

February 6

## Br JOHN CONWAY

24 April 1920 – 6 February 1977



John Conway was one of the seven killed on that terrible night in 1977 at Musami. He was from Tralee, SW Ireland, and like many at the time sought work in England. He saw a vocations leaflet in the church porch at St Mary's on the Quay, Bristol, and applied to join the Jesuits. But his application was lost and he waited a year before applying again. He later said the Spiritual Exercises were a continuation of what he learnt from his mother when he was a child.

In Rhodesia his official job was to care for the boreholes, pumps, vehicles etc. on the missions where he worked. Mark Hackett says he was proud of the siphoning system he devised and installed at Hwedza while he was there. He soon developed his special gift with children. Assigned to teach mechanics to the pre-novices at Mazowe in the late 1960s, he was abruptly banished when the director came back one day to find the workshop turned into a play school. Everywhere John went he told the children stories – true or made up on the spot - and revealed the gospel to them in a way that held them. Gradually his own mission took shape: swings and roundabouts, stories and games, songs and dances, clothes and food, catechism and prayers.

In 1962, he came to Musami for the first time and helped to set up a mission at Maramba. John McCann wrote, 'these were the happiest years of his life. He was doctor, dentist, nurse, teacher and builder'. He would give injections, extract teeth, treat burns and snake bites. Dennis Adamson was later to say, 'some of his stories were incredible but he would tell them without batting an eyelid'.

He was later posted to Westwood in town but soon moved back to Musami where there was so much noise in his room that his fellow Jesuits 'banished' him to a hut of his own a little way from the main house, which inevitably became known as 'Conway Castle'. Asked him how he liked his life in Africa, he replied, 'It is one long holiday'. He enjoyed every minute; yet beneath all the fun and banter, which sometimes drove his more staid English companions crazy, was what his companions called 'a hidden core'. 'One day they will come for us just as we are' he told them and, of course, they shared his sense of impending crisis. Yet his sense of fun was undimmed and he told Gerry Finnieston of his plans to escape disguised as a nun. A plaque in his memory was erected in the square in Tralee and a stain glass window devoted to him was fitted in the Jesuit college in Sydney, Australia.