

24 August

Fr HENRY WIDLAKE 27 February 1910 – 24 August 1978



Harry, as he was called, was born in Rotterdam with his twin, Ivor, who also entered the Society in 1928, but did not stay. Harry was ordained in 1942 and came to Africa in 1950. He was in Chishawasha and Mhondoro learning Shona for a year but was restless and on the point of returning to Europe when Fr 'Beau' Rea, who knew him well, persuaded Bishop Chichester to send him to Makumbe in 1951. Harry threw himself into all the work of the out schools and used his practical skills in small but significant ways. He put up a loudspeaker system outside the church and played music to call people to Mass. And he surrounded the cross outside the church with a neon tube light that could be seen from a distance.

By 1954 it was decided Makumbe was becoming too big and it was divided and Harry went off to Bindura to live and found a mission. Fr Leonard Kennedy tells us he added Mazowe, Mbebi, Concession, Glendale, Jumbo Mine and other centres, reaching to Chiweshe. He was in a hurry and would do jobs while talking to visitors. He had always loved swimming and in the old Heythrop swam throughout the year even breaking the ice in winter. In Africa he continued to swim and contracted Bilharzia more than once. It irritated him that the treatment took so long and pressurized the doctor to reduce it to a third of what it should be. More seriously, he met a crocodile one day while in the water and it grabbed him by the leg. He somehow freed himself but the creature came at him again and still he managed to pull himself to safety. He had to drive a distance to Bindura hospital with his legs lacerated with cuts and losing blood. It took him weeks to recover.

When the church handed over the schools he tried to resist as he saw them as primary ways of bringing the faith to the people. When the war came, he pushed his way to get permission to enter the 'keeps' – camps where people were concentrated 'for their own protection' but really to deny the guerrillas places for shelter and food. He admired the work of the Salvation army in bringing food, blankets and clothes to the people in the keeps and wanted the Catholic Church to do the same.

He bought an old Mercedes at a giveaway price and nursed it to health. When he died it had 280,000 miles on the clock.

He developed a Shona course for whites to learn Shona. In an interview in *The Shield* he said 'Everyone should have a Shona dictionary' and he lectured in the Polytechnic to improve his income for his work. He loved meetings: deaneries, ecumenical gatherings, prayer sessions. It was before one of the latter that he phoned up the hospital to say he would not be able to make the next meeting, fixed for there at 5.00 in the morning. They did not like the way he sounded and came to investigate. By then he had collapsed and died.