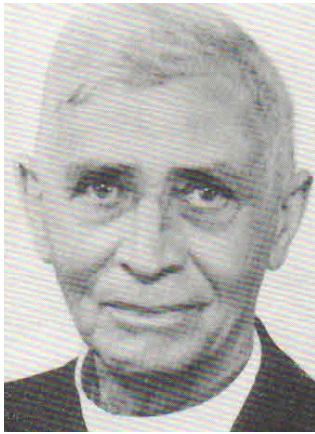


June 20

Fr TILMANN ESSER

3 December 1879 - 20 June 1968



Born near Aix -la-Chapelle (Aachen), in the year of the start of the Zambezi Mission, 1879, Tilmann Esser entered the Society in 1900. He taught at Leeds for two years of regency before setting out for Southern Africa in 1914 where he went to Driefontein. He then moved to Bulawayo in 1922 for eight years before going to Mutoko for nine. In 1940 he moved to St Peter's Mbare and, after short stays in St Benedict's and Kutama, he settled in Mhondoro for 13 years in 1950 when he moved again, this time to Martindale and Chishawasha before finally ending up at Makumbi where this writer met him shortly before his death. He was in the country for 54 years without ever going home.

But we do not have readily available many details about his long life apart from a letter he wrote from Mutoko in 1930 which gives us something of the man. (The photo below shows him at his house in All Souls). On his journey there, with Fr Burbidge as guide, he delighted in the countryside after the flat barren country around Bulawayo. Everywhere there was colour in the hills and 'vines growing wild'. Then he came to the rocks in different shapes which he likened to sentries on duty, fortresses or even cathedrals and he marvelled that every hill had a name.

But he saw little fertile land and when they reached the mission and saw the swamp, he wondered what was the idea of building a mission there where the anopheles roamed at will and which Fr Ebner, the Mariannahill founder, dubbed 'Purgatorio'? He decided there and then to move the mission. He found a place 'high and dry' where the present All Souls (derived from Purgatorio!) is located. Instead of mosquitos he had leopards and baboons but felt he could deal with them more easily.

Esser was delighted by the devotion of the people built up by Ebner but he found the schools he started collapsing as the teachers were not trained. And the people sang flat!

