

Chapter 44 – Springs, St Mary’s Maternity Home

A Spring Idyll

A former patient had this to say of “St Mary’s Maternity Home” in Springs: “...When you visited the Home you experienced an awareness of dedication and devotion among the staff which had an ethereal quality in comparison to the topsy-turvy world in which we live. Despite everybody being very busy, and probably even overworked, a certain tranquillity persisted and encompassed all in a quiet intensity... The standard of work rendered there was remarkably high, and when you were discharged you would declare that there wasn’t another hospital like it – and you might even be right... Here distance and time seemed to be synonymous and the bright sunlight pouring down on the neat garden and into the wards, could not fail to bring hope and contentment to all who waited in the confines of this undeniably serene and friendly institution...” But how did it begin?

Number 36 Main Avenue in Springs Extension was a small Maternity Home of only ten beds, known as “Kimberley House”, owned by a secular nurse, Mrs Brown-Vowler. The property was bought by the ‘King’ congregation and renamed “St Mary’s Maternity Home”. Many urgent repairs were undertaken and, on 8th September 1951, the Home was dedicated by Father George Taylor, O.P. in the presence of Mother General M Demetria Hemmer, a number of Sisters and a gathering of friends.¹ Sister Ann Cogan² was appointed as the first Matron of St Mary’s. At first the Home was a filial of the local Convent of Our Lady of Mercy but, in time, it became independent. The numbers on the register rose steadily so that 1955 began with a full house and during its course 350 babies were born here. As there was no operating theatre on the premises, patients needing caesarean Section Operation had to be transferred to the Far East Rand Hospital – a great disadvantage to the Home.

The little community invoked the intercession of St Joseph that they might be permitted to have a chapel of their own. Father Maurus Revill O.P., who became parish priest of Springs, supported the Sisters’ petition to which Right Rev Bishop H Boyle gave the necessary consent. A room was used at first but Sister M Dominic Heck made plans to provide a small chapel where the garage adjoined the Sisters’ living quarters. On St Mary’s fifth birthday the chapel was ready for dedication by Father Maurus Revill O.P., assisted by Father Francis Middlewick O.P.

When Sister Gertrude Schmid took charge of the Home in the dual capacity of Matron and Superior, she planned to increase St Mary’s bed capacity from ten to fifteen, and also to equip the establishment with its own operating theatre. Mr F van Teeffelen was engaged as an architect and Mr J Hoeben as the contractor. On 2nd February 1961, the first Caesarean Section was performed in the new theatre. Further improvements followed and several surrounding plots were progressively acquired with the view to erecting a larger nursing home on the site at a future date.

Father Revill was delighted to have, in his parish, this Nursing Home, which he said “did so much good to bodies and souls”. At St Mary’s as well as at all our other hospitals, a copy of the Catholic Moral Cod was prominently displayed for the perusal of Non-Catholic Doctors visiting the institution, so that they knew the nursing nuns zealously upheld the teaching of the Church. In this regard tribute must be paid to the chivalry of the South African Doctors in respecting the Sisters’ religious views.

In May 1962, Baby Margaret Ensley was born three months premature. The tiny little girl was nursed in the newly-acquired incubator. After a few days of anxious struggle the little lady made it clear that she had come to stay. In due time she was discharged a healthy and beautiful baby. More such wonders of modern science followed as, for instance, Christo Tromp who weighed on 1112 grams at birth and was also extremely premature. (He is the sole survivor of six former siblings who had also been premature.)

¹ Among these were: Dr van Zyl, the Medical Officer of Health, Dr Eastman-Neagle; Mr B O’Keefe; Mr B Corless, the Chief Health Inspector; Mesdames Crumpling, C Maltman and S Cogan.

² The rest of the pioneering community were Sisters Adelina Mack, Magda Weber, Binigna Schoeffman and Frieda Ziegeltrum.

On a Day of Atonement Mrs Shapiro's little son was due for circumcision. Circumcision ceremonies were usually performed in the Nursing Home for the safety of the infant. This being a special occurrence, however, the Doctor allowed the rite to be held in the Synagogue. The Rabbi requested a member of the nursing staff to be present in order to care for the child, so Mrs G Heyns, our secular sister accompanied the little boy. Circumcision on this day is regarded by Jewish parents as a special privilege and earnest of divine blessing.

By 1967 permission had been obtained for the erection of a new Maternity Home and building operations were commenced. Mr F van Teeffelen had prepared the plans and the tender for their execution offered by Messrs R Herd (Pty.) Ltd, was accepted. The foreman in charge of the work, Mr C de Wet, took special interest in the project and proved an invaluable friend to the Sisters.

Owing to the inclement weather the opening of the new Home took place in the lobby of the hospital, which was full to capacity on the 16th November 1968. The Deputy Mayor Councillor D Terblanche opened the new St Mary's and Bishop H Boyle blessed the building. After the closing prayer, over two hundred guests were permitted to inspect the Home, whose beauty and modernity brought forth many expressions of surprise. Modern features included the fine Nursery, the Baby Advisory Clinic (which would be in operation every Saturday afternoon), the Labour Wards and Operating Theatre – all supplied with the latest equipment.

During the course of the previous week many gifts of flowers were sent to the Nursing Home to welcome the new "Baby" to Springs and the Sisters were delighted that the public was so appreciative of their work.

Dr G Wright, Honorary Medical Superintendent of St Mary's, welcomed the guests on behalf of the nuns. In his speech he gave a synopsis of the long and interesting nursing history of our Congregation. The Deputy Mayor spoke for the Town Council and the citizens of Springs and wished the Sisters every success with the beautiful twenty-four-bed hospital...

On paging through the annals one reads that "on 27th September 1970, Pope Paul VI declared our holy Mother St Catherine³ a "Doctor of the Church". Sister Ann Cogan, Organising Secretary of the Catholic Hospital Commission in South Africa, represented our Congregation at this auspicious occasion in Rome, where she also attended the International Congress for Health in Developing Countries, at about this time.

On 10th October of the same year the eighth centenary of St Dominic's birth was also commemorated at various centres in South Africa where there were so many of his followers. The Diocese of Johannesburg observed the solemnity at Cathedral Place in the city, at which a large number of Dominicans and friends of the Order were gathered.

During the years 1952 – 1967 the statistics show that a record number of infants had been born at the "old" St Mary's – 6384. An amazing figure when it is realised that this constituted approximately fifteen per cent of the population of Springs.

The Sisters, Doctors and patients were delighted with the new St Mary's where everything was so conveniently arranged that work was almost easy. For about another decade the Home continued to give joy to many families as children would importune their parents to buy another baby, adding: "There are many at St Mary's".

But as the numbers of the Congregation dwindled and ever more seculars had to be enlisted, it became obvious that sooner or later the beautiful little hospital would have to be given up. To Sister Amata Heesakkers, one of the best known nurses in the home, this was unthinkable. She even remarked that she

³ *Catharine Benincasa, one of the greatest women of Christendom, was born a dyer's daughter at Siena in 1347. She joined the Dominican Order as a Tertiary. From looking after the poor and sick she was drawn into politics and helped persuade Pope Gregory XI to return to Rome from Avignon. During her lifetime she underwent many mystical experiences. Catharine left writings that are considered classics in purest Tuscan, the Italian vernacular of her time. Saints Catharine and Teresa of Avila are the first women to receive the title "Doctor of the Church" Catharine is indeed a worthy representative of the best Dominican tradition in which contemplation expresses itself in apostolic activity. She is also a noble example of Christian womanhood, taking a role as leader of men.*

would prefer death rather than leave St Mary's. Sister Amata was a most conscientious, reliable midwife and was always ready to take on extra duties in times of emergency. Her special concern was ever the premature babies who seemed to thrive miraculously under her gentle care. In January 1975 Sister celebrated the 25th anniversary of her religious profession and later in the year visited her relatives in Holland. On her return from Europe towards the end of August, she looked well and, though tired, resumed her duties with wonted zeal. Shortly afterwards she became ill and malignant disease was diagnosed. After an operation it was hoped she would recover but, all too soon, it became evident that the malady was making alarming progress... Well-prepared for her last journey, our Sister winged her way to heaven on 4th November and was spared witnessing the closure of her beloved St Mary's.

Like in our other Nursing Homes, St Mary's was sometimes also able to assist unmarried mothers. One instance may be mentioned: An unwedded mother came to the Nursing Home. After the formalities of admission the girl turned her troubled eyes away from the Sister and began weeping bitterly. She was all alone with her trouble, for her parents were not to know about it. Sister took the unhappy girl in her arms and comforted her, telling her she was welcome there, and that God is good... He would send her help. However, the nun noticed that the patient was embittered and did not want to hear about God. Nevertheless, Sister found opportunity to speak to her about the Lord's fatherhood and His love and concern for all His children. When the baby was born it was adopted by a good, childless couple, as circumstances did not permit its own mother to keep it.

On discharge the patient was quite overcome when the Sisters told her that they were making no charge for her stay at St Mary's. Some time later she wrote: "...I had never been in contact with Sisters before although I had heard that 'a nun is a woman with a heart' – and I truly experienced this. How can I thank the Sisters for their loving acceptance of me in my great need and the wonderful care given; yes, and all without charge? I shall always remember your goodness to me... It has also helped me to find my God again, Who I thought had forsaken me..."

The public of Springs sympathised with the nuns when it became known that the Sisters were to vacate St Mary's early in 1976. "What a cruel, hard decision had to be made by the devoted, generous Sisterhood; what heartbreak to come to such a passé after twenty-five years of faithful service to the mothers and babes of Springs..." We close this chapter with the prayer that the unselfish, loyal ministrations the Sisters had given in the name of Christ, may bear a rich harvest in souls.