



Fr Thomas Cooney S.J.
(1896-1985. In Zambia 1953-1985)
17 July 1985

On 17 July 1985 in his 89th year, Fr Tom Cooney went to his long awaited reward. He was born on the 2 December 1896 in Carrick-on-Suir, Co Tipperary, Ireland. He attended the Christian Brothers school in Carrick-on-Suir and won a scholarship to the university in his last year at school. He was a brilliant student and took his B.Sc. from London and a B.Sc. from Dublin getting honors in the latter. He was a mechanical and electrical engineer.

He first learned about the Jesuits from the Encyclopaedia Britannica which did not speak too highly of them in that particular edition, but Tom decided to join them. While an engineering student in Dublin (1915-1919) he used a lot of his spare time in the making of bombs in the Dublin Mountains as his contribution to the final struggle for independence.

He joined the Society in 1920 and after the usual studies he was ordained a priest in Milltown Park on 31 July 1928. He was appointed superior of Hong Kong while still in tertianship and arrived out there in 1929. While there, he was Rector of the Major Seminary and also acted as Professor of Electrical Engineering at the University in Hong Kong. He lived through the Japanese occupation of Hong Kong and left for Macao for a short time before moving on to Australia (1946-1953) as his health had broken down. He had a hard time persuading the Japanese that being Irish was not English, but he succeeded and so was not interred.

In Riverview College, Sydney, he taught for seven years being completely fulfilled in the job. He often said that he liked the Australian boys. He was heart and soul in the effort then being made to overhaul the curriculum. In the senior Mathematics and Physics classes, he was able to bring promising pupils to their full potential.

When the Irish Jesuits came to Zambia in 1950, the Provincial, Fr Tommy Byrne, was on a visit in 1952 and was being asked for more men especially for one or two senior men. He thought of Fr Tom in Australia and wrote to him that evening inviting him to come, extolling the excellence of the climate (it being the month of May!) and describing it as a veritable paradise. Fr Tom flew to Johannesburg and from there took the three day train journey to Chisekesi, arriving on 15 February 1953 in the middle of a downpour of rain which did not let up for two weeks. His transport got stuck in the Magoye river on the way to Chikuni and for a fortnight after his arrival he could be seen at midday sloshing his way in wellingtons and umbrella across the campus to the dining room.

From 1953 to his death, he always lived at Chikuni both as a teacher at Canisius Secondary School and as procurator of the mission for many years. No big decision was taken on the mission without sounding out the advice and experience of Fr Cooney. When the Teacher Training College at Charles Lwanga was to be built in the late fifties, Fr Cooney was the one who looked after the construction of the dam. Before the spillway was ready, there was an exceptionally heavy rainfall which caused the dam to fill rapidly, so that there was danger of the dam wall being swept away by the pressure of water. Every morning, in those critical days, an anxious Fr Cooney was down early to scrutinize the rising level of the water.

He had a fondness for animals. Though he rarely took a holiday, a visit to a game

park was an occasion he would always rise to. The instant memory people have of Fr Tom is the sight of him walking in the evening with his dog. His favorite one was a collie called Pinty.

Fr Cooney was a gentleman in every sense of the word. He had an extraordinary gift for making people feel welcome to Chikuni and would carry the bags of visitors, making sure that they were looked after and he would try to be present when visitors left, in order to wish them a safe journey.

He was a devoted, dedicated, painstaking teacher at Canisius, something which the pupils appreciated and realized that no nonsense was ever tolerated in his class. In the early years, when Grades 8 and 9 were 'fails' in the Cambridge examination, he would tell his pupils, "Gentlemen, Grade 8 is a fail and Grade 9 is a first class fail"!

He was a good Jesuit and had a great devotion to the Mass and the Divine Office. His kindness and welcoming traits reflected that inner appreciation of the person of Christ which flowed out in his attitude to people. He was so willing to help others. Fr Tom was lent to the mission for two years but stayed 32 years until his death.

A strange thing happened on the day Fr Tom was laid to rest in the Chikuni cemetery. "Patches", his last dog, died on that same day.