



Father Joseph Hamor, S.D.B.
1914 - 1999

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OBITUARY LETTER OF FATHER JOSEPH HAMOR

Birth: September 27, 1914

Religious Profession: November 11, 1930

Priestly Ordination: June 23, 1940

Death: February 13, 1999

On Saturday February 13th, 1999, Father Joseph Hamor passed away at Fort Saskatchewan Hospital near Edmonton, at the age of 84 years. He died of complications due to kidney and heart failure. He had been a Salesian for 69 years and a priest for 59. He had spent the last 42 years of his life in Canada.

Jozsef Gyorgy Hamor (né Hollner) was born on September 27th, 1914 at Szentendre, Hungary. In this lovely town by the Danube, not far from Budapest, he spent his early childhood. Here he attended school and grew up in a deeply religious tradition, serving as an altar boy and singing in the church choir. In 1928, at the age of 14 years, he first came into contact with the Salesians of St. John Bosco. He entered Salesian Junior High School and spent a year pursuing his studies, which included Latin in preparation for his high school classical courses. During the year he grew to love the Salesian way of life. At the close of that year, in the company of 12 other young men, he chose to enter the Salesian Novitiate. Among Joseph's companions were John Pastor and Joseph Katona.

He made his Novitiate at Pelifoldszenthereszt, Hungary, from November 1929 to November 1930. Father Anthony Bonato was the Master of Novices during this very special year of his life. The novices lived in the country surrounded by wooded areas. Their seclusion was made all the more Spartan by the lack of utilities like running water and heat. But time passed quickly and Father Bonato's marvellous musical talent, exceptional gardening skills and a great sense of humour wonderfully enhanced learning more about Don Bosco and Salesian life. Among many other things, Joseph looked after Father Bonato's prize rose garden and learned to play the violin. On November 11th, 1930, he made his first profession as a clerical student in view of ordination as a Salesian priest. Joseph, now "Brother" Joseph, remained at Szenthereszt until 1932 where he completed his last two years of high school at the Salesian Seminary.

He did his practical training as a Salesian in formation from 1932 to 1936. From September 1932 to August 1933, he worked at

the youth centre and animated the Sacred Heart Sodality in Rakospalota. The next year, he was transferred to the Salesian Institute of Szombathely. Here he not only worked at the Parish youth centre, but also assisted working boys and students who resided at the Parish hostel. However, due to the terminal illness of a fellow Salesian, Brother Joseph was asked to replace him in the city of Gyula where he continued a similar ministry in the hostel and youth centre there. He remained at Gyula until his entrance into theology in September of 1936. Meanwhile, on August 1st, 1936, Brother Joseph pronounced his perpetual vows as a Salesian.

From 1936 to 1940, he carried out his theological studies again at Pelifoldszentherezst. On June 23rd, 1940, the Primate of Hungary, Cardinal Jusztinian Seregi, ordained "Father" Joseph a Salesian priest in the Basilica of St. Adalbertusz in the city of Esztergom. The Cardinal was a well-known figure throughout Hungary, as well as throughout the Church, for his outstanding work on the Code of Canon Law. The next day, the 9 newly ordained priests returned to Pelifoldszentherezst to celebrate their first Mass. The following Sunday, Father Hamor returned to Szentendre, the town of his birth, to celebrate his first solemn Mass. On this very special day, he shared his happiness only with his mother, for his beloved older sister Anna and his father Gyorgy never lived to see his priestly ordination.

Father Hamor's first assignment as a priest was as an Associate Pastor at the Salesian Parish of Pestszentlorinc. He shared his duties with his novitiate companion, John Pastor; both taught catechism in several suburban schools. In fact, it was in coming back to the parish one evening after teaching that he came down with a severe case of pneumonia. Thus, with only six months in his current position as Associate Pastor, he was transferred to the Novitiate Seminary in Mezonyarad for a 6-month period of recuperation. However 6 months turned into 10 years! From 1941 to 1945, Father Joseph acted as Academic Dean. It was during this period that the war broke out and all Salesian seminarians were returned to their families. During the war the buildings of the Novitiate Seminary were used by the Hungarians, the Germans and finally the Russians as military headquarters.

The war ended in 1945, and in March of the same year, the Salesian seminarians returned to Mezonyarad. There was little food but plenty of land for farming; furniture was also scarce since it had been used as fuel by the Russian army. Fr. Joseph's mother, Zsuzsanna, and the sister of the Salesian Provincial took up residence

at the seminary and helped with the cooking and mending. From 1945 to 1948, Father Joseph served as Director of the Seminary in Mezonyarad. After a term as such, he became the Catechist of the community until 1950, with a particular responsibility for the health of the seminarians. Father Michael Gombos was one of Fr. Joseph's students during his two years as Catechist.

With the Communist take-over of his homeland in 1950, Father Hamor's entire ministry as a priest came to a halt. All religious Orders were dissolved; the Salesian seminarians were returned to their families; all priests and brothers were dispersed. In June of 1950, Fr. Joseph took refuge in the village of Erdokurt where the Pastor of the church was a friend. However, things turned sour quickly as the secretary of the Communist Party in the village found Father Hamor's presence threatening. After a period of 6 months, he was asked to leave. His next stop was Nagybarat where he took the position of Associate Pastor. The Communist government would not allow Fr. Joseph to function as a priest, but did permit him to be church organist and teach catechism. Interestingly enough, Fr. Joseph was allowed to teach catechism because he came from a poor working-class family. His pastor was not given this permission because of his family's wealthy background. Father Hamor continued here as organist, choir master, teacher and moderator of the altar boys until 1953. After 3 years at Nagybarat, a new job presented itself, sacristan at the main church of Kispest. Another year later, a position as organist became available at Sacred Heart Parish, which was run by the Jesuits. He held this position until the Hungarian uprising of October 23rd 1956.

Budapest, where the Salesian Provincial resided, became the main battlefield of the revolution. Fr. Joseph had to see the Provincial in order to obtain permission to visit his family. The Provincial, however, had other plans in mind! He asked Father Hamor if he would be willing to flee Hungary with a group of young Salesian seminarians. He had never refused an obedience in his Salesian life and had not the intention of doing so now. Within days Father Joseph and the seminarians set off for Austria on foot! On route, many persons, including Hungarian soldiers, assisted them to escape the Communists. Little did he know at that time that he was to spend the rest of his life outside his beloved homeland!

Father Joseph and the seminarians arrived safely at Gussing, Austria. The Franciscans kindly took them in and with their help the small group was able to reach Gratz, where another Salesian priest

joined them. After two weeks, they continued on to the Salesian Provincial House in Vienna. Here they were met by 8 other Hungarian Salesian refugees, among them the cleric Michael Gombos. From Vienna, the now enlarged group of Salesians, 12 in all, left for Turin, Italy, where the Salesian mother house was located. Several Hungarian Salesians, including the future Catechist General, Fr. John Antal, were teaching theology at the seminary in Turin. Once again, Father Joseph was asked to move. This time he was to accompany a group of 40 Hungarian refugee children to various Salesian schools throughout Italy and Austria. He spent the next 3 months accompanying the children and getting them settled in their new homes.

Just when things seemed fairly settled, the Salesian Superiors in Turin approached Father Joseph and asked him if he would be willing to move once again, and this time to Canada! Fr. Joseph Balazskovi, a Hungarian Salesian of the San Francisco Province, had appealed to Turin for help with the Hungarian refugees in Edmonton. This was on March 24th, 1957. Father Hamor arrived in Edmonton by train from Halifax on April 13th, 1957.

At this time there was no Hungarian Catholic Parish in Edmonton. Father Hamor lived at St. Mary's Home, a school operated by the Salesians for needy boys, and from there looked after the spiritual needs of the newly arrived Hungarian refugees. Sunday Eucharist was celebrated in the basement of Sacred Heart Church. For a while, Fr. Hamor shared an office with the German and Dutch priests at the Catholic Information Centre. Later he transferred the liturgical celebrations to the Chapel of the same centre. In the fall of 1957, the Norwood Legion Hall, located at 98th Street and 107th Avenue, came up for sale. The purchase contract was signed on November 5th, 1957 and the new church was placed under the patronage of St. Emeric, prince son of St. Steven, whose liturgical feast is celebrated on that day.

Renovations started almost immediately and by Christmas of the same year Father Hamor and the Parishioners celebrated the birth of Jesus in the new church. In early 1958, Archbishop Mac Donald officially recognised the newly formed Hungarian Catholic Parish of St. Emeric. At the same time, Fr. Hamor started the Hungarian School in the basement of the church with 85 students. Also during this time, on October 15th 1963, Father Hamor was granted his Canadian citizenship. Working as a full time priest, part time teacher, scoutmaster, music teacher and conductor of his newly formed chamber orchestra took a toll on his health. In 1971, Fr. Hamor

asked his Salesian Superiors to relieve him from his duties as pastor for a while for health reasons. Father Michael Gombos took over the responsibility for St. Emeric Hungarian Parish. This continued until 1980, when once more Father Hamor was placed in charge.

In 1985, the Parish Council decided to look for a new church for St. Emeric's Parish. The old church was sold to the Chinese Catholic Community of Edmonton. The preparation of the construction plans began in May 1986 and the new church was dedicated and blessed by Archbishop Joseph MacNeil on August 22, 1987. In spite of his advancing age Father Hamor continued as Pastor of St. Emeric's until the summer of 1996.

From 1957 until 1996 then, Father Joseph was spiritual guide, friend and father to his parishioners, putting his abilities as a scholar, musician, playwright, liturgist, linguist (he spoke 6 languages fluently) and teacher at the service of all. His life was dedicated to his Hungarian Parishioners. Much could be said about the different aspects of his ministry. May it suffice to include herein the contributions of a few people who benefited from his care.

Father Hamor was wonderful at bringing out the best in the young. "I had the opportunity to see this during a week I spent with him and the scouts at Pigeon Lake. Through his great organisation he planned many activities that allowed the children to become more confident, outgoing and closer to God. Like Don Bosco, Hamor Atya (Father) was at his best with the children. After a week, we all felt great peace. The shy became more outgoing and the not so shy became more settled. He taught the kids to love God and respect God and each other. He was like one of the kids, swimming in the cold lake and singing by the campfire."

The young were also Fr. Hamor's priority at the Hungarian School. "His was a steely resolve to push his students to do their very best. St. Emeric School was unforgettable for everyone who had Fr. Hamor as a teacher. He did raise his voice in exasperation at times, berating a student's unwillingness to use his God given intelligence appropriately. A number of students actually feared his outbursts, but subsequently most of them admitted that Fr. Hamor had succeeded (where others had failed) in motivating them to study and think effectively." "The mood in Fr. Hamor's school was always upbeat. I had many occasions to marvel at his vast knowledge, at his ability to recite prose and poetry effortlessly. He was a strict and meticulous teacher. His example ignited in several students a need to know more about European culture. A couple of these students sub-

sequently became art historians.” “One day, I was teaching religion to our youngest pupils. Fr. Hamor entered the room, whereupon a little boy stared at him in awe and exclaimed “ISTEN” (God). This was one of the very few times I saw Fr. Hamor at a loss – he was speechless with surprise!”

Father Hamor was also a great musician, playing both the violin and the piano. “He loved to get into political discussions with my father and to sing along with my mother. They would play violin duos, then switch to the piano. My mother loved to sing so Father would play the piano and everybody would sing along. Later on he would give piano lessons to my daughter.”

Father Hamor was also always ready to respond to the various and different needs of his parishioners. “He knew that I was looking for a job for my first summer break. One day he phoned me to give me information about a job that he had found advertised in the Edmonton Journal. I went for the interview and got the job. Similarly, he found a job for my sister, who kept that job for 17 years.” “One day I mentioned that I needed to move two apple trees in the garden. A few days later, Father showed up in work clothes and with shovels ready to move the apple trees. To this day they still produce plenty of apples.”

Father Hamor was a blessing for so many people and had an endearing personality. “He lived a full life, well lived and shared with people who appreciated sharing it. During the years that I had the opportunity to know him and to grow under his tutelage and spiritual guidance, I felt truly blessed. I can honestly say that I have lived a richer life for having known Father Hamor.” “Hamor Atya came to Edmonton like the Good Shepherd minding his flock. The Hungarians were truly blessed with this outstanding man who had so much talent and willpower to help and guide the Catholic Hungarian Community. My wife and I were privileged to form a very close bond with him in the last five years of his life. Not only was he our priest, but as he said, we were like “family” to one another. He became like a father to both of us. Our fondest memories are of the summers we spent at his cabin hideaway, which gave him so much pleasure in his last years. His health got weak, but his character and deep love for God and the Catholic faith were strong until the end.”

“I first met Fr. Hamor in the fall of 1995 when I was using a cane because of recent hip surgery. Seeing that he also found it very hard to walk, I suggested that a cane might be of some help. His answer was prompt, loud and clear. ‘If I start using a cane, it will be the end of me.’ I realised immediately the strength and decisiveness of

his character, as well as his strong innate spirit of independence under every aspect. He loved inviting the Salesians in Edmonton to festive gatherings and he would insist that we drink the special wines he offered us on such occasions. But as soon as he understood that most wines give me a little headache, though disappointed, he accepted the situation. He was living up to one of his favourite mottoes: *Noblesse oblige*. One of the many things that impressed his parishioners was his dedication to youth. How many times I heard them speak of all that he had done for the Scouts, and his self-sacrifice on Saturday mornings when he would drive the van miles and miles, from house to house, to pick up children and bring them to catechism and to the Hungarian school. A scholar and an accomplished writer, Fr. Hamor listened to the radio only for newscasts and consistently refused any offer of a TV set. Whatever free time he had was devoted to reading and prayer."

"In 1992, I was invited to the celebration dinner in honor of St. Emeric. That was the first time I met Fr. Hamor. He welcomed me with open arms as his intimate friend or son. He was so youthful, joyous and energetic, kind and fatherly. I got the impression that I was meeting a real Salesian of 60. Sometime later, I learned that he was 75! After moving into St. Joseph's Villa, I went to visit him often, to say 'hello' and called him 'nonno' (Italian for grandfather). He would answer: 'How are you, my grandchild? You have to eat more; you are too thin.' I really enjoyed his genuine fatherliness. I was unable to attend his funeral Mass. I offered Mass by myself and rejoiced that now we have another powerful patron in heaven to pray for our Canadian Salesian Province."

Father Hamor's personal prayer life had characteristics that were uniquely his own. "I was always very impressed with his deep sense of piety. He always celebrated well his daily Mass, even when he retired from active ministry, even when he was quite sick. He would still do the prayers before and after Mass, by heart, out loud, all in Latin. Many a time, I would come in to pay him a short visit and would hear him celebrating Mass at the little altar in his bedroom. He celebrated his last Mass on Sunday January 24th, on the commemoration day of Our Lady, Help of Christians." "From what I could tell, his breviary was always prayed with devotion, faithfully and regularly. Father also said three rosaries a day, dividing therefore his days into three major parts. As a matter of fact, he had with him at the hospital his Latin breviary, a Hungarian prayer book, his sister Anna's rosary and a picture of his mother."

One of the ways that Father Hamor showed his love for his confreres was by praying faithfully for them. "On October 7th, 1994, the very day when our Alberta parishes became part of our Canadian Province, Father Hamor asked me for a complete list of all the deceased Salesians and Sisters who had worked in Canada. From that moment on, he prayed for the repose of their souls. Furthermore, he showed me how in his day timer he had put the names of all the Salesian Fathers, Brothers and Sisters presently stationed in Canada, spread over a two month period. Upon getting up in the morning, Father would read the name of one of us and he would accompany that person the whole day, through his devotions and Mass. Our names would therefore come up at least 6 times a year!"

The article that appeared in the Western Catholic Reporter at the time of Father Joseph's death bore the following title: "Hungarian Pastor gave himself to his Parish". Maybe this is the best way to describe Father Hamor during his years as pastor. He wanted above all to be a priest and a pastor for those who had been confided to him. Pope John Paul describes the priest as "the good shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep". Father gave his life so that his Parishioners young and old would be proud of their faith and grow ever stronger in it.

On March 3rd, 1999, a tribute to Fr. Hamor was given in the Legislative Assembly of the Province of Alberta. Part of what was said follows: "Mr. Speaker, it is indeed an honour for me to rise and pay tribute to a great Albertan and Edmontonian who passed away on February 13, 1999. Father Hamor was laid to rest on Saturday February 20, 1999, with hundreds of his parishioners and friends in attendance at St. Emeric Hungarian Catholic Church to say farewell. Father Hamor fled Hungary during the October 1956 uprising, never to return. Upon his arrival in Edmonton in 1957 this scholar, musician, playwright, liturgist and teacher was given the pastoral care of the Hungarian Catholic community, a task he did well to his dying moment. May God grant you rest from your labour and may your memory live on forever."

"In memoriam eorum qui vitam et sanguinem effunderunt cum Deo, pro patria et libertate". This Latin phrase is to be found on the monument, situated in front of St. Emeric Church, that is dedicated to the Hungarian freedom fighters of all times, but especially of 1956. The phrase is also an apt synthesis of the life of Father Hamor. Indeed, in Hungary or in Canada, Father spent all his energies and talents, to the last drop, for his people. In this way he imitated our

own Don Bosco who said: "La mia vita è di stare con voi." His life was well spent in a spirit of strong and enthusiastic faith (cum Deo), for a just and worthy cause (pro patria), fighting for peoples' basic human rights (libertate).

Several biblical passages were read on the occasion of Father Hamor's funeral Mass on February 20th 1999. They describe him and his life most wonderfully. "We walk by faith, not by sight". We are reminded of the faith Father Joseph received from his mother, the faith that called him to become a Salesian and a priest. "God tried him and found him worthy of Himself". This line captures well the sufferings in Father's life: after the Communist take-over, his courage in leading the 12 Salesian seminarians to freedom, his strength and leadership in establishing St. Emeric Hungarian Parish and serving as Pastor for so many years. "The souls of the just are in the hand of God; they are in peace". Father Hamor kept alive his hope in God during his last three years of weakness and ill health; he now enjoys peace and liberation in heaven.

Father Hamor has entered the 5th season, that of the Resurrection. May the Lord welcome him with open arms; may He grant him eternal rest. And may Father Joseph continue to watch over his Hungarian people, here in Edmonton and the world over.

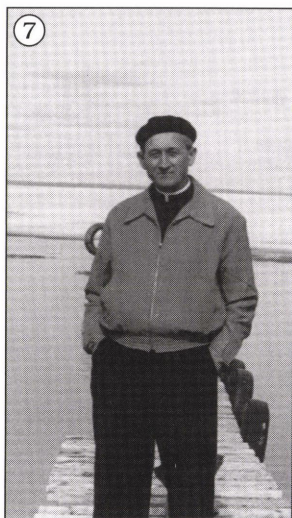
Fr. Richard Authier, S.D.B.
Provincial
August 15th 1999

PICTURES

1. His parents, Zsuzsanna Hann and Gyorgy Hollner, on their wedding day.
2. Joseph as a toddler with his mother and sister Anna.
3. With his classmates in Szentendre around 1926.
4. Novice Joseph at age 15 before his profession.
5. Soon after his ordination on June 23rd 1940 at age 26.
6. In his own way, Fr. Hamor was a very talented violinist. The love of music was one of the great loves of his life.
7. Finally in Canada, back in 1957, at St. Mary's Camp, Lac Ste-Anne (Alberta Beach), Alberta.
8. Fr. Hamor's famous VW "Beetle".
9. The Scout movement and all it stood for was another great love of Fr. Hamor's life. Here as a proud Scout Master and chaplain with his protégés and faithful Scout Master's assistant Pista (Steve) Jakab.
10. Fr. Hamor as the founder, principal and teacher of the Parish Hungarian School.
11. Leading devotional prayer in the old church on 98th Street.
12. The monument to the Freedom fighters of 1956, dedicated also to all who worked tirelessly "with God, for country and liberty".
13. July 23rd 1988, at the new church, the wedding of a good and faithful friend Gabor Botar to Szidonia.
14. On September 23rd 1995, celebrating 65 years of Religious life, with the Provincial Council: Fr. Dave Sajdak, Fr. Richard Authier, Fr. Luc Lantagne and Deacon George Harkins.
15. At a Hungarian sausage dinner on the feast of St. Steven, patron saint of Hungary, August 1993.
16. In August 1996, for the first Canadian Salesian retreat to be held in Edmonton, Alberta, at the Grey Nuns Regional Centre, with Fr. Michael Gombos (his former student in Hungary) and Fr. Luc. (Photo taken by Fr. Paul Cossette)
17. On June 23rd 1990, celebrating 50 years as a priest with concelebrants (left to right): Fr. Louis Masoero, Fr. Carmine Vairo, Fr. Michael Gombos, Fr. Michael Baptista, Jubilarian Fr. Hamor, Fr. Dave Dickinson, Jubilarian Fr. Joseph Katona, Fr. Thomas Prendiville and Fr. John Roche.

Cover: Fr. Hamor in front of the Baptismal fount of St. Emeric's in 1996 (Photo: P. Cossette)





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