

William Richard Ainsworth (1908 - 2005)

First Salesian Provincial Delegate in Southern Africa- A Leader for Grown-ups.

*George Willia Dickson

On 28 October 1957 Fr Thomas Hall, the Provincial of the London Salesian Province announced the appointment of Fr William Richard Ainsworth as Provincial Delegate for the Salesian communities in South Africa and Swaziland.¹ This was in many ways a new and untested role for the English Province. He wrote:

It has of course long been the desire of the Superiors to give greater development to the work there by more careful cultivation of local vocations.

For this purpose, with the consent and encouragement of the Superiors, Father Ainsworth comes to you as Delegate with all the powers necessary for the discharge of his new duties- for all practical purposes they are those of the Provincial and this by lawful delegation.

Be assured that his one desire will be to share with you the labours, the hopes, the fears and the problems in your country, to unify and direct the common effort. I know you will give Father Ainsworth your support and Salesian Cooperation. His presence will help sustain your family spirit, religious discipline and that spirit of piety from which all happiness and solid development flow.²

Between his appointment in 1957 and his circular announcing his replacement in 1966, Fr Ainsworth pursued a path of leadership that focussed on building up the necessary structures of a local Noviciate and House of Studies that would allow the fostering of South African vocations. In a context of extreme financial difficulty he managed to sustain the expansion of the Salesian work in its various Mission contexts. In a difficult political and social situation dominated by racial tension, prompted by the imposition of hard line Apartheid policies in South Africa and the growing demand for self-determination and Independence in Africa as a whole, Fr Ainsworth managed to promote or encourage the development of the Salesian Mission outreach to poorer Coloured and African populations. He strenuously worked towards closer links between the Irish and South African Salesians, as a way of renewing and sustaining the development of the work by means of an influx of Irish missionaries zealous to reach the soul of Africa and initiated the entry of the Salesian Sisters to South Africa. This article seeks to sketch the chief characteristics of the Salesian missionary leadership of Fr Ainsworth, especially in his early years as the provincial delegate of southern Africa.

Introduction

Fr William Richard Ainsworth³ (5.5.1908 to 5.6.2005) was the first Provincial Delegate for the Salesians in South Africa and Swaziland (1957-66; 1970-73) during the critical years of South

¹ The Province of Southern Africa, has its archives at the Provincial House in Booysens, Johannesburg. Nearly all the letters that form the basis of this article are to be found in this archive in numbered box files, denoting the various Superiors with WRA standing for William Richard Ainsworth.

² WRA Box 3: Hall to Rectors and Confreres of the Salesian Houses – South Africa (Oct 28th 1957).

³ GBR Archives, Ainsworth File: William Richard Ainsworth. Born at 104, Halliwell Rd, Bolton on 5 May 1908. Baptised at St Mary's Bolton. Father was John Edward Ainsworth; and mother, Hannah Ainsworth (nee Morrison) who

Africa's struggle with Apartheid. He brought to this new office a gift for leadership, a depth of human understanding and a breadth of missionary vision that saw new possibilities for growth of the Salesian Mission in South Africa, beyond the white Catholic community, in cooperation with the Irish Salesians and the Salesian Sisters which was to lead towards its development as an independent Southern African Salesian Province.

At heart, Fr William Ainsworth was deeply rooted in his traditional Lancashire Catholic background. He was passionate about Cricket and the values of 'fair-play', honesty, openness and respect for others. He was deeply attached to his faith and his vocation as a Salesian of Don Bosco and a priest. At the same time his childhood experience of the trauma of being an immigrant to America, who lost his mother at the age of five and having to be placed in a convent orphanage in New York while his father earned the money to take the family home shaped his sensitivity to the plight of the poor and underprivileged. He endured the Blitz in London, supported crucially a very frail Provincial, Fr Couche during the war, but had no time for authoritarianism in any context. He believed that people should speak their mind and those in authority should listen and take their views into consideration. Fr Ainsworth was a leader for grown-ups, and despised childish authoritarianism.

The Challenging Context

The South African context into which Fr Ainsworth entered when he arrived as Delegate in 1957 was not an easy one. There was increasing racial tension amidst the imposition of hardline Apartheid by the increasingly extreme National Party under Henrik Verworde (1958-66), and the beginning of the armed struggle after the Sharpeville massacre in 1960. The Salesians had been in the Cape Town area, South Africa from 1896 but only after the Second World War had they begun work in Johannesburg, Daleside and Swaziland. But these communities had little connection with the Provincial in London or with one another. Fr Ainsworth's job was to change that.

The year 1948 was a watershed year in South African History. The Afrikaner Nationalist Party led by Dr Malan was elected to government and introduced legislation that institutionalized racial discrimination in every aspect of social life, including a prohibition of marriage between non-whites and whites and the sanctioning of whites-only jobs. In 1950 the Population Registration Act required that all South Africans be classified into one of three categories: white, black (African) or coloured (including people of mixed race and Indians and Asians). Non-compliance with the race laws was dealt with harshly. All blacks were required to carry pass books containing fingerprints, photo and information when accessing non-black areas.

died on 13 May 1913 in New York. Sisters were Edith, Helena (Humphrey) and Christine (Helper of the Holy Souls). The family emigrated to the USA in 1910 but when Hannah died, his father had to leave the children in the care of the American Sisters of Charity at their Manhattan Island convent and earn enough to pay for their return fares. William was educated at various schools but between 1921-6 in Alderney where his sister was a nun. From 1926-29 he was an engineering apprentice in Stalybridge and was introduced to the lay Franciscans who encouraged him to try his vocation. He began his aspirantate at Cowley in 1929. He entered the Noviciate in Cowley in 1931, was professed in 1932. He was assistant to the aspirants from 1932-34 while studying philosophy. He did his practical training at St Patrick's in Malta and studied Theology at Blaisdon from 1937-41. He was editor of *The Help of Christians* Magazine at Battersea (1941-43). He was Provincial Secretary from 1943-52, and then Rector of Theologate at Blaisdon 1952-54, Melchet Court 1954-56, Bolton 1956-57. He was Provincial Delegate of Southern Africa from 1957-66; was at Lysterfield, Australia from 1966-69 then again Provincial Delegate from 1970-73. From 1974 to his death in 2005 he was at Bolton.

In 1951 the Bantu Authorities Act established a basis for ethnic governments in African reserves known as homelands with the aim of excluding Africans from South African citizenship. In 1953, the Public Safety and Criminal Law Amendment Act empowered the Government to declare states of emergency more easily and stringent penalties for anyone protesting against or supporting the repeal of the race laws. The Bantu Education Act of the same year progressively withdrew the government subsidies upon which the extensive system of mission schools relied upon, about 15% of which were Catholic, and resulted in the closure of many of the schools.

Politically, the Sharpeville incident was crucial. In 1960 a large group of Africans in Sharpeville outside Johannesburg refused to carry their pass books and began to protest outside a police station. The Government declared a state of emergency in reaction to this protest which ended with 69 people dead and 187 people wounded when the police opened fire on the protesters. The emergency lasted 160 days and included detention without trial for up to six months.

Around the time Fr Ainsworth set foot in South Africa, the process of decolonization began in earnest with Great Britain granting Independence to Ghana in 1957, followed by most of the rest of Africa, as had been foreseen in the Atlantic Charter which Roosevelt and Churchill had signed towards the end of the War as a blueprint for the future. In this process the establishment of effective systems of elementary and secondary education was often seen as crucial and critical. The Churches who were often already on the ground and had access to missionary resources in terms of teachers and finance from abroad, played a significant role. Part of the Apartheid regime's education policy was to gradually withdraw financial support for the Mission schools which primarily served the African population and where the Catholic Church was heavily involved.⁴

In South Africa and the great protectorates of Basutoland (Lesotho), Bechuanaland (Botswana) and Swaziland, Catholics represented a tiny minority, both among the whites and among the Africans.⁵ The Dutch Reform Church was the religion of the vast majority of the Afrikaner speaking whites and the Anglicans among the English speakers. Catholics were very much regarded as aliens and uncivilised. Among a Catholic population of about 150,000, it was estimated that there were 5,000 Sisters and 34 dioceses, many of them very poor and rural.⁶

The Catholic Church too had its share of ups and downs. Though Southern Africa had already had an Apostolic Delegation from 1922, it was not until 1951 that the South African Ecclesial hierarchy was actually established. Pope Pius XI, the Pope of the Missions, had set out his vision for the African Mission in his encyclical *Rerum Ecclesiae* in 1926, encouraging the development of local vocations and native African bishops. The various missions had been entrusted to different religious orders in order to promote this development. In 1948 the advisory Southern African Bishops Conference had been set up and by 1951 Pius XII judged the situation urgent enough to set up South Africa's Hierarchy, promoting the various Vicariate Apostolic into full blown dioceses.⁷ A

⁴W.E. Brown, *The Catholic Church in South Africa*. (P.J. Kennedy and sons, New York, 1960) pp. 346-347.

⁵ Brown, p. 338. "... in the area with which this book is concerned, the Union of South Africa, South West Africa, and the Protectorates, there are according to the most recent estimates, sixteen and a half million people of whom little over three million are of European origin. Among the total population there are 1.2 million Catholics of whom just over 12 per cent are of European origin and nearly 80% are Bantu; Indian Catholics account for 0.6 percent and the remainder are coloureds. In the population as a whole, therefore about 7 per cent are Catholics and among those about of European origin about 5 per cent. To be more precise, the Catholics of European origin number just over 147,000 in a total population of European origin of 3,000,000."

⁶Brown, p. 338; the figures Fr Ainsworth gives are for Catholics of European origin.

⁷Brown, p. 328ff.

distinctive sign of this maturing of the local Church was the Southern African Catholic Bishops' Conference statement condemning apartheid, in July 1957.

*The basic principle of Apartheid is the preservation of what is called white civilization. This is identified with white supremacy, which means the enjoyment by white men only of full political, social, economic and cultural rights. Persons of other races must be satisfied with what the white man judges can be conceded without endangering his privileged position. White supremacy is an absolute. It overrides justice. It transcends the teaching of Christ. It is a purpose dwarfing any other purpose, an end justifying any means.*⁸

The statement recognised that Catholics themselves were still effectively racially divided, if not in theory but certainly in practice and also, though the statement was pronounced by the South African Bishops in the Conference, they were deeply aware that most of the Catholic clergy and Sisters in South Africa were foreign missionaries whose legal position was actually quite insecure.⁹

In this volatile socio-political and-ecclesiastical situation Fr Ainsworth strove to live out his missionary vocation. He had edited the Salesian Magazine, *The Help of Christians* that often promoted the missions, and saw in his appointment to South Africa a chance to join in this missionary effort. Much earlier in his youth he was inspired by the missionary outlook that had gripped the Church and the Salesians in England who set up the Missionary College at Shrigley Park in 1929.

However, the challenging time demanded prudence. Letters from Fr Ainsworth referring to the political situation are usually couched in very general terms, probably because of Salesian tradition of avoiding politics but also fearing that any ill-advised comments might end up in the wrong hands. However he did write to Fr Andrew Keogh thanking him for a donation of £70 in the aftermath of the Sharpeville shootings in 1960.

As you know our work at Bremersdorp in this rapidly and indeed violently changing Africa is vitally important for the future of the country...

I do not usually talk politics in my letters; it may not be safe to do so anyway. The tragedy at Vereeniging (which in Afrikaans means union or association...some union!) took place near Daleside; Vereeniging and Vanderbyl Park are the nearest towns to Daleside. We have been rather wondering if reprisals against isolated farms such as ours may not follow the massacre. True one must not be misled by newspaper reports; a hundred and fifty young policemen were faced, it is said by 20,000 natives; nine policemen had recently been slaughtered in Durban at a similar riot; and no doubt at all the police were determined it should not happen to them without a fight; twenty thousand men advancing on one is an awesome sight; true other means should if available have been chosen to stop them; the senior officers seem to have mismanaged the affair or just given way to panic; no one knows...

Trouble makers organised two spots of bother at Bremersdorp last year and I know none of the Community went to bed that night; human life means little to the Native; they kill one

⁸Brown, p. 348.

⁹Brown, p. 351. We are hypocrites if we condemn apartheid in South African Society but condone it in our own institutions.

another without mercy and with little provocation. It is estimated that about four times as many natives die from quarrels among themselves in Johannesburg and area as there are murders in England a year. Not much is said it happens so often. A favourite trick is for a gang to 'work' the crowded native trains on pay night; you pay up or you get a sharpened bicycle wheel spoke through you; or you get thrown out on the line; this happens it is said weekly; no wonder there is apartheid on trains! Many of the Africans are wise and sensible, but thousands of others are but half a step from savagery. Injustice there is against them, injustice that makes one's blood boil; but a balanced judgement on the whole set up is not easy to make; there are far too many factors to consider. Meanwhile the whole aspect has changed; old missionaries tell me their work is immeasurably more difficult now than it was ever before.¹⁰

He also is quite sanguine when he writing to the English provincial in 1959 thanking him for sending three Irish Novices about the risks involved, but feels that Catholics in South Africa run the least risk because the natives know that missionaries are here to help and not to exploit them, though he is realistic enough to recognise that in a riot there is only black and white.

We shall receive them with open arms; they will find many from their own country here, the language is the same (although they will have to start at once to learn Afrikaans) the food is the same, and indeed in general better than in England; if nay go back, it is because they have other plans in view. There is a tough political atmosphere here and a chance of getting one's throat cut by enraged Natives; but that is a risk we all take and the Catholics out here run the least risk; most of the Natives know we are out to help them and not exploit them...of course, if things warm up there is only White and Black in a riot... however there is no real risk for the moment and your lads can take the same remote risks as many Sisters and Brothers and countless Protestant missionaries do with their wives and families; so on that score there is nothing very alarming..."¹¹

While Fr Ainsworth outlook definitely echoes the fears of many white people at the time, he is also very aware that the Government does not want Catholics educating the Natives and in one very unguarded moment writes of Dr Verwoerd as a Nazi.

Yes things out here are not very reassuring. Langa is down the road from Lansdowne, where the police station is GHQ: Lansdowne Rd Station. And of course, Vereeniging is the nearest town to Daleside; today Vereeniging is a dead city; no native works...none has worked since the shooting and today the 28th, the stoppage is nationwide; Native gangs are very active and stopping or threatening with death any native who does work, especially in Vereeniging. Tomorrow it is hoped after the day of mourning things will improve if the Government. does not commit any more stupidities; some of them ought to be shot! True there are two sides of the story and the Cato Manor Massacre of nine young policemen obviously caused the Sharpsville men to act first. Verworde who at first refused an enquiry; later agreed- a bitter Nazi-minded, Dutch-German bigot.¹²

¹⁰WRA Box2: Ainsworth-Keogh (23.3.60).

¹¹WRA Box 2 : Ainsworth Williams (17.7.59).

¹²WRA Box 2:Ainsworth Jackson (28.3.60).

While his use of the term 'native' and his political outlook is certainly a hangover from Empire, his traditional 'English' concern for 'fair play' and his deep Catholic roots make him aware of the terrible injustice that the South African government is inflicting on the natives, and he is aware that the Catholic Mission's commitment to educating the natives is the right step in raising African self-awareness and independence, no matter how difficult that is. At the same time he is also aware of the hostility that the Catholic minority experience from the predominant Dutch Reformed population.

Initial attempts at a new foundation and struggles

One of his first missionary initiatives, for which he got into subsequent difficulties, was to respond to the request that had originally come from Bishop Haene to Fr Hall, the English Provincial in 1954 for the Salesians to come to his Fort Victoria Vicariate in Southern Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) to take on a well-established school for African Boys at Gokomere Mission.¹³ Upon his arrival in 1957 Fr Ainsworth began to seriously explore the possibilities because this was a chance to work directly for African youngsters without all the complications of the Apartheid regime. As the negotiations developed he sent Fr Gerard Libera in 1961 to spend three months in the new Diocese of Gwelo where he reported very positively about the possibilities. He suggested that the Salesians should think of founding a Junior Technical School rather than a Trade School as in Cape Town, which would run into all the difficulties of not being recognised by the Trade Unions and the lack of opportunities for its students, apart from the higher levels of costs. A Junior Technical School would cater to a wider circle of students as the end would not be so ambitious, could develop two streams, general engineering and commercial subjects, and could later be adapted to the changing conditions of a developing economy. Fr Ainsworth was enthusiastic but finally when the project was submitted to Turin, he received a definite 'no' and a rebuke from the superiors.

He wrote to the Bishop of Gwelo

The reply from Turin has now arrived and I regret to say has brought naught for our consolation, yours or mine. It in fact amounts to a reprimand in terms which loyalty to my Society and to my Superiors forbids me to elaborate upon. I can only allow myself to say that the terms of the letter are definite and humiliating.

I suppose I made the mistake of moving too soon and too quickly. ...

All I can say is now that I am ready to risk a further reprimand by keeping the subject open; I am not prepared to go back too easily: I feel we should go forward come what may. All things good start with pain and difficulty; this venture in Rhodesia will be no exception. All I can promise you is that I shall keep on trying and shall never give up hope.¹⁴

In many ways this last paragraph illustrates Fr Ainsworth's sense of mission, fairness and justice and while respecting the decision of the Superiors, keeps the question open, a mature and wise response!

¹³ WRA Box 2 Ainsworth – Ziggiotti (26.7.59): *Ecco la storia di Gwelo*

¹⁴ Ainsworth – Bishop of Gwelo (13.2.58).

Nurturing vocations

Fr Ainsworth was clear from the beginning of his mission that at the heart of his work must be the cultivation of local vocations for the work in Southern Africa. To this end he determined that as the Salesians built up the new school buildings at Daleside, they would convert the old house into a Noviciate and house of Philosophy. His argument was that the Salesian South African houses had never had the benefit of any ‘clerics’ or Salesians training for the priesthood, except once in 1927. This deprived the work of those young Salesians who were in many ways the most lively and characteristic members of any Salesian community. He chose Fr David de Burg as the first Novice Master, a South African who had completed his Degree in English Literature and then did his Theological studies in Turin and who was, he felt, capable of undertaking this critical task. Given the paucity of South African candidates, and in order to stimulate the start of this venture he persuaded the London Province to send some candidates for the noviciate to make their noviciate in Daleside with the South African candidates.

Already in 1960, after Fr Ainsworth had completed his first Provincial Visitation, and submitted the report to Fr Fredrigotti, the Prefect General, the latter commented:

*Your report has not reached here yet; we shall be interested in what you relate; we are watching with interest the hatching of the future Province. With the aspirants and the noviciate in order we have good hopes that vocations will be slowly but surely coming.*¹⁵

Writing to the Extraordinary Visitor, Fr Pianazzi, in 1961, Fr Ainsworth already notes the impact of having the South African Noviciate:

*We usually have about 50 confreres to run our six houses here; in fact in spite of much coming and going these past two years we have exactly 50 Confreres on the staff with myself making 51. However, there are three ‘en-route’ who will arrive in SA about the same time as yourself in October; and we have of course for the first time since the Salesian work began in Cape Town in 1896, Novices and Students: there are 14. There are no clerics in SA in the Houses and have been none, well yes one, since 1927; this has always created special difficulties. However we have hopes for the future in this respect. Our first noviciate last year produced five clerics and one Brother.*¹⁶

As we have seen when writing to welcome the arrival of some Irish novices to start the process Fr Ainsworth took the view that the risks that missionaries needed to take were well worth the effort. Having said all that, Ainsworth showed a depth of sympathy and understanding for those who found vocational discernment a struggle. In a very revealing letter written from a Buddhist centre in Scotland by a young man who had tried his vocation with the Salesians and had decided to pursue his personal discernment elsewhere, we see the confidence that a young person had in Fr Ainsworth’s ability to patiently hear and understand his personal struggle.

It seems decades ago since I wrote to you last time and received back your letters of regret, but also of understanding. I can’t tell how much it encouraged me at the time to go ahead and work out my destiny with diligence...

¹⁵WRA Box1: Fredrigotti – Ainsworth (1.8. 1960).

¹⁶WRA Box 1: Ainsworth – Pianazzi (14.9.61).

Last September I took my degree in Dutch language and literature. After that I started theology at the same university, it will take me another 4/5 years to gain a doctorate in Theology. I feel that my time to decide whether it is wise for me and others to go back to the Congregation has not come yet. I keep it in mind but talk less about it. I am personally convinced that the life of a religious hits at the very essence of human life for one who has discovered that to him it is the most important thing to let God reveal himself in you, by striving for total detachment even by detaching oneself from any concept of God.¹⁷

Striving for autonomy and responsible growth

There was a deep feeling with which both the Irish Salesians in Ireland and also those in South Africa regarded the control that the London Provincial exercised as holding back their development. Fr McElligott, as the elected delegate of the London Province at the General Chapter in 1958, was already canvassing support for making South Africa and Swaziland a separate 'Visitatoria'.

I have been to see the Rector Major, my dear and long standing friend, Fr L Tavano being my interpreter. I had a most happy and successful interview. I found the Rector Major to be most understanding and favourable beyond my expectations. He is agreeable to raising without delay the status of S. Africa to that of a Visitatoria. With this you will have that degree of autonomy so much needed for the development of the Salesian work in S Africa.....I approached the following members of the Superior Chapter, Fr Antal, Fr Ricceri, Fr Bellido, the newly elected councillors. Everyone of them was sincerely favourable and promised their support. I told each of them how graciously the Rector Major had received my plea and there with their support I felt sure that it would be granted. The only 'wet blanket' was Fr Fredrigotti who I went to see for the second time. More than once during the interview I had to bite my lips. There were so many 'lente' that one could see he was for delay. And how well I know the effect of that annoying delay which has dogged the work in S Africa for as long as I have been acquainted with it ie for 45 years. My advice to you is to deal direct with the Rector Major. For this you have the advantage of knowing Italian. You need not worry about by-passing Fr Fredrigotti. During my interview with the RM the point arose about my talking things over with Fr Fredrigotti and I told the Rector Major quite frankly that Fr Fredrigotti was not very pleasant to deal with. The Rector Major smiled and nodded his head in agreement. My interpreter can vouch for this and in fact he told me after the interview that I had done well to have made the remark.¹⁸

Fr Ainsworth replied

Obviously autonomy is a very good thing and with the support of the Chapter which you by your efforts and advocacy obtained it should be a far better thing than the present arrangement. My only fear was the liaison; you say I should correspond with the RM and bypass the PG. This is alright if it will be permitted; and for as long as the RM is in Turin; in his absence the PG takes over and is not likely to be any more sympathetic for having been by-passed...Anyway I am most grateful to you dear Father for all your

¹⁷ WRA Box 2: Hans Voet – Ainsworth (17.10. 1967).

¹⁸ WRA Box 1: McElligott – Ainsworth (29.7.58).

*painstaking work and thank you very much. It all helps to put us on the map and will lead to eventual complete autonomy which should enable us to go forward.*¹⁹

Leadership based on trust and relationship

Fr Ainsworth's style of leadership was based on having his feet placed very firmly on the ground. Though there were only five houses in South Africa and Swaziland, he made it his business to visit them all regularly every couple of months, despite the 1400 mile journey between Cape Town and Johannesburg, which he regularly undertook in the train, taking practically 2 days journey and the 350 mile journey by car on often unmade roads from Johannesburg to Swaziland. He saw his role as supporting the health, personal and spiritual welfare of the Salesians, themselves, and their effective deployment in the various fields of work and the necessary breaks that they required. He saw his role as trying to provide the necessary resources in terms of new Salesians and in terms of finance to support, sustain and expand the Salesian work. He also saw himself as looking towards the further development of the work in new centres and exploring new opportunities.

In taking his responsibility as the effective Superior in South Africa seriously, he was not afraid to take initiative in exploring the opportunities that presented themselves most notably at Gwelo in Southern Rhodesia but also in Uganda. He was also prepared to moderate the conclusions and recommendations of the Extraordinary Visitation report by Fr Pianazzi. He wrote in conveying the conclusions of Fr Pianazzi's report:

It is against this two way obligation that I would put before you some of the main points made by Don Pianazzi.

We are all subject to authority and exercise authority. This twofold direction of our life, looking upwards and downwards as it were is obvious; but even the obvious needs stressing sometimes.

Use of the Cane: Even if it is thought fair, the cane should not be used by us; reject its use! Let us try to form the consciences of our boys to obey through a sense of duty rather than through fear of being caught and punished.

Comment: It has been the custom in the Province for caning to be administered only by the Prefect of Studies, strictly controlled as to number etc. In view of what Don Pianazzi says, how can the words to me of a lay-master in one of our schools be reconciled with the truth: in talking to the boys I found that I was the only one on the entire staff who did not use the stick! Salesian school, South Africa. Quid?²⁰

Here Fr Ainsworth takes the recommendation of the Visitation Report and puts it into the local British and South African context where corporal punishment in schools was normal practice, and at the same time encourages those reading the recommendations to take it seriously. This interesting approach appealed one suspects, to the sense of identity and fair-play of his readers who could have been easily offended by the direct implementation of the recommendations.

In one of his most revealing personal letters to Fr Maurice Gordon, another Lancashire man, Fr Ainsworth sets out clearly the complexities of Salesian leadership:

¹⁹WRA Box 1: Ainsworth – McElligott (Aug 5 1958).

²⁰WRA Box 1: Circular letter after the Extraordinary Visitation (1961). Subject: Fr Pianazzi's visit and recommendations.

Problems abound but, like yourself, the heart keeps ticking away and that is something; all the same, I can sympathise with your weight of responsibility because my own violent temptation is to run, to run, to flee away from the perpetual strain and the pressure of decision; the perpetual clash of head and heart, the conflict of duty and the Rule with the urgings of charity and humanity and worse, of weakness which one must allow for and of intransigence and obstinacy which one cannot allow for, in the sense of giving in to it, but which one must take into account; the extent of ill-health, the unbalanced, the lazy, the schemers, the quiet men who say nothing and who bear undue burdens. Keep to the book and you are safe; yes, but says Our Lord, the letter killeth...to what extent can we allow caritas quae superat omnia...to operate against the book: this is, of course, but the human side of the problems: the administrative side has its own perils and pitfalls: but in the last analysis, its folk that count and there's nought so queer as folk!²¹

His essential humanity and concern for persons, brought a sense of common purpose and common effort that inspired a whole generation of Salesians in Southern Africa that experienced his leadership.

Introducing the Salesian Sisters to South Africa

Fr Ainsworth can really be described as the co-founder of the work of the Salesian Sisters in South Africa. In a letter to the Mother Provincial of the English province in 1958 he claims that on his way out to take up his position as Provincial Delegate he had gone to the Mother House of the Sisters in Turin and asked to speak to their Superiors but could only speak to the Superior of the House who promised to hand on his plea for the Sisters to come to South Africa.

...so life for the Church is not easy; in S Africa the existing Government and many of the people are against the Church; immigration laws are very difficult; many Sisters have been refused entrance; but when did difficulty and dangers and hardship keep away any missionaries, especially those of Don Bosco and Mary Mazzarello?

...it would be a great pity if other Religious orders of sisters who work here so valiantly were to think that the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, the second largest in the Church, would not go where the soil was infertile, unless all was made ready for them and prepared and equipped. This is the impression one receives from previous correspondence on the subject with you or your predecessors I have in my possession; let us forget them and start again today. (I deeply apologize even for mentioning such an idea but I had to do it to forestall another letter which no doubt quite unconsciously might seem to give the same impression! Forgive me!) The important thing is for you and the good superiors to decide you will send missionary Sisters to South Africa two or three at a time and we can begin. The Salesians are here, we have many friends among the other sisters, and we would not let our own sisters starve or suffer great hardships; nor would our friends allow this; minor hardships yes but this would not keep you away.²²

²¹GBR Archives: Ainsworth – Maurice Gordon (11.1.1963).

²²WRA Box 4:Ainsworth – Mother Provincial (Feb 2nd 1958).

Under the previous Provincial, Fr Ainsworth found that his pleas fell on deaf ears, or rather he felt that the Sisters concerns for the stability and security of any new foundations and a hesitancy in taking risks was crippling their missionary spirit. In this very revealing letter, he vents his frustration but also makes a heart-warming call for a real risk-taking missionary spirit. Also in this letter he makes the suggestion that the Sisters might be able to start a crèche or nursery which he believed would help working mothers and give their children a real educational experience instead of merely being left in the care of servant girls who because of their status could not really attempt to educate the children. He was convinced that such a venture would also allow the sisters to become financially self-supporting.

You wish to know how you would live? Here is one idea: most of the women here go to work and leave their children in the care of native girls, who are for the most part pagans, who as servants do not guide help or care for the children; there is a terrible need for a number of crèches in the cities and the towns; think dear Mother Provincial, for a very little, a place could be found where three sisters could start a crèche look after say a hundred children from 8am till 3.30pm and parents would pay I am told £4 a month...at £400 a month you would be far richer than we are in this school.²³

Fr Ainsworth was a man who was not frightened to speak his mind clearly and does so in this letter but what comes across is his zeal and conviction that the Salesian Sisters should be in South Africa playing their part.

With the arrival of Mother Andreina Ariagno as Provincial in England, Fr Ainsworth found a very different tone of voice in his correspondence. Her pioneering work first of all in Ireland and then in founding the Sisters' noviciate and student house at Friar Park in Henley-on-Thames, marked her out as someone who shared his pioneering zeal. What emerged from his initiative was a project for the Salesian Sisters to take over a school for Swazi children that the Servite Sisters had founded at Mbabane in Swaziland. The Italian Servites had founded the Mission and Bishop Barneschi had invited the Salesians to start a boys' school at Bremersdorp which was begun in 1953. Fr Ainsworth instinctively saw that this was really missionary work of the first order.

I thank you for the copy of the Convenzione which is clear and modest enough; really there is no possible reply to be made by those who oppose your coming; they invited you, they more or less agreed after long and complete discussions in which all your efforts were directed to make them speak their minds clearly- so often it was the contrary- but one sees now that neither the Bishop nor the Vicar General felt able to commit themselves without reference to their Council.

We shall now see what reply you receive to your offer on behalf of Mother General (may I be permitted to say what a contrast there is in Mother Generals! How anxious to help, how wise and conciliatory has your good Mother shown herself! Comparisons being odious I will not make them...but...) If there is still some objection then I feel the matter will have to end; no one will be more disappointed than Bishop Barneschi, who has opposed his own people very strongly; but he cannot fight everybody all the time: poor man. The attitude taken up by certain good Fathers in defence of their Sisters is chivalrous but quite unrealistic; the Servite Sisters at Mbabane actually have ONE

²³Idem.

*Sister teaching and she teaches SEWING only, I was told. I know what Mr Pitcher thinks, the Education Officer!*²⁴

He believed that this would be an ideal setting among the native Swazis to begin the Salesian Sisters' work. The Bishop and his Vicar General Mgr Botta were very keen. He persuaded Mother Andreina Ariagno to come herself with Sister Maria Lord, an English sister to make a preparatory visit and to confirm the details of the convention or agreement between the Sisters and the Diocese. However, after the exploratory visit, the Sisters asked that the 'mixed' classes of boys and girls be separated as the Sisters, by tradition, only worked for girls. This clause caused a major reaction from the Episcopal Council, made up of Italian Servites who saw this move as undermining the position of the Servite Sisters, though according to Ainsworth there was only one Servite sister involved in the school. Even when the Salesian Sisters Superior General had agreed that for an initial period the classes could remain mixed, the Council had definitely made up their minds to oppose the foundation. Fr Ainsworth's letter to Mother Andreina shows that he is clearly aware of the opposition that Bishop Barneschi faces among the Servites themselves and knows too that even the offer to accept mixed classes will probably not be enough to settle the opposition but he is convinced that at least this will be a clear answer. When on the following day he writes to confirm the bad news, he sees the decision as final and sad but is willing to discern the hand of God in it.

You will have received my recent letter but now I have to communicate to you what must be the final decision on Swaziland. It is a sad decision, sad for many reasons but one which we must accept.

*The Bishop asked me to inform you of the decision of his Council with as much charity and understanding as possible; the long and sorrowful letter he sent me asked me to treat as confidential. Perhaps therefore the quickest and simplest thing for me to say is that the invitation extended to you by the Servites of Swaziland has now been withdrawn; this is the wish of both the Servites and their Sisters. The Bishop has expressed his extreme sorrow at this decision, a decision which he is compelled to follow; he asks me to thank you for your kindness in offering to send your Sisters and for all that was done to make this possible. He is as you know Bishop of a poor territory; he has given me a cheque for £200 as a good will offering to you in part payment of your expenses. I can well understand he can do no more.*²⁵

Not to be put off he suggests re-considering the offer of Archbishop McCann of Cape Town of a school for coloured children at Paarl in the Cape. In recognition of the poverty of the Mission, the Sisters Superiors asked Fr Ainsworth to return the money to the Bishop.

The Sisters eventually open their first house in 1962 in Bellville, in the Cape Town diocese as a parish primary school for European children as a way of being able to prepare to work at Paarl in a coloured school. Fr Ainsworth's letter reassures Mother Andreina that the parish will welcome them and then goes on to recommend a flexibility of approach that is necessary in a missionary country even among the Italians, Dutch and others.

I do not presume to exhort you, dear Mother Provincial to allow your Sisters as much elasticity as possible in their work; as you found at Mbabane, this is a different country,

²⁴WRA Box 4. Ainsworth -Mother Provincial Andreina (24.7.59).

²⁵WRA Box 4. Ainsworth – Mother Provincial Andreina (25.7.59).

a different world and we must all adapt ourselves to it without clinging too rigidly to European standards or practice. In Swaziland your Mother General eventually swept away for the present all that had been holding up progress... as you know only too well, the opposition too strong and too unreasonable. At Bellville they will receive you with the greatest affection; they are praying for the Sisters to come among them to help the Italians, to help the Hollanders, the Portuguese: I am sure your own generous heart will go out to these people, treat them as you would treat them in a missionary country and allow as much latitude as your Rule will allow under these circumstances to carry out a much needed apostolate.²⁶

Mother Andreina came back to Fr Ainsworth having agreed to send three more Sisters the following year for Paarl to explore further the possibilities of a crèche which he had floated in earlier correspondence. He replies with an advantageous offer to allow the Sisters to have the original Ozanam House for £6000 to be paid back without interest over a period of 20 years. Eventually this became a creche and nursery school right next to the Salesian Provincial House in Booysens, Johannesburg. Fr Ainsworth also advised the Sisters about their setting themselves up as a limited company and offers some very cogent advice about the publications that Mother Andreina had asked him to look at with his editor's eye before they were printed. This he did with characteristic honesty and professionalism.

I have read two of the three manuscripts you asked me to look over and would like to make the following comments:

If this preface is meant to stimulate girls to read the life, I very much doubt if it will; most normal girls even the better ones would be put off by such stern reflections that it will be a suitable gift for the modern girl,...That may be alright for their parents or for Reverend Mothers, but...²⁷

Perhaps his most revealing letter to Mother Adreina is one he wrote with regard to the Sisters opening their house in Bellville.

However I feel that in some way they are in my care, that Don Bosco would want me to look upon them as such, however remotely, and there as a father must plead for his children, his daughters as well as his clamorous sons; the gentleness of the daughter can often obtain more than the loud demand of the son!²⁸

Fr Ainsworth's determination to initiate and support the Salesian Sisters' foundation in South Africa was far from being a commonplace among the English Salesians. For many Salesians the Sisters were appreciated mostly for the wonderful domestic work they did in caring for the Salesians and the boarders in the houses at Battersea, Chertsey, Cowley and Farnborough. Fr Ainsworth instead realised the critical role that the Sisters could play in the missionary and educational work of the Salesians in South Africa. Perhaps it stemmed from his warm relationship

²⁶WRA Box 4. Bellville, Ainsworth - Mother Provincial (29.9.61).

²⁷WRA Box 4. Ainsworth – Mother Provincial (27.11.61).

²⁸WRA Box 4. Ainsworth – Mother Provincial Adreina (11.3.62).

with his own sisters on whom he had depended as a young child in the convent orphanage, when his mother died in New York before the First World War.²⁹

During his second period as Delegate, Sister Kathleen O'Callaghan had become Provincial in England and South Africa. She had been one of the pioneers in Cape Town and obviously had a deep affection for Fr Ainsworth. She wrote regularly to him and often asked for his priestly ministry as a Retreat preacher and advisor. His letters confirmed her strength of purpose and he encouraged her to embrace the flexibility that the Vatican Council had recommended without losing touch with the origins of the Salesian charism.

I admire your looking forward to the battles of the Chapter; uninitiated indeed! Yes I am glad you have the taste of conflict and discussion; I really feel this Chapter will be desperately important for you as our XX was for us...There is enormous potentiality in the dear FMA, but I pray that there will be many who will share your healthy reaction; I pray that that the Holy Spirit will really inspire the holy women to see that updating on-going and all the rest of the modern jargon does not mean that you have to throw your ideals and traditions overboard. I am an old fogey enough to view with concern ideas that are too liberal for my taste; but I see clearly that we cannot shut ourselves behind walls of tradition which could really be walls of prejudice, cutting off our vision of the changing world in need...This sounds like Tract 90! So I better shut up; you'll hear loads of this ad nauseam! ...I was aware at least in part, of what you say and whenever I am here I am always most anxious to get the Sisters away to give them an evening without cooking and washing up!³⁰

Challenges on the financial front

The socio-political and ecclesiastical concerns were not the only challenges Fr Ainsworth faced. One of his major worries all the time he was in South Africa was money. In 1959, he wrote:

I live and breathe and have my being in money, money, money, the lack of it, the spending of it, the getting of it; I love it and detest it and would join a monastery if I could escape: but I suppose even there someone has to pay the bills and renew the linoleum and provide the Lord Abbot with his black cashmere socks. No; money darn it, there's no living with it nor without it.³¹

The confreres in Manzini faced a double difficulty: the rising tide of African independence movements and the copycat student strikes and sit-ins that it was feared could lead to violence. As well as that, which kept the confreres awake at night, was the financial difficulties that they faced. By 1960 the Salesians had a flourishing school but a debt of £6,000 and the overall annual income was only £2,000 a year which had to cover the Lay teachers one of whom was paid £540 a year. At one point the Salesians were so overdrawn that the bank refused to honour their cheques. The rumour of bankruptcy inevitably involved suppliers refusing to give credit. In this critical situation, Fr Ainsworth appealed to all the schools and houses in England and Ireland to hold an event once a year to raise money to support the mission. The results in terms of missionary awareness and

²⁹One of his earliest memories he often recounted was that when the Convent in New York wanted to separate him as a young boy from his sisters, they firmly sandwiched him in between them and refused to let him go.

³⁰WRA Box 4: Ainsworth – Sr Kathleen Callaghan, Provincial (25 July 1973).

³¹WRA Box 2: Ainsworth – Williams (23.4.59).

financial support were heartening. Gradually the immediate crisis was averted and gradually the situation improved.

Setting up signposts for the future

After three terms as Provincial Delegate Fr Ainsworth took a break from his post. In his April 1966 circular he wrote

For reasons entirely my own, I have thought it well to request at least a temporary change of Province and the Superiors in Turin have kindly agreed to my being loaned for a while to the Australian Province, a transfer which both Fr Williams and Fr Cornell of Australia have willingly endorsed. I wish to thank all concerned in this move.³²

In the same circular he informed about the appointment of Fr Michael Egan as the Provincial Delegate in Southern Africa. As he welcomed him to his new responsibility, Fr Ainsworth sincerely acknowledged the supporting role of his confreres, reiterating the fact of mission being a team effort.

You and I my dear confreres, can also look back with some happiness and under God with some justifiable pride, on what has been accomplished over the years since 1957. Obviously, many of you and the great men before you bore the heats and the burdens of years long before that date, and constructed the foundation upon which we in later years were able modestly to build, but we can certainly say, too that since that date by our joint efforts, by your wonderful spirit of cooperation, a great deal has been accomplished. We have all been in it together, for the work of God, for the Salesian name, for the people of Southern Africa.... let us appreciate the contribution that each Confrere has made to the whole.

Most of all it has been my privilege to be associated with you in the beginning of the Provincial Delegation of South Africa and Swaziland and in laying the foundations of the future steps which in God's good time must surely follow.³³

At a time like this, words do not come easily and any I could find would be inadequate to express my thanks to you all. To single out anyone would be invidious; but you will perhaps allow me to say a special word of thanks to those Confreres who as Rectors at various times have shared responsibility with me and who have been far-sighted enough and generous enough to support so many brave ventures which God has seen fit to bless. But as I have said, you have all been part of it, the members of the Chapters, the priests young and old, the Brothers – some our grand old men, some not so old, some young and eager- and not least our fine clerics who have already in no small way brought honour to the Salesian name. Forgive me for being a little lyrical, it has really been a great adventure we have been through together and I am happy to have been privileged to share it with you.³⁴

³²WRA Box3 WRA Circular (April 6th 1966).

³³Idem.

³⁴Idem

His long term vision of a greater partnership between the Irish and South African Salesians was finally realised in the decision of the Rector Major, Fr Luigi Ricceri and announced in March 1969, whereby Ireland, South Africa and Swaziland was carved out as a separate province.

We have studied the proposal put forward by yourself and your Council that the Houses of Ireland, South African and Swaziland should be detached from the Province of London to become a separate unit. Fr Tohill at the end of the visit he made to your province in May 1968 had already made to us a similar proposal but for obvious reasons we waited for our work in connection with reshaping to be completed before making a decision in the matter.³⁵

Upon his return to South Africa from Australia as Provincial Delegate in 1970 he was delighted to find that the whole pace had changed in South Africa. In his report prior to his departure for the Special General Chapter of 1971 he proudly states

Nevertheless I shall, as I say, speak about our work and our achievement here in no apologetic air. If for obvious reasons we have not increased the number of our houses, we are almost everywhere expanding the scope of our work. I shall be able to speak of our moving out from schoolrooms to take an increasingly active part in sorely needed pastoral and apostolic activity. I shall tell of our expanding work for the underprivileged of our land, our care for them in soul mind and body, our feeding schemes for poor children in the Cape, Daleside and Manzini. When they ask how many houses we have I shall add to the small number the facts of our five parishes each with its attendant mission churches and mission areas. I shall be able to tell of our schools especially our five additional schools for African Children. For every white boy we have four African Children under our general care. Our white boys for the most part could find other schools; our more than two thousand African children, for the most part could not.³⁶

These reports clearly sum up Fr Ainsworth's achievements during his two periods as Provincial Delegate and give us an insight into his positive and collaborative style of leadership.

When we come to assess the impact of the work that Fr Ainsworth did in his two periods of office as Provincial Delegate in South Africa and Swaziland, it is interesting to look at the account he wrote for the Visitation that Fr Egan, the new Irish-South African Provincial made in 1972. What he highlights are the expansion to 178 students of the boarding school at Daleside, but much more of the African Mission at Clonlea.

The mission itself is based at Clonlea. The former Novitiate chapel is filled every Sunday with Africans from miles around. They love to sing and have all the time in the world and listen to Fr Agostinelli's Sesotho sermons with intelligent interest...On Monday morning we went with him to our African school, our Michael Rua School. Here there are 150 boys and girls and this year in honour of the beatification, we have made a big effort and doubled the size of the school.³⁷

³⁵WRA Box 3 Ricceri – Williams Circular (20.3.1969).

³⁶WRA Box1 Ainsworth Circular. Ainsworth on his departure for the General Chapter of 1971 (5th May 1971).

³⁷WRA Box 1 Booyens: Ainsworth's account of the 1972 Visitation.

Even more striking is the account he gives of Fr Fosker's work at Grassmere, as well as Fr De Bono's parish for Indian people near Lyttleton.

On Wednesday Fr Fosker took us off some 15 miles to his parish of Grasmere for the Coloureds, people of mixed race, the folk who have perhaps the hardest lot. They live in a vast area of hopelessness, of scattered shacks and huts, with but few pathetic attempts at privacy; there were no built up internal roads and I feared for the Delegation car as we bumped and lurched over the ruts to the Church that Fr Fosker has built.

When you get there you do not know whether to cheer or cry. This is a saga of faith and courage that one day must be told at length. He has fenced off a square of dead and dusty veldt, dug for and found water, built a church for more than three hundred, surrounded it young trees, green hedges, flowers and gay shrubs. There in what is worse than a desert, a land of squalor, wrecks of cars, broken bottles and rusty cans, God lives in a garden. No man can observe it without a lift of the heart an impulse of hope.³⁸

In a similar vein, Fr Ainsworth waxes lyrical on the development of the new parish at Hanover Park.

Fr Lonergan came out at the end of 1970 and was immediately given the pastoral care of an area called Hanover Park, where many thousands of displaced coloured people are being housed in a new township, three or four miles from Lansdowne. In the 1970 visitation we went with him to a Catholic family to whom he announced his intention of saying mass in their house the following Sunday; for that mass there were fourteen people present, as there had been fourteen present at the first mass in Fermanagh in 1923. Now 18 months later Fr Lonergan is finishing the building of a large church and commodious parish centre on a corner site in the township.

Incidentally this Hanover Park Church is the seventh church or large chapel to be built by the Salesians since the start of the Delegation in 1957. Like all the rest it is functional and of simple lines but it will prove to be a power house of Catholicity and give light in a dark corner of prejudice.³⁹

In a similar vein, Fr Ainsworth reviewed the history of the work in Swaziland and the expansion of the original boys' school and the development of the surrounding primary schools, all the Salesians being closely involved in the pastoral and missionary work of the diocese.⁴⁰

³⁸Idem.

³⁹Idem.

⁴⁰Idem.: The Salesians have been in Manzini ...the old name was Bremersdorp an Afrikaans name that was changed to Manzini (the meeting of the waters) when the Swazis achieved their independence since 1953..., the school starting in a small way in the February of 1954; Father Stubbings with but two helpers began the high school in a large but unsuitable building provided by the bishop while the Dominican Sisters ran the Primary school. This we soon took over and found that many of the infant school boys were in their twenties. The pioneer days were desperately hard with boarding school fees of £18 a year, no help and ceaseless labour. However by 1960 we had begun to lay out the present school building chiefly by our own labour, that of Brother Thomas Gallagher, Brother James McAlister and others it is now a simple but adequate complex of buildings that houses a three stream High school for over 500 students ...it has almost 400 boys on its books these days is the domain of Fr Fleming with a large staff of Swazi lay men. Last year the school made history by getting 57 first class passes out of 57 entrants...

Conclusion

Fr Ainsworth sensitively set in motion a very significant pastoral development of the Salesian work in South Africa and Swaziland partly by promoting South African vocations in the essential work of the Noviciate and Studentate of Philosophy, partly by linking the Delegation to the Irish province, harnessing the missionary zeal of many of the confreres who volunteered to work in the townships outside Johannesburg and on the Cape Flats, and partly by encouraging the outstanding educational pioneers like Fr Fleming in Swaziland, and the Salesian Sisters in Cape Town and Johannesburg. His own personality, rooted in his own faith and culture, his idealism, and awareness of injustice, his sense of fair-play and ability to appreciate and encourage the gifts of others, his gifts as a writer and advocate all contributed to making his leadership critical to the outstanding chapter in the history of the Salesian work in Southern Africa.

Sommario

Introduction.....	1
The Challenging Context.....	2
Initial attempts at a new foundation and struggles	6
Nurturing vocations.....	7
Striving for autonomy and responsible growth.....	8
Leadership based on trust and relationship.....	9
Introducing the Salesian Sisters to South Africa	10
Challenges on the financial front.....	14
Setting up signposts for the future.....	15
Conclusion	18