

24 October

Abp ASTON CHICHESTER 22 May 1879 – 24 October 1962

Aston Chichester was steeped in tradition and yet had 'far-seeing eyes'. He could trace his ancestry back to Henry I, who died in 1138. He could also look into the future and could think beyond the perimeters imposed by caution. He had been an outstanding rector of Wimbledon and Beaumont in ways that were long remembered. He once apologised to a 12 year old boy whom he suspected of helping himself to the altar wine, 'I made a real fool of myself this morning,' he confessed to the astonished boy.



In 1931 he became the first bishop in the growing mission and soon showed his 'thinking beyond the perimeters'. Six months into his work, Chick announced he would establish a congregation for local sisters. In 1932, nineteen girls began their novitiate in Makumbi. The novices had to build their own novitiate and lay out their own gardens. It was tough and many thought it was bound to fail. 'They will all have gone back home within a year' was the governor's comment. Some parents saw no sense in the project and would not give their daughters permission to join. Chick's response was to require a girl who wished to be a sister to produce a written statement of approval from her father or guardian, signed in the presence of the Native Commissioner. Some families wanted *lobola* from the bishop for taking their daughters and he sometimes complied after the sister was settled and qualified as a nurse or teacher and wanted to re-imburse her family for her lost *lobola*.

Chichester also saw the need for more priests and sought vigourously from abroad but he knew arrivals from Europe were only a temporary solution. A start had to be made in welcoming 'sons of the soil'. Older missionaries were hesitant as education was still generally only at primary school level. But others questioned how long they could rely on foreign priests. Chichester cut through all the discussion and went ahead. On January 1, 1936, a Minor Seminary was opened at Chishawasha at the cost of £1000. At first they had simple huts of unburned bricks for both staff and students and Fr Emil Schmitz was in charge of building. There were misunderstandings and frustrations along the way. In 1939 Chick expected a philosophy teacher would arrive from England but the provincial

wrote that he could not send one as St George's had urgent needs. Chick exploded:

you ... treat me of no account. Facts, however, are stubborn things and getting down to tin tacks it comes to this, you are opposing the ecclesiastical authority and the Council of the Vicariate and refusing to cooperate in the work of the Seminary. ... sending five men in the last two years to St George's ... and one (whom I informed you at the time was not up to the job) to the Seminary is turning down the work. I cannot take this sitting down and however disagreeable it is to me personally I must kick ...`

Having made his protest Chick settled down to wait. It was six years after the founding of the seminary that philosophy started. The feast of Christ the King in 1947 saw the joyful occasion of the first ordinations. Three thousand people, five out of six of them black, witnessed the ordination of Simon Tsuro, son of catechist Robert Tsuro and Isidore Chikore. Stephen Luwisha followed, in Chikuni, Northern Rhodesia (Zambia), some weeks later. This was a moment of extraordinary consolation for Chichester and all those who had worked to establish the Church in Zimbabwe. Sixty years had passed since the first plans for the Zambezi Mission had been drawn up in Rome and Grahamstown and now here was a visible sign that all the efforts were bearing fruit.

The local sisters and the seminary are remembered as Chick's great achievements but there were a multitude of other cares that he attended to in his 25 years as bishop and archbishop. He oversaw the setting up of two more dioceses besides Harare – in Bulawayo and Gweru - and two prefectures soon to become dioceses, in Hwange and Mutare. There were new missions founded, teacher training schools built, new congregations invited into the country to build hospitals and schools. He started the *Shield* as a monthly Catholic magazine and taught regularly at the seminary. His relations with the government were cordial and he got his ways on many things though he does not seem to have challenged the dominant policy of segregation in the country. This writer thinks he was a gradualist, believing segregation would gradually melt away once progress gathered pace. It seems he did not reckon with the Rhodsian Front and at the time of his death, on the steps of St Peter's in Rome at the time of the Council, the RF was still in its infancy.

There are countless amusing stories about Chick. His response to an objection was on the lines of, 'You may well be right but I am certainly not wrong.' Günther Gattung remembers how he twice tried to close Makumbi as it seemed to be unviable. The first time he went there to express his mind he had a puncture and the second time he ran into a cow. He then gave up.

He was buried in Rome but his body was brought back to Zimbabwe with great rejoicing in 2009 (?).