



Fr Andrew Zylka, S.J.
(1911-1971. In Zambia 1951-1971)
27 February 1971

Strange enough, writes Fr Vincent Cichecki, although I knew Fr Andrew for over 41 years, it is not easy for me to write about him, because he never liked to talk about himself, so I know rather little about his background and his life history.

He was born on 30 November 1911 in Bazanowka, a small village in the south of Poland. He first attended the local primary school and then went to the gymnasium in Nowy Sacz. At the age of 17 he entered the Society. He was then sent to Innsbruck, Austria but when Hitler occupied the country in 1933 he was moved to France. The historic storm caught up with him once again. The Second World War broke out with the invasion of Poland in 1939 and he was hurriedly ordained a priest on 28 February 1940 and drafted into the Polish army being formed in exile. The chief chaplain Bishop Joseph Gawlina appointed him chaplain to the Polish Air Force. After the capitulation of France he was evacuated to the UK and stationed for some time in Scotland. I am not well informed about his movements during the war. I met him in Rome in July 1945 as a chaplain to the Polish Air Force with the rank of major.

After being demobilized, he went to Heythrop College to renew his theology (after having been a priest for about seven years). He then did his tertianship and settled in London to work among the thousands of now demobilized homeless and embittered Poles. He started publishing a monthly magazine for the Sodality of Our Lady. As the Prefecture Apostolic of Lusaka was then suffering from an acute shortage of personnel, the superiors suggested his joining the Mission. There was a bit of wrangling over it, because it was suggested that he 'volunteer' for the Mission. In the early Society only those who volunteered for the foreign missions were sent since it was normally a one way journey – that often was quite brief. The tradition continued down to recent times and whether you were sent or had volunteered you technically were listed as a 'volunteer'. Fr. Zylka refused to do this but expressed his readiness to go if 'ordered'. I do not know what happened in the end, but he came here in 1951, never to leave again, not even for a holiday.

This was Fr Andrew, a blunt, frank disciplinarian, very cheerful but serious at the same time, a strong character and a great personality in every sense. Those who understood him not only respected, but loved him. Those who could not or would not – respected him. He never looked for cheap popularity nor cared whether he was popular with anybody. He was above all a very good priest and religious, a man of prayer, and given to solid hard work. Whatever he did, he tried to do it well. Superficiality was abhorrent to him in whatever duties were assigned to him.

He worked for some time in Kasisi and in 1955 handed over his job as Manager of Schools to the youthful Fr Adrian Mungandu. He then went to Mpima Seminary and finally to Mpunde. He spent half of his missionary life teaching at Kasisi and Mpima and the other half (nearly 11 years) in pastoral work at Mpunde. It was amazing how he applied himself entirely to any duties which were entrusted to him. Mpunde will remain as a lasting monument to his devotion. Although it was not Fr Zylka who started the buildings, he did complete those in progress. However, he was at the origin of the fine buildings of the two convents, the clinic, the Church and the priest's house (completed by someone else) – all with the devoted help of his great friend Br Uberman. The brother used to claim that he never had such a good, caring and understanding superior as Fr. Zylka.

Buildings, however fine, do not make a mission. Fr Andrew organized and laid the foundations for the pastoral work in the area, mainly through his great charity. Charity was his true characteristic. He showed it to the needy and to those who worked with him. Our brethren will always remember with what care he looked after them whenever they made their retreat at Mpunde. His concern could even be tender, even though he tried to hide it.