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HISTORY OF CHRISTIANITY (302)

THE MAKING OF AN INDIGENOUS CLERGY:

INTERVIEW WITH FR. JEROME SKHAKHANE, OMI.:

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FOR: DR. PHILIP DENIS, OP.

CM: Good afternoon Fr. Jerome

JS: Good afternoon

CM: We are pleased that you are able to give us your time to interview you and we are trying to establish the history of the Catholic church here in Edendale and so we have a couple of questions that we would like to pose to you about this area and your ministry in Natal.

JS: Ah-

CM: Yes. So maybe to begin, we would like to ask you about your own personal history. Where were you born Fr. Jerome?

JS: I was born in Dannhauser in the Natal Province, that is in the Republic of South Africa.

CM: Yes, OK. So what did your parents do for a living?

JS: Well my father was a catechist and my mother was a teacher.

CM: Do you come from a big family?

JS: Not quite, I have two brothers and two sisters.

CM: Older than you and married?

JS: Two sisters older than me, one brother older than me and one brother younger than me. Married: one sister is married, she is still alive and the other one was not married; she was a nun and now she is dead, since 1990.

CM: I am sorry. In your history through life since you were young, who was the most important person in your life?

JS: I think my mother was the most important person in my life, I had a liking for both of my parents, but my mother was closer to me and I think she really shaped my life

CM: As you grew up, where did you get your Education?

JS: My Education partly I got it here in Natal Newcastle, and then Inchanga and then part of it was in Lesotho at Christ the King High School.

CM: These are obviously all Catholic institutions?

JS: Yes They are.

CM: Could we perhaps suggest that this is probably why you later decided to join priesthood or why did you decide to join priesthood?

JS: I decided to join priesthood mainly because of my Catholic background of the family. By the time I went to Lesotho, I was already determined to become a priest and I was only doing Standard nine. I went to an institution called St Theresa's minor Seminary, which means I was already looking forward to being a priest.

CM: When were you ordained into priesthood?

JS: I was ordained in 1967.

CM: Have you been working in Natal since then?

JS: No. I was assigned to educational institutions. I worked at St Augustine Seminary from 1960 to 1972 with two intervals in between when I went to Rome first to do my Licentiate in Church History and then to do my Thesis in Church History.

CM: It's very interesting. You did your licentiate in Church History and here we are interviewing you on something in Church History.

JS: Oh yes it is!

CM: Is there something you want to add concerning your biography; something that you think is important for us to know?

JS: Nothing in particular.

CM: Still on your biography, do you remember your first religious experience as a child?

JS: Yes, I do remember my first religious experience as a child. That is when I was told the name of God in Zulu, and I remember that this impressed me very much, and in a way it sort of disturbed me because what kind of being or person is God and I remember distinctly that as far as I am concerned I was just confused I could not get this concept in my mind what is God. I hope that is the religious experience.

CM: Are there some people or someone who brought you to experience this or who brought you in contact with the Church?

JS: Mainly, it's my parents. I was baptised when I was young and I grew up under this influence of my parents as Catholics and also as I said my mother was a teacher. She was teaching me at the same time. So I had great influence from my parents.

CM: Do you remember the first priest you came in contact with and was he an indigenous priest?

JS: Yes I remember him. He was not an indigenous Priest.

CM: So this means that your first contact with priests was with

missionaries! How did you think about white priests as a child?

JS: As a child I remember that I found them very friendly and this particular priest I am talking about was very fond of me. But I am also told that he used to call me Tishushu. I did not understand what this meant until I learnt French and then I understood what it meant, "my little dear"

CM: More on the intellectual side, what do you understand by the phrase "Indigenous clergy"?

JS: For me it means the clergy which comes from the soil. That is people who are born here and have as their background, the African culture.

CM: As a child, did you see any difference between black and white clergy?

JS: That's a long time. I am not trying to avoid the question. There was no black clergy then in the Catholic church and so this does not apply to me.

CM: Which community were you baptised and grew up?

JS: I grew up in Kalebas.

CM: In that area, were you in contact with other religions especially African religions for example the Shembe church?

JS: We were in contact with the Zionist religion.

CM: In your youth, did you take an active role in the Church?

JS: I did, especially after the death of my father. He died when I was nineteen. The community looked up to me as a person who should help out. I was expected to lead the services or to

conduct funeral services.

CM: Maybe your experience of working with people and being a leader could also have led to your decision to join priesthood?

JD: It certainly did I must say.

CM: About your religious experience, is there something you would like to add?

JD: The only thing I can say is that in spite of my activity as a youth in the church did help me to decide to be a priest. It was a bit embarrassing for me because in my tradition, a young man of nineteen is not supposed to lead people- he is supposed to be part of the congregation.

CM: I will now hand you over who has more questions to ask you.  
Martin Rosner: MY questions are more about the history and the life in this area. Why and how did you come to this area?

JD: I came to Tebala in 1988 after the sudden death of a young priest who was working in this parish. I was asked to help out during the weekends.

MR: What would you consider to be an advantage of living in Edendale?

JD: For me, as I have been for a long time here, as a person who has been for a long time in educational institutions is that of being in contact with people, participating in their life especially when around here those where difficult times. I felt good that I could be with them during that time of suffering.

MR: What would you consider to be a disadvantage of living in Edendale?

JS: I do not have a disadvantage of living here. The only disadvantage is that its taxing because I work through out the week there and then I have to come here over the weekend. It's not the place that is the disadvantage.

MR: Do you know how and when Edendale started to exist?

JS: No. I do not know.

MR: Are there any persons responsible for the growth of Edendale?

JS: I am sure there are, but I don't know them.

MR: Are there any important clerical persons playing a major role in Edendale in the beginning- any denomination?

JS: There are but I don't know except one and I only know him because he is my relative, the late Rev Sihakhane who started the Ecumenical centre at Edendale.

MR: Is there one Church dominating in Edendale- in the beginning and today?

JS: I think today, the majority of people are Christians so it has a great influence in Edendale - just the church in general, all the Christians in different denominations.

MR: We saw lots of little churches. Where do you see your main area of work in Edendale?

JS: My main area is working with the youth because my conviction is that the youth is the church of tomorrow and they are the only people I can be close to and work with. I don't mean that the adults are not important; all I mean is that I see the adults on Sunday in church, but it's difficult now to organise old people, but the young you can try to organise them for the future.

MR: It's the same in Germany, they have a lot of possibilities to do bad things and to pick them up from the streets and bring them in contact with the Church.

JS: Yes, and you can imagine here, this place has been under violence for a long time and kids are quite familiar with violence. So there is need to give them a different picture as well.

MR: I think there are a lot of mentally wounded people from the last struggle in the last decades?

JS: Yes, maybe not mentally wounded, but psychologically hurt.

MR: How is your community with other churches in Edendale?

JS: There is a good spirit between us and other communities.

CM: Do you also sometimes have shared services with other denominations -the Anglican and the Methodist Churches and so on?

JS: We do, although they are rare. Some times we go to join them or they come to join us. Sometimes the things we do here, for example on Sunday we will be having confessions and we are sure that some of the 17's who will be around here are just accompanying their friends. They are not real Catholics, but the parents are willing to let them come. In the past on certain occasions just across these houses here, there were three crosses which we planted there and the service started here and we went over there to plant those crosses to remember the young man who were killed. This was a service of all denominations.

MR: Is there a better relation amongst the pastors or amongst the congregational level?

JS: Both as far as I am concerned.



MR: When did the Catholic church of Edendale come to existence?

JP: It started in 1870.

MR: Are the Oblates involved in this foundation?

JP: Yes, Oblates have always been working here. They founded this place and they continued up to the present moment.

MR: When was the first church built?

JP: They began service in this area in 1870, but whether this church was built in 1870, this I am doubtful because the first services were conducted under a tree and then eventually in a hall where all the denominations shared time and then eventually, they started building the churches.

CM: You have a background of the history of the coming of the Catholic church in Natal. Can you please give a brief history of that?

JP: The Catholic Church came in Natal in 1852 due to a petition which was made by the bishop of Grahamstown. The Oblates were invited to open missions particularly among the Zulu, but they worked for some time trying to establish themselves, get acquainted with the environment-know the people, know the language. They started opening the Zulu mission only in 1854. But they had difficulties. They opened the mission in the South a place called Isingolweni. They had difficulties and had to close the mission. This is not new, all denominations had such difficulties like that. Then they reopened and to close again in 1858. After that, they thought of trying somewhere else and they went to Lesotho and opened a mission there. That is as brief as I can be.

CM: The Oblates seem to be the backbone of the Catholic Church in

Natal- how many african Oblates are there in Natal?

JS: I should know but I cannot give the number exactly but I think we are roughly a dozen priests out of about eighty something Oblates.

CM: That's very interesting!! Maybe this is a question which should be asked to those priests who are part of the indigenous clergy. Do you have any general idea of what leads them to want to be Catholic priests?

JS: You are quite right. I think each person has his own story. But one thing which is common is that we all have a model, it is one particular priest you felt attracted; "I would like to be like this man," and so you follow that person. My model was a person who was so dedicated to the people, he used live with us in the family and for quite sometime, he would go around visiting people riding a bicycle and so on. I remember another fellow who told me that he was attracted by this white man who was always taking collection on Sundays and he said "Gosh this is a good thing to follow." One day, while the priest was still away, he took the dish and he looked at the dish and he saw so many pennies inside and he said "How can this man be working here collecting so little among the people." Then he started asking himself seriously what is he doing? and came to the conclusion, if this man is able to give himself for us like this, as was a white man, then I think this is something worth following. I am sure others can tell other stories.

CM: Did you personally experience any problems becoming a Catholic priest as an African from your family; your educational background and from the church structures themselves or other reasons that could have caused this kind of hinderance?

JS: No, I had no difficulties as far as the close family is concerned, but my some of my relatives were opposed to this

because they said that this is not the life style which one should follow as an african. I had no difficulties within the church structures, but I had some difficulties round about Matric, with health and also I had some misunderstanding with one of the priests who was a leader, supposed to be in charge of my education to promote my vocation. But I think it was more a question of personal misunderstanding.

MR: I don't like this question, I have heard this question often asked to me; "Why do you want to be a priest?" It is very difficult to give the right answer, but perhaps it is important to ask this question. Why did you become a priest?

JS: I became priest because I saw priesthood as a mode of leadership. It was nothing particularly religious about it. I realised that there are different ways of leading people and here is one way of leading people and it looks like leading them the right direction. The religious experience and conviction about priesthood came later.

CM: Did your family support you as you were studying for priesthood?

JS: They really did. As I said it was only the extended family which said no, this not the way to act.

CM: It must have been very different for you during that time because in 1957, the Church structures were still very much Westernised. I am saying this for example because here at this local institution, St Joseph's; it is said that it used to be a mainly white Seminary for training priests and was there some kind of a separation between where african indigenous students should study and where white students should study?

JS: Yes. As you have already said, whites were trained at St

Joseph's and we were trained in Lesotho.

CM: Did you have big group there as well?

JS: Yes there were a lot of African students there. They were coming from different places though. It was Lesotho, the Transvaal, Natal, Namibia, then of course South west Africa, Kimberley Bloemfontain and so on.

CM: Were there any students from Zimbabwe, Zambia Malawi?

JS: No.

CM: Given this set up that you were in, how did you feel about this kind of separation that was there?

JS: You know, now that you ask me the question, I realise that it was numb. In the sense that we simply accepted that the situation was like this and we studied in Lesotho, they studied here (St Joseph's), the only time trying time, testing time was when we had to work together. We did not know each other. The only saving element is that, at that time, there was uniformity in education. We all studied the Scholastic Philosophy, we all studied the Thomist Theology. It was the same system. So if a person spoke about a point in Theology, I knew exactly, this argument follows. There was no difficulty intellectually, but emotionally of course there was lot to work with, there was no doubt about that.

CM: If you compare your way to ministry with others, do you think there is a striking difference as an african minister working here in Natal and compare that with say, a white Oblate Priest. Do you see any striking differences in your approach of ministry?

JS: Yes, I think the main difference is that it is easier for me and I am closer to the people. I know the mentality of the

people. As far as my colleagues at that time, now of course its better, the people who were involved in ministry, even though they were tempted to get something out of the people, the people did not completely come out. That is my conviction. They said things they thought Father wanted to know this. So they fed him with what he wanted to know and not exactly what is the situation.

CM: Would you say until today, you had quite a normal church career as an african priest?

JS: I would say so yes, the only unfortunate thing with me is that I have worked so long in educational institutions and so if I keep on saying yes, I may give you the wrong idea about what you want to know, because in education, it is really a big job.

CM: I do not know if there is something you would like to add concerning your ministry here or in general?

JS: In general, there is one thing I would like to mention about my ministry. I find that in spite of all my efforts, I still feel that I have not really achieved as yet, what is my ideal. Because my ideal is to see at this stage the church feeling at home in Africa. Or rather the other way, Africa feeling at home within the church. I find this is still very far and I am struggling trying to show people that look here, your cultural background should not make you feel a stranger as a christian. You can be truly a christian and truly a Zulu or vice versa. We are still far from that.

MR: My next part is about indigenous clergy and the history. Do you know when the first indigenous minister was ordained in your church or in your congregation and which factors initiated this process?

JS: The first indigenous clergy in our congregation was ordained

round about 1936. That was in Lesotho, but there were other priests ordained here earlier, I think 1924 or so. It was partly the need for indigenous clergy, the need for people who will be closer to the people as I said the other factor is that it was also around the same time or previous to that Rome or Propaganda Fide started saying that you must establish indigenous clergy.

MR: Was it at this time the first official talks?

JS: Yes.

MR: To what extent do you think the social, political context influenced the process of the making of indigenous clergy?

JS: In the sense that it was evident that eventually, there would be places where the missionaries would be unable to work, because at that time, especially here in South Africa, a white man could not live in locations. All the blacks were in the locations and the whites were outside the locations. They used to live in the boundaries. It worked for sometime, but it was clear that definitely to the leaders of the church that it could not continue like that indefinitely with this situation.

MR: How is the church or are the Oblates in this diocese structured? It is my knowledge that the Oblates are leading the Church in this area. I know from the Dominicans, we have a Provincial in our own hierarchy and in another there is a bishop with their own hierarchy. It is new for me to see a diocese which is run exclusively by a particular order.

JS: What led to that is that when Rome opened the missions in the beginning, especially here, they had to appeal to religious orders for instance after they had failed with the Jesuits and the Holy Ghost Fathers. They then appointed one of the Oblates to head the mission, but then the structures were not diocese, it was Apostolic Vicariates. The head of the church was what we consider to be a Diocese. Eventually however this split we have

the same structure, the provincial and the Oblates and then the bishop with the diocese, even if he be an Oblate, is in charge of the diocese. So it does not belong to the congregation as long as he is in charge of the diocese.

MR: You told us that the first ordination of an indigenous priest was in 1936. Do you know this priest?

JS: Yes. From archbishop M'abathwana.

MR: Was this priest an Oblate?

JS: Yes, he was an Oblate.

MR: Is he still alive?

JS: No, he died. He died in 1966.

MR: Did you ever hear about the difficulties they experienced in their training as priests? What kind of problems, in which time and how did they deal with these problems?

JS: I think the main problem was the ignorance of our background. We were trained by people who did not know about our background and therefore in certain instances, there was a tendency to misjudge. Actually, I can tell you that my being involved in teaching in the Seminary and being a formator of the Oblates, initially was also because this need to have somebody or to have a group of people. Because I was not the first one who have and know the mentality of the people who have the background. Look, I will give you a very simple example:

We used to be surprised at the minor seminary to be reproached for what was termed "handgame". If you started knocking another person, you knocking each other and so on and then you would be reproached; this is handgame. It is not allowed and we were surprised. Why? Because we didn't know that in the background of those who trained us, this meant that we had tendencies of

homosexuality or something of that sort we are playing like this, because there is that time. For us it was I mean, we didn't know, it was a problem and you can imagine that in other things.

MR: Can you compare these experiences with today's problems and advantages?

JS: You mean the problems that we have?

MR: Yes.

JS: Today's problems, as far as I am concerned, I don't think really. The problem is acute. The problem which I have in formation, which I think I became a problem to those who are in formation. It is the problem an ordinary problem which is that of age, because definitely, its not only a problem here, in Germany you have that problem that you are not understood by the old people because they don't know exactly?

MR: Do you know if the number of indigenous pastors always grows in your church or congregation?

JS: It varies. It goes up and down and it is influenced, in my opinion, by the social situation. Sometimes there was an increase, other times it goes down.

MR: That's the old problem: if people are living in bad times, people run to the church and there are a lot of vocations. Now we are looking at the moment to Eastern Europe (for vocations), which vocations are going down quickly. During my preparation for my time in South Africa, I heard a lot about this theme here. The oppression is away and the church is maybe not an alternative for life and vocations and the popularity of the church is going down.

JS: And then there are other openings. You remember I said, when



I joined, I saw this way as a way of leadership. Now with the independence there will be new openings for other forms of leadership. So people will be attracted to, for instance, be high ministers of whatever the case maybe and so the vocations go down. But sometimes they get disillusioned and they realize that they can't be all ministers of the government. Then again vocations will go up. You are quite right, it's true!

CM: Now I think we are going to this stage when we are trying to assess what we have been learning from our other questions. What do you think are the advantages and disadvantages of being an African minister working here among African people?

JB: The advantages I see of being an African minister working among Africans is that first of all, I feel that people have confidence in me, they know that I have an interest in them. I am not saying that the others don't have an interest in them, but they know that my interest is also influenced by the fact that I am of their own blood. That is one advantage I have as an African minister among Africans.

The disadvantages, particularly in my church, is that it is a church who have always been handed down bread. There was no training, in the former system that church belongs to the people and then they should be self sufficient themselves. It is only beginning now and we are not responsible for that because only missionaries began that at least. But that it is still difficult to convince people that, really, this is your church and you have to make it live and those are the disadvantages.

The second disadvantage I would see is in the line of doctrine and so on. The younger generation is sort of with, before we had Catholic schools and catechism etc. Now you don't have things like that and there was a break, a time when they are not in their own religion, they find it difficult to understand Catholicism- what it is all about.

CM: I suppose to a certain extent, the way you have answered this question answers the question I was going to ask you about what you think your own parishoners think about the missionaries who came from abroad and that transition from having a white minister to having a black minister? I suppose that question is greatly answered!

JS: That was a question of which, I think, we were observed: "Will they make it?" I will give you an example: One guy who was ordained after Vatican II and he went home and said mass in the vernacular, of course, but we were ordained in the other system and said mass in Latin. An old lady said to him, "Oh, my grandchild, I always knew that you would never be able to talk Latin." So that shows the kind of mentality; "Will they make it, will they be like the missionary priests?" So that is only that element which I can add, as far as people's attitude is concerned.

CM: Are there certain difficulties now which are experinced by indigenous clergy in former years and today?

JS: I guess some of what I said is already the difficulty which they had.

CM: Do you think there are differences between indigenous clergy and the old missionary clergy concerning access to training for priesthood, access to the people, motivation to become a priest and other striking differences?

JS: Really to my knowledge no. No I don't think so really and anybody who wants to be a priest, I don't think he feels inhibited. Even in the past, it is not so much that we felt inhibited. Whatever inhibition we had about priesthood, it was only the fact that we had never seen a black priest and we thought that perhaps black people are not supposed to be priests. Actually one lady one lady, who saw the bick priest for the first

time said, "Oh, I suppose they are going to use them for requiem masses".

CM: What would you consider to be the main reason for indigenous clergy to serve in ministry?

JS: The main reason for me, it is our people and there is a need to serve them. There is a need to lead them in the religious field. Because if we don't join, they will always think that Christianity is something false; it is something which does not belong to us. Something which has come with a foreigner and remains with a foreigner. Why is it that we don't have African clergy? It is because it is a foreign thing. That's why I said when you asked if there is anything to add; I said this is for me my preoccupation! But unfortunately, probably, not probably, I am certain that I will go to the grave before I see that day when people really feel "Yes, the church, I feel at home in the church."

CM: Do you think these reasons which you have just given, have kind of changed over the years?

JS: Yes they have. They have people who are changing. People are beginning to support the church. People begin to understand that in the church, I mean some of their cultural customs and practices are acceptable in Christianity and so on, but we should be patient.

CM: Recently, I think in July or a little bit earlier than that, there was a meeting in Rome which was called an "African Synod". Were there any striking issues that were discussed, if you know, about indigenous clergy and was there any willingness from the church especially in Africa, to adapt more to African ways of worshipping, basically more to African ways of doing things?

JS: There wasn't anything concerning the clergy. As far as I

remember, but the one point that really interested me was the discussion on inculturation. I thought that was meaningful as far as the Synod was concerned.

CM: Did black pastors have to fight for their right to serve in ministry in the early times; earlier on before there were changes like we have just experienced here in South Africa?

JS: I don't think they had to fight really, because of the structure of the Roman Catholic church. you just fall within the structure and then you work within the structure. They may have had certain difficulties, perhaps, working in certain places or in fact they were simply excluded in certain places. It was unfortunate that the question of apartheid was fully applicable in the Catholic church like it was in the government itself. There were white churches and black churches and so on.

CM: Do you consider this area as a typical place for the work of a black pastor in the early years?

JS: Yes it is!

CM: Why do you consider it to be so?

JS: Because it is predominantly african and so definitely an African is the right person to work here.

CM: What do you think are the possible ways for making or transforming the situation of the indigenous clergy to be better?

JS: You mean better in which way?

CM: Somehow creating a climate where they are able to be much more effective to their parashoners.

JS: I think, as far as I am concerned, indigenous clergy

themselves need to come together. They need to share a little bit more and they need to discuss things and try to find means and ways ; first of all to find out what our problems are and then how do we face our problems. What will be the solution to these problems? For me, predominantly, that would be the thing that is necessary to do.

CM: I would like to understand how you have come to be here, to be the parish priest of this place. Who appoints you? Are you appointed by the bishop or your superior to be here?

JS: We are appointed by the bishop, but he goes through our superior. He usually asks, "Do you have any person who can help in such and such a place?" Then if he has one, he proposes him to the bishop and says, "I have this man who can go there." That's how I came here.

CM: Going back a little bit to the Oblates and how they work; I just happen to have an idea of Oblates and how they work, but are there any african priests or indigenous ministers who are working in the government of the province or in the administrative structure?

JS: Oh yes; the former provincial prior to this one was an african; Fr. Ngubane and I am actually the vicar provincial of the Oblates and then the second counselor to the provincial is also an african. So we do feature in the structure of administration.

CM: Is there anything you want to add concerning understanding of indigenous clergy?

JS: I think we have exhausted it!

MR: Is there anything in general you want to add?

JS: I think we have exhausted it. I don't think anything really.

DM: Fr. Jerome Skhakhane, we would like to thank you very, very much for giving us this opportunity to talk to you about your personal life and your ministry in the church. I hope that this interview we have had with you is going to help many, many students who are going to come after us. So I would like to thank you very, very much for giving us your time.

JS: You are most welcome!

MR: Thank you very much.