in St. Patrick’s College Thurles. He then came here to San Silvestro and did a Licence in Theology in the Gregorian University, choosing Cardinal Newman for his thesis – decleared the most recent Doctor of the Church just this July.

He was ordained priest with his good friend Fr. Donal McCarthy in the Pallottine College Thurles on June 21, 1969, and they were both sent to Tanzania where John spent 6 years in various appointments from teaching to Bursar of Singida Diocese.

He left his beloved Tanzania in 1975, becoming vice rector respectively in Thurles and then here in San Silvestro. He was subsequently Rector of the Pallottine Formation House in Dundrum, Dublin, before 6 years as Parish Priest of Corduff parish in west Dublin and then Provincial Superior of the Irish Pallottines for 9 years. He then came to San Silvestro as Rector and subsequently Vice Rector until having to go back to Ireland last November where he lived out his final few months mostly back in the Pallottine College Thurles where his adventures with the Pallottines had begun and where he surrendered himself into the hands of our Good God on August 23 last.

Just from that brief whistle-stop tour, you can see that Fr. John had a full life – but what was even more striking for all who came to know him was that he was a person who himself was so full of life and who gave so much life to others!

I would like to give firstly a brief flavour of how his family in particular experienced that, from the seemingly banal, which yet captures something of the flavour of who he was at particular moments in his life, to the deeply profound.

1. The childhood memory of him pulling up in his new and newly-smelling car, always armed with sweets or some other treat, and the thrill of being taken out for a spin to visit relatives and friends.

2. His wonderful capacity to put people at their ease – in and beyond his family, and the sense that they could always turn to him in times of challenge or difficulty and be assured of a welcoming and listening ear and the certainty of his ongoing prayer and support.

3. His lovely role in the important sacramental moments of his family’s life – mostly joyful – baptising and officiating at the weddings of all of his nieces and nephews and baptising all of their children too – and also in the sad occasions of the funerals of his parents and of his beloved brother-in-law Con Gleeson.

4. His extraordinary memory for birthdays and anniversaries and the personal touch of always receiving a hand-written card with something in it or a phone call on the day itself – or both.

5. His warm hospitality in San Silvestro when the family came to visit – particularly when his nephew was married here – his extraordinary attentiveness and organisation of everything – including the surprise gift of a wedding album a month later. He simply put them and everyone at their ease and couldn’t have done more.

7. The wonderful Christmas of 2024 that they enjoyed with him, the first time he was home for Christmas dinner since he joined the Pallottines back in 1955, I think – he ate well, – followed by a good glass of his go-to beverage, Figlio di Giacomo – Son of James!

Many of us can catch echoes of our own experiences of John’s warmth and hospitality and attentiveness in that of his family, as well as his keen intelligence and wit. He was such a part of the Irish and broader community here in Rome for nearly the last 20 years – much loved by those who lived in the community in San Silvestro during that time – Enda, Clemens, Edward, Patrick and so many more – those who did pastoral experience here or simply became friends – Stephen, Daniel and others – some of whom joined him regularly in his spiritual outreach in the Scholar’s where he was semi-official chaplain since coming back to Rome – where he was known and loved and regarded as a real friend by Declan and Celeste and so many of the staff – he loved when Mark was on and would order a Stoneybatter – something I think to do with the measure or lack thereof of the glass of his go-to beverage which he was ordering. He was also very well-known and loved in other local hostelries such as Bar Gambero and Ristorante Abruzzi. I can’t fail to mention the Irish religious clergy nights out every 3 months or so of which he was co-founder along with another dear friend Fr. Louis Brennan, Padre Luigi, of St. Isidores who went to prepare a table for him in the Lord’s house just 11 days before John himself set off on his final journey.

He was also an integral part of celebrations at our Generalate in SS. Salvatore in Onda and at the Irish Embassy to the Holy See and other Embassies, and in many other places.

he mentioned that he particularly missed two groups when he returned to Ireland – the poor who came to ask for something each week – he had a tender heart for them and said that although they may have fallen on hard times, they never lost their dignity. He also mentioned the community here at San Silvestro on Sunday evenings – he felt very much at home, very much loved and thoroughly enjoyed the banter – to which he himself made an unfailing contribution. When asked one Sunday evening where he was going by one of the women, he replied, “I’m not married to you, I don’t have to tell you!” There were certainly many others who he missed and who missed him – I was at Abruzzi restaurant the other evening and one of the waiters had tears in his eyes as he recalled Fr. John and his warmth – and that is no one off experience – it is the same with so many others when they discover that he is no longer with us here. It was very tough on so many that they never got a chance to say goodbye before he left Rome – it just wasn’t possible – he needed to get home urgently and to begin to get treatment for the illness that had already spread within his body. How often he said to me how he would love to be back in Rome again – and you were all part of the reason for that – each one of you in your own special unique way – you know what you meant to him – and he knew what he meant to you, you can be sure of that.

As a priest, Fr. John was a natural and integral part of the life of his family and of so many people and families, not least of which the family which is the Pallottines.

Just to finish off, if you will forgive me, on a deeply personal note. Some of you will know that, as an elderly aunt of my father’s said to me when I visited her in the nursing home: “You took your time getting ordained, didn’t you!!!!” Fr. John was Provincial for the last 7 years of my extended time. I have to say that he could not have been more kind or patient – he spoke with me and then left me be – and more than that, as I found out later, he told everyone else to let me be too – that I would be ordained if and when I was ready to be ordained – like the Gambler in the Kenny Rogers song that he loved, he was willing to take a bet on me – and it was no sure thing either – and not just once. I had the great privilege of living with him for nearly the last 10 years and, like you and so many others here and in so many places throughout the world, I thank God for the great gift that he was in our lives. His Muslim doctor in Cork called him “the Holy Man” – he was always so positive, so appreciative of everything that people did for him, so peaceful within himself even in the midst of his trials. His sister Rita said something that was very profound – he was like a saint who had to suffer in his last months. His last words were, “I have to go to the Lord”, and with others I had the great privilege of being with him 3 days later when he yielded his spirit into the hand of God. Rest now dear friend Fr. John in the loving arms of the Good God whom you have sought to love and serve all your life – love and serve directly and love and serve in his people and all those blessed to experience his love through you.

Rest in peace, dear brother and friend.