



Fr. Thomas McGivern, S.J.

(1927-2017. In Zambia/Malawi 1954-2011)

14 January 2017

Tom McGivern was born on Christmas Eve 1927, in Newry, Northern Ireland but early in his life his family moved to Galway which he regarded as his home. On completing his secondary education at the Jesuit boarding school, Clongowes Wood College, he entered the Novitiate in September 1945. From there he progressed through the programme of studies that was customary at that time, doing an honours degree in Irish and English at University College Dublin and philosophy at Tullabeg. In 1953 he sailed to Cape Town and from there moved north by rail to Chisekesi and to Chikuni for his regency.

Tom spent part of the first year of his regency learning chiTonga and the remainder as a teacher and prefect at Canisius College, Chikuni. Afterwards he returned to Ireland for theology at Milltown Park and was ordained in 1959. After his tertianship at Rathfarnham, he returned in 1961 to Northern Rhodesia. Here he spent the next fifty years of his life, almost all of them in various educational apostolates.

Tom would have continued for the remainder of his life in Zambia were it not for what happened to him one night in January 2011: as he was locking the security gate into the Chula House where he lived, a thief sprang on him and gave him a few hefty blows on the head with an iron bar. Tom recovered to the extent that his life was no longer in danger, but damage had been done to his brain and as the months passed it became clear that he needed more specialized care. Consequently, in September 2011, he was repatriated to Cherryfield, the Irish Province Nursing Home. It was there that, following a fairly short illness, he handed over his soul to God on 14 January 2017.

Tom spent seventeen of the fifty years that he worked as a priest at Chikuni, ten of them as teacher and prefect of discipline for the junior section of Canisius College, one as headmaster of Canisius, and six as rector of Chikuni while teaching at Canisius. Three further years were spent at Mpima when it was a Minor Seminary and a further five, divided over two separate periods, at Mukasa Minor Seminary in Choma.

Early in 1964, the year of Zambia's Independence, Tom established at Canisius a battalion of what was to become the Zambia Combined Cadet Force. Later that year, in his capacity as Captain, he marshalled these Cadets into a Guard of Honour for inspection by Kenneth Kaunda, who as Prime Minister of what was still Northern Rhodesia, visited Canisius for the dedication of the new College Church. This is believed to have been the first Guard of Honour that the future President of Zambia ever inspected.

From 1982 to 1993 he worked in the Ministry of Education as inspector of Religious Education. Writing subsequently, Tom recalled very laconically that "word came to me through my superiors that I had been appointed as the Inspector of RE. So I packed my bags and headed to Luwisha House which was to be my abode for the next eleven years." In the Ministry he raised RE to a status comparable with that of other school subjects.

This aspect of Tom's work was acknowledged just a month before his death when two Zambian academics published an article in an international journal about his contribution to RE in Zambia. In an almost unprecedented profiling of an individual and what he had accomplished, the article referred to him as the "father of RE in Zambia" and as its "hero". It also noted that Tom's influence and contributions to RE could not be detached from his Catholic philosophy of education and the way he applied the principles of Jesuit education to this subject area.

From the Ministry of Education Tom moved in 1993 to the Zambia Episcopal Conference where, for the following four years, served as its Education Secretary General.

Three characteristics that endeared Tom to those who knew him were his smile, his loyalty and his open childlike nature. In some ways he was the incarnation of a smile. It seemed to be there always, even when he had to reprimand or correct. He loved a good joke – and he loved to repeat back to you any good joke you might have told him!

As for loyalty, Tom's was almost legendary: loyalty to the Church, loyalty to the Society, loyalty to his companions and friends, loyalty to Zambia. This attitude of strong loyalty became even more characteristic of him as he grew older. It showed itself in a very special way when he set out to do something on behalf of religious Sisters: if one of them let it be known that she had a problem, Tom would be off his mark at once, seeing what he could do to help.

It was hard for Tom that he died away from Zambia and away from the people that he had served and loved for more than fifty years. But it was very fitting that one of his close Zambian friends was with him, holding his hand when the time came for him to go home to God. He will be remembered as one of the pillars of Christian education in Zambia, a man completely dedicated to the well-being of the people, an excellent Jesuit and colleague, and a deeply cherished friend.