



Fr Daniel Byrne, S.J.
(1920-1964. In Zambia 1956-1964)

5 May 1964

It was about 11.30 that morning of 5 May 1964 that the hospital in Choma was asked by the police to send an ambulance immediately to a spot about 15 miles out on the Livingstone road where an accident had occurred. When the ambulance arrived back at the hospital bearing the two survivors who had been found still breathing, the Sister of Charity who met it realized that one of them was wearing a roman collar. On looking closer, she recognized Fr. Dan (who had a sister in Ireland who was a Sister of Charity). In spite of the terrible shock, she immediately phoned the church and Fr Luke Mwanza was on the scene within minutes and gave Extreme Unction. The bishop had just arrived back in Monze from Chikuni when the news reached him.

Dan was heading to Livingstone with his manager of schools, Mr Mungala. On the untarred stretch, they were in a head on collision with an on-coming vehicle. The only permanent survivor from both cars was a child.

The burial of the three who died took place at Chikuni on Tuesday 6 May. At the end of the Mass, the Bishop spoke of the universal anguish at the great loss sustained by the Church and the teaching profession.

Fr Dan, who was 44, was born at Knockaney, near Hospital, Co. Limerick. He completed his secondary school at Mount Melleray (Cistercians). He admitted later in life that it was a retreat given at Mount Melleray by a Jesuit that set him on his way to Emo, where he entered the Society in 1938. During his formation years, his gifts were more practical than speculative: he liked working with wood and there is hardly a house in the Irish Province which has not got some evidence of his handiwork. He noticed things that needed to be done. There was a quality and finish about everything he set his hands to; he did indeed 'do all things well'.

It was inevitable that Dan's practical abilities should have been recognized and used on the missions. He had not been many months in Zambia (then Northern Rhodesia) when he was hard at it, building schools and teachers' houses. From then till his death it is true to say that he had more than a 'finger' in all the major (and minor) building activities of the Mission. Some of the churches he designed and built, for example Fumbo and Kasiya. Later as education secretary, he really found himself and had much more scope for his talents. His mind was very orderly and he never allowed himself to be snowed under by the mass of architects drawings, bills and letters that streamed into his office. When death removed him so tragically from the scene, he had left everything as if he were about to hand over to his successor.

Dan remained always a shy man although he concealed it with a brusqueness that became more pronounced as he got older. This disconcerted people who did not know him; at times they thought him off-hand, casual and blasé. He had little time for non-essentials, came to the point quickly and liked others to do the same. He was completely detached from personal comfort and convenience. At times he expected the same detachment and integrity from others, not doubting that others were as self-sacrificing as he was.

The same attention to essentials was apparent in his spiritual life. There were no 'spiritual frills' in Dan's life. Even in the novitiate there was a quality of robustness about his spirituality. That his devotion went deep is evident by the life he led. He was very much a "faithful and prudent servant" intent on service, indifferent to what people thought of him.

He conquered all human respect early in life. One who lived with him in Monze for several years said that he never knew him to miss a spiritual duty, a remarkable thing in a man so busy.

Bishop Corboy said of him: "He was a truly saintly man – in the chapel every morning at five o'clock with his Mass at six. He was unassuming and never displayed his holiness and love of God that inspired his whole life. Back in the office at 7.30 a.m. a day that could have fully occupied two men began, and that was true of six days a week. On Sunday he regularly said two Masses at out-stations, and returned here to Monze for lunch. On Sunday afternoon when he was free, he would visit some schools to inspect a building he was erecting. He never took a day off and never had a holiday. He is a great loss, but may God's will be done'.