

6 February

CHRISTOPHER SHEPHERD-SMITH

28 January 1943- 6 February 1977



Christopher Shepherd-Smith (Sheppy) was born in Kenya and the family moved to Geita mine in Tanganyika where, in his mother's words, 'it was the old story of drink and debt and I had to leave'. She (seen here with Chris on the day of his ordination) got a job as matron in Loreto Convent School in Nairobi, and Chris and his brother and sister grew up near the precincts of the convent. As a child Chris would wander into the nuns' quarters while they were having a silent breakfast and cause hilarious havoc. But Chris also told David Dryden of how, as a child in the terrifying days of the Mau Mau, he and his siblings would wait alone for their mother to come home. On another occasion at the old Heythrop, Chris told David he was going into Oxford to meet his father for the first time that he could remember. 'These factors go a long way to explain Sheppy's strangeness,' David concluded.

He joined the Jesuits in England and made his way back to Africa in 1965 where he studied Shona, missiology and social science. Sr Dr Aquina Weinrich OP found him sensitive and an excellent analyst. After his ordination in 1974 Chris went to Musami where he single-mindedly applied himself to work on the outstations. But it was here that a trait which had been observed all along showed itself. In his uncomplicated way he did not understand why others did not see things as he did. His companions found him narrow and more papal than the pope. For Chris everything was clear. There were no grey areas. Mark Hackett, his superior at Musami found him 'impossible'. Years later when the present writer was putting together a book on the seven, he asked Mark if he would like to revise his judgement. He just added an adverb: 'He was absolutely impossible'.

We may labour what John McCann, another Jesuit who worked with Chris at Musami, calls 'Chris' wave-length, and with the best will in the world it was difficult to tune into him', we do so, knowing that at the deepest level Chris *did* fit in. One who knew him wrote, 'a month before his death Chris said, the missionaries' sufferings were nothing compared to the people's. All of us, he said, had to be prepared, for the worst - even death. All this was said most calmly, peacefully'.

The stories of the three Jesuits who were killed on that night of 6 February 1977 has often been told. There were also four Dominicans shot at the same place on the same occasion. It was almost ninety years since the Jesuits travelled up to what became Fort Salisbury (Harare) and were followed some months later by the Dominican sisters. They had shared so much over the years on different mission stations; it was somehow fitting that they stood together facing those bullets on that fateful night.