



**Fr Desmond O'Brien, S.J.**  
**(1936-2007. In Zambia 1962-2007)**

**17 July 2007**

Des O'Brien was born on 22 September 1936 in Dublin. He did his early schooling with the Christian Brothers in Monkstown obtaining his leaving certificate in 1954. That same year, he began his life as a Jesuit in Emo Park. After his novitiate, he did his juniorate at Rathfarham Castle, obtaining a BA degree in Arts from UCD Dublin in 1959. Philosophy studies followed at Tullabeg from which Des obtained a licentiate in 1962.

For his regency he was sent to the then Northern Rhodesia. He studied chiTonga for a year at Chikuni and other mission stations. In 1963 he taught at Canisius College and the following year at Munali Secondary School in Lusaka. Completing his regency, he returned to Milltown Park for theology studies and was ordained on 10 July 1968. Tertianship in Dublin followed and in 1970 he went to Swansea University in the UK and obtained a diploma in social policy and administration.

Returning to Zambia in 1971, Des was appointed parish priest in Monze where he served until 1975. Among his many pastoral activities he began a strong youth club called the Red Arrows which was well known for its football success. He was then appointed chaplain of the lay apostolate for the Monze Diocese, living in Kizito Pastoral Centre from 1976 to 1980 and then at Charles Lwanga Jesuit community from 1980-1984. He initiated renewal programs for the laity and traveled throughout the diocese giving workshops. During this time he also became involved with the charismatic renewal and provided steady and balanced leadership.

Des had a sabbatical in the United States in 1981, working on spiritual direction. On his return he was appointed national chaplain of the YCS and took his national team around the country in a minibus offering workshops in all the dioceses. As rector of Xavier House, he was able to provide care for the older members of the community and offer support for the novice director without interfering in his work. The late Paul Lungu often commented on how much he depended on Des' support in his work with the novices.

The Episcopal Conference asked him to be national secretary for the laity while the Provincial appointed him as delegate of formation. He moved to Matero for a year but then went to Luwisha House which was more central for his work. In 1998 he was made superior of Luwisha House. He was a great man in community with his ready wit and happy demeanor. He was an excellent mimic and often had his companions rolling round in laughter with a few well chosen words and a little gesture. As his job as delegate and superior took up more and more of his time, he withdrew from his position with the laity. As a delegate for formation, the young men found in him a great listener. However he could be challenging, but he was always fair and supportive. During his years in Lusaka, Des offered regular courses on prayer and spiritual direction to the novice groups at Kalemba Hall as well as to the sisters' formation program at Kalundu Centre. He was a fine teacher, entertaining yet substantial in the material he offered. Many Church personnel came to him for counseling and direction.

In 2000 Des moved back to Monze and took over Kizito Pastoral Centre, offering retreats and seminars as well as renewing the physical structure of the plant. The Bishop asked him to take care of the young priests of the diocese with regular meetings and direction. He was the chairperson of the organizing committees for the celebration

of the Centenary of the Jesuit arrival in the Monze Diocese. He kept the different committees working together. However towards the time of the big celebration at Chikuni he was quite ill with constant bronchial problems. He did not want to move up his home leave until after the big event. When he finally went home it was found that he had inoperable cancer in his left lung. He underwent chemo- and radio-therapy but he weakened with time and eventually lost his voice. He was accepting of his condition and at peace with it. In an email in May he wrote: 'The picture is not bright but, thank God, I am very deeply at peace (even joyful!) I have no doubt that this is all the fruit of the many prayers being offered for me. I am ready for anything and in the meantime enjoying all the leisure I have'.

He tells how a woman from the parish in St Francis Xavier, Gardiner St., came up to him after a Sunday Mass in which he concelebrated, grabbed his hand and said: 'Thanks, Father, for the words'. Des was surprised and said to her, 'but I didn't say anything, my voice is too weak'. The lady whispered in response, 'Being up there silent on the altar with us every day is a powerful homily'. He entered the fullness of life on 17 July 2007.