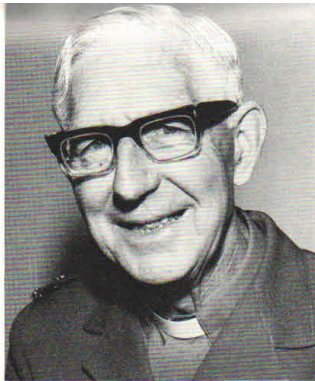


23 January

Fr HENRY SWIFT

19 January 1900 – 23 January 1973



FR. H. SWIFT

Born at Burscough in NW England, Henry entered the Society in 1919. In 1934, he reached Rhodesia and we find him in Driefontein the following year. That same year Henry Swift began his prison work when he was posted to St Peter's, now Mbare. He gradually taught himself what the work involved and he stood by the scaffold of around 100 condemned men over the years. Fr Michael Geoghegan wrote of him: 'He was indefatigable. For many years, he was practically the only minister of religion who visited the prison regularly. When a man was condemned to death, Henry would visit him in his cell and give him basic instruction in the Church's teaching. He would visit him every day and, so gentle and calm was he, the prison authorities always welcomed him. On the evening before an execution Henry would baptise the prisoner and, on the morning of the execution, he would say Mass in the condemned cell, give the prisoner his First Holy Communion and within an hour or so afterwards the man would be dead.'

Henry himself describes his activities: 'I tell those "Awaiting trial" how to get in touch with relatives and employers who do not know where they are. It may take two months for the murder case to go through the Magistrate's court and the High Court, between which, the police will have to go long distances to verify statements ... The relays of guards are very considerate towards the condemned ... With Catholics, the faith helps them to die well. ... After Holy Communion ... I tell him that later his hands must be strapped behind him so that he cannot hurt himself – saying nothing about the fall – that his eyes will probably be covered, that he will hear my voice on his right and that he will have time to say the name 'Jesus' about three times before the rope is made quite tight, at which moment he will die and should be thinking of going to God. ... as he is being strapped, I tell him the executioner will do everything without hurting him.'

Henry was also involved in parish work around the city and he was notorious for getting his way and cajoling priests into Sunday supplies. Anywhere between Rugare and Emerald Hill and beyond was his concern. Geoghegan again: he was 'as cunning as a snake and yet as innocent as a dove' and would dig people out of St George's sometimes leaving the college bereft of Jesuit staff on a Sunday. He was as gentle with a murderer as he was with the Children of Mary.