

CELEBRATING 200 YEARS.
THE FOUNDING OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH
IN SOUTH AFRICA

INTRODUCTION

The celebration of the 200 years of the founding of Catholic Church in South Africa gives us a rare opportunity to learn more about the history of our faith, about where we come from as a community of faith. This is the time to mediate on the pioneering missionaries who brought us our faith. We do so in order to draw inspiration from them, to evaluate the status of our faith and fidelity, and to seek to re-double our efforts to enter more deeply into the mystery of Jesus Christ so that we may emerge as people who experience the generous mercy of God here and now, and in turn, commit to express that warm mercy to others. This is the constant, consistent and persuasive preaching of Pope Francis.

DEBT OF GRATITUDE

John Paul in *Ecclesia in Africa* reminds the church in Africa of their debt of gratitude to the pioneers who brought the faith to Africa. He says it is appropriate to pay profound homage to the missionaries, men and women “who devoted themselves without counting the cost, to the task of transmitting the torch of the Christian faith. That is why we, the happy inheritors of this marvelous adventure, joyfully pay our debt of thanks to God” on this solemn occasion of celebrating the bicentenary of the founding of the Catholic Church in Southern Africa (no. 36).

Bishop Stanislaw Dziuba of Umzimkulu Diocese puts it differently. He says we “stand on the shoulders of giants, the many missionaries from Europe ... whose work can still be seen by the many hospitals and clinics that bear the names of saints” (quoted in Wilson, H. 2011).

Let me point out from the outset that those who glibly accuse the pioneering missionaries of having been in cahoots with the colonial regime are simply wrong. History tells a different narrative. Joy Brain in her Cape Diary of Bishop Griffith (1837-1839) points out that under the Dutch East India Company rule (1652-1795) Catholicism was simply forbidden. Every effort was made to convert Catholic soldiers to Calvinism. Freedom of religion was only promulgated in 1804. Cardinal McCann described the attitudes of the authorities then as one of “friendly toleration” (Cape Diary, 1988 p. viii). Catholic and other missionaries experienced a fair share of discrimination.

PIONEERS OF THE FAITH

Now to the giants of our faith, the heroes and heroines, the saints who responded generously to Christ's instruction "Go ye therefore and preach the Gospel to all nations". It was during the second part of the 19th Century that missionaries, both Protestant and Catholic left Europe with the purpose of carrying the Gospel to the ends of the world. In the Cape of Good Hope, it was the Irish born Bishop Patrick Griffith who was credited with laying the foundations of the Catholic church and of Catholic education in South Africa. Griffith himself was especially interested in re-evangelizing lapsed Catholics of the Cape Colony. In 1852 he built St. Mary's Church of the Flight into Egypt which is today the Cathedral of Cape Town (The Cape Diary, p. 198). It was during Griffith's time that the Catholic church expanded to the Eastern Cape. The felt need at that time was to offer pastoral care to the soldiers and the settler communities. When Bishop Devereux became Vicar-Apostolic of the Eastern Districts, he introduced the Assumption Sisters to Grahamstown for the purpose of teaching at schools. This pattern of bringing Sisters to found schools was followed by other Bishops who came afterwards. Under Bishop Jolivet the Holy Family Sisters opened schools in Durban and Pietermaritzburg (1875). The Marist Brothers became involved in teaching in 1914. Bishop Jolivet had also invited the Augustinian Sisters to run a hospital (1898) C. Diaries, 17). The first Indian school in Durban was established in 1867 by Fr. Sabon. Abbot Franz Pfanner invited the Missionary Sisters of the Precious Blood to take care of the education of the Zulu girls in Mariannhill. While there was no official segregation in Government schools at that time, white parents would withdraw their girls if black pupils presented themselves (Diaries, 137). So when an all-white school refuses to accept black children today, it is regrettable, but it is also a "déjà vu".

RELIGIOUS CONGREGATIONS

Many religious congregations have been involved in education. It is worth mentioning some of them namely: The Brothers of Charity, Christian Brothers, De La Salle Brothers, Marist Brothers, Ursuline Sisters, Sisters of Notre Dame, Salesians of John Bosco, Oblates of Mary Immaculate, Jesuits, Missionary Sisters of the Holy Rosary, Sisters of Mercy, Sisters of the Holy Cross, Dominican Sisters (Oakford), Dominican Sisters (New Castle), Dominican Sisters (King Williams Town), Companion of St. Angela. Members of religious congregations dedicated their entire lives in providing education to generations of young people. They also evangelised young people by offering Christian formation. They provided communities with leaders grounded in Christian formation. The Missionaries, Priests, Brothers and Sisters built schools where there were no schools. As health is concerned, they were involved in primary health, built hospitals, old age homes and orphanages. Nazareth House championed the health care ministry. Hospitals were taken over by the Homelands Government at the behest of the National Government (1975, Wilson. p. 118). The Church contributed immensely towards building this country called South Africa. The people of this country owe the various churches a debt of gratitude for their sterling contribution towards the promotion of the quality of life.

SEGREGATION IN THE CHURCH

The Catholic church together with the other churches was also deeply involved in opposing apartheid. Fr. Godfrey Sieber in his book 'The Benedictines of Inkamana' reminds us that it was Bishop F. Hanneman (S.A.C.) of Cape Town (1933-1950) who was the first Bishop to criticize segregation openly: "Any attempt therefore to introduce legislation based purely on race or colour must be opposed and condemned as unjust" (Sieber, 1995, p. 280). Segregation in the Church was common practice in the past. There has been some changes, but not much and not deep enough. In the past, white religious congregations did not admit blacks into their ranks. They preferred to form black religious congregations under their supervision. Blacks, in the opinion of white religious, could not measure up to the expectations of the white religious congregations. Seminaries in the past were also segregated along racial lines. In the recent past it is fair to say that the Church leadership was heavily involved in condemning apartheid. The Catholic Bishops' Conference under the leadership of Cardinal McCann, Archbishop Hurley and his successor Cardinal Napier, have been strong critics of the apartheid Government. But so too the religious congregations that admitted black pupils into their schools in defiance of the segregation laws.

A GREAT CLOUD OF WITNESSES

Today, we celebrate 200 years of ordinary Catholic men and women, of priests and religious who dedicated themselves to the faith, to the building of the Church and to serving others without counting the cost. They have left us moving stories of their lives of faith. They have left us a clear path to follow so that we do not have to walk in the dark. Their lives have been the interpretation of the Scriptures so that we might learn from them what is expected of us. They have been "a great cloud of witnesses" who compel us to advance constantly towards the goal "of embracing Jesus Christ more sincerely, more deeply" (Gaudete et Exultate no.3). They were – in the language of Pope Francis in his exhortation 'Be Glad and rejoice' – they were "an exemplary imitation of Christ, one worthy of the admiration of the faithful" (no. 5). They are now calling upon us from the grave, from the other world, to be witnesses too, to discern our own individual path worthy of the name : Christian. They suffered hardships (like St. Paul) in their missionary endeavours. They suffered poverty, discrimination, rejection and suppression as Catholics; they suffered wars and diseases, but they endured so that we today may enjoy the legacy they left behind. They endured suffering and persecution for the sake of the Gospel. They suffered in order to make up "all that has still to be undergone by Christ for the sake of His Body and the Church" (Col. 1.24).

Their mission, their commitment, their tribulations were their path of choice to holiness. They shared fully in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This is the example they have given us. Pain and suffering, success and failure are an inevitable, integral part of

our Christian calling. Their lives are an open book of charity and they lived a life of charity to the full. Today we stand on the shoulders of these unsung heroes and heroines.

LEGACY

Apart from the legacy of building schools which have consistently maintained a high quality of education, the missionaries, in spite of the formidable challenges have successfully planted and nurtured the faith. The numbers are perhaps not so impressive. There are about four million Catholics in a population of fifty-five million people. The leaders of the Church have, and continue to play, a pivotal role in both the ecumenical and interfaith movements. These bodies in turn are a conscience of the South African society that is plagued and torn apart by violent crimes, rampant corruption and by greedy political and business leaders who drain the resources of the country with impunity.

The missionaries have also been successful in promoting vocations. There are now significant numbers of indigenous clergy and religious. These bear testimony to the tireless efforts of the missionaries who sought to grow the local church. The task of the evangelizing mission of the Church is now the responsibility of the local people who now have to become missionaries to themselves. While one swallow does not a summer make, the beatification of Blessed Benedict Daswa in Thohoyandou (2016), bears ample evidence of the maturing of the faith in South Africa. The martyr was brutally murdered when he openly opposed witchcraft in his village.

MASSIVE CHALLENGES

(i) The Eucharist

Were it not for the admirable, gallant, courageous and generous missionaries, we would still be walking in the dark, ignorant about the salvation that has been achieved by Christ on our behalf. We do however still have massive challenges. Catholics live in a predominantly Protestant South Africa. Protestant influence is pervasive. This can easily lead to the distortion of Catholic doctrine. For example the *Eucharist*. Many Catholics still see the *Eucharist* through the Protestant prism. They understand the *Eucharist* as a mere sign, a mere host, a symbol, a reminder of what Jesus did at the Last Supper. And that is why they can move from one church to the next without sensing a fundamental difference. The truth is, for true Catholics, the Eucharist is the **Body of Christ Himself, Our Passover** and our **Living Bread**. The *Eucharist* is the **Real Presence** of the **Risen Christ**. The *Eucharist* is the source and summit of the whole Christian life. The *Eucharist* continues to make available Christ's saving work amongst us. It is the pearl of great price. It is not a mere symbol from the past. This is what the missionaries taught. This teaching is their great legacy. Our priests and catechists have a duty to correct this misunderstanding (The Catechism of the Catholic Church, Paulines, 2006, 280-285).

(ii) **Ancestral Spirits**

The second major challenge is that many African Catholics after 200 years of the teaching of the Catholic Church, still place the role of the power of their ancestral spirits at the heart of their religious belief. Their belief in the *Eucharist*, the **Real and Living Presence of Christ** and their belief in the **Holy Spirit** does not seem to have modified or radically changed their belief in the role of ancestors. There is a need to pay heed to the Scriptures: “No one can be a slave to two masters; he will either hate the first and love the second or treat the first with respect and the second with scorn” (Mt. 6:24).

(iii) **The third challenge**

The following passages of Scripture draws our attention to the importance of unity, solidarity and communion.

- Rom (2.5) “all of us, in union with Christ, form one body and as parts of it we belong to each other”
- Gen (1.27) “God created man in His image male and female He created them”
- Gal. (3.28) “You are all baptised in Christ and there are no more distinctions between Jew and Greek, slave and free male and female, but all of you are one in Christ Jesus”.

This is the message which the missionaries – perhaps in spite of their efforts, were not able to deliver convincingly to their congregations. Inequality and racial prejudice have dominated the South African society during the past 200 years. Inequality, divisions, racial prejudice and xenophobia stubbornly persist to this day. They regrettably continue to rip this country apart. These challenges are an unhappy inheritance bequeathed to the present generation of Catholics. These challenges ought to be confronted with an open mind, abundant energy and a sincerity of heart.

CONCLUSION

Today, we are gathered here to pay homage not only to the pioneering missionaries, but also to Mary Mother of Mercy. We owe our predecessors and the past generations of Catholics a debt of gratitude. We also ask Mary Our Mother to help us realize the project of building a Shrine in her honour. We pray that she may inspire our Catholics with zeal and a generosity of heart.

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