



**Fr Charles Bert, S.J.**

**(1869-1952. In Zambia 1924-1927)**

**5 January 1952**

Charles Bert was born at Oostcamp, near Bruges in Belgium on 8 March 1869 and was educated at the Apostolic School at Turnhout. He entered the novitiate at Tronchiennes in 1888 but went to Manresa in the U.K. in August of that same year, since he was destined for the Zambesi Mission. He did a year's juniorate and three years philosophy at St Mary's Hall and taught at St Francis Xavier's in Liverpool from 1893-1899. He did his three years of theology at Milltown Park, Dublin and tertianship at Tronchiennes and then he headed to Africa. He only came back once to Europe in the next fifty years. He was a Fleming, blest with equability, good sense and the single-minded devotion of his nation, and it surely was with an eye on him and his like that St Francis Xavier, in appealing to St Ignatius for missionaries, wrote the famous words: 'Give me Belgians!'

He went to Chishawasha in 1904 and was put in charge (1906-1909) and then at Mzondo from 1909-1921. After two years at Driefontein and a year at Chikuni, he was appointed 'Visitor' to the Polish Mission in Northern Rhodesia. Having handed in his report, he was then made Superior of the Mission with his headquarters at Kasisi. The time had come to make the area an ecclesiastical prefecture and his task there was to help get the structures and procedures in place for the planned development of the Mission. Despite a certain amount of opposition which he bore with equanimity, he brought order into the very disparate group of missionaries. However a letter from one of the men to the Polish General at the time, Fr Ledochowski, accusing Bert of being 'like a Prussian officer,' hurt his Belgian sensibilities. Mgr Brown, the Prefect Apostolic from Salisbury, appreciated the good work he had done and duly the Vatican appointed Fr Bruno Wolnik the new Prefect Apostolic of Broken Hill on 14 July 1927.

He returned in early 1928 to Southern Rhodesia to supervise the new school chapel at Gwelo and then moved on to Driefontein. After a lengthy medical treatment in Johannesburg, he was sent to Empandeni and then for three years to Salisbury. He went at one stage to Dunbrody to negotiate the transfer of the property in 1934 which had a long and unhappy ending. The farm, that so many brothers had labored for on years, was eventually sold after a disastrous court case. He returned to Europe to find a medical cure for his increasing deafness. By 1936 he was back at Monte Cassino, Musami and Chishawasha, now well into his seventies.

Fr Bert had many talents and admirable qualities. Perhaps the greatest of his gifts was his undying interest in everything that was going on, from the capabilities of the local Mass servers to the latest developments in the Korean War. Although he possessed an excellent memory of the events of his early life, he never gave the impression of wishing to live in his memories of the past to the neglect of the present. There must be few people who make such good use of the radio as he did, to keep abreast of news and information of all kinds. He took a minute interest in everything he

used in daily life and was always willing to support with solid reasons his preferences – for one kind of safety razor rather than another, for this blend of tobacco rather than that. The only gadget he showed no interest in was his electric hearing aid – which he kept locked up in a drawer in his desk!

His outstanding common sense and great practical gift of administration and organization stood him in good stead throughout his missionary life. When a person has held a position of authority for a number of years, he must have made a number of decisions which affect matters for a long time to come. People who come afterwards may be tempted to question the wisdom or prudence or common sense of the decision. In a case of this kind, his balance of mind was conspicuous. He was always most willing to explain his reasons for acting in a particular way and one could see the balance between the spiritual and material considerations that had led to his course of action.

For some years he was chaplain to the Dominican Sisters' house of retirement. He went to Chishawasha for a brief break but died there on 5 January 1952.