



Fr Michael Costello, S.J.
(1912-1977. In Zambia 1969-1976)

10 September 1977

Just before Mike died, he was back in New York fighting the cancer that took him in 1977. A quotation from a letter to him from the Provincial of Zambia, summarizes the type of character that Mike was: "We need the skills you have in handling men and uniting communities".

He was born in the Bronx, New York, on 16 November 1912. After finishing school at Regis High School, he entered the Society at Ploughkeepsie, New York in 1930. For philosophy he went to Belgium to Eegenhoven, returning to Woodstock for theology. In June 1943, he was ordained priest in St Ignatius Church, New York.

Subsequent to his tertianship, he had a wide variety of responsible posts in the Society. He went first to Regis to teach French, closely followed by becoming Headmaster at Canisius High School, Buffalo, for five years. The next seven years had him as Rector of St Francis Xavier in New York City. He was three years at Fordham Prep as prefect of studies up to 1960 and then minister at Brooklyn Prep until 1965.

At the age of 52, when most men have settled comfortably into a regular routine, Mike launched out in an entirely new direction. He volunteered to join the newly founded Nigerian mission of the New York Province. He first went to Lagos where he was involved in trying to set up a retreat center. In 1966, when a new house had been built in Port Harcourt, he went there to continue his retreat work as well as to do pastoral work in a poor rural area about 15 miles from the city. He was largely responsible for getting the Catholic Church organized on a firm footing in the villages of this area. Unfortunately, only a year after settling into this work, the Nigerian Civil War broke out and Mike suddenly found himself in Biafra, out of contact from his fellow Jesuits in the rest of Nigeria. He remained there for the first ten months of the war, ministering to the people as best he could in the difficult situation. He had to abandon the house when the Biafran army moved the population into the interior as the fighting closed in on Port Harcourt. In May 1968, Mike flew out of Biafra on one of the famous night flights.

Back in New York for a rest, he took on some studies in catechetics at Fordham University. Getting back to Nigeria in 1969 was impossible so he traveled to Lusaka, Zambia in the same year. While in Zambia, he was posted to a number of houses for a year or so: Kabwe where he taught at Mpima Minor Seminary, Lusaka where he taught the Jesuit novices, Charles Lwanga Teacher Training College in the Southern Province, returning to Kasisi, near Lusaka where he was Superior (1975 - 1976). While at Kasisi he wrote an article called: *Hidden Corner in Zambia* describing the Agricultural Training Centre set up by Br Paul Desmarais S J. His God-given 'skills in handling men and uniting communities' moved with him as he traveled from Mpima to Lusaka to Chikuni and finally to Kasisi.

In 1976, it was discovered that Mike had cancer of the bladder. For a man with a great love of life, this must have been a difficult discovery. He returned to New York for treatment. A visit to Lourdes in France kept his optimism and hopes high. However the Lord had other plans for him. He suffered a great deal towards the end but always kept his usual cheerful spirit. He died on the 10 September 1977 at the age of 65, 'missed by many people in many parts of the world'.