24 August

Fr HENRY WIDLAKE

27 February 1910 – 24 August 1978

Harry, as he was called, was born in Rotterdam with his twin, Ivor. Both entered the Society of Jesus in 1928, though Ivor did not remain. Harry was ordained in 1942 and came to Africa in 1950. After a year in Chishawasha and Mhondoro learning Shona, he grew restless and was close to returning to Europe, until Fr "Beau" Rea persuaded Bishop Chichester to send him to Makumbe in 1951.

At Makumbe, Harry threw himself into the life of the mission and the out-schools, using his practical gifts in inventive ways. He installed a loudspeaker outside the church and played music to call people to Mass. He also surrounded the church cross with a neon tube that could be seen from far away.

By 1954, Makumbe had grown so large that it was divided, and Harry went to Bindura to found a new mission. From there he extended his reach to Mazowe, Mbebi, Concession, Glendale, Jumbo Mine and as far as Chiweshe. He was always in motion, often carrying out tasks while talking to visitors.

Harry had a lifelong love of swimming. At Heythrop in England, he swam throughout the year, even breaking ice in winter. In Africa he kept up the habit, though not without danger. He contracted bilharzia more than once and grew impatient with the long treatment, pressuring doctors to shorten it. More dramatically, whilst ignoring warnings about a pool in the Mazowe River, he was attacked by a crocodile but managed to escape when children distracted the crocodile by splashing the water.

His love of water sport was nonetheless legendary! He dived from the ten-metre board at the Les Brown pool in the capital and even climbed the Musami mission water tank just to take the plunge. He also loved speed, riding a 250cc Honda motorbike and nursing a vintage Mercedes Benz with great care. By the time he died, the car had over 280,000 miles on the clock.

Harry was gifted but eccentric, to put it mildly. He supported his pastoral work by lecturing at the Polytechnic and by running a small clock- and watch-repair shop in a room at Bindura. He also developed a Shona course for whites, telling *The Shield* in an interview that "everyone should have a Shona dictionary." He relished meetings of all kinds—deaneries, ecumenical gatherings, prayer sessions—and rarely missed an opportunity to participate.

Pastorally, he was strong-willed and inventive. He resisted the handover of Catholic schools, convinced they were primary ways of bringing the faith to people. During the war he fought for permission to enter the "keeps"—camps where people were confined "for their protection" but really to deny guerrillas support. He admired the Salvation Army for bringing food, blankets, and clothes to those in the keeps and wished the Catholic Church would do the same.

Harry strongly believed that life should be enjoyed and often said, "I want to have fun." His love of social life, however, was not always shared by his parishioners, who sometimes extinguished their house lights when they heard his car approaching in the evening.

He died suddenly after phoning the hospital to excuse himself from an early-morning prayer meeting. Staff, concerned by how he sounded, came to investigate and found that he had already collapsed and died.

At his burial, his twin brother Ivor appeared dressed as a bishop in mitre and vestments, and had to be prevented, with some difficulty by Fr McNamara, from taking over the ceremony.