

12 June

## Fr THEODORE AUSEMS

16 July 1914 – 12 June 2000



In 1978, when the Jesuits in Rhodesia (about to be Zimbabwe) formed their own vice province, South Africa, finally grasped the opportunity to wrench itself free from being an appendage to Salisbury. It opted to become an autonomous 'Mission', under Britain. The small Jesuit remnant set about reinventing itself in, among other things, parish work. They had been running Braamfontein Parish since 1973 and then extended their outreach to the Portuguese, Polish and (very small) Afrikaner communities by welcoming three Jesuits from outside the British province.

Among them was Theodore (Theo) Ausems. Born in Culemborg, Netherlands, he studied at Canisius College, Nijmegen (1924-29) and joined the Society in 1931 at Mariëndaal. He studied philosophy at Berchmanianum, also in Nijmegen, and then studied Dutch at the university of Amsterdam (1937-42) but did not graduate – probably because the UA suppressed many of its functions in protest at the anti-Jewish measures of the Nazis government. After theology at the Canisianum, Theo was ordained in 1946.

From 1948 he taught Dutch at St Aloysius Jesuit college in The Hague and was, simultaneously, chaplain to various traveller communities around The Hague. Clearly drawn to linguistics, he did a PhD in 1953 in Dutch, focusing on the dialect of his home town, Culemborg (where Jan van Riebeeck was also born) and exploring possible links to Afrikaans. He clearly became something of a specialist in his subject, for example, working on the conservation of incunables ('swaddling clothes', that is, the early stages of writing), at the Catholic Polytechnic. In recognition of his work, he was awarded honorary citizenship of Culemborg in 1963. Together with this highly specialised work, Theo was helping out at various parishes at weekends.

In 1971, Theo spent six months in South Africa. Based at Grahamstown, he gave lectures in Pretoria, Stellenbosch, Grahamstown, Port Elizabeth, Bloemfontein, Johannesburg and Durban. In 1975, Theo came to stay in South Africa and worked in various parishes among Dutch and Flemish immigrants. He arrived

from Holland on the usual KLM flight, got on the bicycle he had brought on the aircraft and cycled to Pretoria - a distance of some 60 kms from the airport. This alone should have pointed to a certain idiosyncratic personality, which indeed he was. He settled at the Cathedral in Pretoria though, in 1982, he moved to Holy Rosary parish, also in Pretoria. He returned to the cathedral in 1984 and left the country in 1986. He had very little contact with the Jesuits in Johannesburg due to distance and occupation. It seems he missioned himself to Pretoria since there was no Jesuit contact there at the time. Although he kept to himself in Pretoria, he was always pleasant and companionable when he met with other Jesuits. Fr General Kolvenbach knew him well and always enquired after him when Michael Lewis met with him. The record does not seem to answer the obvious question why he did not continue his highly specialised work and immersed himself in parish work, both in South Africa and after his return to the Netherlands. Theo died in 2000.

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