

Father Denis Howard St. George OMI (1902–1989)

Early Years

Father Denis Howard St. George was born in Pietermaritzburg on 6 September 1902. On both his father's and his mother's side he came of well-known and well-established colonial families. His mother was a Vanderplank. He grew up in the Pietermaritzburg so well described in Alan Paton's *Towards the Mountain*. He was born into a family that ultimately numbered ten children, five girls and five boys.

The Catholic life into which he was initiated came under the pastoral care of the missionary body known as the Oblates of Mary Immaculate, to whom Catholic evangelization in Natal had been entrusted by the Holy See in 1850. Among their commitments was St Charles College, which they conducted in the premises that later became the Ansonia Hotel. It was there that young Howard began and finished his schooling with an interruption of a few years which he spent at Merchiston, between the time when the Oblates relinquished control of St Charles and the Marist Brothers took over.

After matriculation Howard went to the South African School of Mines and Technology in Johannesburg in 1920. Its principal was then the youthful and precocious Jan Hofmeyr. While Howard was there it became the University of the Witwatersrand at the beginning of 1922 and he became one of the early



Fr. Howard St. George

(Photograph: Nancy Ogilvie)

Wits graduates with a BSc in engineering in 1923. A memory that haunted him was that of his experience in a university contingent guarding captured strikers during the 1922 insurrection. It left him anything but militaristic.

Not many years went by before he became aware of another very different call. While discerning how he should respond to this call he happened to read some words of Cardinal Hinsley reported in *The Tablet*, an English Catholic periodical. The Cardinal was emphasizing that the future of the Church in Africa would depend on the African population. This convinced Howard that he should become a missionary priest.

He applied to enter the Congregation of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate, was accepted and set sail for Ireland in the second half of 1928. He entered the Oblate novitiate at the beginning of September, took his temporary vows in the Congregation on 8 September 1929, pursued his studies for the priesthood in Dublin where he made his final vows in 1932, crossed over to Jersey in 1933, was ordained priest there in 1934 and completed his theological studies in 1935.

On his return to Natal he was posted as curate to Bellair with pastoral responsibilities extending down the South Coast and inland to Pinetown. The people he was serving were almost exclusively English-speaking. This was not quite what Father Howard wanted, not quite in keeping with the vocation that had come to him through Cardinal Hinsley's words. He put his case to his superiors, Bishop Henri Delalle and Father Joseph Kerautret, the provincial superior of the Oblates. No doubt he was given a sympathetic hearing, but another person had to be considered and that was his parish priest, Father Chauvin. However, he got his toe in the doorway by obtaining permission to go to Maphumulo for three months to learn Zulu. His love affair with the Zulu people and their language was to continue to the day of his death.

Missionary among the Zulus: Inchanga

He finally got his chance to serve his beloved Zulus full-time when he was posted to Inchanga in 1940, with a double function: pastoral responsibility for Inchanga and neighbouring places like Camperdown (which had derived its name from a farm owned by his Vanderplank grandfather) and the hills and valleys that tumbled down to the Umsunduze River. Throughout these hills and valleys the equestrian figure of Father Howard became a familiar and welcome sight.

Life was extremely busy for him. Besides his parishioners and their associations and his catechumens he had schools to supervise, including a high school that served as juniorate or minor seminary for secondary school candidates considering entrance into the Oblate Congregation. He was also novice master. Among his first novices was the young man who is now Bishop Dominic Khumalo OMI.

In the midst of all this he found time to pursue his interest in the Zulu language. The elusive verb to be intrigued him and he hunted its traces through various grammatical constructions. On one occasion he dared to expound his theory to the formidable C.M. Doke. As Father Howard described the result, Doke seemed unimpressed.

Diocesan Responsibilities

This gratifying stage of the fulfilment of Father Howard's vocation came to an end in 1950 when I asked him to take on a new three dimensional expression

of his missionary commitment at diocesan level; spiritual director to the Catholic African Union and the Catholic African Teachers' Union and secretary for mission schools. This three dimensional task gave him great responsibility for the structures supporting the religious life of Zulu-speaking Catholics in the Archdiocese of Durban. The Catholic African Union co-ordinated the activities of the various parish and diocesan associations. The Catholic African Teachers' Union was a special organization for teachers in Catholic African schools. These commitments involved Father Howard in frequent diocesan and inter-diocesan congresses. He also took the lead in redrafting the constitution of the CAU and renaming it the Catholic Africa Organization. The post of secretary for mission schools involved Father Howard in all the problems arising from the Bantu Education Act of 1953 and the withdrawal of State subsidies to mission schools.

Other responsibilities that came his way were those of secretary to the Catholic African Savings Union and the Oblate District Nursing Service which co-ordinates the work of half a dozen rural clinics. As if that were not enough he also exercised the functions of diocesan treasurer for four years from 1959 to 1962 and was acting vicar general, that is, number two in the Archdiocese, in 1960. No accumulation of work ever seemed to daunt him.

In 1963 while continuing his work as spiritual director to the Catholic Africa Organization and as secretary for mission schools he accepted a transfer to the Emmanuel Cathedral to serve as curate with special responsibility for the Zulu-speaking congregation which under his guidance became a very large and flourishing one. He remained at the Emmanuel Cathedral until ill health occasioned his transfer to Nazareth House at the end of 1988.

The Last Quarter Century: Emmanuel Cathedral, Liturgical Translation, History

Father Howard's diocesan responsibilities gradually faded out in the late 60s and early 70s. The mission school situation was a rapidly shrinking one and its remnants became the responsibility of a successor in that field. The Second Vatican Council of the Catholic Church held between 1962 and 1965 introduced new ideas and new practices and some of the old structures lost their importance. Among these were the Catholic Africa Organization in the Archdiocese of Durban.

Among the innovations of Vatican II was a move away from Latin in Catholic worship to the use of the vernacular. All over the world translation teams were going into action. In 1968 Father Howard became the organizing secretary of the Zulu Liturgical Translation Commission and a vigorous participant in all its undertakings. He worked on Zulu liturgical translation and publication literally to the day of his death. He was proof-reading a Zulu lectionary in his sick room at Nazareth House when his energies finally failed.

With his close collaborator Father Raphael Studerus OSB and a team of excellent laymen he had completed the translation and publication of ten liturgical books in Zulu and had left a four-volume lectionary almost ready for publication.

The last 25 years of his life saw Father Howard indulging another enthusiasm: history. Those who knew him as a theological student in Dublin and Jersey were aware of this enthusiasm. At the Emmanuel Cathedral the old baptismal and marriage registers and tombstones in the cemetery caught his eye and he began to unravel Catholic family histories. He became very

interested in the ministry of Father Sabon OMI, whose priestly service in Durban lasted from 1852 to his death in 1885, and in the life of Saturnino do Valle, a Mozambican and the lay leader of a group of Catholics, rescued with others by the British Navy from slave ships, and settled on church land at the Bluff.

Father Howard wrote the story of Saturnino in a brief monograph.

But the historical character that really became Father Howard's obsession was Bishop Marie Jean-Francois Allard OMI, the first Catholic prelate in Natal in episcopal orders with the title of Vicar Apostolic of Natal. A Vicar Apostolic is a Catholic bishop in a mission territory not yet established as a diocese but falling under the immediate control of the Holy See with the bishop acting as vicar of the Pope.

For several years Father Howard dedicated all his spare time to unravelling and translating Bishop Allard's journal written in French and in a crabbed and at times almost indecipherable handwriting. This he published in 1981 with voluminous notes and painstaking indices. He gave it the title *Failure and Vindication*, the failure referring to the lack of success that attended Allard's efforts among the Zulus and the vindication celebrating the happier results in Lesotho (then Basutoland) which was also part of the territory committed to him.

Bishop Allard was well served by Father Howard. Every cause that Father Howard took up was well served; the cause of the church in which he ministered as priest, the cause of the Congregation of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate to which he gave a deep and affectionate loyalty, the cause of the Zulu people whom he loved as he loved their language. He was a man of prayer, faithful, trustworthy, reliable, determined and resolute in pursuit of a goal, indefatigable in working for it; friendly, affable, hospitable and ready to regale visitors from his inexhaustible fund of historical erudition.

Surely the Master must have welcomed him on 25 April 1989 with a hearty: 'Well done, good and faithful servant'.