



Fr Joseph McDonald, S.J.
(1918-1999. In Zambia 1951-1999)

11 June 1999

Joseph McDonald finished his secondary schooling at Belvedere in 1936, the year he entered the Society at Emo, leaving behind him a smart red vehicle, one of the very few school leavers in Ireland at that time who had his own car! He was born on 19 January 1918 in Dublin and grew up at his father's established Law firm. After the normal course of Jesuit studies, he was ordained priest at Milltown Park on 31 July 1949. For his regency, he had gone back to Belvedere for which he had a great love.

In 1950, nine Irish Jesuits departed for Northern Rhodesia (Zambia) to aid their fellow Jesuits there and in 1951 the second batch of nine followed among whom was Fr Joe. They traveled by boat to Cape Town and then by train to Chisekesi Siding, six miles from Chikuni, the only mission station at the time and described as a place 'of pit latrines, oil-lamps and candles'.

Building was just beginning at Fumbo, Kasiya and Chivuna to become mission stations. Fr Zabdyr from Chikuni had set up a school at each of these places some years previously. Now they were being developed to house a resident priest. Fr Joe first and foremost was a priest and an apostle. For him, ministry held top priority: for the sick, for the hungry, for the spiritually hungry. He preached the good news in his own inimitable way, both in season and out of season. He would make available the means of grace and salvation to the people.

He worked in Chikuni, Fumbo, Kasiya, Chivuna and Nakambala, all the time his concern was for 'the people'. Of all places Joe ministered in, Fumbo was the favorite of his apostolic life. He lived and worked there for 16 to 17 years having gone there in 1952, just when the mission station was beginning. In fact he was known as 'Fr Fumbo'! Though he was minister in Chikuni and Chivuna at times, it was parish work he preferred in whatever place he was posted.

He built up Fumbo and its wide outreach. Over the years there he was on his own for much of the time. He was so sensitive to the growth and spread of the faith in the valley, that he was known to become frustrated from time to time and would let this frustration be known in writing both to his Superiors and to the Bishop.

There are many stories of Joe from these days. At one time, as Manager of Schools in the Fumbo area, a pompous Education Officer from the Gwembe Boma, kept referring Joe to his circulars on procedure. On one occasion, as the story goes, Joe wrote back to him, 'The people find your circulars very useful for smoking paper'!

Then there was the Father on the staff of Canisius Secondary School on the plateau who expressed doubt as to whether there were elephants in Fumbo. Joe sent him a cardboard box containing some dried elephant dung – the doubt vanished. The classic remark from Joe was made on a day when Joe, bemoaning the fact that the Bishop was not coming to Fumbo as often as Joe would have liked him to come: 'There's very little of the shepherd about James!' Joe had a good sense of humor and liked a good laugh.

As the years crept up on Joe, he was posted to Chikuni, helping in the parish and visiting the sick regularly in the hospital. His death occurred at Chikuni in his 50th year as a priest. It was 11 June the feast of the Sacred Heart for whom he had a deep devotion.