



Fr Anton Terörde, S.J.
(1844-1880. In Zambia Aug-Sept 1880)

16 September 1880

Anton Terörde was born in the small town of Dingen, near Wesel, Germany, not far from the Dutch border on 12 May 1844. His parents were simple farmers but deeply religious. His mother Johanna Wolberg was the sister of Maria Aloysius the foundress of the Sisters of Mercy. He was sent quite far from home for his secondary school – all the way to the Jesuit College in Feldkirche where he showed himself to be a pious and dedicated student. After his novitiate in Friedrichsburg (1862-1864) he was prefect in a minor seminary at Sarlat in France (1866) where he taught German. In 1869 he began his philosophy at Maria-Laach, originally a Benedictine monastery. With the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian war he was conscripted into the Medical Corps and gave dedicated service first at Bonn, but after the terrible battle of St Quentin in 1871, he was sent to the Jesuit College in Amiens which lodged five hundred wounded soldiers.

With the increasing conflict between Church and state under Bismark, he was sent to England for his theology which he did at Ditton Hall near Liverpool and afterwards was ordained at St Beuno's in Wales. His final year of formation, the tertianship, was done at Exaeten near Roermond in Holland. So by the time he had completed his training he had a certain mastery of French, English and Dutch.

Even from his earliest years in the Society he requested to be sent on the foreign missions. While in charge of the boarding school of his alma mater Feldkirche, he first met Fr Depelchin, then looking for personnel and he volunteered for the Zambesi Mission. He begged Depelchin to take him immediately and not leave him waiting even one more month, 'I am burning with the desire to be as soon as possible useful for the conversion of the Negro'. Fr Weisskopf said that, 'Fr Depelchin changed his mind and took this fiery apostle immediately with him'. His desire led him to reach out to people he met even on the journey north. 'Fr Terörde took a whole Bechuana family into the Church on the road as well as a German Protestant farmer and his family'.

He arrived at Grahamstown, South Africa in February 1879 and was in the first group to stay there. Within a few short weeks they headed north. When they reached Bulawayo, a journey of over 1800 km, Terörde went back to Kimberley for the supplies needed for the group he was to lead to the Zambezi Valley. On his return he headed to Mweemba's village, a further 400 km to Pandamatenga and then 320 km more down into the Zambezi Valley with Br Vervenne accompanied by Fr Depelchin himself and Mr Blockley, a seasoned guide. The latter strongly advised them to push ahead to the Tonga over the river which was beyond Lobengula's influence and far enough down the river to be outside the authority of the Lozi king. Blockley himself knew the area well and had taken a Tonga wife. They were kindly received by Chief Wankie on the south bank but he could not help them cross the river as he was afraid of reprisals from Lobengula. Further along they managed to cross the mighty river. They had covered about 320 km on foot with fifty porters in the burning heat of the valley under temperatures of about 38°C. They all arrived safe and sound and within four days both Depelchin and Blockley felt they could now leave the pair of them to get on with the mission.

Both Terörde and Vervenne started to construct the residence of the Holy Cross but quickly fell sick. Terörde wrote urgent letters to Depelchin to come back and help them. The letters became shorter and more urgent and the final one simply said, 'My dear Fr

Superior, I sent you three boys who were met by your last messenger from Henga. I can't imagine that they haven't seen you. Are you so ill that you cannot send me a little note? Alas I fear it must be so. These few lines have taken me three hours to write, which shows you in what state I am. This terrible fever! Since Br Vervenne received Extreme Unction he has been a bit better. But still he can't leave the hut. Father, we need help as soon as possible'. Terörde had correctly guessed the reason for the lack of response, for both Depelchin and Blockely were laid low by fever. Depelchin sent word to Pandamatenga and Weisskopf with Nigg set out quickly to cover the 320 km on foot with supplies. By the time that Nigg got there, Terörde was dead a couple of days. The diminutive Nigg courageously stood his ground before the angry Chief Mweemba who towered above him, and made him return to safe keeping the goods he had pillaged from the dying missionaries. He then hastily withdrew and nursed the fever-devastated Vervenne slowly back to health.

There was always a suspicion that Mweemba had poisoned them, as they both became sick after a gift of local beer. It would be hard to understand Mweemba's motive in doing this, for politically the missionaries were useful allies in his constant struggle to maintain his freedom both from the Lozi further west up the river and from the Ndebele down south.

Thus ended the life of the missionary to the Batonga. Terörde survived only four weeks. He died on the night of the 16-17 September 1880 and is at times claimed to be the first of the Zambesi Mission to die. This is not strictly true as Fr Fuchs had passed away already at Tati on 28 January 1880 but since he had always been sickly even in Europe, his companions seem to have treated his passing more as a criticism of the poor selection of personnel, rather than as a heroic death of a missionary. Terörde was elevated to the stature of a hero and for those who believed in his being poisoned, he was even proclaimed a 'martyr'. Great publicity was made of the untimely death of this remarkable man of faith and within two years his diary and letters were published by Fr Spillman in German (1882). A hundred years later the legend still lived on and over one hundred and fifty members of his extended family, gathered to celebrate the centenary of his death in September 1980, in his home town of Dingen where they called a street after him.