

Ntate Rampeoane Hlobo SJ (*aka Rampe*) – A Tribute to a Friend

Fr Gilbert Mardai SJ

The day could not have been more appropriate. It was Thursday, 24 September 2009, exactly 9 days after I set foot in South Africa for the very first time ever. It was Heritage Day, therefore a public holiday and I was taken to St Martin de Porres Church in Soweto for Mass. Another first! I had heard so much about Soweto all through my student days in Tanzania, and so it was wonderful to finally be there. It was for me a dream come true, a class on African Heritage given on Heritage Day. I could not think of a better way to start my life in South Africa.

After Mass I met a man by the name of Paul Hlobo. Fr Thomas Plastow SJ, parish priest of St Martin de Porres at the time, later told me that that was Fr Rampeoane's father. It all came together. I had heard of this man from Rampe himself. Now, Rampe had visited Arrupe College (now Arrupe Jesuit University) in 1997 or 1998 (thereabouts) while I was a student there with another South African Jesuit, Fr Matsepane Morare. Matsepane and I, together with other Jesuit scholastics, had enrolled in the Karate Club that was under the leadership of Fr Kizito Kiyimba SJ, who was then teaching at Arrupe College as a Regent. When Rampe came to the *Dojo*, we immediately saw a change of guard: Kizito (a brown belt at the time) bowed to Rampe who was wearing a white belt because there was no black belt for him. It should be noted that given that Rampe was a black belt, it would not have been appropriate to wear any other colour, so he wore a white belt just to keep his *Kimono* intact.

That was the first time I met Rampe. As we spoke, I learnt that he was from Soweto. His father had trained him in Karate from when he was a very young boy. That day at the *Dojo* we all experienced a tough trainer. Rampe said to us, since you are all Jesuits, I am not going to be soft with you. What a session that was! But it was great fun. Whenever I meet Rampe, I remind him of that day. The lesson was very clear: we had to be strong and therefore shying away from tough sessions was not an option, and this was one tough session.

About nine or so years after the Arrupe College encounter with Rampe, we met again in London, where both of us were studying theology at Heythrop College. This was in 2006. We did not do Karate together there, but we met often during gatherings of scholastics. I went on to be ordained in 2007, and he was ordained a year later in Soweto. So, when I moved to Johannesburg in 2009 I was very happy to reunite with Rampe.

Rampe entered the Society of Jesus in 1993 in Lusaka, Zambia. After his first two years of formation in the Novitiate he went back to South Africa where he continued with studies in KwaZulu Natal. He then moved on to do his Regency and more studies in Johannesburg. From Johannesburg he moved on to Paris and then to London for theology studies. One of the things that I know Rampe has been always passionate about is physical fitness – he is after all a Black Belt Karate (*I think Fifth Dan*). But that is for his own personal fitness. Rampe is also, and perhaps most importantly, passionate about the plight of refugees and internally displaced peoples. It is this passion that has given him, it seems to me, a reason to wake up every morning and do something – pray, celebrate Mass, visit refugee camps

and internally displaced peoples, join various organisations – as a Jesuit priest. In these activities Rampe finds God and is eager to bring something of the power of God, something of the hope that comes with knowing that God is present, and something of the love of God.

As St Martin de Porres celebrates its 75th Anniversary, it is fitting to give thanks to God for its son. Not only is this a mark of the spiritual growth of the parish over the years, but it is a clear sign that what the parish does touches many people in ways that bring about people such as Rampe. I had the privilege of celebrating Mass several times at St Martin de Porres during my six and a half years in Johannesburg, some of those times concelebrating with Rampe. I can still hear the vibrant singing and I can still see the passion with which people celebrated their faith especially when they saw their son presiding at Mass.

The question now is, what can the parish do to promote more vocations to the priesthood and to religious life? Is there a way in which, as a parish, you can bring the youth together to talk about vocations? Perhaps once in a while invite Rampe to talk to the youth about his vocation to the priesthood in the Society of Jesus and in the Church. Seventy-five years is a long time and it deserves a fitting celebration, not least celebrating your own son, Ntate Rampeane Hlobo SJ.

I started by recalling my encounter with Rampe in Harare and in particular at the *Dojo*. Rampe encouraged us to embrace the tough sessions because those were the moments that strengthened us. St Martin de Porres started during the Apartheid time, and through the thick and thin of it the parish continued to grow from strength to strength. This is a sign that the parish did not shy away from the trying times, and clearly Rampe grew up seeing that spirit which he internalised through his training in Karate and his formation in the Society of Jesus. May many more young people from St Martin de Porres embrace this spirit!

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