



Br Maximilian Klopec, S.J.
(1879-1961. In Zambia 1919-1961)

2 August 1961

Maximilian Klopec was born on 12 November 1878 in Cziesyn, Silesia, Poland. In his early years he worked in the coal mines in Karwina. Till his death, he bore on his face and ears the scars resulting from a gas explosion in the mine. By profession he was a blacksmith.

He entered the novitiate at Stara Wies in 1900 and after a number of years he went to the Zambesi Mission in 1908 to work with the English Jesuits in Southern Rhodesia. He spent his first ten years at the famous Empandeni Mission, the only mission station that survived from the first missionary effort of 1879. They regrouped in South Africa and made a second attempt eleven years later which proved very successful. He was a 'jack of all trades,' while his talent as a blacksmith was in much demand. Besides building a windmill to grind maize, he designed a biogas generator from the waste wood material and used the gas for lighting the mission house. In a letter of 1909 he wrote: 'I am in good health and humor; I work from morning to evening at the anvil and vice in the workshop. I have plenty of work and managed to create my own tools for my metal work'. His companions regarded him as a cheerful and sociable person and in typical British fashion they used to say 'Good fellow Brother Max'.

About 1918 he was transferred to the Polish Mission in the Luangwa Valley. Initially he stayed at Kapoche with Fr Moskopp in quite straitened circumstances. It was just after the Second World War and Europe was recovering from the years of devastation. Each mission station had to survive on \$20 a month! He found these times difficult and used to speak about them. He was transferred to the nearby mission center of Katondwe in April 1919 to replace Br Zurek who had died of a heart attack in 1917. Again he put his hand to everything, but his metal work was always badly needed. He also taught English to the boys in the school.

In 1922 he was transferred to Kasisi to help Br Longa build the fine two storey house for the new centre of the Mission. This house is still standing today like a fortress. He was never a bricklayer nor builder but he readily accepted to work on the project with the aging Br Longa. Stones were needed, bricks were burnt and lime excavated. Planks were cut from very hard African timber, as there was little imported timber at the time. At the request of Fr Bert, the superior appointed from Salisbury, he built a fine convent for the sisters with a 70 foot well 'to secure healthy water'! All of these projects took them three years of unremitting labor.

In 1928, Br Maximilian, now 50 years old, still strong, but beginning to be bent with age and labor, was sent to the farm at Mpima near Kabwe. He never had been a farmer, so it was his first taste of this occupation. There were no implements and no buildings except for some workers' huts. It was just bush and the first task was to clear the land. He levelled the ground removing the termite mounds from which thousands of bricks were made for the new residence of Mgr Wolnik in Kabwe, as well as a brick house for the community. He did not live in the house himself, preferring the simple rondavel with its poverty. He was in the habit of writing letters which often contained acute observations about the life and culture of the people he lived among.

Between 1933-1934 a plague of locusts descended on the land. Their brown color eclipsed the sun, casting a dreadful shadow on the land. Mpima suffered like elsewhere. There was also an outbreak of the dreaded tsetse fly which killed many of the cattle.

These were just too many misfortunes for the poor Brother. He worried about it far too much.

The first signs of a nervous breakdown appeared. Even a transfer to Kasisi for a long rest did not help him. He was sent to Chikuni in July 1933 but was very weak and over the months made, little progress. He went back to Kasisi in January 1934 where he could be closer to medical attention. He was in deep depression. With minor changes this state of his health continued until his death. One had the impression that he was aware of his state. Sometimes in a happy good humor he would say: 'This is what God wants – this is his will'. Hoping that a mental hospital would help him regain his health and spiritual balance he was sent down south to Rhodesia. He stayed in Ingutsheni Hospital in Bulawayo for nearly 19 years without any basic change for the better. He lived there peacefully and quietly, trying to be helpful where possible to the institution. He took care in a very creative way, of the flowers and paths in the garden. Even during this time of suffering he was a shining example of piety and discipline.

A few days before his death he was very normal and prepared himself for death. He received the last Sacraments from a missionary companion very peacefully. Brother Klopec passed away quietly on 2 August 1961.