



Fr Charles Bick, S.J.
(1861-1939. In Zambia 1908-1914; 1921-1924)

27 December 1939

Charles Bick was born 3 October 1861 in Ottrott, just 50 km south of Strasbourg in Alsace, France. At the end of the Franco-Prussian war (1871), France lost Alsace and Lorraine to Germany. At the end of the First World War (1918) France took the region back. However, with the coming of the Second World War, Germany annexed it again in 1940. After 1945 France regained it and by then the people were more clearly French. So Charles Bick was born a Frenchman, became a German for the next 49 years of his life (1871-1918) and spent his final twenty years as a Frenchman (1918-1939).

Shortly before his eighteenth birthday, he entered the novitiate with Torrend in 1879 with the request to go to the Zambesi Mission. He did his juniorate in Tronchiennes in Belgium (1882-83) and then accompanied Fr Croonenberghs who shepherded eleven scholastics from different countries in Europe to Port Elizabeth in South Africa, in order to begin their philosophy at Dunbrody, about 60 km away. It had been a Trappist monastery for a couple of years before the monks decided to transfer to Mariannahill, outside Durban in Natal. The conditions were primitive but the company was good and with a couple of years the community counted over forty. When they first arrived there was no furniture but the brother builder had tables, chairs and beds ready in no time. As there was no wood in the region, he simply used clay! These initial years laid the foundation of a deep sense of Jesuit brotherhood, while being open to the energy and creativity of so many enthusiastic volunteers. Bick (Alsace) studied with Torrend (Auvergne) and later Moreau (Vendee) and Casset (Savoie) joined them. All four, of French influence, would be closely bound up with the early years of Chikuni. All of them produced readers and grammars in local languages.

For his regency he taught for a year at St Aidan's (1887) and then was missioned to the Lower Zambesi Mission (Mozambique). He went first to Quelimane (1888) and then taught in the school at Boroma (1889) for a year and a half. At one stage he accompanied the Mission Superior Fr Daignault on his tour of all the stations in the Zambezi Valley. He had a bout of chronic dysentery and recuperated in Grahamstown for some months. To keep up his morale, he kept repeating to himself: 'I am the strongest man on the mission'. He did his theology at Ona in Spain (1890-1892) and tertianship in Tronchiennes (1892-1893).

In over forty years of ministry, Charles Bick served the people of God in several different parishes, usually clocking up a large number of years by returning again to some places. He was in Empandeni/Embakwe outside Bulawayo among the Ndebele for over 17 years; in Chikuni near Monze among the Tonga for over 10 years; in Makumbi near Harare among the Shona for 10 years. He had a brief stay in Mozambique and at Keilands near Dunbrody. He mastered, in a remarkable way, both Ndebele and Tonga. He had no difficulty in Shona and even picked up some Bemba to minister to the workers from the north at the Wankie coal mines, while he served at St Patrick's in Bulawayo.

He had a style all his own and communicated easily with all he met. As Fr Kendal writes in his obituary: 'His turn for hyperbole and picturesque embroidery was the delight of his friends and a powerful means in engaging the attention of his catechumens'. Old Haantontola, who was one of the four young Tonga who went to

Empendeni with Moreau, says of him: 'Father Bick who laughed every time with people and knew Tonga better than Father Moreau'. At the age of 68 he was assigned to work at Makumbi not far from Harare where he lived among the Shona for the first time. He said he took only thirty six and a half hours to learn Shona!

He had an unusual approach to his own health. He wrote in ZMR: 'Strange as it may sound, a long experience taught me that the worse the appearance of the water I had to drink for want of a clearer liquid, the better I always felt for it'. He once wrote to his superior who complained that he did not look after himself. 'I enjoy such good health, owing to my keeping away from doctors, dentists and medicines and trusting much to nature'. He did have a very robust constitution but it should be added that on at least three occasions, he was at death's door but recovered. It never seemed to diminish his self confidence and he would head back again into his usual habits of bush survival. 'When he had once at the age of sixty, been told by a superior that he would pay for his sleeping out in the open, he replied 'that he had been told that thirty-five years ago and hadn't paid for it yet!'

After six years at Chikuni (1908-1914) Bick was transferred back to Embakwe, switching with Casset who then came to replace him. Before he left, he accompanied Fr Goetz on his expedition to Lealui in the Western Province with Mr Wood of the Johannesburg Observatory. Goetz kept the magnetic recordings while Wood looked after the astronomical observations. Bick came back again to Chikuni from 1921-1924 shortly after the long awaited arrival of the Notre Dame Sisters (1920). He went back again to Embakwe which he handed over to the Marianhill and had a short stay at Makumbi (1929-32) and finally he went to Hama where he continued to tour the countryside on his bicycle. He passed away at Holy Cross on 27 December 1939 at the age of 78, having labored for 55 years in the mission which places him very near the top seniority in the mission field.

Perhaps the best insight into his personality as a missionary was the name the local people had for him and which Fr Hartmann in his memoirs on the early mission mentioned. He arrived at Empandeni and Embakwe only a few years after the Settlers had crushed the Ndebele Rebellion with great slaughter, when the hardships and suffering of every person in the area was still so fresh in everybody's mind, this missionary was give the name 'Tandabantu' – the 'lover of people' or more accurately 'the lover of Africans'.

27 December

3 October 1861 – 27 December 1939

Fr. Carlos BICK

He was born in Ottrot, Alsace, Bas-Rhin, France, on October 3, 1861 and entered the Society of Jesus on November 23, 1879. He arrived in Quelimane in January 1888 and, shortly after, he was assigned to Boroma mission to dedicate himself to teaching in the mission school. He was appointed Headmaster of the school by the Governor. However, after he fell ill, he was forced to return to the Cape Colony in April 1889. (Cf. *Précis Historiques...*, Février 1890, p. 129). He took his final vows on August, 15 1894. He passed away on December 27, 1939, in Driefontein, Rodésia.