

June 27

Fr FRANCIS MARCONNÉS

31 July 1873 – 27 June 1935



Francois Maronnès was born in Rauret in the diocese of Le Puy in France and his father had a skill in water divining, a skill he passed on to his son who was in demand in South Africa and in Southern Rhodesia. We are not told how successful he was, only that ‘his name was subsequently invoked with varying degrees of benediction’ – a rather enigmatic compliment. He was educated at one of the ‘Apostolic Schools’, which are described in his obituary as ‘academies of over-baked asceticism where young men become

stale with too much special training and are lacking in the social amenities so necessary to the apostle’. The one in Bordeaux to which Francois was sent was different in that its director, Père Batut, steered a more wholesome course and his ‘students did him credit in many parts of the world’.

Francois joined the Society in 1880 in London since he had volunteered for the Zambezi Mission. In 1884 he was at Dunbrody and after regency at St Aidan’s went to Belgium for theology and was ordained in 1893. From 1895 he spent twelve further years at St Aidan’s before going to other missions for short periods and Chishawasha for three years. ‘He was some little way from being the ideal teacher of a class... He was inclined to be oracular and naively wholesale in his statements, and was never quite able to throw off the didactic manner even when conversing with grown- up people.’

He then went to Mzondo, which was in the process of moving to Gokomere, and in 1916 moved to Umtali (Mutare) to which his name is most attached.

He built a church there on a much-reduced scale from the grandiose plan he started with, which owed more to Chartres and Amiens than the realities of the railway siding of a small town on the Beira to Salisbury railway. He invited the Dominicans to start a school there, a move that was much appreciated by the locals, Protestant and Catholic. By ‘locals’ in those days I presume we have to understand the Europeans.

After eleven years he moved in 1928 to Gokomere, Driefontein, Makumbe, Gweru, Triashill and Chishawasha in quick succession and in 1934 he was at Monte Cassino in failing health. He wrote on ‘Bantu ethnology’ and produced a *Grammar of Central Karanga* in 1932 to which Dr Doke provided an introduction, ‘I have clearly stated the main points on which I disagree with Fr Marconnés’ treatment; but I was so struck by the amount of valuable material which he had collected that it is to a great extent due to my persuasion that he has brought his manuscript to publication.’