

Concise history of the Salesians in Manzini, Swaziland.

The roots of the Salesian work in Swaziland began with correspondence in 1951 between Bishop A. Barneschi and Fr F. Stubbings, rector of the Salesian Institute, in Cape Town. Fr F. Couche was the provincial at that time of the Anglo-Irish Province of the Salesian Congregation.

Bishop Louis Ndluvo related at the Golden Jubilee Mass on 15th August 2003, how Bishop Barneschi went to Cape Town to invite the Salesians to Swaziland. He was very impressed with the brass band that welcomed him, and returned to Bremersdorp to tell everyone that the Salesians were coming, and bringing a band! Correspondence was finalised between Fr Couche and Fr Stubbings when the latter was appointed Rector of Bremersdorp (as Manzini was called in those days!) in a letter dated 5th September 1952.

Bishop Barneschi presented the Salesians with a large three-storey building, which still dominates the campus. But he was disappointed as the band had not arrived when the school opened on the 4th February 1953. However, there was no disappointment about the beginnings of the co-operative effort between the Servites and the Salesians to launch catholic education in a big way for the local Swazi youth. At that time the building was considered the largest building in Swaziland. The first benefactor of the school was Mr Peter Weidner, a struggling mining prospector in South West Africa, whose wife Cecilia had once lived in Swaziland and spoke siSwati. Mr Weidner offered a loan of three thousand pounds (sterling), interest free to Fr Stubbings. Later when his business prospered, he turned the loan into a gift to the Salesians and to Swazi education. So, the campus was to grow even larger over the next fifty years.

On that memorable day in February 1953 the school opened with three teachers and thirty-two pupils. The following year the enrolment more than doubled. Teachers at that time were Fr J. Fairclough, Fr Stubbings and Mr Dudley Nxumalo. The subjects taught were agriculture, arithmetic, botany, English, geography mathematics, physical education, Zulu, religious knowledge and singing. On March 16th King Sobuza II visited the school together with his friend Bishop Barneschi. The official opening and blessing of the school took place on the 20th May 1953. The then provincial Fr R. Hall celebrated Mass outside. The school was officially opened in the afternoon by His Honour D.L. Morgan CMG, MBE, the resident commissioner of Swaziland.

The Salesian High School began to enjoy some modest success. The Salesian Echo of 1957 reported on the first Matriculation Class and its triumph. In the same year, on August 7th, the Salesian Primary School for boys began. Up to that time there was a mixed school run by the Dominican Sisters.

In spite of the donations the school was constantly in debt. The boarding and school fees for the year were eighteen pounds, yet it was hard to collect. Fr Stubbings was once offered a load of kraal manure in lieu of payment. The outlook was not promising!

The appointment of Fr Ainsworth as the first provincial delegate resident in Southern Africa brought many benefits. He was on the spot to see the needs of the school, so he did two things. He started a novena to Mary Help of Christians in the school, and at the same time sent one of the Salesians to the United States to raise funds. The prayers and begging combined to clear the debt that had been a burden for many years.

During the early sixties South Africa was experiencing turbulent times. So many of the boarding students came from there to escape the Apartheid regime. Today, many of these students are prominent people in the new South Africa. In 1961 Fr P. Fleming returned to Manzini as Rector of the community. He went out of his way to obtain financial help from various sources, local and overseas. Salesian brothers Tom Gallagher, Reginald Wilkinson and James McAllister worked hard at building a library, school chapel, residential quarter and an administration office.

Under the principalships of Fr J. O'Halloran in the late 60's, Fr L. McDonnell and Fr M. Whelton in the 70's and 80's, Salesian High School developed a reputation for academic and sporting

achievements. The gymnastic teams and the school band, which now fulfilled the dream of Bishop Barneschi, were in constant demand. The boarding school was eventually phased out and a day school developed.

The school is one aspect of the work of the Salesian Community. Manzini Youth Care was started in 1978 as a service by the boys of Salesian High in response to the growing numbers of street children. At first they were housed in the disused mortuary rooms of St Teresa's mission, with the primary intention of integrating them back into their families. Longer-term needs surfaced, not only for food and shelter, but also for schooling and skills training. Today MYC runs six residential homes and an orphanage. It runs a bridging school for those who have never been to school or who have dropped out of school because of poverty. (School fees have to be paid in Swaziland.)

MYC also trains young adults for self-employment, as unemployment is high. Skills such as carpentry, motor mechanics, electronics, baking, hairdressing, and screen-printing are taught. The Bosco Study Centre (with well-developed computer courses) offers assistance to those students who fail their final year at school. More than 300 students attend each year to better their matriculation results.

The large Bosco Arena and Oratory complement the youth activity during after school hours and holidays. It also provides the largest venue in Manzini for indoor games such as basketball and seven-a-side soccer. Organisations and clubs may also hire it for their functions.

Don Bosco founded the Salesians to respond to the many young people migrating from the rural areas into the early industrial cities of Italy looking for work, to earn a living. In the Swaziland of today there is also migration and political upheaval. The damage caused by AIDS and modern influences to the traditional structures of society are a huge challenge to this Kingdom and its government. The response of the Salesians has been one with the people to address those issues which will give hope and vision for a better future. As in the past, so the Salesians continue to contribute to the advancement of a wholesome society after the mind of St John Bosco.

(adapted from Fr Martin McCormack sdb)