



Fr Zenon Pilsyk, S.J.
(1928-2011. In Zambia 1966-2011)

3 March 2011

Zenon was born on 23 June (the feast of St Zenon) 1928 in Warsaw. His father, Joseph was a police officer; his mother Eleanora was a dressmaker. He had an older brother Stephen, and a younger sister, Eva.

In September 1939, when the Germans occupied Warsaw, the primary school which Zenon was attending, was taken over and he was forced to change schools a number of times during the war to complete his primary education. Poles during the war were not allowed to attend secondary school but only technical schools. Zenon attended a commercial school where his teachers managed to teach regular academic subjects under the guise of some commercial name.

At school his best friend, Tadek, informed him about the secret underground group, the AK. In July of 1944, during the Warsaw uprising, Zenon and his friend made it into a part of the city that had been liberated and for the next six weeks they served as messengers. Zenon wrote: "It was the life of a mole: from one end of the city to the other through tunnels and cellars, sometimes carrying only messages, but mostly loaded with ammunition or other supplies."

In September they were forced to surrender. Those under 18 were packed into railcars and sent to the industrial Ruhr area of Germany. Later they were marched off to Bergen, the site of the infamous Belsen-Bergen concentration camp. April 15 1945 Canadian tanks approached the camp and, without any fighting, the Germans there, laid down their arms.

The Allies arranged for Zenon and four of his companions to continue their education. Zenon finished his secondary school in Germany and joined some friends going to Australia.

On arrival in Melbourne, Zenon was given a job, first in an army ammunition depot and then with the telephone exchange installing new lines. It was while doing that work that Zenon first met the Jesuits when installing a line at the new Provincial curia.

In 1953 Zenon entered the novitiate at Loyola College, Melbourne. In 1959 he was sent to Riverview College in Sydney for his regency. During his second year of regency, the Provincial spoke to Zenon about Fr Tom Cooney who used to teach at Riverview and was now in Chikuni in Northern Rhodesia and he also mentioned a letter he had received from Rome in connection with the Mission. He asked Zenon if he would be willing to go to Chikuni. Zenon agreed to go and six months later he got a letter approving him for theology at Milltown Park, Dublin.

At Milltown, James Corboy was his rector during his first year, but towards the end of the year he was appointed Bishop of Monze. Zenon was ordained in Milltown Park on St Ignatius Day in 1964. In August 1965 after his fourth year theology, he travelled to Port Townsend in Washington State to do a nine-month tertianship. Afterwards he spent some time in Chicago assisting in a parish at the request of the Polish Mission Procurator there. When he returned to London, he was able to get a visa for Poland.

After visiting Poland, Zenon flew to Zambia where he was almost immediately shipped off to Lilongwe to learn chiChewa. However, there was no organized language school there so, after a few weeks, he returned to Lusaka. He was sent to Karenda for a few months and then, at the beginning of 1967, to Matero to be the parish priest. He wrote: "I became a parish priest of a very big parish, including the present parishes of Kizito and Lilanda, without a good knowledge of any vernacular, and even less knowledge of the local people, or even of running a parish." But with the help of his catechist, the Kasisi Sisters and the parishioners, he grew comfortable in the work. However, towards the end of the year, he was sent to Kapoche Mission to take over from Hilary Rudez, but a few weeks later, he received another message to lock up Kapoche, leave the keys in Katondwe and proceed to Kasisi where he made his final profession in 1971.

In 1972 Zenon went to Europe for home leave and, on returning, was assigned to Kabwe to be the Education Secretary for the Catholic schools in the region. However toward the end of 1973 there was strong pressure from the Ministry of Education to hand over the Catholic primary schools to the government, so Zenon closed the office and was assigned to Katondwe Mission.

In 1977 he was moved back to Matero again and entered into the pastoral work with his usual enthusiasm and zeal. After a clash with Archbishop Milingo, the Provincial asked Zenon to hand over the parish and take a sabbatical for a year. So in 1982, after 20 years away, Zenon returned to Australia. That year was a wonderful experience for Zenon, especially meeting so many old friends again. Towards the end of this year, he received a letter from the Provincial appointing him to be his Socius.

Zenon worked as Socius with three Provincials but, not finding himself overly busy, he found time for pastoral work in different Lusaka parishes, especially Mtendere and St Paul's parish. In 1989 he was asked to go to Katondwe, but only for a year, as he would become the next Province Treasurer. For the next six years he managed the Province funds – very well.

He was happy to be relieved from this work in 1996 and to be sent to Kasisi as parish priest. Once again he enjoyed the parish work and began to think that this assignment would probably last some years as he was getting old. In 2000, however, he was asked to return as parish priest to Katondwe, along with Al McAndrew, who would be teaching R E in the schools. Zenon knew that the assignment would be only for a few years as the Archdiocese had agreed to take over the parish by 2003.

In 2003 Zenon returned to Australia to celebrate his golden jubilee as a Jesuit. When he returned to Zambia, he handed over Katondwe parish and moved to Nangoma as assistant parish priest for two years.

At the beginning of 2006 he moved to Chula House and became the Province Archivist. He was a most pleasant companion to work with. He was a fund of knowledge about the old Jesuit missionaries and he always wanted to ensure that a reliable account of their achievements would be recorded. He would spend the weekends (and sometimes weekdays) in pastoral activity, at first helping in Kasisi and later taking care of Kanakantapa and its outstations. He was preparing to hand over the running of Kanakantapa to John Mlakar when he died suddenly at Chula House on 3 March 2011.