

# *The Bhengu Gallery renovation at Centocow mission*

*by Steven Kotze*

ON Thursday 19 September 2013 the Gerard Bhengu Gallery was officially opened at Centocow mission near the village of Creighton in southern KwaZulu-Natal. The occasion also served as the culmination of a decade-long process to reclaim the use of the original mission church. Widely known as the First Church, to distinguish it from the elaborate Italianate edifice that replaced it in 1913, the much smaller and altogether more modest church was completed in 1892. In use for only two decades, it was then overshadowed by its impressive neighbour, which was built because of the wish of Mariannhill (near Pinetown) to commemorate its transition from Trappist abbey to independent missionary institute.

After being used for only 20 years, in 1913 the First Church was essen-

tially redundant and consigned to a vague state of mediocrity, but only in comparison with the glorious richness of the interiors and scale of the New Church. During the years that followed, the First Church became a school and then suffered indignities from cumulative natural adversities, mainly in the form of termites, while structural flaws caused the tower to crack, and the north-facing wall began in places to sag with age. Half a century later there was a general consensus that the First Church was well on the way to ruin, and would have to be pulled down at some stage.

When the architect Robert Brusseau first saw this old church in 1972, Fr Martin More-Corey, who was Apostolic Administrator of Umzimkhulu Diocese at the time, accompanied him. They came to make a decision concerning another aged and rickety building at



*An aerial view of the Mbaxa valley, with Centocow mission on the left bank of the stream. The two churches along the middle right-hand section of the mission are respectively, the 'New Church' (1913) above, and the 'First Church' (1892) below. St Appollinaris hospital lies at the extreme left-hand side.*

(Photo: Ingwe Municipality)

the mission, a Trappist-era mill that ultimately could not be saved and required demolition. When Brusse noted the visibly crumbling state of the First Church as they passed in front of it, the priest simply stated, "That's the next one." That circumstances have allowed this old gem of Trappist design not only to survive 40 more years, but then also to be entirely resurrected, is nothing short of miraculous.

The importance of the two churches, standing side by side in the same mission parish, cannot be emphasised too highly. Both are products of the Mariannahill architectural office led by Brother Nivard Streicher (q.v. *Natalia* 12:65 and 15.78), and demonstrate both the creative trajectory of his career as well as the internal changes that shattered the contemplative aura of Trappist austerity under which the monastery

at Pinetown had been established. Although the two churches fulfilled the same function as places of worship, they also demonstrate two distinct eras in the history of Mariannahill. According to Robert Brusse, "The handcrafted older building is juxtaposed with the industrial sophistication of the new church. The churches epitomise the transformation of 'monastery' Trappists into a missionary order."

Transformation lies at the heart of the story of these mission churches, and the entire Mariannahill endeavour, which makes it a moving narrative to engage with in contemporary South Africa. The recent renovation of Centocow's First Church into a modern gallery and heritage centre to celebrate the life and work of Gerard Bhengu, as well as the Trappist legacy, is thus completely fitting. Even more appropriate is the



*Centocow mission in 1910, shortly before construction began on the 'New Church' which was completed and dedicated in October 1913. (Photo: Congregation of Mariannahill Missionaries (CMM) archives, Rome)*

well-conceived effort to stimulate local tourism as the latest incarnation in the varied existence of the old redbrick structure. Its unlikely story is a testament to the modern values of recycling and reuse, but such pragmatic habits were also regarded highly by the austere Trappists in their pursuit of a simple existence.

The story of how a gallery for Gerard Bhengu came to be housed in a formerly derelict and dangerously decaying church correctly begins with the arrival of the missionaries. Every Trappist mission station established by Mariannahill kept a careful chronicle of its history. These carefully crafted documents, in neat German script, provide an invaluable insight into the conditions experienced by the founders of the important mission of Centocow.

The location of the mission's future site by Fr Gerard Wolpert and Bro. Nivard Streicher, the celebrated Mariannahill architect, is related in the original chronicle. The two monks were on

the way from Mariathal outside Ixopo to the first outstation of Mariannahill at Reichenau in the spring of 1887, only a year after the great experiment in Trappist missionary work had started.

Tired by the great heat, and nearly impassable tracks, they rested on a hill on the left bank of the Mzimkhulu River.

A green hilly landscape expanded in front of them, with a small farm. Besides a farmhouse, it didn't show anything but small woodlands with just two-foot high wattle trees and some maize fields.

But nearby they discovered a lovely waterfall on the small Mbaxa stream, which flows into the Mzimkhulu River.

Bro. Nivard at once thought of the useful waterpower whilst Fr Gerard saw an opportunity for starting a Mission station for the people whose huts were not far away.

He had no idea then that the Lord had chosen *him* as the missionary just there.

At the time a man named Peak owned the property, which consisted of 4 167 acres of land watered by abundant streams in addition to the Mzimkhulu River. Almost as a sign that its future lay in the spiritual realm, at the time the farm was rather fittingly named *Trinity*. In addition to the chronicle narrative, there is also evidence that Mr Peak and Abbot Franz Pfanner communicated about the farm prior to its romantic “discovery” by Wolpert and Streicher.

Regardless of the exact chronology, Peak was ultimately aware that Abbot Pfanner was buying a considerable amount of land in the district, and made his way to Mariannahill, where he offered to sell his farm to the monastery for £662. Pfanner, in turn, was eager to add the land to his growing number of missions, and set about raising funds for the purchase. The transaction was concluded successfully, and the Trappists took possession of the land on 11 September 1888.

Mariannahill’s seventh mission station was situated about 15 kilometres from a little settlement near the Nkonzo River with the slightly inappropriate name of Dronkvlei. The place was named during the *Kommissie Trek* of 1834, when a party of Boer leaders from the frontier districts of the Eastern Cape passed through the area while they were scouting for suitable territory for settlement. Somehow during that expedition the Voortrekkers came up with appellation “Dronkvlei” for the marshy bowl of the Nkonzo stream near its junction with the Mzimkhulu.

During the rest of the 19th century, Dronkvlei had the doubtful distinction of being one of the earliest places named by the settler community, second only to “Port Natal”. When the Natal Government Railway proposed that

tracks for their new line to the Cape should be laid through the settlement of Dronkvlei, more sober-minded British officials decided that a change of name was desirable. In 1905 Dronkvlei was renamed in honour of Lady McCallum, the Governor’s wife, whose maiden name was Creighton.

When Abbot Franz Pfanner acquired the farm *Trinity*, further up the Mzimkhulu River from Dronkvlei, he also bestowed upon it a new name as a mission station. It was an established convention at Mariannahill that all the new Trappist outstations were named after great European shrines to the Virgin Mary. It is believed that a Polish princess donated the necessary funds to buy the land, which made the name of the mission obvious: Częstochowa.

The sacred image of the Virgin Mary and Infant Jesus venerated at Częstochowa has famously darkened after the several centuries’ worth of candle smoke that has wafted around it, and is known as the Black Madonna of Częstochowa. The Polish icon is kept in a towering monastery fortress at Jasna Gora, and is central to the painful, war-torn history of Poland. In 1888, Franz Pfanner therefore had no trouble in thinking of a name for his new mission station that had been acquired directly through the generosity of a Polish benefactor.

The German-speaking monks, as well as local English and Zulu speaking communities, had some trouble with pronouncing the word Częstochowa, in its full Slavic complexity [tʂɛstɔxɔva]. Being the practical man that he was, Pfanner simply shortened the name to “Centocow” and gave KwaZulu-Natal a unique place name in the process. The unusual designation has led to considerable confusion about how the mission’s



*Construction of the 'First Church' at Centocow in 1892.*  
(Photo: CMM archives, Rome)

name is spelt, and there are several variations in current use.

The first priest in charge of Centocow was Father Gerard Wolpert. He was a newly ordained German who played a significant part in the story of the Trappist transformation that occurred at Mariannahill and its missions. Father Wolpert became the foremost missionary Trappist at Mariannahill, and later emerged as the leader of the missionary faction of monks, as opposed to the more traditional contemplatives. Under his guidance, Centocow effectively became the focus of the new spirit of change within Mariannahill. The first party of Trappist monks, who established the mission, left Mariannahill on 27 November 1888 and made the wagon journey from the coast through the enormous valleys that cut across the landscape beneath the Drakensberg mountains in southern KwaZulu-Natal.

At the time, however, Centocow was technically in the territory of East Griqualand, as it was set on the southern bank of the Mzimkhulu River, beyond

the border of the Colony of Natal. Centocow faced directly on to the Mzimkhulu, running swiftly from its nearby source in the mountains. Conditions at the mission were extremely modest, even by the austere standards of monks whose entire existence was in pursuit of the absolute denial of worldly comfort.

Understatement reveals the sense of dismay evident in the early pages of the Centocow chronicle, which recorded that, "regarding the buildings, not much was to be boasted about, and the sacrifices to be endured were many and varied". Although a lack of personal comfort was to be expected, the mission was still required to be self-sufficient and well organised. In order to achieve this as quickly as possible, the small group of Trappist monks duly began construction on one of the most important outstations of Mariannahill.

A few days after the first monks arrived at Centocow, six Sisters of the Precious Blood made their appearance at the very end of November. The missionary nuns were imbued with the

energetic spirit of their founder and set about cleaning the derelict farm buildings, some of which had been damaged by fire. Meanwhile, teams of monks broke down the ruined structures and began rebuilding others entirely. Their very first efforts would fashion a place for them to live in, and worship in the manner required by their Rule.

Abbot Franz Pfanner arrived a fortnight later on 12 December 1888, and said the first Mass at Centocow. From that point on, the spiritual work of gathering converts to the Roman Catholic faith began alongside the physical labour of bricks and mortar that gave the outstation its visible structure. It took three years for the monks to be secure enough in their position at Centocow to build the mission church – now known as the First Church, and recently restored as the Gerard Bhengu Gallery. For a period of 20 years from 1892 until 1913 this relatively modest structure served as place of worship for both the resident monks and Precious Blood sisters, as well as the growing numbers of African converts they brought into the faith.

Centocow played a significant role in tumultuous conflict that emerged among Mariannahill Trappists after 1894. When the highest decision making body of the Order, known as the General Chapter, became aware that Franz Pfanner had authorised a radical departure from the severe Rule that governed their ascetic way of life, he was deposed as Abbot. A 15-year dispute ensued between those who adhered to the contemplative ideals upon which Trappist life was founded and the monks attracted by the missionary endeavour exemplified by Gerard Wolpert of Centocow.

The spiritual dispute eventually grew so heated that the Pope himself was

forced to arbitrate between the two factions. On 2 February 1909 a Papal decree was issued by Pius X under which the church formally recognised that Mariannahill and its many outstations could no longer be considered part of the Trappist congregation. The abbey outside Pinetown would henceforth be known as a Missionary Institute, and in time became the Congregation of Mariannahill Missionaries. In 1910 the new religious order decided to build a fitting memorial to its Trappist legacy, in the form of a grand new church at Centocow.

Thus when the foundation stone of the New Church was laid in 1910, it came to be seen as a monument to the achievements of the formerly Trappist monks, as well as to their transformation into the Congregation of Mariannahill Missionaries. When the completed church was consecrated in 1913, Fr Gerard Wolpert presided at the ceremony. He was no longer Abbot, but Provost of a new congregation of missionary priests and monks alongside the Precious Blood sisters who shared their work. The blessing he said over that beautiful new church brought the story of Trappist transformation to a close.

As he sang the first Mass in Centocow's impressive New Church, behind the main altar a remarkable story was told in glowing stained glass. Symbolically enshrined in the huge round window was the tale of how the order of contemplative European monks brought a different culture of education and a new faith to this part of Africa. At the same time, the Trappists themselves were taken along a new and different path, entirely beyond their expectations. Many of the people who formed part of that journey were present that day, and saw the significance of their lives cap-



*Centocow mission, showing the 'First Church' in 1910 with the foundations of the 'New Church' rising above it on the right-hand side of the image.  
(Photo: CMM archives, Rome)*

tured in those windows in the mission church at Centocow.

With that, the focus of religious life at Centocow shifted from the original church to the new one. Slowly the inher-

ent flaws of the old building emerged during its next life as a school. It was built on a slope, and demonstrated an element of Trappist building skills, where heavy vertical loads were used to maintain stability in place of foundations. So while the south-facing “uphill” walls sit on natural ground, the north-facing “downhill” walls further down the slope were placed above three-metre high retaining walls made of massive granite boulders. With the passage of time in the 20th century, the great rocks upon which the little church was built



*The completed 'New Church', which is officially known as the Church of the Sacred Heart, at Centocow in approximately 1913. One of the formerly Trappist priests in the foreground with some young members of the community. Although the monastery was no longer considered to be a Trappist institution after 1909, it took some time to develop their own distinctive habit. (Photo: CMM archives, Rome)*



*Interior of the 'First Church' at Centocow, showing the sanctuary and altar, most probably taken before 1913. (Photo: CMM archives, Rome)*

settled a little deeper into place. This almost imperceptible shift resulted in cracks in the north-facing wall.

Even more disconcerting, though, was the bulging splinter of bricks that emerged on the right corner of the steeple tower, just above the entrance arch. A combination of poorly fired bricks, weak binding and the downward pressure exerted by the tower itself caused this evidently fatal rupture in the church fabric over the doorway. Anyone who saw the damage in its later phases would not believe the tower was destined to survive very long. Less obvious, but just as threatening, was the damage inflicted on the roof trusses by termites.

With an architectural career that spans 40 years of careful custodial repair to at least half a dozen Mariannhill churches, Robert Brusse is an acknowledged authority on the subtleties of design in these buildings. He makes the point that while the name of Nivard Streicher is most often associ-

ated with Mariannhill architecture, the monastery erected structures at such a rate that a small team of monks in the draughting office assisted him. "Among them was Bro. Otto Mäder, who was a roof carpenter by training, but as a monk he sought to make his faith intrinsic in his daily work in order that the house of God was always built to the very highest standards," the architect explained.

Modern roof beams are usually hidden from sight, regarded as too functional and part of the skeleton in a building. Knowing the work of Nivard Streicher perhaps better than anyone else, Brusse points out, "He was a bright architect and could combine form and function, as well as explore function to create better aesthetics." Streicher wanted to use the roof space for acoustics, and Otto Mäder accordingly designed trusses that would have maximum acoustic effect during the performance of sacred music. They were simple yet attractive exposed beams that kept



*A perspective showing the back of the 'First Church' at Centocow together with members of the mission community in 1901. (Photo: CMM archives, Rome)*

any outward thrust of the roof to a minimum, in order to protect the overall structure by reducing stress.

Untreated yellowwood timber from the nearby forests at Hlabeni was used for the roof joists, which rested on top of the walls. Unfortunately this proved a point of vulnerability, as termites scaled the brickwork and ate away the posts and retainers. Gradually working their insatiable way along the walls, they destroyed Bro. Mäder's careful mathematically designed work and, once the final pieces of retaining wood were gone, the pressure exerted upwards and into the roof was increased. In the view of Robert Brusse, this last act of entomological vandalism put the roof under threat, and with it the whole church.

This was the state of disrepair that Brusse found at Centocow during his first visit there in 1972. Any idea of repairing the damage was simply out of the question then, as "there was opposition to fixing the old building due to poor knowledge of restoration

architecture at the time", he said. Soon after, Brusse was introduced to the complex nature of conservation architecture by Professor Brian Kearney and his projects since then have included work at missions such as Mariazell and Maria Linden near Ongeluksnek, Maria Ratschitz at Waschbank and Mariannahill monastery itself. These undertakings all gave Brusse vital insights which would influence his approach at Centocow, when that task finally presented itself.

The next stage of transformation emerged at Centocow from November 1991 with the arrival of two Polish priests and a brother from the iconic shrine of Jasna Gora in Poland. Fathers Stanislaw Dziuba, Ignatius Stakiewicz and Bro. Andrew brought with them not only a life-size replica of the icon Centocow is named in honour of, but a tangible bond with Częstochowa too. It is entirely fitting that today the two churches at Centocow on the banks of the Mzimkhulu are under the care of

Pauline fathers from the fortress monastery of Jasna Gora. The Polish priests and brothers are members of the Order of St Paul the First Hermit and they provide continuity with the missionary tradition of Mariannhill.

With the advent of democracy in 1994, the administration of local government in South Africa changed considerably. Two important laws altered the organisation of rural towns and their adjacent areas, namely Act 117 of 1998 (The Municipal Structures Act) and Act 32 of 2000 (The Municipal Systems Act). Rural municipalities were brought into existence for the first time, and were given responsibility for local development. Shortly after these directives came into effect, the newly-created Ingwe municipality in 2001 used provincial government funding and commissioned a study to assess tourism assets in the region.

The context of this study, according to Dudley Smith of Ingwe, was an indication by the central government that funding applications were more likely to succeed if based on tourism proposals. A consultant, Richard Clacey, was appointed to identify any comparative advantages for the development of tourism within the Ingwe municipality. Three areas emerged from this process: rail tourism based on the Transnet branch line; endemic birding habitats; and the network of Trappist missions scattered around Sisonke District Municipality.

The concept of mission tourism was derived from the model of battlefield tourism pioneered at Fugitives' Drift Lodge by David and Nicky Rattray, centred on what Dudley Smith has identified as "the economics of storytelling". Smith believed that the story behind the string of Trappist churches

found at Ingwe was key to finding a competitive advantage among the other tourism products offered in the province. In his view, mission tourism has a greater variety of intellectual interests than other heritage initiatives, combining art, architecture (of churches and associated buildings), engineering (Reichenau mill), religion, history and human endeavour. It is, however, the element of austere monastic life found in the unusual setting of rural Africa that most captivates audiences. The *Hidden Treasures* CD produced by Ingwe in 2009 was an important step in telling this and other stories, particularly in the way it conveys parallel and mutually supportive narratives.

Once Ingwe municipality established the concept of a comparative advantage enjoyed by mission tourism, it required positive support from the Roman Catholic parish of Centocow as custodians of the historic mission. Dudley Smith was fortunate to enjoy a good relationship with Fr Stanislaw Dziuba, then Centocow parish priest and now Bishop of the Diocese of Umzimkhulu. Fr Dziuba recognised the perilous state of various peripheral buildings at the mission, and agreed they could be restored to benefit the local community. The Pauline priests and associated religious of Centocow stressed that mission tourism should serve the public good over the long term, and specifically their parishioners, without becoming a means to enrich only a few entrepreneurs.

Based on the support and goodwill of Fr Dziuba, Dudley Smith secured R1 million to restore a derelict three-storey building on the outskirts of the mission. Though the roof was rotten and the entire structure compromised, this building was renovated to heritage agency standards and returned to a



*Early 20th century image of young children with a sister from the Congregation of the Precious Blood, a community of religious women founded by Abbot Franz Pfanner at Mariannhill. The sisters supervised activities for the children, who are seen here taking their lunch on the terrace above the 'First Church' at Centocow. (Photo: CMM archives, Rome)*

near original state. First built through funds donated by the Kimberley-based Irish philanthropist John Orr, it now served primarily as an airy workspace for Centocow community weavers, a refectory to provide meals for visiting tourists and simple self-catering tourist accommodation. In addition, the building included space that could be used for exhibitions to celebrate the Trappist legacy at Centocow and any artists associated with the region.

The ethnographic illustrations of Barbara Tyrrell fascinated Dudley Smith, and he knew she had spent time at Richmond working on her celebrated portrayals of tribal costume from the mid-20th century. Aware that the bulk of Tyrrell's collection was housed in the Killie Campbell Africana Library in Durban, Smith approached curator Yvonne Winters with an appeal for as-

sistance to procure art for Centocow. She, however, pointed out that Gerard Bhengu was, in fact, a more appropriate artist to showcase at Centocow, as he was born at the mission in 1910. As a result, a steering committee of considerable expertise, including Dudley Smith, Juliette Leeb-du Toit, Brendan Bell, Dolly Khumalo and Robert Brusse, was convened in 2003 to establish a gallery for Bhengu's work.

To facilitate this process, a successful application for funding of the gallery was made to the Gijima Local Economic Development support programme. This initiative allocated European Union funding to create a business plan focused on mission tourism and the Bhengu gallery. Margaret McKenzie of Environdev Consultancy was appointed to write the business plan and in 2004 she made an application to

the National Lottery Distribution Trust Fund for capital to use the top floor in the restored three-storey Orr building as an exhibition space. At that point David Waddilove of the Freedom Challenge, who founded and runs the impressive annual single-track mountain bike expedition from Pietermaritzburg to Cape Town, made a critical intervention.

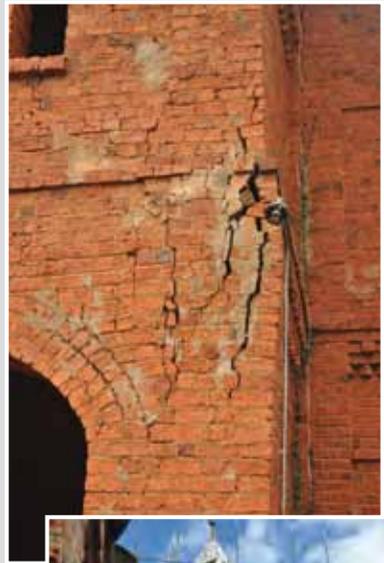
Knowing of the Ingwe proposal to set up a gallery for Gerard Bhengu, Waddilove made an alternative suggestion because he believed the restored Orr building's top floor could rather become suitable accommodation for cyclists on his race every June. A new home would, however, need to be found for the embryonic Bhengu gallery. In early 2005 he suggested the conversion of Centocow's First Church into a museum space. While everyone concerned agreed this was an outstanding idea in theory, serious flaws in the old church's structure were evidently irreversible.

As the municipal official responsible, Dudley Smith had no doubt that if the First Church could be repaired, a gallery in that space would achieve the desired impact for mission tourism. Unfortunately, due to the somewhat modest scope and limited funding initially requested from the National Lottery Distribution Trust Fund, the first application was declined. Margaret McKenzie of Environment then comprehensively revised the concept document, and Robert Brusse bravely worked on the designs once more for another Lottery submission despite the risk of non-payment. Brusse's drawings and comprehensive cost estimates over a period of three years allowed for the concept to be redeveloped and submitted to the National Lottery Distribution Trust Fund once more.

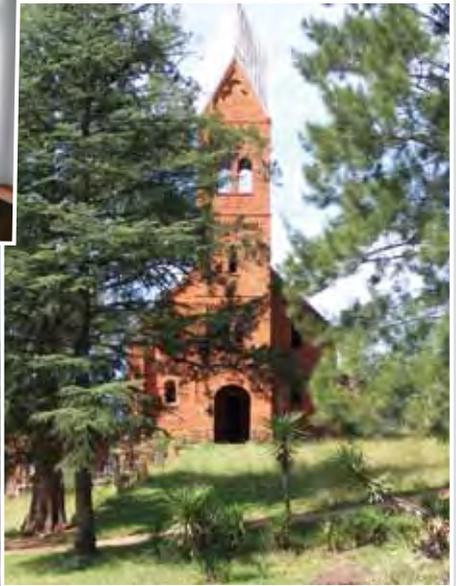
During this time the next element of mission tourism was realised at the end of 2007 when the National Department of Provincial and Local Government (now Co-operative Government and Traditional Affairs) pledged funds for the research and production of a two-hour spoken-word history of Centocow. This ultimately became the *Hidden Treasures* CD set that provided a more complete narrative framework for the gallery project. When the Orr building's third floor was also finally renovated, a KOOP Design team led by Richard Stretton and Angela Shaw completed the interior styling for self-catering accommodation sympathetic to the Trappist heritage of Centocow mission.

The design, planning and historical elements of the Bhengu Gallery were now executed, but financial support for a complete refurbishment of the First Church was still wanting. Here David Waddilove made another critical intervention: he also introduced Patrick Chapman to the process. Chapman represents the Joan St Leger Lindbergh Charitable Trust, and he arranged a commitment of R500 000 for seed funding to restore the First Church, in the event of success with the final Lottery application. This pledge by the Trust proved an important incentive to both Ingwe municipality and the National Lottery Distribution Trust Fund.

In the first instance, the local municipality assured further support of the Bhengu Gallery, in the amount of R200 000, based on the commitment by Patrick Chapman. When the Lottery application for R2,7 million was thus considered, it was not the only source of money for the project and this gave the Bhengu Gallery credibility. The National Lottery Distribution Trust



***Decay and Restoration (All photos: Ingwe Municipality)***



Fund approved the application, which brought the total amount for this proposal to R3,4 million. Sisonke District Municipality then added a final amount of R1 million to make a total budget of R4,4 million, and the Bhengu gallery became a reality.

Once the all-important funding was in place, the previously completed planning and designs could be executed swiftly. Contractors under the supervision of Robert Brusse moved onto the First Church site in November 2011 to begin the painstaking architectural conservation of a much-neglected building. As a custodian of Mariannahill's Trappist heritage Brusse brought an important philosophical approach to his work, as he sought to honour the pioneer monks who toiled at the missions with minimal resources. Summarising his views, he commented that he

felt the task for this building was to set the bar for restoration of its nature, as we have been cavalier until now. I wanted to establish that there were principles – honesty, humility, and respect for both past and future generations.

Largely because the First Church was comprehensively documented in photographs from the Trappist era, Brusse's ambitions could be achieved. He pointed out that the excellent record of the building process and subsequent life of the church in pictures meant that the renovation could retain a plain or "minimalist" interior that was authentic. The architect believes Centocow's First Church "epitomised Trappist sensibility more than other mission houses, for example by not having murals, didactic imagery, or floral decoration. All of which are significant, both for history and for the restoration".

Practical considerations of the enormous task at Centocow were, of course, just as significant as these philosophical factors. As the work began, Robert Brusse found various assumptions thrown out one after the other, explaining, "I had a good idea that the building was held up by mud, perhaps mixed with lime, but discovered it was only mud. I suspected that the foundations were not terribly grand, but there were, in fact, none." The project was revised and refined as it progressed, and is excellent testimony to the adaptability and skill of the team responsible.

Some shock was natural when it was discovered that the building had lasted 120 years as really nothing more than a pile of red bricks delicately balanced on top of each other with some mud in between. This required the mud to be carefully scraped out with narrow tools, one side of the wall at a time, and then to have cement piped into the gaps to give the south-facing side of the structure concrete support for the very first time. This complicated undertaking, however, was not as difficult as the task required on the opposite side of the church.

It was the north-facing "downhill" wall that was constructed above dry-stone retaining bulwarks that had no foundations. Piping in fresh binding was not feasible in this case as the wall was cracked and leaning hazardously. The entire wall was carefully dismantled in sections and bays, with its bricks stacked on scaffolding in the correct order. Once the walls were gone, deep holes were burrowed through the retaining embankment and into the ground below. These housed brand-new, three-metre-deep concrete piers, topped off with a beam cast *in situ* to stabilise both the floor and wall above. Only



*Trappist choir monks, as distinct from lay brothers who wore plain brown habits, resting and preparing a meal while travelling between mission stations of Mariannahill. (Photo: CMM archives, Rome)*

after that could the original bricks then be replaced in more or less the same pattern (if not the exact order), this time using proper cement mortar.

The most dramatic phase of work at the First Church commenced with repairs to the fractured tower. According to Brusse, the distinctive diamond-shaped roof of this tower is a copy of the one at Cîteaux Abbey in France, spiritual home of the Cistercian Order from which the Trappists evolved. This nostalgic roof and the top half of the tower beneath it were suspended in the air during repairs to the bottom half, thanks to a massive steel frame that stood in place of the damaged lower tower. Brusse attributes the success of this astonishing feat solely to the structural engineering team.

Led by Hugh Bowman – the only engineer prepared to try supporting the upper part of the tower while the lower section was being repaired – workers

excised the worst and most dangerous part of the First Church. According to Brusse, the whole procedure was based firmly on prior work he had done with Bowman, and the mutual confidence they shared allowed the engineer to accept the challenges of the site. The architect did add, “To my knowledge, this process has not been attempted before in South Africa,” in tribute to Bowman’s competence.

The restructured tower is now in far better shape than it has ever been, with 100% stability underground as support and the damaged brickwork removed for a pleasing aesthetic façade above the doorway. A result of the deliberate and consistent care used during the renovation is that the First Church actually looks exactly as its Trappist builders would have known it, and not the derelict ruin it became 100 years later. Robert Brusse made a virtue of recycling and reusing as much of the

original material as possible and says, “Although the building can no longer be described as fully original due to the intervention, we returned more than 95% of what we took out.”

Probably the best example of this thrifty and environmentally responsible attitude is the newly shining re-galvanised roof sheets. While the original corrugated iron roof was rusted in places, it was also made of relatively thick metal with a gauge of between 1,2 mm and 1,6 mm. Modern sheeting is rarely even 0,8 mm thick, and only comes in single lengths of around 6 m. The appearance of the old church would be altered substantially with new roofing material, which would, paradoxically, also be of an inferior quality to the 120-year-old original. The six-foot long rusted sheets were removed, sent to Durban and “pickled” before being re-galvanised. This process has provided greater authenticity, as the roof is still made up of three sheets to each length, as it always has been ever since the first roof was delivered in a size that could conveniently be conveyed by ox wagon.

Fidelity to the original builders’ intentions was not only limited to these areas, and Robert Brusse advocated the use of “vintage” yellowwood of the same era as the church, where necessary. When new materials had to be introduced, the architect also tried to follow the pragmatic example set by the Trappists. Metal brackets were used to

ensure repairs to termite damage in the beams would last, but when timbers in the Brothers’ Chapel needed cleaning, they were scraped and not sanded in order to preserve some of the wood’s patina. In short, where possible and within the requirements of the new gallery, Centocow’s First Church has been lovingly repaired, restored, cleaned and put back in order for the first time in 100 years.

The building work was concluded in October 2012 when the last scaffolding was taken down and the contractors departed. During the first half of 2013 furnishings and art works were acquired for the gallery in time for the opening. According to Dudley Smith, the project has exceeded the expectations of the Ingwe municipality, and it is largely due to the unhesitating support from a large array of institutions and individuals. The entire basis of the Bhengu Gallery was willingness of the Catholic Church to give assent to a 30-year lease. Furthermore, the Killie Campbell Africana Library and Mariannahill monastery have lent their support to making Bhengu works available for exhibition. The gallery is also a sustainable scheme, due to ongoing funding from the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Arts and Culture providing for the management and running of the completed gallery that honours Centocow’s famous son, Gerard Bhengu.