

## SOUTH AFRICAN NATIVE MISSIONS

**B**EING asked to describe native mission work is rather like being asked to describe children. Each mission, like each child—or like each angel—is unique. There is only one member in each species; and it is this that makes the fascination of the world. Every missionary has to build according to his own circumstances—meeting his own problem. In visiting a mission one sees what *that* missionary has made of *those* circumstances; and one is liable to think how poor it all looks, and how much better it might have been. Which is frequently perfectly true. I shudder to think what my successor here will say and think when he takes over my job some day. Yet, in fact, many such missions are almost miracles of progress—in those circumstances.

Missions may be divided into various types—like children. There is the mission in a town which has no industries, where the natives are mostly domestic servants; and there is the country mission where there are no adjacent towns and the natives are farm labourers. Both of these have a fairly settled population. There is the industrial centre mission—as in Johannesburg—where there is no country and hardly any settled population. Then there are the missions in the tribal areas, which are again quite a different order of work.

The mission I am describing is one that embraces a country town and its surrounding district. There are no important industries apart from farming—and even that is scarcely important, for the yield on the whole is poor. Consequently we have a relatively settled population. This means that your mistakes—and your consolations—stay with you. There is also a good deal of poverty and neglect.

The general trend of European policy towards natives in this country has been towards social separation, but not of such a strict kind as to prevent the use of the native as the labourer for the European.

As a result, urban natives live in separate areas, 'locations' or 'native townships', within reach of the town on which they depend for their living, and which depends on their work.

On this plan, the location of this town is situated on the south side, and has come to be separated from the town only by the width of a street. There is no further room for extension in any direction, and the result is serious overcrowding. Its area is about one-twelfth of the European town, though it has to accommodate almost the same number of people. The Department of Native Affairs in Pretoria has ordered the local authorities to find a place where a new location can be built—and in so doing they are giving the missionary one more problem. The new location will have to be served. Every denomina-

tion will want its school and church, and the Catholic Priest will have to try to get a suitable site in the religious scramble that will take place.

In the days, some twenty-five years ago, when this mission was founded, the town was still separated from the location by the width of two streets, with a small piece of unoccupied ground between them. There was a Mother Superior of genius at the convent, and she bought this stretch of ground.

On the day when she went out with the surveyor to see the pegs driven in a native came out from the location to ask what they were doing. On hearing that the ground had been bought for a mission school and church, he replied, 'I can tell you this at once: You will never get a single child from this location to that school of yours!' Today there are close on 1,200 children in that school, and the amalgamated school—formed by the union of the schools of four other churches, and now abandoned to the Government—has about 800.

Those were the days! I have heard something of them from my predecessors. The Sisters built a two-roomed school-church, and bought a horse and four-wheeled 'spider' cart. For twelve years that horse and cart went up and down the road from the convent to the mission twice a day. The first mission Sisters found five Catholics—two of the men working at the convent with their wives and one other bachelor. They collected a few children in the school and they worked indefatigably. They visited the tiny flock at their homes in the location, they were available for any caller at any time; they looked after such sick as they came across, produced maps and charts and apparatus out of discarded fragments. In fact, they organised a school from next to nothing; and that is no small matter. From that time on they have been the backbone of the mission, spending their money and their lives to build and to back up the Priest.

This mission had at first to be an adjunct of the European parish, and an additional work for the parish Priest. There was an old and very holy and hardworking Priest there at the time, and he did his utmost to co-operate with the Sisters. In fact, such an arrangement seldom works well. It is necessary to be very cautious in dealing with native catechumens, and a Priest who lives two miles away, and who is daily occupied not only with the town European Catholics, but with all the surrounding areas as well, can never find time to make himself sufficiently familiar with native people as well. Most of our difficult cases of today date from that period. In fact the first essential in a mission is that the missionary shall have nothing else to do, and shall be so completely with the people that he knows their ways intimately and their language thoroughly. It is knowledge of the language that makes the professional missionary. And let it be noted

that anyone can learn to speak a language in a comparatively short time if he builds on what he wants; but the real trouble is to understand the other fellow. This latter understanding is most necessary, for what a new-comer wants is answers to *his* questions, and what an old hand wants is assistance in *his* difficulties. You must be able to understand him—in private if necessary; and you cannot learn to do this without close daily contact.

The holy old part-time missionary was replaced in due course by a whole-time missionary living at the town presbytery. He made a good deal of progress and, working most methodically, mapped out the area, showing the farms where a few Catholics and Catechumens were living. He tabulated the names and relationships and even went into the economic position of the natives in general. He worked out costs of living and scales of pay, and discovered that the latter were wholly inadequate, yet that the natives continued to live. This is not the first time that this discovery has been made, and doubtless it will not be the last. But though he was wholly inadequately supplied with money and material, and had to drag long distances on a bicycle, he was at least a whole-time missionary and the work progressed.

About that time the Anglican church suffered a land-slide which brought us a large number of converts, and these in due course became the native back-bone of the mission. They were a good type and became strong and faithful Catholics. The leader of them was once approached by the Anglicans at a later date to ask if he would not return. He was an old man, but he drew himself up and replied from the depths of his soul, 'I'd sooner die!'

This first whole-time missionary was replaced after two years by another, who carried on the work under the same difficult conditions, but also made progress. By the time he left, a year later, the tally was about 250 Catholics and Catechumens. There was a well-established out-station about twelve miles away in a semi-tribal area, and an older small station about 30 miles away was also progressing and its little school, started two years earlier, was getting along all right.

My own connection with this place began under similar conditions, except that I was the first missionary there to own a car. This was an enormous advantage. After a year or so I moved down to a room attached to the two schoolrooms and lived down at the mission, except for some meals. From this time onwards the work became relatively easy, for I was not hampered by the difficulties of transport and lack of money as my predecessors had been. A routine established itself very quickly; for it is this that makes every mission unique; you have to meet the facts of the place as they are and build

on them or in between them; and so the mission establishes the routine. Thus at every place it is different.

We had now reached the stage of daily Mass, and the Blessed Sacrament was reserved at the mission. The whole outlook began to change. People came to Mass in the morning; the mission began to take on an air of worship rather than school. Then the ease of transport that the car had brought altered the character of the outside work immensely. I could get to outside farms and visit scattered Catholics. Very soon I began to say Mass wherever I found a Catholic family, and the next time I went there were Catechumens ready to start. Usually I appointed the head of the family as Catechist—even though his knowledge might be slight, and let him be the centre round which people gathered. He would baptise in emergency, publish banns, and send for me in cases of serious illness. These centres grew into out-stations. At one place I picked a boy who had a Secondary Teacher's Diploma and made him school-master on £1 a month; and in three years almost every family for about three miles round was either Catholic or Catechumen.

So the work went on. At one time I thought of building a nice Church-school at each of these out-stations, but there I learned wisdom from an old boy who said, 'Don't do it, Father; the people seldom stay more than a few years at one place, and you might find your church standing among Protestants'. The better plan was to encourage the building of a raw-brick chapel by the people themselves, by the gift of second-hand doors and windows, and then if the population moved on, the doors and windows could go too, and little harm had been done. At one time we had as many as thirteen schools; now we have seven. But in fact we are teaching far more children now than then, and usually when the families move, they try to get a place near to an existing school or outstation.

Side by side with this has been the crying need of vernacular religious literature. We had to make a few books on a duplicator, but we could not make many for want of time. One Sister at the town convent made us some fine books of Chant—the principal Masses—and these are still our standby today. We had to make little missals and hymn-books, little prayer-books and sheets with extras that we had not thought of before; and when the Tertiaries developed, they had to have books provided for them too in vernacular and in Latin; and there is still much to be done on this side. Besides this there is a great need for books of devotion, lives of Saints, and so forth, and printing facilities are scarce.

One of the great urges of the Catholic spirit is into public expression of the Faith. I have never had to start anything myself; any attempts I made have always failed. All I have had to do is to

find ways of satisfying the desire of the Catholic spirit. Thus we had the Knights of the Blessed Sacrament, whose day for Holy Communion is the first Sunday of the month. There is a very strong St Anne's Society who do splendid work in organising at functions, and who have provided the priest and the mission with a number of most handsome gifts—notably a very fine set of vestments complete with cope for our Lady's Feasts.

Besides this there are two strong and active Præsidia of The Legion of Mary, who for about four years or more have been my right hand. There was a self-formed Church Committee existing, and when I discovered the Legion I offered them its Constitutions. They took them up, and though some of the original 'committee' left, the work has gone on steadily ever since. There is also a boys' præsidium, and Children of Mary; and beside all these, the Tertiaries, who are most praiseworthy in their observance and their spirit.

All these things grew up without my initiative, out of the circumstances of the mission. All I have had to do is to respond to advances and find ways.

The same is true of the Catechumens. I have not looked for a single one of the 3,500 Catholics and Catechumens in our present 22 outstations. They offered themselves, and it was up to me to find ways to instruct them. The local rules of the Episcopate are our guide. These prescribe two years' instruction and probation, and we stick to that—allowing only a small margin if a Confirmation or marriage is approaching, or if the people are very old or seem to be dying. The greatest difficulties arise out of baptising young girls of 16 or so, and people who seem to be dying and then recover. We now very seldom baptise young girls. We wait rather till they are married and then see if they persevere. In a mixed marriage it is very hard for a young girl to stand up against the pressure of a Protestant husband who claims that he has paid the marriage portion and therefore his wife *must* go to his church. It is striking to note how often Protestant men seem to disregard their promises in this matter. The majority of girls do not lapse, but they suffer a good deal.

It is of course most useful for a missionary to be a jack-of-all-trades, and to have a good supply of tools. There are an unending stream of jobs to be done. A missionary has always to help himself. He has to be grateful for the things that the Convent—and others—discard. Tables in a shaky condition, desks likewise. Pictures in broken frames are offered him, discarded straps, trunks, coat-hangers and what not. He learns to refuse nothing; not even old newspapers. 'It might be of use at the mission'. It very often is, if the missionary can help himself a bit with tools and squeeze in time to do the necessary repairs. If he can be his own architect, carpenter,

plumber, mechanic and painter he can turn out quite a number of necessities which will bring a sense of development and progress. Other people will notice that he planed the wood badly, that the repair to something else is obviously amateur; but if he does not or cannot make these attempts he will be very much worse off.

Above all a missionary must be a social reformer, for life under anything but Christianity is a distortion of human nature. He will find himself up against endless prejudices and evil customs retained by force of tradition. He will find too most greivous holes in the life of his people that have been left by partial and at best superficial contact with Western civilisation.

To take only one example, there is the Saturday afternoon and Sunday holiday. Europeans have developed occupations for this time and have the money to support them. For the natives there is normally very little but drink, dancing and sex—nothing at any rate that brings good development. To try to meet this we got a bioscope, and this has become now a feature of the lives of the local people. It has introduced them to new scenes and ideas, to fine music; to drama, comedy and adventure. It has opened up new worlds for them, and taught them a new social outlook. At the beginning, six years ago, they could not sit still for ten minutes or keep quiet enough to know what was going on. Fights were frequent and the noise was often almost deafening. We still have occasional fights, but the general behaviour is now almost as good as that in a European cinema with its long theatre-going tradition. Pictures for the bioscope are provided by some of the principal producers, and the Government has a Board of Censors which certifies what may be shown.

In this same spirit, we have tried several times to get boys' clubs going. These usually lasted about six months and then suddenly died. I do not know why, but sometimes it may have been due to jealousies, for jealousy is one of the principal vices of these people. The children especially need organised games very badly; but they are allergic to organisation in any form, and their games suffer in consequence. Yet one has to persevere, for organisation is one of the essential features of human life, and a great teacher of self-discipline. The missionary must watch his chance and try to build when an opportunity offers, but always in terms of native character and not European. There are endless things to be done and reform work to be initiated; and yet, indeed, nothing can be initiated till the people themselves have reached the point of looking for it. To this you must pray God to bring them. As Miss Sullivan, the teacher of Helen Keller remarked, 'The right time to answer a question is when it is asked'. But one might add. 'It is the job of the missionary, as of the

teacher, to induce the asking of questions'. This is very difficult. The native wants to be himself, plus European advantages, and without self-sacrifice.

With it all one has to go quietly and never be in a hurry however much one's daily life is in fact a continuous rush. One must not take people's failures too much to heart. Kindness does far more than scolding; and these people are extremely sensitive. They may show little in their faces when you are scolding them; but you can easily break their courage to return to you.

All in all this is a happy life, with so much building to do it cannot but be interesting. And the Sisters, now ten in number, are beyond praise.

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## THE UPROOTED AFRICAN

'LITTLE CHICKENS GO IN TWOS' (*Zulu Saying*)

**A**N African becoming a Christian in South Africa passes through a remarkable experience of two complete worlds; two religions wholly contradictory, two social systems as different, and two methods of church organisation adapted to the separate social systems. Most natives are still born in tribal circumstances, either in the Reserve Territories, Zululand, Basutoland, Swaziland and the others in which natives are under their own chiefs and ancient tribal laws; or at least they are born on European farms on the veldt, where their immediate family and social life is the tribal one, although they are not within a tribe.

Let us suppose a heathen becoming a Christian, for most of our adult Christians are still first-generation Christians, and consider his experience.

He is born into a wide sunlit land, an awe-inspiring creation whether it is the limitless, treeless sweeps of the veld or the great black barren 'Dragon' mountains. He lives in some sort of an oasis, valley or riverside or near water on the veld. He lives under a burning sun the year round, but with tremendous cold at night in winter, violent short rains and hailstorms, peril of crops and beasts. The earth is not friendly as in temperate climates. Insects are dangerous. There are snakes. It is not a land to rest on the grass, or splash in the water. But it has a stirring beauty, vastness, stillness, wonderful fruits, sudden grass and flowers after a brief rain, a light that is polished and air like wine. You may see red hills in South Africa and a green cloud; it is exotic, and the brown men who live in it love colour.