



Fr Stephen Hirjak, S.J.
(1916-2004. In Zambia 1951-1987)

15 May 2004

Stephen Hirjak was born on 24 December 1916 as an American citizen in Yonkers, New York, son of John Hirjak and Anna Cirnyak. He was baptised on 7 January 1917 in New York. However his old grandmother wanted to die at home in Slovakia and he was chosen to accompany her, sometime in the mid-thirties. At the age of 22 he presented himself at the Jesuit novitiate in Ruzembork on 31 December 1938 just after having enjoyed his end of school year party of 1938. In 1940-1943 he did his philosophy and regency in Zagreb where he learned his often repeated epithet 'magarats' (= stupid ass) used by him in a friendly jocular manner. In 1943-1945 he was at Heythrop College, England for his theology. In fact he came there with a whole group of the Slovak scholastics, for whom he had managed to trick the Russian military authorities in getting the necessary permission to leave the country.

He completed his final two years of theology in Woodstock, USA where he was ordained on 20th June 1948. It was there that he started his long lasting friendship with Fr John Courtney Murray, S.J. of Vatican II fame. In 1950-1951 he did his tertianship. He was notified in May that he was awarded his Masters in Education with *Magna cum Laude* from Fordham University. He headed immediately for Northern Rhodesia and was missioned to Katondwe.

In December of 1951 he requested the Apostolic Administrator of Lusaka to move to Mpanshya where he reorganized the place for a trade school. Shortly afterwards in February 1952 he took his final vows there.

He was assigned from 1954-1959 to the Sacred Heart parish in Kabwe which served both the local and expatriate communities and where he built the large parish hall. From 1960 he was transferred to Lusaka where he worked in Chinika, Mandevu/Marrapodi and Matero. He labored there in different capacities until his frequent health relapses necessitated a transfer to the United States in 1987 on medical grounds.

Eventually in 1990 when the Communist regime collapsed in Slovakia, there was an appeal to the Slovak Jesuits abroad to come back to Slovakia and help in its spiritual rebuilding. Hirjak was the first to volunteer and he worked there with his usual total dedication till 1998 when he was transferred to Ivanka pri Dunaji (just south of the capital Bratislava) to the Jesuit retirement house where he died on 15 May 2002.

From the different memories of those who knew him quite well, it looks that right from the beginning of his religious life he took John the Baptist as his model. He took to heart the Lord's teaching about 'one tunic, no coins in the purse' for he had no preoccupation about material things. He would be satisfied to live in a small African hut, because he did not come to Africa to build anything material, he came to set up the living Church in the hearts and lives of people. But if the people wanted a church, let them build one! He took sincerely to heart the care of the poor and those in any serious need. From his extant letters to his superiors it is evident how he desired to be directed by them and followed their recommendations.

His firm dedication to the Lord inspired him to instill that same total dedication into his parishioners. Here his approach to the half-hearted faithful was rough, even very rough. Walking up and down the aisle of the church while preaching, he would shout something like: 'If you came to sit here like a bag of maize instead of giving your mind and body

entirely to the Lord, then get out of here. The Lord does not need you!' Such rugged outbursts, often exaggerated in the telling, did not make friends for him, especially not among those who thought that they were 'someone' in the Church. His superior received several complaints about such insults.

The simple and the humble, on the other hand, both men and women, loved him and flocked to him, especially the poor. When he was distributing blankets to the destitute someone remarked: 'Bambo is angry, angry, but he has a soft heart'. In Mandevu he even built a house for poor widows and took care of them, so that when he was very ill in the hospital and almost dying, these simple people were always around his bed bringing him what they could. No other sick missionary ever had such a crowd of his parishioners around him.

Though he might have worried some of his professors and superiors, he really put his mind to his studies and did them very well. The same can be seen from the Masters Degree in Education mentioned above. Throughout his life, his continuous interest was in Scripture, the Fathers of the Church and solid theology, like that of Aquinas. He produced for his people simple theological/devotional pamphlets in English and chiNyanja about the Lord and his Mother. He produced also for some years, at the request of his superior, the well-received *Messenger of the Sacred Heart*.

He never had great health. Already in 1953 he had a very painful attack of kidney stones and it periodically came back to him. He suffered excruciating pains, often without any palliative medicine. Eventually from 1984 on it became worse, He spent weeks and months in hospitals in Lusaka and in South Africa. Eventually, in 1987 he was sent to the United States to try their more sophisticated remedies. The medical attention he received there re-established him sufficiently to be able to undertake very strenuous pastoral work in Slovakia till 1998.