

BRIEF HISTORY OF THE CAPUCHIN PRESENCE IN SOUTH AFRICA

On **Sunday 20 October 1929**, three Irish Capuchins, Brs Casimir Butler, Alban Cullen and Declan McFadden, arrived in Cape Town at the invitation of Bishop Bernard O'Riley. He assigned them to pastoral work in the present-day Claremont area. After one year they expressed the wish to move to the Cape Flats. In 1930, with the bishop's blessing, the friars moved to **Athlone** where a small 'mission' school founded from Rondebosch parish was already in existence. In 1933 the first Capuchin church in South Africa, St Mary of the Angels, was blessed and opened in Athlone. Its design was based on and similar to that found in Franciscan churches on the west coast of the United States where the Irish Capuchins had been working since 1909.

As well as involvement in pastoral work, the Capuchin presence in Cape Town was seen as a means of forming a fraternity where Irish friars travelling to and from the newly-opened mission (1931) in the Western Province of Northern Rhodesia (**Zambia**), could be welcomed and accommodated. The voyage from Southampton to Cape Town took 12 days. The missionaries rested for a few days before commencing the two-day train journey to Zambia.

As their numbers grew, the Cape Town friars extended their presence to **Welcome Estate** and **Parow**. We're told that the friars travelled on horseback from Athlone to Parow, being warned by the local people that the area known as the Cape Flats, with bush, sand and poor dwellings, was dangerous. St Theresa's parish, Welcome Estate, was established in 1935, with the school hall used as a church until a new place of worship was blessed and opened in 1968. The Parow parish church of the Immaculate Conception was blessed and opened in 1935.

With the passing of years, the friars continued to extend their pastoral presence in (what would later become) the Archdiocese of Cape Town. **Matroosfontein** (1933), **Langa** (1950), **Parow Valley** (1951), **Belgravia** (1954), **Bonteheuvel** (1964), **Bridgetown** (1967), **Manenberg** (1969) and **Elsies River** (1979) were areas pioneered by the Capuchins and which later became thriving parish communities. In later years, with the extension of our Capuchin presence to other parts of South Africa, most of these parishes were handed back to the Archdiocese.

The friars were ably assisted in their pastoral work by the **Holy Cross Sisters** (founded by the Swiss Capuchin, BrTheodosius Florentini). The Sisters ran schools in our parishes in Athlone, Welcome Estate, Belgravia, Langa and Parow. Special mention should be made of the Sisters' work in Parow where they ran primary and high schools, an orphanage and a teacher-training college. In the late 1960s this marvellous complex of buildings and the wonderful work being done was forced to close and re-locate because of the apartheid Group Areas Act. Parow was declared a 'white' area.

Some names of friars from those early years come to mind: Brs Alban Cullen, Colga O'Riordan, Carthage Ruth, Damascene McKenna, Macanise O'Neill, Casimir Butler, Christopher Crowley, Jarlath Gough, Oliver O'Hanlon, Jerome McQuillan, Marcellus and Aquinas O'Carroll, Agathangelus Herlihy and Didacus McGrath (RIP 2018) who came to Cape Town in December 1956. (In the early 1930s Alban paid 5 pounds for the land on which the Welcome Estate parish hall, school, church and presbytery were later built; in 1938 he was assigned to the mission in the USA: Marcellus was Matroosfontein P.P. for 29 years: Oliver was P.P. Parow: Agathangelus worked in Athlone and was later transferred to New Zealand where he died: Jerome is still remembered for his work in the Welcome Estate/ Bonteheuvel areas: Colga later went to Australia to act as novice master; Christopher worked in Langa parish for a good number of years; and Jarlath spent some years ministering on St Helena island: Casimir and Declan, after some time in Cape Town, went to work in the Zambian mission).

Mention should also be made of the work done by Br Matthew Gormley in Langa. Together with Sr. Veronica (Loreto), they were responsible in the 1970s for the building of the St. Francis Cultural Centre. The centre was established with the assistance of German funding agencies. Daily classes were offered from literacy to matric; two schools, morning and afternoon/evening, catered for many thousands of poor people who otherwise, in those apartheid years, would not have had access to education. Many former domestic workers studied at St Francis, achieved their matric, improved their employment prospects, and some even went on to study for university degrees.

Up to 1968 Cape Town and Zambia formed **one mission**. The superior lived in Zambia. Friars were transferred between these two places. In **1968** Cape Town became a separate jurisdiction, with Br Ronald Grace as first Regular Superior (Ronald's brother, John, served as a Capuchin for over 50 years in Zambia). Our Capuchin presence was limited to Cape Town until **1985**. In that year, Brs Flannan Buckley and Bernard Cronin took over the pastoral care of two parishes in Pietermaritzburg, KZN . On 1 January 1986, Br Sean Cahill and a number of our students took up residence at Orthmann Road, PMB. They formed one fraternity together with Brs Flannan and Bernard. In **June 1986** Br Flavio Roberto Carraro, General Minister, visited S.A. and established the **Vice-Province** of Southern Africa, Mary Mother of Africa. Br Sylvius McCarthy was appointed its first Vice-Provincial. Br Bernard returned to Cape Town. Br Sean was appointed P.P. of the parishes of St Anthony's and Raisethorpe, assisted by Br Kenneth Reynolds, who had previously served in Zambia and the United States. Br Flannan became P.P. of St Joan of Arc parish, Sobantu, with its church located at Ohrt- mann Road. Our students attended St. Joseph's Theological Institute(SJTI), Cedara, for philosophical and theological studies.

We were later forced to move from Orthmann Road because the area was becoming increasingly more dangerous. One of the friars had been attacked and injured by a knife-wielding intruder. A house was purchased in Taunton Road, Pietermaritzburg. Our parishes were served from there until the end of 2005 when we no longer had students studying at Cedara. The Capuchins then withdrew their presence from the Archdiocese of Durban.

Friars who worked in Zambia and later came to South Africa: Brs Christopher Crowley, Jarlath Gough, Aquinas O'Carroll, Albeus McQuillan, Bartholomew Prendiville, Sylvius McCarthy, Raymond Dillane, Flannan Buckley, Macartan Hyland, Rufino Ferris and Kenneth Reynolds. Brothers from the Zambian mission came to the Cape on holidays. One of them, BrFrederick McConvery, drowned while swimming at Hermanus, near Cape Town, in 1968.

The first steps in the drawing up a **formation** programme took place in 1974. Br Sean Cahill had been in Zambia in June/July 1972 giving retreats to the Irish friars working there (about 60 at the time). He paid a visit to the Cape on the way back to Ireland and was asked by the Regular Superior at the time, Br Didacus, if he would be prepared to come and help establish a formation programme in S.A. He returned in 1973. Two postulants (Basil Hendricks and Wilbur Petersen) began postulancy at Welcome Estate in February 1974. Novitiate took place with the OFMs in KZN: philosophy and theology at SJTI (Cedara). Brs Kees Thonissen and Matthew Gormley would also be involved in formation work (postulancy and novitiate) in the following years.

St.Francis Friary(Welcome Estate)was officially blessed and opened by Cardinal(Archbishop)McCann in 1979. Br Bartholomew was Regular Superior at the time. The primary purpose in building was to use the friary for our postulancy and novitiate formation programmes. The friary was later used as the residence of Vice-Provincials and Custodes. In 1979 we also celebrated 50 years of Capuchin presence in S.A. The principal celebration (Mass) took place at St Theresa's, Welcome Estate.

The future president of South Africa, **Mr Nelson Mandela**, visited St Mary of the Angels, Athlone, on 12 September 1993, to thank the community for their assistance during the 'struggle' years. Archbishop Lawrence Henry was principal celebrant at a Mass celebrated to mark the occasion.

In 1993 three friars from St. Joseph's Province, **Kerala**, came to work in S.A: Brs Francis Borgia, Sales Manakkaatt and Abel (who had been a missionary in Malawi). They remained with us for about six years, serving in the parishes of Belgravia and Bridgetown, and assisting also with our formation programme. And in August 1998, Brs Odilo Mroso and Pius Nkilagomva from the Province of **Tanzania** came to take over the pastoral care of the Sobantu parish in PMB. Br Pius returned home in July 1999 and Br Odilo remained until February 2002.

In the 1960s the bishop of **Port Elizabeth** had requested our General Minister to send friars to work among the Italian immigrants residing in that diocese. Brs Alfredo Casadio, Aberto De Vito and Romano Bubani from the Province of Emilia-Romagna served in the parishes of South End, Fairview and Malabar. These three friars had been missionaries in India before coming to S.A. The Group Areas Act forced the closure of the Fairview church and the friars relocated to the newly-built parish church of San Francesco in Charlo. When the Vice-Province was established in 1986 the Italian friars opted not to join. On 1 January 1997 Brs Sean Cahill and Terence Valley together with two (2nd year) postulants took up residence at San Francesco, Charlo. Br Alberto, the previous P.P., was by then ill in Nazareth House. At the same time Br Basil became P.P. of St Martin de Porres, Gelvandale. Br Romano remained at Malabar. When he died, his place was taken by Br Ezio Venturini from the same Province. Br Ezio eventually returned to his home province and was assigned to their mission in Turkey. The parish of St Martin de Porres was later handed back to the diocese and for about six years the friars (Brs Noel Winston and Dominic Griego) looked after the parish of Corpus Christi until the end of 2017.

In 1997 Br John Corriveau, General Minister, proposed that a student house for the technical training of lay brothers be built in **Pretoria**. The OFMs kindly offered the Capuchins half their property at the 'Kraal'. The first sod was turned in June 1998. Br Kees designed the building and supervised its construction. In March 2000 Padre Pio Formation Fraternity was formally blessed and opened in the presence of Archbishop George Daniel of Pretoria, Br John Corriveau, the Irish Provincial, and the major superiors of EACC. Because the number of brothers seeking technical training was small, philosophy classes for religious students, including Capuchins, were conducted at P.Pio. From the beginning, however, difficulty in finding suitable formation staff, together with escalating costs in running the house, the provision of compulsory medical insurance for students, and in particular, travelling expenses to and from S.A., combined to put a big question mark after P.Pio. At the annual EACC meeting held in Cape Town in May 2012, Br Mauro, General Minister, announced his decision to close P.Pio as an EACC student house at the end of 2013. The General Curia could no longer afford to subsidise the Pretoria project. The Custody of Southern Africa took over the running of P.Pio from the beginning of 2014 as a retreat and spirituality centre.

Br Donal O'Mahony of the Irish Province came to Pretoria in 2001 with vast experience in worldwide peace movements. For many years he had been an active member of Pax Christi, the inter-faith and international peace movement. He had also served for six years at the Justice & Peace office of the Order in Rome. In 2002 at the EACC meeting held in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe, Donal outlined his plans to establish the **Damietta Peace Initiative (DPI)** in South Africa with a view to extending its work throughout the African continent. With the support of Br John Corriveau (General Minister) and Br Peter Rodgers (Irish Provincial), the DPI was formally established in 2004, with its headquarters at P.Pio. By the time Br Donal passed away in August 2010 the DPI was firmly established in South Africa

and in a number of countries on the African continent. Br Kees took over the DPI after Br Donal's death.

In recent years, because of a shortage of vocations, on the one hand, and the need to strengthen the Order in South Africa, on the other, with the encouragement of Br John Corriveau, General Minister, the custody entered into a fraternal collaboration agreement with the Province of St Bonaventure, Maharashtra. In 2007 Br Sonny Gadai arrived in S.A., followed by Brs Albert Gonsalves, Nicklos Anthony and Ashok Brahmane. This collaboration has continued. In March 2010, four brothers arrived in S.A. from the Province of the Assumption, Tanzania, Brs Odilo Mroso, Benedict Mtena, Ewald Nangay and Paul Sewiya. They took over the care of Siyabuswa, a large rural pastoral area in the Archdiocese of Pretoria. This fraternal collaboration with the Province of Tanzania has also continued to the present. Br Yoseph Guduno from Ethiopia joined the custody in 2016. The Archbishop of Pretoria had requested a friar to act as chaplain to the Ethiopian community in S.A. Br Yoseph is part of the P.Pio fraternity.

Capuchins returned to the Archdiocese of Durban in 2017 when the parishes of Phoenix and Mount Edgecombe were entrusted to their pastoral care.

Apostolates of Capuchins in S.A. As we see from the history of our presence in S.A, **parish ministry** has been one of our principal apostolates. Apart from the great need for this ministry in the Church in South Africa, it also provided the friars with a means of supporting themselves. But up to recent years the friars have also been regularly involved in preaching **parish missions**, and in conducting **retreats** for clergy and religious. We've also seen something of the friars' involvement in **education**, especially in Langa and Parow. DPI sought to promote **peace** initiatives in South Africa and other countries. Friars have also been involved in **seminary** (Cedara, Pretoria and Athlone) lecturing and spiritual direction. In Cape Town, in particular, **SFO** fraternities were attached to some of our parishes. We've also invested personnel and finance in Capuchin **formation** over the years. Our Vice-Province/Custody has sent friars overseas for further **studies**, with a view to assisting our own formation programmes in South Africa. The **Capuchin Poor Clare Sisters**, in Umzumbe and Swellendam, have always been regarded as part of our Capuchin presence in South Africa (Br Basil is fulltime chaplain in Umzumbe). **P.Pio** (Pretoria) now offers us a potentially powerful means of promoting the work of evangelisation and of sharing our Capuchin spirituality and tradition with others.

Vice-Provincials (Custodes): Br Sylvius McCarthy(1986-89); Br Didacus McGrath(1989-92); Br Noel Winston(1992-1997); Br Sean Cahill(1997-2003); Br Kees Thonissen(2003-2009); Br Sean Cahill(2009-2015); Br Odilo Mroso(2015-). Following the 2012 General Chapter with its approval of certain amendments to the Constitutions, Vice-Provinces became Custodies, and Vice-Provincials, Custodes. Note: VP Chapter 22-27 January 1989 and VP Chapter 12-17 January 1992.

Our **Custody Chapter** was celebrated at P.Pio, Pretoria, from Sunday 25 - Friday 30 November 2018. Elected: Br Odilo Mroso (Custos) and Brs Donal Sweeney, Dominic Griego, Ewald Nangay and Ashok Brahmane (Councillors). Present were Brs Adrian Curran (Irish Provincial), Philip Gonsalves (Maharashtra Provincial) and Paul Sewiya (Vicar Provincial, Tanzanian Province).

Br Rufino Ferris, who turned 85 in January 2019, is our senior friar. He first served in Zambia, then in the United States, and since then in South Africa. Ad multos annos!

Capuchin Presence in South Africa, March 2019

Siyabuswa : Archdiocese of Pretoria

Pretoria (P.Pio): Archdiocese of Pretoria

Durban (Phoenix and Mount Edgecombe): Archdiocese of Durban

Port Elizabeth (Malabar and Charlo): Diocese of Port Elizabeth

Cape Town (Athlone, Welcome Estate and Parow): Archdiocese of Cape Town

Umzumbe (Diocese of Mariannhill) and **Swellendam** (Diocese of Oudtshoorn) **Capuchin Poor Clares**

This year (2019) we celebrate 90 years of our Capuchin presence in South Africa. The first friars arrived in South Africa on Sunday 20 October 1929. This year, the 90th anniversary, Sunday 20 October, is Mission Sunday. Deo Gratias!

Br Sean Cahill OFM Cap

17 March 2019

Feast of St Patrick

Postscript: It was suggested at the Custody Chapter November 2018 that an account of the Capuchin presence in South Africa be drawn up, for the benefit, in particular, of our 'new' brothers who have joined us from various circumscriptions of the Order. The hope is that they'll be more aware of 'where we came from', and of the brothers who have been part of our mission/vice-province/custody over the past 90 years, and their dedication and commitment in sharing the Gospel spirit of St Francis with the people of Africa.
