

Fr Desmond Dale, S.J.
(1929-2007. In Zambia 1995-1997)

2 February 2007

Desmond Dale was born on 15 July 1929 in Livingstone, Zambia, the elder of two brothers. His early education was at a government school in Lusaka and then in 1940 he became a pupil at St George's (Harare). On leaving school he did some study by correspondence for a diploma of Certified Accountants but never took the qualifying examination. For some five years he worked as an accounting clerk for the government of Northern Rhodesia. Des tells us himself that he first thought of the religious life when still at St George's, but that he thought any decision should be deferred until he was older. Early in 1950, he applied to join the Society and went to the novitiate in England at Harlaxton in 1951. He did a year of juniorate at Roehampton and then two years of philosophy at Heythrop with the third at Roehampton followed by a year of pedagogy. In 1958 he returned to Africa for regency and language study at Mhondoro. In 1960 he returned again to Heythrop for theology and was ordained in 1963, followed by his tertianship at St Beuno's. He was for a time at Prestage House and then parish priest at St. Peter's. In 1971 he was made superior at Prestage House which had developed into a house of language study and missiology. In 1978 he moved to Campion House and a year later was appointed to the School of Social Work as administrator.

Fr. McCabe says: "Des had two long spells of parish work, first at Mabelreign until 1988 and then at the Cathedral until 1995. After that he went to the novitiate in Lusaka as socius to the master of novices from 1995-97. On his return to Harare in 1997 he was for a time delegate of one of the Arrupe College small communities and worked for two years at Our Lady of the Wayside parish. In 2000 he went to Richartz House where he continued his work in publications and spent three afternoons a week as chaplain at Parirenyatwa Hospital".

Oscar Wermter writes: "I met him first when he was in charge of the Jesuit language school attached to Prestage House in 1971. He was an exacting, but patient teacher. Over the years he produced *A Basic English-Shona Dictionary* (1975), *A Short Shona-English Dictionary*, *Duramazwi* (1981), a little practical guide to Shona grammar, and *Shona mini Companion* (1981). They all went through many revisions and editions. He once revealed what drove him to undertake this incredible labor: "The language of a people is always a key to its culture. Happily, there is an awakening interest in Shona being shown by European Zimbabweans. Long may it continue! And if this work will open the door of the Shona culture and heritage to others – however slight that opening may be – I shall be amply rewarded" (*Shona mini companion*)".

In the eighties and nineties he worked on a new translation of the Shona Missal, leading a capable team. They labored for several years only to be told in the end that their translation was not acceptable (apparently it was not literal enough and too bold in using traditional poetic language). The Bishop of Gweru did authorize the publication of a provisional volume containing the Ordinary of the Mass and the Eucharistic prayers and prefaces as translated by the team. That is all of this enormous effort, undertaken by those priests over several years, that saw the light of day. One can only imagine how disappointed he must have been but he showed little of it. He was never a man of dramatic gestures, he used to dismiss such setbacks with a rueful smile and few casual, even witty remarks. After that he went back to work undaunted and with the same energy.

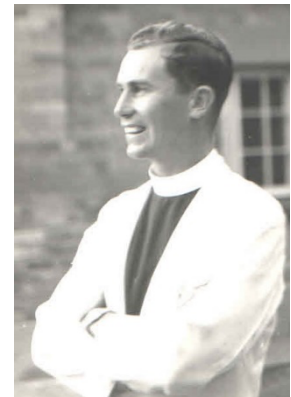
He was after all, first and foremost, a pastoral priest. He wanted to bring people to Christ, heal them, reconcile them and make them living members of the Church. He compiled many little booklets of prayers for different groups of people like the youth, married people etc. constantly reaching out to others through his writing skills. He had such a big heart for the sick because he himself had to fight illness all his adult life. He suffered from a severe form of diabetes. Time and again he would go into a diabetic coma and had to be revived, sometimes simply with a bottle of Coke. Several times he was found in a coma in his car: once a nurse discovered him parked in front of the hospital and took him to 'out-patients' to revive him. When he came round he just went back to his work as if nothing had happened. This slim little man was a fighter.

2 February

Fr DESMOND DALE

15 July 1929 - 2 February 2007

Born in Livingstone, Des Dale may qualify to be the first Zambian Jesuit? He went to school at St George's and worked in the N Rhodesian Civil Service for three years before joining the novitiate in Harlaxton, in England, in 1951. When he returned to Africa, he worked in Mhondoro (learning the language), Prestage House (in charge of the language school), St Peter's Mbare, the school of Social Work, Mabelreign and the Cathedral (all in pastoral work). He was also socius to the novice master in Lusaka.



He developed an interest in Shona and wanted to share it with others as a gateway into the culture. His book, *A Shona Companion*, was popular with new arrivals in the country as it was basic and methodically set out. When he was in charge of the Language School, he had many arguments with his assistant, Tobias Chawatama, over minute details of the language. He paid tribute to Tobias in his introduction to his *Basic English-Shona Dictionary*.

In the 1980s and '90s he worked with Xavier Munyongani, later Bishop of Gweru, Fr Michael Chitewe, Nimrod Ushe and Fr Edward Hancko on a new translation of the Shona Missal. They laboured on it for several years only to be told their translation was unacceptable, apparently because it was not literal enough and was too bold in using traditional poetic language. Gweru diocese authorised a provisional publication of their own for a while. Des also translated the Evening Prayer of the Church into Shona in the hope it would be used by religious.

In his later years he wrote a multitude of small pamphlets in English with prayers for people at different stages of life and for the sick. For forty years he lived with the effects of diabetes and there were many painful moments for himself and others. He once had a coma in a hospital car park and had to be revived in Casualty. When he did recover, he just got up and started visiting the patients which was why he had come. He was a great hospital visitor and had much compassion for the sick. He knew what it was to be sick. Mark Hackett adds, 'Des never knew when he was going into a coma. He gave me a lift back to Prestage House from town once and drove miraculously through all the red lights without mishap. He went straight into a coma on return.'

As a scholastic at Mhondoro he got up at 4.30 so that he could have completed meditation etc before mass at 6.00. I remember being astonished, but it was typical of his way of organizing everything in his life. John Fairhurst, who knew him well, felt the title of a book on Pierre Favre, *The Quiet Companion*, would be a suitable description for Des.