



Fr Brian Liam Sharkey, S.J.
(1919-1980. In Zambia 1950-1980)

28 October 1980

Brian Sharkey was born on 22 January 1917 in Balbriggan, Co Dublin to Michael J. and Mary J. Sharkey. His early schooling was at Clongowes and Belvedere. Fr Brian entered the novitiate at Emo on 7 September 1935 and went through the usual Jesuit formation: a B A at the University and philosophy in Tullabeg with theology in Milltown. He was ordained in 1948. The war determined that the scholastics of these days would receive their academic and spiritual training within the shores of holy Ireland, uncontaminated by the philosophical stirrings on the continent. T

The utter dependability that was to be a characteristic of Fr Brian's priestly life was noticeable during those years. Here was someone ready to help in picking potatoes on a cold November day or to rake the autumn leaves off the gravel in Rahan - the congenial Brian would never let you down.

In 1950, the Irish Province committed itself to the short staffed Polish Lusaka Mission, and at the end of his tertianship, Brian was assigned to Zambia. For thirty years, he labored in that field. He did not leave any lasting monument of brick and mortar, but no one could quarrel with this assessment written years after he had left Kasiya: "none of us touched the hearts of the people as Fr Brian did".

His successors on the mission would be reminded again and again, 'Fatha Shaakee baptized me', 'Fatha Shaakee married me'. This was the more remarkable as Brian did not acquire a fluency in their language. The reason for their response and the depth of their feelings towards him may be gathered from this letter of sympathy from a Form 2 boy who met Brian once, on retreat. He wrote: "It's very sad that such a man should pass away. He was so kind and such a peace-loving man. He was always so eager to help the students. Even though we never lived together, my life has been changed by him".

The most striking quality in Brian Sharkey that everyone noticed, during his 30 years in Zambia, was what may be summed up as his benevolence. The list of places where he served is alone enough to show his availability: Chikuni 1950 to 1953, Kasiya 1953 to 1963, Namwala 1963 to 1970, then, between 1970 and 1974 Chivuna, Kasiya again, Fumbo, Kizito and finally Mukasa where he remained until his life ended. After one such sudden switch he remarked to a colleague, 'You know, there can be the last straw!' But for him, his vows were a sure guide. At a discussion on obedience, he once said, "One may always state objections but if the superior holds to his decision, the subject should lay aside his objections and throw himself unreservedly into the task". St Ignatius, who wished his sons to be outstanding in obedience would have been pleased with Brian's performance. He was pre-eminently 'the man in the gap', who could be called upon when there was an emergency to be coped with, an awkward vacancy to be filled, or a contrary person to be accepted.

His devotion to duty resulted in his having a remarkable personal interest in all those committed to his care, whether as parishioners or pupils. He knew each one by name as well as all the other members of that family, the places from which they came and their cross-relationships with other people. Detailed information of this sort was very

valuable to him in his apostolate and was a matter of admiration and, at times, of surprise to his brethren. His devotion to duty likewise kept him working to the last. He was carrying a full teaching load of 24 periods a week with exam classes, right up to eight days before he died. He gave no indication that he was ill during the preceding months. The only thing that the community at Mukasa noticed as different from usual about him, was that he tired easily and went to bed early and that he was eating less and sometimes did not appear at meals.

His kindness to all was common knowledge and there was no limit to the trouble he would take to oblige anyone. His tolerance of the shortcomings of fallen humanity, both within and outside the Society, seemed almost a reflection of the Divine magnanimity. Consequently, he was hardly ever heard to utter a critical word about anyone. Finally, he was renowned for an unruffled calm which was proof against even the most 'provoking' situations, or people. His keen sense of humor which led him to savor and to recount little human tales, if they hurt no one, kept him chuckling good humoredly to himself.

When he was dying, he said to the rector of Mukasa, showing his concern for both the Rector and the boys: "I am letting you and the boys down". He then went on to give him details of what he had planned to do in the classes that remained before the exams began and explained where his notes could be found. Long before these words became a catchphrase, Fr Brian was a living example of 'a man for others'.