



Fr Edward De Meulder, S.J.
(1904-1983. In Zambia 1956-1957)

17 October 1983

He was born in Contich, close to Antwerp on 2 February 1904 and was, in his own words, “a nationalist (Flemish) at the age of ten, but I have honestly tried to complete my nationalism by a love of the whole world and of the whole human race”. The well-built and tallish youth loved to proclaim, in his resonant voice, the stirring poetry of Rodenbach, moving his schoolmates to call him the Lion of Flanders, after the title of a famous Flemish novel. He joined the Jesuits in 1923 and set out for India four years later where he studied philosophy in Shembaganour (in the south) and did his regency in Torpa. He contracted galloping consumption and nearly died and left Bangalore with a collapsed lung to study theology in Kurseong. Later, people, hearing his powerful voice in his preaching and teaching, tried to imagine what he might have been like if he had the use of two lungs!

He set to work with the great energy of his enormous physique. His mere presence was commanding but not domineering, for he was always approachable and cordial as he had the gift of enthusing others for his plans. He launched the Mahila Sangh in a makeshift building and proudly called it a Catholic Ashram with library, reading and lecture rooms where the leading personalities of the town were invited to speak.

Four years later (1945) he was sent off to Mandar, 17 miles away, where he established the Holy Family Hospital and invited the Medical Sisters to run it. After three years he was sent to the USA to collect funds for St Xavier’s College. He toured all over the country and within the year raised the necessary support. By now his superiors recognized his pioneering abilities. While he was at Hazaribagh from 1949-1950, he got the Apostolic Carmelites to start a school. He built a church, got land for the Holy Cross Sisters to put up a hospital and prepared the way for the future work of the Australian Jesuits. He was then sent to Giridih where he persuaded another branch of the Carmelite Sisters to set up a school and he erected a parish among the Santals (1952-1956).

Since his dynamic presence was a bit too much for some people, he was sent to Northern Rhodesia and came to Lusaka in 1956. He visited different countries with insatiable gusto. He raised a certain amount of controversy in his opposition to the long years of catechumenate which was then the norm in much of Africa. He was keen to use the ‘net approach’ to conversions! In Lusaka he planned an inter-racial college which had Church backing but the Ministry of Education refused permission.

On returning to India he was sent for eight years to Raigarh in M.P. Soon he had a school up for the local Harijans run by the Apostolic Carmel Sisters with the Missionaries of Charity serving the poor and the J.M.J. Sisters running a hostel for college girls. After this followed other even more marginal posts: Muri (1972-1975), Purulia (1975-1978), Laparo-Khalari (1980-1982), Bundu (1983).

He was a great man with the courage to take risks and build for a future he would not see.