Hoping Against All Hope
*The Survival of the Jesuits in Southern Africa (1875–1900)*

Aquinata N. Agonga

The establishment of the Jesuits in southern Africa was by no means easy. From the beginning, the Jesuits encountered conditions that would render any mission difficult: the number of missionaries was limited, the climate harsh, and the local population hostile. Thus, what is today a successful and well-established Jesuit mission would be non-existent but for the tenacity of the first Jesuit missionaries in southern Africa. It took the missionaries a combination of dogged determination, youthful optimism, and a spirit of unquestioning obedience to overcome these challenges. The survival and success of the mission in the face of many obstacles have constituted a subject of great historical interest, and is replete with lessons that can inspire contemporary missionary enterprises. This paper seeks to establish an account of the success of the first Jesuit mission in southern Africa: how the missionaries survived the hostile environment to establish their mission, with skeletal personnel, minimum resources, and limited knowledge of the land and the people. The paper especially seeks to highlight the extreme hardships that the missionaries faced, including an attempt at poisoning by local chiefs who plotted to have the Jesuits killed so they could inherit their possessions.

The Historical Background

Founded in 1540, the Society of Jesus was, from the start, keen to send missionaries to foreign lands which had not yet been reached by the Gospel message. The Society’s *Constitutions* encourage missionary work, and include

>a special vow to obey any order that the present Roman Pontiff or his successors might issue with regard to the spiritual progress of the people or the spread of the faith, and to go wherever they may choose to send us, without any sort of evasion and as quickly as we can, whether it be among the Turks or others who do not share our convictions, even as far as India, or to any heretics and schismatics, or even the faithful themselves.¹

As early as 1541 Jesuit missionaries were already being sent to Africa. The Jesuits were, in fact, the first Catholic missionaries to arrive in southern Africa and to penetrate inland into what is today known as Zimbabwe. Father Gonçalo da Silveira (1526–1561), a Portuguese Jesuit missionary, launched the first Christian mission in the region, among the Shona of Zimbabwe at the court of the Monomotapa dynasty. Father Silveira lived in the court of the Monomotapa dynasty until he was murdered in 1561, a victim of court intrigues. By the time of his death, he had established several churches, but by 1667 they had all disappeared. The commitment, zeal, and determination that characterized this first missionary venture came to nothing as all their work and legacy were lost over the ensuing generations. Indeed, as Marshall W. Murphree observes, by the seventeenth century there was not even a trace of Christianity in South Africa.

In 1773, the Society of Jesus faced the greatest challenge in its history when it was formally suppressed by Pope Clement XIV. The suppression, as Jonathan Wright points out, was largely a result of volatile political circumstances in Europe at the time. Before the suppression, the Jesuits had been active and vibrant in many parts of Europe and beyond. They had a tradition of establishing schools and mission houses wherever they went. In Africa too, they set up missions and other apostolates, like schools and hospitals. The first Jesuit missions in southern Africa were established near the Portuguese forts at Sena and Tete, at the mouth of the Zambesi.

In 1624 the Jesuits founded a college in the Mozambican region. The college had six priests and about two hundred students who had become Christians. At Sena, nine fathers served the king and his subjects, and further inland at Chemba they set up a base from where missions could be directed. The land on which the residence was built was donated by the king. With the suppression much of what the Jesuits had established was either destroyed or taken over by other missionaries.

Following the restoration of the Society in 1814, the Propaganda Fide asked the Jesuits to reconsider the evangelizing mission in southern Africa. However,