

Br Arnold Vervenne, S.J.
(1834-1891. In Zambia Aug-Sept 1880)

20 November 1891

Arnold Vervenne was born in Diemen near Amsterdam, the Netherlands, on 10 March 1834, making him the earliest born of all who worked in our Province with the sole exception of Fr Depelchin, the first Superior of the Zambesi Mission (born 1822). He entered the Society in January 1864 at the ripe age of 30 and after volunteering for the missions arrived out in South Africa in 1880 in the second batch. It was only a few months after the first group of missionaries had headed for the Zambezi. Initially there were some unfounded rumors of men starving and sick. Rome appointed Fr Anthony de Wit, who was at the time working in a parish in Graaff Reinet, as official visitor. Br Vervenne accompanied him on his journey north. After a brief inspection which revealed nothing beyond the ordinary hardships and trials of the endeavor, de Wit pulled back down to Tati.

Initially Fr Depelchin was not too happy with the arrival of Br Vervenne for he felt the Mission did not need another farmer but rather a blacksmith or a carpenter. He also complained that the new arrival was already 46 years of age. Fr Depelchin needed younger men who could stand up to the hardships of long journeys and demanding conditions. It never seemed to have crossed his mind that he himself was already 58!

Later when Br Vervenne arrived at Pandamatenga, the launching pad for the planned missions to the Lozi and the Tonga, he labored long and hard to set up a good garden. Depelchin then saw the value of being able to supply some of the basic needs locally for it was proving expensive, both in time and money, to carry up goods from South Africa, for even Kimberley was 1500 km away.

Even in those early days Fr de Wit had written to Rome suggesting that the Mission needed a base in South Africa near the border with Zimbabwe, where the men could be supplied and could recuperate from the Valley fevers. In time a farm was bought near Zeerust called Kalffontein (or Vleeschfontein) where Br Vervenne would spend the last few years of his all too short missionary life.

Br Vervenne went with Fr Terorde as the first missionaries to the Tonga. Once Fr Depelchin saw them installed in Mweemba's kraal he headed back to Pandamatenga but collapsed with fever almost immediately he crossed over the river. The medical doctor Gelfand wrote that 'No sooner had Depelchin departed for Pandamatenga than Terorde developed fever very badly and Vervenne an acute dysentery – both probably of malarial origin'. Despite urgent letters there was no one near to help who was on their feet, and by the time that Br Nigg came in great haste, all the way from Pandamatenga, Terorde was already dead and Vervenne in a bad state.

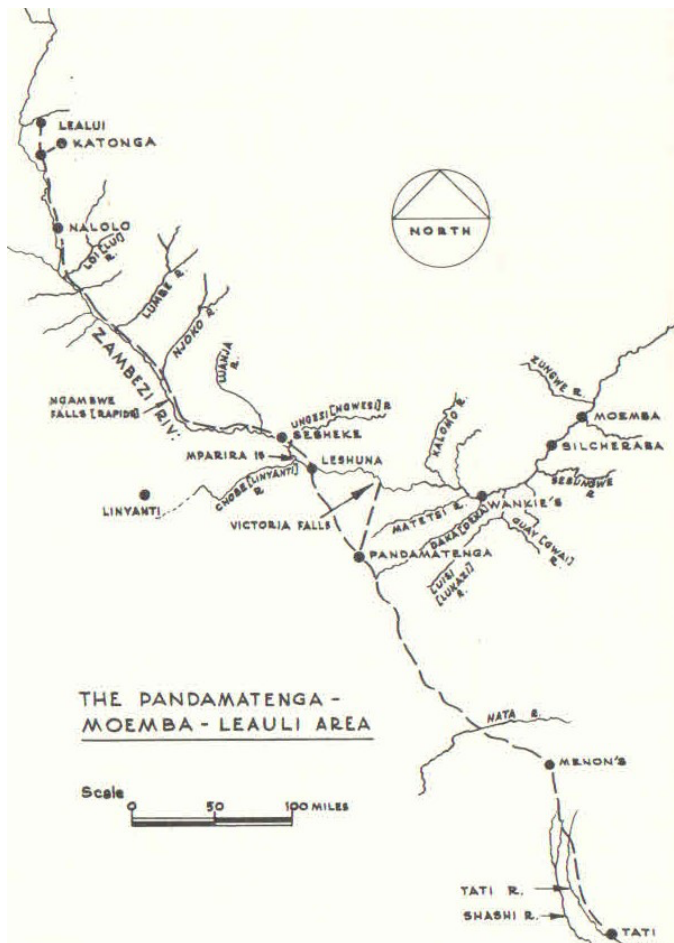
Br Vervenne recovered and continued to work in the garden at Pandamatenga which was just 90 km south west of the Falls. When the second attempt to set up the Mission of the Holy Cross in Mweemba's kraal, Vervenne was again one of the team. However the advance party of Engels and Nigg fell sick immediately and suspecting poisoning they withdrew back over the river, where Vervenne and Kroot had remained with the wagon. All four returned to Pandamatenga. Nigg never fully recovered from dysentery and died some years later at Keilands.

Br Vervenne after almost four years in the Zambezi Valley, was sent to Bulawayo and Tati and then further south to recover. He continued to work at Kalffontein (Vleeschfontein) to establish a good garden which would help put the weary missionaries from the Valley back on their feet again. His time in the Zambezi had shattered his health and after only seven years he passed away on 20 November 1891.

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Br ARNOLD VERVENNE

10 March 1834 – 20 November 1891



Born in Demen, Holland, Arnold Vervenne entered the Society in Ravenstein in 1864, at the age of 30. He was in the second group that came up from the south to the Zambezi moving from Old Tati to the Pandamatenga in 1882. He developed a garden which provided wheat, potatoes and vegetables for the mission. Henri Depelchin, superior of the Mission wanted to cross the Zambezi and travel to the Lozi kingdom in the hopes of founding a mission among the people there. But his way was blocked by Francois Coillard, the Protestant missionary, who had established relations with the Lozi and competition among the churches would be

counterproductive. However, Frederick Courteney Selous, a hunter/explorer, told the Jesuits they could go to the Tonga at Chief Mweemba's (spelt Moemba on the map) on the left (north) bank of the Zambezi.

Vervenne was one of the small group that set out and which, after serious obstacles were overcome, reached Mweemba's on the 9th August 1880. Depelchin was elated and saw the whole of what is now Zambia open up for missionary work. But his optimism soon evaporated. He became ill on his way back to Pandamatenga and Fr Anthony Terörde, who he had left at Mweemba's with Vervenne also became ill and died. Br Vervenne also became seriously ill but Br Theodore Nigg was able to make the difficult journey to rescue him and carry him back to Pandamatenga, himself becoming ill on the way!

Vervenne gradually regained his health and, in 1885, made his way to Vleischfontein, a mission that was established as a base for the Jesuits much further south than Old Tati. He worked there for some years but died, no doubt prematurely weakened by his experiences, in 1891.