



Fr Robert Thompson, S.J.
(1918-1995. In Zambia 1951-1963)

9 September 1995

'He was radical, he had vision and he made things happen. He was single-minded and, not least, he was stubborn as a donkey'. These words were spoken by Mr P J Kirby, chairman of Clane Community Council at the graveside of Fr Thompson on 12 September 1995.

Fr Bob was born in Mallow, Co Cork in 1918, went to school with the Patrician Brothers and then on to Clongowes Wood College. He entered the Society at Emo Park in 1936 and after studies and ordination in 1949 and then tertianship, he straightaway went to Northern Rhodesia where he stayed for 12 years. While there at Chikuni, he was involved in general teaching, in teacher training, scouting and teaching of religion. He moved to Lusaka and was editor of a newspaper *The Leader* which advocated independence, was very pro-UNIP and was critical of the colonial government. With Fr Paddy Walsh he became friends with Kenneth Kaunda and other leaders at the Interracial Club. This was all during Federation days. In fact, the then Federal Prime Minister Roy Welensky wrote to Fr Bob's brother who was a doctor in Rhodesia, 'Tell that Jesuit brother of yours he is causing me a lot of trouble'. At Independence in 1964, Kaunda brought Fr Bob back from Ireland for the occasion.

Fr Bob was very intelligent, had plenty of ideas in a very active mind and would 'take up the cudgels' as it were, for worthy causes. Many did not see eye to eye with him and often it was mutual, yet he got things done and was never shy of speaking out. Having gone back to Ireland on leave, the Colonial Government requested that he not return.

When he returned to Ireland in 1963, he was on the Mission circuits for five years, traveling throughout Ireland and then stayed on retreat work at Rathfarnham and Tullabeg for seven years. In 1977, he was transferred to Clongowes Wood College and became assistant curate in the parish of Clane, a nearby village. For ten years he took part in the life of the parish and the local community: primary schools, the restoration of the old Abbey, renovation of Mainham cemetery, projects for tidy towns, negotiation for a site for a new business enterprise center and a memorial to Fr John Sullivan S.J. 'He made things happen'. After leaving Clane for Moycullen in Co Galway, he was called back for the unveiling of a plaque at the restored Abbey, which read: "This plaque is erected to the tremendous contribution of life in the locality by Rev R Thompson S.J. during the years 1977 to 1987".

Bob's remark about this tribute was that he was the first Irishman to have a plaque erected to him before he died. A business center was built and opened in 1996 after Bob's death and is called the Thompson Business and Enterprise Centre.

In 1987 he retired to Moycullen, Co Galway, for the quiet life as assistant curate and a bit of fishing. The word 'retire' does not really apply to him as his active mind soon saw him involved with concern for the environment, the collapse of the sea trout stocks and the rod license dispute, being on the side of the fishermen. He helped in the Church and stayed there for four years up to 1991. He returned to Clongowes and Clane and four years later he died in Dublin on 9 of September 1995.

He was a man of big ideas he had 'a remarkable ability of having a new idea every day' yet he never praised himself for his achievements. He was a devoted confessor. There was nothing artificial in his dealings with parishioners and he was always so sympathetic to those going through hard times. He looked after poor people in a

sensitive and low key way that protected their dignity. He had an abiding interest in encouraging young people to use their talents and had total confidence in their ability to improve on what the last generation had done. He motivated those around him, especially the young people. Nobody got preferential treatment, least of all those who believed they deserved it!