

May 17

Fr BERTRAM CALLAN 5 September 1878 – 17 May 1939



‘Bertie’ Callan was born in Cookstown, Co Louth, Ireland, where his father was an MP. He entered the Society in 1897 and was ordained in 1912. He taught in Malta for five years from 1904 and then in 1913 moved to Southern Africa (Empandeni). In 1915 he moved to St George’s for eleven years and then in 1926, joined Fr Jean-Baptiste

Loubière at Kutama Teacher Training College, then struggling. He is seen here with his students. He used to cycle the 17 miles to Murombedzi every Saturday so as the Christians could have Mass on the Sunday. But he struggled with Shona.

In 1928 he moved to the Cathedral and used to visit the hospital six days a week to give Holy Communion to the sick at 6.00 a.m. He was devoted to the sick and especially the dying and would often spend the whole night by the bedside of someone dying or he would wait out in the corridor nearby. The nurses noticed and wanted to invite him to their annual dinner to show their appreciation but it was against custom to have outsiders. They eventually said they would not attend themselves if he was not invited. They won their point.

Those who knew Bertie said he was not particularly intelligent but he was stubborn and learnt to convert this quality into ‘a soluble asset’. As a boy he was fed up with another boy who needled him for always reading and Bertie challenged him to a fight and pounded him. His reputation soared that day. As a teacher he was meticulous in preparation but a bit wooden in sticking to the rules.

Bishop Chicherster later recorded that ‘his long stories fell flat. It takes courage to tell a long story badly.’ But Bertie persevered!

His death was dramatic. He was making his retreat at Makumbe and, taking an afternoon walk, he climbed a kopje some way from the mission. While on the top, he must have lost his grip for he fell 120 feet and it took two days to find his body. This writer has climbed the same kopje and also stood at the edge and realises it could easily happen.