

A Time to Forgive

Fr. Louis Blondel, M.Afr, was brutally murdered in a botched robbery in his mission, in Diepsloot a township south west of Pretoria, South Africa in the early hours of Monday December 7th 2009. The robbers, all teenagers had gained access to the mission through a window, awakened a fellow missionary in the house (Fr. Guido Bourgeois); helped themselves to a watch, mobile phone, two second-hand computers and the equivalent of \$5; when Fr. Louis was also awakened by the commotion, as he opened his bedroom door to investigate, a single shot rang out that killed him instantly. The assailant and other four ran in panic!

The police reacted efficiently and swiftly and within 24 hours had arrested all five youth. The killer immediately owned up to his hideous crime; a position he would continue to take during his trial. In fact, there was no trial as he admitted guilt; there were only arguments in litigation of sentence. In the end he was convicted on four counts: murder, robbery, possession of a stolen gun and possession of ammunition. In cross-examination, Fr. Sean was asked by the defence attorney if he forgave him and he said no: arguing that first there had to be justice but that down the line a day might come to forgive. On September 7th 2011 the accused (Nelson Malope) was given a sentence of 32 years; 14 of which would run concurrently, which was an effective 18 years sentence.

In the course of 2013 the condemned young man through the intermediary of his sister approached Fr. Sean saying that he wanted to be forgiven. He explained it was not as easy as that as those closest to the deceased needed to be consulted. Fr. Louis's family in France explained their brother had effectively two families, his biological family and his missionary family and if his fellow missionaries in South Africa were willing to forgive the killer, they would agree. At a meeting of the confrères in the South African Sector the issue was put to them and the majority agreed that Nelson should be forgiven in a meaningful ceremony.

The prison authorities were consulted and were happy to facilitate such a ceremony under their Victims/Offenders Program. Three confrères (Fr. Didier Michon, Fr. Didier Lemaire and Fr. Sean O'Leary) representing the family in France and the confrères in South Africa met the prisoner in Zonderwater Prison, near Pretoria on March 12th 2014. The period of Lent had been consciously chosen for such a moment.

The prison authorities, in the persons of the One in Charge, the Social Worker, Psychologist and Chaplain asked to be present and actively participated. The prisoner (now 22 years of age) was asked to tell what happened in his own words after which questions of clarity would be asked, followed by prayers of

forgiveness. In a calm voice, he told the story of how the gun had been found in a tavern, how the motive was to rob computers in the parish house, how they had been drinking and smoking drugs, how he felt reluctant to steal from a Church, how he had panicked when confronted by Fr. Louis, how this was the first time he had shot a gun and how terrible he felt after the shooting. Indeed he showed a great deal of remorse some four years after the tragic event. In answering questions it became very clear that he had no intention to murder; simply an intention to rob. He explained that from the very beginning when he got arrested, he took full responsibility for his actions.

All present prayed over the young man asking God to forgive him and set his soul free. The text from Mathew's gospel of: "ask and you will receive" was cited. This was a very moving moment for all present, including the prison authorities.

Nelson is studying in prison and hopes to complete the Secondary School Certificate in two years' time, as he had dropped out of school at an early age. His intention is to eventually come out of jail a better person than when he went in. The psychologist and social worker will write a report about the ceremony for the Victims/Offenders Programme which will be included as well in his dossier for Parole. The Missionaries of Africa present pledged to support him in this endeavour with their prayers! Though, still facing many more years in jail, Nelson has now a certain feeling of having been set free.

Seán O'Leary

Didier Michon

Didier Lemaire

Missionaries of Africa, Edenglen, March 2014