Centocow Mission

Centocow Mission - History outlines

Centocow was founded in 1888, when Abbot Francis Pfanner purchased a small farm on the western bank of the Umzimkulu River, in the Creighton district. The Abbot named the new station after the famous Polish Shrine of our Lady of Czestochowa. The word was simplified into Centocow. A Polish princess gave Mariannhill a donation to buy land and with this money the mission was bought and developed.

Among the original 27 persons assigned to Centocow were six sisters. They left Mariannhill on 25 November 1888. The sisters lived in four-roomed farmer’s house. A Trappist brother, who had come two weeks prior, took up his first residence in the horse-stable. Abbot Francis arrived two weeks later and celebrated the first Holy Mass in Centocow. A week later a priest came to stay for some time; more brothers followed. Fr. Gerard Wolpert was the first resident priest and rector. Soon mud-houses were put up to serve as school and church. The first church built of bricks was erected in 1892 and it is still standing today.
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In 1895 Fr. Gerard Wolpert, then Abbot of Mariannhill, founded the sodality of the Sacred Heart at Centocow Mission. Its spirit was one of prayer and concern for the poor. From there the Sodality has spread throughout Southern Africa.

The number of Christians at Centocow grew steadily. In 1909 the Catholics numbered 953. By the beginning of 1912 two thousand were registered. Fr. Emmanuel Hanish planned a bigger church which was to be dedicated to the Sacred Heart. On October 24, 1910 its foundation stone was laid by the retired Abbot Gerard. The plans had been drawn up by the monastery architect, Br. Nivard. Its Polish influence was due to Fr. Emmanuel. The solemn consecration of the new church was celebrated on 28th of December 1913.

The Sacred Heart Church at Centocow is one of the finest of all Trappist Churches. Its lofty tower in Italian style is a masterpiece in itself. The rosette stained glass window in the apse portrays, under the protective mantle of our Lady, many personalities connected with the foundation of Mariannhill and its missions, including Bishop Jolivet, Abbot Francis and his Red Sisters.

By the end of 1920 Centocow had 14 outstations and over 4300 baptized Catholics. They were cared for by 2 priests, 10 brothers and 25 CPS sisters, also known as the Red Sisters.

The missionaries developed Centocow into a flourishing station. The brothers cared for the farm, did all the carpentry, blacksmith work and made the bricks for building operations. They laid out vineyards, forests and orchards which were famous for many years. They had taught people how to lay out and keep a good orchard.

Mention must be made here of a devoted priest and extraordinary missionary namely Fr. Apollinaris Schwamberger CMM. He was missionary and rector of Centocow Mission from April 1920 till 1936. He was not only a priest, but served at the same time as teacher, doctor and builder. Dr. Walker encouraged him to build the hospital. He died quite suddenly on 28 April 1936 before the completion of the hospital. It was the wish of the people to name the hospital "St. Apollinaris Hospital" in grateful remembrance of their cherished parish priest.

In 1954 the diocese of Umzimkulu was established. Soon thereafter Centocow was assigned to this diocese. As a result the Mariannhill fathers and brothers as well as the sisters (except for the hospital) gradually left this beautiful mission. Fr. P. Memela was appointed by bishop P. B. Dlamini as priest in charge. He was followed by Fr. C. Gebashe until in 1991 the new bishop of the diocese, Gerard Ndlovu, called on the Pauline Fathers and Brothers from the Monastery of Czestochowa in Poland to work among the Zulus in this African Centocow. On 3-4 June 1995 about 10000 members of the Sacred Heart Sodality from various diocese of Southern Africa flocked to Centocow for centenary celebration. Today Centocow Mission has become a place of pilgrimage, where members of the Sodality meet regularly to draw spiritual nourishment from the Sacred Heart of Jesus, supported by prayers of Our Lady of Centocow, the Mother of Mercy, the Mother of Africa.

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