

HISTORICAL FACTS OF THE DIOCESE OF MASVINGO

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Introduction

The Catholic Church in Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) has its commencement in the Zambezi Mission which was assigned to the Society of Jesus affectionately known as the Jesuits by Rome on 7 February 1879 (The Catholic Church in Zimbabwe). Among their first establishments of missions was Driefontein Mission called Guta by the local people. Guta is Afrikaans meaning three fountains named after the initial site prior to its move in 1908 to where the mission is presently located (Driefontein Mission). The Bethlehem Mission Society (SMB) from Switzerland also known as the Bethlehem fathers were the second after the Jesuits to evangelise in Fort Victoria (now Masvingo). The First Swiss Bethlehem fathers arrived in Southern Rhodesia in October 1938 after an invitation by Bishop Aston Chichester, SJ who was in charge of the Vicariate of Salisbury (now Harare). They were entrusted to the area which was separated from the Apostolic Vicariate of Salisbury to become the Apostolic Prefecture of Fort Victoria from which Gwelo (now Gweru) diocese was formed in 1955 after the establishment of the hierarchy in Zimbabwe on the 1st of January (SMB Zimbabwe). A part of it was then separated to erect the Diocese of Masvingo in 1999. Hence, the historical facts of the two dioceses of Gweru and Masvingo are intertwined.

The Evangelisation of “Masvingo Diocese” Before Separation

During the early missionary endeavour, after establishing Chishawasha mission the Jesuits went on to establish another mission at Driefontein in Fort Victoria (Masvingo) in 1904. Driefontein was a farm located fifty miles north of Fort Victoria. Rev. Richard Sykes, Prefect Apostolic of the Zambezi Mission purchased this farm for the purposes of starting a mission (Driefontein Mission). Sykes bought it from an Afrikaner convert, Jan Engelbrecht in 1904 and this place was locally known as “Guta”, three fountains in Afrikaans (Driefontein Mission). According to the Article

entitled, “Driefontein Mission – A Tribute in Memorium”, work on the mission commenced with Fr. Emil Schmitz (1870-1953) aided by Frs. Lindner and Hornig and other Jesuits in 1906. They built a huge Church with distinctive orange coloured brickwork which was completed in 1912. By this time the Jesuits had established two more missions. Namely, Gokomere in 1909 and St Joseph’s Mission in 1912 (Driefontein Mission).

According to C.J.M. Zvobgo, the inception of Gokomere, the then Mzondo mission in 1909 was a second attempt after abandonment of mission by the Jesuits in March 1900. The Jesuits had abandoned the mission due to health deterioration of Frs. Casset and Stempfel who were working at the mission. When Fr. Apel and the two Jesuit brothers re-opened the mission in 1909 they renamed Mzondo mission to Gokomere mission.¹ Jesuits contributed immensely in teaching and building of many schools. The schools constructed included; Gokomere, Matova, Gambiza, Makamure and Rutanga, to mention but a few.² At Gokomere, they built a school-chapel huge enough to accommodate 400 people which was opened on Easter Sunday of 1912.³ The Jesuits spread the faith rapidly such that they opened St Joseph’s, the Holy Cross and Silveira missions respectively. They managed to establish five missions from 1906 to 1934.

At Driefontein, the Jesuits opened a training school for native teachers and catechists but unfortunately it was closed after two years due to lack of funds (Driefontein Mission). Nevertheless, after realising the English Jesuits’ lack of sufficient resources, Bishop Aston Chichester, SJ in charge of the Vicariate of Salisbury looked for assistance from other Catholic orders (Driefontein Mission). The Bethlehem Mission Society of Switzerland responded positively to the bishop’s call. For the SMB, this was their second missionary area after Manchuria China.⁴ They were assigned to evangelise in Fort Victoria. As such, the Bethlehem fathers assumed responsibility for some of the existing missions and they founded many others. Subsequently, in 1947, the Jesuits handed over all the missionary work to the SMB.⁵ One of the Swiss fathers, Haene became the first bishop of Gwelo. He founded the Sisters of the Infant Jesus for African sisters (SJI) in 1950 who then served in the area (Driefontein Mission). However, among those who served at various times in Fort Victoria Prefecture were the German Dominican

Sisters, SJI, and Precious Blood Sisters. These were mainly involved in assisting the Jesuits and the Bethlehem fathers in the ministries of evangelism, teaching and medical missions. The SMB contributed greatly to the spiritual and infrastructure building. They established and run Mambo Press, opened schools, vocational centres, teachers' colleges and hospitals. Furthermore, they served as priests in parishes, spiritual guides to schools, religious communities, among others (SMB Zimbabwe).

Historical facts of Masvingo Diocese after separation

Masvingo diocese is the fruit of the separation from the diocese of Gweru in 1999. It is a suffragan diocese located South-East of Zimbabwe, which covers about 27 037 square miles (David Cheney). This diocese covers eight civil districts. Namely; Gutu, Beitbridge, Bikita, Mwenezi, Chivi, Chiredzi, Masvingo and Zaka. It is under the Patronage of Saint Mary Queen of peace whose feast day is on 22 August (Dioceses). The first episcopate of the then new diocese of Masvingo was Rt. Rev. Michael Dixon Bhasera. He was appointed bishop of this diocese on 9 February 1999 and eventually installed on 24 April 1999 (Dioceses). Prior to the creation of the diocese of Masvingo, Bhasera was the bishop of Gokwe diocese. He had worked on the foundation of Gokwe diocese from 1991 until his new appointment as the bishop of the diocese of Masvingo. The diocese's affiliated bishops are the current bishop of the diocese, Bhasera and Rudolf Nyandoro who was appointed the bishop of Gokwe on 28 January 2017 and the late bishop of Gweru diocese, Xavier Johnsai Munyongani (Catholic – hierarchy). Masvingo diocese falls under the Metropolitan see of Bulawayo together with the dioceses of Gweru and Hwange. The Bulawayo Metropolitan Archbishop is Alex Kaliyanil.

Masvingo Diocese Statistical Data

According to “the Catholic – hierarchy document”, the diocese of Masvingo began in 1999 with about 102 000 Catholics out of a population of about 1 863 650, thus, 8.6% of the total population. The Church grew over the years such that by 2016 the diocese had 229 676 Catholics out of a total population of about 1 886 249. Thus, after seven years Catholics grew up

to 12.2 %. Upon inception, the diocese had twenty-seven diocesan priests and sixteen religious priests who belonged to the SMB. Comprehensively, the diocese had a total of twenty-six male religious (10 brothers and 16 priests) and 132 female religious (The Catholic – hierarchy). However, by 2016 there was an increase in the number of local priests (diocesan) to forty-six and a reduction of religious priests (Bethlehem fathers) to one. The male and female religious reduced to four and eighty-six respectively. Masvingo diocese begun with fourteen parishes but by the year 2016, the parishes had increased to twenty-five. At the present-day, Masvingo diocese is left with no missionary or male religious order or congregation. Nevertheless, there are three female religious congregations involved in the diocese. These are; the SJI, Little Company of the Blessed Lady (LCBL) and the Holy Cross Sisters.

Conclusion

The Jesuit and the Swiss Bethlehem fathers evangelised the region of Masvingo. Initially, they collaborated with the German Dominican Sisters and then later on with other minor female congregations. After the Jesuits handed over responsibility to the SMB, no other male religious worked in this mission area to the present day. Both the Jesuits and SMB contributed a lot to the diocese. They promoted building of schools, teachers' colleges, hospitals, parishes and vocational centres, among others. In a synopsis, their three momentous aspects of missionary work in Masvingo suffragan diocese were preaching, medical missions and education.

¹ Zvobgo, J. M. *A History of Christian Missions in Zimbabwe 1890-1939*. Gweru: Mambo Press, 1986. P. 69.

² Zvobgo, J. M. *A History of Christian Missions in Zimbabwe 1890-1939*. Gweru: Mambo Press, 1986. P. 69-70.

³ Zvobgo, J. M. *A History of Christian Missions in Zimbabwe 1890-1939*. Gweru: Mambo Press, 1986.

⁴ Zvobgo, J. M. *A History of Christian Missions in Zimbabwe 1890-1939*. Gweru: Mambo Press, 1986.

⁵ Zvobgo, J. M. *A History of Christian Missions in Zimbabwe 1890-1939*. Gweru: Mambo Press, 1986.