



Fr Cornelius O'Driscoll, S.J.
(1933-2015. In Zambia/Malawi 1959-1994)

27 January 2015

Father Neil O'Driscoll died peacefully in St Vincent's Hospital in Dublin on 27 January 2015. Neil was born on St Ignatius Day, 1933, in Wexford. His primary and secondary education took place in Kilkenny. Before entering the novitiate in 1954, he spent three years in the Irish Army Cadet Corps earning a commission. Throughout his life Neil carried himself with almost a military bearing and dealt with issues in a measured way. He was affectionately known to so many fellow-Jesuits as "the Captain" – almost instinctively you wanted to salute him when you first met him!

Neil spent almost one-third of his life in Zambia. In 1959, he arrived in, what was then, Northern Rhodesia, for his three years of regency, spent most of his first year learning chiTonga and the following two years teaching in Canisius College at Chikuni. When he returned to Zambia in 1966 after ordination in Ireland, he found both national and church scenes greatly changed compared with the way they had been when he left in 1962: what had been Northern Rhodesia had become Zambia and the Diocese of Monze had been established, with James Corboy as its first bishop.

Neil was always happy to be sent where there was a need. At the time of his return to Zambia, the need was for dynamic teachers and exemplary role-models in the schools for which the Society was responsible. And so it was that he spent the next eleven years of his life teaching either in Canisius or Mukasa. In some ways these were Neil's best and most fulfilling years. He was totally engrossed in his work, never seemed to have a moment for himself, and clearly enjoyed every minute of it. He was just too busy to pay attention to the dark and nameless anxieties that were lurking under the surface of his personal life and that became such a heavy cross for him in later years.

The legacy that Neil brought with him into the Society as a cadet officer in the Irish Army, stood him in good stead during the years of his assignment to Canisius. Under Tom McGivern, a cadet contingent, attached to the 2nd Battalion of the Zambian Army, had been established at the school in 1964 and flourished over the years. On his return to the school in 1967, Neil enthusiastically became involved with these Cadets – the records show him as 'Lieutenant the Rev N O'Driscoll' for five years and then for a year as Contingent Commander, until he withdrew gracefully from this position so that a Zambian could take charge.

It was not unusual at that time in schools in Zambia, to have strikes and disturbances among the students. This was a challenge for Neil, often involving a situation where he did not feel comfortable or at ease. But invariably he provided courageous support and showed unswerving loyalty. However, the experience of such situations unsettled him in some ways, though in later life he could recall them with sardonic humor.

In 1979 Neil moved from school to parish work, becoming assistant parish priest in Chivuna. He served in this position for two years, before returning to Dublin

to spend three years in Gardiner Street on vocations promotion and parish work. From there he moved back to Zambia, first to a teaching post for three years in Canisius, then to Namwala for five years as superior and assistant parish priest, and then once again back to teaching, this time in Mukasa for a year.

Because of a chronic health problem, Neil returned to Ireland permanently in 1994 for a new ministry of giving retreats and running the parish in Galway. This was a good time for him. He always spoke of Galway with special affection. Meeting him, you sensed a man who was happy in his priestly vocation, right up to his last years in Cherryfield Lodge, the Province Infirmary.

That he never deviated from the steady paths of apostolic engagement and agreeable companionship shows that spiritually, as well as physically, Neil was truly a man of God and a man of stature. He will also be remembered for: his bright reassuring smile; the twinkle in his eye; his personal concern for his fellow-Jesuits and their work; the warmth of his friendship; his gentle manner; the patient resignation with which he bore adverse health conditions; his deep spiritual life, never paraded openly, but obvious in his great devotion to the Mass, the Blessed Sacrament and the Rosary.