



Fr Brian MacMahon, S.J.
(1907-1960. In Zambia 1950-1960)

15 August 1960

At an early stage in the Society, someone had the courage to tell Brian that he was speaking and acting like a bishop. General agreement consecrated him with the nickname of 'Bishop MacMahon', almost immediately reduced to its homely form of 'The Bish'.

Fr Brian was born in London, England in 1907 and educated at Clongowes Wood College. After vows, he studied for his BSc and then his MSc at University College Dublin also obtaining a traveling scholarship. He went to Valkenburg, Holland, for philosophy. This was followed by a further three years of Biology, one of them at Munich, Germany and the other two at Louvain (changing from German to French!) where he obtained a Doctorate in Science with First Class Honors. He taught for a year at his Alma Mater and then went to Milltown Park for theology and ordination to the priesthood in 1940.

He was minister, Professor of Cosmology and Biology at Tullabeg 1942-1943, minister at Milltown Park 1943-1944, prefect of studies at Clongowes 1944-1947. He became rector at Mungret College, Limerick, in 1947 until 1950 when he departed for Northern Rhodesia (Zambia) with the first batch of Irish Jesuits. For several years he was rector and principal of Canisius Secondary School. In 1959, he moved to Lusaka as Education Secretary of the Bishops' Conference. Serious illness brought him back to Ireland where he died of cancer on 15 August 1960, at 53 years of age and 20 years as a priest.

What of the man himself? He was a big man. Fr Dominic Nchete preached at the Mass for Brian at St Ignatius Church, saying, "Fr MacMahon was a big man. He had a big body, a big heart, big brains. He thought big, he spoke big, he acted big. Amid his many and varied occupations, he remained calm, kind, charitable, considerate and, above all, extremely patient; he was kind to all whether they were white or black."

As a school boy, as novice and as a man, he was always ready to put work before play. His normal life was a steady application to duty whether it appealed to his taste or not. He would like to have studied Mathematics and Political Economy (under Fr Tom Finlay S.J.) but obedience took him down a different path of studies.

"He was dominant in height" one wrote about him, "but not domineering in manner. He could achieve a certain loftiness of style that well matched his bulk, but his dignity had a fatherly flavour about it; his natural superiority was almost lost in that kindly, friendly, good-humored way he had". He loved to keep up with world news and his brother had sent him a subscription to the air edition of the Times which Brian loved to read, sitting in his office. As one scholastic once remarked, "The Bish's biography should be entitled '20 years behind the Times'."

Under his direction, Canisius Secondary School was improved and enlarged. He was headmaster (then called principal) from 1951 to 1959. Senior courses leading up to the School Certificate were introduced by him. Among the large number of African schoolboys who passed through his hands, he enjoyed a unanimous reputation for patience and kindness, combined with an unwavering sense of justice. To his fellow Jesuits, devotion to his work and to the interests of the school was well known. Government officials whom he dealt with held him in the highest esteem.

He did not easily resign himself to the close of his life. He fought the blood poisoning

and cancerous growth to the end. He remained buoyant and optimistic as long as there was any shred of hope of recovery. Eventually, in simple faith and acceptance, he answered the call to eternity.