

# Church and Empire: Evangelisation by the OMI among British, Indians, Afrikaners and Indigenous People of Southern Africa (1852–1874)

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## Abstract

The British proclaimed the Colony of Natal on 4 May 1843. Therefore, the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate entered a British Colony to begin their work among the indigenous people of southern Africa. There was further contact with colonial society during the Basotho Wars (1858–1868), when Blessed Joseph Gerard supported Chief Moshoeshe. This explains the options taken by the Oblates to work in close collaboration with the indigenous people in their fight to defend their property and sovereignty. The period covered is from 1852 until 1874 when Bishop Allard was in charge of the Vicariate of Natal. This paper deals with why the Oblates were more successful in Lesotho than among the Zulu in Natal. Brief mention is made of Indians in Durban, British missionaries in Natal and Afrikaners during the Lesotho wars. The role of culture in the evangelisation of people is an important theme within missiology and pastoral theology today. There needs to be an investigation why this was not the case in the early stages of evangelisation in South Africa and Lesotho—as being considered within this study. The first steps of evangelisation among the Zulu and Basotho were quite different and indicate growth in awareness and strategy of the Oblate missionaries in the effort to evangelise the indigenous people. The works of Brain, Skhakhane, Levasseur and Zorn were consulted, and archival resources from the Hurley Archives (*Missions 1867–1868*) investigated. The correspondence of Bishop Allard and his Journal *Failure and Vindication* was also consulted in the research process.

**Keywords:** Oblates of Mary Immaculate (OMI); Church and Empire; Colony of Natal; Lesotho; British Settlers; Afrikaners; Indians; Indigenous people of southern Africa

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## Introduction

The Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate (OMI)<sup>1</sup> was founded in 1816<sup>2</sup> in Aix-en-Provence in the south of France by Eugene de Mazenod. De Mazenod was formerly a diocesan priest and then set out to found a missionary congregation which engaged in revivalist missions in parishes where the faith was no longer so fervent. However, bishops from many parts of the world began to request his help in foreign missions, and soon the Oblates moved to England, Canada, South Africa and Sri Lanka. Donat Levasseur OMI can be consulted for more detail regarding the growth of the OMI Congregation in France, Europe and eventually engagement in worldwide mission. This put the Oblates in a precarious position of having to deal with new challenges within the mission field, as was true of the first Oblates who arrived in Durban on 15 March 1852. This new mission territory would present a new cultural milieu where complex relations between the colonial settlers and indigenous people needed to be worked out. The Oblates needed both groups to assist in their mission and were, therefore, between a rock and a hard place. The first Oblates in South Africa were products of their time and history and came to evangelise the indigenous people of South Africa to prevent them from eternal damnation if they did not get baptised into the Roman Catholic Church.<sup>3</sup>

The majority of the Oblates that came to South Africa were from France. This meant that in Natal they had to learn both English and isiZulu to be effective. This would take time, so patience was of the essence. In Lesotho, Sesotho had to be learnt, and the living conditions were more challenging than the way it had been in Natal. There was great poverty in Lesotho, but there was a better foundation to build on. This was due to the work of the Paris Evangelical Mission Society that had worked in Lesotho since 1833.<sup>4</sup>

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- 1 It needs to be noted that the Missionary Oblates were a group of diocesan priests who wanted to live in community and collaborate with each other in pastoral endeavours. By 1825, they decided to form a religious community with the four vows of poverty, chastity, obedience and perseverance for life. Their main mission was to preach in parish missions where the faith of the laity had become lax over time. They also had a keen interest in establishing Marian Shrines. There was also a specialisation in working with prisoners, youth and domestic workers. A further step taken was to engage in mission work in foreign countries such as Algeria, Canada and the United States of America, South Africa and Sri Lanka (1841–1861). This demanded that the Oblates change their initial thrust in doing revivalist missions and going abroad to engage in the work of first evangelisation in the mission territories of the Roman Catholic Church. These events took place during the period of 1816–1861.
  - 2 Donat Levasseur points out that the first residence of the Oblates in Aix-en-Provence, an old Carmelite Convent, was purchased on 2 October 1815. It is also interesting to bear in mind that the first name of the Oblate Congregation was *The Society of the Missionaries of Provence*. See Donat Levasseur, *A History of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate: Towards a Synthesis*, Volume 1, (Rome: General House, 1985), 39 and 41.
  - 3 Jerome Skhakhane speaks about this in the video: “Blessed Joseph Gerard OMI (Life and Legacy).” This video presentation was produced by Oblate Media in Bellville, Saint Louis, USA, 1988.
  - 4 <https://www.frontlinemissionsa.org/south-africa/mission-to-lesotho>. Accessed on March 15, 2018.

This was contrary to the approach adopted in Natal, where the Oblates sought out virgin territory where the people had never before heard of Christ.

The approach adopted was evangelisation by seeking out one convert at a time. This was referred to as the line-fishing method.<sup>5</sup> Early converts were given a good foundation in the Catholic Catechism, and then they were encouraged to share with others what they had learned. The role of the local culture was not emphasised, as according to missionaries of the time, European culture was assumed to be superior. These native peoples had to be “rescued” from a lifestyle that would lead them to eternal damnation. Baptism was seen to be the only solution to receive eternal life. Within this context, collusion with the mechanism of empire was present as there were no alternatives given to the indigenous people but to be baptised to be saved. These early missionaries were not critical enough to recognise that they were being used as the front line in the process of colonisation of peoples in the southern hemisphere. In their minds, it was considered normal to believe that they came from a culture that was superior to the people among whom they were sent to work. Jean-François Zorn quotes Jean-Georges Gantenbain as making an apt remark in this regard:

... the tasks are a “humbling apprenticeship” for Western Christians who, at the same time as other Christians stream into the West, have yet to recover from the fact they are no longer the centre of the world.<sup>6</sup>

This establishes the attitude that the Western worldview was one of dominance and, therefore, made missionaries and colonists from Europe agents of empire. Their ambitions and opinions were considered better than those of the peoples being colonised, and there was no room for discussion about how true those presumptions were, and if they were benefiting the nations being subjugated.

## **Colonialism and Empire Defined within the Context of the Church**

The process of colonialism was about subjugating developing nations and having easy access to their national resources. The work: *The Role of Missionaries in Conquest* by Nosipho Majeke, focuses on the fact that missionaries and traders were the first line of encounter in the process of colonising an indigenous people. These agents of empire were then followed by settlers and the military in the process of domination of this local population. Majeke points out:

The coming of the missionaries in southern Africa at the end of the 18th century coincided with the first occupation of the Cape by the British. The missionaries were a British product and this was not accidental ... But the main missionary movement, led

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5 This is elaborated upon by Fr. Jerry O’Hara in the same video presentation mentioned in Footnote 3.

6 Jean-François Zorn, “For a Missiology of Western Culture,” *International Review of Mission*, 95 (378–379): 323.

by the London Missionary Society, was a British one and was in full force during the period of military conquest in the first half of the 19th century.<sup>7</sup>

The case mentioned by Majeke concerns the British at the Cape at the beginning of the 19th century. This alerts us to the possibility of the same dynamics being played out by other missionaries in other contexts. For example, the Zulus in Natal and the Basotho in Lesotho went through similar issues; be it in a British Colony or British Protectorate. The role of settlers and clergy was to establish their projects with the assistance of colonial authorities. All the good intentions of missionaries and colonists do not exonerate them from blame in the overarching project of subjugation. In fact, these agents assisted local people in changing their traditional way of life and becoming more westernised in their practices. This was justified under the umbrella of civilising, educating and even promoting development in these foreign lands. However, the underlying principles are the same as the colonising nations who regarded their culture and lifestyle as being superior to the nations being subjugated.

According to Jeorg Rieger, the term empire describes:

... the massive concentrations of power that permeate all aspects of life and that cannot be controlled by any one actor alone ... Empire seeks to extend its control as far as possible; not only geographically, politically, and economically ... but also intellectually, emotionally, psychologically, spiritually, culturally, and religiously.<sup>8</sup>

This definition is a helpful starting point in understanding how empire affects theology and the church at large. This is due to the fact that in the history of Christianity, her leaders at times sought to dominate all spheres of human existence. This is no less the case in the history of the missions during the period of colonial expansion throughout Africa, South America and the Far East. It was a period when wealth was concentrated in the hands of a few. There was at times collusion between the wealthy within society and the missionaries who were evangelising the peoples of the developing world.

Empire shapes the manner in which we do theology. This is due to the manner in which it affects how we look at God and society. Theology can be justified to legitimise the process of globalisation, which is a system of keeping the monopoly of finance and control in the hands of a few. This is challenged in turn by the Gospel imperative to reach out to the poor and the most abandoned within society. Jesus teaches us to seek other ways of responding to the control mechanism promoted by the agents of empire. Christians have a duty to combat the negative effects of empire within society. This was very much the case during the period of colonisation. Missionaries played a role in conflict and the maintenance of the status quo, which was to the detriment of the poorer

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7 Nosipho Majeke, *The Role of the Missionaries in Conquest*, (Johannesburg: The Society of Young Africa, 1952), 1.

8 Jeorg Rieger, *Christ and Empire: From Paul to Postcolonial Times*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 2007), 2–3.

people within the societies in which they served. This serves as an indictment to the many good intentions and broken promises society has had to deal with as a result of the monopoly of society by a few members of that society, putting forward their agenda above all else. Christianity has a duty to challenge these anomalies within society. Zorn puts this succinctly in his article “For a Missiology of Western Culture”:

... missiology was born because the missionary movement began to encounter difficulties from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, when colonial conquest started raising questions in the minds of the first evangelists as to whether the goal of Christian mission was truly liberating.<sup>9</sup>

The OMI Congregation did not arrive in South Africa with a political agenda. However, their association with the colonists in Natal would have influenced their perceptions of the native peoples from the outset. Even if it were done unwittingly, there would have been an element of prejudice that would have affected their interactions with the indigenous peoples of southern Africa. Two such areas of concern would have been the quick conclusions raised about the indigenous people as being drunkards and polygamists. Even though similar social practices existed among the colonists, in a prejudicial manner, they considered it as a problem among the indigenous population only.

### **The Beginnings of the Natal Vicariate (1852–1874)**

The OMI Congregation was not the first Christian denomination to work among the Zulus in Natal. The London Missionary Society (LMS)<sup>10</sup> and the American Board Missionaries<sup>11</sup> had worked in the region before the arrival of the Oblates. Those were not the most ecumenical of times, and when the Oblates arrived in 1852, they wanted to work with the Zulu in a “virgin soil”<sup>12</sup> as indicated by Jerome Skhakhane. This was a serious mistake that was made from the outset. They preferred not to work with people who had been educated by Protestants, as they believed that would cause confusion in the minds of their new converts. However, it was the exact opposite scenario that led to the success of the OMI mission in Lesotho a decade later. It seemed that, once the basic

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9 Zorn, “For a Missiology of Western Culture,” 321.

10 Edward Williams founded the London Mission Society (LMS) in London in 1795. It was a non-denominational organisation that was closely linked to the Congregationalist Movement. The LMS helped to form the Paris Mission Society (PMS), also known as the Paris Evangelical Mission Society (PEMS) in 1822. In French this society is known as the *Société des Missions Évangéliques de Paris*. The PMS was established under the governance of the Reformed Church in France. The PMS has foreign missions around the world, but notably in Africa and Oceania.

11 The graduates of Williams College founded the American Board Missionaries in 1810. This group of Missionaries were also known as The American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM). Denominationally, they comprised of the German Reform Churches, Congregationalists and Presbyterians.

12 Jerome Skhakhane, *The Catholic Pioneer Attempt to Evangelize the Zulu*, (Rome: Gregorian University, 1974), 143.

beliefs have been instilled, it would then be easier for the new converts to enter into dialogue with other denominations. This may be because they have now been introduced to theological jargon and have a better frame of reference within the contexts of instruction in the new faith. Despite this being the case in more ecumenical times, Skhakhane points out:

There was so much prejudice and ill-feelings between Catholics and Protestants at the time, that to begin working where Protestants had begun, or vice versa, had its own disadvantages for the parties concerned.<sup>13</sup>

The remarkable truth of this strategy not being the best approach was tested and proven wrong, as will be discussed later. Prejudice and suspicion have their own bitter fruits to bear, as is shown in the long run.

Perhaps, it is worth taking a detour to discuss the work of the London Mission Society and the American Board Missionaries, before continuing with the discussion about the OMI and their work among the Zulus of Natal. Skhakhane notes that when Shaka and the Zulus met the white people for the first time, this was indeed the first moment of encounter with Christianity.<sup>14</sup> The only thing that interested Shaka was his interest to read and write. Dingane, on the other hand, was extremely reluctant to work with the Anglican Missionaries. The first Anglican pioneer to approach Dingane was ex-Captain Allen Francis Gardiner. Gardiner had arrived in Port Natal in January 1835.<sup>15</sup> Dingane was interested to see the Bible and to have it read to him. Dingane refused Gardiner permission to preach. Instead, he wanted to teach the Zulus how to use muskets.<sup>16</sup> Gardiner later returned to Dingane and pointed out: "I insured them that it was not my intention to interfere with their laws and their customs ..."<sup>17</sup> This approach yielded greater success. As a result, Gardiner was then allowed to preach to the Zulus. Rev. Francis Owen was introduced to Dingane in July 1837 by Gardiner. However, that meeting was followed by a huge massacre of Voortrekkers, and as a result, Owen left Natal on 11 May 1838. "The attempt by the Anglicans to evangelise the Zulu had not been successful."<sup>18</sup> From 1853, there was an improvement in the Zulu missions for the Anglican Church in Natal. The appointment of Bishop John William Colenso brought new vision and energy to the programme of evangelising the Zulu. Further assistance arrived in 1854 in the person of Dr Henry Callaway.

Apart from the Anglicans, there were also the American Board Missionaries who were relatively successful in the process of evangelising the Zulu people. There is also a history of progress and setbacks. The American Board Missionaries arrived in Cape

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13 Skhakhane, *The Catholic Pioneer Attempt*, 143.

14 Skhakhane, *The Catholic Pioneer Attempt*, 52.

15 Skhakhane, *The Catholic Pioneer Attempt*, 52.

16 Skhakhane, *The Catholic Pioneer Attempt*, 53.

17 Skhakhane, *The Catholic Pioneer Attempt*, 54.

18 Skhakhane, *The Catholic Pioneer Attempt*, 56.

Town in February 1835. The aim was to evangelise the Zulu people. They would work in two groups. One group was to work with Mzilikazi and his people. The group comprised of Reverends Daniel Lindley, Alex Wilson, Hy. L. Venable and their wives.<sup>19</sup> The second group consisted of Reverends Alvin Grout, G. Champion, Newton Adams and of course accompanied by their wives.<sup>20</sup> This group arrived in Port Natal on 21 December 1837. Their mission was to work with Dingane and his people. Dingane gave permission for missions to be established south of the Tugela as a type of experiment. In 1838, Champion established a mission at Umlazi. Later permission was granted for missions to be established north of the Tugela as well. There was an initial setback in that Mzilikazi did not agree with the type of doctrine being taught.<sup>21</sup> This was short-lived, as after the defeat of Mzilikazi, he and his people moved north of the Limpopo River. Missions were then established in Ilovu and on the uMhlatuze River. Some of the missionaries left Natal. Just three missionaries were left behind, viz. Adams, Lindley and Grout. In 1839, Dr Adams re-opened the mission at Umlazi. In 1840, Grout resumed his position at the mission at uMhlatuze River. Skhakhane contends that: "The Board, however, found that their efforts were not worth the expenses and so the Mission was called off. There was also a hope that the Missionaries would be replaced by the Anglicans."<sup>22</sup> The American Board Missionaries left Port Natal in 1844. On their arrival in the Cape, some were convinced to remain in South Africa. Adams took up employment with the government. Grout, on the other hand, returned to Natal. In 1846 an old woman requested baptism, and that was the start of much success for the American Board Missionaries. They were subsequently joined by Rev James C Bryant, who translated the Bible into Zulu and composed hymns in the vernacular. During the period of 1847 until 1850 they had established as many as nine mission stations, 36 people had entered the church, and they had a total of 14 mission stations. According to Skhakhane: "The stage was set for the arrival of the Catholic Missionaries in 1852."<sup>23</sup>

The British established the Colony of Natal on 4 May 1843. The advantage for the Catholic Church in terms of British rule was that freedom of religion was assured. Finance was also provided by the colonists for the building of churches. Labour was provided by the Irish soldiers in the British army for the erection of fences and the building of churches for the Catholic community within the territory under British control. In certain instances, the land was also provided by the British authorities for use by the Catholic community within the Colony of Natal.

The first choice for vicar apostolic for Natal was Fr. Charles Bellon. However, due to ill health, Bellon could not accept this challenging task. The second choice was Fr. Jean-Marie Francois Allard, who was a novice master in Bytown, Ottawa in Canada. Joy

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19 Skhakhane, *The Catholic Pioneer Attempt*, 61.

20 Skhakhane, *The Catholic Pioneer Attempt*, 61.

21 Skhakhane, *The Catholic Pioneer Attempt*, 62.

22 Skhakhane, *The Catholic Pioneer Attempt*, 63.

23 Skhakhane, *The Catholic Pioneer Attempt*, 64.

Brain<sup>24</sup> points out: “De Mazenod and Allard now set about the selection of Allard’s companions and the preparations for the voyage. In De Mazenod’s opinion, Allard was considered a very holy man. There is no doubt that he was very pious and strict in the observance of the Oblate Constitution and Rules.” Two priests were to accompany him: Fr. Jean-Baptiste Sabon who had worked in Algiers on the Oblate mission, and Fr. Lawrence Dunne, recently ordained and serving in the Anglo-Irish Province of the OMI. He was the only English speaker in the group. There was also a scholastic brother, Julian Logegaray, and a lay brother, Joseph Compin.

On 13 November 1851, the ship *La Providence* left Marseilles for Zanzibar via Cape Town. The missionaries reached Cape Town on 19 January 1852. They then sailed from Cape Town (26 February) for Natal on *The Gem* and arrived in Durban on 15 March 1852. At first, they resided with the Snell family until they rented a small house in Smith Street. A mass to welcome Bishop Allard and his mission band was held on the Feast of St Joseph on 19 March 1852. A church site was obtained in Durban on 29 October 1852. From the outset, land was given by the British authorities to the Catholic community to build churches in Durban and Pietermaritzburg. This was a great help and established good relations between the British authorities and the Oblates from the very beginning of the mission in the Natal Vicariate. At first, the Oblates built their own dwellings. Later, in Umzimkhulu, they hired workers to construct huts. This was probably due to the fact that the style of building and the process of thatching were not familiar to them.

On 1 April 1852, the Oblate Missionaries left for Pietermaritzburg. They arrived in Pietermaritzburg and they were welcomed in the capital by John Bird. Bird then rented a small cottage for them in Burger Street. One of the rooms was turned into a chapel and mass was held on Sundays for a group of about 100 parishioners. The building of the church began in May of 1852, and it was officially inaugurated on Christmas day of that same year. According to Joy Brain, the church was dedicated to “Our Lady under the title the Immaculate Conception.”<sup>25</sup> Within the first year Bro. Compin and Fr. Dunne left the community. Fr. Dunne became a Protestant and returned to Europe. This left Bishop Allard to deal with the British authorities, which was problematic as his fluency in the English language was poor. As a result of this development, Allard lacked confidence in dealing with British government officials. This was a setback to the mission from the very beginning. The group, therefore, did not have an English-speaking priest among them. A layman by the name of John Bird<sup>26</sup> offered his services to Bishop Allard as a translator. This was most helpful in translating church notices and communicating with government official and business people who could help as potential benefactors.

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24 Joy Brain, *The Catholic Church in Natal Over 150 Years*, (Durban: Jansen, 2002), 7.

25 Brain, *The Catholic Church in Natal Over 150 Years*, 7.

26 Brain, *The Catholic Church in Natal Over 150 Years*, 12.



In December 1852, Fr. Sabon was made the parish priest of Durban. Sabon struggled to learn Zulu, but when the first Indian indentured labourers arrived in 1860 on the Truro and Belvedera, he began to learn Tamil.<sup>27</sup> There were 91 Christians aboard the Truro, and 50 of them were Catholics. By April 1861 Sabon “could now write correctly in Tamil the Our Father, the Hail Mary, the Confiteor and the Litanies of the Blessed Virgin Mary.”<sup>28</sup> Gradually the farmers for whom the Indians worked began to offer Sabon more hospitality and occasionally a horse to assist him in his travel between Verulam in the north and Umzinto in the south. The first recorded marriage conducted by Sabon for an Indian couple was between Charles Joachim and Catherine Curpiah on 13 January 1861. Father Sabon began a school for Indian children in Durban in 1867, after receiving books in Tamil from the Oblate missionaries in Ceylon. He had petitioned in vain the Lieutenant Governor in November 1863 for assistance in starting a school for the Indian community in Durban. Despite the favourable response, funds from the government were not forthcoming. It was only in 1872 that an annual grant of £68 was allotted to be shared between four schools.

Fr. Logegaray served in Pietermaritzburg until he left the mission in 1856. Fr. Justin Barret replaced Logegaray as parish priest in Pietermaritzburg. Barret had arrived in 1854 with a deacon, Joseph Gérard, and Brother Bernard. They learned English and Zulu in preparation for going to work among the Zulu people. Soon after Christmas 1854, Fathers Barret and Gérard made the 144km trek to Chief Dumisa, who resided near Umzinto on the Natal south coast. Having borne the heat and slept on the open ground, they received a favourable response from Chief Dumisa with regard to their starting their first mission among the Zulu people. Bishop De Mazenod insisted that he had sent the Oblates to evangelise the Zulu and not the white colonists. This dream was to be realised when Barret and Gérard set out on 27 February 1855 to Dumisa’s homestead. On arrival, there were problems concerning the price of building huts and overall the missionaries sensed an unfriendly attitude among the people. Permission was granted to move 14km from the original site and Bro. Bernard was sent to assist with the building. On 2 September 1855, the mission among the Zulus was opened and the ceremony was attended by approximately 100 people. The missionaries encouraged the people to visit the chapel regularly, for instruction in the faith and to learn hymns translated into Zulu. The key point was that of baptism, where one had to renounce one’s old life and begin a new life as a Christian. It needed changing one’s worldview to that of a European view of death and eternity. For the Oblates, baptism was the only way to save these people headed for eternal damnation. For the Amacele, however, it meant separating themselves from their ancestors for all eternity; a doomed prospect at that. Empire involves the placing of one worldview as being superior to another. This is problematic, as the Oblates were people of their own times and did not see the pitfall of this approach in the mid-19th century. In February 1856 rain destroyed the chapel and

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27 It is surprising as to how Fr. Sabon learned Tamil so quickly when he had difficulties learning the Zulu language.

28 Brain, *The Catholic Church in Natal Over 150 Years*, 15.

the area became very swampy. After a dispute over the land granted to the Amacele and the Oblates, it was decided to close St Michael's mission on 17 July 1856 and return to Pietermaritzburg.

Bishop De Mazenod, on 30 May 1857, wrote a stern letter indicating that the mission of the Oblates was to evangelise the indigenous people of South Africa. This is illustrated in his words:

What! Not a single one of those poor infidels to whom you have been sent has opened his eyes to the truth you were bringing to them! I have difficulty in consoling myself since you were not sent to the few heretics that inhabit your towns. It is to the "indigenous people"<sup>29</sup> that you have been sent, it is their conversion that the Church expects from the holy ministry she has entrusted to you.<sup>30</sup>

As a result of this correspondence, on 15 February 1858 a second attempt was made to work among the Zulu at St Michael's mission in Umzimkhulu. The lot fell to Frs Gérard and Bompard to go back to the area and build three huts to make a new beginning at the mission. Bishop Allard joined them in March of that year. The chapel at the new site was opened on 17 July 1859, and the ceremony was attended by the local people. Their initial hopes were dashed again because, by the time they were visited by Fr. Francois Le Bihan in April 1860, the local people had stopped attending the services at the chapel or classes to learn the catechism. The missionaries were granted land on the condition that they build a school for the local people. This did not materialise and therefore was a problem. There were also issues of locals stealing maize and wood from the missionaries, which tended to sour relations between the two groups. Nevertheless, by the end of 1860, the numbers of people attending Sunday mass was in the region of 130 faithful. Fr. Gérard prepared sermons on topics suggested by Bishop Allard. These included attacking diviners, talking about death and hell and also challenging polygamy. These were unpopular topics, and the congregation threatened not to return to Sunday services. On the other hand, the missionaries felt that despite regular attendance on Sundays, the congregation was "hard-hearted" and generally not interested in converting to Christianity.

Bishop Allard and Fr. Gérard, in February 1860, went on a journey to visit the Amacele in Umzimkhulu. The chief was cautious, but the people welcomed them enthusiastically. This prompted the missionaries to return to the same spot in June of the same year with a view to setting up the mission once more. This time two brothers, Bernard and Terpent, accompanied them and they brought an ox wagon along. This was the beginnings of the mission of Our Lady of Seven Sorrows. The people were still

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29 Indigenous people have been used to avoid using the "K" word, which in the middle of the 19th century was the word used to refer to heathens. Nowadays this word has become taboo because of the racial implications that are connected to it in the 20th and 21st centuries.

30 Blessed Eugene De Mazenod, *Letters to Ceylon and Africa (1847–1860)*, Rome: General Postulation. This work is presently held in the Hurley Archives at Cedara (KZN, South Africa). 206.

reticent about converting to Christianity. In July 1861, Bro. Terpent caught his leg in a trap used for hunting. The group took several days to reach a doctor in Pietermaritzburg. The missionaries made their retreat, and it was decided to move elsewhere, away from Umzimkhulu, to establish their next mission. A factor that is not mentioned by Brain or Skhakhane, was the instability created by faction fights between the various Zulu clans. This meant that during wartime the local people would change their places of abode. This was not very helpful when the Oblates were establishing mission stations and then there would be no people at that spot to evangelise.<sup>31</sup> The hospitality and care shown to the Oblates also need to be clarified anew. This is contrary to the impression that the Zulus were hostile to the Oblates in Umzimkhulu. It is worth noting the diary entry of Bishop Allard regarding their reception among the Amace on the Feast of the Assumption in 1861:

1861: August

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... In the evening at the first kraal of the chief of the Amace we were intending to visit. This vigil of the Assumption though we had meat beside. Some little parcel of bread, we could have kept well our abstinence.

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The following day the Feast of the Assumption we were intending to take rest until the afternoon but a Circonstance [sic: circumstance] came to trouble the joy of the feast at 8 o'clock Fr. Gerard went to look for 2 horses he thought they were far and lost a great while of time. At last after 4 hours of absence he arrived. In this mean time I was in great anxiety, for Father Gerard had run far whereas the horses were not distant from the village. On the evening we arrived at the Kraal of Umbali, Chief of the Amace. The Chief had assembled his counsellors and treated very important business. He received us coolly. Nevertheless, he assigned us a hut for our lodging and soon he came to join us and to know if we had been sent by the Government.<sup>32</sup> Soon he spoke friendly ... even he gave us a sheep to be killed for us.<sup>33</sup>

This indicates that there was continued hospitality and concern towards the Oblates in Umzimkhulu. However, there were also problems of theft that had to be dealt with on a case by case basis. It is unfair to paint a picture of eternal doom and gloom. The real problem was that, despite the preaching of the Oblates to the local Zulus, there were

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31 The *Mfecane*, 1815–1840 (Translated into English it means: The Crushing), was a process of wars that emanated from the rule of King Shaka when he amalgamated smaller clans into the mighty Zulu nation. Those who did not want to be part of the Zulu nation had to fight or flee. Another reason for faction fights among the Zulu was the scarcity of water holes during drought periods, which are common in southern Africa. This put added pressure on what was a limited resource at times in the past and even until the present day.

32 This indicates that the Zulu chiefs were concerned about the missionaries being sent by the government to erode their authority. The Zulu chiefs found themselves in a catch-22 situation. This is what Nosipho Majeke had alluded to in the quotation at the beginning of this study.

33 Howard St George, *Failure and Vindication*, (Bishop Allard's Journal), Unity Publications: Durban, 1981, 108.

also no conversions. The locals enjoyed the preaching and practising of hymns, but it was not convincing enough to request baptism. A longer period of time was required for the planting of the seed of faith. That is understandable because people being evangelised have a right to exercise their freedom of choice.

Jerome Skhakhane contends that there were direct and indirect reasons for the failure of first Catholic attempts to evangelise the Zulus. Concerning the indirect reason: the need for the Catholics to start a mission in virgin territory where Protestants had not worked before, eventually became problematic. There was competition between the various Christian denominations and their attempts to evangelise the Zulu. A major point of contention was the practice of polygamy. There was the belief that the different churches had diverse approaches to the problem. On the contrary, the Zulu saw all the Christian denominations as representing the same faith and culture. The problem became even more complex when Western settlers also started practising polygamy. This made a lie of all that had been taught about what lifestyle was expected of a Christian. Skhakhane points out: “Evidently, to the people to whom the gospel was being announced these things made European civilisation and Christianity a big lie.”<sup>34</sup> The unacceptable double standard perceived was that European settlers, who were Christians, were now at times practising polygamy, whereas Zulu converts to Christianity had to renounce polygamy.

There is little doubt that missionaries were given a hard time by the Amacele of Umzimkhulu. The locals were quick to doubt and ridicule what the Oblates were preaching about. Christianity was seen to be eroding the power of the chiefs and the very livelihood of the Amacele. Skhakhane goes on further to add: “Unfortunately for the missionaries, the people considered their right to the country and human dignity of primary importance and therefore regarding their preaching as a means to dupe them.”<sup>35</sup> At that stage, even the establishment of hospitals and schools were treated with suspicion. Zulu traditional medicine and the Zulu lifestyle of herding cattle were seen to be under threat. On a religious level, the Zulu believed in a God that was evident through the acts of sending rain and being active in creation. On this score, the missionaries insisted that they did not know God. Worse, still, was the veneration of ancestors which was considered to be idolatry by the early Oblate missionaries. In the minds of the ordinary people, it was believed that the missionaries were asking them to abandon their own ancestors and venerate the ancestors of the white people; these new ancestors being “Christ and the Saints.”<sup>36</sup> Much of this was not immediately evident to first Oblates who worked among the Zulu in Umzimkhulu.

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34 Skhakhane, *The Catholic Pioneer Attempt*, 145.

35 Skhakhane, *The Catholic Pioneer Attempt*, 147.

36 Skhakhane, *The Catholic Pioneer Attempt*, 151.

In hindsight, it can also be noted that the success of the Trappists<sup>37</sup> was due to the development offered to the Zulus. Services provided by schools, hospitals and especially trade-schools responded to the needs of indigenous people of Natal and the Transkei. This is what the local communities of the indigenous people wanted, so as to improve their lives. The work of AT Bryant concerning Zulu medicine and his Zulu Grammar and Dictionary also assisted future generations to become more proficient in the Zulu language and better understand the role of traditional healers in the lives of the Zulu. The Oblates had focused on prayers, doctrine and the catechism to be learned by the local people, whereas as a much greater emphasis on development is what the situation in southern Africa required.

### **The Mission in Lesotho (1862–1886)**

Zorn, in his book: *The Transforming Gospel: The Mission of François Coillard and the Basuto Evangelists in Barotseland* (2004), speaks about the work of the Paris Mission Society (PMS) in Lesotho and Zambia. Zorn points out that the PMS was established with the help of the LMS.<sup>38</sup> He further asserts that “The PMS accepted this plan (to come to South Africa), and the French missionaries arrived in the Cape Colony in 1829.”<sup>39</sup> This is intriguing, as they were not to work among the French Huguenots at the Cape Colony but the people of Lesotho. To quote Zorn: “Their intention was to meet the ‘real black pagans’ and to evangelise them.”<sup>40</sup> It appears that Moshoeshoe wanted white missionaries to help his people build up the Basotho nation in Lesotho. “Thus the Lesotho mission was founded in 1833, with its first stations at Morija and Thaba Bosiu.”<sup>41</sup> It appears all went well initially, until the Basotho at a later stage began to doubt the loyalties of the PMS members. This was due to the colonial ambitions of the British and the Boers. Being foreigners, the Basotho people became reluctant in trusting the PMS, and this could have marked the beginning of needing new missionaries to be in competition with the PMS. This is speculation and there is no way to prove the assertions, but there is a strong possibility that it was part of the bigger picture that was emerging in the middle of the 19th century in Lesotho.

Allard and Gérard had been advised by Barker, an Irish trader,<sup>42</sup> to go to Lesotho and to ask Chief Molapo if they could work among his people. This they did, but Molapo

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37 The Trappists arrived in Mariannhill in 1882 and were extremely successful in their missionary endeavours among the Zulus. At that stage, infrastructure in Natal was more advanced and made life easier regarding post and travel. The motto of *Ora et Labora* (Prayer and Work) meant that they were able to develop the areas under their jurisdiction. In 1913 they formulated a New Constitution and became the Congregation of the Missionaries of Mariannhill. A great debt is owed to them for the eventual evangelisation of the Zulu people.

38 Jean-François Zorn, *The Transforming Gospel: The Mission of François Coillard and the Basuto Evangelists in Barotseland*, (France: WWC, 2004), vii.

39 Zorn, *The Transforming Gospel*, vii.

40 Zorn, *The Transforming Gospel*, vii.

41 Zorn, *The Transforming Gospel*, vii.

42 Joy Brain, *Catholic Beginnings in Natal and Beyond*, (Durban: TW Griggs & Co., 1975), 70.

replied: "I am but a child of Moshesh, to him you must go for your answer."<sup>43</sup> They travelled to Thaba Bosiu and communicated with Moshoeshoe, with the assistance of an interpreter. Permission was granted for the Oblates to open a mission in Lesotho. The Oblates left for Lesotho in August 1862 and arrived on 11 October 1862 and settled in the valley known as Motse-oa-'M'a-Jesu, which means the Valley of the Mother of Jesus. Moshoeshoe was very friendly and encouraged his people to attend the services held by the missionaries.<sup>44</sup> Moshoeshoe and a large entourage once came to listen to the preaching of Fr. Gérard. Gérard succeeded in translating the catechism into seSotho by the end of the year in 1864. A great disadvantage was the tremendous distance between Durban and Lesotho. This meant that for long periods of time Fr. Barret (Pietermaritzburg) and Fr. Sabon (Durban) were left isolated because it took so long for letters to arrive from Lesotho. The first mission opened on 1 November 1863 and the Oblates started visiting the people in the nearby villages. The problems encountered included drunkenness, the use of magic, and polygamy. There was also the issue that the women were regarded as having a very low status within society. It was hoped that with the arrival of the Holy Family Sisters, the women could be assisted by offering them an education so as to improve the lives of future generations.

As soon as they arrived in Lesotho, the Holy Family started preparing catechumens for baptism, which took place on 8 October 1865. That group of catechumens was confirmed in January of the next year, 1866. Fr. Gérard assisted the sisters to speak in seSotho. The opening of the school was delayed until the sisters had a better grasp of the local language. According to Dr Joy Brain:

Later the sisters served as educators both in schools and the catechumenate, they taught practical skills, such as spinning, weaving and making clothing, they looked after the old, destitute, the sick and orphans, dispensing medicines when they had them, and herbal remedies when they did not.<sup>45</sup>

To add to their troubles, there was a typhoid epidemic that broke out in 1869. Three sisters took ill and were unable to work for weeks. The sisters took care of the sick and had to adjust to circumstances greatly different to that of the mother-house in France. The food was different, cooking methods were strange to them and communication by mail was slow. This was further complicated by the fact that Mother Marie Joseph and

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43 Brain, *The Catholic Church in Natal Over 150 Years*, 28.

44 It was mentioned frequently that Moshoeshoe I decided to allow the Oblates into Lesotho as he believed that a patient is better off having two doctors rather than only one. For this reason, he allowed Protestants and Catholics to care for his people's pastoral needs. Moshoeshoe I wanted development, education and health care for the people of Lesotho. It was his conviction that missionaries would help him to achieve these goals.

45 Brain, *The Catholic Church in Natal Over 150 Years*, 30. The Holy Family Sisters served to address the issue of development as well as the training of the people in skills. This was a tremendous advantage in helping the mission in Lesotho to be a success.

Bishop Allard had differences regarding the manner in which the Oblate Rule was to be interpreted on matters of poverty and the choice of confessors.

The Boer-Basotho war took place from 1865 to 1866 and was the result of disputes concerning land possession along the Caledon River. The Boers<sup>46</sup> encouraged the missionaries to vacate the area before hostilities began. However, they decided to remain so as to help the elderly and wounded. The Holy Family Sisters tended the wounded Basotho and Fr. Gérard took Moshoeshoe food during the nights. Many old and sick people were left abandoned as the Basotho fled, so these people had to be carried to the safety of the mission. Lesotho was dedicated to Our Lady by the end of 1865. At that stage in Lesotho there were 500 baptised Catholics and many more catechumens. Due to ongoing pressure from the Boers, Lesotho became a British Protectorate<sup>47</sup> on 12 March 1868. This was done to secure a semblance of sovereignty for the Basotho against the increasing aggression of the Boers. However, the situation was precarious and could have become even more dire; which led to the development of seeking British protection.

Jolivet (who succeeded Allard) visited Lesotho in the following years: 1875, 1877, 1878, 1881, 1883 and 1876. His first task was to improve the living conditions of the Oblates. While Jolivet was in office, new mission stations opened up in Lesotho. These mission stations include: “St Monica in 1876, Montolivet in 1881, Gethsémani in 1882 and Sion 1886.” Jolivet decided that there needed to be a single superior for Lesotho. Fr. Odilon Monginoux was appointed as superior of the Lesotho missions in 1884. In 1886 Lesotho became part of the Vicariate Apostolic of the Free State, led by Bishop Anthony Gaughren, who lived in Kimberley at that time. It was in 1894 that the Prefecture Apostolic of Basutoland was established with Mgr Odilon Monginoux appointed as the first prefect. Later he was succeeded by Fr. Alexandre Baudry and in 1897 by Fr. Julius Cenez. Today the Lesotho Catholic Bishops’ Conference consists of four dioceses: Maseru, Leribe, Mohale’s Hoek and Qacha’s Nek. The proliferation of the African Catholic Church dreamt of by Eugene De Mazenod became a reality in Lesotho, with all due thanks to the ministry of Joseph Gérard and the Sisters of the Holy Family from Bordeaux.

Ending this section on a more ecumenical note; the work of the PMS eventually paid off in Lesotho with a novel idea of by Adolfe Mabilie and Jen-François F Coillard. The

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46 There is not too much to say about the relationship between the Boers and the early Catholic missionaries in Lesotho, except to say that there was a mutual suspicion born out of the experience of Catholic priests not being able to be resident at the Cape in the early days of the colony. Also, as there was no freedom of religion in the early days of the Boer Republics, the Catholic Church could become active only with the establishment of British rule in Southern Africa.

47 Majeke, *The Role of the Missionaries in Conquest*, 97. “Historical forces operate in a more complex fashion, making use now of one agent and now another. Nevertheless, as a political agent of government, Dr Philip played his part in setting in motion the events that were to engulf the Sotho nation.”

idea was to take Basotho evangelists to work among the Lozi in Zambia. From 1877–1879, Coillard had gone on an expedition to Zambia to investigate this future mission among the Lozi. This was due to the linguistic and cultural links between the two groups. It is part of a missionary spirituality to share the Lord Jesus that you have received with others. This meant that the Basotho would now have to face hardships of foreign culture and customs, lack of food and shelter and beginning in a new land. The year 1885 marked the foundation of the new mission to the Lozi people in Zambia. Zorn remarks concerning these developments: “For the Paris Mission, to give up Lesotho and the Zambezi would mean, in so many ways, depriving itself of the ‘goose that lays the golden eggs’.”<sup>48</sup> For missionaries, fundraising is done according to the difficult missions that one enters into so as to bring about transformation. For the PMS to leave either Lesotho or Zambia would have meant losing funding from Switzerland, France and Italy.<sup>49</sup>

## Rumours of Rain

There is an expression in seSotho: *Khotso, Pula, Nala*, which translated into English means “Peace, Rain and Plenty.” Rain is a sign of plenty among the Basotho as it means that the fields will be irrigated. However, too much rain can be destructive to the land. Allard had found an oasis in Lesotho where the people responded positively to the message of the Gospel. However, locking himself up in the mountains of Lesotho was to be the ultimate undoing of his career in South Africa. By focusing all his energies on Lesotho, he neglected the rest of the Vicariate of Natal. Yes, the Vicariate was basically too large and unwieldy to manage. However, it was not a good decision to focus solely on Lesotho and allow the rest of the Vicariate to be neglected. Allard was still Vicar Apostolic of the territory from Mozambique (Limpopo River) in the north to the Eastern Cape (Kei River) in the south, as well as Kimberley in the Northern Cape. The success in Lesotho led to the unravelling of the apostolate in the rest of the Vicariate of Natal. The rumours of plenty in Lesotho led to drought in the rest of the area under Bishop Allard’s authority.

In September 1871, Fr. Martinet arrived in Durban for an official visitation, which was to respond to complaints from the Vicariate.<sup>50</sup> From Durban Fr. Martinet travelled to Pietermaritzburg and then on to Lesotho. Martinet’s visit produced a report that had six recommendations. These are summarised as follows:<sup>51</sup>

The Acts of the Chapter at Autun (1867) should be binding in the Natal Vicariate.  
There was a need for more efficient administration within the Vicariate.  
Each member of the Vicariate was to do their duties to the fullest of their abilities.  
Bishop Allard needed to be available to all in the Vicariate of Natal.

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48 Zorn, *The Transforming Gospel*, 80.

49 Zorn, *The Transforming Gospel*, 80.

50 Brain, *Catholic Beginnings in Natal and Beyond*, 132.

51 Brain, *Catholic Beginnings in Natal and Beyond*, 133–135.



Finances in the various houses of the Vicariate had to be controlled more efficiently. The priests should be engaged primarily in ministry and doing manual labour should become a secondary duty. Priests in the Natal Vicariate should be allowed to exercise their faculties in ministry without undue interference from the Vicar Apostolic.

As a result of the visitation, Martinet tried to discuss the recommendations with Bishop Allard, who refused to cooperate. The final decision was that Allard should resign as Vicar Apostolic, the main complaint being that Allard had not taken care of large sections of the Vicariate.

In 1872 the Oblate General Council decided that Allard should resign and that a younger person should be appointed as bishop of Natal. On 4 June 1872 the Superior General Fr. Fabre approached Allard regarding the handing in of his resignation. Initially, Allard refused to resign. His reasons were that Fr. Martinet's report had lacked objectivity and that the visitor to the Vicariate Apostolic had over-stepped his authority. The Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith initially stepped in to come to the defence of Allard. However, after several months of deliberations with the Congregation of the Propaganda, Allard eventually decided to hand in his resignation on 6 June 1874. Pope Pius IX accepted the resignation of Allard on 18 June of that same year. Allard was appointed Archbishop of Taron and also a consultor to the Congregation of the Propaganda. Bishop Allard then took the next step, which was to retire to Rome. At first, he resided in a private house at via Monterone 79. In 1887 he then moved to the new Roman Oblate Scholasticate at via Vittorino de Feltre.<sup>52</sup> Allard died on 26 September 1889. Beaudoin points out: "His life in Rome was one of recollection and prayer, observing the Rule with the meticulousness of a novice."<sup>53</sup> The latter part of his life had been an arduous sojourn in the mission territory of South Africa and Lesotho. However, until the end, Allard remained true to himself and his commitment to the Oblate Rule.

## Conclusion

All churches engaging in mission are also agents of empire. We are all shaped by the context from which we originate. There is a sense in all people that where they originate from, is the centre of the world. This is true of the Catholic Church and the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate as the missionary institute that has been the subject of this study. In some cases, Christian villages have been established to separate people from their community of origin and assist them in developing a new style of life with Christianity at the centre of their world. This has not always been the case; such as was practised by the Jesuits in Paraguay, for example. In KwaZulu-Natal, there were such communities in the Bluff (Durban) and Oakford near Verulam, on the northern outskirts of Durban. Both these missions were founded by the Oblates of Mary Immaculate.

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52 <https://www.omiworld.org/lemma/allard-bishop-jean-francois/>. Accessed on February 20, 2018.

53 <https://www.omiworld.org/lemma/allard-bishop-jean-francois/>. Accessed on February 20, 2018.

These, however, fall outside the time framework and geographical context of this study. By and large, the Oblates saw themselves as preaching the gospel and not changing the culture of the local people. However, on a subconscious level, there are many assumptions that undermine the culture of the people being evangelised. This needs to be addressed at some stage. It is most helpful when local clergy—from the culture that was being evangelised—are ordained and begin a true dialogue between the culture and the gospel.

The Diary of Bishop Allard, titled *Failure and Vindication* that was transcribed by Fr. Howard Saint George, tells of the difficulties among the Zulus and the success in Lesotho. This is all the work of the Lord in His vineyard. However, the fact that Allard failed to take care of the entire Natal Vicariate is indeed unfortunate. Allard's obsession with following the Oblate Constitution and Rules to the letter meant that he placed unnecessary burdens on the missionaries under his authority. This caused tension and made him unpopular in the 23 years as Vicar Apostolic of the Natal Vicariate—all of which caused his demise after the Martinet Visitation, in which it was concluded that Allard had to resign as bishop in the early years of the missions in southern Africa.

The obvious question is: “Did the Oblates act as agents of empire within southern Africa?” Yes, they did; in as much as they cooperated with the colonial society to build-up the Catholic Church in southern Africa. There was at the time the underlying belief that European culture was superior to African culture and that baptism meant taking on a more westernised lifestyle. No, they did not at times act as agents of imperialism in that they worked among the indigenous people and eventually also took on board the concerns and issues of the people that they ministered to within southern Africa. An example would be assisting the people of Lesotho during the war with the Afrikaners. They did not abandon the local people but remained with them in their trials and tribulations.

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## **Video**

*Blessed Joseph Gerard OMI (Life and Legacy)*. Video presentation produced by Oblate Media in Bellville, Saint Louis, USA, 1988.