

Une souvenir du France¹

The contribution of France to a little-known aspect of Natal history has an interesting memorial in St Mary's parish church, Loop Street, Pietermaritzburg. An undeniably gallic spirit defined Roman Catholic worship in Natal for the first century of official ecclesiastical presence. The Vicariate of the earliest bishops was decidedly French. In fact, between 1852 and 1942 the local church was under the direct leadership of French clergy. In its entirety, St Mary's beautiful parish church is a monument to francophone Catholicism.

Initially, Catholic endeavour in south-eastern Africa was dominated by French-founded religious orders, which supplied the priests and nuns serving the young diocese². Significant among these were the Oblates of Mary Immaculate, to which the first four bishops of Natal belonged and to which the majority of priests in the Archdiocese of Durban still belong. In addition, religious congregations of women were represented by the Association of the Holy Family, of Bordeaux, who were mainly teachers, and the Augustinian Sisters of the Mercy of Jesus, who were a nursing order³.

When the first bishop, Jean François Allard, arrived in Pietermaritzburg on 4 April 1852, there was no house of worship available for use and his first Mass in the colonial capital was celebrated in a private home. Fortunately a member of the congregation was the local magistrate and Acting Surveyor-General, John Bird, and he immediately assisted in raising £90 for the construction of the first Catholic chapel in Pietermaritzburg⁴. The building was consecrated on Christmas Day 1852 and was dedicated to Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception. Enlarged in 1867, it was to serve as the symbolic home of Catholicism in Natal for 40 years.

By the turn of the century the quaint church was too small and Father Justin Barret supervised the construction of a larger, though temporary, building in Longmarket Street⁵. In 1911 the last French-born parish priest arrived at St Mary's⁶. During his tenure Father Amandus Langouet, of Rennes, would celebrate the contribution of French Catholics in Natal with unique flair. Returning from France in 1919, having fought in the First World War, he embarked on his commission.



St Mary's Church, Pietermaritzburg

Sanctioned by Bishop Henri Delalle, Langouet raised funds for a church to replace the interim structure Father Barret built in 1890.

The profound influence French clergy had brought to bear in Natal was destined to wane, but memories of their zeal would be sheltered in the new church. No better site for a minor shrine to Roman Catholic France in South Africa could be found. World events burst upon the original little church in 1879 when the parish suddenly found itself central to the whirl of Imperial France. Louis Napoléon, the Prince Imperial and godson of Pope Pius IX, visited to worship and pray there while on his way to the front as an observer in the Anglo-Zulu War. Sadly, only two months after his arrival, the Prince would return to St Mary's dead, killed whilst with the British army in Zululand. His body was brought to the chapel with great ceremony and was embalmed in the school hall. Father Barret, the parish priest, had the honour of singing the Prince's first requiem Mass. Thus St Mary's simple brick chapel became the unlikely setting for the sad notes of the Requiem of St Louis⁷. This Mass was only sung for funerals of kings and emperors of France and previously had only ever been used at the cathedral of Nôtre Dame de Paris.

The following year the Empress Eugénie made a pilgrimage to the sites her son had visited, and the place where he had died. In a strange twist of fate, she was accompanied by the Bishop of Natal, Charles Constant Jolivet, whom she knew personally as he had been chaplain to the imperial household during the Second Empire⁸. The saga of the Prince lifted the profile of Catholicism in the colony considerably and identified its nature as significantly francophone. Testimony to this is evident in the parish church ultimately built 50 years later.

Construction of the third St Mary's parish church began on 1 March 1927 and, costing £14 000, it was opened on 24 May 1928⁹. The architecture is of a classic Romanesque form, with a rounded nave and two side aisles flanking a central aisle, but the interior proclaims France.

The most striking feature in this regard are the stained-glass windows. They were made by the firm of Charles Champigneulle of Paris and take a conspicuous number of French saints, or French-related topics, as their theme. Among these, on the side aisle windows are St Marguerite Marie of Alacoque, a popular French saint associated with the Sacred Heart of Jesus; St Joan



St Mary's Chapel



Main door, St Mary's Church



Interior, St Mary's Church

of Arc, the proto-nationalist heroine of France; and St Thérèse of Lisieux. There is also a depiction of the Holy Family of Nazareth, obviously linked to the French nuns at the convent, and it is flanked by a window dedicated to the pious king of France, St Louis XII. The sanctuary windows relate to the life of the Virgin Mary, but the centre window depicts her as Queen of Heaven in a design based on miraculous medals popular in France throughout the 19th century. The lady chapel altar is dedicated to another symbol of French Catholicism, Nôtre Dame de Lourdes and the windows show two appearances of the Virgin associated with France, namely Lourdes and Nôtre Dame de Pont-Main.

French themes continue in the ornate main altar. It was made in the Marbrerie Barran of Toulouse, using white French marble, and was sent out to Natal in pieces to be installed at St Mary's. The 14 Stations of the Cross were also

made in France and the inscriptions are in French. The three bells in the belfry were cast by Paccard et Cie at Annecy le Viens and are named for The Little Flower of Jesus (St Thérèse of Lisieux), St Marguerite Marie of Alacoque and St Joan of Arc¹⁰.

Amandus Langouet left no justification for his choices, but it is conceivable that the horror of destruction he witnessed in his beloved France between 1914 and 1918 bore heavily upon him. Almost in secret, the elegant old church bears symbolic confirmation of the deep and abiding love of France the early priests and bishops brought with them to the shores of Natal.

NOTES

1. This forms part of a more extensive examination of the French contribution to Catholic missionary enterprise in Natal, 'Three bishops and their French orders', originally presented at the 'French presence in KwaZulu-Natal' Symposium, Pietermaritzburg, 1996.
2. The progress of a Roman Catholic community in Natal has been skillfully documented by Joy Brain in her seminal works *Catholic beginnings in Natal and beyond* (Durban, 1975) and *Catholics in Natal II: 1886-1925* (Durban, 1982), as well as in other published forms.
3. J.B. Brain, 'The centenary of the Augustinian sisters in Natal', *Natalia*, 21, December 1991, pp. 54-65.
4. *Natal Standard*, 20 April 1852, news report.
5. J.G. Duckworth, *The St Mary's story: A history of St Mary's Catholic parish, Pietermaritzburg* (Pietermaritzburg, 1989), p. 55.
6. Durban Archdiocesan Archives: Langouet correspondence, p. 1.
7. P. Deléage, *Trois mois chez les Zoulous et les derniers jours du Prince Imperial*, (Paris, 1879), p. 40.
8. J.E. Brady, *Trekking for souls*, (Cedara, 1952), p. 86.
9. *Natal Witness*, 25 May 1928, news report.
10. *Natal Witness*, 22 May 1928, news report.

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