

5 March

Fr PETER KAVUMA

10 April 1917 – 5 March 1996



Peter Kavuma was ordained for the diocese of Masaka in Uganda in 1947 at the age of 30 but from his early years in the minor seminary he wanted to be a missionary outside his own country like St Francis Xavier whom he greatly admired. Finally, in 1956, he took action and wrote to the Jesuit General in Rome. There followed a five-year correspondence back and forth before he got the green light to join the novitiate in Edinburgh with Raymund Kapito and Jim Hughes, two other priests, in 1961.

Peter was born in Mpugwe, near Masaka and for 17 years was in the minor and major seminaries. Bishop Muchabaiwa was the only one from Zimbabwe who visited his home and gave a name – Chipu – to a new born girl in the family. After his vows as a Jesuit he came to Zimbabwe (Rhodesia) and was at Monte Cassino and Silveira House where he served Mabvuku parish. He also went to Mhondoro, St Peter's, Mhondoro and Martindale.

At his funeral, Raymond Kapito summed up his life as desiring God's people lived a life of faith, prayer and the sacraments. He was direct and simple in his approach and would use his time waiting for a bus asking people if they were married in church. Kapito said, 'Joking (about Peter) was permissible but let us save our Kavuma from unhealthy and unprofitable caricatures'.

His memory is preserved at Arrupe in that the first community dwelling, when it was not yet a university, was named Kavuma House. By then there were two Ugandan scholastics at the college: Drasiga and Ngabirano. The writer of his obituary makes the point that Kavuma had no one to share his thoughts and reflections with as one from Uganda. Most missionaries have companions from their home countries. He did not. He was on his own.

On his visit home in 1979, he was caught up in the war between Amin and the Tanzanian army at Butende where he and others sought shelter in a house and spent the day praying and singing hymns. He had the Blessed Sacrament in his pocket. A child was born and he was asked to name it. He chose John Ogilvie, whose feast it was that day. To remember that, in the heat of battle, says something about 'our Kavuma'.

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PETER KAVUMA 1917-1996

Peter Kavuma was the first Ugandan Jesuit. He was born in Mpugwe, near Masaka and entered the minor seminary in 1931. It was there that he had the first thoughts of becoming. In his own words he was 'attracted by the name of Jesus and the good works of St Francis Xavier.' He was ordained by Archbishop Joseph Kiwanuta in 1947 and worked as an assistant priest and later parish priest. His Jesuit vocation did not go away during these years and, finding no way of achieving it, he decided, in 1956, to write to Fr General, despite the opposition of his bishop. Correspondence back and forth followed for five years, including an interview in the Congo, until Fr Terence Corrigan received him into the Jesuit novitiate in Manresa, London, in 1961.

He was immensely happy in the novitiate and felt he had at last achieved his purpose. Having left his family and his country he was on the road to fulfilling his missionary vocation. He arrived in the then Southern Rhodesia in 1964 and after spending some time learning Shona he was posted successively to Mabvuku, Mhondoro, Mbare and Martindale. In 1972 he passed through Uganda on his way from tertianship and the people there tried to detain him but he said, 'I must go to Rhodesia. That is where I am called to be.'

The only person from Zimbabwe who visited his home was Bishop Alex Muchabaiwa of Mutare and he was at Peter's funeral in Harare in 1996. He spoke movingly at the graveside about his visit to Mpugwe where he blessed Peter's mother's grave and was asked to give a name – he chose Chipo - to a new born child in the family. Raymond Kapito, a fellow priest novice with Peter, preached at the funeral and spoke of his lively faith – so confident, so certain - that all who met him were challenged and called to fidelity:

Kavuma, in his own simple incoherent ways, was, perhaps, not sufficiently understood by his fellow Jesuits. He found meaning and courage in all he did, his sufferings and misunderstandings. His apostolate was simple but persistent: to get God's people to live a life of faith and prayer, of the sacraments, especially Reconciliation and the Eucharist.

There were many stories about how he would encourage people - married traditionally - to marry in church. He would confront taxi drivers and people he

met casually at bus stops, *'Makachata here?'* We smile at his directness but it bore fruit wherever he stayed for any length of time. He was known to reply to a taxi driver, 'I have no money but kneel down and I will give you my blessing'.

Raymond Kapito thought that people sometimes did not see the real man. 'Joking is permissible', he said, 'but let us save our Kavuma from unhealthy and unprofitable caricatures'. His burial started in the usual sad way but it gradually turned into a celebration as the women led in ever more joyful song and dance. It was poignant and fitting that two young Ugandan Jesuits were part of the ceremony: Simon Drasiga and Emmanuel Ngabirano. Peter never forgot his country and occasionally the cost of leaving it could be glimpsed. Most missionaries have companions from their countries of origin to share with occasionally. Peter had no one. We did not know the culture that nurtured him. In a real sense he was alone.

Besides, for much of his time in Zimbabwe his own country was in agony. The war was at its height when he visited in 1979. He wrote afterwards:

I went to Nkozi parish on the Kampala-Masaka road to see my relatives and I was in Butende celebrating Mass on Ash Wednesday when a shell burst about three yards from the church. Everyone – myself included – fell to the floor out of fear. Butende became a battlefield and Amin's soldiers and the Tanzanian army occupied it several times.

The worst day was 10 March. Bullets were whistling by, shells were exploding and planes bombing. I was caught in the crossfire. Desperately seeking shelter with the boy who was accompanying me, I dashed into a house. With the Blessed Sacrament on me I was to remain sitting there from 10:00 to 16.30. Many people came and it was soon full. We said many rosaries and sang hymns. The firing went on unabated. As we were in great danger of death I baptised a boy and gave him the name John Ogilvie, whose feast it was. And I gave general absolution to the people in the house.

At about 16.30 I decided to go back to the mission. The firing got heavier and we could see bullets hitting the ground on both sides. When I got there I gave Holy Communion to about 30 people. I baptised two other babies (one of them John Ogilvie) and gave general absolution. I stayed in Butende to comfort people. On the 26th March I walked the 20 miles to Bishop Dungu's house in Kitovu; for me the war had ended.'

That Peter in baptising the boys could remember that it was the feast of John Ogilvie, a Jesuit martyr, while shells were bursting around him, captures in a nutshell his faith, his persistence and his centeredness.