Chapter 1

Murder by legal process is immeasurably more dreadful than murder by a brigand. – Dostoyevsky

On Monday, 3 September 1984, a smouldering human rage exploded in a cluster of black townships 40 miles south of Johannesburg, South Africa. The conflagration was sparked off by rent increases proposed by black-run town councils whose members were perceived as collaborators with the apartheid government. At least seventy men, women and children died during the next three months in the violence that spread across the five black townships of Boipatong, Bophelong, Evaton, Sebokeng and Sharpeville.

Kuzwayo Jacob Dlamini, deputy mayor of the area known as the Vaal Triangle and a local councillor in Sharpeville, was among three black township officials killed in mob violence that day. He was approached at his home by a noisy crowd, part of an earlier, much larger crowd which had been dispersed by police with tear gas and rubber bullets. Called on to join them in a march to the administration offices to air their grievances, he produced a gun and began firing, wounding at least one in the crowd. Enraged, the crowd attacked and burnt down his house and car, after which he was felled by stones and finally died from burns inflicted by the attackers.

This was the climax to years of barely disguised public disdain for the government-sponsored town councillors who were seen to be corrupt and lining their pockets at the expense of the community. From this tragic incident emerged the case of the "Sharpeville Six" – five men and one woman who were arrested in the weeks following the killing, tried, convicted and sentenced to hang for having what was called in the judgement "common purpose" with the unknown killers of councillor Dlamini.

Soon the world media wanted to know about the unknown accused. They were:

- Reginald "Jaja" Sefatsa, 32, a fruit and vegetable vendor at a nearby train station, married to Regina, with one daughter.
- Melebo Reid Mokoena, 24, who worked with an engineering firm. He was a trade union member and unmarried.
- Aupa Moses Diniso, 32, a building inspector at Stewarts and Lloyds. A golfer, he was married with two children, a son and a daughter.
- Theresa Machabane Ramashamole, 25, an unmarried waitress at a nearby roadhouse.
- Duma Joseph Kumalo, 26, a student at Sebokeng Teachers Training College.
- Francis Don Mokhesi, 30, a well-known professional footballer, working as a shelf-packer in a supermarket, married with one daughter.

There were orignally eight accused – Christiaan Mokubung and Gideon Mokone were later found not guilty of murder but guilty of public violence, and were sentenced to eight years imprisonment each. They were released after serving five years.

None of the eight accused was known as a political activist.

The trial opened on 23 September 1985, before a judge and two assessors, and was conducted in English and Afrikaans, neither of which was the mother tongue of the accused. Throughout the trial the judge relied on interpreters to render an accurate account of the young prisoners' evidence. Whose voice would he hear, I remember thinking – that of the accused or that of the court interpreters?

From now on the Sharpeville Six were to become familiar with the rarefied sleepy atmosphere of courtrooms, the whirring fans on hot summer afternoons emphasising long pregnant silences during cross-examinations, and the consistent incomprehension of an elderly judge who spoke no African language and had never visited an African township. Although all his legal life Mr Acting Justice Wessel Human had dealt sympathetically with crimes of individual rage and passion, he clearly could not fathom what triggered communal rage and passion.

He appeared incapable of understanding the internal dynamics of life in his country's black townships.

An expert witness told the court that it was "highly probable" that people experience de-individualisation when joining a crowd which sees itself as discriminated against or besieged, and that this leads to diminished responsibility in much the same way as does the consumption of too much alcohol or great emotional stress. A particular event – such as the Vaal riots – triggered what is known as "contagion", marked by the rapid spread of rumours and a mood of anger and impulse.

I was at court for this evidence. It was subsequently rejected in total, prompting a legal expert to remark that "many judges believe that they are impartial and that they administer justice fairly, but they are white judges working within a white system with no experience of black township life, no knowledge of black languages, black aspirations or frustrations."

It was argued that for ordinary people like Theresa Ramashamole, Mokhesi, and millions of others, the daily pervasive realities of living under apartheid, given the powerful social and psychological forces at play, inevitably conspired to draw them into the vortex of political strife. This line of argument was again rejected by the court.

Two months after the trial began, on a hot summer's midday, the trial judge declared before a packed court in a barely audible, gravelly voice: "The result is … that the accused numbers 1, 2, 3, 4, 7 and 8 are found guilty of the crime of murder …"

I remember that morning well. Even as the judge disappeared from the courtroom the accused sat dazed for some moments, still facing in his direction. Slowly they looked at one another as if for reassurance and hope, then looked around searching for their families in the crowded courtroom. Their legal counsel, obviously shaken, told them that appeals would be made on their behalf. They must be brave; they must be strong, he said. Meanwhile consternation, anger and indignation swelled the public galleries behind the condemned. Their families and friends straining to get near them, the six Sharpeville prisoners were led away through the waiting cells to a prison van, which took them to Pretoria

Maximum Prison. There they were greeted by noisy, inquisitive death row inmates as they were shown to their cells. Another life had begun. In passing this sentence Judge Human made history and triggered a massive outcry from the international community.

Years later, when it was all over, I visited this place of the slowly dying. I was with ex-detainee Hugh Lewin of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) and Duma Kumalo, one of the condemned. The smell was what hit you first: a combination of human sweat, stale cigarette smoke and too little ventilation – the off-loading of tortured souls awaiting execution. "On this corridor," recalled Kumalo with a pained shrug of familiarity, "strong men would cry at night."

The lawyers for the defence, preparing a formal appeal, also launched a campaign to petition for clemency. That campaign would spread worldwide.

In 1986 State President PW Botha refused to intervene. Meanwhile, I brought the case of the Sharpeville Six to the attention of the Catholic Bishops and provided background material for distribution among national conferences of bishops and interested parties throughout the world. I'm sure sister churches were doing the same.

Sharpeville Day, on 21 March, was traditionally the day on which the Sharpeville killings of 1960 were remembered. Joyce Mokhesi, sister of Francis, one of the condemned, spoke about the Sharpeville Six at a meeting of the United Nations Special Committee Against Apartheid.

In early May leave to appeal was granted.

But to digress for a moment. Were the Sharpeville Six the lucky ones? For not all in the Vaal had the benefit of a trial in those days, much less a fair trial. Benedict Moshoke was one of those.

He was arrested at his home in Zone 7, Sebokeng, on 10 October 1986 and brought to Bekkersdal in the Eastern Transvaal for interrogation. The date is important for these were the dread days when the police were hearing more and more orders from above such as "uithaal" (take out), "neutraliseer" (neutralise) and "verwyder" (remove). Moshoke died in mysterious circumstances on 24 March 1987 while still in detention. "If you want to lay a charge you must face me," a security policeman later told his mother.

The matter did not end there. The family was informed that the body had been mislaid. From her home in Sebokeng Mrs Moshoke set off on a lonely search for her son's body. She went to the mortuaries at Pretoria, Witbank, Middelburg and even the "whites only" mortuary at far away Groblersdal – to no avail.

Late one afternoon the police informed her that they had found the remains. A funeral was duly organised at the church at Small Farms. It was a highly political occasion. Police and military "guarded" the services closely. That morning the ageing Mrs Moshoke again met the security policeman who had originally threatened her. He told her, "Jy moet genoeg pap eet want ek sal jou skiet" (you must eat enough porridge because I am going to shoot you). That man was the notorious Barend Strydom, leader of the neo-Nazi group the *Wit Wolwe*, who later went on a racist shooting spree in a busy Pretoria street, deliberately murdering seven black people.

Chapter 2

I am overwhelmed by the thousands of people shouting and waving to me – and I greet you as a friend – PW Botha in the Vaal Triangle, June 1987

Thursday, 4 June 1987

The Sharpeville Six had been on death row for a year and a half when the State President, in a clever political manoeuvre, made a high-profile, stage-managed tour of Vaal townships (which, incidentally, cost the local council R10 000) where he was offered the "freedom" of the rent-boycotting townships by the discredited and manipulated black mayor and town councillors. The trial of the Sharpeville Six, it must be remembered, concerned the killing of the deputy mayor of the region. No reference was made to it during the visit.

A feature of the day was the sight of regular South African army township patrols taking time off to play football with local children, clearly for the benefit of the visiting international media and the comfort of their masters. Government spin doctors loved it. According to a black school inspector, Joseph Makhokolo, farm school children (local schools and various groups refused to be involved) were bussed into Sharpeville to cheer and flag-wave a president they had never known or seen in their young lives. It was a day weeping with contradictions.

Law and Order Minister Adriaan Vlok commented quite innocently (or was it tongue in cheek?), "It is a very wonderful experience for me. How can they receive us like this?" The United States Ambassador, Edward Perkins, who was in Washington at the time, later told me he had a problem explaining this apparently "joyful" reception in the corridors of the Pentagon.

1 December 1987

After waiting for almost two years in the death cells of Pretoria Maximum Security Prison, the accused were informed that their appeal

had failed. The five appeal judges found that the accused had had an "intent to murder". Their conviction for murder and subversion was upheld. They were shattered. Their lawyers, from the Johannesburg firm of Ismail Ayob, were seriously concerned.

The churches were involved in the affair, taking positions that were not universally applauded. The South African Catholic Bishops Conference (SACBC) published a plea for commuting all death sentences, especially in the case of the Six, and once again appealed to the State President "to institute the end of every form of apartheid". Unctuously angered, *Business Day* (4 December 1987) declared that the "prelates are talking airily of condoning the necklace" – a system of killing whereby a tyre round a victim's neck was drenched with petrol and set alight – and that by this gesture they "sacrifice their claim to moral leadership".

Ambassador Perkins visited Sharpeville for Sunday Mass, then he met the families of the Six and conveyed to them the concern of his government. Later the Security Branch questioned some young people about this visit – they were especially keen to know if anyone had asked the ambassador for money.

The families met regularly at the church for consultations with their lawyer, to discuss travel arrangements to and from prison, and sometimes for meetings with reporters. The Detainees' Parents Support Committee (DPSC) co-ordinated these meetings.

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On Thursday, 11 February 1988, a new petition for clemency was sent to the State President. Lawyers for the defence and Father Edward Lennon and I conferred on the advisability of visiting Washington and European capitals, with representatives of the families of the Six, to highlight the case in influential political circles. The Vatican informed the bishops of its "special interest" in the case, and supported local bishops' initiatives in this respect.

On the following Sunday, I attended a prayer service for the Sharpeville Six at the Methodist Church at Sebokeng. The service was well attended and assisted by a number of church ministers. It was important to keep the case before the attention of people.

Later I consulted with the president of the SACBC, Bishop Wilfred Napier, and his vice-president, Bishop Reginald Orsmond of Johannesburg, regarding the proposed visit overseas. After discussion there was consensus that we should meet representatives of key foreign governments here in South Africa at least as a point of departure. (Other prominent South Africans such as Reverend Frank Chikane, head of the South African Council of Churches (SACC), Sheena Duncan of the Black Sash, and civil rights lawyers were also part of these consultations.) After lunch I drove across Johannesburg to the 12th floor offices of the Six's legal team and told them of the morning's deliberations. They accepted the proposal.

That evening Joyce Mokhesi, sister of Francis, and Julia Ramashamole, mother of Theresa, left South Africa for Europe. This and their subsequent journeys to foreign capitals gave the case much valuable exposure.

A few days later Bishop Orsmond, acting president of the SACBC, sent a courier message to the State President requesting a meeting to discuss the case. The bishop's request was declined on the grounds that all legal channels had not yet been exhausted. Meanwhile there were hurried consultations all round as Bishop Napier set up a meeting between the ambassadors of Great Britain, Germany and the United States with myself and advocate Ayob representing the six South Africans – Sefatsa, Mokoena, Diniso, Ramashamole, Kumalo and Mokhesi.

> From my journal:
>
> *Tuesday, 23 February 1988*
> *I flew to Cape Town this morning with Ismail Ayob who was defending the Sharpeville Six, and for an hour and a half we conferred at the German Embassy with the three foreign representatives. Confidentiality was agreed upon, after which the ambassadors expounded their respective governments' more or less similar positions on the case. The British diplomat appeared to be speaking on behalf of his colleagues, for he clearly took the initiative in our discussions. They were at pains – especially Robin*

> *Renwick of Britain – to indicate that their governments did not have as much clout with the South African administration as is commonly believed. We wondered. Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan are at the zenith of their power, and do not believe in sanctions against South Africa, only in constructive engagement. Surely this is a recipe for friendship with State President PW Botha? Nevertheless, we had useful exchanges with the diplomats that were reported to their respective capitals overseas.*

Mr Ayob and I privately agreed before the meeting that if we did not get satisfaction from the Western diplomats we would approach the Japanese. As it happened, we did not need to. The meeting was a reasonable success from our point of view.

Renwick later, in his 1997 book *Unconventional Diplomacy in Southern Africa*, took credit for quietly trying to persuade the Nationalist government not to hang the six Sharpeville youngsters.

Chapter 3

Moreover, the state-controlled media assisted in promoting the view that a crowd of black people … was by nature barbaric and likely to engage in violence – Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report, 1998

From my journal:
Sunday, 13 March 1988
I celebrated Mass for the detainees at which an ex-detainee and member of the Sacred Heart Sodality, Zanele Dlungwana, shared with the congregation her experiences of solitary confinement for over a year. Zanele was detained on the same day, 11 June 1986, as local church deacon and prominent National Union of Mineworkers member, Tefo Phate.
She is a paraplegic and by profession a librarian.
She spoke movingly about her programmed humiliation at Kroonstad prison where she shared a tiny cell and open toilet with two other detainees.
Zanele recalled an extended period of solitary confinement: "I still can't stand the sound of keys as they represent sealing me off into a silent world at 4 p.m. each day. The only company was birds and the distant sound of traffic." And at night: "Sleep never came as the body wasn't tired." She paused to reach for a tissue as the memory became too strong. The full church fell into a deep questioning silence as Zanele was wheeled from the sanctuary. She repeated her message later at Boipatong Church.[3]

[3] Zanele Dlungwana is now in Parliament and holds a portfolio for the physically challenged.

Monday, 14 March 1988
Even if American prison films hadn't informed me, I now know what the "slammer" is. It's the clinically clean, cold, over-polished and sanitised atmosphere of a prison. It is slamming gates and jingling monster keys echoing through impersonal corridors. All of which greet the visitor to the Pretoria Maximum Security Prison en route to visit South Africans awaiting capital punishment.

For within these precincts, 117 prisoners were to be executed in 1987, often in groups of seven, giving South Africa the distinction of being the hanging capital of the world.

9.00 a.m. This morning I came on my more or less monthly visit to Francis Mokhesi and Theresa Ramashamole. Though I had met those from other churches before their sentencing, I am now allowed to meet only the two Catholics condemned. And if I wasn't an ordained minister even this might not be possible.
After the warder, the ever-efficient Sergeant Makhubu – who escorts all visitors to "non-white" prisoners – had checked his files for my visit number, he handed me over to another warder. He in turn led me through the two remaining steel barred gates to the small upper open-aired courtyard. Off this courtyard two doors opened into rooms of eight cubicles – death cell visiting rooms. The guard smiled as he let me through.
This section of this prison was always under world focus. I used to wonder what black prison officers thought about that. How did they feel about working with regularly decreasing numbers on death row? What did they think about in the taxi on the way to work on hanging mornings? Did they tell their wives? Did they talk about it among themselves? How did they relate to the Sharpeville Six?
A pane of glass, reinforced by thick iron bars, separates relatives and the condemned during their last visits.

Conversation is by means of a piped speaker system, fixed to the half-table on both sides of the glass partition, into which one speaks sitting in an uncomfortably crouched position.
Francis was led in by the popular warder Sergeant Mlambo, and greeted me with his usual calm smile tinged with what appeared to be quiet resignation. We spoke in Sesotho (The emotional state of the condemned is not easily accessible to those assured of life tomorrow. There is too much happening in their unreal world, suspended between the here and the hereafter: "I am pulled in two directions" [letter from Francis, July 1988]).
I looked at a person who was somewhat gaunt, with a pasty complexion through lack of sun, whose court appeal had been dismissed and who for two years had bravely tried to cope with the prospect of sudden death by hanging. Domestic affairs certainly engaged his attention – his wife, the children at school, the first communion of his daughter, Mamodise. Over and above these matters, and transcending them, he appeared to be reflecting a lot on the Bible and the life-threatening experiences encountered by Peter and Paul in the Acts of the Apostles and related Bible texts.
When I told him about the Mass and public prayers said for him yesterday, he lit up and talked the strange joy, peace and desire to just simply pray to the Lord that he had experienced on Sunday. In fact, it is not unusual for prisoners, especially those served with the ultimate penalty, to turn to religion to find solace and hope in their situation. The six condemned, all from various Christian traditions, are no exceptions. Enhancing this is the traditional African and Biblical view that sees little division between the supernatural and the everyday details of life. God is present always, often through his children, our ancestors.

The world of Francis "Don" (his pro football nickname) Mokhesi lies within this broad framework. And more. Clearly from his letters to me, and in our ensuing discussions, as well as his meetings with the prison chaplain for counselling and the sacraments, Francis has found a Lord with whom he wasn't familiar. A marked inwardness is evident, profound spiritual insights surfaced as he wrestles with such themes as the peace of feeling loved by God, the mysterious will of God in his present predicament, a death embraced by Christ, resurrection and future communion with the household of God. Anger and bitterness seem replaced by a perception that there is some God-plan working in and through his present anguish.

Mokhesi was convicted of stoning Dlamini's house, making petrol bombs on the spot, and ordering the burning of the house when it was surrounded – a conviction based on information by a state witness (Johannes "Eyster" Mongaule) who later, after the trial, admitted that he had given perjured evidence as a result of repeated assaults by the police while in detention. Mokhesi, for his part, testified – supported by his team doctor and football coach – that he had injured his ankle in a game shortly before the killing and could not walk without difficulty. He was nowhere near the Dlamini house, he told the court.

9.45 a.m. I asked him to give my good wishes to the other four condemned. We closed the visit with prayer. A feeble parting smile and he was gone.

Later in the day Francis would share some of these moments with his co-accused, as was customary among them. The corridor in which prisoners did this was at least fifty metres long. Conversations took different forms. Some were unconventional. They would shout to one another from their cells or via linking toilet pipes. The toilet pipe link-up was done by flushing the toilet, and then soaking up the remaining water from the bowl and under-pipe with a cloth. Your friend in order to hear you had made the same preparations. You sent a message to him

secretly about your coming communication: "Hamba Ngasimva/eboshe" (Go to the back area – to the toilet bowl). News-gathering of this type would be done between 5 and 7 p.m.

I made my way down to the condemned women's section, and after a half-hour of very methodical processing I was finally allowed to see Theresa Ramashamole, the only female of the Six.

Theresa – known popularly by her Sotho name, Machabane – was picked up in November 1984, still dressed in her nightgown, and spent several months in solitary confinement before being charged and convicted. Sometimes she got permission to visit her five colleagues in the men's section, where, after exchanging greetings and sharing news, they strengthened one another in spontaneous prayers and hymns.

Theresa was normally high-spirited and talkative, though at times angry at the bizarre fate that had befallen her in the prime of life. She looked forward to meeting her hard-working mother after her overseas journeys to foreign governments on Theresa's behalf. She had always been confident that she would not hang – that justice would eventually be done – to the point of planning for her wedding and joining church groups as soon as she was released. Again, her letters contained much paraphrasing of Biblical passages relevant to her present status as an awaiting-death prisoner.

Like the other five condemned she was aware that much was being said and done on her behalf in the outside world, and wanted the world to know how thankful she was.

> From my journal:
> *10.30 a.m. Theresa was very happy to hear about yesterday's Mass celebrated for her intentions, in which I was able to convey to the congregation her previously written greetings. The prison chaplain, Monsignor John Magennis, celebrated Mass in her cell last week. She told me that Sisters Gertrude Ryan and Francis Sheehy of the Sisters of Mercy had visited her. The always-present black prison warder noted my name and address during our meeting, which again was a non-contact one. Yesterday Theresa*

sent me a card "just to say thank you for everything that the Church does for us", and asking me to come and see her as soon as possible. She enjoyed the compliment when I mentioned that she was putting on weight. Finally we were reminded that our 40 minutes were up, and our meeting closed with a prayer and blessing.

Ramashamole's evidence was that on the morning of the tragedy she was forced to join a protest march which, when it reached the deceased councillor's house, was dispersed by police using tear gas and rubber bullets. A defence witness later testified that she had treated Theresa Ramashamole who had been struck in the head by a rubber bullet. Lawyers argued that, as she had been hurt and was in a dazed state, she would have been in no condition to join the crowd which 15 minutes later regrouped and attacked Mr Dlamini. She was finally convicted on the evidence of a single witness who said that during the commotion he heard her shout, "He [Dlamini] is shooting at us. Let's kill him."

During the trial, evidence was submitted to the court that Theresa had been tortured in solitary confinement. Electric shocks had been applied to her nipples.

At the time of the trial, during an altercation with her guards, her arm had been badly injured. She did not press charges. "I've forgiven him," she told me later.

Chapter 4

On the fateful day of September 3 1984, more than thirty people lost their lives. But only four murder charges arose, each of them out of the killing of a community councillor – The Sharpeville Six, Prakash Diar

Tuesday, 15 March 1988

Moments after I departed the Pretoria Maximum Security Prison on Monday, the Sharpeville Six were called to the then head of death row, Major Cronje's, office where a sheriff of the Supreme Court informed them that they would hang on Friday. Their petition to the State President had been refused. I wasn't to know this until the next morning.

A terrible, hopeless sense of resignation – and, they told me later, relief – settled over them as they were led from their old cells to the "waiting cells" section in the middle of a long corridor near the visiting block.

The authorities notified their families of the execution date. On Tuesday the Six were measured for the rope and weighed in order to eliminate any bodily "unpleasantness" as they dangle seconds after the trap door has shot away. Thickness of neck, height and weight were all taken into careful account. "They came and told me I was going to hang on Friday. They measured my neck, weighed me and gave me my number," Theresa said.

> From my journal:
> *8 a.m. Father Kevin Egan, who first heard the news on BBC radio, was, like myself, devastated. He knew the Six from their awaiting-trial days. He broke the news to me. Of course, I had to go to the prison immediately, but first I talked to the prison chaplain. He asked me to delay a while, as he wanted to meet Francis and Theresa*

(Machabane) immediately and bring them the support of Holy Communion. He would do this each morning till the end. In a state of suspended shock I decided to drop into the seminary chapel and ask the Lord how He wanted me to handle the situation when I met Machabane and Francis later that morning. A terrible sinking feeling gripped my guts. I needed time to think. Somehow God's inexplicable purpose had reached a very critical crossroads. On my arrival at the prison, which coincided with that of the case lawyer, Mr Prakash Diar, I recognised shocked and dazed relatives of the five male condemned standing in muted conversation at the side entry point of the male section. Brief greetings and strained smiles were exchanged. Ascertaining that Diar would be going into immediate consultation with his male clients, I slipped down to the uncrowded female section to see Theresa.

After much processing I was ushered into a private visitor's room, a gesture perhaps to a female prisoner nearing early death.

And there she was behind a thick window, smiling bravely, seemingly at peace. When I informed her that further urgent initiatives were being explored on her behalf in the outside world, she betrayed a certain impatience, indicating that she was "ready to go". Previously she told Diar, a Hindu, that Jesus had died for the sins of others, and now she had resigned herself to the same fate. I find it difficult to comprehend fully that I am seated before someone young and vibrant, the average, next-door kid, whose life will be officially terminated in the next few hours for allegedly being part of a highly emotional crowd of over a hundred, some of whom participated in the tragic killing of a prominent discredited local government official.

Since I was the last priest to talk to her in her mother tongue, it was obviously not a time for idle chatter or

wasted silences. The image of Christ agonising in the garden of Gethsemane on the eve of his judicial murder came to mind and we talked about it. No, she wouldn't fall asleep like the disciples, but would remain awake in prayer with Him. Besides, He would be with her in daily communion from now until Friday morning at 7 o'clock. Then she would receive Christ in the form of Holy Communion for the last time, twenty minutes before seeing Him face to face. "He who eats My Flesh and drinks My Blood will have life everlasting," she said.

I told her that I hoped that she'd continue to pray for me too, at which she paraphrased St Therese of Lisieux (she had earlier asked for some information on this 19th-century nun who was a doctor of spirituality) who promised to spend her time in heaven doing good on earth. Then poignantly, as the thought struck her, she remarked that she too would be dying at 24 years of age, the age at which St Therese died from tuberculosis. She remarked in total simplicity that like Benedict, the 16th-century Franciscan wonder-worker (the first African canonised, who, according to tradition, by an inspiration of God knew the time of his death), she knew the exact time of her death.

Theresa asked for a rosary, though I was sure she had one. Perhaps she wanted one big enough to be worn around her neck, as is customary in Africa. To be there when the hangman's rope encircled her neck in a few days' time. She also asked for a "scapular of Mary"[4], prompted no doubt by the fact that she herself was a former member of the Children of Mary youth association in Sharpeville

At this point we were interrupted, by a white warder who politely excused herself and, with an indulgent smile, asked Theresa for her mother's name, address, and home telephone number. Oh, the chronic insensitivity of it! A touch of the macabre, I remember thinking. Forms had to be filled in; final documentation completed. The hanging

[4] A piece of cloth worn over the shoulders, of religious or devotional significance – in this case related to Mary mother of Jesus.

procedures were moving into top gear. The South African prison authorities had by now informed Theresa's mother, Julia Ramashamole, that she and some relatives could attend a memorial service held at the prison chapel soon after the execution. Burial would be private and done by the authorities of the prison. Later the family would be informed of the whereabouts of the grave. The warder departed, content with her information. Theresa seemed unfazed, but I wondered what was going through her mind. We continued. She still wanted to talk about spiritual things. She found it consoling, she said, reflecting on the Anglican and Catholic Ugandan martyrs when faced with torture and final execution. Their experience of a strange joy under hopeless circumstances encouraged her to be brave. (They were a group of committed Anglican and Catholic Christians, who faced execution in the last century rather than submit to the perverted desires of a powerful chief.)

Later she wondered why they had given her only four days' notice of the execution, and added almost immediately and with a brief glint in her eyes, "Tell them to bring flowers." And then remembered, "But I won't see them till Sunday," (visiting day) and immediately, "Oh! I won't be here on Sunday."

All this time the black prison officer had been sitting with us. Finally, she gently reminded us that our somewhat extended time was nearly up. We exchanged understanding glances. We prayed that the Lord would accompany her from now on, that she'd feel His close presence, that He would fill her loneliness with His love and strength.

Just as I was leaving, I met Diar and his assistant, after their consultation in the male section, arriving to see Theresa. They reported that their clients, apart from Mokhesi, were in a state of great anxiety. "It's not clemency we want, it's justice," the prisoners had told

them. Referring to the contradictory evidence of the state witnesses, the five young people pointed to John 8:17: "It is written in your law that when two witnesses agree, what they say is true."

Diniso had found Romans 8:35 consoling. "Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will affliction, or hardship … danger or death?"

When I was finally admitted to the all too familiar visiting room of the male condemned, I was greeted with a cacophony of anxious voices as the families and relatives of the five condemned engaged in spirited, hopeless and final leave-taking with their loved ones.

Somebody ushered me into Mokhesi's cubicle – he was half-smiling, calm and composed as usual. It had been my clear impression for some time now that Francis Mokhesi had deliberately worked through the reality of early abrupt death, and had taken the necessary spiritual, cushioning steps to contain his feelings. There was a sense of final relief about him. Yes, even if not a homecoming, at least a perception that his death was not the end, but rather a change – a continuation of life in another sphere perhaps with the living-dead and further – a regular theme of his letters. Our conversation took on the same pattern as earlier with Theresa. Francis seemed in deep concentration half here, half there, oblivious of the heartbreaking din surrounding us. Finally, we prayed a very disturbed prayer, followed by a blessing.

Someone wanted a few last words with him. Visiting time was drawing to a close. I then quickly visited "Jaja", Reid, Aupa and Duma in their cubicles. I prayed with them a prayer for strength, and finally blessed each one.

I hardly noticed the endless security gates opening and closing behind me. I left the prison in a daze, still trying to gather my agitated feelings. Soon, I was winding my way through sunny Pretoria's mid-morning traffic. I was drained and emotionally exhausted.

That night I phoned the Six's lawyer who told me he was preparing papers in an attempt to halt the executions scheduled for Friday. Prakash Diar wouldn't give up.

He worked into the night, and next day a final application for a stay of execution was presented to the Pretoria Supreme Court before trial Judge Wessel Human. Unprecedented national and international interest was focused on the Pretoria court that morning. The public gallery was packed an hour before the court opened. Tense crowds filtered out and onto the streets. Foreign ambassadors including the Vatican delegate were in the public gallery. Foreign and local TV crews clustered around outside the courthouse. For the next two days, riveting courtroom exchanges would lead to life or death for the Sharpeville Six.