



**Fr Francis Berghegge, S.J.**  
**(1849-1916. In Zambia 1881-1883)**

**21 August 1916**

Francis Berghegge was born at Delft, in Holland, on 21 February 1849, and he entered the Society in September 1867. He did his regency in the Jesuit College at Katwijk and after his theological studies he was ordained in September 1878 at Maastricht.

He was among the first volunteers for the Zambesi Mission and left his native land for Africa in 1880. He sailed with Fr Weisskopf and Brs Proest and Simonis and landed on 28 February 1880. Within three weeks they were already in ox-carts heading north and met Fr Depelchin, the superior, just north of Shoshong (in Botswana). On arriving at Tati, he was sent to Bulawayo until the following March, when he left for Barotseland with Fr Depelchin and Br de Vylder.

This first expedition to Lealui was tentative, in order to get the necessary permission and good will of Lewanika, the Lozi king. Depelchin has left us a vivid account of the 800 km journey, half of it in canoes under the Lozi river guard up the Zambezi. They were warmly received and they returned back to base greatly consoled as both the Tonga and the Nguni missions had run into difficulties. On returning to Pandamatenga he set off almost immediately with Br Allen to re-found the Tonga mission over the river in Mweemba's kraal, but no one would take them across the Zambezi. In 1883 with Brs Simonis and de Vylder they made the return trip to Lealui but disaster struck as Br de Vylder drowned just beyond Lusu Falls. By now the situation had changed as the Protestant missionary Arnot was already there. The hunter Westbeech, in whose compound they lived at Pandamatenga, later boasted how he had blocked them. They were under house arrest for a few months and all their goods gradually taken. Finally they were let return but they were broken hearted. Soon he was sent to Tati until December 1884 and then to Bulawayo. However with Lobengula still in power, it was not possible to evangelize at that time as the king rightly could read the signs of the times and knew his days were numbered. He had little to show for seven years labor and had suffered many disappointments.

Fr Berghegge recuperated in Grahamstown and settled down there to what was to become his real life's work, ministering with extraordinary dedication to the local population in the "Location". When he came to take over the work only 24 baptisms had been recorded. He immediately took up residence in the area living in a small cottage in great simplicity. He built a small school and then replaced it with a larger one which had a chapel capable of seating 300 people. His congregation consisted of coloreds and local people and even those living well outside the town. His figure was a familiar one to the people in the surrounding districts and many a time he was called to instruct and baptize some old person who felt his end was approaching. By the time of his death his register contained almost two thousand names.

In 1894 there was a severe outbreak of smallpox which lasted several months. Three hundred people were treated and 28 died. The local newspaper wrote: 'During the many months through which the loathsome disease has been rampant and the hospital and lazaretto had their quota of patients, it was not creditable to piety or humanity to know that no clergyman or minister of any Church or denomination has visited the sick and afflicted to attend their spiritual wants – with only one exception. And this devoted minister is a Roman Catholic priest, the Rev Fr Berghegge of the local Kaffir Mission. We have been informed that both by day and night this good and unselfish priest visited

all, irrespective of Church and creed, even the most loathsome cases, and spoke words of comfort and consolation'. The local undertaker recently narrated how, while the epidemic was raging, he one day said to Fr Berghegge, 'Father, are you not afraid of mixing with these people?' And how the answer came like a flash, 'Afraid! There is only one thing I am afraid of, and that is sin'.

The Grocott's Penny Mail of August 23<sup>rd</sup> (1916) noted: 'His interests lay among the natives, who held him in high esteem and veneration, and he lived in their midst in a small two-roomed cottage in Albany Road.... He was a man of few words, simple in his tastes, loyal to his friends and grateful to anyone who helped him in any way with his labors in the location. In his poorly furnished lodging the only ornaments to be found were a crucifix, a picture of the Blessed Virgin and another of Queen Wilhelmina (of Holland), he being an intense lover of his native country. He was sincere and straightforward, almost on the verge of bluntness. But it may be said he lived almost entirely for the natives with whom his life was wholly bound up. He denied himself the necessaries of life in order to feed and clothe them'.

Between May 1902, and February 1903, he enjoyed the only holiday he took in the course of his long life of work for God. He had the rare pleasure of visiting his native land, to which he was ever most warmly attached. On his return to Grahamstown he resumed his labors with fresh vigor, and in spite of advancing years he remained faithfully at his post until the last sickness gave warning that his long day's work was done. He has left a flourishing school, attended by some 140 colored boys and girls, and a fervent Catholic congregation, numbering several hundreds. How deeply he was loved by all his spiritual children was proved by the outburst of grief that followed the news of his death on 21 August 1916, in his 67<sup>th</sup> year.