



Fr Joseph A. McSweeney, S.J.
(1909-1982. In Zambia 1950-1967)

14 February 1982

Born in Dublin on 31 March 1909 Fr Joseph Augustine McSweeney grew up in Dublin, Ireland, and completed his secondary education with the Christian Brothers in Dublin. He worked for a short time before entering the Society in 1930. He followed the normal university studies, philosophy, regency and theology, being ordained in 1943. In 1945 he was assigned to be chaplain in the Royal Air Force where he served until 1949. He enjoyed his years in the armed forces, especially the opportunity they gave him of seeing the Holy Land and the Middle East. In later years, his recollection of those years seemed to bring him real joy. After a year in Belvedere, he was missioned to Chikuni in Zambia. There he taught as a Jesuit priest for 17 years, from 1950 to 1967. Because of poor health, he returned to Ireland. He celebrated his jubilee, 50 years as a Jesuit, in 1980. Two years afterwards, he died in Dublin in 1982.

A single quotation from one of his letters will best describe the type of dedicated man Joe McSweeney was: 'I have the normal 28 periods a week, and as these are all in Forms 5 and 6, they involve much preparation and correction of homework. During this term, I have felt bound to give 4 more periods a week to teaching hymns to Forms 1,2,3 and 4, because the singing of hymns at Mass and Benediction has become very poor. This makes 32 periods. I give 7 hours a week attending at the Spiritual Father's room; this is the equivalent of another 10 periods a week; altogether 42 periods'.

Besides being a highly competent teacher, Fr McSweeney was a most devoted spiritual Father in Canisius. Throughout his 17 years he was always concerned about providing his students with both religious and moral training, never taking the easy way out. 'Training in responsibility needs continual supervision' was one of his beliefs with the result that he was present at all student Masses throughout the week, being available to them in the confessional, at all times promoting among them a habit of regular attendance at Mass and reception of the sacraments.

It was he who introduced and promoted religious groups like the Crusaders of the Blessed Sacrament, Apostleship of Prayer and the Sodality of Our Lady. His serious conscientiousness was evident in all that he did. The young students appreciated his gentleness and thoroughness. In the homily in Gardiner Street at his funeral, Fr Paul Brassil, the Zambian provincial, told of the past pupils' appreciation and gratitude for all that they had received from him. "An outstanding successful teacher" was the description of Joe that those who worked with him in Chikuni gave him.

By no stretch of imagination could Fr Joe be termed a modern, well-integrated priest. He was just an old-fashioned, slightly nervous and tense priest, but he did dedicate himself fully to the improvement of his students. And they were his students, particularly the senior ones for whom he had a great sensitivity.

Towards the end of his teaching at Canisius, Fr Joe began to suffer from his nerves, finding it more and more difficult to cope with the normal tensions of a dedicated teacher's life. Of course he had always been a perfectionist. Even in his more relaxed days, he had required at least a month's notice to prepare his choir for a sung Mass. It is quite easy to imagine the agony that the more casual attitudes of today can be to a perfectionist! But even when he felt the lack of special attention in the way of food more suitable to his needs, he retained his sense of humor: 'I hope at 57 I am not going to be asked to approach the minister, plate in hand like Oliver Twist, *toties quoties* for some more'.

In Joe's case, it is now clear that in this nervous person, God provided us with a great example of care and dedication and He no doubt even now rewards Fr McSweeney's dedicated response to this vocation.