

The Salesians in Swaziland:

In 1952 the Bishop of Swaziland, an Italian who knew the Salesians well, requested that they come to his diocese to set up a high school for the Catholic boys; the German Dominican Sisters were already educating Catholic girls.

Three Salesians arrived in December 1952 and first took on the running of the Little Flower Primary school – it had just emerged from the Bishop’s garage, where a German nun single handed was running the entire school. The new high school was completed and occupied in 1953 – at three stories, the tallest building in Swaziland.

At first there was a great reluctance on the part of the local parents to send their children to school – the Salesians actually went out visiting the local homesteads trying to persuade the parents to recognize the value of education. Among those who came to school, many later became leaders in various sectors of the Swazi government, business and social life.

Father Pat Ahern arrived in 1962. Times were really hard. Still under the control of the Salesian Provincial Office in London, the Swazi Salesians felt that they had been forgotten about. There are so many tales illustrating the poverty they lived under: sneaking around corners with the wheelbarrow to shop in some business to which they were not yet indebted. Father Pat served in various positions both on the teaching staff and in the Salesian community, but even from these days his reputation as a math teacher was already being recognized at national level.

By 1970 the high school had a staff of 25, twenty of whom were Salesians, and a student body of about 300 boys. The Little Flower Primary had morphed into Salesian Primary school, with less than 200 students. Since many of the students came from South Africa, there was a boarding section in the early days. This was closed in 1970 because of the ever-increasing number of local students wanting an education. By now the school had achieved an excellent reputation for its exam results, as Swaziland was still following the English GCE exam system. The school had also gained a reputation as an ANC school – the anti-apartheid African National Congress, which by now had chosen the armed path to liberation. Father Pat is featured in a recently published book about the armed struggle in Swaziland: “43 Trelawny Park,” with an entire chapter dedicated to Salesian High School.

During these years the Salesians, especially Fr Pat Fleming with great help from Father Pat Ahern, was literally building the Cathedral Parish schools, all eight of them. This meant long hauls with building materials over dirt tracks up and over the mountains. Father Pat spent many a week-end saying Mass in these schools long before any of the present chapels were built.

In 1978 the schools celebrated 25 years of contributing to the education of Swazi youth. Both schools were at the height of their achievement: between them there were 1,200 students: our results were always among the best in Swaziland and our past pupils continued to be successful in their careers. Many of the princes from the royal family were educated at the schools and many of the South African students, after liberation in 1994, held very high positions in the corporate world. When the Swazis say “ We Swazis are running corporate South Africa”, they are referring to past pupils of Salesian.

By 1988, there were 1,600 students at the two Salesian schools. Due to the decline in missionaries coming to work at the school, the schools were handed over to the local community in 1992. While it was deemed inevitable, since we did not have the personnel to run the school, there was divided opinion about whether the administration should have been handed over entirely. Most aspects of life of the

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school went into decline. While the long Salesian tradition maintained the good name for some years to come, some intervention had to be made in the early 2000s to bring back the Salesian ethos to the school. This has been successfully carried out and the educational reputation is again ascending.

In 1978, the Salesians initiated a new project for marginalised youth, Manzini Youth Care. It dealt initially with the rising number of street children appearing from the increasing amount of broken families in the early days of independence. This project now has beneficial contact with well over 2,000 children on a daily basis. Father Pat took a keen interest in this work, daily meeting with and helping the many young people who could not go to school, who had no food or who were abandoned - mainly because of the country's increasing poverty. 70% of the population live below the poverty line.

The past pupils of Salesian work in Swaziland are found in all areas of influence: the last Prime Minister, the present Deputy Prime Minister, two Cabinet Ministers and several Members of Parliament attended Salesian. The present, long-standing Governor of the Bank of Swaziland is also Salesian. Father Pat was best known as a math teacher. A large number also populate the professional areas, as the school has a high reputation for its math and science results.