



**Fr Henry Depelchin, S.J.**  
**(1822-1900. In Zambia 1879-1883)**

**26 May 1900**

Henry Depelchin was the founder of two missions: West Bengal Mission and the Zambesi Mission. He was born in Russeignies, a village in east Flanders, Belgium on 28 January 1822. He grew up in a pious family and from an early age was inclined towards the religious life. A priest from a neighboring village taught him the rudiments of Latin and for his humanities he went to our college of St Barbara in Ghent.

He felt a strong desire to go on the missions, being inspired by the great Jesuits of old. After his novitiate in Tronchiennes, his juniorate in Tornace, regency of two years in Alost and his philosophy at Namur, he was sent to Louvain in 1851 for theology and was ordained in 1854 at Liege. He worked in Antwerp as a minister in the college for a while.

The English Jesuits had started a mission in Calcutta in 1834 but owing to difficulties had withdrawn from West Bengal in 1846. The vicar apostolic requested Rome for some new Jesuits. In 1859 Fr Depelchin was summoned to Rome and Fr Beckx made him superior of the Mission of Calcutta. He set out late in 1859 with 6 men. They took back the old Jesuit college of St Francis Xavier. However Fr Depelchin came down with cholera after two weeks and fought with death for another two weeks. He was sent off to recuperate for a few months and handed over the role of superior to Joannes de Vos who was then confirmed in his office. When Fr Depelchin recovered he joined the college staff but then Fr de Vos himself fell ill. Fr Depelchin took over and in the next seven years greatly expanded the college relying on funds he raised locally.

The Vicar Apostolic Meurin S.J. called him to be mission superior in Poona. He was rector of the college founded by the German Jesuits in Bombay. While rector he taught philosophy and theology.

After 18 years of energetic work, he was called back to Europe in 1877 to head the new Zambesi Mission. He gathered eleven men in Grahamstown, South Africa and set out for the interior in four ox-carts on 16 April 1879. The immediate destination was Bulawayo (in present day Zimbabwe), the kingdom of King Lobengula and from there to reach out to other peoples.

The area of the Zambesi Mission was vast (it was equivalent to a piece of land 1000 miles long by 900 miles wide!). It covered the present day Zimbabwe, most of Zambia and parts of Malawi and Mozambique. After four months journey in ox-carts they were welcomed by King Lobengula in Bulawayo, but forbidden to evangelize among Lobengula's own people. They planned three missions: among the Tonga over the Zambezi River, among the Lozi in Barotseland and among the Nguni in the east of Zimbabwe. The initial journey to Bulawayo was over a thousand miles (1800 km) and each of the other missions an additional 400 miles (700 km). Depelchin personally led the first two groups to their mission to install them. His letters and notes were quickly published in two volumes which created quite a stir in Europe and inspired many other Jesuits to come to the Mission. Although almost 60 years old, he was by far the most active and dynamic of the group, constantly on the move, leading an expedition and then going back down south to Kimberley and even to Grahamstown, to welcome new missionaries and obtain additional supplies. On one of these trips, near the Marico River on the way to Tati, his ox-cart overturned and he broke the lower part of his left leg. After several months in great discomfort he recovered and was soon back on his trips again.

The overall plan of the itinerary was made in Rome by Fr Weld following the detailed account of a journey by Mr Bailie, a surveyor living in Kimberley. It was a mission too far, without enough backup and poor medical care. On the ground Fr Depelchin, while very dedicated and energetic, went beyond what his men and supplies could take. Quite a number of the early group died within three or four years. He was recalled to Rome and Fr Weld himself came out to take over as superior of the Mission.

After a couple of years in Belgium, when he was almost seventy, he headed back to India to Darjeeling. With his usual energy and courage he started a large construction program to transform a Capuchin seminary into a fine college which opened its doors in 1888. Then he handed over the leadership and stayed on as spiritual father. In 1894 he was sent to the novitiate as teacher and spiritual guide. He was tertian instructor for three years and finally he was sent to Calcutta where he passed away on 26 May 1900 after 58 years a Jesuit.