



Fr Philip O'Keeffe S.J.
(1946-2007. In Zambia 1970-2007)

17 December 2007

'Philip was my friend. Our life's correspondence could easily fit in your smallest pocket. Many here might have lost contact with him because of his pocket size communications. Many here too can say he was their friend. Certainly I know many a person in Zambia who would say emphatically: *Phillip was my friend*'.

'Tis many a night in the early nineties', writes Fr Colm Brophy, 'that I sat in the sitting room of St Kizito's Pastoral Centre Monze with the two Clare men with whom I was privileged to live, for Philip was born in Ennis, Co Clare on 12 June 1946. Two genuinely saintly men. The elder statesman, John Counihan, would stand up promptly at eight pm and announce 'All right boys, I'll leave you to it. It's time for me to retire'. And he'd toddle off to his room to the Greek New Testament and Tonga New Testament laid out side by side on his desk - no English - and he'd prepare his homily for the following day. Meanwhile myself and Philip would switch off the serious stuff and put on a videotape, in those days it was the special Late Late Show tribute to Sharon Shannon - another famous Clare person.

The long drawn out notes of the accordion are the years of love and struggle, the years of pastoral planning, the years of walking with, that Phillip did from the time he first boarded the plane in Dublin for Zambia 'in August 1970 with Joe Hayes and Stan Farrell. He walked with care and love in his own humble, shy, unintrusive manner. First in Mumbwa in the late 70's where he had to learn chiNyanja and some chiShona. Then in Monze, Maamba, St Mary's Monze and finally Nakambala Sugar Estate, Mazabuka. While he walked unobtrusively yet he could lay down the law with people in a most fruitful and containing way. And his shyness could disappear like a cloud in a sunburst when he would sit and read for you with enthusiasm some favorite poetry or throw out one of his humorous and acute observations of the human situation. Or, offer his funny, sometimes painfully frank, comments on a person's foibles.

Philip was very honest with himself and had no ambitions to power. He had a really hard time with his inner self. I know some of the intense personal agonies he went through. He was low and depressed a lot of the time. And still he could ride the waves of the unconscious and throw humor and good sense to his fellow travelers. Even in hospital, the last time I spoke with him from Sheffield on the phone, he displayed his wry humor. I asked him how he was managing with all the visitors while feeling so weak - knowing also that in his very introverted nature he likes to put a limit on seeing people. 'Well', he says, 'I'll tell you, it's like in the old days in Ennis when Duffy's circus used to come to town. They used to have this little tent where we'd have to pay sixpence to get in. People would come, half out of guilt and half out of curiosity to see the cow with six legs'. Then he paused. 'Since they put me in this wheel chair - I'm still counting my legs'. He found it enormously difficult to summon the energy to keep going in his parish work. But he was utterly faithful to it. After some initial medical tests in Lusaka, he returned to Ireland for further treatment and passed away on 17 December 2007 of cancer of the spine.

Philip was a man of faith. I look at you now Philip in wonder and admiration. Thank you for your friendship. May you rest in peace'!