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# Flash

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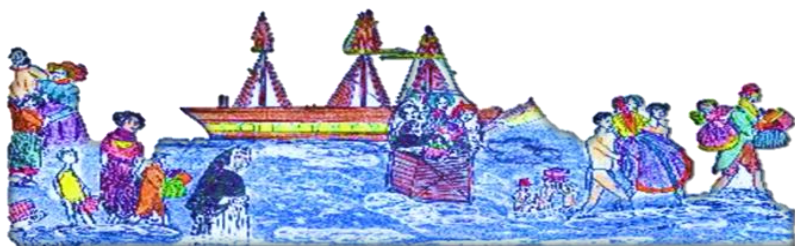
May 2015

## The Holy Family in Lesotho

*"If you agree, dear Rev. Mother, to send us six of your Sisters for Basutoland, our work here would be much easier and doubly fruitful. I would regard it as one of the greatest favours bestowed on us by Heaven, and I would be eternally grateful to your Institute."* This eloquent appeal for help in the mission of Basutoland (today's Lesotho) addressed by Monsignor Allard O.M.I to Mother Mary of the Cross was the beginning of everything. The appeal was all the more willingly answered by the Good Mother, since Providence had just placed at her disposal a capable leader, most suitable for this mission. A few months previously, the Sisters of Hope had been obliged to withdraw from North Africa, where they had started work in Algiers with Mother Mary Joseph Angot as Superior. She was now first Assistant of the Hope Community in Paris. Five companions, admirably gifted for such an apostolate,



were chosen for her. They were Sister Saint-Paul (Françoise) Geny, Sister Saint-Pierre (Victoire) Renaudot (Sister of the Immaculate Conception), Sister Saint-Augustin (Geneviève) Cachin, Sister Marie-de-Jésus (Jeanne) Vaillant (Sister of Hope) and Sister Saint-Louis-de-Gonzague (Marie) Rabat (an Agricole Sister). In this FLASH we remember those Sisters whose heroism prepared the way for the results that we see to-day. Mother Mary Joseph was to have the consolation of a visit to France later on, but for her five companions it was a definitive Adieu.



The little band of apostles sailed from Brest on February 6<sup>th</sup> 1864 for their new, unknown field of action in the company of two Oblate Fathers and two Brothers. In our day, when distances are

so quickly and easily covered, it is difficult to realise that the sailing vessel, the Nereid, a war-sloop belonging to the State, reached Durban only on May 27<sup>th</sup> 1864.

The Oblate Fathers had established their first European Parish at Maritzburg, Natal, in 1852, and it was there that Monsignor Allard wished the new Missionaries to wait for him. So there they waited until February 18<sup>th</sup> 1865 while Monsignor was having a convent built for them at Roma. But for Mother Mary Joseph no time was ever wasted. She and her Sisters began their apostolate with the Europeans and some Africans engaged as servants in Maritzburg. At the same time, they learned a little English but concentrated especially on Sesotho (the language of Basutos), of which even a superficial knowledge would allow them to make immediate contact with the people whom they were to evangelise.

At last, Monsignor Allard, two Oblate Fathers, one Brother and the six Foundresses, took their places in oxen-drawn wagons. On they went for three or four hours at a time, then came to a halt when each one set to work to prepare a meal. When night came on, they slept under a tent. From time to time, they camped near a farm where perhaps a charitable family would offer the missionaries much appreciated hospitality. Sometimes there was a marsh that had to be traversed on foot, or a river to cross. Once, when nearing the border between the Orange Free State and Basutoland, they came to a wide river which had been very swollen by the recent rains. There was no bridge and no boat was available. After waiting for ten days on the bank of the river, the Fathers, impatient to reach the journey's end, decided to attempt the crossing in a packing case that was more or less water-tight. The case was about 6 ½ feet long and a little over 3 feet wide. The two Fathers, who were good swimmers, aided by a few Africans set to work. Whilst some towed the case, others steered it to prevent it from

capsizing. In one single day, they did 38 crossings, transporting some 150 cwt. of luggage, besides the personnel.

It was on April 8<sup>th</sup> 1865 that Mother Mary Joseph and her companions reached MOTSI-WA-MA-JESU – the village of the Mother of Jesus – later called Roma. King Moshoeshoe himself came to greet them and his welcome was most cordial. Mother M. Joseph presented him with a magnificent military uniform brought from Europe, which fitted him so perfectly that it might have been made for him. His Majesty, in turn, offered Mother M. Joseph a magnificent tiger skin mantle. The new Missionaries lost no time in visiting the neighbouring villages, with which it was important to be on good terms, and received everywhere the same cordial welcome.

In surroundings of great poverty, the Missionaries began their apostolate with women and children, but soon disturbing things began to happen. By August 1865 the Boers had entered the country spreading terror and devastation everywhere. It seemed as if the devil was bent on preventing the development of a mission which was to become, according to the testimony of the Holy Father Pope Pius XI, “the most consoling in the world”. As soon as calm was restored, the Sisters opened a school and work-room: they started with eight girls on 20<sup>th</sup> October, 1865. A rapid increase in the number of children necessitated a corresponding increase in the number of workers. Soon the latter were reinforced by the arrival of five more Sisters from France. Other groups were to follow until gradually the number of European missionaries had increased to thirty. Religious vocations began to appear among the newly-converted Basuto girls. As their number grew yearly, in 1871 a noviciate was opened.

Meanwhile, Roma had been firmly planting its roots as the Central Mission and the fertile tree of the Holy Family had begun to spread its branches. In 1869, the first offshoot took root at St. Michael. St. Joseph of Korokoro came next in 1873, while St. Monica followed in 1877 and Sion in 1895. Besides the creation of mission centres in Lesotho, the arrival of new Sisters from France in 1875 allowed Mother Mary Joseph to found three convents in three strategic points in South Africa from which the Holy Family Sisters were to spread throughout the country; namely Durban, Maritzburg and Bloemfontein.

The Sisters established themselves also in some pre-existing missions in Lesotho: Gethsemani in 1885, Montolivet in 1889, Massabielle in 1903, Lorette in 1907, Nazareth in 1909, Saint-Louis in 1914 and Bethany in 1926. Between 1865 and 1965 the number of Holy Family Missionaries in Lesotho increased to 125: 46 from France, 13 from South-Africa, 2 from Holland, 8 from Germany, 11 from Ireland, 4 from Spain,

8 from Belgium, 17 from Canada, 12 from Poland, 4 from England. In 1958, Lesotho was constituted as a separate region with Sister Agnes de Jesus Vandenhende as the first Regional Superior. In 1965, only 47 Sisters from abroad were still actively working in the country while nowadays the Mission is entrusted entirely to the care of Lesotho Sisters whose number has increased to 63 in 2015. Apart from the Apostolic Sisters, the Mission currently includes 49 Lay Associates and 1 Priest Associate. The Sisters are engaged in numerous ministries such as pastoral work, education and the care of the sick and suffering.

Mother Mary Joseph described the characteristics of the true Missionary when she said: “True Missionaries are happy to devote themselves for the glory of God in humble and obscure labours; they taste in the intimacy of their own hearts a consolation the extent of which those only can understand who, having left all for the salvation of souls, are resolved to live by immolation and sacrifice. If the imagination is not always charmed, the heart is content and the soul is at peace; it is truly the work of God Alone.”



### **The Celebrations**

Looking back in thanksgiving to God for the graces he showered upon the Holy Family Association worldwide and, in a special way, upon the Unit of Lesotho, we remembered the route followed by our six Foundresses as they entered the Mountain Kingdom of Lesotho. Therefore, on 18 April 2015 we commemorated their first encounter with the Great King Moshoeshoe I in Leribe, the village of Chief Molapo. Members of the Association of the Holy family of Bordeaux, Holy Family High School



students and teachers, two representatives from all Holy Family schools and the Christian Community of Maryland gathered together to recall and mark the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the arrival of the first Holy Family Missionaries who were also the first religious women in Lesotho.

Leribe is also a significant place in the History of the Church in Lesotho because when the first Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate arrived in 1862, Fr Joseph Gerard said his first Mass in the country, under a big tree which has been enshrined at this particular place in the Parish of Maryland. So the launching of the Jubilee Year was marked by Holy Mass led by Fr. Moeketsi OMI, the Parish Priest of Maryland, who

concelebrated with Fr. Mohapi from St Monica's. After the opening prayer of the Mass, Sr. Blandina Tsibela welcomed the congregation and presented to the community six girls representing the first six Missionaries, wearing the old religious habit of the Sisters, with one boy representing Bro. Moran OMI who travelled with Bishop Allard, Fr. Le Bihan, Fr. Barthélémy and five Basuto men on their journey from Pietermaritzburg.



At the end of Holy Mass, a few speeches were made. The first speaker was Chief Qacha Qacha who is the local chief at Maryland. He welcomed the congregation and pointed out that the presence of the Catholic Church brought outstanding developments not only in Leribe but in the whole country because the Sisters built schools, clinics and hospitals and they have always given wonderful service. Sr. Hyacintha Moopisa then thanked the assembly for their presence and said that the Jubilee is the time of giving thanks to God for the graces that he showered upon the Holy Family in Lesotho. It is also a time to evaluate the past, strengthen where we were weak and plan for the future full of hope in the power of the Spirit of God who will always lead us to be true followers of Christ.

The second phase of the celebration of the Jubilee was the presentation of awards to some outstanding workers and long-serving participants in the Holy Family Mission in Lesotho. This ceremony took place on April 24 at Roma. It began with Holy Mass concelebrated by his Grace Bernard Mohlalisi OMI, Archbishop Emeritus of Maseru and Fr Joseph Ntlai OMI, the parish priest of Roma. The liturgical singing and dancing were led by St. Mary's High School choir. In his sermon, Bishop Mohlalisi pointed out that the Church is here because of the dedicated service of the missionaries. He sincerely expressed gratitude and appreciation for all that God has accomplished through the Holy Family Association in Lesotho. He asked the congregation to pray for the peaceful repose of the members who had passed on to the next world. He also asked for prayer for vocations and urged young people to be generous in responding to God's call inviting some to join religious life and ensure the continuity of the good works begun by the Foundresses.

At the end of Holy Mass, awards were given to St Mary's High School as the first Girls' School of the Holy Family in Lesotho, to head teachers, teachers, nurses, domestic-workers, Holy Family Lay Associates, Provincial leaders, the first Priest Associate, the oldest member in the Unit and representatives of Missionaries who came from other countries.

After Holy Mass, the congregation processed to the graveyard where many wreaths were placed on the tombstones of our departed Sisters in appreciative memory of their dedicated service. The whole day was spent reminiscing about the past and this kept us all in touch with the reality of the Communion of all the Saints – especially those of the Holy Family worldwide.

The core celebration was the third phase that took place on 25 April 2015 at Roma to mark the high point of the Jubilee Year activities.

Holy Mass was concelebrated by the Emeritus Bishop Mohlalisi OMI and about 25 priests. After the penitential rite, Sr Sheila Wasp, the Unit Leader of South Africa passed the burning Jubilee candle to the Unit of Lesotho, by handing it over to Sr Hyacintha Moopisa, the Unit Leader of Lesotho.

During his sermon Bishop Mohlalisi pointed out that it was not easy for the first Oblate Missionaries to evangelize women in Lesotho. That is why they decided to send letters back to France asking for the Sisters of the Holy Family of Bordeaux to come to their rescue in the ministry. It is significant that the Sisters arrived in 1865, three years after the arrival of the Oblates. The Bishop went on to borrow the words of St Paul who thanked God for what he did for him and said, “We thank and highly appreciate the mercy of God demonstrated through the Sisters of the Holy Family in Lesotho.” He also remarked on the scarcity of religious vocations these days and reminded those present that God continues to call people for his service, even though people are so busy with the riches of this world and turn a deaf ear to God's call. He finally encouraged everyone to follow the example of Jesus, as he was a humble and prayerful man who always listened to God and went about doing good.

At the end of the Mass, 150 pairs of shoes were distributed to seven Holy Family Schools. The shoes were wrapped in such a way that each school received a parcel which will be opened later and distributed to disadvantaged students. After that all the members of the Holy Family Association, present for the celebration, sang their Jubilee Song.

Sr. Hyacintha Moopisa spoke on behalf of the Holy Family Association in Lesotho, giving a vote of thanks, firstly to God who has been with the Association from the beginning to this moment. Secondly, she thanked God for the missionaries who left their countries to empower and develop the bright future of the Basotho. Thirdly, she thanked the Bishop, priests, religious men and women and the whole congregation for the support they showed to the Holy Family Association for many years, but in a special way during the time of preparation for the Jubilee to which all contributed and, by their presence, made the celebration a success.



This wonderful celebration of 150 years of Holy Family presence in Lesotho demonstrated our enormous gratitude to God and to all those who have gone before us and who left us their virtues, love and hard work. With them let us all sing, “Glory to God Alone. “



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