

'Studia Missionalia'
Roma, vol. 61/2012
p. 211-227

**Witness of Christ's Truth
in the Republic of South Africa:
Tshimangadzo Samuel Benedict Daswa
(1946-1990)**

ZDZISŁAW JÓZEF KIJAS OFMCONV

Tshimangadzo Samuel Benedict Daswa belongs to the first generation of Catholics in the Diocese of Tzaneen, an exemplary layman, a faithful husband and a devoted father who has left a wonderful example of Christian behaviour to Catholics of every walk of life¹. He was a teacher and a Volunteer Catechist, very active in preaching as a leader of Sunday Service, in youth ministry, in building a self-supporting Church as treasurer and member of local and parish pastoral council. He was killed on February 2nd 1990.

The "homeland" system and witchcraft in Venda

As indicated by the clan name *Bakali*, Benedict was a *Lemba* - one of several ethnic groups, such as the *Zulus*, the *Xhosas*, the *Tswanas*, the *Swazis*, the *Ndebeles*, the *Pandos*, the *Tembas*, the *Nort Sothos*, the *South Sothos*, the *Tsongas* and the *Vendas*, - all descendents of successive migrants of *Bantu* speaking peoples, moving south and mingling with the indigenous *Khoisan* peoples.

In the diocese of Tzaneen there are three distinct groups of Africans as well as Whites and some Asians. The *Venda* live in the land between the two towns of Louis Trichardt and Messina. The *Sepedi* or *North Sotho* speaking people live between Louis Trichardt and Pietersburg, while to the east in land bordering the Kruger National Park are the *Tsongas* or *Shangaan* people.

Benedict Daswa's life and death are closely interconnected with the social and political history of Venda.² In 1896 the armed forces of the South African Republic invaded the Mphephu area and the Mphephu,

¹ I wish to thank especially Fr. Lucio Di Stefano MSC, the Postulator of the Cause of the Servant of God Benedict Daswa for his help to collect materials and proofreading assistance.

² Cfr. *Report in solidum of the Historical Commission* (Ph. Denis, OP, J. Brain, N. V. Ralushai), Diocese of Tzaneen (South Africa), prot. N. 2844-1/08, pp. 6n.

the most important Venda leader, was forced to flee to Rhodesia with his followers. Modern government began in Venda in 1913 when the government of the Union of South Africa demarcated Venda territory as "reserve" for black people. In 1954, when Daswa was still a child, twenty-five tribal authorities and one community authority were established under the Bantu Authorities Act of 1951. One of them was Mphaphuli, the tribal authority that Daswa would later serve as a secretary. The Mphaphuli area was the third most populated tribal area in Venda after Mphaphu and Tshivhase which were, in genealogical terms, "senior" Venda chiefdoms and were associated with the government of Venda, the former under apartheid and the latter after the 1994 elections.³

In 1971, the year when Benedict Daswa began his teacher career at Tshilivho Primary School near Sibasa, the Thoyohandou Territorial Authority was established by the apartheid government to give a political forum to the tribal authorities created in 1954. In 1973 Venda was declared a self-governing territory within South Africa. In 1979 Venda was granted independence from the South African government with Patrick Mphaphu, the leader of the Mphaphu tribe, as president. Mphaphu's regime has been described as "decentralized despotism".⁴ He died in April 1988.

The "homeland" system was an essential feature of the apartheid regime. When the Nationalists came to power in 1948, one of their priorities was to strip Africans of any vestige of access to the white political system and substitute these with political rights within the reserves.

The "tribal authorities" established in 1951 would, in time, provide the basis for local African self-government in the reserves. All Africans would be categorized according to their various "tribal" antecedents and forced to accept citizenship of the appropriate designated "homeland" where they would exercise their political rights. Four of the ten "homelands" were formally declared independent in the late 1970s. Venda was one of them, alongside Transkei, Ciskei and Bophuthatswana.⁵

³ J. T. D. FOKWANG, *Historical background to the Tshivhase Chiefdom*, ch. 2 of an unpublished doctoral tesi, University of Pretoria, p. 39. See: [http://up.ac.za/tesis/available/etd-02192004-141105/unrestricted/02 chapter 2.pdf](http://up.ac.za/tesis/available/etd-02192004-141105/unrestricted/02%20chapter%202.pdf).

⁴ J. T. D. FOKWANG, *Historical background*, p. 44.

⁵ *Illustrated History of South Africa*, 3rd revised ed., Cape Town and London, Readers Digest Association Limited, 1994, p. 378.

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⁶ K.F.C. RAULIN

⁷ T. PARFITT AND London: Routledge

⁸ A. ASHFORTH, University of Chicago

The Lemba tribe

Benedict Daswa spent all his life in Venda and he spoke the Venda language, but he belonged to the Lemba tribe. For a very long time, the *Lembas* have never lived as a separate tribe, but dwell among others, especially the *Vendas*, and to a lesser extent the *Northern Sothos* and the *Shangaans*. The *Lembas* claim to be of Jewish origin. Similar theories flourish in Africa, with regard to the Tutsi in Rwanda and Burundi in particular.⁶ What we know for sure is that, from oral tradition, they see themselves as "black Jews".⁷ They tend to intermarry, favour circumcision schools and do not eat pork. Among the other tribes where they live, the *Lembas* involve themselves a good deal in traditional ritual activities, such as circumcision schools: (by this term it is meant traditional school following circumcision where youth are taught about manhood, good manners, respect for elders and sex education). They are quite ambitious and deeply committed to education, business and public service. These admirable traits often arouse the jealousy of neighbouring peoples.

Benedict Daswa died victim of a witch-hunt on 2 February 1990, the very day President F. W. De Klerk announced the unbanning of the main liberation movements and the opening of constitutional negotiations, the first step in a process which would lead to the holding of the first democratic elections in the history of South Africa in April 1994. The coincidence of dates is not fortuitous. The period surrounding De Klerk's dramatic announcement has been marked, throughout South Africa, by an upsurge of violence.

Anthropologists will confirm that in many parts of Africa, tribalism and the practice of black magic are characteristic elements of the traditional culture and this is markedly the case in the *Limpopo Province* where witchcraft and ritual murder is a particularly dark and disturbing reality. The belief in the potency of witchcraft lies deep in the people's psyche, underpinning their view of the world and of themselves. Mentalities, according to Australian anthropologist Adam Ashforth, who studied the subject in Soweto, are "saturated" with witchcraft.⁸ Yet not all South African provinces practiced the witch-hunt on a massive scale. The serial murder of witches, usually women, at the hand of young people, often with the tacit complicity of elders, only became

⁶ K.F.C. RAULINGA HAMISA, *Who are the Lemba/Senas*, unpublished dissertation, 2002, p. 1.

⁷ T. PARFITT AND E. TREVISAN SEMI, *Judaizing movements: studies in the margins of Judaism*, London: Routledge 2002.

⁸ A. ASHFORTH, *Witchcraft, Violence and Democracy in South Africa*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2000.

prevalent in the Northern Transvaal in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Venda was particularly affected. We do not have reliable statistics on the number of victims. According to A de V. Minnaar, more than 400 refugees sought refuge in police stations in 1990.⁹

On the basis of press reports, Stephen Hayes established that over 200 people, accused of witchcraft, were burnt to death in South Africa between the beginning of 1994 and mid 1995.¹⁰ It should be noted that two types of violence were associated with the belief in witchcraft: the murder of men and women accused, on the basis of hearsay, of practicing witchcraft and the ritual murder of people, adults or children, with the aim of extracting from the dead bodies substances alleged to provide magical power (*muthi*).¹¹ Both forms of violence were endemic in the Northern Transvaal.

Benedict grew up in an atmosphere where respect for elders, taboos around certain foods, circumcision and *talking* to the ancestors were normal practices. And for the Daswas, living in harmony with the surrounding spirits and the natural world was of considerable importance.

However in Mbahe village and the surrounding areas, sickness and misfortune were seen as the work of evil spirits or the jealousy of individuals. The common beliefs held were that certain members of the community had special powers to influence events and the fortunes of people and that these powers transcended the effects of natural phenomena.

We know from oral evidence that throughout his life Benedict Daswa took a principled stand against the belief in witchcraft and all forms of violence associated with it. In 1976, when he was still a teacher in Mbahe, he refused to support the use of traditional medicine (*muthi*) to improve the performance of his football team and he founded an alternative team which was free from such practices.

The childhood and adolescence

Tshimangadzo (traditional name) *Samuel* (first Christian or English name given at birth) *Benedict* (baptismal name) *Daswa* (family name), and finally *Bakali* (Lemba clan name), was born on June 16 1946 in the

⁹ A. DE V. MINNAR, D. OFFRINGA and C. PAYZE, *To live in fear. Witchburning and medicine murder in Venda*, Pretoria: Human Sciences Research Council 1992, p. 23.

¹⁰ S. HAYES, «Christian response to witchcraft and sorcery», *Missionalia* 23/3 (November 1995).

¹¹ *Zulu* word meaning medicine; in Venda *mushonga*. Literally translated, *muthi* means tree. Some parts of tree, like roots, skin, leaves, can be used as a medicine in drinking, rubbing (after grounding). There is also *human muthi*, when body parts, like fat, skull, eyes, lips, ears, etc. are used.

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small, rural village of Mbahe, in the former Venda homeland in Northern Transvaal, at the time of the *Union of South Africa* and later established as the *Republic of South Africa*.

Benedict was the first of five children, born to the late Mr. Tshililo Petrus Daswa and Mrs. Thidziambi Ida Daswa, who gave to their first son a Venda name, *Tshimangadzo*, meaning "miracle" or "wonder". Benedict was followed by three brothers and a sister. As the first born son, Benedict's role in the family was shaped by the expectations that one day he would be head of the household in his father's absence or his death.

Benedict's parents were not poor, but far from wealthy and were thought of as hospitable, kind and generous to those in need. Petrus Daswa kept cattle and cultivated a garden, while his wife Ida Daswa started up a small business brewing traditional beer to fund her children's education.

His primary education Benedict began in *Vondwe Primary School* in 1957. Later, when he came back to Mbahe, he attended, in the years 1958-1961, *Senior Primary School* from Standard A (Grade 1) to Standard 2 (grade 4). After that he went to *Ha-Matsheka School* [1962] and then he went to *Mphaphuli High School* for three years, from Standard 6 to Standard 8. Finally he went to *Tshisimani Teachers' Training College* for two years [1972-1973]. Benedict chose to go to Tshisimani Teachers' Training College because he was poor and in two years he could get a teaching job and so he was able to help his younger brothers to go to school. It was necessary especially after the accidental death of his father Petrus¹² and so Samuel Benedict took on the responsibility of caring for his younger brothers and sister. Helped to pay for their education and continually encouraged them to study. Benedict's sister Mavis Muthige, member of the Zion Christian Church, tells us:

Benedict spent his childhood at Mbahe. He grew up with good respect for his father. He was loved by his father. He used to look after his father's cattle. His father loved him because of his good manners. When he grew up, my father built him a *rondavel house*¹³ and it was nicely thatched out with grass. He was very bright. I have been told by my mother that when he was still very young at Primary School he used to dodge school and do some part time work so that he would have some money to buy books, trousers and shirts. During the school holidays Benedict used to go to Killarney golf course in Johannesburg to stay with his uncle Frank Gundula. His uncle would give him part time jobs so that he could get some money to pay his fees when school reopened.¹⁴

¹² His father Petrus Daswa was killed under suspicious circumstances on December 27th 1974.

¹³ A small round hut for dwelling.

¹⁴ *Copia pubblica*, vol. I, p. 176.

Benedict graduated in 1973 and was soon teacher at the Tshilivho Primary School at Ha-Dumasi. Later, in 1977, he was promoted to the post of Principal at Nweli Primary School.

Benedict's Baptism

An unexpected development occurred in Benedict's life whilst he was a young student. We told that during the school holidays Benedict would go to Johannesburg to stay with his uncle who would find him temporary work. It was while he was staying with his uncle that Benedict met a white young man who was a Catholic. They became friends and this white man would sometimes come home with Benedict. This young white man introduced the Servant of God to Benedict Risimati, a Catholic teacher, a committed lay-catechist who in those years was active especially among the youth in the village of Tshififi, in the territory of Thohoyandou Parish, at a place called Tshitani, where a thoroughly neatly clean *rondavel house* was used as the only Catholic church by a community of Catholic people who had come from Mozambique. Mass was celebrated there under a big tree by a priest who would journey 100 km. from Louis Trichardt.

Who was Benedict Risimati? He had been a school teacher for many years in Sibasa. He was a married man with three children; by working as part-time catechist, he was a great help to the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart (MSC) priest who visited the district from Louis Trichardt. As well as being a late vocation, he was also a widower. His wife Imelda had died under tragic circumstances: a wall of the school in which she was teaching collapsed and killed her. Encouraged by Fr. O'Neill from Louis Trichardt, Benedict Risimati gave up teaching and became a full time catechist. After some time he felt called to the priesthood and he was ordained on May 24th 1970.¹⁵

Benedict Risimati had a special role in the life of Daswa, because his teaching was strong and very convincing. Following the excellent instruction by Benedict Risimati, Daswa was received into the Catholic Church and baptized by Fr. Augustine O'Brien MSC, on 21 April 1963, at the age of 17, at Ha-Mafenya, Sibasa Parish. He was confirmed three months later on 21 July 1963 by Bishop van Hoeck of Pietersburg.¹⁶

¹⁵ Cf. *The MSC apostolate in South Africa: 1950-1975*, General House of the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, Via Asmara 11, Roma.

¹⁶ *Certificate of baptism and confirmation*, Catholic Baptism Register Certificate, No. 14, of Our Lady of Peace in Louis Trichardt.

During August Benedict met his missionary, who in his letter sent after 9 December oration he received

I had the pleasure of friendship developed over the year. I met Benedict at Training College, the only one of the others, and went to Confession. Mass came to Mass, persuasion began every Thursday. At this time, in July of 1971, he was called to the mission to collect money to cover a few days after the Dutch Reformed sweeping and of that Church belonged to. He took him to the mission, when he wished, when he wished. In 1971, he lived on the main road from the district (Shangha). He would never say the night. He was not in on, he had two and Baptised twice a month. Sibasa was 1 would come in. He would be struggling. He was very 1

During August 1969, while studying at Tshisimani Teacher Collage, Benedict met his new parish priest, Fr. Patrick O'Connor MSC, a zealous missionary, who became his close friend and spiritual guide. Father Patrick in his letter sent to his Provincial Superior, Father Timothy Gleeson MSC, after 9 December 1990, has left a telling memoir about the fervent collaboration he received from Daswa in his own pastoral activity.

I had the pleasure of meeting Benedict for the first time in August 1969 and a friendship developed until he was brutally murdered at the beginning of this year. I met Benedict for the first time, when I went to Tshisimani Teachers Training College for Mass in August 1969. He was the first one to greet me, and the only one of about 7 students waiting for Mass. He went around and called the others, and whilst I was talking to them, he readied the table for Mass. He went to Confessions as he always did before Mass. After some months, others came to Mass, some non-Catholics, to have a look, and through Benedict's persuasion began Instruction to become members of the Church. I used to go every Thursday evening to the College for Instruction, and he was always there. At this time, he was doing his 1st year Teacher's Training course.

About July of the next year [1970], whilst in his 2nd and final year at the College, he was sent home, as he did not have money to complete. He called to the Mission for a job, but I did not have any, but I offered him the money to complete. He refused and said he would try Sibasa for a job. A few days after that, I was coming through Sibasa and saw him outside the Dutch Reformed Church Hospital. He told me that he had got work there - sweeping and polishing the floors - but after a few days there, the Minister of that Church - who was very anti-Catholic - asked him what religion he belonged to. When he heard he was Catholic - he told him, he would have to become a member of the D. R. C., to keep his job. He refused and left. I took him to the Mission, gave him money, told him he could return it if he wished, when he was working. He returned it and much more.

In 1971, he began teaching in a school at Tshilivho, which is beside the main road from Sibasa to Malamulele. I used to go to the Malamulele district (Shangaan) twice a week. I'd always visit Benedict on the way home. He would teach me Venda, and would always prepare food for me. He would never miss saying prayers before and after the meal. I would have to say the night prayers with him before departing.

He was not long there when he gathered a group for Instruction, and later on, he had two groups. I began saying Mass once a month in that location, and baptised. He had Mass once a month there, he would come to Mass twice a month in Sibasa, walking or a lift, we did not have taxis that time. Sibasa was 10 km from Tshilivho. And the other Sunday or Sundays, he would come with me to Malamulele. Benedict was a Lemba Venda speaking. He would always use Venda with me, even at the beginning when I was struggling. He had two reasons for this: one: to teach me Venda, and two: he was very proud of his language, customs and culture.

I remember an incident whilst he was at this school. One evening, coming back from Malamulele, I called him. He introduced me to a young lady who was later to become his wife. She made a meal for us. I waited till fairly late, she was still there. As usual Benedict walked me to the car. Before I left, I told him that I was not too happy. Later that night, he arrived at the Mission. He said, "Do you not trust me Fr.? I would not do anything not Catholic." I told him, that I trusted him, but the old lad was always lurking around. He stayed the night at the Mission.

Sometime after that, he was appointed to a school to his home, to a place called Nweli - where we had a small outstation. There, he took over the station for me, and things began to move, today we have a Church there. He prepared Adults for Baptism and the other Sacraments. Sometime later, we had Confirmation, under a tree in a place called Tshikambe. That was central to 5 outstations, including Nweli. The Confirmation was conducted by Bishop Durkin. There was quite a crowd there, both Benedict and Michael Maliavusa were both confirmed along with many others.

The next big occasion held under the same tree, for the same 5 outstations, was the Marriage of Benedict and his wife and two other couples from that area. I remember it was well as if it were only yesterday. There was a huge crowd - we had a big number for Confessions. The Confessions, Mass and Ceremonies went on for hours. Benedict and his wife were dressed in their Sunday cloths. [...]

Just about this time also Benedict became Principal of the school and his wife began teaching in the same school with him at Nweli. When his first child was born - a boy - he had him Baptised within a short time. He loved this boy and would carry him to Mass. When we formed the first Parish Council in the Sibasa Parish, he was elected the Chairman.

I remember also in those years we used to have 2 weeks per year for the updating of the Catechists. Benedict was always there, and enjoyed the lectures and talks and especially the Masses. He never missed the chance of going to the Mass and the Sacraments; and it was obvious that he prayed daily. [...]

The last time I met him was January of this year [1990]. I went to Sibasa for a few days. Michael Maliavusa and I were on our way to visit Michael's home, when we met Benedict. He was very happy to see us, and begged us to come for supper in his new house that evening. We agreed and arrived about 5 p.m. We met his wife - who later on gave a beautiful meal, and 7 of his children, the 8th one the oldest is at school at St. Brendan's, Dwars river. He told me he has 8 children and expecting the 9th. He said, "Fr. Is that too many", and I assured him, "Certainly not for him". [...] And before I left, we said the night prayers together. It was very obvious that he, his wife and children, were used to saying their daily prayers. As we were on our way, he said he had not been so happy for ages. [...]

I was in Sibasa for Michael's ordination, and spent a few days there. I spent a day with Benedict's wife, 9 children and brother. They told me that Benedict was a member of the local football Committee. The football team

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had not done well for years. So the other members of the Committee decided to call in a witchdoctor to use 'human muthi' on the members of the team, so as to help them to play well. Benedict objected, and eventually resigned. The witchdoctor came and performed his rites. But now they had a problem. This 'Doctor' demanded a lot of money as they are wont to do. The only one having money was Benedict. They approached and he refused.

A few days after his refusal, he was coming from Sibasa, there was a roadblock quite close to his home. He stopped; we presumed; to remove the stones, they jumped out of the bushes and began stoning his vehicle. Apparently, he jumped out and ran quite a distance to a Rondavel, where he tried to hide. They surrounded the Rondavel, told him to come out, or they would burn it. He came out, and they stoned him to death. The woman of the homestead was afraid to come out for about three hours, when she ran to the Daswas's and told them. I got the same story from Joseph Netshikulwe, the Catechist from Rembander, and Elias Chabalala, the Catechist at Malamulele, who were both lifelong friends of Benedict.¹⁷

This is an important letter and therefore I wanted to report it entirely. It is written by the eye-witness as it was Fr. Partick O'Connor and shortly after the murder of Benedict Daswa. Fr. Partick knew Benedict Daswa personally many years and now gives his evaluation of the quality of Benedict's spiritual life.

Benedict's pastoral activity as catechist

On becoming a Christian, Benedict took his membership of the Church very seriously and got deeply involved in building up the local Church. Fervently committing himself to pastoral work, he invited fellow students to the Catholic Church on Sundays, offering them instruction about the faith. In due course a number of these students became Catholics.

On qualifying as a teacher, Benedict worked with Fr. O'Connor as a voluntary catechist, helping to instruct members of young Catholic communities and to start new ones in the *Nweli* district. He took great pleasure in ministering to the young and in preparing people for the Sacraments, becoming Chairman of the first local Parish Council to be established in *Nweli*.

Benedict was the Youth Animator in the *Nweli* district for the six communities. He organized retreats, trips and workshops. He was

¹⁷ Letter written by Fr. Partick O'Connor MSC to his Provincial Superior, Father Timothy Gleeson MSC. The letter has no date, but with certainty it was written before the end of 1990.

spending much time with the youth to help the Church. During the time of Apartheid, Benedict was helping people to open its eyes as to what the Church was teaching, i. e. that people should not oppress others. He worked very hard with the youth and they appreciated him. He was committed, sharing and helping. He was encouraging people to know what they should care about in the Church and to meet their responsibilities.

But Benedict was not just involved in the life of the Church; he was the backbone of the Church in the district. He organized sessions to explain what it meant to be a Catholic with such topics as: What does it mean to be a youth in the world and in the Catholic Church. As a youth ministry animator, he believed that the youth were the foundation of a strong community. He would give his time to be with them during their meetings and outings. Sometimes they did not like the things he was telling them such as behaving in a Christian way, i. e. being chaste until marriage and the boys not hanging with girls. Those true to their faith liked him. He loved everyone equally.

He was a prominent member of the parish council. He participated fully and his behavior was commendable. He started to take over as a lay catechist giving some homilies when the priest and catechist were not there. His faith was growing steadily. He would also take some people for instructions. He represented the animators of the Nweli district at the parish council. He had a wider knowledge of the Catholic Church than persons recently baptized. He was also involved in teaching catechism and in youth ministry. As a Sunday Service leader, if the priest could not go to say Mass on a Sunday as arranged. Benedict would offer to go and lead the service. In his way the parishioners could hear the Word of God and those who were not yet Christians could be prepared. The Word of God was important in his life; he had developed the attitude that the people should be able to hear the Word even the priest was absent. Benedict could lead the Sunday at the Nweli church and explain the Word of God.

Benedict's marriage

In 1974, at the age of 28 years, Benedict married *Shadi Eveline Monyai*, following local custom and tradition. She was a Sotho speaking person, a member of the Lutheran Church and a nurse at Donald Frazer Hospital near Sibasa. Four years later they have a civil marriage on 24 November 1978. Then, on completing her catechumenate, Eveline was received into full communion with the Catholic Church on 28 January 1979. On 9

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August 1980 then they were married by Fr. Patrick O'Connor in the Catholic Church.¹⁸

Benedict and Eveline had eight (8) children: Lufuno born in 1975; Mulalo Hellen born in 1977; Vuledzani Patient born in 1979; Vhutshilo Michael born in 1981; Thabelo Faith born 1984; Zwothe Raymond born in 1985; Rotondwa Cyrill born in 1988 and Ndifhedzo Benedicta born on June 1st 1990, four months after Benedict's death. Benedict's parents were not in favour of his engagement to Eveline because Eveline was a Sotho-speaking person and she was not living like a Venda women. The witnesses are telling also that she was lazy and not always faithful to his husband. In fact, in 1979, a year following the civil union between Benedict and Eveline, a child was born whose father was not Benedict, but a teacher colleague of Eveline, one Shylock Gavhi. After this initial problem he not only did pardon his wife, but in order to strengthen the marital bonds, he decided to have more children.

The marital problems helped also Benedict to become a man of prayer. He prayed every evening with his family. He went regularly to confession and made every possible effort to attend the Mass daily. And he was recognized by others as a loving husband and a good father. He was also seen as kind, generous, considerate and sociable person. Some persons say that he loved a lot his wife. He loved her truly and he wouldn't go out without telling her where he was going.

This beautiful life was tragically short, ending on February 2nd 1990, when Benedict, aged 44, was brutally murdered by evil man. The death of such a promising catechist was a severe blow to the Catholic Church in the Diocese of Tzaneen.

Benedict' death

In the afternoon of 2 February, 1990, at around 4.00 p.m. Benedict drove his sister-in-law and her sick baby by car to a doctor in the nearby township of Makwarela and then took them home following the medical check up. After giving a lift to a man who asked to be taken to Nweli, Benedict made his way back to Mbahe. When he was close to the soccer ground, not far from his home, he found the road blocked by stones and tree trunks. In the dark, but with moonlight, Benedict stopped and blew his car horn in an attempt to call for help. In place of help, men and boys emerged from the bush and started stoning him. Fleeing from his

¹⁸ Catholic Marriage Register, No. 55 of Saint Joseph Parish in Sibasa.

assailants, Benedict found refuge in Mrs. Ratshipondo's rondavel kitchen. However some of the mob had seen him entering it and threatened to burn it down if Benedict failed to surrender. On hearing the threat, Benedict emerged from the rondavel kitchen whereupon a boy, Mukosi Rasuba, dragged Benedict back into the *rondavel hut*, crying out that they wanted to kill him. As Benedict pleaded for his life and to be allowed to pray, a man, Nematikundani, entered the hut and without a word struck Benedict a blow on the head with an iron knobkerrie, fracturing his skull and killing him almost instantaneously. This occurred between 7 and 9 p.m. Mrs. Ratshipondo dutifully informed Benedict's mother of his death and then reported the murder to the police the following morning.

Some witness, as Muvhulawa Calson Daswa, Lutheran, Benedict's younger brother, report what he was told from his mother and from his wife:

I came back home to Mbahe by train from Pretoria. When I got home, my mother related the whole story to me. She said this whole thing happened after Benedict had come back from Donald Fraser Hospital where he had taken my sick son and my wife; and then proceeded to take a man and his bag of mealie meal to the eastern side of the village. On the way home he found that the road was blocked. When he stopped there at the roadblock, stones came flying at him from two directions. And he ran away to the Ratshipondo house. The mob was approaching then and the first of the group to arrive was a Mr Nematikundani. He asked the lady owner of the house, Nancy Ratshipondo, if she had seen someone go in. she told Benedict to come out as there were people looking for him. When he came out of the kitchen rondavel, many people gathered around him and started beating him. They heard Benedict say: "Allow me to pray first". He asked them as well: "Why do you want to kill me?" They did not wait for him to finish praying. They were hitting him while he was still praying. He collapsed and died.¹⁹

The motive of Benedict's death

The members of local Commission, set up by Bishop of Tzaneen Hugh Slattery before beginning the canonical investigation, declared that Benedict was killed for the following reasons:

1. The first reason of Benedict's death seems to be the question of his position in the school. It is known that the teachers who were Venda were jealous of him, and of his standing at the local level. He was very well

¹⁹ Copia publica, vol. I, p. 169-170.

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regarded by the Headman. This Headman was appointed by Chief Mphaphuli; he was like a stranger in that area, a member of a royal family. The people were jealous of the Daswa family because they were seen as leaders in the village. Peoples said that this family had more weight in that village. Benedict's uncle Edward Matshili was a Principal in a school. Three people of the same family were school Principals in the area and this created jealousy. Also Benedict was close to the Headman.

Benedict was seen as protecting his uncle who was suspected of sending the lightning.²⁰ It is clear that often in life there are two types of characters in the community. There are those who love a person who works hard and those who like the good things they accomplish, but are jealous. Benedict was regarded as a role model in the community. He was a member of a school community and a community leader. He used to give advice to youngsters, eg. to leave drugs, to concentrate on their studies etc. He was on the Headman's Council and that's why people started to hate him. They hated him because of his hard work for the community and the influence he had.

As already said, Benedict was well-known in the village and a man of influence. Some admired him for his goodness and integrity, but others, however, grew to hate him and began to look at him with envy because of his prosperity and success. He had a house built of bricks, cement and zinc, a television and telephone, a new car, an orchard with vegetables and fruit trees. Some people were saying: He is a teacher, how come he can work so much in his garden. They thought he was using zombies at night to help him. Zombies²¹ are people who were dead, and then buried, but the corpses in the coffin were just an appearance, actually they were logs. People using zombies are using witchcraft. They thought that Tshipanga, the uncle of Benedict, could have assisted Benedict with zombies. They were spreading this rumour because they did not understand how he could find time to work in his garden. In fact, he worked in the garden very early in the morning and late in the evening.

In a small and poor village, in which, apart from the social discrimination, there was also ethnic animosity and rivalry within the Black popu-

²⁰ "Lightning": an ordinary lightning is called in Venda "lupenyo": but the lightning that strikes at something (a tree, a person, a house or an animal) is no longer called "lupenyo" but "ndadzi" because "ndadzi" means this human being changed in a bird-like creature with wings. In Venda culture, it is believed that some lightning strikes are caused by some person because of jealousy.

²¹ A reanimated corpse devoid of consciousness. In contemporary versions these are generally undead corpses which traditionally were called "ghouls".

lation itself. It was almost impossible that relations among the inhabitants would be free from petty feelings of malevolence and jealousy.

2. The second main reason of Benedict's death was to be not prepared to contribute for consulting a *sangoma*²² as he knew that this may lead to the killing of an innocent person.

The starting point of the clash between Benedict and some villagers is directly related to Benedict's love for sport and, in particular, his interest in soccer. In fact, Benedict was a member of the local football club, the *Mbahe Eleven Computers* when the question of how to improve the team's performance arose. After some success against other local soccer clubs, the *Mbahe Eleven Computers* suffered a series of defeats. However, rather than examine how they could improve their tactics on the field, their footballing skills and fitness levels, some members of the club preferred to fall back on traditional beliefs. Blaming their lack of success on forces beyond their control, they wanted to consult the traditional healer or *sangoma* and purchase medicine or *muthi* to ensure their team's success.

Benedict, together with others club members, was totally against any dealings with *sangomas* and was outspoken in his opposition. To remedy the situation he believed that the team needed to train harder and better prepare for its matches. As a man of deep faith and strong religious convictions, the use of *muthi* by the players was totally abhorrent to Benedict, something foreign to his conscience and his faith. However, faced with the implacable, Benedict along with some friends formed their own team, the *Mbahe Freedom Rebels*. This move engendered considerable jealousy and hatred.

At a meeting at the soccer club Benedict made public his views against witchcraft and strongly opposed the decision of the majority to make use of a diviner in order to *sniff out the witch*. He explained to all present that lightning was a natural phenomenon for which there was a scientific explanation. He knew that if someone was accused of sending the lightning, that person would be killed, usually by burning. As a man of principle and as a Christian of deep faith, his conscience would not allow him to contribute the R²³ 5 fee for employing a *sangoma*.

²² Zulu word used to call a diviner and traditional healer, who is called in Venda *nanga* or *diviner*.

²³ Rands or South African currency.

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At the same time, he was also well aware that by expressing his Christian convictions so strongly, he was putting his own life at risk. Nevertheless, this is what he did and in consequence of that he was killed for his fidelity to his Christian Faith. As a Catholic he believed in his faith and did not believe in witchcraft or in witches. He would not help by donating money that would be used to *sniff out* people who were suspected of being involved in witchcraft. He refused to cooperate and that is why he was targeted.

Benedict spoke openly and strongly in public opposing people who wanted to use witchcraft. He did not hide what was motivating him. He refused to contribute to the collection because it was against his faith. He thought that contributing R 5 he would have encouraged the behaviour which would lead to a fatal situation. He told them his faith did not allow to him to condone the killing of other people. He had no grudge against them. The people were furious as they wanted a high ranking person to support them. They knew what they were doing was wrong, but they wanted him to be with them. It was a plot to make him part of it. They wanted to hide behind him. Fortunately he refused. He did not know how he would be punished, but he was determined to defend his faith.

Based on the witnesses we can highlight that it was principally the hate for the Catholic faith the main and ultimate motive for Benedict Daswa's brutal execution. He had no time for things that did not make sense religiously. Wherever he was, his faith dominated and was his guide. Also he believed strongly in Church doctrine which influenced and inspired him. He would not believe in witchcraft. Benedict was also killed because of his stand against the popular belief in witchcraft. We can suppose that jealousy was one of the reasons, but that would not have mattered if Benedict had not made a strong stand against a popular belief. From the testimonies result that the main reason why Benedict was killed was because of his refusal to participate in the collection for the sangoma.

The Catholic Church was very small and very new among the Venda people when Benedict became a member in 1963. The small Catholic communities were living in an area where the mainline Protestant Churches, especially the Lutheran Church, were well established. Traditional African

religion was still strong and the Zionist Church were growing very rapidly. In this situation it was not easy for the young Catholic members to really develop their Catholic identity. The close friends and quite a large number of the Catholics in the Parish of Thohoyandou/Sibasa regard Benedict as a really good Catholic, a good Catholic family man, a good Catholic teacher and a very active member of the Parish. Since his death in 1990 Benedict has not been forgotten. The priests of the Parish were asked by the parishioners to say Mass on the February 2nd 2000 at the village of Nweli to remember the 10th anniversary of his death. Since then there have been several initiatives, which indicate a growing interest in the life and death of Benedict Daswa.

On January 6th 2007 during the Plenary Session of the Southern African Catholic Bishop's Conference was passed unanimously the following resolution: "The Conference resolves that the initial investigation into the cause of beatification of the Servant of God Benedict Daswa should proceed with the support of the Conference". The resolution was signed by the President, Buti Joseph Tlhagale, O.M.I., Archbishop of Johannesburg. This document was followed by nine individual letters sent to Bishop Hugh Slattery of Tzaneen, in support of his initiative to start the beatification cause regarding the layman Shimangadzo Samuel Benedict Daswa Bakali. There are very important letters. In one of them, sent by the Bishop Emeritus of Dundee Michael Paschal Rowland, O.F.M., we read:

In these days when the Church in South Africa is involved in much soul searching over the whole area of recourse to Sangomas, Traditional Healers and Witchcraft, when even some of our Priests are practicing these crafts, I feel that the example of the life of Benedict Daswa is a very timely call to our people to cease their involvement in these things.²⁴

Fr. Kris Radebe, in his letter written on November 1st 2008, observes: "The son of Africa [Benedict] who embraced his traditional way of life but who had to draw a line and travelled a road less travelled and who entered through a small gate of life. This cause can play a role in changing the indifferent and faint devotion to saints that exist among the youth today. It will come with a new vigour in knowing that the challenge is even more imperative of that call to holiness in sainthood".²⁵

²⁴ Letter of September 22nd 2007.

²⁵ Letter of November 1st 2007.

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In the summer 2009, Michail Rassool published on "The Southern Cross",²⁶ on the National Catholic Weekly newspaper, the article with the aim to inform the Catholic population of South Africa about the official conclusion of a second beatification cause²⁷, namely of Benedict Daswa. The information, given by Fr. Eddie O'Neil, a Catholic priest involved in the cause, presented the Servant of God, his life and the importance of his message for the local Church.

²⁶ "The Southern Cross", July 22 to July 28, 2009.

²⁷ The cause of Benedict Daswa is the first cause of a South African-born Catholic to be proposed for beatification and canonization, but chronologically the first cause for beatification, still on-going, is of the Austrian-born founder of the Marianhill Missionaries, Abbot Francis Pfanner (1825-1909).