



Br Francis Simonis, S.J.
(1842-1929. In Zambia 1880-1884)

18 April 1929

Francis Simonis was born at Leiden in South Holland on 12 February 1842. He joined the Pontifical Zouaves soon after he turned twenty, defending the Papal States against Garibaldi. Fr Lallemand said 'he remained a soldier at heart all his life long. When the 'Middlesex' were stationed in Grahamstown before the Boer War, he would on occasion go and see them on parade, and march along with them with the glee of a youngster'. He was physically well built, of a strong, robust constitution and had a fine expression. Fr Weld used to say of him 'what a fine model he would make for an Italian artist'.

In 1871 he became a lay-brother at Mariendaal in Brabant. He had been trained as a carpenter from the beginning and at once we find him exercising his trade even in the novitiate. He worked in this capacity in our colleges at Sittard and The Hague. In 1880 he volunteered for the Zambesi Mission and went by ship with Frs Wehl, Weisskopf, Berghegge and Br Proest. On arrival they set out for the interior and on reaching Tati met up with Fr Depelchin. Frs Law and Wehl went to the east on their ill-fated mission while Br Simonis headed up to Pandamatenga in the Wankie area, just south of the Falls.

While at Pandamatenga they eventually received news of the deaths of Terorde in the Zambezi Valley and of Law and Wehl in Mount Selinda. It must have been a time of great hardship for the missionaries, for the news that reached them in that lonely spot was scarce but singularly depressing. Br Simonis worked hard to erect accommodation in the compound of the trader Mr Westbeeck, as the launching pad from which the mission both to the Tonga and the Lozi could be organized.

After a long delay they were given permission to head up the Zambezi River to Barotseland. In early 1883 the three of them started off: Fr Berghegge and Brs Simonis and De Vylder. However disaster struck. At Lusu Falls, about 40 km upstream from Sesheke Br de Vylder was drowned. Greatly depressed, they continued their journey right up to Lealui where King Lubushi had his residence. With the presence of a Protestant missionary already there and with the negative influence of Westbeeck, the permission they had received earlier, was rescinded and they were dismissed. They spent a number of months confined to a hut by the king who stripped them of everything they possessed before releasing them. He drove them out of his territory with orders never to return. They had to travel on foot for 200 miles bereft of all equipment. Thus in the following October Br Simonis found himself back at Pandamatenga with no evangelical progress despite all their efforts.

He was sent down to Grahamstown to recover, after which he continued his service of building at Vleischfontein until 1887. From 1887 till 1913 he was engaged as a carpenter and even as an instructor at St Aidan's. As Fr Lallemand wrote: 'By trade he was a carpenter, and

for some years he was instructor at St Aidan's to the boys, who all keep an affectionate remembrance of "old Sim". He did artistic work in the chapels and library, and what he did will last for ages. He worked for eternity in more than one sense. He was most interesting in conversation, especially when he spoke about the early days of the Mission. His memory was very retentive, and without hesitation he could give dates correctly and in the minutest detail. However he never mastered English, and often created much amusement by mixing up in the same sentence, Dutch, French and English'.

At last his rheumatism became so bad that he was sent in 1913 to Dunbrody in the hope that the drier air would reduce the pain to some extent. However he was over 70 and so crippled that he could do little. Fr Ryan, shortly after he arrived in South Africa, recalls: "Slowly down the path hobbles the bent figure of an old man – Br Simonis, once a papal zouave, now 86 years of age, and his work completed. He is feeling his way along the wall by means of a stick. Once he was a carpenter. He is now almost blind and cannot now behold the admirably carved altar which he once gloried in constructing". He passed away in his 87th year on 18 April 1929.

18 April

Br FRANCIS SIMONIS

12 February 1842 – 18 April 1929



Born in Leiden, Holland, Francis Simonis joined the Papal army (the Zouaves) and fought Garibaldi in defence of the Papal States in the 1860s. He was trained as a carpenter and when he joined the Society in 1871, he worked as one in Holland. In 1880, he volunteered for the Zambezi Mission and sailed with four others in February that year. He was one of those who made their way by ox-wagon to Pandamatenga where they endured a lonely wait for permission from the Lozi king to proceed. This eventually came in 1883 and, on their journey up the Zambezi, his fellow brother, de Vylder, was drowned in the Lusu rapids. When they arrived, they received a poor reception and were even held under ‘house arrest’ for a while before they were allowed to leave with all their hopes dashed.

Weakened by fever he returned to Grahamstown to recover and worked as a carpenter in two missions before settling at St Aidan’s in 1887 where he stayed until 1913. He then moved to Dunbrody for his rheumatism and to be in a larger community and he died there at the age of 87.

‘Old Sim’, as his carpentry students called him at St Aidan’s, never quite mastered English and spoke in a mixture of Dutch, French and English which made him hard to follow but he was greatly loved even if not fully understood. He used to make coffins ‘in advance’, his own included, and could be seen each day heading for the chapel with his arms extended in front of him as he became more blind and tried to avoid walls and trees on his way. Towards the end of his life he worked at his carpentry by feel rather than sight.