

June 27

Fr GREGOR RICHERT

10 May 1930 - 27 June 78



Two German Jesuits, Fr Gregor Richert and Br Bernhard Lisson, were shot, it seems to be generally accepted, by Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army guerrillas at St Rupert Mayer Mission, in Makonde 200 kms west of Harare on 27 June 1978.

Gregor was a good correspondent and his letters were published ten years after his death. He was born in 1930 in Danzig (Gdansk, then part of Germany and now of Poland) and his family had to flee west at the end of the war. He joined the Jesuits in 1948 and came to Rhodesia in 1961. He worked in Marymount, Guruve, Chitsungo and St Albert's, Mount Darwin, before arriving in Makonde in 1968. All of these places were in their foundation stages and he built his own missionary approach in tandem with the physical building of the missions. This was evident when he came to Makonde, 'a fallow country... (where) Fr Rudolf Kensy had built an oasis in this otherwise stony and sandy reserve'. Sometime later he wrote;

(Easter) was really celebrated at Magondi (Makonde). On Palm Sunday we went in a solemn procession through the villages waving proper palms. On Maundy Thursday some ... were most impressed by the foot-washing ... I (hadn't) got twelve (Catholic) men ... so I invited twelve influential men of the neighbourhood, all of them non-Christians. It was a sweeping success ...

But Gregor saw the dependence of the people on maize and in a bad year there would be hunger. He proposed cotton as a cash crop and after a faltering start it took off in the area. He was also deeply involved as schools' manager even after the government took over the schools. He loved the work but it was exhausting. In the early years of the war, Makonde had been spared experience of the war but by the late 1970s people talked of the war drawing closer. In late March, 1977, he wrote, 'It really can't be denied any longer that the whole situation is becoming more tense every week'. And he wrote these prophetic words:

One time we were mighty proud of our measurable achievements ... but now has that all to become desolate, forgotten? ... I think it is now time after a period of more outward growth for the message of Christ to take stronger and deeper root than before. But if this is supposed to be achieved, then the heart of the one who has devoted himself to this task must bleed. ... We are not spared the fear and distress of the heat caused by the terror all around us through which we also, like Him, must live. This is part of our self-sacrifice. But what this world considers mad, senseless, futile and foolish wastefulness is – if we really take God's word at least once seriously – the fulfilment of all our longing, the final arrival at our destination, for which we were created, to win everything.

Around 4.00 pm on 27 June 1978 three armed men entered the mission and one of them asked to see Gregor alone. Gregor offered him tea and the discussion was of money. It appears there was little in the mission at the time and the three became angry and shot Gregor and also Br Lisson who was repairing a truck at the time.