



**Fr Joseph Benignus Conway, S.J.**

**(1925-1981. In Zambia 1951-1980)**

**17 May 1981**

Joseph Conway was born in Co Clare, Ireland on 7 March 1925. After the normal period of primary and secondary education, which latter he did at Mungret College, he entered the noviceship on 7 September 1943. He followed the usual university and philosophical studies and arrived in Chikuni in August 1951 with Fr Robert Kelly, the first two Irish scholastics to be sent to the Zambian mission. He spent three years at Chikuni teaching but at the same time made himself thoroughly fluent in chiTonga. In 1954 he returned to Ireland to study theology and was ordained in July 1957. By August 1959, he was ready to return to Zambia to begin his life's work, as parish priest in Chikuni for 13 years. He had no difficulty in learning the ChiTonga language and was the picture of a man who had the ability, determination and dedication to carry out his life's work. For the next 13 years he labored single-handedly in Chikuni parish, which, for part of that time, included areas covered by the present Monze town and St Mary's parishes.

As parish priest, Joe was meticulously dedicated to his work. Not only did he take great care of the parish records, but by degrees he equipped himself with pocket records of all the parishioners, village by village, which he brought up to date on his annual visitations. The people knew their parish priest and Joe was known and is remembered as a pastor who "spoke about God", as one who "told us the ways of God", as one who "told us how God wants us to live". At times people referred to him in the same context as Fr Moreau. He was also manager of schools. In this capacity he once again had direct contact with his teachers, now in their more professional and temporal needs. He built outstations at Chipembele, Choomba and Gwembe. Just before he left Chikuni, he supervised the building of the new parish church which was designed by his architect brother, Senan Conway and built by Br Martin Murphy.

Appreciating the value of the Pioneer Total Abstinence Movement in the promotion of strong Christian family life, Joe was the diocesan director of the Movement for most of his time at Chikuni. To promote recreation among the young men of the parish, he started a football league between the different districts. This league was most successful, culminating each year in the big event of the Bishop's Cup.

After 13 years as parish priest at Chikuni, he became secretary to the Bishop of Monze which post he held until he was forced to go to Ireland because of failing health, in December 1980. On top of all this responsibility, his work also included being bursar of the diocese and coordinator of the diocesan building team.

Joe's greatest contribution was his service to the personnel in the diocese. Being at the same time superior of the Bishop's house, he kept an open door. Everyone experienced his hospitality and helpfulness, especially the sisters of the diocese.

Joe did not lose his pastoral interests during this long period of administration. Each weekend he did his "supplies", preferring the small and isolated communities to the centers of large congregations. Fundamentally, he was a community man, loved the Christmas get-together and other similar occasions. He never wore his spirituality on his sleeve. One of the dominant features of Joe's spiritual life seems to have been the sacramental life offered to us by the Church and about which he frequently preached.

In 1977 he went to Ireland on long leave. He had a complete medical check-up together with operations for gall stones and hernia. When he returned to Zambia, he was the picture of health.

For more than a year and a half, he remained in good form. Then his health began to decline and he was flown to Ireland in December 1980. Almost immediately on arrival, a tumor on the brain was diagnosed. His family took him home to Co Clare and agreed to his own request to keep him there as long as possible. He became totally blind. Two days before his death, Joe became semi-comatose and was moved to a nearby hospital run by the Sisters of St. John of God. While in this state, he spoke chiTonga and also answered Fr O'Driscoll in chiTonga who was with him the day before he died. His two sisters, both of whom are nuns, were with him when he died on Sunday evening, 17 May 1981.

The Lord took Joe peacefully home, though not at the time of life Joe would have planned for himself. One of Joe's last prayers was to the Lord of the Harvest to send more shepherds, especially Zambian shepherds, to the Church in Zambia.