



## Bernard Mezeki

*By Br. Robert Lentz OFM*

Bernard Mizeki was born in Mozambique in the last half of the 19th century. He left home when he was about 12 in order to work in Cape Town. During the ten years he worked there for whites, he refused to drink alcohol and remained untouched by the life of the black slums. He enrolled in night school founded by the Anglican Church for Blacks. Besides the fundamentals of European schooling, he mastered English, French high Dutch, and at least eight local African languages. In time he was invaluable when the Anglican Church began translating its sacred texts into African languages.

He was prepared for baptism by the Society of St. John the Evangelist. After his baptism in 1886, he accompanied Bishop Knight-Bruce to Mashonaland to work as a lay catechist. The bishop assigned him to the village of paramountchief Mangwende, and there he built a mission complex. He prayed the Anglican hours each day, tended his subsistence garden, studied the local language and cultivated friendships with the villagers. He eventually opened a school, and won the hearts of many of the Mashona through his love for their children.

He moved his mission up onto a nearby plateau, next to a grove of trees sacred to the ancestral spirits of Mashona. Although he had the chief's permission, he angered the local religious leaders when he cut some of these trees down and carved crosses onto others.

Although he opposed some traditional religious customs, Bernard was very attentive to the nuances of Shona Spirit religion. He developed an approach that built on people's already monotheistic faith in the one God Mwari and on their sensitivity to spirit life at the same time that he forthrightly proclaimed the Christ.

During the Mashona rebellion, he was fatally speared outside his hut. When his wife and a helper went to get food and blankets to tend him, they saw a blinding light on the hillside where he had been lying, and heard a rushing sound, as though of many wings. When they returned to the spot his body had disappeared. The place of his death has become the focus of great devotion for Anglican and other Christians and one of the greatest Christian festivals in Africa takes place every year around the day that marks the anniversary of his martyrdom, June 18.