

15 January

Fr **DESMOND DONOVAN** 10 October 1927 – 15 January 1978

'Gussie', he was never called Desmond among Jesuits, was killed while visiting an outstation of Makumbe Mission on 15 January 1978. But this date was not known with any certainty for four years. His motor bike was later found but not his body. His coffin contains only some earth from where we think he died.

Gus was born in Leeds in England in 1927. His father, a teacher, died when he was three and his mother struggled to care for him and his sister. The 1930s were the years of the economic depression. A Jesuit family friend, Fr Augustine Ganley, suggested Gus go to St Aidan's in South Africa and it was there that he completed his schooling. He joined the Jesuits in 1947 and spent four of his student years teaching in St Ignatius, London. His contemporaries remember him as a man with a short fuse and in one exasperated moment he poured a pot of marmalade over the head of Michael Campbell-Johnson, later the English Jesuit provincial.



After ordination Gus returned to South Africa and St Aidan's. Fr Gregory Croft tells us he had a genius for caring for 'bad' boys and gave them his time. And Gus could be tough with those in his care one of whom was Michael Lewis SJ, who had cause to remember. 'He would think nothing of loading his boxing team on a lorry taking them 15kms out of town, unloading them and telling them to run back withing an hour and a half. He once lined up a whole dormitory of thirty boys after a pillow flight, when they thought he was out and beat them with a short bit of hose pipe until many of us bled. It was not considered unusual, in fact most boys thought it quite deserved and fair.' Mike was to say later, 'he was a warm and affectionate man who never learnt to deal with his emotions'. David Rowan recalls that the community at Musami called him 'Grumps'!

David Dryden relates: 'Gus took over the boxing coaching at St Aidan's from Fr Felix Jackson and continued the unbroken run of winning the Eastern Cape Province Championships 13 times. The organisers of gave the cup to St Aidan's with the words, "You guys always win so you better keep it." Other Jesuits in the boxing tradition were Dunstan Myerscough and Bernard Brewer. It trained many boys in self-control, patience, courage, perseverance, self-confidence and sportsmanship in the best sense of the word.'

Gus was a perfectionist with himself and with everyone else. In 1967, he came to the then Rhodesia and applied himself to learn the language with awesome thoroughness. He would mark the inflections on each Shona word in his written homilies. He was first posted to Musami where Fr Mark Hackett remembers his exhaustive attention to all the details of running a large mission. His perfectionism could cloud his judgement as when, during war time, he shot some pigs that, despite repeated warnings to the owners, strayed into the mission vegetable garden.

His last posting was Makumbe Mission where he threw himself into the pastoral work in the outstations seemingly oblivious that the war was all round the mission. He was warned several times by the people to stay away but he took no notice. In fact, the provincial, Henry Wardale, suggested he come into town from Makumbe but Gus, using the unprintable language of contemporaries to each other, refused. On the fateful day, he was captured by ZANLA forces when visiting a sick person at his second outstation. He was beaten and bayoneted and his body thrown into a river. Mark Hackett considered Gus 'a great man. He lost his patience a lot, but always made up. I can't think of any other Jesuit whom I would rather have with me in a difficult situation'.