

Chapter 28 – Springs; Brakpan

The Spirit blows where it will

Convent of Our Lady of Mercy Springs

On the wind-swept area of the East Rand, known as “The Springs”, Mother General Augustine Geisel procured land from Messrs Rennie and Co. The town had a resident priest, Father Julian Bannister, O.P. who had dedicated his wood-and-iron church to Our Lady of Mercy. But though there were many Catholic families flocking to the gold mines of the Springs, the vast majority knew nothing of their religion, nor in fact of any religion. Many could not even recite the Apostles’ Creed and but few knew the Lord’s Prayer. They had been drawn to the locality by the report of the fabulously rich gold fields and only a sprinkling of some eight or ten persons came to Sunday Mass at the Church of Our Lady of Mercy. At the request of Very Rev Father Bede Jarrett, O.P. Prior Provincial of the English Province, the Sisters obtained leave from Right Rev Bishop David O’Leary, to open a convent at the Springs. By this time so many people had settled in the neighbourhood that the fountains from which the place derived its name had all run dry; so the article was dropped and the growing town was simply called SPRINGS.¹ Mother Winifred Simpkins was chosen Superior and given as staff Sisters Praxedis Tutzer, Teresina Ullrich, Inviolata Killermann, Alana Goettlinger and Everista Scharf.

Rumour travelled far and wide that at Springs, five minutes walk from Selection Railway Station, a stately convent of vast dimensions to accommodate 200 children had been built. Crowds flocked to see the new building. Alas, the first sod of the convent had not yet been turned; and they found out that Father Bannister had given up his cottage to the Sisters, reserving only one room for himself and that the shed-like church was used as a school house during the week and turned into a chapel of ease on Sundays. As time progressed even Father Bannister’s garage was turned into a class-room.

At the back of the tin church was a lean-to which was divided into a classroom for Mother Winifred and her senior students, and a tiny sacristy which was also the resting place of the Blessed Sacrament when the church was used as a school. The church, used in succession each week as a church, parish hall and classrooms, entailed work for the Sisters that can be better imagined than described.

The pioneers had arrived on 27th January 1930 and on 3rd February school was opened with 25 pupils ranging from the Kindergarten to Matriculation. Father Bannister had arranged with the Municipality that buses should bring the children to and from school at scheduled times: some of them lived five miles or even further away from the convent. This bus service is still available today. The number of children increased rapidly and by the end of the year there were about a hundred on the roll.

Mr Fitzsimons of Benoni drew the plan of the new Springs convent; the contract was signed by Mother General Augustine and given to Mr Muldoon² on 29th January 1931. A large double-storeyed building, enclosing three sides of a quadrangle was the result. The frontage of the convent opened on Derby Avenue; the South wing formed the convent proper; the North wing contained the classrooms. Thus the Sisters quitted the presbytery and the church ceased to serve as a school.

At a gymnastic display given by the pupils under the direction of Major Collard, V.D., the Mayor, Mr Geo Suttan M.P.C., and later M.P., congratulated the Sisters upon the minute precision of the Swedish Exercises, including tableaux of pyramids and fans and even a Baby Percussion Band. He remarked that it did not seem more than twelve months since he had walked with Father Bannister over that same site where there was then nothing but grass and sand. Now, in 1934, he said the convent stands as “the finest institute in Springs”. Two hundred and thirty children took part in the display and another two hundred

¹ Established as a colliery at first, it existed in the 1890s as a source of coal for the Netherlands South African Railway Company, but it became a township in 1902.

² Father of Rev L Muldoon, O.M.I.

were engaged in games. Scholars started to come from Brakpan and Nigel so, before long, it was found necessary to consider building convents in these two towns to relieve the overflow of pupils at Springs. When Father David Donohue, O.P. was parish priest the old house was replaced by the present church facing Derby Avenue. This building was designed and the work supervised by Rev Father Humbert Smetrys, O.S.B. With its 70 foot tower at the entrance and its dome 48 feet high and 32 feet in diameter, resting on sixteen columns and arches it was, from the architectural point of view, one of the finest of its kind on the Reef at the time.

In October 1935 Bishop O'Leary blessed the church in the presence of representatives from Johannesburg, Pretoria and all the Reef towns, including fifteen priests. Very Reverend Father Essex, Principal of the Dominican Priests in South Africa, delivered the address in which he praised the pioneers who had suffered many hardships in establishing the Catholic Faith on the Far East Rand. He complimented Father Donohue, who had laboured to secure the erection of the church, and he thanked the Town Council and the Public of Springs for the support they had given. After the Pontifical High Mass a luncheon for a hundred guests was spread at the Clarendon Hotel and at which Bishop O'Leary presided.

Mother Winifred wrote to the Mother House saying that, whereas at their arrival in Springs there were not more than about a dozen people at Sunday Mass, there was now a congregation of nearly three hundred. Many of the children taught the catechism they learned in school to their parents at home. The parish was very scattered, extending over a radius of more than 25 kilometres.

Mrs Murray, sister of Father Mark Flynn, C.Ss.R., came every day from Brakpan to teach Afrikaans to all the Standards at the Convent. Her services were gratis. Nor did she ever come empty-handed. There was always a basket of eggs for the cook or scones for the morning tea, or fresh fruit from her garden. And she declared she loved every minute of the day when she was helping the nuns. Rain or shine made no difference to her arrival.

The Convent School continued to grow so that adequate facilities had to be provided as well as substantial additions made to the buildings.

In 1964 the entire School was deeply shocked to learn that the loved headmistress, Sister M. Nivard Schneider, passed away during the June vacation. Though in poor health for years Sister knew no idle moment and always administered her school efficiently. She was planning for a holiday in Europe with her family and while briefly visiting her one sister at Cambridge Convent, East London, prior to departure, she collapsed and was admitted to the "Mater Dei" Hospital. However, God had decreed that all efforts to save the precious life would not succeed. She left behind her an example of having carried the cross of Christ faithfully to the end.

In June 1964 the Most Rev Father Aniceto Fernandes, Master General of our Order, visited South Africa, mainly to attend the solemn opening of St Peter's Seminary for African Clergy at Hammanskraal, which was staffed by Dominican Fathers. The Master General also called on a few of our communities. Father General addressed the Sisters, speaking in Italian while his Assistant, Father Hilary Carpenter, interpreted for him. Father General stressed the importance of our vocation as apostles and missionaries and of the need to let all our apostolic endeavours be the outcome of a deep interior life.

From as far afield as Potchefstroom, Klerksdorp, Potgietersrus, Ermelo and Welkom teachers and pupils converged on the Convent of Our Lady of Mercy, Springs, to take part in an inter-convent festival of speech and drama and music that was held for the first time in 1965.

The idea of such an annual event was originally the brain-child of our Mother General Fromunda Zimmermann, based in the hope that the pupils of the Sisterhood might meet together in a love and desire for some of the better things of life – good music, good literature and a general appreciation of the Arts. The idea was taken up and brought to fruition by Sister Emmanuel Hamilton-Brown whose musicianship and activities in speech training and drama are well known in Springs. Of the best adjudicators on the Rand were invited to these festivals. The criticisms offered by these judges were always constructive and artistically sound. These annual gatherings were also considered a great contribution to the cultural life of Springs.

The “Fons Virtae” Institute Courses for young religious were inaugurated at the Good Shepherd Convent, Johannesburg on 5th February 1968. A considerable number of our Sisters have benefited from these instructions.

In the same year Springs Convent also started a club for teenage girls called the “Links Club”. The aim was to help members look beyond themselves and their own little world, to the needs and problems of those around them; to enable them to channel their energies along creative lines and to show our young people how to put their idealism to use. From the Links Club grew the Christian Life Group.

The realisation of a project which had been long awaited by the staff and pupils of Springs Convent was fulfilled on 4th September 1970, when their new Science Block was officially opened by the Secretary of the Anglo-American Mines’ Corporation Fund, Mr PG Henwood. The Mayor of Springs, Cllr. Lloyd, said that a benefit to any part of the community was an asset to the whole town and that the Convent had now again added a facet to the school which, although important in the past, was vital to the future.

In recent years the boarding establishment of the school had been closed down and Springs Convent is now conducted as only a day school which, however, has six hundred pupils on its roll.

Sister Bonita Deschler, the Superior of the Convent of Our Lady of Mercy, died in a road accident on the East Rand Highway on 5th March 1976. The funeral was well attended and the Community received many messages of condolence; among these was a letter from the Education Department of the Transvaal expressing sympathy and appreciation of the work the Sister had done to further education in South Africa. This death was a grievous loss and it was difficult to find a substitute for the deceased Superior in the middle of the year. At the request of the Community, Sister M St Denis Quinn, though in indifferent health, generously stepped into the breach until the end of 1976.

Convent of Blessed Imelda, Brakpan³

The Brakpan Convent began as a filial of Springs Convent when Mother Winifred was prioress at Springs. Father Desmond Murray O.P., parish priest of Brakpan complained bitterly that Mother General Augustine Geisel had by-passed Brakpan, giving Springs the preference of having a Dominican Convent. Mother General then purchased a small property at Brakpan and school was started there in a cottage while Mr Muldoon built the convent.

This reef town was not very imposing at the time. A photograph of the Catholic Church shows it to be only half its present size and without its tower. On 23rd January 1932 Bishop O’Leary, O.M.I., of Johannesburg, blessed the small house with its added classrooms. Among those present at this dedication were Fathers Murray, Maurus Revill, G Coyle and J Harrison, all Dominicans; also Mothers General, Winifred, Aidan Kilbride and Sister Clement Lynch. It was decided that the Brakpan staff would stay at Springs and come over each morning to school in the Springs car.

School began on 1st February 1932, with only about 40 pupils. By the end of the year the number had almost doubled itself and 24 children made their first Holy Communion. In September 1934 the foundation stone of the new building was laid. As soon as rooms in this were available the children took possession of them without any formal opening and, in 1935, the Sisters came to stay. They were Sister Clement Lynch (Superior), Sisters Alban Middleborough, Symphorosa Engelmann, Regula Schelle, Judith Richtsfeld, Trinita Haag and Ella Rehr. The children were prepared for the College of Preceptors Examinations and also for the Junior Certificate Academic Course at which they did very well.

In 1938 the University of the Witwatersrand offered a three-weeks vocational refresher course in Botany. This was the first of its kind and Sister Alban was among the 54 nuns who availed themselves of the opportunity. It was an auspicious day for the school when the commercial department was opened and pupils could go from the classroom equipped with a good business education. On St Dominic’s Day of

³ *Established as a separate municipality from its neighbour, Benoni, only 4 miles away, it became an important gold-mining and industrial centre.*

the same year the Sisters surprised the parish priest by singing a Miss Cantata, complete with the sequence, without any instrumental assistance.

On 24th August Sister Clement was taken by ambulance to the Far East Rand Hospital. The Sisters thought the illness was only a passing cold; but it proved to be Pneumonia of which she died on 28th September, to the great sorrow of the community. Her body was brought back to the Convent from which, later, her funeral moved to the East Rand Cemetery. Sister Alban succeeded her as Superior.

However, the incredible happened on the next 4th August; on that day Sister Alban was not at Mass. Fear clutched the hearts of the Sisters as they heard Dr Beckett diagnose double pneumonia and very little chance of recovery. She was moved by ambulance to Caerglow Nursing Home at Springs and for nine weeks she heroically fought for her life. The pneumonia passed but left her in such a weak condition that she was unable to cope with the complications that set it. Her last days were brightened by visits from her Sisters and also from the Dominican Priests stationed on the Rand. She died on 26th October 1940 and was buried near Sister Clement in the Rand Cemetery.

Sister Symphorosa became Superior. The year, 1941, was opened by a grand mayoral service when Holy Mass was said for the first time in the Brakpan Town Hall. The impressive ceremony was attended by, among other important persons, the mayors of Johannesburg, Nigel, Springs, Boksburg, Randfontein, Roodepoort and Krugersdorp. They, with their attendants, joined the mayor of Brakpan and other distinguished guests in a colourful procession to the town hall, the entrance of which was guarded by a group of firemen in their uniforms. Every available seat was occupied and hundreds of Brakpan citizens listened to the profoundly moving Catholic ceremony which was explained in a running commentary by Father F Synnot. In his address the Priest declared the purpose of the service was to ask God's blessing on the execution of civic duties for the year. He pointed out that every function of human life was of deep interest to God and they were there to call down God's benediction on the Mayor, Mr J Freel and upon those who would have to co-operate with him.

In 1942 the community was increased to 22 and when Father Revil opened the new parish hall the Convent pupils staged "The Cup of Coffee" to a delighted audience. January 1944 found the Sisters very busy with interior and exterior repairs and the school opened with a roll of three hundred and sixty. In 1954 Mr Freel donated an annual prize of Three Guineas, to be given to an English-speaking pupil who showed proficiency in Afrikaans or to an Afrikaans-speaking student who was proficient at English.

About two miles from Brakpan there was a mission. The Dominican Fathers asked Mother Augustine to supply a staff of her Sisters; but as this was impossible she promised to pay the salary of one African teacher at this mission. In addition to this, every Sunday, two Sisters went from Brakpan to prepare the altar and church for Sunday Mass at this mission until the Priest's catechist could take over.

The clergy were aware of the contribution the 'King' Congregation was making towards the establishment of the Catholic Church in South Africa. The Very Reverend Father Bede Jarrett O.P., of holy memory, then Prior Provincial of the English Province of the Order, paid a visit to Klerksdorp in November 1929. He sang the Community Mass in the church of Potchefstroom on All Souls and All Saints of the Order and gave the Sisters several beautiful conferences on the true spirit of the Dominican Order and its glorious Founder. To the Sisters themselves he seemed the very embodiment of that spirit, a true mirror of their Blessed Father. The other Convents on the Reef were also visited by this saintly son of St Dominic. In several letters to the Prioress General he expressed his appreciation of our Sisterhood and its work. One of these, dated February 6th, 1930, might be quoted here:

"... Without the Sisters we could not have done anything at all at Klerksdorp and Potchefstroom and with them we shall be sure at Springs and Brakpan that our work there will be permanent and valuable. Your Sisters have been most kind to us... Last Monday I said Mass for the venture at Springs. I hope that the results were not too disappointing and that the faith and courage of the adventurers were not too sorely tried... With every best wish for the success of your works, spiritual and temporal, and most grateful for your generous help in the past ,

Fraternally in St Dominic,

F. Bede Jarrett, O.P.”

With the progress of Brakpan the number on the school roll increased accordingly and the peak of 300 was reached, necessitating further extensions. Extra rooms were provided for the music department. When the new Convent was built the Nuns' old quarters were converted into additional classrooms. The school also held its own in the field of sports. Swimming was a favourite exercise and our excellent team was chosen to represent the Transvaal in the Provincial contests and travelled right to Cape Town for the purpose.

It has been aptly said that the Catholic Church, though so poor, entered the Transvaal through the gates of diamonds and gold. News of finding gold on the Witwatersrand brought our Sisters to Johannesburg, 'not in search of gold but of the greater treasure of souls' as Mother Eleonora had expressed it. There were many sequences of events that formed links in the chain which finally reached Brakpan and the establishment of the convent there. The Catholic population grew from the original 20 or 30 people to several thousand at the present day. The school at its peak offered a full course from Kindergarten to Matriculation, with music and commercial subjects. Many of the pupils had reached provincial level in sports and several achieved brilliant scholastic records.

After nearly 40 years of service in the town the Blessed Imelda Convent was forced to close down at the end of 1973. Although the fees were quite low for a private school the number of pupils diminished owing to the soaring cost of living.

The Convent was, in future, to serve as a Noviciate House for the training of young nuns and only a small Nursery School and the Music Department are to be maintained. Mrs S Stezer, the last Chairman of the Parent-Teachers' Association, said: "Brakpan has lost much through the closure of the Convent School, but we will always be grateful that our children were fortunate to benefit by the school's existence..."

Convent of St Hyacinth,⁴ Nigel⁵

In 1933 and part of 1934 the parish priest of Springs, Father David Donohue, O.P. used to visit Nigel regularly to say a second Mass there on Sundays. Two Sisters from Springs convent accompanied him to act as sacristan and catechist. Mass was said in a fairly large wood-and-iron shed which was bitterly cold in winter and intensely hot in summer.

In May 1934 Mother General Augustine bought a property at the end of Commissioner Street and later added an adjoining building, bought from Mr Cantamesso. However, there were no Sisters to staff the potential convent so Mass was said on the verandah of the empty house and thus, in open air style, the Catholics heard Sunday Mass kneeling or standing in the adjacent garden. There was no seating accommodation and, after the service was over, the priest had breakfast at the house of the Catholic family while the Sisters taught catechism to the children. They often returned to Springs only just in time for their midday meal and they were still fasting.⁶

Helped by Sister Cornelia Huebner, who succeeded Mother Winifred as Prioress at Springs, Sister Lioba Koch and Sister Fulgentia Pallauf arrived at Nigel on 1st November 1934 as pioneers of St Hyacinth Convent. They found a couple of cottages in a state of disrepair and a ramshackle outhouse. Sister Lioba was a woman of few words; she lonely sadly shook her head as she went through the neglected place. From Heidelberg Brother Robert of the Servite Order arrived soon after the Sisters. As the spiritual care

⁴ *This renowned Dominican apostle and his brother Ceslaus were the sons of the Count of Odrowatz in Poland. Already a priest and Canon of Cracow, Hyacinth and his brother visited Rome in 1220 where they met St Dominic and received from the Saint the habit of the Friars Preachers at Santa Sabina. With the habit Hyacinth seems to have also received the holy Patriarch's spirit, so manifest became his zeal for souls. St Dominic sent him to evangelise the northern parts of Europe where his apostolic journeys can be traced by the Friaries which he founded on his way. He died in 1257*

⁵ *Mining town on the Eastern Witwatersrand, named after Nigel MacLeish, founder of the Nigel Gold Mine. The town was founded in 1909.*

⁶ *In former years Catholics received Holy Communion fasting from midnight at least. This rule was changed by Pope Pius XII during World War II.*

of the Catholic residents of Nigel was now given to the Servite Fathers, he had come to do what repairs were absolutely necessary to make the place habitable. The three religious worked together and after a few days were joined by Brother Luecke, S.A. C. and Mr Hand Geigenberger, both professional builders. Meanwhile the ladies of the town had heard what was happening and joined forces to help the Sisters.

Stables and outhouses were soon demolished by the builders and on the 15th November the first sod of the new convent was turned. The nuns, in the interim, lived in one of the cottages. As there was no church or resident priest they turned their front room into a chapel and for ten days spent their time furnishing the house to the best of their ability.

On 11th November Father A Botha O.S.M. came to say Mass and reserved the Blessed Sacrament in the Sisters' Chapel. After Benediction on the same afternoon fifteen local ladies gave a high tea as their official welcome to the nuns. Delicacies were served and the crockery used was left as a gift to the Convent. At Mass on Sunday 18th November, the tiny chapel was filled beyond capacity by about 50 people. After Mass a German farmer and his son presented themselves to the Sisters. They formed part of the Vogel family and had come from their home 15 miles away on horseback to hear Mass. Speaking in German they greeted the nuns with the old traditional salutation: "Praised be Jesus Christ!" and the Sisters replied, "Praised evermore!" The visitors presented them with gifts of their farm produce, which were very welcome. This family has remained good friends of the Convent to this day.

St Hyacinth School grew steadily and new buildings were added to accommodate the increasing number of children which reached 265 at its peak. The classes ranged from the Grades to Matriculation. The Commercial pupils also did well. On paging through the annals one sees impressive lists of Convent pupils of Nigel that had passed examinations of the Trinity College of Music, London.

Through lack of Sisters, not for want of pupils, Nigel Convent was obliged to discontinue its senior department at the end of 1974. Two years later the school was closed down completely. The last Mass was said in the old Convent chapel on 15th January 1977. Fortunately the senior Sisters had, by that date, already left Nigel and were thus spared the traumatic experience of seeing their former home stripped and vacated. Sisters Marianna Wandinger, Rosalinda Schaumberger, Sieglinde Bauhofer and Pieta Hutten now moved to No 199 Breytenbach Street, the roomy private house which had served as a hostel for Convent Boy boarders. Here the foursome would continue St Hyacinth Convent and would help the Priests with parochial work and teach catechism to the Catholic children of the town.