



Fr Roland Pichon, S.J.
(1917-2002. In Zambia 1972-1973)

27 June 2003

Roland Pichon was born in Dorgogne, France on October 1917. He was the last of ten children. Although his parents were baptized and very close to each other, they did not frequent the Church. After successful studies at secondary schools in Anger and Paris, he entered the School of Mining in Saint-Etienne. During the holidays in Vercore, he encountered two deeply Christian families. When he was 23 he was baptized at Christmas and completing his third year in the School of Mining, he made a retreat at Chatelard and went to join the Jesuit novitiate at Yzeure with Fr J Constantin. After tertianship he was appointed director of the technical school at St Etienne but then another took over who had a different pedagogical method. Roland said to his Provincial that he would like to go to the Chad – the mission had only 25 Jesuits for an Apostolic Prefecture twice the size of France.

On an October morning in 1955 he landed at Fort Lamy and two days later set down at Fort Archambault. He began learning the local language and started getting used to the local diet which was a bowl of rice with some sauce and sometimes some fish or chicken. Bediondo to the west was to be his parish. He trained the catechists and with them taught the catechumens. Problems arose between Roland the officials at the Sub-Prefecture about the mission property, the encroaching plantations, and the unjust arrest of a Christian farmer. Roland, always the defender of the poor, appeared to the Chadian government as 'the white man who thinks he is boss around here.' He was arrested and on 4 June 1964, with 12 other Frenchmen, he was expelled.

At Pentecost in 1966 he welcomed Fr Geoffrey Cockcroft, an English Jesuit, a friend of his tertianship, who invited him to come to Southern Rhodesia. In Salisbury he found his fellow student of Fourvière, Fr Pat Moloney. He perfected his English and learned chiShona. He began his rural mission at Chikwizo on the border with Mozambique. His discussions with the Fathers on apartheid were difficult as they disagreed among themselves. He preaching was not well accepted, but after the summer of 1972, a cabinet minister pushed for his departure. Roland carried with him the manuscript he was working on *The Rhodesian drama, the rise of Zimbabwe* which was to be published in 1974.

At 55 he was still full of courage. The superior in Zambia offered him a contract for three years. He learned chiTonga and set out for Fumbo Mission. But after a year of encouraging pastoral work, he had to return home for a prostate operation. A message from Lusaka arrived in Paris, 'he would have to postpone his return'.

In 1978 at the request of the bishop he headed off to be chaplain at the university centre in Martinique. The two cultures, European and Creole have little contact, being the result of racism enmeshed with the love of money. Roland's insistence on these

problems alienated a part of the clergy. The students saw him as a liberal but the President of the University succeeded in persuading the bishop not to renew his contract.

On returning to Paris, he met Mgr Charles Vandame, his old superior in Chad and now bishop of Ndjamená. He spent seven months with the Chadian Christians in the small church of Chagwa and was so happy to be with them again. In the spring of 1990, the Scheutists came to Ndjamená to take over the parish of Chagwa. He headed back to France, actually to Marseilles, where for four years he was minister as well as helper in a few parishes. In 1995 Mgr Xavier Baronnet, his companion of Vanves, was appointed bishop for the Seychelles. He invited him and gave him the parish of Praslin Island. He set himself to learn Creole but he opposed the custom of the baptism of infants independent of the marital situation and the persuasion of the parents. In his homilies 'the golden calf was vigorously denounced.' Afterwards he was given two parishes on the main island of Mahe but he was again 'the priest who upsets' by denouncing state censorship, clerical conformism and again he was deported.

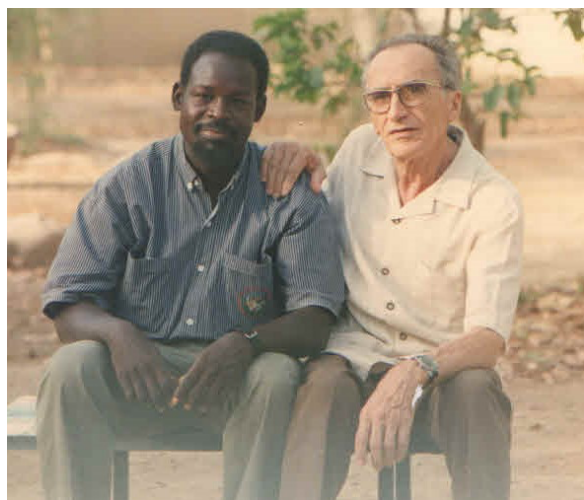
In 1977 he visited his old friend Pat Moloney in Harare. He was asked to teach French to the scholastics but four months later, the authorities refused his residence permit because of his continued denunciation of apartheid. In Paris the Provincial listened to his account of the 'six involuntary interruptions of his mission'. These were the confessions of a man weather-beaten by trials. The Provincial offered him a sabbatical year of rest in the Chad. His final joy was to find his companion of 1985, Debi Yomtou, newly ordained and superior at Paul Miki community at Ndjamená.

In December 2000 he bid a final farewell to Africa. He accepted his final ministry, chaplain to the Sisters of Mercy of Dorat in the diocese of Limoges, where on 27 June 2003 he passed into eternity.

27 June

Fr ROLAND PICHON

7 October 1917 – 27 June 2002



Roland Pichon appears in *Companions on Mission*. The present writer simply wants to add a little Zimbabwean relish to the story. Born the youngest in a family of ten to non-practicing Catholic parents at Moulins Neuf in the Dordogne, France, Roland only came in touch with the Catholic faith through a devout family he met in his student days at St Etienne, where he was studying mining. He was baptised in

1940, aged 23, and two years later entered the Society. In his theology days he came under the influence of Stanislaus Lyonnet, a Scripture scholar, and Henri de Lubac, who was silenced by Pius XII and later made a cardinal by John XXIII and became a *peritus* at Vatican II. It was during this intoxicating decade, the fifties, that Roland was ordained (1953).

In 1955, he went to Chad where he had a parish at Bediondo, in the west of the country, for nine years. He trained catechists, built a school and a church and ran into a showdown with local officials by standing up for a poor Christian farmer in a dispute over boundaries. The government of the newly independent state was annoyed by this ‘white man who thinks he is still boss around here’ and it decided to expel him and some other priests and lay workers.

Back in France, Roland was invited by Geoffrey Cockcroft, a former fellow tertiary, with the approval of Fr General, to come Rhodesia as it still was. After two years learning Shona and English, Roland went to Chikwizo, a new mission beyond Mutoko on the Mozambique border. He made his own decisions and built a church which was unusual in having a section for catechumens separated from the main church by a red curtain. After the gospel and homily the curtain (the Red Sea) was drawn and the catechumens had to wait until baptism to participate in the Mysteries. The archbishop heard rumours of what was happening and decided to go and investigate. He was met by Pichon who explained what he was doing and why and capped his explanation with bottle of good French wine. Not only was Markall mollified he offered to pay for the roof.

Pichon had built a church of local undressed stone and the altar was a huge stone from the floor of the Rwenya River. 'It was easy to choose a stone' he wrote, 'but not so easy to move it. ... I was sure it was the will of God to use this stone as *guyo* (grinding stone) but how to haul it from its millenary bed to the top of the hill.' He went on to describe the struggle ending with Shona proverb, 'a work begun is a work ended'.

It was the time of the turmoil in the country before the hot war and Pichon lent his weight to the demand for freedom. A cabinet minister pushed the archbishop to get him out of the country and the latter felt he had to comply. Pichon went back to France but wrote a book on the *Rhodesian Drama and the Rise of Zimbabwe* which came out in 1974.

Still full of energy at 55, Pichon then accepted an invitation from the Jesuits in Zambia to work at Fumbo Mission but within a year had to return to France as he was ill. While there he received word to 'postpone his return' - a polite way of saying, 'Don't come back'. He had been critical of the bishops in Zambia.

In 1978, he went to Martinique as chaplain to the university and noticed the Creole and European cultures were not mixing and he preached about it. Again pressure was put on the bishop to send him away, which he did.

He worked in France for a time before being invited back to Chad where he preached about reconciliation after years of civil war and this was much appreciated but then the mission was handed over to another congregation and he returned to France. In 1995 he was invited to the Seychelles where he had a parish for a while but when he preached against the baptism of children when the parents were not going to Church, he was denounced. Also he spoke out against the clergy conforming to the government's wishes too quickly. Again he had to leave. He now had the reputation of **THE PRIEST WHO DISTURBS**.

In 1999 he was invited back to Zimbabwe to teach French at Arrupe College but his immigration papers were bungled and he was humiliated by being asked to go after a few months on a tourist visa.

He then went back to Chad where his friend Debi Yomton (photo) was just ordained and superior of Paul Miki community.

At Roland's funeral, Père Lepoutre spoke of his 'faith purified by fire as strong and bright: at every Eucharist he spoke passionately of Christ who was at the heart of his life which was so often studded by sacrifice.'