



**Fr Michael Columba Mary O'Riordan, S.J.**

**(1919-1992. In Zambia 1951-1992)**

**2 December 1992**

In a letter written in January 1953 by Fr Colm (as he was known) to his Provincial, he wrote 'Since July, new schools have been finished at Pemba, Haaamapande, Siggubu, Ntambo, Lumbo, and Ntanga; new teachers' houses at Pemba, Ntambo, Sikabenga, Njola, Civuna, Fumbo, Ntanga and Nyanga'. He was Manager of Schools since 1952 having learned chiTonga after he arrived in 1951. So much in so short a time!

Colm was born in Galway in the west of Ireland on 31 May of 1919. He was fluent at the Irish language which influenced the other languages in which he was proficient. After juniorate, philosophy, regency in Clongowes Wood College and theology, he was ordained priest in Milltown Park, Dublin in 1949. After tertianship, he came to Zambia on August 1951.

Education was his field of work for the forty years he lived and worked in Zambia. As Manager of Schools, he built both new schools and teachers' houses as mentioned above. He became education secretary in Chikuni, Civuna and Monze up to 1960 and was responsible for building the church at Monze town. In the early days, he traveled by bicycle, motor bike and land rover setting up, visiting and inspecting schools.

Someone compared Fr Colm to that Irish 6th century Saint Columba (after whom Colm took his name). 'He (Columba) was able, ardent and sometimes harsh but mellowed with age. The description is also apt for Cohn, he was extremely able. As an educationist and administrator he was highly capable and was driven by a generous zeal for the Lord's work. Like other outstanding people there was also a negative side to his very positive character, at times he would appear moody or even harsh. But this was only a passing phase especially as time went on. Like his patron Columba, he mellowed with age'.

His work in education continued in Lusaka from 1960 to 1976. He worked in the Catholic Secretariat as Education Secretary General (1960 to 1964) and combined this with the job of Secretary General 1964 to 1976. He was convinced of the value of education and the apostolate of education was his first preference. Charles Lwanga Teacher Training College was launched by him and he was responsible for the establishing and developing of lay missionary teachers (LMAT), so sorely needed in the early days of independence. He came to be widely known as a good organizer and administrator, a chairman who could be relied upon to give satisfaction, get work done and produce results.

In 1970 he was nominated by the President of Zambia to be chairman of a high level commission to review salaries, salary structures and conditions of service for the Public Service, including police and defense forces on a nationwide basis. He had not left building behind in Monze, for he planned and executed the Catholic Secretariat Building, Unity House on Freedom Way, as well as the residence at St Ignatius Church in Lusaka.

His work became widely known and he was invited to cooperate in the setting up of a Bishops' Secretariat in Lesotho, which occupied him from 1977 to 1978. He retired to Kitwe to be engaged in mainly pastoral work.

He was very loyal to his friends and devoted to others ready to put himself out to help

them. In the midst of all his education work, he was first and foremost a priest, very conscientious to his call to grow in the love and service of the Lord and bringing others to Him, helping others to seek and find God in their lives by his preaching, Mass, sacraments, retreats and counseling.

As the years went by, his health became quite a serious problem, especially heart and circulation difficulties. He was in Ireland for treatment but his mind was made up to return to Zambia since he had become a Zambian citizen in 1966. At Heathrow airport on the way back, he collapsed and died on the 2 December 1992.