

LEBAMANG JOHN SEBIDI  
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Interviewed by Gail Gerhart

My people come from a little place in Lesotho called Mafeteng, Mafeteng District. . . We come from that district, not Mafeteng itself. My father and his parents also decided to leave that place and we came through the Orange Free State; working in the farms, from one farmer to another, until in the late 1930's they landed up in Potchefstroom on the farms. And I was born in Potchefstroom in 1939.

I grew up in Potchefstroom and by the time I opened my eyes I was living in the local township in Potchefstroom, that's in the western Transvaal.

Then of course, I went to a Catholic school. I went to school very late actually, when I was ten. And because I was older I think was made to jump a couple of classes. I jumped standard 5 (7th grade), I went to standard 6 (8th grade), I jumped form 2 (9th grade), I went to J.C.( Junior Certificate). So I was doing quite a lot of jumping. I matriculated, finished high school, in 1959. Then went to what we call the Major Seminary, St Peter's Major Seminary, where I studied philosophy and theology.

HAD YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO BE A PRIEST?

I think so, because we had a very good French-speaking Canadian priest in Potchefstroom who was loved by the young people, and everybody wanted to be like him. I ended up in the seminary because of him. I wanted to be a priest. So I went to the seminary in the beginning of the 1960's. Part of my philosophy-theology studies was done at St Peter's and I finished my theology studies at Roma, St Augustin, in Lesotho. That was 1969.

Then immediately when I started working, I was teaching in what we call the Minor Seminary; a free high school for students who want to go into the priesthood, Roman Catholic priesthood, taking ordinary school subjects but with special emphasis on the priesthood. So I was principal at that Minor Seminary, St Pius X Minor Seminary. This was in Umzimkulu, in the Transkei, Umzimkulu St Pius Minor Seminary, that's where I worked as the principal, or rector. This was 1970-1972. I was principal and I was also teaching.

Then in 1972, September, I went overseas. I went to Rome to do my masters in theology, specifically ethics, Christian ethics. I was there '72 through September 1975.

Then I was recalled to become rector of St Peter's Seminary. This was a black seminary, distinct from the white seminary which was in Pretoria, St. John Vianney.

So I was there in '75, and I had the misfortune to be there when '76 was still coming. And we had problems, I'm telling you, we had problems.

ST. PETER'S IS AT HAMMANSKRAAL?

St Peter's Hammanskraal, ja. It was '76. Then if you remember in '77 all the Black Consciousness organisations were banned, October 1977. And I remember getting so incensed by that that I decided to go around organising some ministers to march to John Vorster Square [Security headquarters] with me, just to get arrested. And I did that; I didn't get much cooperation though. And I think when we marched, it was 24 October, to John Vorster Square--

AFTER THE CRACKDOWN ON OCTOBER 19?

Yes. When we marched I think we were about twelve. We were all in clerical regalia, with our Bibles.

ALL CATHOLICS?

No, it was mixed; but it was really organised under the auspices of the Black Priests' Solidarity Group, and I was president of the Black Priests' Solidarity Group at the time.

I'M CURIOUS HOW MANY CLERGYMEN YOU HAD TO APPROACH IN ORDER TO END UP WITH TWELVE?

You can't believe it, Gail! Father Buti Tlhagale was my colleague at the seminary. We travelled for two solid days, day and night. I think we met hundreds -- but we came up with twelve. [laughter] Hundreds, literally hundreds, the East Rand you know.

ON THE TELEPHONE?

No, just actually going, driving.

WHAT WAS THE MOST COMMON EXCUSE?

Most of them would say " Well, we'll come." But then they didn't pitch up. And that's pattern. Ministers are like teachers when it comes to that kind of involvement.

DO THEY FEAR FOR THEIR JOBS?

They fear for their jobs, yes. But also I think they've got difficulty in trying to reconcile what they perceived of their mission at that time. Some would fear to offend their superiors, and others would have genuine difficulty in trying to reconcile what they are doing. What that would involve, with what they're actually doing, I don't know.

WHAT WAS YOUR TACTICAL SENSE OF WHAT WOULD BE ACHIEVED BY AN ACTION OF THAT KIND?

There was a lot of anger. And I think uppermost in my mind was a feeling that all black organisations had been banned, and some of these guys were our parishioners. And they've been banned, they've been incarcerated, they've been detained because they were fighting for justice. And I was feeling it is the church which is supposed to be a champion of justice, and nothing's happening to it! So let's also go and be arrested, be where those fighters were. In fact, this was actually the words I was using, "let's be where they are".

IN ORDER JUST TO SATISFY SOME SENSE OF FRUSTRATION IN YOURSELVES?

Ja, I think so. I mean, we can't be saying that we're fighting for justice, and yet when the government bans, it doesn't ban the church. It bans other people, other organisations. There must be something wrong.

IS IT AN EXPRESSION OF SOLIDARITY?

Ja, it's an expression of solidarity, I think.

WERE YOU LOOKING FOR PUBLICITY?

Yes, that as well. I think we were.

DID YOU ORGANISE PUBLICITY? DID YOU CALL THE PRESS?

I think we did. That's why when we didn't get it we even threatened the *Rand Daily Mail*. I remember going with the group to the *Rand Daily Mail* offices and saying "Hey, you're going to get it".

DID THEY SHOW UP AND TAKE PHOTOS?

They did. They put us on the very inside, you know [laughter]. I think the press at that time was quite beleaguered as well, because they didn't respond in the way we wanted them to respond. And we needed some publicity, we tried to organize it, and we didn't get it.

WHAT ACTUALLY HAPPENED WHEN THESE TWELVE PRESENTED THEMSELVES AT JOHN VORSTER SQUARE?

We intended to march from West Street. If you know where West Street is, it would be about four kilometres from John Vorster Square. We were going to march down West Street. I didn't know Jo'burg very well at that time because I was from Potchefstroom and I was working in Pretoria. So we were going to march down West Street, then get I think, Anderson Street, then march towards John Vorster Square. It was about four or five kilometres, not much. But we hardly marched from here to the gate. They were there. In fact, when we got there they were there.

The police were there already with their dogs and vans and things. They were there already. They knew we were going to march. Don't ask me how they knew, I don't know, but they knew. So, I was leading the procession, and they stopped us. "Do you have permission to march? The magistrate allowed you?" And we said "As of now we don't." And we had placards and bibles. Some of the placards were reading "JIMMY KRUGER BAN THE BIBLE AS WELL", something like that. So I said, "No we didn't. We didn't get permission and we don't need permission to march." And they were very polite. But they had their guns trained on us and they were holding their dogs. It's amazing. They were shaking. These guys were frightened.

WERE THERE ANY DUTCH REFORMED CHURCH PEOPLE WITH YOU?

Ja, we had two, two dominees: Dominee Kle-- and somebody else from the Pretoria seminary.

YOU WERE ALL BLACK?

We were all black, yes.

HAD YOU TRIED TO GET WHITES TO GO WITH YOU?

No. We didn't. Now that you are asking, we didn't. I think it was the feeling. I think it was a latent philosophy of opposition we had. Those were the days of the Black consciousness. Those were the BC days, and everybody was automatically BC.

Then they said very politely, "Could we take your placards? Would you care to get into the vans?" So we got into the vans and they took us to the police station. We were there the whole day, taking particulars and so on.

YOU HAD PLANNED TO BE ARRESTED, I ASSUME?

We had planned not only to be arrested and to go to jail, but also not to accept bail. But when we got down there they offered us bail. Then we had problems with some of the guys who said "Accept bail. Come on, lets go." So there was a big how-do-you-do there. Finally those who said "Let's accept bail", won the day and we bailed out as a group. All of us were bailed out. Then when we came back we got a very light sentence really. They wanted to get rid of us quickly. But it was about sixty rand or sixty days, okay, something like that. That was the end of it. But it was all done under the auspices of the Black Priests' Solidarity Group, which was basically a Catholic group. But very, very powerful at the time, really influential.

LET ME COME BACK TO THAT. YOU WERE THEN AT ST. PETER'S HAMMANSKRAAL?

Yes. That action brought me into trouble with the church, with the bishops who were my employers. And the strange thing is this happened after the 1976 and 1977 documents that the bishops at the Joint Council of Catholic Bishops had written. I don't know whether you know about that document, Gail -- which was saying "We, of the Roman Catholic Church, we pledge solidarity with Blacks who have suffered." This was after 1976. It was written in February 1977.

WHAT WAS THE TITLE OF THE DOCUMENT?

I don't remember. It pledged solidarity with the Black people. It condemned apartheid as being inherently immoral and unethical, and so on. Now in October when I've organised a march to go to John Vorster Square, they're against that; and they suggested I should resign.

THIS IS THE LOCAL.....?

The bishops, the South African Catholic Bishops Conference. I should resign. I refused.

THAT'S THE HIGHEST ADMINISTRATIVE BODY?

Yes, of the Catholic Church in South Africa, with their headquarters in Pretoria. I refused to resign, and I gave them the option of them expelling me. They didn't want to expel me because they were afraid of the Black backlash at the time. So they did it in a very clever, subtle way.

St. Peter's Seminary is big because it is a national seminary. National meaning that thirty or thirty-one dioceses in South Africa, each bishop sends his students to the seminary if he is Black, and to the St. John Vianney in Pretoria if he is White. So what they did was, the individual bishops decided they were not going to send their students to St. Peter's Seminary as long as we were there. So we would end up with no students to the seminary.

A VERY HIGH PRICE TO PAY. THEY WERE NOT SENDING THEM SOMEWHERE ELSE, THEY WERE JUST CANCELLING ALL STUDIES?

They were sending them to Lesotho or wherever.

DID THEY ALSO COMPLAIN THAT SOMETHING WAS HAPPENING AT ST. PETER'S THAT THEY DIDN'T LIKE? OR WAS IT SOLELY THIS OCTOBER ACTION THAT THEY WERE AGAINST?

It was not only the October action. I think it was the whole spirit that was there; the 1976-1977 spirit, which was a kind of fermentation taking place there, and they thought I was fomenting that kind of thing. They thought I was too critically oriented for a seminary, and not doing much theology. The October march was just the last straw that broke the camel's back.

WAS THERE AN ACTIVE SASO GROUP AT THE SEMINARY?

Not really active SASO, but everybody was up and aware of what was happening, and endorsing the SASO-BPC kind of thing. Everybody was Black consciousness. Everybody was "Black is Beautiful", you know what I mean? Including myself.

WAS THERE FRICTION BETWEEN THE STUDENTS AND THE ADMINISTRATION AT THE SEMINARY?

There was very big friction between the students and the White part of the staff, and that was what was causing problems really; because the White staff felt this was not the way a proper seminary should be run. Then I had problems with faculty members.

WITH WHITE FACULTY MEMBERS?

Ja. In fact many faculty members were White. So, that ended my three years at St. Peter's Seminary in 1977.

AND THAT WAS DECEMBER 1977?

Ja. Then the next stop was Regina Mundi, in Soweto. I was out on a limb because there was no more place for me (?) in the South African Catholic Church.

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IS A MONOPSONY. AS FAR AS PRIESTS ARE CONCERNED, THERE IS ONLY ONE EMPLOYER, LIKE THE CHAMBER OF MINES.

There is only one employer like the Chamber of Mines, exactly! So if you fall out with those, you're out. But they were so afraid of me, because I was still then the prelate of the Black Priests' Solidarity Group you know, and they were afraid of that because we had mobilised Black Catholics behind us, you know. When we called a meeting at Regina Mundi, thousands would come. So that was really frightening, you see, really frightening.

WERE THERE SOME WITHIN THE CATHOLIC HIERACHY THAT ACTUALLY SUPPORTED YOU, BUT WERE IN THE MINORITY? WHAT ABOUT ARCHBISHOP HURLEY, FOR EXAMPLE?

Archbishop Hurley would have been wary of what was happening. He would not have been terribly happy with what was my style of doing things; although he would say, if you want to categorise him, he was very much "left" for the South African Catholics Bishops Conference, together with Bishop Zwane. There was a Zwane from Swaziland. The rest were AWB! Zwane was not the only bishop. We had Peter Buthelezi with Zwane.

I ACTUALLY ATTENDED THE INSTALLATION OF BUTHELEZI IN 1972. THERE WAS A BIG MULTIRACIAL CEREMONY AT MILNER PARK. AND DRAKE KOKA DISRUPTED THE CEREMONY BY WALKING IN AND PRESENTING SOME PROTEST.

It's like Drake Koka! [laughter]

. . . SAYING " WHY DON'T YOU HAVE MORE BLACKS IN YOUR HIERACHY?" THAT WAS OCTOBER 1972.

So you were there.

Maybe I'm not quite fair to say the AWB. No, maybe I should correct that. On the very conservative side. The church's basic concern is religion, souls, the spiritual side of things. There will be a feeling that the church should preach justice and love, and so on, but not be really engaged in that kind of overt political activity. So that was the general feeling of the bishops at the time. Buthelezi would have been there, who was a Black bishop. B.S. Manzi from Eshowe, also a Black bishop at that time, and Zwane.

LESS THAN FIVE PERCENT OR TEN PERCENT?

Yes, much less. Did you hear that Bishop Steven Naidoo has just died? He would have been there as well. That's about it.

SO HOW DID YOU END UP WITH REGINA MUNDI, WITHOUT THE APPROVAL OF THE POWERS THAT BE?

I could go on like that because I had the Black Priest's Solidarity Group with me and a whole lot of Black parishioners behind us. It was very unorthodox. To be orthodox, when I left St. Peters I had to go back to my diocese, Klerksdorp-Potchefstroom, western Transvaal. I had to go there and present myself to my bishop. "I've lost the job at St Peters Seminary. I'm back. Can you give me a job, maybe the parish or something?" But I got stuck at Regina Mundi.

#### WHO WAS THE PERSON IN CHARGE THERE?

At Regina Mundi? The Black Priests' Solidarity guys. They put me on the staff. We were doing things all over the place, and we turned Regina Mundi into a real BC kind of a meeting place. It was at that time that Regina Mundi began to be on the map, because of our presence there.

That's why they tried, I remember in '78, to burn down Regina Mundi one evening. They came in and they started putting petrol on the chairs and everywhere, and we just saw smoke coming out. As we tried to go out they just started shooting. But the fire didn't take. But anyway there was a lot of smoke within the church. These were white guys, we saw them. And then they started running out. They were shooting. They got into their cars and ran off. It must have been security police. Because Regina Mundi became something like a common rendezvous for our toyi-toyis and things.

And I was there in end of '77, 1978. We were doing parish work, going around the parishes of Soweto every Sunday. This Sunday I would be at Molapo, next Sunday I would be in [?]. We would be changing. At the same time I was terribly involved in the Soweto Action Committee. Do you remember the Soweto Action Committee of '78-79?

#### THE FORERUNNER OF THE SOWETO CIVIC ASSOCIATION.

Right. Now I was a member of that as well. In the meantime I was doing that. That is '78.

Then in 1979 -- you know what I've forgot to tell you was when I came to Regina Mundi, I became part of the parish priests; but at the same time I was working for TEEC, Theological Education by Extension College. I was writing courses for them. Because you know I would have no support or remuneration anywhere, so I had to get a job.

#### IS THAT A CATHOLIC GROUP?

No, it's not Catholic. It was TEEC. I was writing courses for them in Christian Ethics. Of course, the bishop of Johannesburg, who is in charge of the work here, was really unhappy with my stay at Regina Mundi. And he kept on sending signals, "what is that guy doing there?" So in the meantime I was thinking about my future very seriously. . . I decided to get married in 1979 [and leave the priesthood]. And I told those chaps at Regina Mundi. . . Everybody was so surprised because it was so sudden.

TWO DAYS AGO I WENT THROUGH THE RECORDS OF THE UNIVERSITY CHRISTIAN MOVEMENT AT WITS. I DON'T KNOW IF YOU'VE HEARD OF COLIN COLLINS, WHO WAS A VERY CAREFUL COLLECTOR OF DOCUMENTARY RECORDS. THERE IS A VERY LONG STATEMENT BY HIM ABOUT WHY HE DECIDED TO LEAVE THE PRIESTHOOD.

Is that right?

I THINK HE'S A PIVOTAL CHARACTER IN THE EVOLUTION OF SASO AS AN ORGANISATION.

I think so! I think so! Very sharp.

#### YOU SAY THAT YOU KNEW HIM?

Not really well, I must say, but I knew of him because he became very very impactful here around here in South African affairs. I was overseas already.

HE WAS THE GENERAL-SECRETARY IN THE LATE '60'S OF THE CATHOLIC BISHOPS CONFERENCE,

Ja, but most of the time then I would have been in Lesotho. But I knew of him, and he was a very central figure in what was happening in the Catholic church there.

WHAT CAN YOU TELL ME ABOUT HIM?

Not very much. You must see Sabelo Ntwasa before you go.

BUT HOW DO I FIND HIM? BECAUSE I ASKED SMANGALISO MKHATSHWA WHERE HE WAS, AND HE SAID THAT HE HAS NO FIXED ABODE.

He has no fixed abode. But most of the time he would be at the Black Theological Project, where Mkhathswa is. The Institute of Contextual Theology. He will be around there most of the time. He is supposed to live somewhere in Dobsonville.

DO YOU THINK HE'D REMEMBER?

Oh no. He is still extremely sharp when you talk to him. He drinks too much you see, he's so frustrated. But he'll be able to fill you up on lots of those things because he's the man, the University Christian Movement and so on, he knows that stuff.

So I decided to get married, and left Regina Mundi. This is '79. And immediately decided to do some education courses with Wits University. Then I did a B.Education and MA with Wits University. It was easy because of my philosophy background. I did a B.Ed. and a Master of Education at Wits, because I knew I wouldn't be able to work anywhere without some kind of degree.

While I was doing that I was doing some part-time lecturing in the Department of Theology at UNISA, the University of South Africa. That kept me going until April 1985, when I came here [to the Funda Centre in Soweto] to direct adult education programs. As you can see I haven't done much of ministering, priesthood. I was always in school teaching, like I'm doing now.

CAN WE BACK UP TO THE BLACK PRIESTS' SOLIDARITY GROUP? WHAT CAN YOU TELL ME ABOUT THE ORIGINS OF THAT? WHERE AND WHY IT WAS FORMED, WHO WAS INVOLVED IN IT?

I think that the origins of the Black Priests' Solidarity Group cannot be understood in isolation from the Black Consciousness spirit. It was really a continuation of the BC spirit in ecclesiastical, theological form. The dark, murky beginnings of it [laughter] can be located during the time of Drake Koka and the so-called "Spoba Four", the " Four Priests of Spoba". Spoba is the St Peter's Old Boys Association. I think in the early '70's, for the first time in the history of the Catholic church in South Africa, those guys had the courage to write -- Mkhathswa should give you that document -- he was one of the four. Mkhathswa, David Moetapele, John Oliphant [he's deceased] and Anthony Mabona, who is married in Switzerland. Anthony Mabona was a staff member of St Peter's Seminary at the time. I think he was the moving spirit behind that. It was strange that now somehow Drake Koka was connected with that group.

HE WAS A ST PETER'S OLD BOY?

No, he wan't. He was a kind of godfather, if you like [laughter]. These guys wrote a document that frightened most of us to hell! It was the first time that Black priests could talk like that to their bishops, accusing them of racism and all sorts of discriminatory practices in the church, and telling them enough is enough.

WHERE CAN I GET A COPY OF THAT?

I think Mkhathswa should have a copy of that, Pat, Smangaliso Mkhathswa.

YOU CALL HIM "PAT"?

Yes, Patrick Mkhathswa, but he doesn't like that.

THAT WAS IN THE EARLY '70s?

Very early '70s, 1970-'71. [I was still in Rome]. I remember my first reaction to that was " these guys are exaggerating a bit now", you know what I mean, to show where we were. It shocked even me! Now I would say that's the beginning within the Catholic church of those kinds of rumblings, against how the hierarchy and how the church in general was behaving. That should be an interesting document to look at. I can still remember it, written in not too clean a language. [laughter] It's about 3 to 4 pages of that stuff. Just ask Pat about that, he probably knows where it is. I would say that's the beginning.

Then when I got to the seminary, my going to the seminary to become rector of St Peter's Seminary at Hammanskraal, coincided with the emergence of the Black Consciousness Movement and the 1976 events.

I really think I'm right in saying what catapulted the formation of the Black Priests' Solidarity Group is the problems I had at St Peter's Seminary with the White staff, the hierarchy in general. The difficulties, the conflicts that ensued between me and the White staff, because they had different perceptions and I had different perceptions about how a seminary should be run. And because I realised I would not be able to win a battle against the White staff who were very influential with the bishops.

WERE YOU THE FIRST BLACK RECTOR?

I was the first Black rector at St Peter's Seminary. The bishops came and gave them a ready ear. They listened to what they were saying. Now this is BC time, and we were not getting pushed by these guys, you know what I mean?

WAS IT ABOUT THE EXTRACURRICULAR LIFE OF THE STUDENTS OR WAS IT WHAT WAS HAPPENING IN THE CLASSROOM.?

It's mostly extracurricular life, students beginning to identify with what's been happening in Soweto, mostly extracurricular life. They had problems with that, not so much with the academic. So I said maybe the best thing would be to enlist the help of some priests.

THOSE WOULD BE THE MARSHALLS.

Exactly, those would be the stroke of freedom [?], Mkhathswa and the others, David Moetapele, Oliphant, those guys. Anthony was gone at that time, Anthony Mabona was already gone at that time, as were people like Drake Koka. But I got people of like-mindedness you see.

HOW DO YOU SPELL IT, IT'S NOT OLIPHANT BUT....?

L-O-U-W-F-A-N-T. So because of the climate, it was easy.

THESE WERE ALL IN THE PRETORIA AREA?

Not only in the Pretoria area. Guys would come as far as Pietersburg, some would come as far as even Natal. When we started organising -- by "we" I mean me and Buti Tlhagale and people like father Shomang in Joburg here. Buti and I were already staff at St Peter's Seminary, and a guy called Monyai. The three of us, Buti Tlhagale, Monyai and I were at St Peters.



Now when we started organising we travelled all over the place, going to Natal; trying to instill the spirit of togetherness, that people must be together. And this kind of pushing [by whites] is out of place and that we shouldn't stand for it. Before we knew what was happening, we had formed a group of Black priests who were really going to be catalysts in trying to fight what was happening in the church, the racism and discrimination that was there. Everything from the allocation of resources within the church, the allocation of personnel within the church, the educational opportunities given to people within the church.

WAS THIS BEFORE JUNE 16, 1976?

No. It was 1976-77.

BUT IT WAS IN THE WORKS BEFORE THE EXPLOSION ?

Yes, exactly. '76-77. So that was the Black Priests' Solidarity Group, and I was the president.

HOW OFTEN DID YOU CONVENE?

We convened at least twice a month at Regina Mundi, and we talked about this and that.

IT WAS A DISCUSSION GROUP ?

Yes. We had a core of people, about 15. We were moving the spirit with 3 people there, myself, Buti and Reverend Shomang (sic). He is still there.

WERE YOU FORMAL IN THE SENSE THAT YOU DREW UP A CONSTITUTION ?

No, there was no constitution. We just had a president to speak.

I remember one of the memorable things we did, apart from organising the march to John Vorster Square, was when the bishop of Pietersburg decided to expel some old Black sisters for some stupid reason, send them home. The Black Priests Solidarity Group met and we said "here's a crisis, our Black sisters are being victimised by those White guys. What are we going to do about that?" They decided, "why don't you go out to Pietersburg, get those sisters (I think there were four or five) and house them at St Peter's Seminary without asking the bishops or anybody?" We did exactly that. We packed them up and said we have room at St Peter's Seminary, you can stay there. They stayed at St Peters free of charge. The bishops were mad! They stayed there 6-10 months.

In the meantime, something happened that really caused such a furore. I'll never forget, one of the sisters got sick and died. Of course she would have to go back to Pietersburg, and be buried in the diocese of Pietersburg where she was expelled. We organised that people from every parish, get into buses, let's go to Pietersburg. And was it something! ! You know that poor bishop will never forget it! And did I preach a sermon there! Those people in Pietersburg will never forget me.

DO YOU HAVE A COPY OF IT ?

It was just coming from my heart [laughter]. The essence of it was that the crime must be commensurate with the punishment. We have written so many letters to the bishop of Pietersburg, begging him, please tell us what the sisters have done in order to be punished the way that they were, because we believe that the punishment must be commensurate with the crime. I don't know how many times we drove to Pietersburg, how many letters we wrote, and the bishop never responded. The punishment must be commensurate with the crime, we kept saying that.

And people were incensed. Older people, Black people in that parish, including the other sisters who remained in Pietersburg, were behind us. I remember whilst carrying that coffin to the graveyard we were singing BC songs: "Senzenina" ["What have we done?"]. It was something you can't believe! Even today the bishop of Pietersburg, when he thinks of BC, he cries!

#### WAS THAT AFTER THE SOWETO UPRISING HAD BEGUN?

It was after the Soweto uprising. Now what has happened to those sisters, they finally got accepted into the diocese of Pretoria. Now they are running this beautiful creche in Tembisa, and they are quite happy now. We saved them from starvation because most of them are old. So they are running this beautiful thing and they are quite happy. They now belong to Pretoria, which is thanks to what the Black Priests' Solidarity Group did for them.

The other thing which is worth mentioning maybe is one of the things the Black Priests' Solidarity Group was really fighting about. That is, why have two seminaries, one for blacks and one for whites? Especially after the joint Pastoral Letter of the Bishops of 1957, which condemned apartheid as unethical and immoral. Now if a Catholic says something is inherently, is intrinsically immoral, *nothing* can justify it. Nothing.

But a few years after that, the bishops built St Peter's Seminary for Blacks as a separate institution. That's the type of thing we were fighting. We had meetings after meetings, bombarding the bishops.

#### IS THERE ANYONE IN THE HIERACHY THAT AGREED WITH THAT?

Not really; it's amazing. People would say, "Ja, but give it time; we need time, things will be okay." But we had made such a hullabaloo that a few years after I had left, those two seminaries got amalgamated. They are now acting as one. In the early '80s. They mix the students. St Peter's is now used as an orientation place for both Whites and Blacks. You go to St John Vianney and you get Whites and Blacks.

#### TO WHAT DO YOU ATTRIBUTE THE DECISION TO DO THAT?

I think at the time when the individual bishops decided they were no longer going to send their students to St Peter's Seminary because of me, they sent them to St John Vianney. It was just recently that the students at St John Vianney invited me to go and speak to them, and I'm thrilled.

#### HOW RECENTLY?

In March 1989.

#### WHAT DID THEY WANT YOU TO SPEAK TO THEM ABOUT?

They said "We're interested in education. Come and tell us about that." I couldn't believe it! I said "Chaps, do you understand what you're trying to say? Did you talk to the staff, do they know that you invited me?" That day that I went and talked to them, there were only two staff members, White staff members, present. And I was surprised that the student body was all Black.

#### THE WHITE STUDENTS JUST DID NOT COME, OR ARE NOT ATTENDING?

Whites are still there, maybe 30-40%. But there was not a single one there. Then after the talk they took me aside, and said " We had such a problem convincing the rector and chaps here that you're okay, you could come." He said they used so many excuses trying to stop us from inviting you here. One excuse was that I was married, and their other excuse was that I was no longer a Catholic any more, I've joined the Anglican Church. Which is not true. [laughter] But what amazed me is that the students went on and I was invited to go and talk. Now I don't know if they would repeat that invitation, but it's possible. It's really something unheard of, that anybody in my position would be invited to go and talk to the seminarians, but they did.

#### WHAT SORT OF REACTION HAS THERE BEEN AMONG THE CHURCH HIERARCHY TO SISTER BERNARD NCUBE? HAS SHE HAD A BATTLE ALL ALONG THE LINE AS WELL?

I think she has problems within her own congregation. Because there are some sisters who are living with her. She is [not in a?] cell. That's not the style of being a sister. Also, I think she has problems with the hierarchy because they don't understand. Now, you ask yourself "Why don't they act?" I think it's more or less like in my case. The hierarchy couldn't act very quickly and very ruthlessly against me because of fear, of a backlash. I think that's more or less it.

BACK TO THE SOLIDARITY GROUP. SO THESE VARIOUS ACTIONS WENT ON DURING THE SOWETO PERIOD, THE MARCH AND SO FORTH. WHAT HAPPENED TO THE GROUP EVENTUALLY?

Very sad, Gail, very sad. Maybe this could be attributed to my style of doing things, I don't know, but its very very sad because when I left in '79, and really joined the world, as it were, that group just folded.

FOLDED UP?

Folded up. That group just folded up.

IT WAS FUNCTIONING UP TO THAT TIME?

Up to that time, yes. It was functioning up to that time. People were meeting regularly up to that time.

STILL FOCUSING LARGELY ON ISSUES WITHIN THE CATHOLIC CHURCH?

Issues within the Catholic Church, but also on issues in the community as well. It just folded up, and that was the end of it. In '79, really you could say that was the end of the Black Priests' Solidarity Group.

TLHAGALE ALSO DID NOT WANT TO KEEP IT GOING?

Tlhgale also somehow lost interest in it. And Shomang. So that in the beginnings of the '80's, say '82/'83, probably '82, then, Frank Chikane felt we had to have some kind of clerical, religious-clerical fraternity, where we'll tackle issues in the community. And we formed together, myself and Chikane, what we called the Ministers United For Christian Co-Responsibility, MUCCOR.

WHAT DOES CO-RESPONSIBILITY IMPLY?

Meaning they are co-responsible, as Ministers we are co-responsible. Instead of operating as denominational, in our denominational department, we are co-responsible for our communities.

SO, ECUMENICAL?

It's ecumenical. Not a very large group. So you could almost say, that MUCCOR is really a continuation of the Black Priests' Solidarity Group, in a way.

IT'S NON-CATHOLIC?

Ja, it's not Catholic.

IT'S JUST INFORMAL?

It's informal, a fraternity. And it's still performing and still very loose, but it's still performing some very good function in the community here. They are meeting here almost every third Friday of the month. Its basically a priests' fraternity or a pastors' fraternity. It's really a continuation of what the Black Priests' Solidarity Group was trying to do.

FOR MUTUAL SUPPORT

Ja. To show its significance, for instance, in February last year, when the different organizations, UDF, AZAPO, and so forth, got restricted, it was MUCCOR which continually tried to talk on the issue of rents with the Soweto City Council, with those people. It is MUCCOR who met the students of SOSCO and talked about education. It was MUCCOR which was there spearheading the idea of forming a delegation, for instance, last year I was heading a delegation that talked to the Department of Education and Training on the questions of crisis in education. Its still MUCCOR which is spearheading that kind of bringing the parents, the teachers, the principals and the students together. It is still MUCCOR which is doing this

IT CROSSES THE BC-UDF LINE?

It crosses, yes, exactly. It does.

AND WHO ARE THE KEY PEOPLE IN IT?

It's still me -- Frank of course had to leave because of his SACC affiliation -- unfortunately. So it's still me there, and I'm still the leading...

HE'S JUST TOO BUSY, OR -- ?

He's just too busy I think, he's just too busy. He can't do it, can't really do it, he's just too busy. It's still me in a way, although I'm not the chairman, simply because I refused to be the chairman. Reverend Masemola, who is an Anglican priest, is the chairman. He comes out from Randfontein. He's the chairman of MUCCOR. It's a loose structure, we don't want to form it into anything very, very tight.

WHAT'S THE AVERAGE ATTENDANCE?

It varies, but the average attendance would be about 10-15 people. That is, people who come in regularly, continually. Then others come in the next time we meet, but it's a core of about 15 priests, mostly in Soweto.

You could say that Black Priests' Solidarity Group as it were is really being continued in the form of MUCCOR today. I'm still there. I'm still operating as a priest although I have no legal standing in terms of being a priest, I don't have a congregation.

YOU ARE NOT A MINISTER

I am not a minister. That's about my life, in short.

I KNOW IT'S A COMPLETELY DIFFERENT GROUP, BUT HOW WOULD SOMETHING LIKE THIS BE DIFFERENT FROM, SAY, IDAMASA?

I think IDAMASA is apolitical, whereas these guys wouldn't shy away from political issues. IDAMASA would be apolitical, completely apolitical.

BUT THIS IS EXPLICITLY POLITICAL ?

It's explicitly, ja, because we talk about ministry in conflict situations; it's one of the basic things. Ministry in a conflict situation. And they cooperate very very closely with the Institute for Contextual Theology. We work very closely with that because of the inspiration of Frank Chikane from the Institute of Contextual Theology. You could almost say the Institute of Contextual Theology has adopted MUCCOR, in a way. MUCCOR doesn't need much money to function, but now and then--

IT'S A NETWORK..

Ja, it's a network, yes.

IS THERE ANY TENSION BETWEEN UDF AND THE INSTITUTE FOR CONTEXTUAL THEOLOGY?

No.

HAS THE ICT HAS BEEN VERY BLACK CONSCIOUSNESS ORIENTED ?

Just the opposite.

IS IT?

Yes, just the opposite. Just the opposite; because BC had as its theological "underbelly" Black Theology. Now Black Theology is contrasted with "Contextual Theology".

OH! IT IS?

Yes, which is very funny.

I'M SURE IT'S VERY BASIC BUT CAN YOU EXPLAIN?

For instance today -- During the time of the Black Priests' Solidarity Group, and during the time of SASO, during the time of the Black People's Convention and so on, Black Theology -- we were the black theologians. Manas Buthelezi was a black theologian, Smangaliso Mkhathshwa, Pat, was a black theologian, and so forth. If today you went to ICT and said, "Pat, what about Black Theology? How is it progressing?" They would say, "What is Black Theology?" He would say that, because he does not believe anymore in Black Theology, he believes in Liberation Theory.

Now, Black Theology is tied up and associated with what was happening in North America, during James Cone and the Black Panther Movement, the Black Pride Movement, the black is beautiful thing. In other words, it's a theology that goes along with the analysis of the South African conflict, and maybe the analysis of the North American conflict, as having racism as its basic ingredient. So it's an analysis which says part of the [problem?] is racism, therefore you have Black Theology.

Now if you change the analysis, as it changed after, since 1977, when people like Lybon Mabasa and Ish Mkhabela tried to resuscitate the Black People's Convention by bringing about AZAPO, and immediately you could see a groundswell of opposition. Saying you don't need that anymore, you need something else. Why? Because somehow the analysis has changed. The analysis says the basic ingredient is no more black versus white, but is labor versus capital. And this grew and grew.

Once you change the analysis in terms of labor versus capital, then you don't talk in terms of Black Theology but you talk in terms of Liberation Theology. Because part of the point of Liberation Theology is economic dependency, and to do away with that, liberate people from economic dependency. Now ICT, what it should have said really was the Institute of Liberation Theology, because "contextual" is a generic term. Even black theologians will regard their theologizing as contextual.

IT'S NOT ETERNAL; IT APPLIES IN A CERTAIN CONTEXT.

It's in a context, right. Feminist Theologians will regard their theologizing as being contextual. Liberation Theology will regard their theologians as being contextual, so they use a generic term. But I think what they wanted to do was to use Liberation Theology to distinguish it from Black Theology, which focusses on race.

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[ NON-VERBATIM --Tape less distinct] . . . This happened after October 1977, when there was an attempt to revive black consciousness. I have asked myself why. And I think it was because after Soweto, a lot of youngsters left the country and joined ANC. Though ANC is black in composition, it's dependent on whites. So the talk of blacks-on-their-own makes them uncomfortable. So that had to be modified, de-emphasized.

When BC ideas came up, communism was banned. The ideas were not "available". But at other times these ideas were accessible "through the northern suburbs"; university people become influential in directing things. The key publications were *Work in Progress*, and also literature coming from overseas. So before we knew what's what, this new ideology had come up.

WAS THERE A FEELING THAT BC WAS INADEQUATE BECAUSE THE GOVERNMENT HAD JUST BEEN ABLE TO SHOOT EVERYONE DOWN IN THE STREETS DURING SOWETO?

It's true that black consciousness did not have an adequate response to what the state was doing. But also perhaps black consciousness did not have a very profound understanding of what the conflict was in South Africa, they said. It defined the conflict in terms of "epiphenomena", they said, when they started to talk about labor and capital.

And this was at the time of the Wiehahn Commission, and the trade unions were coming up. And it seemed to make sense now, to make this analytical shift.

BUT DOESN'T THE IDEOLOGICAL SHIFT TAKE PLACE BEFORE THE REAL EMERGENCE OF THE BLACK UNIONS AFTER WIEHAHN?

You're right.

HOW MUCH MIGHT HAVE BEEN A SENSE OF DISILLUSIONMENT WITH BC?

I think it's more that people discovered suddenly that there was this other ideological thing that seemed to explain things.

The controversy was largely precipitated by the publication of the Oxford History of South Africa in 1971, which epitomized the liberal interpretation. Then the attack on the liberal interpretations began. Harrison Wright's book relates all of this, about how many reviews there were of the Oxford History, critiques by Martin Legassick, Shula Marks, Stanley Trapido. They directly challenged the interpretations and the values of the liberal historians.

WEREN'T THESE DEBATES CONFINED MAINLY TO THE UNIVERSITY COMMUNITIES? HOW DID IT FILTER THROUGH TO OTHER PEOPLE?

Some of those kids from the townships are in Lusaka and Dar es Salaam, and they're with the ANC.

BUT HOW DID THE IDEAS GET BACK INTO THE TOWNSHIPS?

I can only mention the example of one chap I know, Jabu Ngwenya. He had little formal education, was self-educated. [But he was spreading/absorbing these ideas.] He is here, but heavily restricted. He hasn't done time on Robben Island, but he's been many times in detention. He was involved in consumer boycotts after 1984, and the Release Mandela Campaign. I see him now and then. He'd be one guy who'd be very useful to you. He was previously a very staunch BC person. I met him through a Zionist priest, Castro Mayathula, a very powerful Zionist priest. Jabu used to be next to him all the time. That's how I met Jabu. He would be very knowledgeable among the UDF youth.

BACK TO THE INSTITUTE OF CONTEXTUAL THEOLOGY?

Frank Chikane was the secretary general there before he went to SACC. He's a very strong UDF person. Buti Tlhagale is very BC; he's never been close to the ICT. Pat Mkhathshwa is strong UDF. At one time JS used to be on the steering committee there, but not now.

Albert Nolan is a committed intellectual. Very influential in the ICT and among black churchmen. He writes beautifully. He was [key?] in writing the Kairos document. JS was secretary to him but that doesn't matter. We know this, but we don't say it (that a white was important in the drafting).

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JOHN SEBIDI - supplements to the tape of July 3, 1989

My view is that Black Consciousness and UDF are complementary. A true democrat will need to accept that both are necessary viewpoints -- now and in the future -- in South Africa. Some say now that Black Consciousness is a minority point of view, so why don't you join the UDF? JS rejects that, and believes in democracy -- that minority viewpoints should also exist, be heard, represented, and respected.

JS was never PAC. He never did anything political until he came back from Rome in 1975. The "no bail" thing in 1977 had nothing to do with PAC.

Sebidi is a mediator trusted by both sides. Meetings take place at Funda. He doesn't belong to any political organization.

JS close to both Chikane and Rev Joe Seoka (of Black Consciousness). In the Soweto Rent Delegation, Tutu and JS play this role -- they're the only two non-UDF. There's a bit of tension; for example, someone suggested getting the Urban Foundation to brief the group, others said no and asked what was UDF's position on Urban Foundation? Chikane then said, "Let's not discuss that," and it was dropped.