

The Church and Migration during Apartheid Times: Roman Catholic Missionaries Banned from Former Homeland of Qwaqwa – Witsieshoek

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Abstract

The unjust policies of the apartheid government, which came to power in 1948, made the proclamation of the message of the Gospel difficult for the Roman Catholic missionaries. Catholicism has always determined to communicate the Gospel in ways that engender transformation. However, the apartheid laws in South Africa hindered foreign missionaries from reaching out to the communities which were on the periphery. There was an element of the *Roomse gevaar* in the apartheid policies. The idea of the '*Roomse gevaar*' (the Roman Danger) prevailed in the Afrikaans-speaking community and the corridors of the apartheid regime.

This article presents a historical survey of attitudes towards the missionaries of the Catholic Church in the Eastern Free State during the apartheid regime. It further investigates the impact of the Catholic Church on historical developments in the former Basotho homeland. This research adopts a combination of socio-historical and narrative approaches. The data-gathering technique is the main source of historical books, unpublished and Internet materials. The research is conducted in the form of a comparative Literature study. It draws from Literature on the historical book *Patience Our Daily Bread – The Catholic Church in the Orange Free State and Kimberley from 1850* in the work of Professor J.B. Brain as the main source and my Thesis titled: *The mission of God's people in the light of God's mission. A Missiological case study on the Catholic Church of Bethlehem, South Africa*, and other sources will be incorporated into the discussion. The Eastern Free State is the area of focus, with the Qwaqwa homeland being the main focus.

Keywords: migration; apartheid; missionaries; homeland; Qwaqwa; Witsieshoek.

UNISA 

Studia Historiae Ecclesasticae
#15919 | 11 pages

<https://doi.org/10.25159/2412-4265/15919>
ISSN 2412-4265 (Online), ISSN 1017-0499 (Print)
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Introduction

The Native Land Act of 1913, also known as the “Black Land Act”, and in terms of the Native Resettlement Act of 1954, Blacks had to vacate their premises in which they were residing and were moved to a new location. This had far-reaching and devastating consequences for Black South Africans, shaping the country’s history in profound and devastating ways. There were many evictions between 1913 and the early 1990s.

There was also formal repression of persons, including missionaries. Some of the repressive actions against persons were: i) Banishment, which is a practice which was quite prevalent during apartheid. It involved removing a person from a particular area for political reasons and was most often combined with the subsequent confinement of that person to some remote area. The Riotous Assemblies ACT, the ISA (forming part of a banning order), and homeland security legislation were used. ii) Denationalisation or the withdrawal of citizenship was a by-product of the creation of the “independent homelands”. It involved the refusal of admission into “South Africa” of “political undesirables” or their “deportation” into their relevant ethnic homelands and iii) Deportation or expulsion of South Africans to their respective homelands (Ciskei, Venda, Witsieshoek, Bophuthatswana, Kwandebele, etc.) (Human Rights Commission, 1989, p4).

The churches and church organisations were in a special position in the struggle against apartheid, having an immunity not enjoyed by other opponents of apartheid. However, this “immunity” did not protect its members or property from the following: i) Hundreds of church workers suffered detention without trial and have even reported torture. ii) The churches and their leaders have been subjected to vitriolic propaganda attacks by state-controlled TV and radio. iii) Hit squads have attacked numerous church buildings and have, for example, destroyed the headquarters of both the SACC and the SACBC. iv) An attempt on the life of Rev Frank Chikane, Secretary General of the SACC, was made through the use of poison (Human Rights Commission, 1989, p10).

The Concept of Homelands in South Africa

According to the apartheid government in South Africa, the concept of homelands (also known as Bantustans) was a central part of their discriminatory policies. These homelands were areas to which the majority of the Black population was forcibly moved, preventing them from living in urban areas. These were places where White people were not permitted to live or stay there. Apartheid laws caused forced migration of the Black majority of South Africa.

The apartheid government established the purpose of homelands as a major administrative mechanism to segregate Blacks from Whites. The idea was to separate different ethnic groups and give Blacks the responsibility of running independent governments within these designated areas. By doing so, the government aimed to deny

Blacks protection and any rights they could have in South Africa. The whole policy of apartheid was to disempower the Black people of South Africa.

Ten homelands were created in South Africa during the apartheid era. Each homeland was designed for specific ethnic groups. Examples include Transkei and Ciskei for the Xhosa people, Bophuthatswana for the Tswana people, and KwaZulu for the Zulu people. Lebowa for the Pedi and Northern Ndebele. Venda for Vendas, and Gazankulu for Shangaan and Tsonga people. QwaQwa for Basothos (www.sahistory.org.za/article/homelands. Accessed 4 April 2024).

However, the main focus of this article is, therefore, to present a historical survey of attitudes towards the Catholic Church's missionaries in the Eastern Free State during the apartheid regime. It further investigates the Catholic Church's impact on historical developments in the Qwaqwa homeland and the banishment of Catholic missionaries.

Historical Overview of the Diocese of Bethlehem

The history of the Catholic Church in the Diocese of Bethlehem begins with the German Missionaries. It is rooted in the Holy Ghost Fathers or Spiritans of the German Province and the Religious Sisters of St. Paul (Mofokeng 2015). Bethlehem Diocese has four deaneries: Central Deanery, Eastern Deanery, Southern Deanery and Qwaqwa Deanery. For the purpose of the project, the author will limit himself to the latter.

The first German Spiritan missionaries set foot on South African soil “as far back as 1878” (Kuckertz 1984, 4). In its history, the Catholic Church in the Orange Free State, as it was previously known, had had numerous changes in its boundaries. Firstly, it was the Orange Free State Vicariate from 1886 to 1923. “The new vicarate of the Orange Free State, included Kimberley and Basutoland (later Lesotho), was established by a *Decretum* or decree of separation on March 15, 1886. Fr. Anthony Gaughren OMI was vicar Apostolic of the new vicariate” (Brain 1996, 32).

On 26th November 1923, a papal document was issued to establish the Prefecture Apostolic of Kroonstad. Fr. Rath cited the papal document, which stressed that “the Prefecture Apostolic of Kroonstad [was] to be formed from part of the Vicariate of Kimberley and responsibility for it be given to the members of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit” (1973, 67). For the Spiritans, this was the opportune time to spread the message of the Gospel intensively (Kuckertz 1984, 5).

Fr. Kuckertz noted that “a field of work was created for the Spiritans” (1984, 6). At that time, the Prefecture of Kroonstad had “only 821 Catholics, largely of European origin, who were known to the three Oblate priests who stayed in Kroonstad and Harrismith and visited Ladybrand regularly” (Echo 1964, 10). The travelling missionaries made stops in these areas to search for Catholics and administer the sacraments.

At the pioneering stage, there was no missionary activity among the African population. This was a great concern for the missionaries. The state of affairs, as mentioned above, was exacerbated during World War II, as the missionaries were once again not allowed to shepherd the Blacks. They were described as pagans, and “a few were baptised on their death beds or were converted by the prison chaplain while serving a gaol sentence” (Brain 1996, 27). In the same vein, Fr Kuckertz recorded that the missionaries “were forbidden to undertake all pastoral work among the Blacks except in the case of death or near death. In 1945, this restriction was lifted” (1984, 28).

Subsequently, after the establishment of the Prefecture Apostolic of Kroonstad, the hierarchy was also instituted, “on the 24th March, 1924, the former Provincial of the German Province, Fr. Leo Klerlein, was appointed Prefect Apostolic” (Kuckertz 1984, 8). A significant development came in 1935 when “the prefecture was awarded the status of a vicariate. Mgr. Klerlein was appointed Vicar Apostolic. He was subsequently ordained bishop on 30th May 1935” (Kuckertz 1984, 26).

In 1948, following Bishop Klerlein's suggestion, the Vicariate of Kroonstad was divided into the Vicariate of Bethlehem and Kroonstad.

Early Missionary Days in the Diocese of Bethlehem

Overall, the Spiritans from Germany were the ones who first planted the Catholic Church in the Orange Free State, which later, after the new political dispensation (1994), was called the Free State Province.

The pioneering work of the Spiritans began under trying circumstances. Even before the Nationalist Party came to power, the unjust policies of the government did not make the proclamation of the message of the Gospel easy for the Catholic missionaries. The government policy of segregation discriminated against people of colour. In those days, it was fashionable among the Whites to talk about *swaart gevaar* (Black danger), *Katolieke gevaar* (Catholic danger), and *Roomse gevaar* (Roman danger). This was a derogatory noun also used ironically in the apartheid South Africa referring to Roman Catholicism. There was even an anti-Catholic smear campaign by government officials, *predikant* (preacher or minister) and teachers in government (public) schools.

Some of the people, especially the Protestant Afrikaners, were hostile to the Catholic missionaries and looked upon them as unwanted intruders. For instance, in their early years on South African soil, the Catholic missionaries “had to withdraw from Mafikeng since the constant conflict with the Protestants [...] made any further work impossible.” (Koren 1958, 276f). In the heart of Apartheid, the Afrikaners barred the Catholic missionaries from entering their areas or farms. Fr. Schings noted that the Catholic missionaries were “greatly handicapped by the Afrikaner’s negative attitude towards Catholics especially on the farms where the missionaries were barred from entering and

Black Catholics [were] forbidden access of school and church and often under penalty of dismissal” (1933, 170).

According to Brain (1996, 38), under the apartheid government, “the Dutch Reformed Church was the state church, but other denominations existed alongside it”. No doubt, the Catholic Church was ostracised by the government of the day.

Brain records that with time, the missionaries were cognisant of the fact that “blacks in the Orange Free State were receiving little or no attention from the Catholic Church” (1996, 31). As their first move in terms of justice, the missionaries started to organise the Blacks, who were mostly uneducated. From then on, the missionaries devoted their time to “the conversion of the blacks. However, the ministry to the blacks was particularly difficult because many of the men were working on the mines or farms”.

“On 11th January 1951, the Southern African Hierarchy was established by papal decree [...] Bloemfontein received the status of archdiocese and the Vicariate of Bethlehem became the Diocese of Bethlehem” (Kuckertz 1984, 36). Bishop Peter Kelleter CSSp, became the first bishop for the Diocese of Bethlehem after Bishop Klerlein, who was the Vicar apostolic.

Witsieshoek (Qwaqwa) Homeland

The Diocese of Bethlehem comprises four deaneries, and Qwaqwa is one of them. The frequent snow on the Drakensberg mountain peaks surrounding the town led the San to call the region Qwaqwa (whiter than white). In Afrikaans, it was known as Witsieshoek, named after a farm (Wikipedia).

Qwaqwa covers 45,000 hectares of mountainous country on the Lesotho border. Due to apartheid, which segregated people, the Catholic Church went to Qwaqwa homeland much later, in the sixties (1960s), when “Qwaqwa (Witsieshoek) experienced a boom in population” (Kuckertz 1984, 26) at the time of the Group Areas Act (which was passed by the Apartheid government in 1950). The ‘Ghetto Act’, as it was notoriously known, enforced segregation of different races to specific areas; for example, Basotho were sent from cities to Qwaqwa as their homeland. Consequently, Qwaqwa had the highest growth rate of Basotho due to the influx of people into the homeland, and the number of Catholics started to grow, especially in the 1980s.

Due to the apartheid Group Areas Act, the Diocese of Bethlehem suffered two kinds of migrations: On the one hand, People were removed from the towns to the “homeland” Qwaqwa and on the other hand, to a new township called Botshabelo, which is not far from Bloemfontein and according to the Catholic demarcations it is under the Archdiocese of Bloemfontein (Mofokeng 2015, 108).

During the height of apartheid, Whites were not allowed to stay in the Black populated areas and were not allowed to dine with them. Hence, missionaries from Europe could not stay in Qwaqwa. The Spiritan Fathers, who used to carry the pastoral care, moved out of Qwaqwa as their pastoral area in 1981. They sporadically served pastoral care in Qwaqwa, Phuthaditjhaba, from Harrismith, about 50 km from Qwaqwa. They eventually moved out of Qwaqwa. This is one of the reasons that the Catholic Church in Qwaqwa progressed at a slower pace, although it picked up in the 1980s. For example, some villages had to remain without a visiting missionary for more than three months. Between 1981 and 1982, the Bishop of Bethlehem, Hubert Bucher, often drove from Bethlehem to Qwaqwa to celebrate Mass in Phuthaditjhaba and the villages (Mofokeng 2015, 90).

Another reason the Catholic Church entered the area of Qwaqwa late was the Dutch Reformed Church, which “concentrated at Witzieshoek (sic) where a theological school for Africans was opened” (Brain 1996, 13).

The White Fathers, now known as Missionaries of Africa, were invited by Bishop Hubert Bucher to the Diocese of Bethlehem, and they took over Qwaqwa as their pastoral area in 1982. Bishop Jan De Groef is a Missionary of Africa from Belgium who has lived and worked in the homeland and the Black townships of South Africa since the 1980s and was still there when the Whites were not permitted to stay with the Blacks in the area. Bishop Jan attested that till half of 1983, he and his confrères had to stay in the small town of Kestell, about 30 km away from Phuthaditjhaba. Pastoral care, therefore, constantly suffered in Qwaqwa. No Catholic priest was residing in the area to pastor +300 Catholics then (De Groef, Interview 14 October 2023). In Kestell, the White Fathers established their operational base as a Diocesan Pastoral Animation Team. Qwaqwa formed their ‘home parish’ for which they assumed full responsibility (Bethlehem Diocese, archive pre-1982, part 2).

To get a residing priest in Qwaqwa, Bishop Hubert Bucher approached Basotho Priests in Lesotho to come over to Qwaqwa for pastoral reasons. He pleaded with the Ministry of Co-operation and Development in Cape-Town offices, Pretoria offices and Qwaqwa homeland offices to allow a Mosotho priest, Fr Simon Rampeo from Lesotho, to provide spiritual assistance for a small Catholic Population in Qwaqwa. In this difficult situation, Bishop Bucher wrote numerous letters to the Missionaries of Oblates of Mary Immaculate (OMI) both in Lesotho and Natal Provinces and during the Plenary Session of the Southern African Catholic Bishops’ Conference (SACBC), the bishop would be asking them to assist the Diocese of Bethlehem with missionaries willing to work in Qwaqwa. He made urgent appeals to aforesaid structures, stating that he was “in trouble”; out of desperation, he even called himself “a beggar with dignity.” Unfortunately, his appeal was often declined (Bethlehem Diocese, archives pre-1982, part 2). However, the setback during that time was the policy of the government, which, for a certain period, expelled Catholic Missionaries in Qwaqwa, including Fr Simon Rampeo, who originated from Lesotho (Mofokeng 2015, 91). Some missionaries

received official letters informing them that their work permit would not be renewed and that they would then be deported (Bethlehem Diocese, archives pre-1982, part 2).

Furthermore, Bishop Hubert Bucher, who succeeded Bishop Peter Kelleter in 1977, approached the government of Qwaqwa for a site to establish two institutions for Catholics in Qwaqwa: 1. Minor Seminary and 2. Marian Shrine.

1. Minor Seminary: In Catholicism, the minor Seminary is like a boarding school for boys. Students have a regulated life that includes academics, recreation, and spiritual life. During this period, a boy's mind and character are shaped, and his life receives direction. So, the bishop approached the government with the intention of establishing a minor seminary in the homeland. Unfortunately, his application was denied.
2. Marian Shrine: A Marian shrine provides a strong Marian devotion in the Catholic Church. In 1985, Bishop Bucher applied for a site to erect the Marian Shrine in Qwaqwa, and after a long delay, the application was accepted. At the inauguration of the Marian Shrine (07 October 1989), the speech of Dr TK Mopeli demonstrated the hostility the Church or missionaries received in the homeland: "To those who were born and raised in Qwaqwa for three scores and five would not negate the statement that the Catholic Church was unknown and non-existent in these parts of the country. The Church was given a mountainous area to level without the assistance of the government" (Mopeli, T.K. speech. Diocesan Archive, 1989).

The inauguration of the Diocesan Marian Shrine in Qwaqwa was a watershed in the relations between the Catholic Church and the Qwaqwa Government. Dr TK Mopeli had this to say:

The inauguration of the Diocesan Marian Shrine is a historical event that the inhabitants of Qwaqwa will fondly and indelibly remember, particularly the various Catholic congregations in the region of Qwaqwa. Today is the culmination of many years of undying hope and unending supplication to God Almighty that a shrine of this magnificence and magnitude be constructed in Tsheseng-Qwaqwa in honour of the Blessed Virgin. As Head of the Qwaqwa Government, I bring you felicitations and joyous greetings on this memorable occasion. It is no empty boast to impress upon you all that my government is committed to freedom and justice for all people, irrespective of colour, race, sex or religion. My government is particularly dedicated to the principle and ideal of freedom of worship. Our participation in this auspicious occasion is an unequivocal testimony of those God-given ideals we so much cherish. (Mopeli, T.K. speech. Diocesan Archive, 1989). According to Fr. Atoro, the parish priest of Phuthaditjhaba, the latest diocesan statistics (2023) show that there are 27,000 Catholics and currently 15 churches (Atoro, Interview 16 January 2024).

The Missionary Work in the Homeland of Qwaqwa

This section aims to help the reader understand the working conditions of the early missionaries in the Qwaqwa homeland. The homeland is largely rural and includes several villages.

The Spiritan Fathers (CSSp) and the Oblates of Mary Immaculate (OMI) were missionaries on the ground. Even though they were in a strange land, they embraced a new culture, social outlook and attitude. They made every effort to study the language and, to a certain extent, the customs of the Basotho (Mofokeng 2015, 111).

The missionaries discerned the signs of the times; for example, they identified the core issues of concern in the homeland, which included abject poverty, abuse of human rights, lack of laity involvement in the church, etc. In their poverty, everyone used candles and lived in matchbox-like houses with asbestos roofs, steel doors, and no electricity. They also attended the ministry to youth like Chiro, which trained young people in leadership.

The homeland government of Qwaqwa built many schools for the inhabitants of Qwaqwa, and many parents in the townships, because of riots in their areas, particularly after the 1976 Soweto uprising, sent their children to study in Qwaqwa (Mofokeng 2015, 67). However, because of a hostile homeland government towards Catholics, the Catholic Church in Qwaqwa could not establish Catholic or mission schools even though there was a hostel for those who were attending schools in the neighbourhood and were also discerning their vocation. A sewing project for women was established in the village, *Letshalemaduke*, but it also collapsed. The church built six educare centres in *Tsheseng*, *Mangaung*, *Thababosiu*, *Tebang*, *Makwane*, and *Phuthaditjhaba* villages. Some of these educare centres are run by the Sisters of St Paul and appreciated by the community. The missionaries were able to get land from the area chief even though there were disputes at times.

The outreach programmes in Qwaqwa, of which the missionaries initiated some and are still operational, include helping struggling families with food and school uniforms. There are also Community Gardens and Soup Kitchen under the auspices of Catholic Community Service (CCS), *Hlokomela wa Heno* (Take care of your neighbour), St Kizito Children's' Programme, and Home-Based Care (Mofokeng 2015, 125).

All this notwithstanding, the usual daily round of parish chores had to carry on: marriages, baptisms and their preparations, home visits, funerals, parish administration, and so on (Noonan 2016, 145). They still had to attend to the normal, more traditional forms of parish ministry such as lay formation, community building and the sacramental life and needs of the parish community (Noonan 2016, 89).

Finally, the white missionaries were not in any danger of Basotho attacking them. The only fear was the police harassment. At times, their missionary work was tragic and frightening but also glorious.

The Response of the Southern African Catholic Bishops' Conference

The Bishops' Conference took a firm decision that the Catholic Church could not stand by idly while the apartheid police were harassing its members and priests, missionaries were expelled, some were under arrest, banned and numerous restrictions imposed on their pastoral ministry (SACBC, 1986).

At the end of their 1976 January Plenary Session, the bishops protested against the excessive use of banning, restricting, and withdrawing passports and residential permits for undeclared reasons. The SACBC urged the apartheid government to repeal or drastically revise laws permitting banning and other such actions.

The SACBC concluded their statement by citing a periscope from Pope John XXIII's 1963 encyclical titled *Pacem in Terris* (Peace on Earth):

Such expatriates show that there are some political regimes which do not guarantee citizens a sufficient sphere of freedom within which their souls may breathe humanly; in fact, under such regimes the lawful existence of such a sphere of freedom is either called in question or denied. This is undoubtedly a radical inversion of the order of human society, since the reason for the existence of the public authority is to promote the common good, fundamental element of which is the recognition of this sphere of freedom and the safeguarding of it.

Essentially, the SACBC took a strong anti-apartheid stand. The formulation of Justice and Peace commissions and lay movements assisted the church in moving from denunciation to active opposition to the apartheid policies.

Conclusion

In the early days of the Catholic Church in South Africa, the Church, particularly the Catholic Church, was not popular with the majority of White groups, especially the Afrikaners; thus, the derogative noun *Roomse gevaar*. Hence, the Catholic Church entered Qwaqwa at a late stage when other churches, especially the Dutch Reformed Church (NGK), were long established in the area and were apartheid's principal proponents.

Even though the Bantustans were created for the exclusion of Black people, the Catholic missionaries in the former homeland of Qwaqwa ministered to the Basotho culture and were captured by their experiences. The presence of the missionaries among the Basotho of Qwaqwa was a sign of hope in the situation of despair and oppression, even though these missionaries kept a low-profile view of the homeland's politics.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank the Academic Committee at St John Vianney Seminary and the Diocese of Bethlehem for the support provided in conducting this research. This article was solely written by Dr D.W. Mofokeng, and data analysed by the author are available upon request.

Competing Interest, Ethical Consideration and Funding Information

The author declares that he has no financial or personal interests that may have inappropriately influenced him in writing this article. Ethical clearance was not required. St John Vianney Seminary financially supported this study.

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