

Fr Ferdinand Engels, S.J.

(1847-1915. In Zambia Aug-Sept 1882)

3 August 1915

Fr Engels was born at Ageseke, a small town in Westphalia, Germany on 6 February 1847. He was educated at the college of Paderborn and entered the Society in 1869. After his philosophy and theology in Holland and England, he was ordained on 8 September 1879. In the previous year he had met Fr Depelchin and volunteered for the Zambesi Mission.

He arrived towards the end of 1880 and from that date to his death in 1915 he remained in Africa never once going home to revisit his native land. Soon after his landing, there was a crisis, as the news from Fr Law's expedition to Umzila was not good. He had set out at the end of May 1880 and had to abandon the wagon as the route became very difficult. In fact he managed to get to Umzila's at the end of August but in a sorry state. By February 1881 there was no definite news except some somber rumors, so Frs Engels and Blanca were sent up the east coast to see if they could establish contact overland from the coast. They got to Inhambane on the coast and sent off some messengers to Umzila's kraal. Engels suffered so badly from malaria that his companion anointed him, as he thought he would not make it. News came through that Law was dead and nothing more could be done and the two rescuers returned to Cape Colony. When reliable news finally came through it was realized that both Law and Wehl had died. Brs de Sadeleer and Headley eventually made it back to Bulawayo.

Fr Engels left for the Zambezi in January 1882 and got to Pandamatenga in the Wankie area, south of the river. After a few weeks preparing for the Tonga mission he headed off to the Zambezi. Leaving the wagon with the necessary supplies, he headed down the valley on foot with Br Nigg, just as Terorde and Vervenne had done two years before.

Again like Terorde they found themselves trekking in the Zambezi Valley during the oppressive hot season. The Chief welcomed them and gave them the same piece of land he gave Fr Terorde. Again they fell sick after consuming some local beer sent by the Chief. Dr Gelfand, historian and medical doctor, reckons that Fr Terorde went down with malaria in the extreme temperatures of the Valley and due largely to the lack of suitable medication. Livingstone, the great explorer, had always claimed he could only have survived by regular doses of quinine. However we also have to admit that as soon as Fr Engels and Br Nigg took the beer they received from the Chief they fell sick and were convinced they were poisoned. They immediately withdrew back to Pandamatenga and so ended the mission to the Tonga.

Engels after a short stay at Pandamatenga went back to Bulawayo for a year but since Lobengula had forbidden any direct ministry among his people, he returned to Cape Colony. Bishop Ricards had need for a priest in Stutterheim, not far from Grahamstown, and there he remained for eight years, loved and respected throughout the district. His work of visiting and looking after the spiritual interests of the Catholics scattered over a large area necessitated a great deal of riding about and Fr Engels who was a bold and fearless rider, performed some exploits on his favorite horse, Bless. He was then sent to Dunbrody to be the parish priest and spiritual father of the community. He had no difficulty in doing the parish work, as he spoke Cape Dutch fluently, and the chiTaal is the language chiefly used by all the local people of Dunbrody. During his five years there he baptized 220 local people.

In 1899 he was transferred to Chishawasha as spiritual father and chaplain to the sisters for the last 16 years of his life. His health was beginning to cause problems as

he suffered from epilepsy which drained him of his energy. He was a man of iron will, and nothing could turn him from what he knew ought to be done. In addition to his other maladies he suffered acutely from some chronic disorder of the stomach which made it difficult for him to eat, so he was able to take but little nourishment. But he was invariably bright and cheerful, and few suspected how much he suffered. He died after a short illness on 3 August 1915.