

22 December

Fr MICHAEL HANNAN 4 October 1909 – 22 December 1977



Michael was born in Goresbridge, Co Kilkenny, Ireland, and the family migrated to Canada when he was three. Four years later he was back in Europe and at school in Hodder, the preparatory school for Stonyhurst. Three years after that, he retraced his steps across the Atlantic to attend school at St Michael's, Toronto. Six years later he was back in the UK to join the Society (1925). He was 16. In the novitiate, when he was looking after the poultry, he found two live chicks in his pocket during

Benediction.

He did his philosophy in Holland where he learnt German and developed an interest in anthropology but the decision was not to follow this up but go to Leeds to teach. He began to learn Shona during theology and, with the help of Dutch scholastic, he also wrote a biography of Br de Sadeleer, who accompanied Law to Mzila's in 1880 and later worked in the Congo. Ordained in 1938, his party zigzagged its way down the war torn Atlantic to reach Cape Town in 1941.

He was posted to Musamai and soon became the superior where he worked through the 1940s with his team of sisters (OPs and LCBLs) and lay teachers to build up the mission. Towards the end he became a Mission consultor and was tasked to survey a site for a new mission in the Mount Darwin area. Searching for a suitable place he chose what became Marymount. Three consultors went out to look at the site and voted against the choice but Fr Enright, the Superior, sided with Mike and Marymount came into existence. The road and the distance were horrible but they persevered.

In 1952 he went to the seminary to teach Theology, Maths and English and, after two years, moved to Chishawasha. By this time he had a reputation for his enthusiasm and knowledge of Shona and was asked to produce the first Standard Shona Dictionary. The government gave him a salary and a team, of his choice. He added to his tasks by starting the Teacher Training College at



Musami in 1959 and in 1961 we find him at Kutama with its 22 outstations, school and the Marist Brothers.

The following year the Rhodesian Catholic Bishops' Conference asked him to translate the New Testament and those parts of the Old that are used in the liturgy. He chose Rothwell Farm

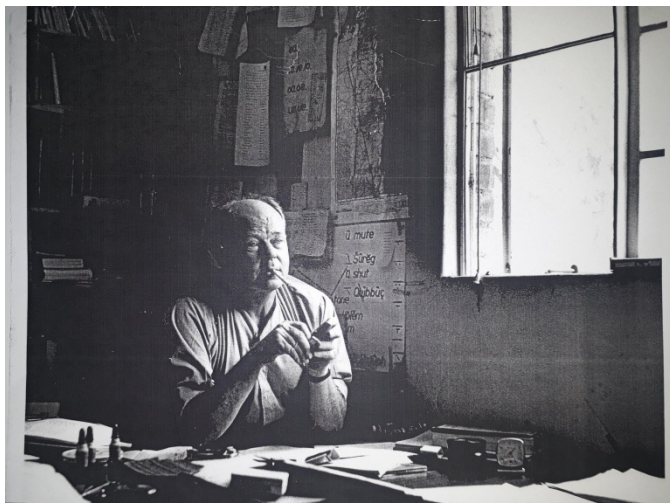
as his base because the families of his four co-workers, representing the four dialects, could be housed there. Among his helpers were Elias Gumbo and Charles Muza. The NT came out in 1966 and the Shona Missal two years later. He then set about revising the Standard Shona Dictionary and enlarging it substantially; there were three pages on 'walk' with roughly 300 different entries on that one word. (See picture above. Charles Muza, I think, on right. Others, regrettably, we do not know). Mike found the ecumenical effort to produce the whole bible was often slipshod. For example, a whole chapter of Titus was left out. Mike also produced text books for teaching Shona and he wrote eleven articles for NADA on cultural questions. 'His scholarship was the fruit of his missiology' was Paddy Moloney's verdict.

All this time Mike was promoting the Catholic Africa Association, a structure that encouraged 'Better Harvests, Better Homes and Better Hearts. It flourished in the 1960s with thousands attended the annual congresses. He loved company but had a rigorous daily timetable, starting work at 7.30 and ending at 5.00. He left the week-ends free for retreats and supplies.

In 1974 our mission elected him to represent us at GC32. He found meeting his fellow delegates from other parts of Africa invigorating but he was often lonely. They were talked at for six hours a day and he knew the real work was being done in committees. He witnessed Fr Arrupe in action and was much moved. There as an appeal for help in the Sudan and he wondered if he could apply.

Illness caught up with him in the mid-1970s and he was going to and fro for treatment in the hands of the devoted Dr Gelfand. This writer remembers visiting him with two others just before he died. As we entered the room he looked up and said, 'Wonderful! Wonderful! I think he had already left us.'

12.22.1977



MICHAEL HANNAN

1909-1977

There were many ‘bush’ missionaries among those who came from Europe and elsewhere in the century that roughly coincided with the colonial period, 1890-1980. Michael Hannan was one who explored further and delved deeper than

most. He is remembered for many things but perhaps his Shona-English and English-Shona dictionary and his translation of the New Testament and the Old Testament passages used in the liturgy stand out.

Mike, as he was called, was born in Ireland near Goresbridge, Co Kilkenny, in 1909 and soon after, like so many, his family emigrated. He went to Canada but after some years he returned to England for his primary education at Hodder, the Jesuit preparatory school to Stonyhurst. For his secondary education he returned to Canada to St Michael’s, Toronto and, after leaving school at 16, he returned to England to join the Jesuit novitiate. At one time he had the job of caring for the chickens and was embarrassed one evening to find two day-old chicks in his pocket during Benediction.

From the novitiate onwards he chose Africa and Shona as his great interests but he was not sent to Africa for regency, but to St Michael’s, Leeds. Mike had learnt from the German scholastics during philosophy at Valkenburg the value of planning every hour of the day and while in theology he used his time to develop many interests, one of which was to write a life of Br. De Sadeleer, one of the first on the Zambezi Mission with another scholastic. He was ordained in 1938 and sailed for Africa in 1941. This was during the war and the provincial, Fr Francis Mangan was apprehensive about sending seven young Jesuits on one boat. Was he not ‘putting all his eggs in one basket’? The sailors too had their private jokes about the ‘seven Jonahs’ aboard! The journey took six weeks in place of the normal two as the ship had to zig zag its way down the Atlantic to avoid German U boats.

Mike was sent to Musami where he consolidated his Shona and after six months found himself in charge of the mission. Frank Barr tells us he would visit the outstations regularly staying a few days and making contact with the people. He became well known, especially as he spent the evenings sitting round the fire with people learning their history, customs and language. He wrote articles for papers in Canada and Leeds, where he had been a regent, to raise money for his work. With others he started the 'Catholic African Association' to help people find solutions to their problems. Thousands came to their annual gatherings and for thirty years Mike was the animator of the meetings. He gave talks and heard hundreds of confessions. He encouraged the founding of scout groups as another way of teaching self-reliance.

After seven years at Musami he was asked to found a new mission in the remote NE of the country. The Superior sent all four consultants, of whom Mike was one, to view the site and they voted three against and one (Mike) in favour. The superior decided with Mike and so Marymount was started, although there were many Jesuits who came later who questioned the wisdom of the site, saying Rushinga would have been more suitable.

The new mission nearly did not happen because of the difficulties in starting. Fortunately Mike found a Canadian Mission helper, Hughie Heaney, who shared the hard physical work and was also prepared to live in a tent and put up with the lions roaring in the vicinity.

After two years Mike was exhausted and he was sent 'for a rest' to teach theology and mathematics at the seminary in Chishawasha and do the local outstations. It was there that he met Professor Michael Gelfand who became a lasting friend and they shared their studies of the customs, health and religion of the Shona. Gelfand, a devoted Jew, used to take care of all the medical needs of the seminarians and staff for free

In 1956, Mike was asked to make a complete change of life and compile a Shona dictionary. He chose Elias Gumbo as his assistant and the two of them shared an office in the offices of the 'Ministry of Native Affairs'.

In 1960 he returned to Musami, this time to found a Teacher Training College and later he had a time at the sister TTC at Kutama where he also worked in the 22 outstations of Zvimba.

Two years later he started his work of translating the Bible into Shona and he chose Rothwell Farm as it was a suitable place for his four helpers and their families to stay for the long period needed to complete the work. The New Testament came out in 1966 and in 1968 the missal was complete. For the next five years he worked on a much enlarged revision of the dictionary and worked on what became in effect the ecumenical bible.

Mike, Paddy Moloney wrote, was driven by his sense of mission and his love for the people he lived with.

Perhaps his greatness lay in being an educator – all his talks and sermons were the result of his instinct and reflection on the religious and social problems of the people. His textbooks were in use for quarter of a century. ... While he could be lavish with time he gave to anyone in need and while he knew how to recreate and hilariously enjoy companionable recreation, his life was one of fairly rigorous order where both prayer and work were concerned. ... At the seminary he was a model to all who saw him daily walking the hundred yards from his room to his office at half past seven in the morning after his hour of prayer, Mass and breakfast. After lunch he was back in the office at 1.30 until 5.00. Prayer, work and joyful service were in perfect rhythm.

He admitted that he was biased with regard to the new ecumenical translation of the bible which he considered was ‘very inferior to ours. ... I am quite shattered by the poorness of the translation’, he wrote, ‘and the carelessness which results in parts of verses, whole verses and a whole chapter of Titus, being left out’.

Mike Hannan was chosen as the Salisbury Mission delegate for the 32nd GC where he discovered a great sense of encouragement from meeting the other delegates from Africa. Rhodesia was cut off, in those days, both physically by sanctions and culturally by lack of contact with other countries on the continent. But he felt lonely at the congregation as language was barrier. He saw how Pedro Arrupe was the personality and animator of the congregation and members expressed their affection and fidelity and admiration in unmistakable terms.

GC32 is chiefly remembered for the new emphasis it gave to the Society’s mission: The promotion of justice was to be an integral part of the proclamation of the faith. But there was also the painful moment when, through a

misunderstanding, Arrupe allowed the Congregation to begin a discussion of grades in the Society against the wishes of Pope Paul VI. When the mistake was discovered Arrupe instantly obeyed the pope, but Mike was almost in tears when he reported the incident back to us on his return.

His last two years were filled with illness, interspersed with brief moments of recovery. Profesor Gelfand prescribed tests in the UK and Mike went on from there for leave in Canada where I met him (I was on tertianship) at the time the Jesuits and Dominicans were killed in Musami. He was anxious to return to Rhodesia to fill the gap there but was not well enough. When he did return he said he was overwhelmed by the kindness he received both in the UK and back in Rhodesia where Gelfand came every evening with delicacies that he could eat and his wife brought roses from their garden.

As his death approached, he remained alert and I was one of the three visitors who came to see him when he was dying. His eyes opened widely and he said, 'Wonderful!' 'Wonderful!' They were his last coherent words.

He always had this sense of wonder, Paddy Moloney tells us, 'There was always something childlike about him. His charity – let the word not be misunderstood! – was as total and wonderful as the gift of a child'. He died three days before Christmas in 1977.