



Fr Joseph A Sommer S.J.
(1915-1992. In Zambia 1969-1972)

8 May 1992

Fr Joe Sommer was born on 20 June 1915, in Detroit, Michigan. After high school and a little experience as a secretary and stenographer, he entered the Jesuit novitiate at Milford, Ohio, in 1935.

He moved to West Baden, Indiana, where he studied philosophy and theology and was ordained there in 1948. During regency, he taught at Loyola University, Chicago and St Ignatius High School, Cleveland. After tertianship, he went to Missouri to The Queen's Work as a writer for eight years. He took to teaching again from 1958 to 1961 at John Carroll University and the University of Detroit. Here he became involved in Sodality work.

This brought him to South Africa where he set up a secretariat for the Sodality of Our Lady in Johannesburg. At the opening of this secretariat, Bishop Hugh Boyle said, 'Great things are expected from this work that Fr Sommer has undertaken and I sincerely hope the clergy, religious and laity will cooperate with him to the fullest extent'. Adult sodalities in Johannesburg and Pretoria and other dioceses, as well as children's sodalities in schools throughout the country, were established. He spent a lot of time traveling through South Africa training priests, brothers, sisters and lay people in the work of the Sodality. He even reached the two Rhodesias for a visit which must have sown the seeds of future work. While in South Africa, he wrote and published booklets.

In 1964 he returned to the USA to the University of Detroit, teaching again and as Assistant Director of the Sodality. Africa drew him back for three years in 1969, this time to Zambia. He wrote to his superior in Zambia that he was keen to learn a local language. 'Fr X sent me a lengthy word list for the chiNyanja language and I have started learning the language. So far, I've gotten a grasp of about 60 words' (letter written 11/07/1969 just before he came to Zambia).

When he arrived in Zambia he first went to Mpima Minor Seminary in Kabwe where the American Jesuits were, and taught English and English history (of all things!) to High school students. But not for long. Kachebere is a major seminary situated on the border of Zambia-Malawi and thither he went to lecture in fundamental moral theology, church history and liturgy. He still yearned to get time off to learn chiNyanja but that was impossible with the work load he had. He was kept very busy at Kachebere. For example, in a letter to his Superior in 1971 he wrote 'In January I shall conduct four three-day leadership-theology workshops for the priests of the Mzuzu Diocese (Malawi). All is quite well here at the seminary. There's a wonderful spirit of cooperation between the staff and the seminarians'. This 'spirit of cooperation' could be attributed a lot to Fr Joe.

He returned to the United States in 1972 and taught in the University of San Francisco. 1975 saw him at Manresa Retreat house for two years. From 1980 on, Fr Joe spent the rest of his life at Colombiere Centre at Clarkston. He was involved in retreats, particularly in 'Let Go, Let God'. The program is a series of recovery spiritual meetings held throughout the year for alcoholics. The Rev Tim Shepard, the Colombiere Director, at the time of Fr Joe's death, called Fr Sommer "a very caring, gentle man, always concerned for people in need." This neatly sums up Fr Joe's life and work. He died of pneumonia on 4 May 1992, in St. Joseph's Hospital, Pontiac, aged 76.