



Fr Liam Browne, S.J.

(1929-2017. In Zambia 1954-1974)

26 October 2017

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Liam was born in the Rotunda on 18 August 1919 and brought up in Kilmainham, Dublin. He went to school at Christian Brothers in James St. He entered the Jesuits at Emo Park on 7 September 1946. At the time of his death, four of his 12 companions who took vows with him, were still alive: Frs John Guiney, John Dooley, Jim Smyth and Michael J. Kelly.

To say Liam had a rich, varied and eventful life is an understatement. He worked in Zambia, Ballyfermot and Cherry Orchard in Dublin and was chaplain in St Vincent's hospital and Marley Nursing Home and all the time, was constant in his research on the chiTonga language and culture. A common theme of Liam's life was his desire and wish to be close to ordinary people and to understand their cultures and ways of life.

After his ordination he returned to Zambia and worked in several parishes - initially at Monze Parish (1963-1964) and then at Chivuna ((1964-1972), where he also taught the local language. He was the first resident priest at Chilala Ntambo in 1967. This latter was not an easy life for him as there was no solid Catholic community. The place was new. For Sunday Mass only eight or ten people would turn up, mainly from two families. He was ploughing a lone furrow. By 2005 when the parish was celebrating its 50th year jubilee and the parishioners were hoping that he could attend but he was too ill at the time, there were over 3400 names in the baptismal register.

He had two periods of study on social anthropology: at Oxford under the renowned E. Evans Pritchard 1962-1963 and later at London University 1973-1974. He was not only interested in learning a language but set about researching the culture of the people, looking at what makes them tick – trying to understand seeing how culture/religion/faith are interrelated. Two years ago when John Guiney, the Mission Director was visiting Zambia, he met the retired well known anthropologist, Elizabeth Colson who had worked with Liam. She was full of admiration for the work and research that he had done and which was now being used by students of Tonga culture. A real joy for Liam was the Tonga-English dictionary that he had started in the 60s and was finally completed and published three years ago by Frank Wafer from the Mukanzubo Kalinda Cultural Centre in Chikuni. He produced a stenciled handbook on Tonga culture (*The Plateau Tonga*) at the request of the Superior, but it fell foul of at least one influential Tonga political leader who felt that some secrets of their culture was not for public reading, and above all not what a priest should write about. After his London study period he was asked not to return to Zambia. Undaunted he remained in Ireland and worked in different high-density parishes (Ballyfermot 1974-1989) and then at Cherry Orchard (1986-1988). He continued his cultural research at Milltown Park while being chaplain to St Vincent's Private Hospital and Marlay Nursing Home for many of his remaining years.

At the end of his life he remarked: "I am glad I did what I did when I could." He had few regrets. Those who knew Liam in Zambia and Ireland remember him as good-humored, generous and who loved music especially jazz. His friends also remember him as a man who shot from the hip, spoke his mind with a bluntness and could put

people off. He had a certain distrust of superiors and people in authority, sometimes with well- founded reasons. However, once he had got it out of his system, he got on with things and remained on good terms with all whom he encountered. Perhaps the phrase 'he got on with things' sums up the greatest characteristic of Liam's life. He was a man always available for mission and when the mission he really loved, Zambia, was suddenly interrupted – it must have been a heartbreak for him, but he moved on without complaining to the new mission on the home front.