



Fr John Coyne, S.J.
(1889-1978. In Zambia 1964-1972)

17 March 1978

Fr John Coyne was born in Dromore, Co Galway, Ireland on 28 April 1889, where both his father and mother were teachers. Within a couple of years, his father became an inspector of schools and as a young inspector he was kept on the move: after a period in Dublin he was posted to Tralee, then to Cavan and then on to Cork in 1902. After three years with the Christian Brothers in Cork, John came to Clongowes in 1905.

He entered the Society in Tullabeg on the 7 September 1906. After vows, he attended the university taking a classics degree, also taking an M.A. in 1912. He won a traveling scholarship and was posted to Innsbruck in Austria. Later he moved to Vienna, as the First World War had broken out. Then he went on to Poland for a year to Nowy Sacz to prepare for his final philosophical examination. Returning to Ireland, he completed his studies and was ordained priest on 15 August 1922.

Assigned to Rome after tertianship, he became substitute secretary to the English Assistant from 1925 to 1929. Fr Wladimir Ledochowski, the General of the Jesuits, told him that he had learned as much in the Curia as he was likely to learn and that he was sending him back to Ireland to become rector of Belvedere College in Dublin.

He was master of novices from 1931 to 1934. One of his novices said of him later, "I think it would not be unfair to describe Fr John as a Christian stoic rather than as a Christian humanist".

Then came a long period of 24 years (1935 to 1959) as socius to the provincial, not just to one Provincial but to four of them – Frs L Kieran, J R Mac Mahon, T Byrne and L O'Grady (who for reasons of health and temperament 'left Province decisions rest far too much on his socius, Fr John'). He worked for a few years in Gardiner Street Church after being socius.

In 1964 at the age of 75, he accepted an invitation of the Polish Archbishop Kozlowiecki of Lusaka to come and set the diocesan archives in order. Though his provincial suggested a stay of six months, Fr John spent about 8 years in Zambia.

Returning to Ireland, he spent a lot of time translating works of German into English. He was prevailed upon to write his memoirs. 'Memoirs of a Jesuit priest 1906 to 1977: Grafted on the Olive Tree'. He died a year after this on 17 March 1978 in Dublin.

Of his time in Zambia, Fr Max Prokoph writes:

"In spite of his age, he tried to make himself useful in every way possible. For a man who had a finger in every pie in his home province for so many years, it was quite remarkable that he never tried to interfere in the province of his adoption, but spent his time in all sorts of projects for which a younger person would neither have the time nor the inclination. Having put the archives of the Lusaka Archdiocese in order and separated what belonged to the newly erected diocese of Monze (1962). He got down to gathering material for a history of the mission in the days of the Zambesi Mission. Since there was only one full-time priest available for the parish of St Ignatius (Fr Des O'Loughlen) he gave a hand wherever he could, in the confessional, extra Masses, keeping the parish registers and not least by regular systematic parish visiting house by house as far as he could get on foot, perhaps the most systematic visiting the neighborhood ever had. Quite a few were brought back to the church."

Fr Michael Moloney writes:

"Fr Coyne took a very keen interest in what Jesuits had done in Zambia since the coming of Frs Moreau and Torrend for whom he had a deep admiration. Admiration for people who did 'great things for Christ' was a permanent attitude of his. His standard for a Jesuit was that he should be "a saint, a scholar and a gentleman" and he clearly tried to exemplify that in his own life. He was a kindly man yet at the same time a puzzle to many. Many wondered what 'the real John Coyne was like' because externally he seemed to be set in a conventional spiritual mould and to be rather formal in much of his behavior, so much so that one cannot escape the conclusion that he was a man with a conflict between his personality traits and what he considered Jesuit spirituality demanded of him. In Zambia he was faithful to his afternoon stroll during which he would meet people and through which he made some friends whose hospitality he was pleased to accept."