

A Brief History of the Catholic Church in Southern Africa



200 Years of the Catholic Church
in Southern Africa

(Extensive use was made of the papers from Father Anthony Egan SJ, the Catholic Bishops' Conference and Other on line Documents)

In 2018 the Roman Catholic Church celebrates the 200th anniversary of its official foundation in South Africa. It has participated in two centuries of our history, playing a major role in education, care of orphans and elderly and making a significant contribution to health care from its mission hospitals and clinics, including, in the latter years, an extensive roll-out of anti-retroviral treatment. The Church has, alone and in co-operation with other churches, faith communities and civil society, been a voice for justice, democracy and human rights.

Catholic scholars and public intellectuals have engaged with fellow South Africans on everything from philosophy, theology, history and the politics of race, revolution and reconciliation and they had a significant influence on the debate that led to the birth of democracy in South Africa.

During the first decades of Nationalist rule, the hierarchy often adopted a conciliatory stance towards the government in the hope of maintaining the Church's network of schools, hospitals and welfare institutions. When in 1953 the government struck at church schools for African children with its Bantu education Act, the Catholic Church fought desperately to retain the educational system seen as its major aid to evangelization. The Southern African Catholic Bishops' Conference, created in 1947, made its first pronouncement against racism in 1952 and in 1957 condemned apartheid as "intrinsically evil". Until the late 1970's however, there were few acts of defiance against the state. Within the Church itself, a de facto discrimination was practiced at many levels.

However this proclamation of the SACBC set the church as institution firmly in opposition to apartheid. It was not the first expression of official opposition, but it was for its time the strongest and a pointer to what would be a consistent and systematic challenge to the state until 1994. 2

In 1970's, under the influence of the Vatican Council and spurred by protests from black clergy, Catholic opposition to apartheid started to intensify. In 1972 a move began to desegregate the seminary. In 1976 the decision was taken with regard to both seminaries and schools. The Soweto uprising of 1976 led to a still greater awareness among Catholics for more active Catholic participation in various manifestations of Christian protest, activated mainly by the South African Council of Churches and the Christian Institute. Since February 1990, priority is given to conflict resolution, education to democracy and development.

These ideas, pioneered by a handful of clergy like Mariannhill missionary Bernard Huss and later embraced by leaders like Archbishop Denis Hurley of Durban, forced a church still

dominated politically and economically by a white lay minority and a foreign-born missionary majority to finally confront apartheid after 1948.

The late Archbishop Denis E Hurley was a persistent and passionate voice against apartheid and a pioneer in the fight for justice and peace. He was also the driving force behind Ecumenism in KZN and in 1976 founded the Diakonia Council of Churches which brought together the mainstream churches and enabled vibrant, constructive political and ecumenical debate and civil action against the apartheid regime. He was pronounced “Communist” by the apartheid regime and became the object of ridicule, insult and harassment by the Security Branch and even from within the Church.

Getting back to the early years, colonial politics inevitably influenced the expansion of the Catholic Church in “South Africa”. In British-controlled territories after the 1830s, the Church was generally tolerated and the nationalities of priests – and increasingly congregations of religious sisters and nuns – did not matter as much as it had in the past where, in the Boer Republics, the English speaking missionaries were labeled “Roomse Gevaar” and even viewed as British spies.

Given the mixed colonial demographic, it was generally a good idea to have British or Irish clergy, though Germans, Flemish, French or Dutch missionaries were also welcome. Among the latter, most spoke passable to good English, were useful even communicating with non-English colonists – and worship at the time (until 1965 in fact) was conducted in Latin anyway.

By the turn of the century, the Catholic Church in South Africa was growing and was evangelizing among African communities. In Natal the Trappists founded the monastery of Mariannhill in 1882, but soon Abbot Pfanner concluded that their contemplative life needed to be modified by extensive mission work among the Zulu people. From the monastery he and his congregation established a network of mission stations and schools. The Trappists, together with the Congregation of the Precious Blood, were in a few decades working very effectively throughout southern Natal and the Transkei.

Although the origins of the Church have their roots in Cape Town, the intervening 200 years have witnessed the spread of the Church throughout Southern Africa. It is worth noting that the “adjacent territories”, referred to in the papal document of June 7, 1818, included both Australia and Mauritius and for this reason, an invitation will be sent to the Presidents of the Bishops’ Conferences of both territories to visit Cape Town during the bi-centennial year.

On 11 January 1951, Pope Pius XII established by Papal Bull the Ecclesiastical Hierarchy in the then Union of South Africa, and set up the Ecclesiastical Provinces of Cape Town (comprising the suffragan sees of Aliwal, Oudtshoorn, Port Elizabeth, Queenstown and De Aar); Durban (comprising the suffragan sees of Mariannhill, Eshowe, Kokstad and Mthatha); Pretoria (comprising the suffragan sees of Johannesburg, Lydenburg, Swaziland and

Pietersburg); and Bloemfontein (comprising the suffragan sees of Kroonstad, Bethlehem, Kimberley, Keimoes and Lesotho).

Further growth has taken place in the Church of Southern Africa since then: new dioceses have been created; Zimbabwe, Lesotho and Namibia – which had been part of the Southern African Catholic Bishops' Conference – left the Conference to establish their own Conferences in 1969, 1972 and 1996 respectively; and the ecclesiastical province of Johannesburg was created in 2007 with the diocese of Johannesburg being raised to the status of an archdiocese.

We owe much too to those members of religious congregations who have established hospitals and hospices for the sick and the dying and also to those whose charism is to minister to the poor and the destitute. Generally Religious orders have played the greatest role in African missions in South Africa. While some, like the Oblates of Mary Immaculate (OMI) and Jesuits (SJ) operated in both the colonial towns and rural missions, others – notably the Mariannahill Missionaries (CMM) (emerging from the Trappists) and later the Franciscans (OFM) – concentrated on rural evangelization.

The Church in South Africa faces many challenges, not least among them the failure to hold young people post Confirmation. A change in approach to evangelization and mission is essential if we are to produce sound, enthusiastic disciples eager to bring others to Jesus.