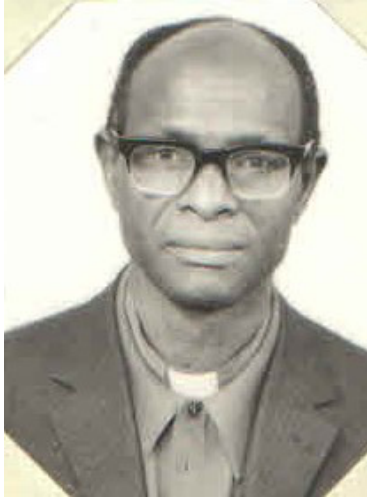


1 August 2002

Br LADISLAUS BVUMKUMBWE

4 May 1932 – 1 August 2002



Ladislaus Bvukumbgwe entered the Society at Silveira House in 1959, one of the first local Jesuits to do so. He much admired Fr Walter O'Connor, the novice master's socius, and followed his advice to take the total abstinence (from alcohol) pledge for life. After his vows, and some practical maintenance work at Mutoko, Mazowe and Musami, he went to Acre House in Glasgow to study building and carpentry. Br Francis Fitzsimmons visited him there and saw how impressed his instructors were with his interest in his subject. Echoing St Ignatius, he was already 34 when he arrived in Scotland and was mixing with teenagers whose dialect of English was almost impenetrable. Also his clerical collar and homburg hat (originating in Bad Homburg, Germany), marked him off from his fellow students. Br Alan Harrison, a contemporary, tells us; 'at Acre House he could usually be relied on to provide a sage commentary on the tragic comedy that was so often the stock in trade of that institution. He resorted to prayer and singing' to escape it! He passed the City and Guilds examination in 1970 and returned to Zimbabwe where he started work with builders at St Ignatius College.

He moved to Chishawasha in 1971 and stayed there for fifteen years until he came to Silveira House in 1986. There he introduced building into the youth programme and would travel to his students' home areas to help them find work. He would sometimes go on his knees to beg for work for them and many gained a livelihood as result. We should not throw the word 'humble' around too easily but Bvukumbgwe was a humble man in the true sense. His spirituality was genuine. Everyone could see that. And he was deeply drawn to the Passion. Dieter Scholz tells us he brought back a crown of thorns from his Holy Land visit and wept a great deal each Friday as he looked at it for a long time.

Bvukumbgwe was known for his compositions. He like to travel long journeys and the noise of the wheels and the vehicle suggested tunes to him that he would develop in his head and then share with choirs at Mbare, for example, and together they would put a song or a hymn together. Fr Paul Caspersz wrote:

I was welcomed to Silveira House by Br Bvukumbgwe. He was named Ladislaus at his christening, 'but I don't like the name. It was given to me by the missionaries. I must carry my father's name, which God gave him and me. To me he will always be living so long as I bear his name.' ... His birthplace is Mutunduru and I went there one day with him.

He is a composer ... I have two cassettes of his songs. When I play them on rising in the morning, I hear the call of Africa again ... Many of his songs come to him in his dreams at night. He then rises from his bed, sings or hums them into a cassette and goes back to sleep. In the morning he plays the cassette to his singers who then produce the song. While driving me to his village, he would be lost in his musical thoughts and his fingers and hands on the steering wheel would sometimes keep time with his thoughts. ... The rhythm ... improvises on the theme carrying it to new depths of meaning and experience. At the improvisation, each at the right moment, come in the sopranos, the altos, the contraltos, the bases and the baritones, and at intervals some men blow the rousing African horn.

He lives in a world of his ancestors' spirits. 'I must visit my grandfather's grave', he told me in Mutunduru as the evening was turning to dusk. 'Come with me if you like'. I remained thoughtfully a few steps behind. 'Makadii? How are you grandfather?' he asked clapping his hands. 'Look after us,' he prayed, 'and do not let the evil spirits have power over us.'

Gibson Munyoro gathered his compositions recorded on cassettes. Ken Spence, when he was provincial, tried to explore possible places for Bvukumbgwe to meet composers in other countries but lack of French barred a trip to the Congo. He did go to Nairobi for a while on his way to the Holy Land and Rome but what influence these visits had on him is not recorded.

In his last days, Dr de Sousa diagnosed kidney failure and Bvukumbgwe found the winter of 2002 particularly hard. His companions at Silveira House used to prepare a sort of *chaise longue* for him outside where he could relax in the sun and keep warm. But he weakened and died on the first day of August. His funeral was one of the biggest any Jesuit ever had.