



Br Louis de Vylder, S.J.
(1841-1883. In Zambia 1879-1883)

29 April 1883

Louis de Vylder was born on 29 January 1841 at Zele in East Flanders, Belgium into a large family of eight brothers and one sister. His parents were simple farmers. With a generous heart guided by faith, he offered himself for the defense of the Papal

States. As a papal zovave he fought against Garibaldi in 1867 at Mentone near Monte-Rotunda, just a few kilometers north of Rome. On his return home he decided to dedicate himself to the Service of Christ and the Church by entering the Jesuit novitiate at Tronchiennes in 1877. While there he volunteered for the Zambezi Mission and was gladly accepted by Fr Depelchin, who was at the time on his recruiting tour among the various provinces in Europe.

His jovial disposition coupled with his physical strength and army experience must have appeared attractive to Fr Depelchin. He petitioned for his immediate release from the novitiate where he had already completed the required canonical year, so that he could form part of the first group to set out for South Africa. They all met together for the first time in Grahamstown in March 1879: four Belgians, three Germans, two Italians and two English. Within a few short weeks the great trek to the Zambezi began.

Brother de Vylder had three outstanding qualities which served the mission. He was a strong and willing worker, so he was often sent on long journeys to bring up the needed supplies; he was a good hunter and constantly provided game for the table; and he had an infectious joy and happiness about him. After the bitter disappointment of being refused permission by King Khama at Shoshung (present day Botswana) to set up a station there, they went on to Tati, a small mining town that had seen better days, as already the mines had become partly flooded. There, after a journey of over a thousand kilometers by ox-cart, Louis took his first vows on 22 August 1879. He commented on the occasion: 'When I left Tronchiennes (the novitiate) I declared that I would make my vows under a great tree in the heart of Africa, and this is just what has happened. Blessed be God!'

He was sent back almost immediately to Kimberley with Fr Terorde, covering 375 km each way, to bring up supplies for the excursion across the Zambezi. The following year between April and November (1881) Fr Depelchin with Fr Berghegge and Br De Vylder covered the 400 km to Pandamatenga, just south of Victoria Falls, on the first expedition to Barotseland to visit the Lozi king. At Sesheke 160 km upstream they were taken up the river another 256 km by the king's river guard. The meeting with Lewanika at Lealui was most successful and Louis made quite an impression on the entourage. Fr Depelchin wrote: "The ardour of this ex-papal zouave enlivened and consoled us all. Always happy, always content, this brave brother was the joy of the group around us." He so impressed the Lozi within those few brief weeks that they had a nickname for him 'The Laughing Hunter'. On his return he went with Fr Depelchin to Chief Mweemba's village on the north bank, to confront him over the death of Fr Terorde and to try to reclaim some of the misappropriated goods.

He spent almost a year at Pandamatenga and then accompanied Fr Berghegge and Br Simonis, also an ex-papal zouave, as part of the permanent mission to Barotseland. The final tragedy came suddenly. From Sesheke upstream to the royal abode at Lealui was a distance of 335 km. The only canoes on the river belonged to the king who controlled any traffic on the river as his line of defence. Ratow, the river Captain, took them up in several boats. When the current was gentle, the paddlers would keep close to the bank, when the current was strong, the paddlers knew the intricate pathways to take in the water. In fast flowing waters the paddlers would leap out of the canoe and pull it forward against the current. With the few high falls they would travel overland, around the waterfall itself. Depelchin was lost in admiration at their agility and knowledge of the waters and wrote a long detailed account of their navigational skills.

However accidents do happen. The two paddlers in De Vylder's boat let the canoe be swept across the current at Lusu Falls, about forty km upstream from Sesheke. They jumped out to rectify it. So did de Vylder but he leapt out of the boat on the river side and immediately found himself out of his depth. He came up once, but never again. Berghegge yelled from the other boat to stop him getting out but it was to no avail. The leader of the expedition, the induna Ratow came back quickly but all he managed to get was de Vylder's hat. The irony was that the boat never overturned and was shortly afterwards retrieved with all its baggage intact, wedged between the rocks.

It is only when he read Fr Prestage's diary that we can appreciate more fully the staunch faith of this man heading hundreds of kilometers up the Zambezi in a precarious dugout for the sake of the kingdom. It seems that the others in the group were not aware of it, for after all, the brother had already been up to Lealui and back and this was his second journey. Prestage wrote on 21 July 1883, "de Vylder, not being able to swim, was drowned." The Protestant missionary, Rev Frederick Arnot was already installed at the kingly court, and when the companions eventually got there they were flatly refused permission to establish a mission and returned back to Pandamatenga broken hearted. Although it must be added, that the local hunter Westbeeck, in whose compound at Pandamatenga they lived, claimed in his diary, that he was the one who blocked them. He could not accept non-British missionaries, for even at this early stage, the empire was part of the British mind.