

Part 2

Missionary Endeavour

In our day people have come to think of “missionary work” as enterprises undertaken only for evangelising Non-White races. This concept is, of course, incorrect. Our first Sisters, as seen from the narrative, came to South Africa to aid the Priests in maintaining the Faith among the scattered White colonists who were drifting from the Church through lack of pastors in this vast land. Were it not for the Catholic Schools there should be no Catholic parishes among the European population of South Africa today. The Church Schools, in their past pupils, both Catholics and Non-Catholics, have produced some of the finest men and women of South Africa. Nevertheless, only for the sake of convenience in compiling this book, is the work done by our Congregation for the Non-White races recorded in a separate section.

The obstacles in extending the Catholic Faith among the Black people in South Africa were legion, but it is generally agreed that one of the major hindrances was the large number of religious sects that were already established in the country before the advent of Catholicism. The Africans, finding such a confusion of creeds around them, remained for the most part indifferent and sceptical, if not directly opposed to Christianity. But despite these and many other impediments in their path, the messengers of the Gospel laboured courageously to announce Christ’s message in our sub-continent.

I – Holy Family Mission, Heilands

The Annals of 1893 record that the Sisters at Izeli farm prayed daily for the conversion of Africa and for the propagation of the Faith. “The time had now definitely come,” wrote Sister Alacoque Brien in her notes, “...for mission work to be commenced among the Bantu peoples. Thirty African labourers had been employed in the erection of the convent Church at King William’s Town. Of these men five embraced Christianity on the Feast of St Dominic in 1893...”

Mother Mauritia Tiefenboeck and Sister Margaret McConville visited Lovedale¹ Mission in order to study the methods used by the Protestant Missionaries there. On her return Mother Mauritia opened a boarding school for Bantu girls. For some time the enrolment numbered only two. The small fees charged were beyond the finances of the poor parents for, at that time, Kaffraria had been ravaged by locusts. The Sisters then took the children free of charge and the number immediately rose to twelve. Before admitting most of them though, the teacher had to supply them with clothing.

To form the nucleus of the Catholic settlement, twenty Bantu families were given huts and small holdings on the convent farm. Father Hornig, S.J. of Keilands Mission sent his catechist to instruct the Africans. The Sisters picked up the Xhosa language mostly by listening and, within a short time, they were at least able to recite prayers with the catechumens in their mother tongue. In order to counteract pagan influence, it became customary for the Sisters to make a round of visits to the huts in the neighbourhood. The zeal of the missionaries soon urged them to lengthen their radius and, in order to move about more easily, they made use of donkeys. In a few years the sight of the nuns on their doughty little steeds was one of the familiar scenes of the countryside. As the years advanced, at first horses, then the priest’s motor cycle, and finally the motor car replaced the donkeys.

The rapidly developing mission work of the “King” Dominicans was a great joy to Bishop Ricards, whose health had now begun to fail. He wrote: “This had been the darling object of my missionary life... Almost from the first moment I set foot in Africa and saw around me the splendid Black race, I have carefully considered by what means they might be brought to the saving knowledge of Christ.”

For some time the Jesuits had been asking for Sisters to staff the Mission of the Holy Family at Keilands. Mother Mauritia gives the following account of the trail-blazers’ journey thither: “... On 28th August 1894

¹ A large missionary and educational centre at Alice in the Cape Province.

Father A M Daignault, S.J., Mother General Euphemia Koffler and I accompanied the five first Sisters² to this vineyard of the Lord. We travelled by train as far as Dohne Siding. Having secured our luggage we now boarded one of the ox-wagons awaiting us, while the Priest and Brother took possession of the other. Each wagon was drawn by a span of fourteen oxen. They took us across the veld where there was no road at all and, finally, halted for the night at a little clump of trees on a river bank.” Here the travellers prepared their supper and Rev Father promised to say Mass next morning and give them Holy Communion. “... After soul and body had been refreshed we were ready to continue our journey when, alas, the oxen were lost! They had strayed into a farmer’s field and were taken to the pound some miles further away. By the time these animals had been retrieved it was clear that we would have to spend another night in our tent on the veld. Now, however, the oxen were tethered to the yokes and so we could proceed in the morning... As we approached our destination Father Daignault pointed out a flat rock on which the late Father Fraser, S.J. had said Mass when he came to found this mission in 1886.

“Fathers Hornig and Bick, S.J. came to welcome the new arrivals and, at the sound of the big bell, Africans approached from all sides to see the first nuns at Keilands. The Priests gave up their house for the Sisters and lived in huts for the time being. Brother Eberhard, a builder, had been lent by Abbot Francis Pfanner of Mariannahill to erect the new church here. An old benefactor, Count Bernaert of Belgium, who had made the farm over to the Jesuits, sent money to build the church, while the Countess and daughter supplied vestments and other devotional articles. Father Hornig now began teaching the Xhosa language to the Sisters in earnest and Father Daignault joined the students.”

Sister Rosa took over the school of the mission. The sons of the wealthy Chief Saliwa were the first fruits of the missionaries’ labours. “His three sons, with their wives and children became Christians. Their father was so incensed at this that he requested a witchdoctor to poison his sons. And lo, the eldest was struck by some malady of the spine and died within a few months. The other two became mentally ill. The wife of the youngest son was an exceptionally good woman and devout Christian.” In the year 1897 the Rinderpest broke out, killing most of the livestock in the country. “Chief Saliwa lost his hundred head of cattle and was so upset by this misfortune that he attempted suicide by casting himself in the river; but he was rescued in time. After this he was a changed man and, finally, even allowed the priest to baptise him before his death...”

Keilands is situated in a region of extremes: There is either an abundant harvest or none at all, depending on the rainfall. Sister Benigna wrote in the mission annals that the “worst drought in living memory was experienced here in 1900. Eventually our victuals were depleted and every effort to procure provisions in the stricken district was of no avail, for absolutely nothing was obtainable. In our great need we asked St Anthony of Padua’s help and intercession. On about the third day of our novena, Tom, one of the African parishioners, came, saying: ‘I understand that the Sisters are very poor. My wife said I should give you this pig with its three young ones.’ It is now September 1901 and that pig has supplied us with several litters. Sad to relate, during last year’s drought, typhoid fever broke out, to which Tom and his wife succumbed...”

The Dominican Sisters worked here until 1909, when they left the mission to Sisters of the precious Blood of Mariannahill. In 1922 Sister Cassiana Rohrmeier³ records: “... After an interval of fourteen years it was decided by our respective superiors that the ‘King’ Dominicans should return to the mission of Keilands. On 17th December Sisters Cajetan Brandl, Gertrude Fortholer, Hildegard Stotka and I left the Mother House by the evening train and reached Dohne at about midnight. From there we continued on our way at 2 a.m. on the donkey cart with the two Africans that were sent to meet us and arrived at Keilands at 5 p.m. The cool of the morning was followed by an afternoon of burning heat which brought on a thunder storm. This broke over us as we neared the mission in our cart without a hood. We were drenched to the skin as we trudged behind the cart through the mud, and must have looked a sight, while the Xhosas of the village greeted us on every side.

² *Sisters Rosa Schnell, Camilla Klostermeier, Bartholomea Kreppold, Isidore Wiedemann with Sister Benigna Osterberger as the Superior.*

³ *Aunt of the future Sister Revocata Recher, O.P.*

“On arrival, Fathers Albert Schweiger and Nicholas Schweb and Brother Simon – all of Mariannahill – together with the Sisters, gave us a very hearty welcome. The Sisters of the Precious Blood very kindly remained in order to initiate us into our work. On 20th December they returned to Natal...

“Two of our Sisters accompanied the Priest to Cofimvaba⁴ on 8th September 1923, where the thanksgiving for a good harvest was celebrated. It is a pretty little village lying in the valley with a good water supply. It was beautifully green, while Keilands, in comparison, resembled a desert owing to the lack of rain. There were only three Catholic European families, among whom was Mr Murphy, the Postmaster, a recent convert. He was very happy to meet the Sisters and made use of the opportunity for further instruction in our religion. So far the religious services here are held in a large hut which also serves as a school...”

Keilands in those days was an almost inaccessible spot. In a bend of the Great Kei River, surrounded on all sides by trackless mountains, there lived a population of about a hundred Xhosas. They had settled there for reasons of economy, but remained dispirited and totally indifferent. The school, too, was a humble affair. No inspector knew of its existence; the buildings were primitive and the children few and raw; school hours were short and not much was achieved.

Reverend Bernard Huss of Mariannahill had relieved the last of the Jesuit Priests who left to work in the Zambesi Mission. The Jesuits had noticed the lack of interest in the people and, together with the Dominican nuns, had done their best to remedy the state of apathy. Thus they resorted to a practice which, though well intended, in due time proved disastrous. They provided all possible material help to these African Christians which one would give to people in Europe during a time of emergency. At first the Africans accepted the support gratefully, but later came to consider it their due for being Christians. The mission had fallen prey to a “Bread Christianity”.

Father Huss took stock of the situation and found that the number of Christians remained static, while the debts of the mission mounted rapidly. There was also the school at which the Dominican Sisters had worked hard and had brought it up to Standards Five and Six. But all the classes were taught in the same room and thus progress was greatly hampered. The priest was faced with the unpleasant task of stopping material assistance to all but the most needy members of the congregation. “We came here to help the Bantu people, not to spoil them; we may not create a nation of paupers,” Father Huss explained to his helpers. Effective measures of thrift were introduced to pay off the debts. The Sisters co-operated will and gradually the mission finances recovered.

The Christians, however, were dissatisfied and told their pastor that it was impossible for them to live without material support from the mission. They argued that their fields were poor and the rainfall inadequate to make a living. The priest explained to them that their fields had become poor through neglect and, although, the rainfall is not plentiful, he reckoned it sufficient to raise a reasonably good crop by means of “dry farming method” (storage and conservation of moisture). The process described by Father Huss implied a good deal of work and this was not a favourable feature in the opinion of these people. Father Bernard realised that he had taken an enormous task upon himself, but was determined to go his way in the right direction in spite of opposition and disappointments, where were not lacking.

After that the priest set about raising the standard of the school so that he could apply for Government aid, which he eventually achieved. In the whole of South Africa he could not find a trained African Catholic teacher, so he set about training his own teachers. Every evening he faced a class of five pupil teachers and taught them arithmetic and the elements of teaching and education. The Sisters assisted him by teaching other subjects. One day he presented to the School Inspector five uncertificated teachers and the arrangement was accepted as a temporary measure.

Eventually Father Huss decided to send the best of his uncertificated teachers, Barbara Ndaba, to qualify at a non-Catholic Training School. The young lady, aged seventeen, passed the course successfully and returned to Keilands. The Priest gave her one of the subsidiary schools that had recently received a grant-

⁴ A village in the region now known as the Transkei. The name is derived from Native words meaning ‘squeezing a milk-bag’, because of the excellence of the cattle.

in-aid from the State. Here she seemed to teach with success and the Priest was pleased with this achievement.

When riding out to visit Teacher Barbara one day, Father Huss noticed a large gathering of people at the kraal of a petty chief. On asking the cause of the celebration he was told: "But don't you know, Father, that our Chief is taking his fifth wife? It is Balabala, the new teacher of your school. The Chief paid fifteen oxen for her lobola. Isn't it wonderful? How happy the father-in-law must be!"

No! This was too much for the missionary... It had all been arranged behind his back and he felt like a fool at the way he had been tricked. What was the use of it all? ...But no, he may not despair; he must continue following the Master who suffered similar disappointments while still on earth.⁵

Father Huss also pondered long on the inert and sluggish nature of the Africans. He came to the conclusion that the European must remember that the Black man migrated south from the Northern parts of Africa. Thus most of his traditions originated in the tropical regions of the continent where the climate is hot and enervating; the needs of subsistence were few and simple and were achieved with comparatively little labour. Thus there was no strong stimulus for excessive exertion.

The African continent was, to a great extent, also isolated, communication being scanty; consequently the tribes, lacking stimulating outside influence, were left to their own resources and so remained chiefly static. The influence of witchcraft also forbade all innovations, thus initiative and invention were stifled.

Western civilisation ought to have come to Africa in a way of natural development; but, in fact, it happened quite differently. With bewildering suddenness the strong European civilization overthrew the African culture with its good and bad elements together... Therefore the missionary should proceed at the pace of the ox. It was well to bear in mind that in the earlier opening and changing of Africa horsemen and their speed failed but the ox wagon of the Cape penetrated as far as the Zambesi and beyond...

During January 1946 a devastating storm took the roof off the old priests' house had been built by the Jesuits. By this time the Holy Family Mission had changed hands again and it was now under the care of the Pallottine Priests, since the independent Prefecture of Queenstown was created under Right Rev Monsignor F J Vogel.

Brother Franz P.S.M. was sent to Keilands to put the roof back and to attend to other repairs that were badly needed. The scarcity of building material after World War II and the difficulty of transporting it to the isolated mission caused the missionaries many hardships. Most of the goods had to be carried by women and children down the hill and across the river...

"The 8th December 1946 was a red-letter day when the first two men belonging to the Tembu Tribe of the Xhosa people were ordained to the priesthood at Keilands. The neophytes, Stephen and Michael Phako were also brothers. Forty Xhosa men on horseback from Keilands and Zigudu Missions rode out to meet His Excellency Archbishop MH. Lucas S.V.D.⁶ and Monsignori JB Rosenthal and T Koenig, to escort them to the place where the ordination was to take place. Fifteen priests from the neighbouring missions also assisted at the ceremony, after which the new priests gave their blessing to several hundred Catholics..."

The last two Dominican missionaries of Keilands, sisters Anacleta Frizino and Dalmatia Treiner, worn out by their labours and advancing age, left this station on 8th September 1958 where, for forty years the 'King' nuns had borne the burden and heat of the day and had helped to develop it into a flourishing Catholic community.

On the departure of the nuns, one of their former pupils, Miss Walburga Mguda, now a qualified teacher, was appointed principal and she also took charge of the dozen boarders. A couple of the more recalcitrant pupils, Miss Mguda took into her own house where, with genial firmness and her instinct for good psychology, she finally won their hearts completely. Under her management the little school continued to grow so that now the hostel department accommodates 88 boarders. "Aunty Walburga", as she is

⁵ Taken from '*Against the Stream*' by Rev F Schimleck by kind permission from Right Rev Bishop E Schmid of Mariannhill.

⁶ The second Apostolic Delegate to South Africa.

affectionately called, is a remarkable woman. In time her friends and relatives living further afield, heard of the success she has in rehabilitating refractory boys and girls between the ages of ten and eighteen years, so they began sending their sons and daughters that play truant from school to Keilands boarding school. It is not a reformatory. The pupils are put on their mettle, special stress being laid on good conduct, and the principal is seldom disappointed. The parents are encouraged to keep in touch with their child by letter, so it feels it is still love at home; but no pocket money is needed in this country place where there are not shops. Food parcels are not allowed. All must learn to eat the simple food of the mission. It is again a private school run on rather primitive lines because the fees are kept low.⁷ Some children bring practically no remuneration for the board and tuition, to that the finances are often strained, but Miss Mguda has never yet turned a child away. The Pupils all help with the household chores and in the vegetable garden according to their age and ability. Every evening all gather in the chapel as a family for night prayers at which there is a brief reading from the scriptures or an exhortation by Rev Father S Adelfang or by the Principal. They then pray the Rosary and sing a hymn before retiring.

There is, for example, the case of one truant – an only son, who was still in the second standard at the age of sixteen. His mother testified that he, too, emerged from Keilands a changed person. She confessed that she was never one who went to church herself, but her son, now imbued with Christian principles, takes her there regularly.

The Sisters who trained Miss Mguda at Keilands must be filled with joy to see their former pupil as a modern apostle, carrying on the good work they had begun.

⁷ *State aid was later withdrawn from all private mission schools.*