



Fr Donal McKenna, S.J.

(1933-2000. In Zambia/Malawi 1960-2000)

24 May 2000

To walk into Fr Donal's room was like walking into a multi-purpose workshop. Apart from his bed and table and wash sink, there were pieces of machinery, electrical components, bottles of a variety of liquids, exercise books and other mysterious pieces of equipment. In a tribute to him it was said, 'He was a good engineer, mechanic, electrician, scientist, teacher, agriculturalist, and above all a man of prayer'.

Donal was born in Dublin on 6 July 1933 into a family deeply connected with Irish history, for his father was Chief of Staff of the Irish Army for many years. He was educated by the Christian Brothers at O'Connell's School in Dublin, after which he went to University College, Dublin where he received a B.Eng. (Electrical). He worked as an engineer in Switzerland for a year. He then entered the Society in 1955. For regency he came to Zambia in 1960, learned chiTonga and then taught science at Canisius Secondary School. Returning to Ireland to study theology, he was ordained priest in Milltown Park in 1966.

He returned to Zambia in 1968 and remained at Canisius Secondary School until 1982. During this period, apart from teaching and using his many talents in answer to the many requests made to him, he did the Post-Graduate Certificate of Education (PCE) at UNZA by correspondence. He was also Headmaster from 1974 to 1978. It was in 1978 that he handed over the post of headmaster to Mr Mooya Nyanga, the first non-Jesuit and Zambian headmaster. He then returned to being an ordinary teacher under the new head.

During this time too, he developed Chikuni Rural Industries (CRI) involving the manufacturing of soya bean inoculum, a bacteriological fertilizer. The extraction of oil from sunflower, the compounding of animal feed and an eight year crop rotation experiment, all came under the CRI. His ever productive mind led him both to silk worm and mushroom cultivation. In recognition for his work at Canisius, Donal received the Order of Distinguished Service, First Division in the 1978 Freedom Day Awards from President Kenneth Kaunda.

He moved to Kasisi, just outside Lusaka (1982 -1990) as superior. He worked in the Kasisi Agricultural Training Centre where he developed the pedal water pump and the ox-cart with rubber wheels and a timber axle.

Then a complete change of scene brought him to Harare in Zimbabwe for one year as spiritual father in the juniorate. Not such a change of work really as Donal, in the midst of a hyper-busy life, kept studying theology and spirituality at a deeper level which he used in his own life and in retreat giving. Sunday was his day for theological studies. One of his brethren remarked "If you were looking for a novel in Donal's room you would in all probability find Schillebeeckx!"

He was recalled to Zambia and sent to Mukasa Minor Seminary in Choma as headmaster and superior from 1991 to 1996, back to the classroom and the grind of trying to make ends meet in a boarding school. He then returned to Chikuni as farm manager. In May 2000, he had gone to Blantyre in Malawi to give a retreat to the Sisters of Divine Providence. On the 24, he collapsed at table and died.

In that full life, Donal always had time for people, was always warm and welcoming in the house and took great care of all visitors. Whenever anyone wanted help, Donal would immediately drop everything and come to the rescue e.g. ZESCO electrical failure, water pump stoppage, engines not working properly. The autoclave in Monze Mission Hospital was maintained by him and when he decided to learn the computer he became an expert, and his expertise was called on! He was most sensitive to the needs of others.