



Fr Denis O'Connell, S.J.
(1923-2004. In Zambia 1958-1987)

18 October 2004

Fr Denis O'Connell (known to all as 'Dinny') was born in Westport, Co Mayo. After primary school, he went to Clongowes Wood College, run by the Jesuits. The attraction to religious life was already there for he went to the Cistercians for a short time but turned back to the Jesuits he knew from school, and entered the novitiate at Emo Park in 1942. He followed the normal course of studies of university, philosophy, regency at Belvedere and on to theology at Milltown Park Dublin, where he was ordained priest on 31 July 1956.

He came out to Zambia (then Northern Rhodesia) in 1958 and went to Chikuni to learn chiTonga. After a year at Charles Lwanga Teacher Training College he came to Monze (1962/1963) where he worked in the parish. Pastoral work was to be his vocation for the rest of his life. A big step from here took him to the large urban parish of St Ignatius in Lusaka where he worked for six years (1964–1970). Nakambala on the Sugar Estate in Mazabuka held Dinny for eight years. During that time he oversaw the building of Christ the King church, the second church on the estate along with St Paul's.

After thirty years of fruitful, patient work in Zambia, he returned to Ireland to continue his pastoral work, first in the archdiocese of Dublin for three years and then in the diocese of Galway, where he did pastoral work and chaplaincy. After nine years at this, he went north to Sligo to Nazareth House as assistant hospital chaplain. He returned to Galway from Sligo on the 18 October 2004, staying with a priest friend at Crossna, Co Roscommon on the way, but died peacefully in his sleep while staying there.

These are the facts of Dinny's life, a pastoral priest at all times. What of the man himself? Outwardly he was a very laid-back person, easy going in the sense that very little disturbed him much. Always associated with him was his pipe and his hand basket in which he carried the essentials for his pastoral work as he moved around.

As a pastoral worker and chaplain, he was most faithful to the work at hand, proceeding quietly and with no fuss, almost unnoticed. He had an easy way of talking to the elders, putting them at their ease, whether visiting their homes or attending at their bedside in hospital. He loved to walk on his own by the sea if it was nearby or along a river bank and for him this was also a time of prayer. He loved a good chat with friends, once he had the pipe lit and glowing.

He was not adverse to recounting stories or events about himself. One that springs to mind is the time when he was traveling to Lusaka with a Jesuit colleague who said: "Dinny, I admire you". "Huh! why's that?" said Dinny. "Well" was the reply "you are a man of few talents but you use them to the best of your ability". Dinny's talent was the quiet, unobtrusive ability to get his pastoral or chaplaincy work done and his easy manner with people.

Before he died, Dinny donated his body to the National University of Ireland (NUI) Galway for medical research. After the evening service in St Ignatius Church, the body was taken away so that at the Mass for Dinny on the following morning in Dublin, his body was not present.