



# Dehonians USA

PRIESTS OF THE SACRED HEART

December 6, 2023

Dear Brothers,

In June 1923, Pope Pius XI asked Fr. Dehon to send missionaries to South Africa, and the Catholic Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith urged the German Province to assign members to the region. Fr. Dehon responded favorably to the request. As a result, the first SCJ missionaries from Germany, led by Fr. Francis Demont, arrived on November 28, 1923.



Catholicism is relatively small in South Africa, about 10% of the population. The number of SCJs in this province remains relatively low, with around 11 members – 13 with the two SCJ bishops – from various countries in the congregation, including Poland, India, Zambia, and the United States. However, there is a promising sign for the future of the province as there are 17 students in various stages of formation. This is due to their provincial chapter's decision to recruit vocations outside of South Africa, particularly Zambia, where they have found relative success. Two of their

students were among the six SCJs ordained to the diaconate on December 3, 2023.

South Africa is renowned for its natural beauty and cultural diversity. Its history, however, is marked by apartheid, a system of racial segregation that lasted from 1948 to 1991. While in Johannesburg, a group of us SCJs visited the apartheid museum to learn about this dark history and the fight for racial justice. Recently, I reviewed two books that helped me understand how racism works and recognize its similarities in both South Africa and the United States. In *Subversive Habits*, Shannen Dee Williams exposes the US Catholic Church's participation in slaveholding and racial segregation. For instance, the Jesuits of Georgetown University sold slaves from their Maryland plantations to save the university from

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financial ruin. Black girls and young Black women who desired religious life were not welcomed into white religious communities. In *Deconstructing Racism: A Path Toward Lasting Change*, Barbara Crain Major and Joseph Barndt analyze how racism has evolved and propose steps to dismantle its roots. Dismantling racism should be systematic, including creating a well-trained and officially authorized institutional team, building a strategic plan with transformational goals, and maintaining the institution's ongoing anti-racism agenda.

Racism has a profound impact on the dignity of the person and the psyche of the nation, wherever it occurs. Outside the apartheid museum is a very visible quote from former President Nelson Mandela etched on the wall: "To be free is not merely to cast off one's chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others." How the SCJs in South Africa respect and enhance the freedom of others in their respective ministries is something that I would like to learn more. According to Fr. Peter Surdel, the provincial superior of South Africa, the SCJs were frowned upon by some white people – paradoxically by ministers of the Dutch Reformed Church inimical to the Catholic Church – for ministering to, living with, and defending the rights and dignity of the black community.



Fr. Peter Surdel, SCJ  
Provincial Superior of South Africa

Our presence in South Africa is born from the Gospel witnessed by many. Historically, the province's mission has always been to be with the indigenous peoples. We have served in the poorest areas of the country. Early ministries centered on parish work, education, healthcare, and job training. We also established the very first seminary in South Africa. Today, the province's ministries include mostly pastoral ministry and the formation of pan-African SCJ students.

Mary Gorski has written about the history and mission of the South African Province. To access it, click on the following link: <https://dehoniansusa.org/feature-stories/multicultural-ministry-to-a-multicultural-land/>

Fraternally,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'V. Surdel'.