

28 December

Fr WILLIAM SMULDERS 11 June 1931 – 28 December 1975



‘You have kept the best wine till now.’ As this writer comes to the end of this marathon trot through the lives of all our brothers on the Zambezi Mission since 1979, inevitably some people stand out: Law, de Sadeleer, Prestage, Sykes, Richartz, Chichester, Corrigan and others in our own time. But when I came to Wim Smulders, and Anthony Bex’s life of him in *Letters and Notices*, I found myself deeply stirred. Those of us who knew Wim know that Tony’s account is accurate. It should be made more widely available. If we pick out one simple fact – 30 buses and 100 cars accompanied his

remains to the cemetery in Warren Hills (not Chishawasha) – it tells us how much this 44-year-old man was revered by his parishioners.

Wim was born in Wassenaar, Holland, and his family moved to London with the outbreak of war. Wim completed his schooling at Wimbledon College and entered the Society in 1950. In 1957 he started his regency at St George’s College where he taught Roland von Nidda. Ordained in 1963, he was back in the country in 1966 and studying French and Shona at the university. He used to go to parishes where he could minister in Shona and learn in practice what the university was teaching him of the culture and traditions of the people. In 1969 he went to St Peter’s where he was to remain for the rest of his short life.

I can only summarise here what Tony Bex has written. Wim began by working with the small Jesuit community; one brother and three priests. Together they shared their ‘joys and tears, successes and failures’ and planned their approach to develop the huge parish, a work that their predecessors had started. Working with the parishioners they set up 24 sections in 3 zones of 8 sections and Wim insisted that all decisions be implemented through these structures. Tony remembers the “slightly mocking laugh and searching eyes that sought you out when you said something ‘conventional’ and not quite the truth.”

Wim was always there at every parish meeting and the people noticed it. He was there not as the leader but as one of them. In this way he was fulfilling, fifty years ago, what Fr General Sosa asks us to do today: the laity are not our collaborators. We are all collaborators of each other. We all work together.

Wim immersed himself in the language and culture and would constantly ask how to handle marriages, funerals, bereavement and the like. Tony forgot to mention that Wim would stay all night at a funeral with the people.

There are many other things that Tony does mention: his working with the Methodists and attending ecumenical gatherings, his enthusiasm for the Better World Movement, his study of the documents of Vatican II and the 32 General Congregation and how they applied to the parish. One striking aspect was Wim's refusal of gifts offered to tidy over the parish when they were in debt. He would prefer to take the car off the road or sell it. In fact, one of his last acts was to sell the car so as to pay the catechist a living wage. Wim then travelled by bicycle,

It was on a visit to Gokomere to help with a Better World retreat just after Christmas that he was killed in a car accident. He thumbed a lift with a Mr Anthony Rees and as they were leaving Beatrice, they had a head on collision with a two-tonne lorry that had another vehicle in tow. Both were killed outright.

This writer has his own special memory of Wim. During the Christmas holidays in 1967, while he was at St Ignatius teaching, the headmaster, Fr Ken Spence, asked him to sort out the filing in his office. Wim was at the college on a break from the university and offered to help. I thought he would help for an hour or so but he devoted the whole week to this tedious task. I do not remember anything of our conversation but I do remember the consolation of his company and his generosity. It really moved me at the time – and still does.

To the reader: please try to avail yourself of the pamphlet, which I hope will soon be available on line or even in hard copy, of Tony Bex's life of Wim. It is 12 pages.