

**A MAN OF HUMANITY
A MAN OF GOD**

**Short Biography of
Fr. Herman Rasschaert S.J.**

**Published on the occasion of the
50th Anniversary of his martyrdom**

Fr. Louis Francken s.j.

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Message

The human society is in dire and urgent need of persons who inspire people not through words alone but by their sacrifice and service. We desperately need such outstanding persons who really wholeheartedly attend to others and are beacons of hope in our search for a society where peace, justice, brotherhood, care for the weaker members of our communities and love flourish.

I present this short biography of Father Herman Rasschaert s.j. to you reflected upon and written by Father Louis Francken s.j. It is very inspiring to those who would like to know the meaning of love and service, the worth and cost of following Christ and spreading his message to the world around.

Father Herman Rasschaert who wanted to become a farmer knew what it meant for him when Christ said, "unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit" (John 12:24).

He followed the example of his Master who loved us to the end. "The Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many" (Mt. 20:28). If Father Herman had not sacrificed his life in that communal violence on 24th March 1964, at Gerda, many more people might have been killed.

This biography is about a person whose legacy is his unquenchable passion to spend himself for the well being of others. I wish and pray that each one who reads this booklet will be closer to God and to Humanity.

✠ **Vincent Barwa**
Bishop of Simdega

1st November 2013

Foreword

Fr. Herman Rasschaert, S.J. is a Jesuit martyr for communal peace and harmony. He was martyred on 24 March, 1964 by an armed mob in his effort to save the lives of hundreds of refugees who took shelter in the mosque of Gerda in Kutungia. The Church of Chotanagpur celebrates the 50th anniversary of his martyrdom this year. This small booklet on Fr. Herman Rasschaert, s.j. is a tribute to his unforgettable sacrifice for the cause of peace. This is thanks to Fr. Louis Francken, s.j. who has worked hard and took all the pains to write this short biography for us to read and get inspired from the life and sacrifice of Fr. Herman Rasschaert, s.j. In this booklet, the author offers us sufficient knowledge about his family background, his early childhood and youth, his education, his character, his zeal for service to the poor and needy, sick and suffering and about his life and works in Ranchi, Torpa, Khunti, Karra, Kutungia, etc. Sure enough the booklet provides us with a lot of information about Fr. Rasschaert, but above all it invites us all to go beyond the letters and get in touch with the true spirit of love and service of humanity which kept burning in his heart, an impelling force and epitome of his entire life and works.

The 50th anniversary of Fr. Herman Rasschaert coincides with the celebration of the 200th year of the restoration of the Society of Jesus. On account of some unpleasant social, economic and political developments and the hostility towards the Society that followed it was suppressed on July 1773 by Pope Clement XIV. All the activities of the Society of Jesus remained suspended for nearly 40 years till Pope Pius VI restored the Society on August 7, 1814. The Jesuits the world over gratefully remember this event with great humility. There is a serious effort from them to look back and learn from the past and simultaneously to draw

inspiration from their history and then to look forward to change, renewal and newness within and without. Fr. Herman was a member of this Society. What Fr. Herman has done is heroic. However, more than doing the Jesuits proud, he has been a great harbinger of peace for the country and a hero of the Chotanagpur Church. What he has done for the Church and for peace and harmony during the riots in 1964 has left an immense impact in the life of people of the area and the country. The entire Church of Chotanagpur gratefully commemorates this event of his supreme sacrifice with great fervor and love.

Fr. Herman Rasschaert, s.j. was for all the people. I would like to quote from the booklet what Mrs. Indira Gandhi the then Minister of Information and Broadcasting said of Fr. Herman Rasschaert in the first public function organized for commemorating his first death anniversary on 24th March, 1965, "the life of Fr. Rasschaert is for all of us a source of inspiration to find courage and strength on our journey. He knew no fear and he invites us to fight communalism." Further, the Prime Minister of India, Lal Bahadur Shastri in his letter affirmed that Fr. Herman sacrificed his life on the altar of human brotherhood and peace and this sacrifice shall remain forever an inexhaustible source of inspiration. Given the context in which we live, the peace and brotherhood of one another is what we cherish the most in the country and the same remains the need not only of our country, but in the entire world. Fr. Rasschaert and his sacrifice will go down our memory lane for years and years to come and keep inspiring us to go beyond our narrow domestic walls of caste, creed and race, and to work with a great sense of love and devotion for peace and brotherhood in the country and the world.

Xavier Soreng, s.j.
Provincial Ranchi Jesuits

2nd February 2014

Acknowledgment

In writing this brief biography I have consulted many documents and publications on the life of Fr. Herman Rasschaert s.j. A list of the main publications is given in the References at the end of the book.

I am greatly indebted to the late Fr. Pierre Ponette for his unpublished manuscript entitled A MAN ALL OF A PIECE, Herman Rasschaert, for all the effort and time he put in to prepare such a well-documented biography of the first 25 years of the life Fr. Herman. Part I and Part II (up to the departure to India) of this book are in fact an abbreviated version of the manuscript.

The article of Fr. J. Van Troy on the life of Fr. Herman has been a source of inspiration to me as he has given a good sketch of the personality of the martyr.

The monumental book of Mr. Robert Houthaevae on Fr. Herman under the title "RECHT, AL BARSTTE DE WERELD!" has been a guideline to me throughout the preparation of this book. His publication will remain forever a reference book for anyone interested in the life of H. Rasschaert. I express my sincere gratitude to him for publishing such an exhaustive and well-documented biography on one of the great missionaries of the Ranchi Mission.

In the course of writing this book I have been in regular contact with the Mr. Geert Rasschaert, the brother of Herman, and his family and I am grateful to them for assisting me with letters and other information.

In the process of writing this biography I have experienced the support and encouragement of my Jesuit companions and friends and I remain grateful to all of them. In particular I thank Fr. Xavier Soreng s.j., Provincial, for encouraging me to take up the task of writing the biography in preparation for the 50th Anniversary of the death of Fr. Herman Rasschaert. In a special way I wish to thank Fr. Walter Beck s.j., Assistant Director of Kishor Nagar, who graciously allowed me to spend nearly two months in Belgium to do all the ground work for the writing of this book. I remain grateful to Fr. K.C. Philip s.j., who readily agreed to read the final draft and who pointed out the shortcomings in the language.

Louis Francken sj

Preface

This is a short biography of a great human being, Fr. Herman Rasschaert. Born in exile, he had his primary education in the Netherlands. On return to their home country, Belgium, the family settled in Aalst and Herman joined the local Jesuit High School. At the age of 19, after completing class 12, he decided to join the Society of Jesus. He came to India at the end of 1947. He completed his ecclesiastical studies and was ordained a priest on November the 21st 1953 at Kurseong. His first posting as a priest was as Assistant Parish Priest in Khunti.

In January 1961 he became the Parish Priest of Kutungia, a mission station on the border with Orissa. In 1964 there were serious Hindu- Muslim conflicts in Eastern India, including Jharkhand. The impact of these disturbances spread even to the rural areas and the isolated villages in Kutungia were also caught up in the conflict. On the morning of March the 24th 1964 Fr. Herman could hear the frenzied cries of mobs attacking the small hamlet of Muslim families in Gerda. Fr. Herman Rasschaert put his life at stake in an attempt to save the lives of Muslim families under siege. The frenzied mob killed him and all the people who had taken refuge in this hamlet.

In this short account it is not enough to present the facts and narratives of the life of Fr. Herman. Going beyond the facts and the narratives it is good to try to understand the character of this great man. He made a desperate attempt to save the lives of people. Knowing fully well that he might fail, He put his life on the line. What was the inner inspiration which brought him to this heroic deed?

Hearing the ultimate sacrifice of his son, his father testified: "It would have been out of character, if my son had not died as he did". Even his former school companions remarked that if he had not laid down his life in those circumstances, he would have regretted it his whole life.

Louis Francken sj

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PART I : Growing into Adulthood

Childhood

In Exile

Herman was the first child of Julian Rasschaert and Cecilia Goossens; he was born in exile in the Netherlands (Holland), where his father, Julian, had taken refuge at the end of the First World War. Julian became a refugee on account of his political convictions. Right from his youth Julian was by nature very outspoken and a man of strong convictions. At the beginning of the 20th Century the Belgian State was controlled by the French speaking elite. Julian found it a great injustice that the Flemings were second-class citizens in a country where they were in majority. Julian became an ardent supporter of the Flemish movement and even during the 4 years of German occupation of Belgium he did not hide his political convictions.

In 1918 when it became clear that the German Army would be defeated, Julian went prudently into exile to Amersfoort, in the North of the province of Utrecht, in Holland. His involvement in the Flemish movement had made him a marked man. Julian left behind his fiancée with the promise that he would call her soon.

After two years he left Amersfoort and settled in Kampen. In 1921 his fiancée joined him and they got married on April the 22nd 1921. On September 13, 1922 their first child, Herman, was born.



**The parents of Herman
on their wedding day**

A year or so later, the family shifted to Roosendaal, in the South of Holland, close to the Belgian frontier, where their three other children, two daughters Alice and Lena, and son Geert, were born. It was probably to provide a Catholic education to their children that his parents had decided on the move from Kampen to Roosendaal.

In his new surroundings Herman soon made friends with Rene, the son of Mr. Willy Brant, a neighbour. Rene was only four months older to him. With his straightforward ways and sincerity Herman was a most engaging little boy. Through the two little friends, the families were soon brought very close together. It is in Roosendaal that Herman spent his most precious years and also the happiest ones of his life.



Herman at age 7

about four years old and the daily rosary said together. The Christmas Celebrations were great occasions, with the crib as the focus of all his attention and wonder.

He was brought up in the traditional Catholic way by his mother, a pious and gentle person, always smiling, solicitous and generous. She had that simple good-heartedness. In the letters, which he wrote to his parents after he had left home, Herman recalled many events of his childhood. It was chiefly the devout background of his childhood that came back vividly to his mind. He remembers the little prayer, 'Thanks, little Jesus dear', taught by his mother when he was

He attended Holy Mass daily, from the day he attended the local school of St. Cornelius. The street where his parents lived was behind the Paterskerk, the church he went to. The curate to encourage him rewarded his piety with a prayer-book. Yet, with all that, his heart at the time was set on becoming a farmer.

A letter, which Mr. Brant wrote after Herman's death, gives us a good insight into the character of Herman. "You will wonder why we were so much attached to Herman. We have often asked that question ourselves. But you have to understand that by coming to us for his holidays Herman established ties of friendship between our two families. It is about 33 years that they have left from here, and we remain united as one family. This is Herman's doing... We loved him very much because he was so pious. He always said his prayers before and after meals, in the morning and evening, aloud. Secondly, he was straight and he never told a lie; and thirdly, he was obliging, going out of his way to help wherever it was needed".

Herman studied up to the 3rd standard in Roosendaal. He had spent the first 9 years of his young life in the Netherlands, sheltered by his age and parental love from the unpleasant realities of a life in exile. He had fallen in love with the country.



The house in Roosendaal where Herman spent the first 9 years of his life.

Back home

The exiles returned to Wetteren, their home-town in East Flanders, on the 1st of May 1931. Julian wanted to find better employment in order to support his family. They also wanted their children to be brought up and educated in their home-country. When Herman heard the news, he was upset. The prospect of having to say good-bye to the Brant family left him sad. When Mr. Brant told him that he could come every year to spend his summer holidays with them, he brightened up and got reconciled to his departure. From the next year on until 1941, when he joined the Jesuits, he would spend every



Herman, age 12, at his Solemn Holy Communion

year one month with the Brants in Roosendaal. As the Great Depression had set in, it was not easy for Mr. Rasschaert to find employment. After some searching he found employment in the Flemish National Syndicate in Aalst, a short journey by train. It was a congenial occupation for a man as taken up as he was with the social welfare of the working class. Herman got enrolled in the diocesan school of St. Francis de Sales, as a student of the Primary section in 4th standard. Three years later, in 1935, he began his 'Classical' studies called Humanities, with Latin and Greek. A year later, in 1936, the whole family shifted to Aalst where Mr. Rasschaert was working, and there Herman joined the Jesuit high school of St. Joseph in the 2nd Year, i.e. class 8.

The Formative Years

A new school: St. Joseph's High School - Aalst

Herman now found himself in entirely new surroundings: a new town, a new school, new companions. The Jesuit high school of St. Joseph was an important educational institution; it had about 550 day-scholars and 220 boarders. It offered a twelve years' course - 6 years of Primary education and 6 years of Secondary education. At the end of twelve years a student could join the University of his choice. Herman had already done one year of his Secondary course in Wetteren; he was therefore admitted in the second year, (Class 8). He was to spend five years there, years that constitute the most formative period of his life.

His presence in his new class was immediately noticed: he was a newcomer, also the tallest, and an outsider who spoke Dutch in the particular dialect of Wetteren. His companions also noted something else. They found him a little mysterious as he did not talk much, and now and then laughed. After a few weeks the strong impression grew upon them that he possessed a quiet self-assurance and surpassed them all by his maturity and manliness.

Something else puzzled them. When he put questions or answered them, he did so in an ironical tone that took them a little aback. Was he getting sarcastic? A good many thought so. In fact it was not so. Herman was merely expressing his mental puzzlement in a very personal tone. Others did so in a more impersonal manner. He spoke as he felt, from the heart.

Herman was a day-scholar and very soon he became a close friend of Florent Adriaans, a boy of his class, who lived in the same street. Both friends attended H. Mass every day, also during holidays, in the parish Church. Herman was always on time and received H. Communion every day. He had received a special prayer book at the time of his confirmation and followed the mass very

diligently from his "Missal". Herman and Florent were very close friends, but they never sat together during mass; prayer was for them something very personal.

Herman was a good student and obtained very good results in language subjects, such as Dutch composition and translations from Greek and Latin. Mathematics and physics were his weak spot. He had neither aptitude for nor interest in these abstract subjects. He spent many hours with his friend to make his home-work. "After my Humanities are over, I'll dump all my maths books in a corner, and that will be the end of them", he liked to proclaim. He was firmly convinced that after his studies he would never have any use for mathematics, and he expressed that conviction in a language that was picturesque, outspoken and forcible. Such outbursts and explosions expressed with harsh words and fist-blows on the table were natural to him. Not that there was anything violent about it; it was a trait of his character, a streak of boyishness; he nearly did it as a sort of play-acting. He meant what he said; only he expressed himself in a manner that was different from that of his companions. Even as a Jesuit and a missionary, Herman used to express himself in this manner.

The Catholic Student Action

Herman was a man of action and at the end of his first year in St. Joseph's Herman joined the Catholic Student Action, a Catholic Action group for youth. The C.S.A. appealed to the generous impulses and interests of the youth, as it combined Catholic action and its idealism with some of the attractive elements found in other youth organizations of the time - flags, singing, uniform, games, campfires and other activities. Its appeal to the Flemish adolescent rested on that mixture of Flemish idealism and discipline, of action and fun. Very soon Herman became leader of his class unit. For some time he faced a personal crisis. His political convictions were in line with the



Herman a proud member of the Catholic Student Action

Flemish Nationalist movement, which favoured the separation of Flanders from the Belgian state to become part of Holland. The official stand of C.S.A. on the Flemish question was one of restraint in this conflict, with a bias in favour of the State and the moderate Flamings. The unity of the Belgian State should be maintained. Herman soon realized that his political inclinations should not stand in the way of commitment to Catholic Action. He remained a diligent and enthusiastic member of the C.S.A. In Class 11 he became the head of the school council of the C.S.A. This responsibility gave him a lot of opportunities to develop his leadership qualities. For him the task of a leader was to be at the service of others and to be a man of action.

He took the initiative in organising many outings on foot or on bicycle, the whole year through. These were great occasions to be in the open country side, in all seasons and always in uniform, for Herman insisted that his boys be

recognized as members of the C.S.A. to give witness to their ideal. On one of these outings they came upon a house on fire, quickly formed a chain, passed buckets of water from hand to hand up to where Herman already stood close to the flames, pouring water with a speed and endurance and vigour that far outdid all his companions. The fire extinguished, they were back on their bicycle to the next village where they sheltered in an empty cowshed, and had a very pleasant evening without a word ever being said about the fire.

Acting talent

He was still in class 9 when Fr. Van den Daele, the teacher of the top class, asked him to play the title-role in 'Jacob Van Artevelde', a powerful poetical drama by the priest-poet Cyriel Verschaeve. Herman took his role to heart because it was that of the idealist Flemish leader, a heroic figure of the 13th century, the incarnation of Flemish independence, who gave up his life for his beloved people. His superb performance was a revelation to all and to Herman himself. It is said that Herman Rasschaert belonged to "the solid core" of the actors of the school.

The Great Recession and the Second World War

The great recession, which had begun in 1932, reached its nadir in 1935 with 223,000 unemployed workers in Belgium. In the office of the Flemish National Syndicate the father of Herman was helping many idle hands in filling the forms for unemployment compensation or in supplying addresses for work. Poor himself, he had empathy for these unemployed.

Herman did not lag behind. With a group of the C.S.A. members under the supervision of a teacher they went out to bring some help to the poor in town. They gathered clothes, toys and sweets for the children and took these to the Mijlbeek barracks, as a town-ward was called, where houses in wood sheltered the very poor. His friend Adriaens was convinced that Herman went also on his own to bring some money from his own savings to an old man, called Samain.

On Friday, 10th May 1940, the German Armies simultaneously crossed the frontiers of Holland, Belgium and Luxemburg. Fleets of Stuka planes (dive-bombers) swept over the country to bomb fortifications, bridges and troop concentrations and also to intimidate the population. It was war and a wave of indignation shook the whole country.



Family Rasschaert-Goossens 1938
Father Julian, Mother Cecilia, Herman,
Alice, Gerard, Lena

The schools closed down immediately. Herman was about to complete class 11. On Tuesday May the 14th, the Government called up on the radio all able-bodied men from the age of 16 to 35. It ordered them to reach Poperinge (in South West - Flanders) by their own means, and from there on to take the train, as reserves for the Belgian army that would be assembled in France. On Wednesday the 15th, at 9 o'clock in the morning, in answer to the army call-up, a crowd of young men with their bicycles filled the street along St. Joseph's High School. A young Jesuit

priest, Fr. J. Van Branteghem, stood at the head of the street ready to accompany them to the military rendezvous in France. The Rector of the school addressed the young boys and as he was giving his blessing, the air suddenly rent with the noise of hooting sirens. Nearly all the boys rushed helter-skelter into the safety of the school cellars, except the few at the head of the street whom the priest, on the spur of the moment, told to jump on their bicycle and follow him. Herman was among the 35 who did so.

No sooner were they out of town than they too had to rush into the ditches alongside the road for protection against the harrying planes overhead. The next day, they reached Menen on the French border where new orders awaited them: "cross over to France" with no mention of any train. They were on their own. The first days of their trip were rather pleasant: a group of young people cycling together, exploring a new country. Yet there was great anxiety about their parents. They had left home and country exposed to the devastations of a war with all communications cut off.

Soon they experienced the hazards of the war. German Stukas always on the prowl strafed troop concentrations and bombed convoys, in order to clear the roads for their armies. On the 20th May the fleeing boys had a memorable escape. They were sitting in the meadow along the edge of the forest of Richemont when Stukas suddenly loomed in the sky with rattling machine-guns. 'To the ditch!' rang a shout and all leaped to safety. From the ditch they saw how the rattling machine guns destroyed a travellers' shelter. When the alert was over, Herman rose up as white as a sheet. He took his rosary and put it round his neck. One of the group stared at him. 'Do you find it ridiculous?', Herman asked. 'Not at all, Herman', the boy replied. Herman wore it the whole day, as if to fulfill a promise. He felt he had escaped death.

The group encountered many difficulties and obstacles on the road. Some bicycles were not in good condition and

there were breakdowns. A few of the boys were not at all prepared for such a long trip on bicycle. Some could not tie up their luggage properly, others were slow, still others had always some mechanical problem or other. Herman soon spotted them and kept an eye on them, always prompt to help out, or give to the weak a steady push on the steeper climbs. They formed a well-knit group in which Herman was easily the leader and the right-hand man of the Chaplain.

In whatever village they stopped for the night, they were well received and given accommodation either in a barn, or in a school hall. The 'invasion' of the locality by this extraordinary company of 35 fugitives was a sight for the local people. Settling down, they washed, cooked, ate their meal, then recited together the rosary walking in an orchard or along field-paths, and ended the day with a round of songs. At 7 in the morning, they went to church.

On the 28th of May, they heard the news that Belgium had capitulated. The news brought a sense of relief to the anxieties of the group. At least for the folks at home the hostilities were over. But there was no question yet of returning home. They informed the villagers that they were ready to work on the farms or in the vineyards. Eager peasants engaged them in pairs and by their hard work they earned the respect and friendship of the farmers.

The boys had been three weeks at work when a press announcement told them they could return home. Belgium was governed by the Germans; France was split into the 'occupied' and 'unoccupied' zone; the Belgian and French armies had been disarmed. They were eager to get back on the road to get home, but the return journey proved to be more arduous than they had expected. German troops were pouring in to occupy the country side. They had to venture into the unoccupied zone where it was no better. They encountered large caravans of French refugees, tramping along the country's thoroughfares.



At one point, Fernand, one of the boys, collapsed from exhaustion. They had to leave him behind in the local hospital, as the group was not allowed to spend the night in the village as there was no food for all the refugees pouring in. They cycled 20 km further to the next village. As soon as they arrived there, they felt very uneasy about the fate of Fernand. Joseph, his cousin, could not reconcile himself to abandon him. They looked for a car and

found one, but there was not a drop of petrol. Herman approached the Chaplain: 'Father, let's go and fetch Fernand'. After some hesitation the Chaplain agreed and Herman then set off with Joseph. By 2 a. m. they were back with Fernand. They had cycled with the boy in tow, without lights, on a road immersed in darkness under a heavily covered sky.

Some days later the group managed to get a lift in a truck with German soldiers that took them in record time straight to Brussels from where in the thick of the night they all raced home. Their two months' odyssey was over.

It had been for Herman a rare testing-field for his qualities of leadership, resourcefulness, devotion to duty and fellow students. No better scenario could have been

invented to draw out what was best in him. In his already remarkable youth this had been the zenith of his performance and a good preparation for his works in the mission field.

Vocation

The school reopened in September 1940 and Herman entered Class 12, called Rhetorica. This was the year he would have to make up his mind about the choice of a career. He had not yet thought much about it. When he was in class 10 he wanted to become a lawyer - in class 11 he thought of becoming an actor. By the time he reached class 12, he was confused. He had gradually become aware of a third option: the idea of becoming a priest came up in his mind again and again, even though he felt a certain aversion for the clerical state. He thought of joining a religious congregation but could not make up his mind about religious life, wondering if he were cut out for it. His hesitation was pertinent as he was well aware that the vow of obedience might be hard for him.

He attended the Vocation Retreat, under the direction of Fr. D. Stracke, a noted Jesuit scholar and Flemish nationalist. Those three days of talks, prayer and reflection gave him an opportunity to get some clarity in his mind. He reflected a lot, put down a good deal in writing, citing in the Ignatian tradition arguments for and against, but the indecision persisted.

He did not want to take a hasty decision and went on with his reading of literature on vocation. He considered two options on which Order to join: the Dominicans or the Jesuits. He opted for the Jesuits, because he felt that its austere institution and strictness complemented his radical temperament. It was also the one he knew best.

He made up his mind on the 13th June and the next day he informed the Rector of the school of his wish to become a Jesuit. Fr. De Pauw on hearing this news was both dumbfounded and happy. A few days later he went to break the news to his former teacher, Fr. Noé. After some



Herman , age 18, at the end of his High School

hesitation he told him that he wanted to become a Jesuit. To his relief, he saw his former teacher's agreeable surprise and asked: 'Will it work?' Father assured him that it would work out. He still had one difficulty: he found it strange that a Jesuit could leave for the Mission without any hope of ever returning, leaving behind forever his people and country. Father showed him that there was nothing wrong in leaving everything for God's sake.

At the end of July he broke the news to his mother, who promised to ask for his father's consent.

His father was not happy with his decision. He had never thought that his son would become a religious. He had hoped that his eldest son would one day follow in his footsteps and work for the emancipation of the Flemish community. This dream was shattered. He did give his consent but rather reluctantly.

About a month after his formal request Herman

received the official notification of his admission into the Society of Jesus. As was and still is the custom, four Jesuits interrogated all the candidates who had applied, including Herman. Their confidential findings and opinions were passed on to the Provincial Superior. For Herman all four reports were favourable. Yet on one point caution was urged and that was on his radical Flemish nationalist convictions!

Herman's qualities largely made up for what was after all a political conviction. This would not diminish his commitment because it was recognized by those who knew him best that though he had a generous and rich fiery temperament, he was not proud and was always ready to obey when matters were properly explained. He was not a yes-man, yet he was ready to listen to reason. Another point in his favour was his openness and straightforwardness.

He withheld the news from his companions until the last day of the school-year. A few days before the end of the school year, he went to his friend Florent and showed him the Provincial's letter. Soon the news spread in the school. The sensation was total. Herman, a Jesuit! They had all been so convinced that he would become a professional stage actor. Would he now also renounce his nationalist ideas? He told his companions that he wanted to become a religious like Fr. Stracke and other Jesuits, who also worked for the Flemish cause.

On Sunday 7th September 1941 he left for the novitiate in Drogen. His last days at home, he experienced how much his parents loved him and how they made a great sacrifice in allowing him to join religious life.

Part II Jesuit Formation.

Formation in Belgium

Novitiate



Herman as a Jesuit Novice in Drongen

Drongen was then a little village of 6000 inhabitants, some 5 km. west of Gent. The Jesuit House was an old Premonstratensian abbey with long and large corridors. The building was big enough to accommodate groups of Jesuits at different stages of formation. There was a big garden with alleys and lawns and also a farm. The war was still on and Germans soldiers were occupying more than

half of the building and this caused a lot of inconvenience to the religious community.

Herman found himself once again in a completely new environment. All his companions were youths of his own age, sharing the same aspirations, striving after the same ideal, more or less equal in their intellectual and moral endowments, with not a few of them superior in intelligence, talents or other gifts.

The novitiate is an apprenticeship in Christian discipleship under the direction of a spiritual guide called Novice Master. Fr. Croonenberghs was Herman's guide. It was a two years period of intense spiritual life, wholly concentrated on spiritual exercises, leading the novices into personal prayer and awareness of one's personal defects. There was a well set routine for various engagements of personal as well as communitarian prayers, religious instructions, personal reflection, performing simple house chores such as keeping the house clean, and recreation. The Novices, as the new comers were called, were kept busy the whole day. Herman remained a man of action, but at the same time he was growing and maturing in his vocation, trying to live in union with God.

Once in two years every novice had to run the gauntlet of a public accusation by his confreres of his exterior shortcomings. When his turn arrived Herman was told, among other things, that he liked to hear the resonance of his own booming voice. The aptness of the observation was greeted with a general burst of laughter and Herman's amused chuckle.

All his companions recognized that generosity was his outstanding virtue. He was not one to refuse a service. Some keener observers detected under his exterior casualness or even coolness, a great sensitivity, for he was open to friendship and responded to trust shown him with total loyalty. And for all his ebullient exuberance, deep down he was a timid, shy person, concealing perhaps a lack of self-confidence.

Herman remained himself and stood as a character apart, partly because of his imposing physique - he was about 1.86m tall -and especially because of his straightforwardness and simplicity.

Herman was very regular in writing letters to his family once a month and these letters show his deep feeling for his family. He never missed a birthday, neither of his parents nor of his two sisters and brother. Beneath the stolid youth he liked to show himself to be, Herman was a man with tender sentiments. In a letter written on the 22nd of November for his mother's birth-day, he wrote: "We are simple people and there is perhaps in our feeling with our closest relatives a certain timidity and reserve. But now in a letter I can freely write to tell you how much I love you. And I may even say, now that I am away from home, that my affection for you has grown to be more genuine and deeper. Always remember that there is a heart that beats full of love for you."

He remains extremely grateful to his father and mother to have allowed him to become a religious. We discover here a Herman that is delicate, tender, introspective, so different from his blunt, sometimes tactless manner.

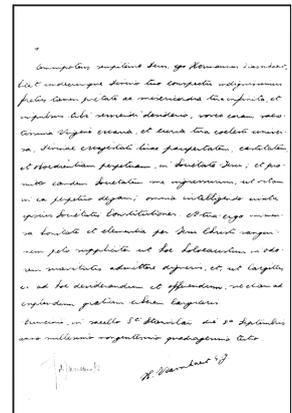
Though Belgium was no longer at war, it was nonetheless a country occupied, governed and exploited by the enemy. The novitiate experienced like the rest of the country privations and hardships of all sorts brought on them by a callous policy of grand-scale plundering. Life turned into an enduring struggle for survival. Clothing, fuel, and especially food became scarce and expensive. Herman never complained about these hardships, but a word here and there was telling enough.

As the novitiate training came to a close Herman announced his desire to do the Indian Juniorate in order to prepare himself to go to India as a missionary. His companions were surprised by what appeared to be a very sudden decision on his part. In fact it was not a sudden decision. Herman was a man, who lived in the present.

At the time of joining the novitiate he had taken a radical step of giving up everything in a total commitment to God,. He felt that he made a great sacrifice of offering his life to God as a gift. His attention then was much on vocation as a sacrifice. He had gradually become aware that his vocation was really a grace from God. He often meditated on the words of Jesus: "it is not you who have chosen me, I have chosen you." St. John 15, 16. His radical commitment as a response to God's call already implied a readiness to leave his own country and become a missionary.

He wrote a long letter to his parents explaining to them why he wanted to go to India as a missionary and asking their permission. As usual Herman was very direct in putting this unexpected request to them. His letter shattered their peace and caused deep anguish. The request implied a lifelong separation from family and country. His parents came to see him to talk the matter over with him. Mr. Julian Rasschaert was very bitter and he was not ready to listen to any arguments. Seeing their strong opposition, Herman then asked them if they would still love him if he went away, if they would still write, and if he could go home after 8 September. This desperately anxious and childlike cry of his son deeply moved his father.

Herman took his first vows in the Society of Jesus on the 8th of September 1943. A few days later he went home for a two days' visit. It was a wonderful visit and Herman felt how deeply and warmly his parents loved him. Father especially was happy to have his son close to him again. The bitterness of the Drogenen visit had all vanished.



Document of Herman's first vows as a Jesuit in 1943

Indian Juniorate

After two years of novitiate the Jesuit in training, called a scholastic, attends a one year programme, which focuses on humanities. This is called Juniorate. At the end of September 1943 Herman went to Wepion for the Indian Juniorate, the first step on the way to India. This was a separate course for the scholastics of both the Belgian Jesuit Provinces, who were preparing themselves for their missionary assignments in India. Experts on Indian Culture and Languages shared their knowledge with the young Jesuits. Fr. Johans, who had spent many years in Calcutta, was one of them. He taught the basics of Sanskrit and Herman found the study of Sanskrit very hard. Otherwise there was much to make him happy in Wepion. The country side was beautiful; besides there was a lot of farming to do, especially on account of the war. They tried to cultivate crops and vegetables for their own consumption. Herman found farming the most enjoyable experience of his stay there. The course came to an end in July 1944.



Servant of God Fr. Constant Lievens sj,
apostle of Chotanagpur, for whom
Herman had a great admiration

Philosophy

From Wepion Herman went to Godinne, some 10km to the South, a small village on the beautiful river Meuse for his studies of Philosophy.

In the meantime the Allied Troops had landed at Normandy in France on June the 6th 1944 and were getting ready to recapture Belgium and France. In the beginning of September Belgium was gradually liberated from Germany occupation.

Herman received very sad news from home. With the liberation of Aalst instant retribution came to all those who in one way or the other were associated with the hated enemy. Mr. Rasschaert's rented house was ransacked and the entire family thrown out on the street. What had been his crime? He had received compensation from the German occupying force for the loss incurred after his property was confiscated by the government after World War I! This is ironic because all the while he had worked in the social work centre, called the Green Cross (Groene Kruis) where he had helped many young men escape forced labour in Germany. Yet, he had to go into hiding. Julian Rasschaert was again deprived of all civil and political rights, and the Government confiscated all his possessions. This action left Mr. Rasschaert penniless as he also lost his job.

Herman was allowed to go home for a visit. The family had been given shelter in the house of the family De Neve, until they would find other lodgings. Their condition worried Herman a good deal even though Fr. Van Branteghem bestirred himself very much to help them out of their plight.

For Herman and his family life had to go on. After so many years back in Belgium, the family had not yet been able to settle down and they moved from rented rooms to rented houses in five locations. Herman spent his life also "going from place to place". As a Jesuit he never stayed longer than four years in the same place.

Herman, being a man of action, did not take easily to the study of philosophy with its abstract courses. He remained a hard-working student, not by inclination but by a spirit of duty that made him always single-minded in all he undertook. He found himself in a group of young Jesuits, whose minds were bursting with ideas and plans. They read books and reviews and were eager to express themselves. One outlet for such eagerness was to write. Herman wrote his first article on 'The Setbacks of St. Francis Xavier', a well written piece on the less glamorous aspects of the Saint's life with some observations that ring so true under his pen, because of his own experience of the family setbacks. He wrote: "In misfortune and contradiction Xavier got cleansed, his charity got refined and he became a saint".

His spiritual life grew in depth, owing particularly to the commitment of his vows, and also to the cleansing effect of the aftermath of the war that so unhappily was affecting his family. During the summer holidays of 1946 he obtained permission to visit the family Brant in Roosendaal. The Brants were more than friends; they were, emotionally at least, as close as family relations.

In those days the Philosophy course was of two years duration for all scholastics, but those who were found fit for a more in depth study of philosophy were given a third year course. The selection of candidates for the third year was based on the result of the examination at the end of the two years and the overall evaluation by the Professors.

Herman was hoping that he would qualify for the 3rd year course and he studied very hard for the exam. In fact most scholastics were eager to qualify for the 3rd year as this would qualify them to take the 'long course in theology' and eventually make them eligible to become Professed Jesuits with four vows.

Herman passed the 2nd year examination satisfactorily, but did not qualify for the third year course. He had worked hard and he was greatly upset. The moment he got the

result, he jumped on his bicycle and rode the whole day to purge his system of the bitterness of his disappointment. A truth had slapped him in the face: he was not intelligent enough to rank among the professed Jesuits of the 4th vow, and he found it hard to accept it.

A few good friends who were in the same predicament but took it philosophically, tried their best to minimize the effects of what seemed to Herman a catastrophe,

On August the 6th 1947 Herman got his official appointment to the Ranchi Mission. He went home on the 17th August and soon learned that he would stay in St. Joseph's High School until his departure fixed for the 19th of November. He functioned as housemaster for the day-scholars who came to school bringing along some sandwiches for their noon-meal. They were served a dish of soup in a ramshackle building. Herman became very popular with the boys. His sympathy for them was aroused by his sense of justice. His boys were a somewhat neglected lot, who outside the class room lived on the fringe of the school world.

Departure to India

On the 19th of November, the day of his departure, they had all gathered - friends, day-boarders, confreres, the family - at the airport of Melsbroek, now Zaventem, in Brussels. The atmosphere was relaxed. His young day-boarders wanted his autograph.



Herman signing his autograph to his young friends as he was about to depart for India

Herman was very touched by the presence of so many friends. He had to embark for London from where another plane would take him to India. After a long wait, there was an announcement: "Mist over London; departure delayed till tomorrow at 8 o'clock." This was a disappointment for all gathered there. But nothing could be done. The best was to return home with his family and come back the next day.

The next morning he returned accompanied by his close relatives and a few friends. Bidding farewell, his father said, 'Herman, be a good soldier!' Then both his parents blessed him with signing his forehead with a little cross. Herman warmly shook hands with them, his sisters, his brother and friends, and went to the plane. Reaching the top of the ramp, he turned round and his resounding voice called out 'Till we meet again in heaven!'

He had no luck. The plane landed, in Gatwick, close to London, with so much delay that it was too late to start for Rome and reach it the same day. It left for Brussels instead, where Herman spent the night in the Jesuit residence, and was taken the next morning to Melsbroek. He thus left on the 21st of November, and the itinerary took him to Rome, Athens, Beyrouth, Basrah, Bahrain, Karachi - a night was spent at each of these halting-places - and Calcutta, which he reached on Friday November the 28th 1947.

He was 25 years old. A beautiful chapter of his life was closed. He landed in a new country and a new life began for him.

Formation in India

Study of Hindi

Herman Rasschaert arrived in Ranchi on the 3rd of December 1947, the Feast of St. Francis Xavier. He spent a few days in Ranchi to visit some of his companions, who had come to India after the War. On the 8th of December he took a bus to Hazaribagh, from where a rickshaw brought him to St. Stanislaus' College at Sitagarha.

St. Stanislaus' College was a formation house for the first years of Jesuit Training, the novitiate and juniorate. It had an impressive building with three wings. Here Herman devoted all his time to the study of Hindi and he did not find it easy to master the intricacies of the language. However he was very determined to become fluent in Hindi. A Hindu pandit came every day and taught them the basics of the language. Herman soon realized that the theory classes alone would not suffice to pick up the spoken language. So he decided to cycle everyday to Hazaribagh to sit with the children and attend some classes in the local mission school. This gave him an opportunity to hear spoken Hindi as used in the school. This would also prepare him for his next assignment, teaching.

As it was a very peaceful place, Fathers and Brothers used to come there to take rest or to make their retreat. So the students could interact with the seasoned missionaries. One of the visitors was Fr. Camil Bulcke, who became a renowned Hindi scholar. Fr. Bulcke spoke about his studies at the University of Allahabad. For him fluency in Hindi was an absolute requirement for coming in contact and establishing rapport with the people.

In the month of May the students had their first examination, followed by a one month holiday. Even while in holidays the study of Hindi continued, but there was also time for other activities. Sometimes he accompanied the Brother Infirmarian on his visits to the villages to examine the sick and distribute medicines.

Herman was happy to come in contact with the realities of the Indian society and culture. He heard about the condition of the Untouchables, the Harijans, who lived at the margin of society and were not allowed to take water from the village well.

In his free time Herman started to read about the history of the Lievens Mission; this became for him a passion. He wanted to visit all the places where the missionaries were

at work, and know everything about the origin and growth of the mission work. Right from his days in Sitagarha he was busy with Cartography. He collected and studied maps of the region. This remained for him a hobby the whole of his life. On 11th December 1948 Br. Herman was sent to Manresa House - Ranchi to continue his study of Hindi.

Teaching in St. John's High School

In the beginning of March 1949 he was assigned to St. John's school for his regency, i.e. a period of one or two years of teaching to get an exposure to the apostolic work of the Society of Jesus and to help the young Jesuit to grow in maturity living in a Jesuit Community. Herman was assigned as a teacher to class 8 and was also assistant to the "Hostel Prefect", the warden of the boarding school. It kept him busy from early morning till late in the evening. The teaching was in Hindi and Herman took a lot of time preparing his classes carefully. In order to make sure that the students were able to understand his teaching, he used to move around in the class, asking the students questions. It was a very interactive way of teaching.

Herman remained his usual self: he was very sincere and outspoken, a man of his word. Yes was Yes and No was No. There was no scope for compromise. At times he was also impulsive. Fortunately there was a good understanding between him and his Prefect, Fr. G. Van Doorselaer. At times the Prefect had to restrain him from taking drastic action against mischievous students. For a minor infringement of rules, Herman could get quiet upset.

Teachers' Day, celebrated on 1st November, was a real feast. To express their gratitude the students presented a cultural programme with songs and dances. The teachers received garlands of flowers and also a small present. Herman told his students that their performance was above the standard he had seen in his own school.



Herman being felicitated by his students of St John's High School Ranchi

The boys had given him the nickname 'Bhalu', meaning bear as the Brother was tall and strongly built and hairy with a black beard. His boys liked him as he was a good teacher, always ready to help them in all their difficulties.

Among the students he soon took special interest in the Munda boys; he found them reliable and steady, although slow and rather closed. It seemed to him that many Jesuits favoured the cheerful Oraons who were the majority among the Catholics, and neglected the Mundas, who were fewer in number. In the words of Fr. J. Van Troy, he "opted" for the underdog and organized competitions for the boys along tribal lines. He openly encouraged and supported the Munda Boys. From that time onwards he was determined to work in the Munda belt. During his holidays Herman took time out to visit the mission posts in the remote areas. He cycled to the 'quadrilateral', the four posts established before the arrival of Fr. C. Lievens: Sarwada, Dolda, Bandgaon and Burudi (Kochang). Of course he also visited Torpa, the place where Lievens

started his missionary work. Herman wanted to see for himself the living conditions of the people in the far off villages.

He also liked to visit the homes of his boys so as to know their family background. He really took care of his pupils.

During 1950 a tragic event took place in the school. An epidemic of cholera broke out in Ranchi town and steps were taken to stop the spread of this disease. Medical personnel, doctors and nurses, visited the school to give anti-cholera injections. In the class of Herman one of the boys was sick and running a fever. The medical team did not give him the injection as he was already taking other medicines. Unfortunately the boy died two days later and nobody of the family was in Ranchi on that day to take care of the cremation. The same day the father of the boy had left for Bundu on bicycle to attend to his wife who was bed-ridden. So the school with the help of friends arranged for the cremation. Herman felt very sad about this turn of events.

In October of that year Herman had been suffering from headaches. After some days he developed a high fever. He was given a room in Manresa House. It was clear that Herman had all the symptoms of malaria and he received the required treatment. He had to take a few days rests.

The end of the school year approached and with that the work load increased: correction of answer books and preparation of final results. The holidays started on the 9th of December 1950 and that was the end of the two year regency in St. John's. His next destination was Kurseong.

Theology Studies at St. Mary's College - Kurseong

The courses of Theology, which every candidate aspiring to become a priest has to complete, are spread over 4 years. In St. Mary's College in Kurseong (Darjeeling Dt.)

the new session started in January 1951 and the Ranchi scholastics approved for theology studies that year were: Joseph De Cuyper, Herman Rasschaert, Paul Buckens, Maurice Claeys and Leo Bara. Herman with Paul and Leo left Ranchi on 31st December 1950, arriving in Calcutta on New Year's Day 1951. On the 2nd of January they took the train and arrived in Siliguri the next day. From there they took a taxi to go up the mountains to Kurseong.



**St Mary's College, Kurseong,
where Fr. Herman Rasschaert did his theological studies**

The student community comprised all nationalities: Americans, Spaniards, Belgians, Italians and Indians from the four corners of the country. The language was English. The four years was totally devoted to the study of the Bible (Holy Scriptures), the Teaching of the Church, the History and the traditions of the Church, including the Writings of the prominent theologians. The College had a very good library, not only of books on theology but also a lot of literature on the history of all religions of India.

At an altitude of 1650 m. Kurseong, at the feet of the Himalyas, was a beautiful place. It had been developed as a Holiday resort for the British. From his room Herman had a splendid view of the mountains at the horizon.

As per Jesuit custom classes were held 5 days a week. Thursday was a holiday; on that day the theologians could go for long walks. On one of the first weekly holidays the group of Ranchi theologians went for a picnic to the Balasan river below in the valley. They left in the morning and took a route winding its way through the tea gardens. On arrival they unpacked their provisions and started preparing the food of the day. The "Adibasi" scholastics among them, very adept at catching fish in the running water of the stream, brought a good catch to the delight of every one.



Herman during a Thursday outing in Kurseong

Herman enjoyed these weekly outings and he took a liking to the long treks in the mountains. He used to plan these outings very meticulously and used to take all the heavy tasks on himself. He would carry the heaviest rucksack with the pots and pans. Usually on arrival at the picnic spot the group would relax and take a little rest after the long walk. Herman would set out to bring water from the river and to collect wood to make a fire. A group would usually consist of 7 to

8 Brothers. With Herman present, there used to be a lot of life and fun.

Every year the group of 'strong' fellows among the theologians made a long climb upto Sandakphu, which

offered a panoramic view of the highest mountain peaks of the world, Everest, Kinchenjunga and others. It was a trek of 40 km on foot, climbing up to an altitude of 4000 meters. It was an outing of 3 days and they took with them all their provisions, food, blankets, and extra warm clothing. For Herman these days were an occasion to be the life and soul of the group, encouraging everyone and being at the service of all.



Herman (left corner) with his companions at Sandakphu in the Himalayas.

On class days there was a regular routine with time for prayer-meditation, Holy Mass and community prayers- and time for classes, recreations and manual work assignments in the house or in the garden. Herman was very faithful in his spiritual duties and would not miss any of the daily spiritual exercises. Even on outings he would take time out for the examination of conscience and would ask his companions to do the same.

Right from the first year Herman devoted a lot of time to study the various courses. The first year passed very quickly and he worked hard for the 'oral' examinations conducted in Latin.



Herman proudly showing off his strength

In the second year starting in January 1952 Herman became "Beadle" of the theologians. The Rector, Fr. Timmerman, selected him to be the representative of the theologians and to be a channel of communication between the Rector and the students. The Rector found him to be very generous and sincere in all he did, a good scholastic, but of course he had his defects like every body else. Herman remained himself, a thoroughly honest person, who could not tolerate any injustice, always taking the side of the poor and the weak.

Some of his companions spontaneously came to him for help. One incident might be narrated here. Among the scholastics from Ranchi there was Theodore Toppo, short in stature. He desperately wanted to accompany the strong guys on their annual trek to Sandakphu, as this would be the experience of his life. Everyone thought that he was too weak for such an expedition. Herman wanted to give him a chance and for the next few weeks he took him every Thursday for a long walk in the hills. Theodore had no problem in keeping up with Herman. As an immediate preparation, Herman filled a rucksack with

15 kg of stones and he handed the bag to Theodore. They set off for the trip, joined by George Zwijsen. They walked for about 8 hours up and down the hills with a short break for lunch. Back home Theodore was still in good shape, and Theodore joined the group of "strong fellows" on their trip to the Sandakphu. He became one of the toughest in the group.

In the second year the students got an intensive course in the study of the Bible, the Holy scriptures. Right from his novitiate Herman had taken up regular reading of the Bible. He found inspiration in the lives of the Prophets and the great religious leaders of the Old Testament. His liking for Cartography now took concrete form as he prepared a monograph of "Historical Annotations on the Maps of Chotanagpur". George Zwijsen assisted him in typing out the manuscript.

At the end of October 1952 a tragic event took place. The young Jesuit Priest, Fr. Edward Wenish, who had just finished his final examination, went alone for a stroll or to say his breviary after on reaching Sandakphu. He did not come back; he disappeared without a trace. Two years later his bones were found.

The 3rd year started. It was an important year for Herman as he would be ordained to the priesthood at the end of this year, that was 1953. More time had to be devoted to studies as preparation for the main examinations. He kept up his regular correspondence with his parents, especially now with the preparations for the ordination. Herman started the reading of the breviary, the praying of the Psalms three times a day, compulsory for priests and religious. For him it was a sacred duty; it was an expression of his deep faith and trust in God.

That year twenty three Jesuits were to be admitted to the sacred orders. The biggest group (seven of them) belonged to the Ranchi Mission. The others were from all the four corners of India.



Fr. Herman's Priestly Ordination Ceremony in Kurseong



On the 18th of November 1953 the twenty three scholastics received the diaconate, they became deacons. Three days later they received the Priestly Ordination. It was a very solemn occasion. All ceremonies were performed in Latin. The Ordaining Bishop placed his hand on the head of each of the ordinandi and pronounced the word "a priest till eternity". Then the hands were anointed with sacred oil. The family of Herman had donated a beautiful chalice, which Br. F. Jonckheere had brought along from Belgium. On the foot of the chalice was placed a crown of thorns, a sign of Jesus' sacrifice on Calvary. Herman also received a very touching letter from his father. While offering congratulations to Herman, it was also an expression of gratitude to God for his grace and love. He was proud that his son was privileged to spend his life in the vineyard of the Lord.

Herman offered his first Mass in the chapel of St. Mary's College at the altar of St. Ignatius. Fr. Van Baal assisted him and saw to it that he made no mistakes. In Aalst - Belgium the occasion was celebrated with a solemn Eucharist in the Church of St. Joseph's High School. Rev. Emile Rasschaert, the uncle of Herman, offered the Mass and at the end Herman's father Julian addressed the gathering, thanking all for their presence on this occasion. He ended his speech with the words: "Herman's name will certainly be remembered in the history of India." It was like a prophecy.

Herman had received altogether 176 letters from family members, friends and old students offering their congratulations, prayers and best wishes. It took him a lot of time to answer these letters. Herman was really happy that he could begin his priestly ministry, a ministry of bringing people closer to God.

In preparation for his first High Mass he practiced the singing of the Latin texts with a companion. This first High Mass was celebrated in the novitiate chapel of the

Daughters of the Cross in Kurseong. At the end of the Mass he sang the "Ite missa est" in such a low voice that nobody could answer "Deo Gratias".

For the Christmas Celebrations that year Fr. Herman along with Fr. Paul Bulckens and Brs. George Zwijsen and John Guria, went down to Siliguri. People came from the teagardens in trucks, provided by the Manager. Herman and Paul heard confessions till about midnight, followed by a High Mass and two silent masses as was the custom in those days. Then they slept for a few hours on the floor in the chapel itself. Early morning there were again three masses. After all the ceremonies and a good breakfast, the faithful came to greet them with garlands and flowers. The people also offered gifts (rice, eggs and a goat) as an expression of joy and gratitude. The fathers could not stay as they had to return to Kurseong for the Christmas celebration in the community. It had been a tough expedition. On the eve of Christmas they had a 7 hours walk down the hill along steep slopes. After the celebrations there was the trek back, this time up the hills. Paul had cramps, but Herman took it all in his stride and felt a great joy and peace in his heart: the joy of having celebrated Christmas with the families working in the teagardens.



Fr. Herman with Tensing Norgay

The fourth and final year of theology began on January the 4th 1954. After a few days Herman fell sick. The strong man was down once again with malaria. For six days he could not say

Mass. That year the Ranchi group of theologians made for their annual picnic an outing to Darjeeling. On that occasion they met Tensing Norgay, the Sherpa who with Edmund Hilary were the first to reach the top of Mount Everest.

Herman was doing the short course of theology, but even for the short course all the subject matters had to be studied. The only difference was that he did not have to face the final Comprehensive examination. He found time to prepare himself more intensively for direct missionary work.

Frs. Herman Rasschaert and Maurice Claeys spent the Holy Week in the parish of Gayaganga. Herman took his precautions and took along medicines against malaria.



Father Herman, new priest, celebrating the Eucharist.

The Fathers had their first experience of giving religious instruction to a dozen couples who were to be married after Easter. Herman told them the story of Tobias from the Old Testament; this story gave him enough matter and inspiration for preparing the couples for their married life. On Good Friday there was a large gathering

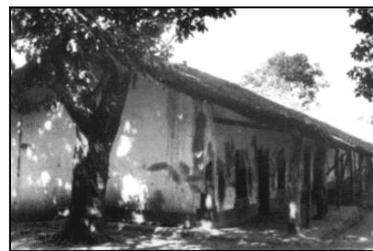
of faithful for the Stations of the Cross and the celebration of the Passion of Jesus. Easter, the feast of the Risen Lord, was celebrated with great solemnity. In the afternoon the young priests went to a Military Camp and met about 70 Christian soldiers from the Ranchi mission. The young men made their confession and in the evening the fathers celebrated the Eucharist with the soldiers in a tent. After the Mass the soldiers offered them tea and snacks. It was a very meaningful way to conclude the Easter Celebrations.

After all these pastoral activities, it was time to prepare for the final examinations. Herman was ready for this examination; he had studied and he felt confident. This time there was no tension. His exam was on the 5th of October and the same afternoon he left for Siliguri on his way to Ranchi. All the theologians had gathered to say farewell to Herman. After a strong handshake with each of them he stepped into the truck and was off. It had never happened that all the scholastics came down to say farewell for a companion. The journey took him to Patna, where he stayed in St. Xavier's School and spent a few days to see some of the works of the Patna Jesuits and made a trip to Bodh Gaya, the place where Gautama Buddha obtained 'enlightenment'.

On the 10th October 1954 he was in Hazaribagh, where the Mission Superior, Fr. Moyersoan, told Herman to proceed to Gumla to assist the Parish Priest for a few days and from there to go to Soso. After a day in Ranchi, Herman took a bus to Gumla. It was an eventful trip. The bus left Ranchi in the afternoon and was to reach Gumla before dark. In Gagra there was a major breakdown. Everybody got down from the bus and Herman, exhausted after the long journey from Kurseong to Ranchi, found a place to take rest in the verandah of the local Police station. At one o'clock the bus was repaired and some boys came to wake him up and they continued their journey. In Gumla everybody was asleep in the presbytery;

fortunately one Father woke up early and gave Herman a room. After a day of rest Fr. De Buck, the Parish Priest, had arranged a pastoral tour for Herman: he had to visit 5 village chapels. There were chapels in those villages which were far away from the parish. The programme for these village tours had a set pattern. The Priest, accompanied by the Catechist, arrived in the village in the afternoon. In the evening the priest heard confessions and attended a short cultural programme. He used to take meals and sleep in the chapel. The next morning he celebrated the Eucharist for all the people. After breakfast there was a meeting with the men folk to discuss the problems of the village. There was also time for the priest to visit the sick and to go round the village to bless the houses. After lunch and a short rest the priest and the catechist left for the next village, on foot or on bicycle.

Herman spent five days in the villages on his first pastoral tour. He was happy to be with the people, to bring them the sacraments and to listen to their problems. He did not understand their language, which was Oraon, but the language was not a barrier. Many of the people, at least those had gone to school, understood Hindi. After the tour Fr. Herman went to Soso parish, where he said the daily mass for the Sisters and the children in the absence of the Parish Priest.



The school at Torpa

On November 6th Fr. Herman landed in Torpa, the mission station, from where Father Constant Lievens had started his missionary endeavour. He was there for his second language school. The Mission

Superior had agreed to his request that he would work among the Mundas. So it was time for him to master this difficult language. Fr. Albert Van Exem, a veteran missionary of the Munda belt, was the Parish Priest. He assigned a room to Herman and on the door he pasted a paper with the words "language school". Inside on the table Herman found the little book of Fr. Hoffman, the Mundari scholar, entitled "Mundary - Grammar and Exercises". Herman put the book aside and he took out from his bag the notes he had gathered for an article on which he had been working in Kurseong: "The Geography of Chotanagpur". He wanted to complete this article and so a few days went by without the study of Mundari. Fr. Van Exem had been observing him and made his move. He asked Herman to go and spend a few days in a village about 15 km from Torpa. He gave strict instructions to the Catechist, who was to accompany him, not to speak a single word of Hindi, but only Mundari; he was to start with teaching common words and phrases. Herman learned his lesson: the little bit of Mundari he had picked up during his formation was totally inadequate for the work of a pastor. On his return from the village, Herman set aside the writing of his article and started his Mundari language study.

Tertianship

After finishing 9 to 10 years of studies a Jesuit completes his formation with a third year novitiate, a time of spiritual renewal and deepening of one's commitment to God.

On the 1st of January 1955 Herman arrived again in St. Stanislaus' College Sitagarha, this time for his third year probation, also called Tertianship.

After a few days of rest the Fathers made for the second time in their lives the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius. It lasted for 30 days and was called the long retreat. All 30 days were spent in silence, reflection and



Fr. Herman (second from right) with his companions and the provincial of Belgium at tertianship in Sitagarha

prayer, a time of deepening one's union with God and rekindling in one's heart the fire of total surrender to God.

After the long retreat the Tertian Master gave a series of instructions on the Constitutions of the Society. The tertians devoted their free time to personal reading of the Constitutions and other documents, such as the Autobiography of Ignatius. In this way they got a deeper insight into the Spirituality of Ignatius, but also became acquainted with the way of Proceeding and Administration of the Jesuit Order.

The task of a priest is to bring people closer to God. It is God's work and the priest is an instrument in the hands of God. The tertian instructor helps each priest to become aware of his own shortcomings so that he can correct himself and so become a better instrument in the hands of God. Herman reflected on the remarks given to him by the Tertian Instructor and it appeared to him that some of the

'defects' were actually qualities. His companion, Paul Bulckens, later remarked that both, Tertian instructor and Herman, were right. Herman could not tolerate any injustice. He was obedient and showed respect to his superiors but he was very outspoken, he did not hide his likes and dislikes. He was a strong character and would do what is right. If he had not been like that he would not have become a martyr.

During this year of probation the young priests were also sent on 'experiment'. Herman went to Serampore, north of Calcutta to work in a hospital. Various tasks were assigned such as giving a bath to the patients, making their beds, feeding them, dressing their wound and cleaning the rooms. Most of the works consisted of humble service to the sick. Herman put his heart and soul to it.

The priests prepared themselves for giving retreats in schools and parishes. In October of that year the Parish Priest of Banabira invited Herman to give a 3 day retreat to the parish youth. Herman was very eager to give retreats to young people. This retreat offered him a chance to visit the mission posts in the Biru region, which today constitutes the Simdega district.

The tertianship ended on the 15th of October 1955 and Herman spent another 10 days in Sitagarha to work on his article on the "Geography of Chotanagpur". He had never expected that it would take him so much time to finish this study.

Part III Priestly Ministry

Assistant Parish Priest

Khunti

Fr. Herman's first appointment was as Assistant Parish Priest in Khunti. He arrived there on the 13th of November 1955. The mission station of Khunti was started in 1885, the year Fr. C. Lievens arrived in India. The Bungalow (Fathers' Residence) was built in 1892. Khunti was centrally located in the Munda belt and therefore a place where the Fathers from the interior mission centres would come and spend the night on their way to Ranchi.

As Assistant Parish Priest Herman had to assist the Parish Priest in his pastoral ministry, but his main assignment was to take care of the middle school as Headmaster. Herman would have liked to devote himself full time to pastoral work, but his presence was required in the school. Fr. Ponette was the Parish Priest; he was a veteran missionary with a good knowledge of Hindi and Mundari.

Even though Herman had studied Mundari in Torpa, his knowledge of Mundari was still elementary. He prepared himself well for his first Mass in Mundari, but he was nervous and his memory failed him and he did not give a sermon. Fr. Ponette gave Herman ample opportunity to go on pastoral tours and to go for sick calls. The Christians of far away villages used to call the Priest when a person was very sick for administering the sacrament of the sick (also called the last sacrament). In those days the Parishes covered an extended area and at regular intervals people came to the parish to request the Priest to visit the village to anoint the person with holy oil and to give him or her Holy Communion. At times the call was very urgent as the person was dying.



Fr. Herman, Assistant Parish Priest in Khunti

On the 15th of August 1956 Independence Day and Feast of Our Lady, Herman took his last vows in the Society of Jesus. There was a High Mass during which he pronounced his vows. The ceremony was held in the verandah of the bungalow with the faithful sitting outside in the open air.

During the Puja Vacation Herman gave a retreat to about 100 catechists and teachers of Khunti parish. After that he preached a retreat for boys of St. John's school in Ranchi.

Khunti had 30 village chapels to be visited at least twice a year. During one of the tours the Parish Priest fell sick and was taken to Holy Family Hospital Mandar. Herman was asked to visit 5 of the village chapels. Such visits gave him a chance to speak Mundari and he made progress by listening to the people and by interacting with them. His teachers were the people around him. As a boy he had a great love for his own mother tongue, Flemish. Here he was very keen that the faithful should recite the prayers in the local language, Mundari. The hostel girls of the Ursuline School used to attend the mass in the parish and for them the morning prayers were said alternatively in Hindi and Mundari, as a good number of girls in the hostel did not know Mundari. Herman insisted that only Mundari should be used. This caused some friction with the Sister in charge of the Girls Hostel.

In April 1957 he had gained enough confidence in speaking Mundari and for the first time gave a retreat in Mundari to the girls of the St. Anne's School in Torpa. He followed the approach he had adopted in St. John's: he did not remain standing, but used to walk around and ask questions from those present. In this way he could feel in how far people did understand his message.

That year -1957- there was a failure of the monsoon in some parts of the region and therefore the harvest was very poor. Men and women had to go out and find work to feed their families. The Government did not have enough food stock to offer food to all regions where there was drought. The Mission was able to offer some help to the poor and the needy by distributing food items, received from Catholic Relief Services, USA.

The distribution of "American Supplies" put extra workload on the Fathers and the parish staff, but these were a great help to the people.

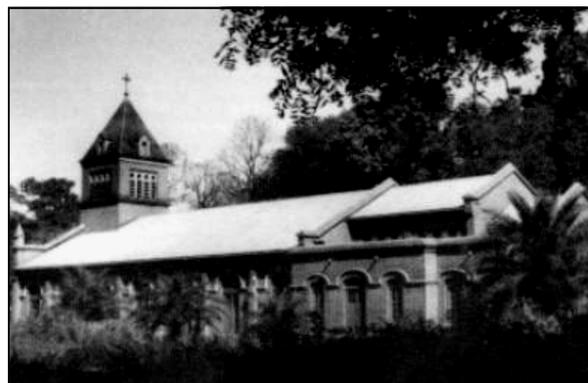
Before Christmas 1957 Herman received a new appointment as Assistant Parish at Torpa. His stay of about two years in Khunti had been a good training for him as he learned the intricacies of school administration.

Torpa

On the 14th of January 1958 Herman joined his new post. Torpa was the place where he had done his Mundari Language School and Fr. A. Van Exem was still the Parish Priest. There were two assistants: the first Assistant was Fr. Daud Bara, in charge of the school, the second was Herman, Assistant to the Parish Priest. Herman was happy that he could give full time to pastoral ministry among the people.

In the month of February an accident occurred in the bungalow. There was no electricity in those days and in the evening, when darkness fell, the Fathers used kerosene lamps or lanterns to light up their rooms. It so happened that there was no kerosene in the lamp in his room and Herman went to the room of the Headmaster to get some kerosene. In the darkness he lit a match and as he held it rather close to the kerosene container, the oil caught fire and the container exploded. The two Fathers dashed out of the room. None of them had any injury on their faces, but the pants of Herman were on fire. Many had heard the noise and the boys came rushing with buckets of water to extinguish the fire. There was no major damage to the room, but Herman had severe burn wounds on both his legs and thighs. He himself did not know how serious it was and he went on foot to the local hospital for treatment. The medical staff there had to remove the burned skin and disinfect the wounds, which was very painful. He received an injection and some pills. Then the boys had to carry him back to the

parish, as he was not able to walk by himself. The next few days he remained in his room, under the treatment of the local nurse. He did not want to go to the hospital, but even after 2 weeks he could not yet walk around. So he was taken to the Holy Family Hospital in Mandar. There the doctors gave him an injection in the spine and put him on the operation table to remove the dead skin. On the way back to his room after the operation he talked to people in the corridor and then took a good meal. In the evening he had a serious headache. He remained one month in the hospital and during Holy Week he attended all the services, sitting on a chair. It was a real penance for Herman to remain there and to take rest. Of course as soon he could walk around he visited the patients and talked to people. This incident would have consequences later.



The Church of Torpa where Fr. Herman was Assistant Parish Priest

Back home in Torpa he gave all his time in assisting the Parish Priest in his various tasks. In particular Herman was interested in knowing the functioning of the Catholic Cooperative Credit Society. From the early days the missionaries were engaged in the overall development of

the population. For this purpose the Catholic Cooperative Credit Society (CCCS) had been started by Fr. JB Hoffmann sj in 1903. By becoming members of the CCCS the people were encouraged to save money and deposit their savings in the Cooperative. The CCCS was instrumental in getting the people out of the clutches of the money lenders. In every parish the Priest was the Secretary of the local unit of the CCCS and with the assistance of the Munshi (Clerk) he took care of its financial transactions. Before Herman got fully acquainted with the activities of the 'bank' he received his appointment as Parish Priest of Karra. So his stay in Torpa was only for 5 months. By now he had become fluent in Mundari.

Parish Priest

Karra

Fr. Herman took up his task as Parish Priest in Karra on the 4th of June 1958. The parish was not very big with just 20 village chapels. His Assistant in charge of the school was Rev. Cyril Tirkey, a diocesan priest.

The main task of the Parish Priest, called the "Bara Father" was to be a shepherd for the Christian community, helping them in all their needs. He was the pastor visiting the people in the villages and administering the sacraments. In this work of religious instructions and faith formation he had an assistant, the Catechist. Right from the beginning of the mission, the pastoral work went hand in hand with education. There were several Primary Schools in remote villages, where boys and girls of the neighbouring villages received a basic education. At the centre there was the parish middle school, with hostel facilities. The "Chhota Father", the Assistant took care of the educational apostolate.

The residence of the Fathers, called the bungalow, was quite old and the first job Fr. Herman took up was to put some order in his room. By nature he was a very meticulous

person and liked to keep all papers in proper order. In the process he did a thorough cleaning up of the bungalow.

The parish had some fields at a distance of about 2 kms from the parish. They were good rice fields. When the time came for ploughing the fields and planting the rice Herman was there to supervise the work. At harvesting time he even spent a few nights in the field sleeping on the threshing floor. The threshing of the rice with bullocks was for him like a scene taken from the old testament. He remembered that as a young boy he had thought of becoming a farmer. In a sense his dream had become true.

In the month of October he set out on a pastoral tour to visit the village chapels and to meet his flock. His parish was in the Munda belt, not very far from Khunti, but there were a few Oraon villages in one part of the parish. So he started his tour with visits to the Oraon villages. Later on in December was the time for the "marriage school". Couples to be married were given catechism classes and orientation to married life. It was the first time that Herman had to take charge of these pastoral activities.

The time for marriages to be celebrated was after Christmas. There used to be several couples getting married in one Mass. Even then it took several days to allow all the couples to participate in the Eucharist and pronounce their marriage vows.

There was plenty of work for a zealous Parish Priest. In the beginning of 1959 the Bishop announced his visit to the parish to administer the sacrament of Confirmation to the children.

About 100 children were to receive the sacrament and Fr. Herman, together with his Assistant, conducted an intensive religious instruction programme of several days for the children.

During Lent the Parish Priest visited all the village chapels once again to give an opportunity to the faithful to make their confession as preparation for Easter. It took at least 4 weeks to visit all the villages. During his tour



Fr. Rasschaert Parish Priest in Karra

Herman observed that some superstitious practices were still prevalent in the villages, even among Christians. The fear of evil spirits was still strong. In a particular village quite a few persons had fallen sick and the people believed that the spirits were displeased and their displeasure had caused the sickness. They consulted a soothsayer and their suspicions were confirmed. A teacher of the school had

provoked the displeasure of the spirits. In the general meeting of the village community, attended by all -both Christians and non-Christians- it was decided that the teacher should offer a goat to pacify the spirits and he should also pay a big fine of Rs.1000. This amount would be used for a community meal for all the people. The teacher came to complain to the Parish Priest, who on the following Sunday gave a strong sermon on the topic to his parishioners. He gave them a clear warning that such superstitious practices would not be tolerated as they showed a lack of faith and trust in God. Fr. Herman was indignant that a such a heavy fine was imposed on the accused; he found it a great injustice. In fact he had a feeling that a few leaders had instigated the people to punish the teacher out of jealousy. The teacher took good care of his fields, had a good harvest and plenty of rice in his house. At first it appeared that his sermon had no immediate impact on the people, but after some time people relented and matters were settled amicably.

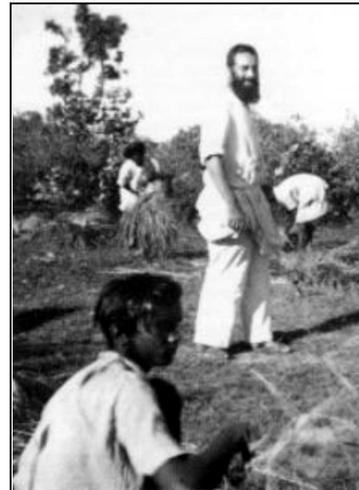
Herman found an opportunity to make a tour of the Gangpur region, a part of the original Lievens Mission in Orissa. This region had recently been handed over to the Congregation of the Divine Word (SVD). He visited Hamirpur, where he met the Bishop, Msgr. Westermann. From there he went on to visit Kalunga and Kesramal where he prayed at the tomb of Fr. Grosjean, who had been the Mission Superior of Fr. C. Lievens. From there he proceeded to Rourkela, where a new steel plant had been constructed with assistance from Germany. Under the leadership of Jawaharlal Nehru India had embarked on the path of industrialization. He visited the factory and also saw the new township coming up. On the way back to his own parish, he passed the huge dam constructed on the river for the supply of water to the steel plant and township. The visit had been very enriching for him and, without realising it, he had made good contacts, which would be of help in his next appointment.

Herman was always ready to render a service to his fellow Parish Priests. He travelled all the way to Banki beyond Lachragarh to take care of the parish for one week. The priest was alone and had to go for his annual retreat. The place was located in hilly terrain with a lot of jungle. The country side brought back memories of his days in Kurseong. Twice he travelled on horseback to visit a few villages. He loved to explore new places in the far corners of the mission.

Back home in Karra Herman had plenty of opportunities to show his love for the poor and the sick. One evening a messenger came to the bungalow requesting him to come and administer the sacrament of the sick to a man in danger of death. Without delay he took his cycle and left for the village where he met the doctor who was treating the sick man. The doctor told Father that nothing could be done in the village. The only chance of survival was to take the man to Ranchi and get him admitted in the hospital. At that time there was no means of transport available and the road was only a mud road. Resolutely Herman put the nearly unconscious man on the bar of his bicycle and held him between his arms so that he would not fall. Then he set off in the darkness to Ranchi, a distance of 40 km. He had light on his bicycle, but even then it was a arduous trip. On arrival in Ranchi a few hours later the man was admitted in the Sadar Hospital (Government Hospital) where the doctors gave proper treatment. The man recovered his health and his life was saved thanks to the care, courage and strength of Fr. Herman. He was a true missionary, always ready to sacrifice his own comfort to save the life of others.

In the second year of his stay in Karra Fr. Herman got busy with the repair and renovation work of the buildings. The tiled roofs needed urgent repairs before the rains. Other repair works were also badly needed, in particular repairs of floors and walls in the residence and the school.

In December 1960 he received news of his transfer to another parish. He would become the Parish Priest of



Kutungia and his Assistant, Rev. Fr. Cyril Tirkey, would take charge of Karra parish. During the Christmas holidays Fr. Jan De Bruecker, an old student of St. Joseph's High School Aalst, paid a visit to Karra. Fr. Jan had recently arrived in the mission. Herman was very happy to meet an old student of his school and to hear news about Aalst and about his family.

After this visit it was time to pack his belongings and to move on to Kutungia. The whole of his life he was a man on the move, exploring new ventures and taking up new challenges. In a sense he felt sad that he could not finish all the jobs he had planned. At the same time he knew that Karra was in good hands. His new appointment was certainly a call to new frontiers. The people of Karra did not like to see him go for he had won their hearts. They would remember his devotion to duty and his readiness to serve them.

Kutungia

Fr. Herman Rasschaert arrived in his new mission post on January the 2nd 1961. Kutungia was an isolated place at a distance of 240 km from Ranchi on the border with Orissa. It was a beautiful country side with hillocks and jungles, but not easily approachable as there were no all-weather roads. In the words of Fr. Matthijs it was the right place for Herman: "a wild place for an impetuous man".

Herman had visited the mission station earlier and he remembered that it was a very peaceful location. He soon noticed that the environment was changing very rapidly. The railway line between Ranchi and Rourkela was under construction and passed very close to the mission. Many vehicles -jeeps and trucks- were moving up and down the line to bring materials for the construction of the embankments. On the stretch close to the Orissa border many obstacles had to be cleared: hillocks had to be leveled, trees to be cut and bridges to be built. More than 100 coolies were at work to erect the embankments. In fact for many poor people, this work on the railway line was a blessing as they could feed their families, especially during the dry season when there was a shortage of food in many homes.



The Fathers' residence of Kutungia where Fr. Herman was Parish Priest

The Kutungia parish was started in 1952 by the Parish Priest of Lachragar. The priest's residence was a modest building with several rooms but only one entrance door. Some of the rooms were used as storage place for rice and other supplies. There was a small church and a school building. The convent building was still incomplete. Herman had no Assistant Priest and so he found himself alone to take care of all the activities and tasks, including the running of the Boys Middle School. The Sisters took care of the Girls School. In addition to all these a lot of work remained to be done for the building up of the parish.

The pastoral work remained the priority of Herman. In February he started his visits to the village chapels; there were 17 such chapels and most of them could only be reached on foot. For him this was not much of an obstacle as he was accustomed to long treks in hilly terrain. He had no Assistant and therefore even when on tour he often received "sick calls" in other villages at



Father Herman with his friend Fr. Leonhard Dürschlag

quite a distance from the place he was on tour. On such days he was on the move the whole day. His catechist was of great help to him in such situations. He was there to show him the paths to be followed to reach their destination.

Back from his mission tour Fr. Herman paid a visit to the closest neighbour, the Parish Priest of Gurgura in Orissa (now Barilapta). He met Father Leonard Dürschlag,

a German priest belonging to the SVD congregation. Gurgura was 30 km away from Kutungia. Fr. Leonard was fully engaged in building up this new mission station. Fr. Herman and Fr. Leonard became very good friends and the latter used to visit Kutungia nearly every month on his motorcycle. He would spend the night in Kutungia and the two used to have long conversations about their experiences.

Right from the start of Kutungia parish, some villagers belonging to the Lutheran church had tried to create difficulties for the mission. Some of them claimed that part of the land of the mission compound belonged to them and that they had not received any compensation. They used to "capture" the land so to say by ploughing the disputed site for cultivation. That year they went one step further and filed a case in the local Police Station. So the matter had to be settled in court. This was a step to harass the Parish Priest as he would have to appear in the court in Simdega, the sub divisional headquarters. For a few months Fr. Herman travelled to Simdega every fortnight, but each time the case was postponed. Then he decided to send his munshi for the case, which dragged on for many years. Fr. Herman did not bother too much about the case; from the documents in his possession it appeared that the case would be settled in his favour. However the frequent visits to Simdega and the services of a lawyer were a financial burden for the parish.

For the busy missionary the time passed very fast. In the month of May the villagers had the processions in honour of our Lady and the Parish Priest was invited to celebrate the Eucharist. The rainy season came and the people started to plough the fields for planting the rice. That year many families had to manage the ploughing and the transplantation on their own. Earlier the village women used to help one another in the transplantation work, but now there were not enough women left in the village. Those working on the railway line did not want to

forgo their daily wage. This was clearly an adverse impact of the railways on the traditional way of life in the villages.

At harvest Fr. Herman had the company of two Jesuit novices to assist him in the job of threshing the paddy and bringing the grain to the bungalow. This was a welcome change in his daily routine. During Advent a seminarian, a student of theology in St. Albert's College, came to assist him in conducting the marriage catechumenate for the couples to be married after Christmas. Fr. Herman was very happy with the active participation of the faithful in the Christmas Celebrations.

At the start of 1962 Fr. Herman was determined to make a beginning with the construction works. First of all he started to collect all the required materials such as lime and sand for the plastering of the walls of the convent. He



Fr. Herman with his Jesuit friends on visit to Kuntungia

also needed corrugated sheets to replace the village tiles on the roof of the bungalow. The railway engineers and contractors were helpful in providing transport for bringing these materials to Kutungia. Extra classrooms were badly

needed for the Girls Middle School as for the new session class 6 was to be started. Fr. Herman had put labourers on the job to make bricks and he had also collected enough fire wood for lighting the fire in the brick kiln. As usual Father went about the job in a very systematic manner. All the works would be executed in phases. There was always shortage of money for such extra ordinary expenses, but fortunately the students of St. Joseph's High School in Aalst and his family members put in extra efforts to gather funds.

In spite of his involvement in all the construction activities Father did not neglect his pastoral duties. He made the annual Lenten tour of all the village chapels. On all these visits he carried medicines with him to distribute to sick people in the far away villages,

Herman was happy to receive the visit of his Provincial Superior, Fr. Crick. It was an opportunity to place all his plans and expectations before his superior. He also talked about his people back home in Belgium expressing the hope that sometime in the future he would get the opportunity to see his family members again. Herman remained very close to his family.

Before the summer vacation the Parish Priest organized a special catechumenate for more than 350 children who would receive the sacrament of Confirmation. Herman liked to give the instructions in the open air and in his usual interactive style of questions and answers. The boys and girls enjoyed his lively talks and remembered his teachings. On the 3rd of May His Grace Archbishop Pius Kerketta administered the sacrament to 380 children. Confirmations did not take place every year and that is why the number of children was so large. There were big celebrations to welcome the Archbishop for this festive occasion.

Sometime later Herman gave accommodation to a mother with 5 children. The mother had been accused of being a witch. Herman could not tolerate such superstitious accusations and as the woman had to run away from the village, he decided to give her a place in the parish compound.

It happened that Fr. Herman was called upon to settle disputes between the labourers and the contractors of the railway construction or between labourers and the management. Such disputes resulted in the stoppage of the work. The intervention of the Father was appreciated by both sides, the labourers and the management. Herman always stood for justice and the people had great trust in him. Gradually Fr. Herman came to realize that the construction of the railway line, although at present beneficial for those who were employed, would have an adverse impact on the local community. It would provide better and faster transport to Ranchi and Rourkela, but at the same time many people from outside, especially from North Bihar, were coming in search of work. With the influx of outsiders the peace and harmony would be disturbed. Thefts and other criminal activities would be on the rise.

Fr. Herman knew that among the Christians a good number were to receive money as "compensation" for the land which had been acquired by the Government for the construction of the railway line. He made sure that the Catholic Cooperative Credit Society opened a separate Unit for Kutungia parish so the people did not have to go anymore to Lachragarh to deposit money or to take loans. He foresaw the danger that once the compensation money was received, the local money lenders and traders would take advantage of the innocence of the local tribals and try to get a share of the money. Fr. Herman was alert and he managed to convince the Christians to deposit their money with the CCCS. Once the money had been deposited in the bungalow, he had to see to it that it was transferred to the office of the Cooperative in Ranchi. Fortunately the engineers in charge of the construction regularly travelled to Ranchi and were always ready to give him a lift. His many contacts were really a great help.

At first sight the outward appearance of Herman, a tall figure with a deep voice, made the people hesitant to approach him. But once they came in contact they found

that he was a very kindhearted person. Those who lived with him noticed his physical strength; when cement bags had to be unloaded in the bungalow, he used to carry two bags, one in each hand. Nobody was able to do this.

It was this physical strength and endurance that enabled him to cycle many kms without showing any signs of fatigue. He travelled on his bicycle in the heat of summer to Kalunga beyond Rourkela to purchase medicines for a little girl, who had fallen sick and needed urgent treatment. He took great care of the sick. On another occasion he spent three days, going up and down to Rourkela to get a young man, who had TB admitted in the hospital.

By the beginning of 1963 the construction and repair works had made slow progress. The workers were not lazy, but their work was slow and steady. Fr. Herman was very keen to finish the main works before the middle of 1963. He did not find time anymore to go and give retreats in other parishes. The renovation works and his pastoral duties kept him fully engaged from early morning till evening. Herman was always faithful in his spiritual duties. Many times he could be seen walking along the railway line after a day's work, reciting the prayers of the breviary. Not a single day would pass without taking time for the examination of conscience and the breviary. As he was the only priest in the parish, life was rather lonely and for Herman to have no Jesuit companions around was hard. However his prayer life gave him strength to carry on the work.

During the rainy season when people in the villages were busy in the fields Father decided to have a break and to attend the annual 8 day common retreat for the Jesuit Parish Priests. In Sitagarha (the usual place for such retreats) he found about 25 confreres, who had come from various corners of the mission. He was happy to meet so many of them. The previous years he had always made his eight day retreat in some mission post as it offered him an



Fr. Herman, leaving the parish on yet another pastoral tour.

opportunity to visit new places and learn more about the mission. This time he was looking for a quiet time to reflect and pray. To be with other priests after many months of hectic activities was a welcome break for him and he returned to his post with renewed vigour.

There was progress on the new railway track. From the month of September goods trains started running from

Ranchi in slow motion up to the railway station beyond Kutungia. When the first train moved on the embankment along the parish property, within a few seconds all the classrooms were empty; the children rushed out to see the first train passing by.

Soon after the harvest season Father set out again for his village tours. It was the time for intensive pastoral activities with the marriage schools and retreats in preparation for Christmas.

For the Christians in Chotanagpur the feast of Christmas is the big feast of the year (the big day -baradin) and is celebrated with great solemnity. The harvest is over and the grain has been stored up in the house. It is a time to rejoice. Fr. Herman always experienced inner peace and happiness in celebrating the Eucharist with his flock on Christmas night. After the solemn midnight Mass he would watch the singing and dancing of the people under the rhythm of the heavy drums.

After Christmas Fr. Herman travelled with Fr. Leonard SVD to Rourkela. He wanted to buy spare parts for his bicycle. Recently he had broken two pedals and the handle bar of his bicycle was also bent as he had pulled too hard when cycling up a steep slope on his village tours. Both Fathers had a short get-together with the a few German Engineers, engaged in installing the heavy machinery in the steel plant.

Herman started the New Year 1964 with a short visit to Samtoli as he was in search of good teachers for the Girls Middle school. Some constructions jobs were not yet completed. There were always some delays or other. The window-panes required for the bungalow were still lying in Lachragar and had to be brought to Kutungia. As India was at war with China asbestos sheets for the toilets of the Sisters were not available.

On the 26th of January 1964 (Replublic Day) the New Railway line was officially inaugurated and the first goods train rode from Ranchi to Rourkela. It was an



Fr. Herman, a friend of all.

event the people here would remember for a long time to come. Fr. Herman was very busy trying to finish the pending works. He started early on his tours of the village chapels and finished this major pastoral activity well before Palm Sunday. Father was not aware that this would be his last tour. He went to attend the Annual General Meeting of the Catholic Cooperative Bank, held in Gumla. He followed this up with a trip to Ranchi for a visit to the dentist and other matters. He met some of his Jesuit friends, in particular Fr. G. Zwijsen, and they talked late into the night.

This was his last visit to Ranchi and by that time the troubles, which brought an abrupt end to his life, had already started in that part of country.

Part IV A Martyr's Death

The Sacrifice of his life at Gerda

Communal Violence

In the beginning of March 1964 communal disturbances and conflicts erupted in the industrial centres of Jamshedpur and Rourkela and these disturbances spread quickly to the interior villages. The region of Kutungia was also badly affected.

These disturbances were the outcome of a violent confrontation in East Pakistan (presently Bangladesh) between the Muslim population (the majority community) and the Hindus and Adivasis (minority communities).

The conflict with the Hindu population started with the alleged theft of a holy relic of the Prophet Mohamed from a mosque in Srinagar in Kashmir. Pakistan accused the Hindu community in India of having committed this crime. In East Pakistan the tensions rose so high that the Muslims started to persecute the Hindus living there. As the atrocities on the Hindus increased, they started to leave the country and seek refuge in India. Along with the persecution of the Hindus, some Christian tribals also had to bear the brunt of Muslim anger and aggression. They also started fleeing from their country. There was a great influx of refugees into India. In the border towns and villages there was no place to give shelter to so many refugees. Hundreds of them were sent by special train from Kolkata to resettlement areas in Madhya Pradesh. The sight of so many refugees caused great indignation among the Hindu population.

They wanted revenge. Fanatics used this opportunity to incite the people, to instigate them and to whip up communal passions. Communal riots broke out in Rourkela on the 18th of March 1964. All educational institutions were

closed immediately. Even the steel factory was closed down. Curfew was imposed on the town. Soon the violence spread to the rural areas on both sides of the border between Bihar and Orissa. Armed gangs fanned out into the country side, creating fear and spreading wild rumours: "Pakistan has declared war. Muslims are killing Hindus". Many villagers, including tribals, were forced to join these marauding gangs. Frenzied mobs attacked Muslims, burned their houses and killed them. In general the Christians did not join these communal forces.

Gerda

On Palm Sunday, 22 March 1964, Fr. Herman celebrated the First Mass as usual. The Blessing of the Palms, the procession and Eucharist took place in the open air. Many faithful attended this celebration, marking the beginning of Holy Week. The catechist and the teachers present noticed that Father was not his usual self and his sermon was not so inspiring as usual. Nobody turned up for the second mass. It is not clear whether Father was aware about the communal disturbances in the region. On Monday, March the 23rd Father went to administer the sacrament to the sick in the nearby village, Orga, and from there he went to another village across the Orissa border to anoint a person, who had suddenly fallen sick. On his way back he met a Muslim of Genmer village, who told him that all Muslims were living in fear of possible attacks by roaming gangs of frenzied people.

The next day, Tuesday, Father said Mass for the Sisters, the catechist and a few others. After breakfast he found that no workers had turned up for duty. Then the catechist informed him about the situation in Gerda. A big crowd of people, headed by men who had come from outside, had surrounded the village the previous evening and there had been fighting at night. Muslims from other villages had fled to Gerda, in the hope that they would be

able to defend themselves, but they were outnumbered. Even the few police men, posted there to protect the inhabitants, took flight and left the place out of fear that they would be killed. That morning the final assault on the village began about 7.00 a.m. The shouting and yelling of the incited mob as well as the cries and wailing of the Muslims could be heard as far as Kutungia.

Hearing this terrible news Father Herman started walking up and down the verandah of the bungalow. After prayer and reflection he made up his mind: such barbaric acts could not be tolerated. This was a great injustice and had to be stopped. And so he took out his cycle and prepared himself to proceed to Gerda. He was aware of the risk he was taking; he handed over his keys to the catechist and even mentioned that if any Muslim came to the parish for refuge, he should be granted protection. The catechist and the teachers tried in vain to convince him not to risk his life, and even tried physically to stop him. They told him: "It is too dangerous, you will be killed". His answer was: "I am ready to give my life." Off he was on his bicycle to Gerda at a distance of about 5 km. It was a bad sandy road, but within 20 minutes he reached the village. He saw the crowd of attackers, men wild with hatred and passion. This was a very dangerous situation. He left his bicycle and made his way through the crowd. Some people, who recognized him, begged him not to risk his life. Someone told him: "this is not a place for you." In other words the man was telling him: keep out of this. But Father made his way up to the low boundary wall surrounding the mosque. The attackers were hurling stones and bricks at the hundreds of people huddled together in the small enclosure. Father spoke a few words to the Muslims, telling them not to fear. Then he turned towards the crowd of attackers. Seeing the tall figure with a black beard and in a white cassock, the shouting and yelling slowed down. As there was no use of arguing with a mad

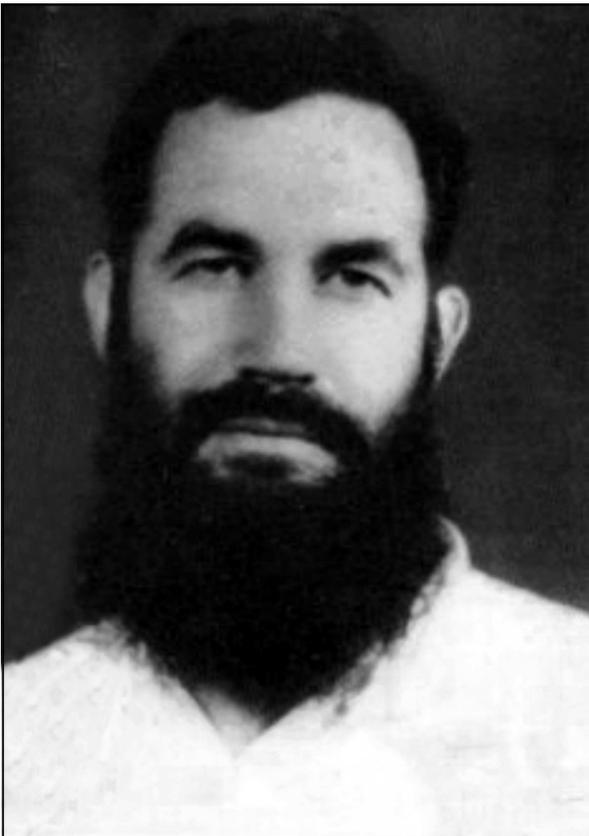
crowd, his message was short but strong: "killing people is a grave sin, stop this madness". He repeated this message a few times. Most people in the crowd did not recognize him as they were outsiders. "He is one of them" someone shouted and the attack resumed. A stone flew through the air and hit Herman on his face. From the impact he sank down on his knees and tried to get up again. A few



The burned out mosque at Gerda

Christians in the crowd shouted: "He is our Father, do not kill him". But a few boys rushed forward and killed him with sharp weapons.

He died almost instantly and the crowd rushed forward with more strength; they set the mosque on fire so that those inside would come out. It was a real massacre. Nearly a thousand people were killed and all their houses were burned down. The Christians managed to pull the body of Father away from the fire. The news of the killing reached the parish at around 10.30 a.m. The Sisters set out on foot to Gerda to take charge of the body. The women of the



**Fr. Herman Rasschaert s.j.,
Martyr of Peace and Communal Harmony**

next village stopped them and requested them to go back and wait till the attackers had left. The Sisters went back and sent two persons to Lachragarh to inform the Parish Priest of the killing and to ask for instructions on how to conduct the burial. At night the Sisters were afraid to stay in the convent; they went out and joined the women of other villages camping under trees in the open.

In the meantime a few catholic boys could retrieve the mutilated body from the clutches of the crowd at about 11.00 a.m. By afternoon it was all over and the mob moved on to other villages. The catholic families of Gerda village brought the body to the little village chapel about 2 km away and stood guard the whole night. The Police and Civil authorities of the region sent news to Ranchi and the Authorities there contacted the Archbishop and the Jesuit Provincial Superior, requesting them to send an official delegation to Kutungia without delay. The same day Rev. Joseph Tigga, Vicar General of Ranchi Archdiocese, and Fr. Victor Rossner left for Simdega, where they spent the night.

On the morning of the 25th the Sisters of Kutungia together with the Catechist and a few teachers went to Gerda to bring the dead body of Fr. Herman to the parish. They found the face of Father badly wounded, all his teeth were knocked out. The people carried the body from Girja Tola to the Parish.

There the Sisters took great care to dress the wounds, wash the body and dress it in clean clothes. After that the body was placed on a bier in one of the rooms. Delegates were sent to Herman's priest friend Fr. Leonard requesting him to come for the burial.

The same morning Rev. Joseph Tigga, Fr. Rossner and Fr. Bossuyt along with along with Shri S.K. Bage (Cabinet Minister - Government of Bihar), and the Sub Divisional Officer, left Simdega and proceeded to Kutungia. On the way they met groups of people armed with traditional weapons intent on taking revenge on

the Muslim villages. They stopped them and tried to argue with them, but in vain. By the time the official delegation arrived in Kutungia it was 3 p.m. The Fathers went straight to the room where the body was laid up. They knelt down and prayed for some time. The Fathers found that inspite of the wounds the face of Father looked very serene and peaceful. After the prayers the Officials also entered the room to pay their respects. They were very moved by the sight of the body. Immediately arrangements were made for the burial Mass. Fr. Bossuyt and Fr. J. Tigga offered the Holy Mass. The delegation had received instructions from the civil authorities to leave the area before dark. So after the Mass the Fathers asked the Sisters to complete the burial rituals. Soon after they left Fr. Leonard arrived and he took charge of the burial in the parish campus. That night he stayed at Kutungia and this saved his life. The same night a frenzied mob came to his mission post in Orissa in search of a Muslim boy, who was given shelter there. The mob broke into the house and killed the boy.



The grave of Fr. Rasschaert s.j.

The next day, Maundy Thursday, Fr. Leonard celebrated the Eucharist in the morning for the Sisters and some of the faithful and then left for his own parish for the Holy Week services.

In the evening Fr. F. Crick, Provincial Superior, and Rev. Joseph Tigga arrived from Ranchi to conduct the Holy Week Services. There was an atmosphere of deep mourning among the Christians of Kutungia.

From Gerda the violence spread to the other areas in the region. On Friday Shri G. Nanda, the Minister of Home Affairs, Government of India, arrived in Ranchi to take stock of the situation. In consultation with the Chief Minister, Mr. B.K. Sahay, plans were worked out to bring the situation under control. The Chief Minister told His Grace, Mgr. Kerketta, Archbishop of Ranchi: "Father Herman will go down in history as a true martyr of charity." The next day Shri G. Nanda in a broadcast on All India Radio- Ranchi paid tribute to Fr. Herman: "I offer my respectful tribute to his memory. The supreme sacrifice he made for maintaining brotherly feelings should serve as an inspiration for all of us for the maintenance of peace and goodwill."

On Easter Sunday His Grace, Archbishop Pius Kerketta, came to Kutungia and spent the night there. Gradually the situation was getting back to normal, but there was a lot of fear among all sections of the population.

By offering his life for his fellow human beings, Fr. Herman could not stop the killings at Gerda and nearby places, yet his sacrifice was not in vain. Herman died as he had lived, If he had not sacrificed his life, many more people might have been killed. On account of his death the Government of Bihar with help of the government of India took immediate action to bring the situation under control. More Armed Forces were sent to evacuate Muslims from isolated villages and bring them

to safer places. In some quarters there had been accusations that the Christian tribals had been instigating the killing of Muslims. The death of Fr. Herman clearly showed that these accusations were false.

Homage to a Martyr

"He who loses his life, will save it." These words of Jesus apply to Herman. He died as a Martyr of Peace and Communal Harmony and his memory has been kept alive.



The tomb of Father Herman Rasschaert s.j.

Pandit Jawarharlal Nehru, the then Prime Minister of India, in one of his last public speeches to the Congress Party recalled the name of Father Herman Rasschaert and he announced: "Father should be honoured". This

was a message to the nation. Later a group of prominent persons formed the Father Herman Rasschaert Commemoration Committee. Mr. Shashi Bhushan was the general secretary of this committee. They took the initiative to organise a public function to pay homage to Fr. Herman on the first Anniversary of his Death, on the 24th of March 1965. This Commemoration ceremony was held in the campus of St. Xavier's School Delhi. Mrs. Indira Gandhi, Minister of Information and Broadcasting, unveiled the photo of Fr. H. Rasschaert.



Shrimati Indira Gandhi at a function in honour of Sjahid Fr. Herman Rasschaert sj

In her address she said: "The life of Fr. Rasschaert is for all of us a source of inspiration to find courage and strength on our journey. He knew no fear and he invites us to fight communalism." Dr. Ashok Mehta presided over the function and said: "Fr. H. Rasschaert was a Man of Humanity, a Man of God. We must continue to keep his remembrance in the years to come."

On the 11th of September 1965 there was a Commemorative Service in the Town Hall of Aalst in Belgium to pay homage to Fr. Herman. Mr. Shashi Bhushan was the official representative of the Government of India for this celebration. On behalf of the Government of India, Mr. K.B. Lall, the Indian Ambassador in Belgium, extended a special invitation to the parents of Fr. Herman to travel to India, to visit Kutungia and the tomb of their son and to be present for the Official Commemoration of the 2nd Anniversary of his death.

Mr. Shashi Bhushan carried with him letters from the President of India. Dr. S. Radhakrishnan wrote to the parents of Herman, assuring them that the remembrance of the sacrifice of their noble son would never be forgotten in India.

The Prime Minister of India. Lal Bahadur Shastri, in his letter affirmed that Fr. Herman sacrificed his life on the altar of human brotherhood and peace and this sacrifice would remain forever an inexhaustible source of inspiration.

Pilgrimage to India

On the 16th of March 1966 the parents of Fr. Herman Rasschaert departed from Brussels for their journey to India. Fr. Paul Bulckens accompanied them and on the 18th March they arrived in Ranchi, where they were received as State Guests at the Circuit House by the Government Authorities Officials. After that they visited Catholic institutions in Ranchi, in particular St. John's High School where Herman had been a teacher. The same day they were taken via Khunti and Torpa (places where Herman had worked) to Noatoli, where they spent the night.

The next day they started the pilgrimage to Kutungia. They first visited Gerda village, where the parents offered



Memorial in Gerda on the spot where Fr. Rasschaert was killed.

flowers on the memorial stone erected on the spot where Herman died. The whole village had gathered to receive the guests. From there they proceeded to Kutungia Parish where they received a grand welcome. The guests placed flower bouquets on the grave of Herman and prayed in silence. It was a great consolation for the father and mother to see for themselves how the people loved and venerated Herman. His presence was very much felt by all.

From that day onwards the family and the Belgian friends of Fr. Herman have kept a special bond with Kutungia parish.

After their pilgrimage Mr. Julian Rasschaert and his wife travelled to Delhi and attended the Official Commemoration of the Second Anniversary of Herman's Martyrdom.

Epilogue

HERMAN RASSCHAERT

One of the Officials, who was present in Kutungia when Rev. Joseph Tigga along with other Fathers arrived for the burial of Fr. Herman, made a statement that "Father gave his life so that hundreds of Muslims might live a few minutes longer." This is a factual statement of what had happened on the fateful day. Father Herman Rasschaert did get killed and his death did not save the lives of the Muslims of Gerda. Yet from the story of his life it is clear that his way of dying was in line with the way he had lived, a living out his deep commitment and faith. His close companions and friends all agreed that if Herman had not gone to Gerda and not made an attempt to stop the massacre he would have regretted it the whole of his life and he would have felt himself a coward. Herman knew that he might be killed. What really inspired him to go and put his life at stake?

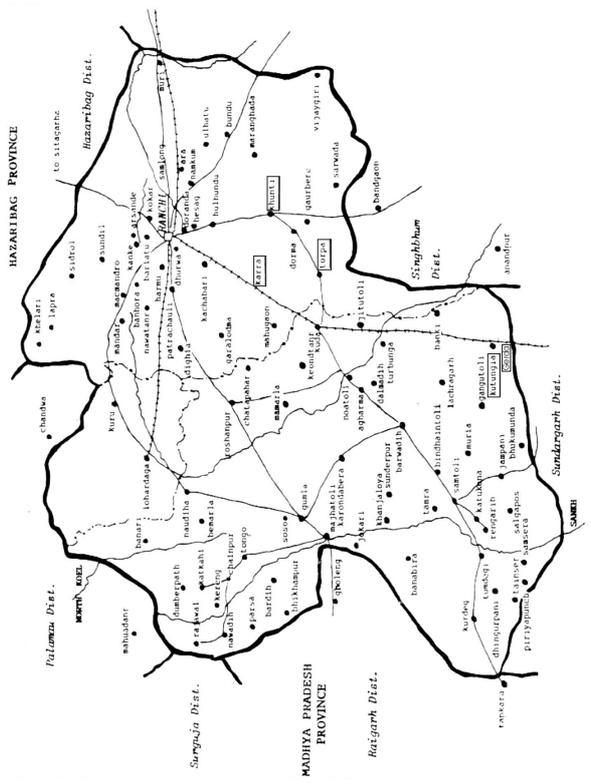
Herman was *man of humanity*. He strongly believed in the equality of all human beings. Wherever he was, he came up for the poor, the powerless and the marginalized. His family had lived in exile on account of the injustice meted out to them at the end of the World War I. He could never forget how they had suffered and therefore fighting for justice was part of his life. Deep down in his heart he felt that great injustice was being done to the inhabitants of Gerda, who were innocent. He was a man of action and ready to sacrifice his own life in an attempt to save the lives of innocent people.

Herman was a *man of God*. Responding generously to the call of God he joined the Society of Jesus. He walked in the footsteps of his Master Jesus Christ. Like his Master he went the whole way. When Jesus died on the Cross,

the leaders of Jews were convinced that his death was the end of the dreams of this itinerant prophet proclaiming the arrival of new kingdom, a kingdom of justice and peace. In fact most of his disciples had run away in fear of their lives. Yet some time after Jesus' death these same disciples proclaimed that Jesus was alive and their message attracted many followers. Speaking about his death, Jesus had said: "Truly, I tell all of you emphatically, unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone. But if it dies, it produces a lot of grain." The grain of wheat falls into the ground and bears abundant fruit.

The death of Father Herman did not have an immediate impact, but his dying the way he did has born fruit. By dying a martyr's death his life became a symbol, a sign for all people working for justice, peace and harmony in society. This message of his life is with us today and we can even say that Fr. Herman is alive today. He is certainly alive in the hearts of many people of Kutungia. The place of his martyrdom has become a pilgrimage place, where people gather every year to commemorate his death and pray for his blessings.

This short bibliography is published on the occasion of the Commemoration of the 50th Anniversary of Fr. Herman Rasschaert's death so that his life may remain a source of inspiration for the whole nation, a source of courage and strength for all of us to work for justice and peace.



The Ranchi Jesuit Province

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