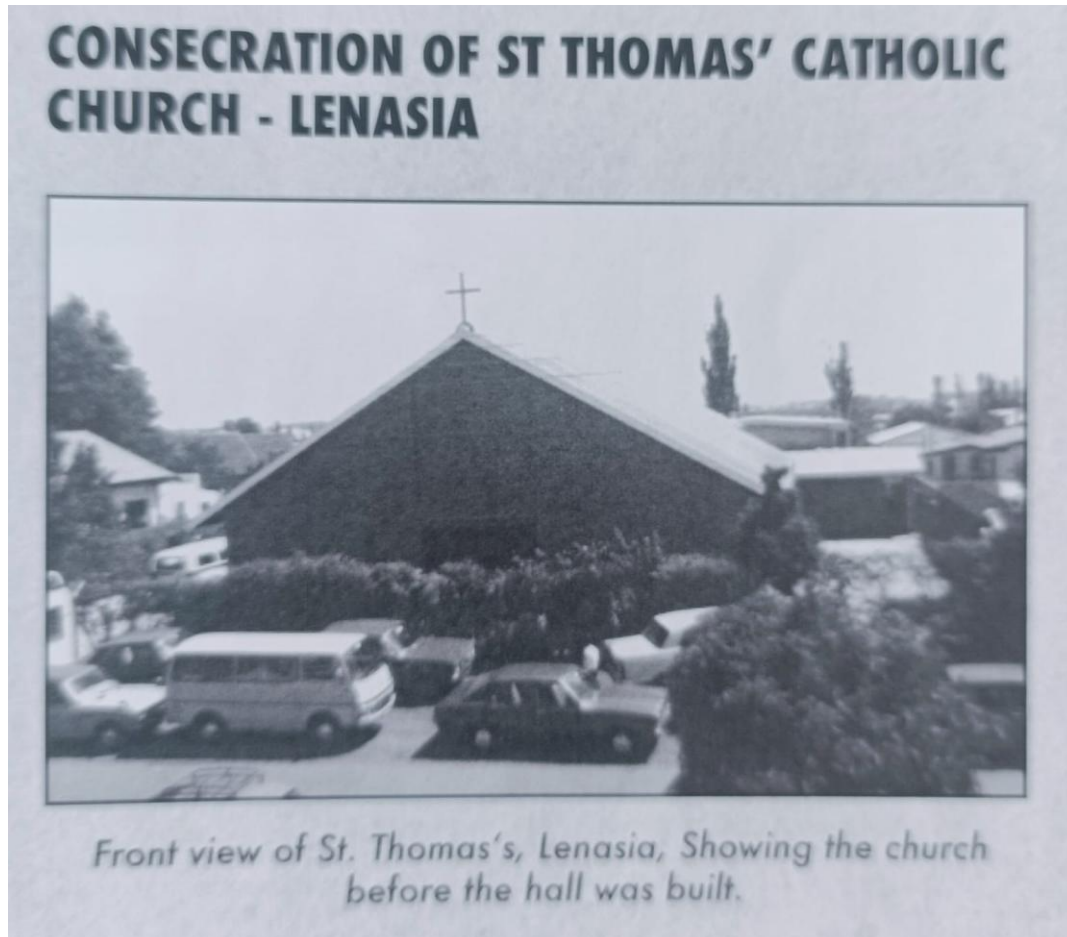


St Thomas' Parish Recollection of Thoughts and Events

(Patrick Naiker)

Although the official opening of the St Thomas' Parish was on Sunday, 19 December 1965, the origins of the church go back to 1955 in the Old Military Camp in Lenasia. The foundation cornerstone was laid and blessed by Cardinal Owen McCann of Cape Town.



Fr Joseph Lawrence Smith OMI had come to the Old Camp to check on the arrival of the 'new settlers', seeking out for any Catholics among them. He came across a very young Tony Moses playing outside their Hut No.7 and made his enquiries. He was quite delighted to have made the acquaintance of Rosie Moses and was soon introduced to her extended family in the immediate vicinity. Having found the Catholics, he was searching for he offered to say Mass monthly if they could get ten people together. This was no problem, and he found to his amazement a house full of Catholic at his very first Mass in Lenz.

The earliest recollection is of Mass being said in Hut No.8. Present were Grandma Lazarus, her daughter Aunty Margie, son Paul, his wife Louisa and their son Leonard,

who would go on to become one of the very first altar boys from the community. From my childhood memories, the other attendees at that initial Mass were:

- The Lazarus family, including Lucy and her son Cyril;
- The James family - Uncle Joe, Aunty Mary, Valerie, Ivan, Henry and Rolan;
- The Moses family - Uncle Siga, Aunty Rosie, Tony, Cynthia, Clifford, Denise;
- The Naikers - my mother Aunty Mary, my sisters Ruth (Rookie) and Vigie; and
- The Reddys - Aunty Violet, Thumbie, Vernie, Theresa, Errol and Brenda, and Valdene.

I recall that we did not have Mass every week; for the intervening Sundays, we travelled by train to Kliptown. This practice continued for some time. As the Hut (military bungalow) was by now far too small to accommodate the growing community, a Classroom No.3 was generously made available by Anthony Francis, then principal of Lenz High School.

This room, incidentally, was also used by the Anglican community and for many years served as the only formal Christian Church in Lenasia, although the Nazarenes (Br Sammy Moonsamy) and The Bible Society (Br Wright) had established a mobile presence in the township.

This classroom was eventually extended to include the next classroom as well, with a foldable dividing wall to accommodate the increased numbers. Eventually this too was too small and the congregation was accommodated in the newly built school hall for the remainder of its tenure, until the new church building opened its doors in December 1965. The reception for the church's opening was also held at the school hall, a gentle reminder of things past and present.

As a matter of interest, this was the only school in the area, so it catered for all grades until 1958, when the Lenasia Indian Primary School opened and commenced lessons.

This was also the times of the dreadful Group Areas evacuations, which saw the Indian schools shut down in central Johannesburg, Fordsburg and Kliptown. The scholars and teachers were transported by steam train from those areas to Lenz.

During those years in the classrooms Fr Joseph L Smith was holding regular Sunday Mass for both the Lenasia (Indian) community, as well as a Black (Sotho) community, who travelled by train each Sunday to attend Mass. The extended sermon was given in English with a translator expounding the Sotho version. What was remarkable was that the hymns were alternately sung in English and Sotho!

We did not have our own altar-servers in those days, and I vividly remember Father Smith, who also ministered to the Good Shepherd Convent and community in neighbouring Protea, bringing in altar-boys to assist at Mass. Names which I clearly recall are those of Basil Bagley, Denis Durries and Eddie Carstens. Father Smith was ably

assisted in those early years by Mr Carstens and Mr Durries. In record-time, he trained our first servers, Ivan James and Leonard Lazarus, in the Latin rite, and for the very first time our community began taking on a shape and identity of its own.

It is well to remember that in those days, there were no kitchen facilities and no electricity in Lenz, apart from the old camp (as it was and is affectionately referred to), which meant no kitchen facilities at the school "church". So it was that Aunty Mary James prepared a breakfast for Fr Smith which he had after Mass and during discussions and meetings with everyone around. This duty was later carried on by Aunty Rosie Moses, although we had taken occupation of St Thomas', but Fr Smith could not reside in Lenasia due to the law of the land.

By 1958, there were sufficient youngsters in the Parish to start Catechism classes, which were conducted by AJ (Joe) Williams, then Vice-Principal at the newly opened Primary School. These classes were held on a weekly basis after school with AJ sacrificing his time, thereby missing the 'school train' and leaving for his home in Doornfontein on the 3.15pm train.

His efforts bore wonderful results, and on Christmas Day 1958, Lenasia had its initial group of extremely proud First Communicants. Some of the names that come to mind in that group are Henry and Rolan James, Tony and Cynthia Moses, Cyril Lazarus, Clive Valiatham, Errol and Brenda Reddy, Priscilla and Cynthia Francis, Sheila Paul, Evelyn and Desmond Jackson, and me.

The next group of altar boys emerged from those first communicants: Henry and Rolan James, Tony Moses, Neville Paul and Clive Valiatham.

There was no choir per se, but a young Adelaide Naidoo (nee Paul) took it upon herself to school us in the hymns of the day and conducted "choir practice" at the residence of her brother, Uncle Edward Paul.

The first organ used was a pedal organ donated by the Fredericks family from Protea. Mr Fredericks was the Afrikaans Headmaster at Lenz High, and his wife was one of two of our esteemed Midwives on a Lambretta Scooter, who was responsible for virtually all the early births in Lenz.

In later years, and prior to the opening of the church, choir duty was ably taken over by the Francis sisters, Choo Choo, Myrtle, Elaine, Gloria (Cookie) and the daughters of Gabriel and Fina Francis. People such as Eugene Peters and Patrick Thomas brought their specific singing abilities to the parish and eventually our organist and choir-master emerged in the form of Edcent Williams, who inspired and conducted the singing with a new fervour. This choir was augmented by the talent of a young Andrew Francis, and later to the present group with Gordon and Brian Jackson and their sons.

I have only school-holiday recollections of the period January 1961 through to December 1965 regarding the growth and activities of the community as I was away at boarding school and the seminary during those years. But I do know that Fr Smith made a very strong point of getting to know each member of the community, visited every household; he held those precious memories through to his dying day.

We often recall the wonderful and funny stories about him, and how he would collect us during the school holidays, pile as many as possible into his trusty VW Beetle (of which there were quite a few replacements over time) and take us to places we would otherwise never see nor experience such as Dale College (Salesians) in Vanderbijlpark. We would go picnicking and swimming as if the world belonged to us. No cares!

Fr Smith, the founder of our community, was singularly instrumental in obtaining the land on which St Thomas stands today. I know from correspondences I shared with him over the intervening years how he had to beg, cajole and plead for a piece of land on which to build a Catholic Church.

As if that was not a big enough problem, he also had to find the funding for such an undertaking. For this purpose, he established the famous "Building Fund". Each working person had to contribute a set amount, starting at R1 (yes R1) per month. For this exercise, he created a spreadsheet detailing each name and the amounts contributed or due or overdue. This spreadsheet was eventually nailed to the inside of one of the front doors of the church so everyone could see how their contributions were being recorded. He went so far as to name and shame those whose funding was in arrear during his really-long sermons.

His efforts were augmented by those ladies who worked in the garment factories, where they would have boxes with samples and rejects marked for the parish. Add to this the cake sales, bingo sessions, fetes, raffles and parish dances all of which had a considerable financial impact on the financial well-being of the fledgling parish.

I remember seeing photographs of the sand and stone, and bricks that were delivered to the building site; these were carefully monitored and overseen by Francis Sequeira, who had stewardship over some of the building operations.

So every time you enter the church, you should be reminded that somebody in your family or connected to your family actually bought those bricks that are clearly visible both inside and outside the church building.

What is particularly worth mentioning at this point are the two statues on either side in the front alcoves: those of Our Lady and The Sacred Heart. These were donated by Tamil ladies, Ms Vigie Naidoo and my grandmother, Ouma Katie Pillay; they were carried in for the classroom mass on specially made trays. After each mass they were locked away until the following week. Ouma Katie eventually became a caretaker of the present

Church building and converted when she was well into her eighties. Uncle Bill and Lilly Simons were the caretakers for a number of years prior.

I learnt that Fr Smith chose to name the church after St Thomas, as he is the Patron Saint of India. Whether there was discussion and/or debate around this I will never know. But I personally think it's an appropriate name and looking back, I'm sure there could not have been any dissension about it.

There used to be an altar-rail separating the main body of the church from the Sanctuary, which was donated to us by St Anne's. There definitely were two inscriptions, one of each side off the open-centre of the rail: "St" and "A". This rail disappeared many years ago when it was decided to have the Mass as inclusive as possible. This is a fate that befell many other churches as well.

Eventually the great day dawned on that Sunday in December 1965. His Grace Bishop Hugh Boyle OMI officiated in the official opening of the church. After a day that started in absolutely bright sunshine, the heavens opened and it literally poured down within an hour of the 3pm service.

It was going to be a personal honour for me as I had never served as an altar-boy in our church, ever. My duty was to carry the Bishop's Crozier. I recall so vividly how Tony Moses and I ran through the storm and the muddy river that is now a tarred road, to get to the church on time. And on arriving there all soaked and muddy, to be told that we could not go onto the altar in that state. Not to have this great honour taken away from us, I said to Tony that we should simply undress and put our cassocks on over our underwear and go barefoot.

Although Fr Smith wasn't amused, we did just that and so we had our day, the church was officially opened and we lived to see that first group's Confirmation (from which I was absent, having been confirmed at Aliwal North). Marriages were blessed there, we had our children, and some had grandchildren baptised here. They, too, had their first Sacraments here.

We must recall the various Sodalities that were founded in the years leading up to 1965; such as The Sacred Heart Sodality and The Sodality of Our Lady. Mrs Catherine Sequeira, Mrs Christie Lazarus, Mrs "Girly" Xavier, Mrs Mercia Jackson, Mrs Philmy Jackson, were founding members at the heart of these movements.

Of course we also started The Legion of Mary in 1966, under the Chairmanship of AJ "Joe" Williams, with Ronnie Morgan, and teenagers Tony Moses and I as the founding members. It was through the efforts of Lennie Marian that the St Thomas' branch was aligned through the Johannesburg Diocese.

Fr Smith also started the Pioneer movement in those early years, and many of us youngsters joined up wearing the badge and eventually the pin which indicated our abstinence from all alcohol. For most of us that only lasted until we were around eighteen, then the badges slowly came off our lapels!

Many of our earlier parishioners, and many of my very own childhood companions, the original pioneers of this Parish, have now passed on and were buried out of this Church.

There have been successive Priests here over the many years; each one of them has made a positive contribution to the growth and stability of the Parish. Their individual contributions, although not measurable, will be fondly remembered by those whom they served.

There are other parishioners who made outstanding contributions to this community, people such as Freddie Jackson, his brother Gabriel Jackson, Pagey James, the start-up choir, of whom there must be many stories worth relating.

Here are some interesting stats that need to be confirmed, but that somehow stick in my head:

- The 1st wedding in the new church - George Morgan and Rita Jackson on the Saturday before the official opening, probably 18th December 1965, and
- The 1st wedding after the official opening - Tony Jackson and Philly, probably Boxing Day 26 December 1965.

The Parish of St Thomas has grown enormously over the years. Some parishioners have crossed over to other denominations, but the congregation continues to grow; and God-willing, it will flourish into the future. Such is the nature of life.

I must categorically state that this is not a definitive historical version of events as they unfolded but represent the best personal recollection of the earliest days of our Catholic community in Lenasia.

Patrick Richard Naiker
Cape Town
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