

6 November

Br CANISIUS CHISHIRI (SVUNGURI)

1 January 1948 – 6 November 2014



The French pioneer aviator, Antoine de St Exupery, wrote, 'man measures himself against the obstacle'. The greatness of Canisius Chishiri is that he was a fighter who never gave up. Both his parents opposed his wish to be a Jesuit. He was the eldest of

eight and was expected to be responsible for the family. But despite receiving minimal education he set his mind on it and his parents came to accept his choice. He was at ease with his lack of formal education and set out to educate himself. The books he left in his room at his death was a testimony to this.

During the final stages of his training as a Jesuit the provincial wanted him to combine his *tertianship* with a course. One suggestion was the Pastoral Institute at Gaba in East Africa. They turned him down because they judged he would be unable to follow their course. And when he went on *tertianship*, to Britain, no one there helped him to get placements for experiments. In his letters to the provincial there is not a hint of bitterness though he clearly found it hard to take. If those who failed to help him had any inkling of whom they were dealing with they would have been highly embarrassed.

There was a third battle during his last ten years when illness laid him low. After two or three years at Richartz House, he realised it was unlikely to recover. Deep desolation followed. With the help of Fidelis Mukonori, then provincial, and Paddy Moloney and others, he persevered. He wrote a letter which he sent to several people at that time in which he described his coming through this torment. We will never know what he went through but the letter was a celebration of acceptance of his condition in a deeply spiritual way. His boisterous good humour during his last years at Richartz were evidence enough of a fighter who was confident of winning.

These struggles were interspersed with a life of imaginative service. He was born in Nyanga in 1948 and joined the Society in 1972. Not long after first vows he was part of the team set up by the newly ordained auxiliary bishop of Harare, Patrick Chakaipa, to develop lay leadership in a Christian Communities

Programme, modelled somehow on the Latin American *Comunidades de Base*. Canisius was one of the team that would train others. It was war time and Canisius began to think about the countless displaced people who lost their homes and often witnessed the killing of their relatives. In his file there is a copy of an article in *The Herald* around 1980 describing Canisius' 'Rehabilitation Retreats' or, more accurately, his 'Crying Retreats'. Neither he nor his chosen helpers had an ounce of training but – with imagination and advice - they designed a programme to meet the immediate need. They encouraged victims to express their bottled-up emotions; then they shared their experiences and finally they would be helped to rebuild their lives. It was an imaginative and powerful programme and widely appreciated.

In 1984 he was appointed administrator at St Paul's Musami where he started the Arrupe Centre for Concern for handicapped people, whom he affectionately named his 'wobblies'. He lavished care and imagination on them and personally raised funds for them through letters to 22+ donors. He never seemed to have difficulty in raising funds. Everyone wanted to help him. He wrote of the drought, the need for artificial limbs, glasses, knitting and sewing projects and gardening – all done by the handicapped themselves. 'We who are involved in trying to help them quickly realised that what is essential is to live a relaxed and calm life and to look up to the Lord who came to give his life for many. ... To create an atmosphere where confidence is born is not easy. We can quickly forget what the poor are revealing about us. We put up a lot of resistance and retain our masks. Our egotism, illusions, fears, desire for success and recognition are always there. But the community reminds us why we are here; to welcome the poorest, to open our hearts to them and help them grow. In the life we share together we soon discover that they are our teachers.'

In the mid-nineties Canisius developed his final initiative: Zambuko House. He took great care in developing his plan. He wanted it to be a Jesuit work with a Jesuit ethos. Once again, he had no difficulty raising the money and again all his fund-raising was accompanied by regular newsletters and further appeals! Zambuko was to be a place of welcome for youngsters who found themselves on the streets of Harare. The aim was always to reunite them with their families and also give them some skills in metal work, gardening and so forth and for some it would include help with formal education.

Canisius had a great love for the Society and particularly for Pedro Arrupe. He collected everything Arrupe wrote and it was his constant reading. He was an obvious choice for Henry Wardale when he was looking for a Vocations Promoter in 1978.

CANISIUS CHISHIRI 1948-2014

The French pioneer aviator, Antoine de St Exupery, once wrote that ‘man measures himself against the obstacle’ – the thing that stands in his way. By this definition, it is not just a soldier but every person who is born to be a fighter. The greatness of our brother, Canisius Chishiri, is that he was a fighter who never gave up.



Three episodes in his life illustrate this immediately. There is a record in his file that both his father and his mother opposed his wish to be a Jesuit. He was the eldest of eight and it was expected he would one day be responsible for the family. But he set his mind on it despite receiving minimal education and his parents came to accept his choice. He was unusually at ease with his lack of formal education and set out to educate himself. The choice of books he left in his room at his death was a testimony to this.

The second episode was during the final stages of his training as a Jesuit and the provincial at the time wanted him to combine his *tertianship* with some course. One suggestion was the Pastoral Institute at Gaba in East Africa but they turned him down because they judged he would be unable to follow their course. And when he went on *tertianship*, to Britain, no one there helped him to get placements for experiments. In his letters to the provincial there is not a hint of bitterness though he clearly found it hard to take.

The third battle that he faced was during the last ten years when a particularly unpleasant illness laid him low. After two or three years at Richartz House he realised it was unlikely that he would ever recover. Deep desolation followed and maybe depression. With help from his contemporary, Fidelis Mukonori, then provincial, and Paddy Moloney and others, he persevered. He wrote a letter which he sent to several people at that time in which he described his coming through this torment. We will never know what he went through but the letter was a celebration of acceptance of his condition in a deeply spiritual way. His boisterous good humour during his last years at Richartz were evidence enough of a fighter who had won the battle.

These struggles were interspersed with a life of imaginative service. He was born in Nyanga in 1948 and joined the Society in 1972. Not long after first vows he was part of the team set up by the newly ordained auxiliary bishop of Harare who wanted to develop lay leadership in a Christian Communities Programme, modelled somehow on the Latin American *Comunidades de Base*. Bishop Chakaipa asked Silveira to start the programme and twelve men and women, lay and religious, from different urban and rural districts of the Archdiocese were chosen to attend a four month courses with the idea that they would become the trainers of the leaders. Canisius was one of these and showed immense enthusiasm and dedication from the start. It was war time and Canisius began to think hard about the countless displaced people who lost their homes and often witnessed the killing of their relatives. In his file there is a copy of an article in *The Herald* around 1980 describing Canisius’ response to these people. He started ‘Rehabilitation Retreats’. A more accurate term would be ‘Crying

Retreats'. Neither he nor his carefully chosen women helpers/counsellors had an ounce of training but – with imagination and advice - they designed a programme to meet the immediate need. The first stage was to give the victims space and time to cry. They had been forbidden to weep during the war and all their emotions were held tight within. So the first thing to do was to free what was bottled up. No words were spoken but much wailing and crying took place.

Then, stage two, the people spoke and Canisius and his teams helped them to share their experiences together. If some had experiences too painful to share he would arrange for them to meet one of the women privately. The third stage was the rebuilding of plans and hopes. This was done with scripture and prayer and material support. It was an imaginative and powerful programme and widely appreciated.

The time came for him to go on tertianship and he experienced the difficulties already mentioned. We can forgive those who failed to help him then but if they had any inkling of whom they were dealing with they would be highly embarrassed.

On his return from the UK (1984) he was appointed administrator at St Paul's Musami and soon after started another initiative; the Arrupe Centre for Concern. This was a rudimentary settlement for handicapped people, whom he named his "wobblies" from the way they walked. Once again he lavished his care and imagination on them. He wrote a newsletter to anyone who could help. A copy of the 16th issue, in the archives, lists 22 donors by name and mentions there were others who wished to remain anonymous. He never seemed to have difficulty in raising funds. Everyone wanted to help him. He wrote of the drought, the need for artificial limbs, glasses, knitting and sewing projects and gardening – all done by the handicapped themselves.

One of his letters, in 1987, reports the words of a mother of a retarded child:

We mothers of the handicapped children are learning a lot from being together like one family. We are also encouraged by our children, by their confidence in those who are trying to help them and the lessons we get at our meetings.

And Canisius comments;

We who are involved in trying to help them quickly realised that what is essential is to live a relaxed and calm life and to look up to the Lord who came to give his life for many. It is in such meetings and in the joyful smiles of these handicapped and those who care for them at home that we come to discover a whole new world. Yet life for such people is often hard to bear.

The whole letter is a detailed reflection of his work with the handicapped and what they do for us. He wrote;

To create an atmosphere where confidence is born is not easy. We can quickly forget what the poor are revealing about us. We put up a lot of resistance and retain our masks. Our egotism, illusions, fears, desire for success and recognition are always

there. But the community reminds us why we are here; to welcome the poorest, to open our hearts to them and help them grow. In the life we share together we soon discover that they are our teachers.

It was in the mid-nineties that Canisius developed his final initiative: Zambuko House. He took great care in developing his plan. He wanted it to be a Jesuit work with a Jesuit ethos. Once again, he had no difficulty raising the money and again all his fund-raising was accompanied by regular newsletters and further appeals! Zambuko was to be a place of welcome for youngsters who found themselves on the streets of Harare. The aim was always to reunite them with their families and also give them some skills in metal work, gardening and so forth and for some it would include help with formal education.

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Later, from his sick bed, he followed what was going on worldwide in the Society and often talked about what was happening and it was part of his prayer. When the present writer was in *tertianship* he had occasion to visit St Louis and the home of the *Studies in Jesuit Spirituality*. Asked how many copies regularly found their way to our part of Africa, Fr George Ganss, the director, looked at the records. There were just three: one to the seminary then run by the Jesuits, another to Garnet House and the third to? Canisius Chishiri!

Fr Tony Bex wrote of Canisius' final illness:

The specialist, doctors, nurses and carers who looked after him admired his patience and courage, especially during the painful chemo-therapy treatment. He was obedient to a fault to whatever his doctors and carers proposed. When he had sufficiently recovered from his chemo I witnessed his new apostolate. He was available to family members who came to seek his counsel and support. Hardly a day passed without someone phoning to make an appointment. He was strict about those appointments and people learned to come, and sometimes to go, on time. He was careful about his mother's needs. Just recently the roof blew off her house and Canisius quickly got involved in seeing to repair. Canisius sometimes shared his painful experiences but always ended by saying, 'That's all right.'

Fr Paddy Moloney was a great support during his illness and he and Canisius used to do an *Examen* together every evening and pray for the pope's intentions listed in the Catalogue.

Canisius was a brother Jesuit but also a Jesuit Brother. There is some evidence that early on he saw vocation as meaning being a priest but in those days educational opportunities were hard to find. He was probably told that if he wanted to be a Jesuit he could become a Brother. He became a wonderful witness of what a Brother is for us Jesuits. Most of us are Jesuit hyphen priest. But Brothers are Jesuits - full stop! Fr Arrupe used to say that the Brothers remind us of what our vocation is.

Canisius displayed an amazing simplicity, dedication and cheerfulness and, above all, confidence in who he was.

He was a beautiful contradiction: on paper he was the most uneducated of us. In reality he shone as a Jesuit *par excellence*, second to none.