

28 February

Fr WOLFGANG ABELER 14 June 1937 – 28 February 2020



Wolfgang was born in Papenburg, Germany and attended school in Oldenburg after which he trained in agriculture. He then went to university in Göttingen where he studied agriculture. He wanted to learn, not just from books and lectures, but from actually working on a farm. Here he learnt what farming was all about, growing crops and breeding animals, especially cattle. He was an outdoors-man. He always had to do some muscular work. Every day he had to spend some hours in the field, with the cattle or horses, in the garden tending vegetable or picking apples or other fruit from the trees in the orchard.

At the university he got to know other students. There was a Union of Catholic students which he joined. They discussed their Catholic Faith and prayed together. Regular Holy Mass deepened their faith. In his family, it was not just farming, but also living their faith. Wolfgang had an uncle who was a Jesuit priest. This and the Catholic students' union were powerful influences in his life. He was told that in Africa he could be a priest and a farmer at the same time. His faithful would be mostly peasant farmers who needed further education in farming. Gradually he came to see, that he could be a Jesuit like his uncle and still be a man of faith who would share his Catholic faith with farmers in the farming industry.

He was in his late twenties (1964) when he joined the novitiate in Berlin. It was not a farm, but it had a garden, where he could make himself useful. During his years of study – he did theology in England – he kept up his interest in agriculture, working in research institutes and co-operatives during vacations. He was ordained in 1970, and left for Africa in 1971, where he had to learn about the culture of the Zimbabwean people and their language. Fr Abeler was not a genius in languages, but he was motivated to learn so that he could have access to the people. In 1972, he was at Mount Darwin, working in Kangaire. In 1976, he moved to Karoi and worked in St Boniface, Urungwe. In 1979, he was in Mhangura, a mining and farming centre, north of Chinoyi. The parish had only a vegetable garden, not a farm with fields and animals. The big commercial farmers did not need his advice. Though some were friendly, others

were hostile. They blamed missionaries for putting 'ideas' in the heads of the African people.

He was soon moved to missions where he could be a pastor for some farming communities and where he would be able to do some heavy working in his garden or on the small farms of his parishioners. During his last years he was a very active and zealous farming priest and adviser to his congregation of men and women who were keen to reap even better crops and have more healthy domestic animals. One mission was St Rupert's, Makonde, where he arrived in 1982 and had the task of rebuilding the mission after the war and the deaths of two Jesuits there in 1978. This was followed by another spell at Karoi (1987-91) before moving to Guruve in 1992. In 1996 he moved to Marymount for fourteen years up to the time it was handed over to the diocese. He then moved to Musami where he overhauled the water system. He remained there until his death.

Such are the brief outlines. In his fifty years of pastoral work he was ever the practical man putting his agricultural knowledge to good use. While at Marymount, he wrote a paper on the advantages of 'minimum tillage using a ripper.' He explains the advantages of 'ripping' rather than 'ploughing.' The former is much easier to do and prevents soil erosion.

Wolfgang Abeler had always been a healthy and strong worker. It hit him very hard when the doctor told him that he had a brain tumour which could only be treated overseas. He was sent to Germany for specialised medical treatment in 2019. Even in his last weeks, when he knew that his condition was serious, he still drew plans for facilities he wanted to build after his return. He never had any doubt that he would be back in Zimbabwe eventually. A benign tumour was removed from the brain but others were discovered and he died in hospital in Munich. He was buried in Pullach and Konrad Landsberg went to represent the province.

Priest, farmer and builder – may he rest in peace.

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