



Fr Sean O'Connor, S.J.
(1920-2006. In Zambia 1952-1975)

4 September 2006

After secondary school, Fr Sean entered the novitiate at Emo in October 1937 and after vows he progressed through the normal course of studies, viz. university in Dublin, philosophy in Tullabeg, regency in one of our colleges, theology in Milltown Park, Dublin where he was ordained in 1950. His final year of tertianship was in Rathfarnham, Dublin.

The first large batch of nine Jesuits had gone to Africa in 1950 and the African mission was in the air. So in 1952, Fr Sean departed for Northern Rhodesia to Chikuni, where he began to learn the local language, chiTonga. After a year there he then worked for some time in Chivuna and Fumbo mission stations.

In 1955 at the request of Archbishop Kozłowiecki, Fr Sean went north to Kabwe to Mpima Minor Seminary to teach for eleven years. During this time he was very active both teaching and being chaplain at St. Paul's secondary school some miles away. For nine months he was parish priest in a church in Kabwe and even lived at St. Paul's for some time.

1967 saw him back in Lusaka as archdiocesan coordinator for the Lay Apostolate, a post he held for a year. He was also asked to work on radio and TV in the absence of Fr E Milingo who was studying in Nairobi. From 1986 to 1975 he gave religious instruction in nine Government schools in the Lusaka area. He was then appointed fulltime Communications Secretary for the Archdiocese. This entailed a great deal of work, giving basic training in radio, TV and journalism. He helped to produce 26 Sunday morning services and many shorter programs. This was really his last job in Zambia.

He returned to Ireland on health grounds for a year and a half. While convalescing his active mind was constantly enquiring about different courses which he might follow. He went to Tanzania in 1977 where he worked in the minor Seminary in Tabora for six and a half years. He became Vocations Promotor for the East African province for about twenty years. He traveled all over East Africa: visiting schools and families of those aspiring to religious life, giving retreats and workshops, directing young men into seminaries and religious life. He retired from this work in 2004 as his health was failing and he returned to Ireland but on rallying, he returned to Nairobi. He died in Nairobi on 5 September 2006 at the age of 86.

What of the man himself? He was a good letter writer to superiors keeping in touch with them in Zambia and elsewhere. In one of his letters he wrote: 'It's not the teaching that counts but giving students your time, interest and energy'. This Fr Sean lived throughout his long life with his contact with young men in minor seminaries, in government schools, in Christian Life Groups and in his vocation promoting work. While in Zambia, he edited for eleven years a magazine called "The Sun" for young people, for which he found material, sourced out advertisers, collected photos and did the editing. He was also very active in the Christian Life Groups and the Pioneer TTA movement.

Early on, he became involved in refereeing when he was asked by his superior in Mpima if he would help the referees in their work in Kabwe. He became chairman of the local branch of referees and became so involved with this work that later he became honorary secretary of the Referee Board of Zambia. For many years in Zambia he both refereed and trained referees. In 1972, an article of his appeared in the Mirror

newspaper '*Know the Soccer Laws*' and in the same year a 26 page booklet also appeared entitled, '*How to be a Football Referee*'. This was very successful with 4000 copies printed which the Daily Mail called the "the perfect referee's 'Bible'". It cost 9 ngwe in that year! He was most influential in this field of work as it dealt with youth. So much so that in November of 2004, he was awarded a certificate:

'The Football Association of Zambia in recognition of your contribution to Zambian Football bestows the award of: OUTSTANDING REFEREE to FATHER SEAN O'CONNOR'.

Communications was another love of his life, speaking and writing, radio and TV – all of which took a lot of his time. He completed communication courses in Dublin, Wisconsin (US) and elsewhere. He encouraged the youth to write wherever he was, for he considered this the apostolate of the printed word.

As with so many people who are active, always looking ahead, people in a hurry, details were often forgotten which caused misunderstandings with fellow workers. Still, in his letters he was always at pains to clear up any such misunderstandings. He retired from his ever successful vocation promotion work shortly before he died in Nairobi on 4 September 2006.