



**Br Ilija Dilber, S.J.**

**(1926-2012. In Zambia 1968-1993)**

**4 June 2012**

Br Ilija Dilber was born in 1926 near Sarajevo, in present day Bosnia-Herzegovina. He entered the Society of Jesus in Croatia in 1946, the first of three brothers, all of whom entered as Brothers. His elder brother, Ivan, entered in 1950 and a younger brother, Stejpan, entered in 1955.

The Province files have no material on Ilija's early life in the Society. In 1967 he went to Malta to study English in preparation for coming to Zambia. Ilija, who had a background in electro-mechanics, arrived in 1968 and was stationed in Katondwe where he took charge of the garden and did mechanics. In 1969 he moved to the novitiate community from where he served throughout the Lusaka Archdiocese as a mechanic.

It was in 1975, when Fr Vincent Cichecki was the treasurer for the Archdiocese, that Ilija found a real niche for his talents in Zambia. Although Ilija had no experience in the construction trade, Vincent asked him to supervise the building projects of the Archdiocese. When the Archbishop agreed to the proposal, Ilija took up the work that was to define his mission in Zambia. His first major project was a new church in Mumbwa, for which he had raised the money from his benefactors in Croatia.

Throughout 1976-1977, he developed his team which eventually had 30 permanent workers, including bricklayers, carpenters, painters, electricians and plumbers. If there were a major construction, he would hire more workers to speed up the job; the largest group he worked with had 66 workers. His workers were very faithful to him and stayed with the team over many years. Likewise, Ilija, while demanding hard work and professionalism, was very fair in dealing with his team. He provided a decent wage, a midday meal and in 1983 he improved all their accommodation: replacing or repairing roofs, plastering and painting walls, adding additions to the house, providing materials to build a new house, etc. He also built St Joseph flats near the Airport Roundabout to house some workers. It was there that he had his office.

By 1979 Ilija and his team were working more directly under the Provincial. Although he continued to do work for the Archdiocese, he also took on many other projects for various religious groups. Bishop de Jong, the then chairman of ZEC, wrote to him in 1978 after his team had done some renovation of St Dominic's Seminary. "For it is thanks to your careful planning and execution that the Saint Dominic's Major Seminary in Lusaka has been able to start offering courses to future priests on schedule. What you have managed to achieve in such a short period of time and with limited funds at your disposal will, for a long time to come, remain a source of admiration to us all."

The number of churches, convents, clinics, schools and other buildings that Ilija and his team were responsible for says volumes of his dedication to service of the Church in the way that he knew best. To name but a few: the churches in Kaunda Square, Nangoma, Kalingalinga, and Chongwe; the offices at Roma parish, St Ignatius offices and the Provincial curia; the new wing at the novitiate, the Province library, John Chula House; an extension to the Jesuit residence in Bwacha and Lukanga convent in Kabwe. He truly put his talents to use as a servant of Christ's mission.

But he not only supervised the building, he raised funds continually to help finance the work. Every year he wrote articles for the Sacred Heart Messenger and the Good News mission magazine published in Croatia. He also wrote six booklets in Croatian on his life and work during his time here. Even after he left Zambia, he continued writing and raising funds for the work of the Church here. In 1996 he wrote a 200-page book called, *25 Godina Misionar (Twenty-five Years as a Missionary)*. Many of the churches in the outstations in Nangoma and Kasungu and elsewhere were built from funds that Ilija had raised.

In 1985 during an armed night attack on the novitiate, Ilija's room was especially targeted. Gunshots were fired through his door in the new wing and he was robbed. Although he was not injured, the event left him very frightened. He asked to be moved to another house

and was transferred to the St Ignatius community. He lived his final eight years in Zambia in that community.

No matter what community Ilija stayed in, he was a wonderful companion. He was an edifying Jesuit: regular in his prayer and Mass, a pleasant community member, good humored and helpful. There was an order to his life that helped him to be well organized. You would find him at the novitiate every morning before 08 00 h giving instructions to his team for the day's work. At 20 00 h each evening after dinner and some recreation, he would retire to his room to listen to the news, work on his accounts for the day and plan the following day's work.

In the early 90s he experienced some health problems. His heart began giving problems and he found the daily work more and more tiring. He requested that he be allowed to return to Croatia while he was still in reasonably good health. In the middle of 1993, he returned to Croatia permanently, but he always remained a member of this Province. Until 2007 he did maintenance work in the Croatian Province's college of philosophy and theology. In the final years of his life, he moved to the Province Infirmary and prayed for the Church and the Society. The Zambia-Malawi Province was always part of those prayers. Every year he would send Christmas greetings to the Provincial. His message was often: "While I am still a member of this Province, I feel as a duty to pray for you and the Province and I will continue to do so."

In 1996 Ilija wrote to the Provincial about his health: "Every day I take some medicine, but the medicine cannot make a weak heart stronger and younger. So, everything is in God's providence. I trustfully put my life in the hands of the Lord. I am only praying that His Will be done. I cannot pray to stay shorter or longer in this world. Our Lord knows what is good for me... But if the Lord decides and Ilija will be taken from this world, then I ask all my dear brethren from the Zambia-Malawi Province to pray for this poor Jesuit Brother—Ilija, that the Lord will have mercy on him."

Ilija died peacefully on 4 June 2012.