

LEMMENS, Fr. Heinrich J. 97 D NGA JAM USA

+ October 23, 2004

* May 17, 1907 Aachen (Aix la Chapelle), Rhineland

Bethel Park, PA

He was born on May 17, 1907 at Aachen (Aix la Chapelle), Rhineland, one-time capital of the Holy Roman Empire. After his primary education there, he attended our junior seminary at nearby Broich, 1919-1922, followed by six years at Knechsteden, 1922-1928. On April 4, 1929 he made his vows at Heimbach. He returned to Knechsteden for senior seminary courses and was ordained there on April 8, 1934.

His first appointment was to the Spiritan School for Late Vocations at Spire in the Palatinate, but in 1938 he was assigned to Benue, Nigeria, for a mission prefecture entrusted to the German Province of the Congregation. He ministered there under the guidance of Fr. Peter Becker at Korinya. When World War II broke out, Bp. Charles Heerey placed him and Fr. Siegfried Eckert in Onitsha, Eckert, at his cathedral and Lemmens at Christ the King College as a teacher. It did not save them from being included in the group of German Fathers and Brothers who were interned. They were regarded as very dangerous Germans and suspected of having set up a network of stations at strategic locations to prepare for a Nazi invasion of the country. The irony of the situation was that at home their confreres were accused of being against Hitler's Nazis, and now in Nigeria they were viewed as pro-Hitler. In December 1940, they and many other Germans were transferred from Nigeria to a prisoners-of-war camp in Jamaica.

The camp's population consisted of hundreds of sailors, many of them only 14 years old, officers, agricultural experts and other learned men, plus Protestant and Catholic missionaries. Idleness is a dangerous factor when so many people are doomed to remain for years until the end of a war. So Fr. Lemmens obtained permission from the camp's British Commander to organize what has been called a "university behind barbed wire". In no time students enrolled by the hundreds in all kinds of courses leading to degrees in agronomy, marine engineering, business administration, etc., and for the youngest, secondary school. Needless to say, sports also flourished, including of course, soccer. School began daily at 8:00 a.m. and often ended only at 10:00 p.m. With no vacations interrupting school days, the students were able to put nine years of studies into the four and one-half years of their internment. After the war, the government of Germany officially recognized the degrees they had earned. For books and other needed materials Fr. Lemmens appealed successfully to a Mr. Emeril Auer of Buffalo, NY.

When the war ended in 1945 the other internees went back to Germany, but the Spiritan Fathers and Brothers were not released; they were considered too dangerous. Fr. George Collins, then Provincial of the USA, moved heaven and earth to obtain their release; but it took until January 1947 before they arrived in the USA.

After a few months of rest and recuperation, Father Lemmens was assigned to Duquesne University, where he taught German and earned a Ph.D. in 1952 at the University of Cincinnati.

In 1954 he became pastor of St. Gabriel African-American Parish in Hot Springs, AR. The work he did there so impressed some people that his name was submitted to appear on the television program "This is Your Life". Provincial Superior Francis McGlynn, however, denied permission saying "We are not in favor of public appearances of this type".

In 1959 he returned to Duquesne University and resumed teaching there in the Modern Languages Department and became the head of the Department. He retired in 1977, having taught there for 25 years. Being only 70, he then served temporarily at Epiphany Church, Venice, FL. Thereafter he spent the winter months in Puerto Rico and the summers at Duquesne's Trinity Hall until 1990. In that year he went into full retirement at the Sarasota, FL, community but continued to be active in ministry as much as he could.

In 2001, at the age of 94, he transferred to the Bethel Park, PA, Spiritan retirement home. Frail and almost blind, he faithfully was present in all religious meetings and events.

He passed away peacefully on October 23, 2004, at the age of 97. Viewing was held in the Chapel in The Spiritan Center (formerly Bethel Animation Center), and a Mass of Resurrection was held there with burial at St. Mary's Cemetery, Sharpsburg, PA.