

INTERVIEW BETWEEN SISTER GERTRUDE C H N, MRS NGUBANE AND DALISU ZUNGU ON 2 DECEMBER, 1993 AT MAPHOPHOMA IN THE DISTRICT OF NONGOMA

REF.: Sister Gertrude is one of the three sisters who started the Convent of the Holy Name in Zululand. Together with her were Sister Veronica and Sister Claudia.

Mrs Ngubane is a local Anglican woman who together with Archdeacon Mbatha helped the first girls who wanted to join the Convent to wait for ~~for~~ a year, under guidance, until a convent was opened.

D Z - Dalisu Zungu
Sr G. - Sister Gertrude

INTERVIEW

D Z : Will you tell anything about the Convent of the Holy Name?

Sr G: It all started as a small convent in Basutoland called the Sisters of Mary at the Cross. There was not much of a progress. The Bishop had to get a convent for us overseas. For that reason some of us had to go to England. The community that the Bishop got was the Community of the Holy Name. The Bishop had to ask us whether we were happy about the overseas arrangement, because it would mean a lot of changes from our side. We were no longer going to be the Convent of St Mary at the Cross. We told him we were in fact in favour of that arrangement. For Sisters had ~~to~~ then go to England, because the mother body of the C H N is overseas. I was one of those who went to there in 1961 and we spent two and half years. Together with me were two Sothos, one Tswana and one Zulu. For all this period we were starting all over again, so as to familiarize ourselves with the Order. We had to start afresh from Novitiate and we all passed except for the Tswana who had to be sent back home. That was the place where we met the late Bishop Nkwane (C B). He was very helpful as a person who could speak our language.

When we got to England, the other three sisters who were senior sisters from St Mary at the Cross had to start all over again.

After completing our period, we then went back to Africa. I had now familiarised myself with that Order and I also had my own ring. This was then the beginning of the Convent of the Holy Name in Southern Africa.

D 2: Did you go back to Basutoland when you got back?

Sr G: Yes, when we came back we had some ~~few~~ white sisters with us from the Headquarters. When we got back, the other sisters of Mary at the Cross had to be asked whether they wanted to change. As they agreed, they all had to start from Novitiate for two years. So they changed everything. Some who were Senior to me became a year junior than me. We only came back to Zululand in the 70's. Bishop Alpheus Zulu was the key figure in the story. Let me tell you how the whole thing started. The late Archdeacon Mbatha was the one who really helped me to develop my vocation. I was only twenty (20) years old when everything began to dawn on me. Archdeacon Mbatha helped me a lot to realise whether I wanted to continue with a religious life. He then contacted Bishop Zulu, who was then a priest in Durban in Natal, because they were very close, to help. I then used to travel to Durban to stay with them and also come back by train. So they ended up sending me to Basutoland where there was a Convent for the Sister of Mary at the Cross.

Let me now say something on how the Zululand Convent started. When the Convent of the Holy Name was finding its feet in Basotholand, Bishop Zulu, who was then the Bishop of Zululand, wrote to our Mother of the Community in Basotholand. He told her that there were young girls who were interested in religious life and wanted to join the other sisters who were from Zululand. The Bishop also said that passports were a great difficulty. There was therefore a need to start a local convent. So there was an agreement that a convent be started in Zululand. So at that time there were three of us, myself (Sister Gertrude), Sister Veronica and Sister Claudia. This was going to be a very difficult job of starting a new convent. Sister Claudia had to go overseas to acquire more knowledge for this venture.

Before we came back to Zululand there were already girls who had stayed for the whole year seeking to test their vocation to religious life. These were under the care and guidance of the late Archdeacon Mbatha and Aunt Ngubane. They were called the "Amadodakazi".

Two of us, therefore, came to lead seven (7) women. We then had to split. We had come to teach the indigenous people that age does not hinder one's vocation. You can be in a position of leadership whether you are young or old. I don't know whether they understood that. So, Sister Claudia took leadership and became administrator. You know, Mfundisi we have different gifts. All this happened at Isandlwana. There were already Junior Sisters. Sister was then back from England and there was a need for a second convent. I was then asked to go to

Maphophoma and Sister Claudia and Sister Veronica were left behind. I was needed at Maphophoma because of my experience. What we were bringing to the people was really new and it was very difficult to send a young person for leadership. So I went to Maphophoma and I stayed for a long time.

Before Archdeacon Mbatha died he wrote me a letter sharing his wishes, what he wished from us as we got to Zululand. For him, what was very crucial, as we got to Isandlwana, was to teach indigenous women that they can be breadwinners for their families while men were away as migrant workers. "Women should be taught not to sit down and fold arms but to plough fields whilst waiting for money from their husbands", he said. This was really very helpful for the local people.

So then I left Isandlwana and ^{a)} few years after I left it was agreed that since our community had grown, all along we had our Superior in Basutoland, Sr Veronica had to be our Superior. We then moved from Isandlwana, others remained, to start a new convent at Kwamagwaza. This happened in 1983. Since Sr Veronica was then to start a new community, I was asked as her assistant to go to Kwamagwaza as well. When she died she was no longer a Superior but an ordinary sister.

D Z : What happened?

Sr G: Our Community, I don't know with the others, does not make a "Mother" as an Order but it is just a position of responsibility. It is like a Bishop, which you are for life. When you are not re-elected you become an ordinary Sister.

D Z: How many years does it take?

Sr G: It takes three years and we either take you back or elect somebody else. You see, the Mother we have now has completed a year and in two years time, we will have our elections, so will re-elect her or say thank you. The other most basic thing about our community is obedience. You see, Father, Mother has sent me here at Maphophoma in this old age and I could not say no. The work that is done in these small convents is difficult but I have to obey my Superior. The life of a nun is based on respect, when this is not there, you run into big problems i.e. respect and obedience are pertinent.

D Z: Would you say that your Community is growing i.e Numerically?

Sr G: One of the difficulties we encounter is people's acceptance of religious life. To us, Zulu people, this is a new thing, hence people cannot just accept it. Our convent overseas is growing in numbers because it is now over hundred (100) years, we are even less than twenty five (25) years old, so it is still difficult.

Father, you will agree with me that when you are still growing up, as a teenager, you tend to like something, without any critical eye i.e. seeing nuns their vestments and wishing to be part of them. Yet when you join the religious life, you discover that nuns are people like all other people. In convents there are problems like in any other place. So, young people would come to our convent but discover life, you discover that nuns are people like all. There are problems like in any other place.

So, young people would come to our convent but discover, how "hot it is" and just leave. The biggest problem is that of obedience.

So we have had a lot of young people joining, but they come and go. I think this happens with all communities. There are times when you have a lot coming up and also a very dry season. The problem is that when people leave the convent they tend to speak badly about it. Yet people are given ample of time to test their vocation.

D Z: How long does it take?

Sr G: Two to four years for Novitiate and three years as a junior sister. In all these years, you have a chance to resign from the convent. This however, is done in a very good spirit. But ordinary people do not understand, they will always say that a person has absconded. The only bad thing I suppose, is when a person has made her vows in front of the Bishop, Priests and all other people to be part of the religious life, then just resign. This gives a negative reputation of the Convent. In all the years of Novitiate and Junior sister, you do not have a ring. Even if the years are completed, you are not forced to take the ring until such time that you are ready. You have to be 25 years of age. So people have asked for a delay in taking vows and sometimes resign afterwards and that is done in good faith.

D Z: Thank you very much sister, you have covered a lot of ground I am now only left with some few questions.

Mrs Ngubane: Just before you continue, Father, I have just something to say. Religious life is like a school but a person receives the word from God and listens; In response to the word a person goes to the convent. But ordinary people will interpret it as just the love of a convent and an end to everything because they do not know what happens inside the convent and yet a person is called and controlled by the Word. When it says stop, she stops and does some introspection and then continues.

I am emphasizing this because when the whole thing started as you have asked me to be part of this interview, I was there and I was appointed to help, though I cannot say much as I was not a Nun myself. But I was put in it because of this Gertrude who was shouldering the life of those young people. What I am saying I received from Sister Gertrude herself, for when they began they were sent here at Maphophoma at that time you were still very young, Father.

They were sent here because religious life talks of Faith in the Living God. This was the product of the Iviyo Lofakazi (The Legend of the Witnesses of Christ). When young people heard the Word they listened. The onlookers would always think they were misled. I refer to Richard Shorten and yet a person is controlled by the Word. Even to priests this does happen, you listen and follow but there are times when you feel darkness in front of you and yet that is the direction. This group that was sent here helped my life a lot.

I only knew Lesotho through Sister Veronica Mkhonza. I think you were still very young at that time Father. I went to Lesotho when Sister Veronica was taking vows and receiving the ring. This kind of ceremony needs blood relatives. The Mkhonza family had all died and we, the Ngubane family were looking after Veronica and the others and that is how I got to go to Lesotho.

So, what I am trying to emphasize is the fact that there is nothing new in what Sister is telling you and I cannot add much since she is the one who experienced it.

But one can thank God that in Zululand such work has been initiated now at Kwamagwaza, Isandlwana, Maphophoma and Transkei.

Sr G.: Talking about various sub-stations, the Isandlwana branch has now about four Sisters and here (Maphophoma) there are six of us (including the one who has just come as a Novice). One of our sisters, Patricia is working in a local school.

D Z: What is the process of your initiation?

Sr. G.: When you enter the convent to test your vocation, you can put your own clothes and a white cover on your head and you change after nine months. Now you enter into be a Novice.

After Novitiate, you then become a Junior Sister, wearing all vestments like us, but the crosses are a little bit smaller but not the ring you only get the ring when your final vows. There will then be a Bishop and all people.

D Z: Sister, do you see a lot of changes in your convent?

Sr G: Oh, yes a lot since we started you see, in our early days we did not wear the kind of clothing we are wearing now. We use to have a different attire. Even when we came back from Lesotho, Bishop Zulu could not recognise us. He asked why we did not tell him when we were changing. Father, nowadays there is a lot that is demanding change. Some of the things have changed in a very positive way. During the early days we did not have pocket money. These days sisters have pocket money and ^{may} other developments.

D Z: Talking about developments, do you see a difference between this Zululand Convent and the one in England? Is there some African contribution to it?

Sr G: There is not much of a difference between the two. The fact is that ours is predominantly black and has lot of young people. I could say that it is only myself and sister Claudia who are elderly, though I cannot say Claudia is as old as I am. She is, in terms of age their age (i.e. the other sisters) comparatively speaking, most of the things are the same. The only thing is that we are more liberal than England, the younger people take things a little quicker. Sometimes you can even see the danger of it but all in all we do things in the same way.

D Z: I only came across the Convent of the Holy Name in 1989, when one sister visited us at St Barnabas, Chesterville. This was a year after college and I had never had an encounter with any Nun in the Anglican Church. My question is : Was there a time when your Community was a closed one and if so when was it opened to public?

Sr. G: Mfundisi, our convent right from its conception was an open evangelistic community. Its aim being to bring Christ to the world. So, unlike other convents, which might be called to pray indoors and others which promote ecumenicalism by teaching in schools and building hospitals, ours is primarily for evangelism. But, we do have Sisters who teach etc. so as to boost the income of our Convent, but we are very selective, as evangelism is our priority rather than ecumenicalism. So our convent is that kind of a convent, even when we were at Lesotho we were primarily doing missions in parishes and reaching out to the unreached. I do believe that the Bishops chose to link us to the CHN in England because of the nature of our calling to evangelism.

D Z: Sister, Mrs Ngubane has referred to the Iviyo Lofakazi as a crucial part of your vocation. How has this evangelistic movement, within the church, contributed in the life of the CHN in Zululand?

Sr G: Yes, there is a lot of contribution from the Iviyo Lofakazi. But before I left for Lesotho I was a field worker under Archdeacon Mbatha and the Movement had not started. But there was a woman, Mrs Mbatha, who is now late, who was collecting young girls and teaching them about morals and purity of life. They always had prayer services, which I used to despise. I felt that I was originally from a big mission (Parish) and I cannot join everything that the people who were backward and uneducated were doing. But one day it came to me like a dream and God had something in my life and I cannot tell what made me to do those prayer services almost everyday. These were therefore, healing services and evangelistic meetings. So when the Iviyo Lofakazi movement started, we were already aware of what the Renewal is all about. In fact the Iviyo Lofakazi contributed a lot to calling of young people to Religious Life.

D Z: Maybe the question form which follows, in terms of the Iviyo's contribution, Do you therefore see your conventing growing or not. (I am saying this because other convents are being moved to smaller places because of numbers)?

Sr G: There is something amazing about our convent, when people resign, the very same number is born. We do lose a lot of young Sisters but at the same time we gain more. You can see by the way in which we have NOVICES, almost every year you see. Father, God is wonderful he always replaces for us. Mfundisi we are growing and we thank God for that because He is the only source of growth. If you look at England Convent, you will discover that they have had a bad time there was a lot of decline, but now they are

growing in numbers. You see, Father, it always happens with religious life, there is a time where you have vocations in abundance and sometimes a very dry season. It is all in God's hands.

D Z: Thank you very much Sister for your contribution. maybe one question that I should not leave out is what is the general attitude of the Sisters towards the Ordination of women in the Church of the Province of Southern Africa?

Sr G: Generally speaking we are mostly in favour of it, though I, personally had difficulties in the past, but I fully support it. But, you see, I am now too old to even think about it but maybe the younger ones. I think if God ordains something, nobody will ever block it. A vocation is a vocation, male or female God can call His people. The difficulty is when we say everyone that is just any woman can be a Priest, that is wrong, totally wrong. I know of some women that can make good and honest Priests.

Mrs Ngubane: I will like to add that God's way is not people's way. When God calls nobody can prevent him. The Christian life is not difficult when people listen to the word of God. It's Christ that presses people with a calling and they go according to His will, whether they are male or female. I have seen this happening amongst these CHN Sisters. God called the three of them, some followed in their footsteps, some fell on the way. But it Christ's life that is needed and listening to Him. So I have see the development of this convent until now.

D Z: Mama Ngubane, you have a very interesting way of looking at vocations. Sister Gertrude has mentioned that you started to look after young girls before they (Sisters) came to start a convent. How was it? How did people take it in this conservative tribal neighbourhood?

Mrs Ngubane: As I have said before, what helped the most was to look at the development of the vocation of these three young sisters. Girls coming from very indigenous areas of Maphophoma and Ndulinde and I said, surely God can do wonders. So when the other girls came up after them, and I was asked to look after them in the meantime, I pressed on regardless. I had seen how God can work. I did face a lot of insults, when I was walking on the road I could feel that no one wanted anything to do with me. The person who helped me was the Chief Moses. He called me and said nobody will prevent those young girls to do what God is calling them to do. Then I was relieved, whatever people said, I ignored. Men of the tribal land were concerned about their girls, because they were expecting

dowry (lobola). But I pressed on and God helped me. It was even better in the Roman Catholic Church because children could be identified whilst they were young to be "Children of Mary" and when a child is called, it could easily be understood. But for me, it started as an Iviyo Lofakazi prayer meeting and girls chose to live this life. It was very difficult, in such a way that some people did not want even to talk about Iviyo Lofakazi anymore. So, when the first felt this vocation, I really saw how God the Holy Spirit can work in the lives of people. Truly, Mfundisi, it was God the Holy Spirit, because when some tried to resist it they would end up dying. God called children from unchristian tribal homes and they had to listen. I sometimes used to pray to God and asked Him why He chose me, as a married woman to carry a such a burden. But I could not pull out. Yet something worse was still coming. There was a lot of turmoil. What made things worse was the fact that, my son, Theophilus, who is now a priest, also got married. People began to ask a lot of questions. "His child is now married", they said, and she is preventing our children to have husbands. It was very difficult! Even the whites who were around got so confused with what was really happening. I remember a Scandinavian minister questioning us about this. I said to him, "You do not understand how God the Holy Spirit works".

I do believe that the Iviyo Lofakazi gave birth to a lot of nuns that we have. It taught girls the purity of life, preservation of virginity and young girls felt that they wanted to continue with this purity. Hence such an interest in Religious Life. So within the movement others felt that they were called to this purity of life within marriage and hence we have purely * "white weddings" , our engagement services are not a mockery but empowered by God the Holy Spirit. I just want to end there for Sister has said everything. But one thing she did not mention is that she started from a convent in Transkei at Tsolo, but she can relate the story. I have finished all I wanted to say.

1. A white wedding : is a wedding entered into by a girl who has preserved her virginity.

Sr G: Yes Father, Mama Ngubane is right and I think this is very crucial to relate. I started from a Community at Tsolo, which is St John's Sisters. But I could not stay because of the way I was brought up you see, I was brought up in Renewal Service and that was my spirituality and that community was so different. So I

never stayed for a long time I came back home. There is this big difference between CHN and other convents and that is our emphasis for being "saved" and "born again" so I had to come back.

Just to say something on what Mama Ngubane was saying, on the difficulty we had when we told parents about our vocation. For me, personally, my parents did not want to hear anything to do with a nun. In our Diocese, some priests were not convinced that I should go. There were meetings after meetings trying to solve this "problem". Finally I left without much backup from my own Diocese. When I was at Tsolo, in the St John's Convent, policemen were sent to take me back home. I was only 20 but when they asked me how old I was, I said "21 years old" and they said I was old enough to make a decision.

When I decided to come back home from Tsolo, my Priest Archdeacon P J Mbatha was very furious. Days went by and I met an elderly Sister, who was a Novice from St John. When I told her of my calling and vocation, she told me of the Sisters in Lesotho called the Sisters of St Mary at the Cross. This is how I got to know them. Everything was arranged for me and I ended up very happy in that convent.

Thank you Father for taking such interest in my story. I have a copy of the letter from the late Archdeacon Mbatha and I have also kept some information that can be helpful to both of us. May God bless you!