



Fr John Spendel, S.J.
(1880-1945. In Zambia 1921-1945)

1 December 1945

John Spendel was born in Upper Silesia on 4 June 1880 and did his philosophy and theology at the University of Breslau as a diocesan seminarian. After his ordination he served in his diocese for several years, first as vicar and then as prefect of the minor seminary at Beuthen (Bytom). In 1913 he joined the Society of Jesus in Belgium with the intention of going to India as a missionary. But Providence directed him to the Jesuit Mission in Northern Rhodesia where, after several delays and many vicissitudes, due to the unsettled conditions following the First World War, he arrived in 1921.

He was hardly in the country when, owing to the sudden death of the superior, Fr Czarlinski on his journey from Katondwe to Kasisi, he was appointed his successor. The mission was then still part of the vast Zambesi Mission.

He set to work with great energy to make Kasisi a suitable headquarters, after the years of neglect by the aging Torrend. In 1922 he laid the foundation stone of a fine two storey building erected by Brs Klopec and Longa. He visited Kabwe and requested a site from the Commissioner as there were over 400 Catholics trained by the White Fathers from the 6,000 laborers of the mines. Shortly afterwards the Church received a plot. A little later he would opening up ten schools in the surroundings area and help get teachers from both Kasisi and Katondwe to the teacher training centre in Mpima. He also attended the 1924 meeting of the General Missionary Conference which did not always have a representative from the Catholic Church. However, now that the Colonial Office was taking over the administration of the territory, it was important to be officially involved, especially when it came to the new educational policies that the British Government were in the process of articulating.

In 1923 he visited Lusaka and accepted the offer of a site on the plot owned by the Italian family of Marrapodi, on which he built the first church of St Francis de Sales. It was blessed by Mgr Brown during his ecclesiastical visit from Salisbury in June 1924. Mgr Brown had already installed Fr Charles Bert as the Mission Superior replacing Fr Spendel, as a preparatory measure necessary to get the Mission ready for its own ecclesiastical independence. The rapid death of the previous superiors and the loss of some of the young dynamic personnel had prevented the Mission from developing as well as it originally had in mind. Fr Bert having completed his initial inspection was far from happy when Mgr Brown himself visited and officially appointed him for a term of office. There were some clashes between the old superior and the new but in time it was all sorted out and the overall purpose was achieved with the appointment of Fr Wolnik as the first Prefect Apostolic in 1927.

Fr Spendel was an excellent missionary and at the same time was a good preacher and retreat master. His robust health and strong constitution enabled him to bear the hardships of touring the country by scotch-cart and bicycle. Endowed with a good memory and easy facility for languages, he soon mastered the local dialects of which there were several in this part of the country. His publications in chiLenje included a catechism (1926); the Sunday Gospels (1930); a prayer and hymn book (1935) and school readers (1936). In chiNyanja he produced a catechism (1926). His publications give some idea of his dynamism in developing the liturgy which renewed the Christian life of the missions where he ministered.

Even in 1944 at the age of 64 he headed off towards the Luano to the east of Kabwe on a visitation of schools, up and down the hills and valleys over streams and dry river beds. After his two week safari he was so exhausted that he had to spend some days in hospital! Unknowingly he had contracted pleurisy and suffered much in his daily work till the doctor took him into hospital. What first appeared as heart trouble and asthma was after more careful examination diagnosed as a chest infection which dislocated the heart causing much pain and unease. He was sent to Port Elizabeth in South Africa and passed away in St Joseph's hospital on 1 December 1945.

Above all else his heart was with the people and while he took care of their souls, he also helped in their material needs, disregarding his own comfort and personal needs. Humanly speaking, he might have regretted that he had to die far away from his Mission and the people he loved so much and for whom he had worked during twenty five years.