

29 November

Fr ANTHONY STEMPEL 8 July 1862 – 29 November 1904



Reading the life of Anthony Stempel one could be forgiven for feeling annoyed. He seems to have hastened his own death, at 42, by his apparent disregard for his health. But then, any reading of our Jesuit history will show up the rigours people like Xavier and Favre and many others submitted themselves to and they died young; Xavier at 46, Favre at 40.

Born In Pfaffenheim in Alsace he lost his parents early. His father first and then his mother who lingered in a wheelchair for some years.

Anthony remembered, with great affection, those early years when he spent so much time with her while she was paralysed and she finally died in his arms. He was still only a boy. He learnt the cornet, a brass musical instrument similar to a trumpet though mellower, and used to play it to her. Influenced by a friend he developed a desire to be a missionary in Africa. After various schools in which he distinguished himself as a sportsman and as being head boy, he joined the novitiate in 1880. He was first prefect in St Aidan's in 1884. In 1885 while studying philosophy at Dunbrody, he took the initiative of teaching catechism to the local people, learning their language for the purpose.

In 1888 we find him in Keilands helping Fr Fraser with pastoral work. He loved it and literally wept when he was sent back to St Aidan's. He was there for two years before going to Belgium for his theology. Ordained in 1893, he did a supply in England where he astonished the Jesuit community he stayed with by showing there were many more Catholics in their parish than they knew. In his direct way, he would visit a house and ask, 'Are there any Catholics here?' He would get a 'yes' or a 'no'. If they latter, he would ask 'are there any on this street?' Again he would get an answer. The overall result, as mentioned, was a huge increase over what was presumed.

By 1894 a 'painful illness' was diagnosed and later it was concluded this was a malignant stomach growth. The air of Alsace helped him recover and in 1896 he returned to South Africa and St Aidan's full of energy. Two years later he was considered sufficiently well to be sent to one of the most unhealthy missions in Southern Rhodesia, Mzondo, which had carried off two Jesuits and was about to carry off two more. It was eventually abandoned in favour of the more healthy

Gokomere. Meanwhile Stempfel had moved to Gweru where he used a bicycle to visit the people scattered in mines. He made one heroic visit to a mine to a sick person and nearly died himself in the effort.

In 1902 he went to Dunbrody to recover his health again and used his energy to develop viticulture at the mission. The wine produced was widely praised. In 1903 and 1904 they had a great vintage. But his illness gathered force. He endured 'stomach pump', a form of medical torture, and eventually died to the consternation of all who knew he was ill but not that ill.