

## VII – *M'phatlele Clinic*, Molepo, Potgietersrus, Northern Transvaal

On 22<sup>nd</sup> December 1910 the Northern Transvaal was erected into a Prefecture by Decree of the Propaganda Fidei in Rome, with Right Rev D Ildefons Lanslots O.S.B. as first Prefect Apostolic. In 1921 he was succeeded by Dom Salvator van Nuffel of the same Order who, on 11<sup>th</sup> November 1924 visited King William's Town. He was accompanied by the Apostolic Delegate, Archbishop BJ Gijlswijk O.P. and asked that Sisters of our Congregation might take over a mission he had already established at a place known as M'Phatlele, some forty-two miles from Pietersburg. This was a clinic and dressing station for the Africans at which Government would supply medicines but which must otherwise be self-supporting.

Mother Lucy Kaltenstadler, then Prioress General, appointed Sister M Angela Hanshuber as Superior and gave her a staff of three additional Sisters. They left King William's Town by train on 19<sup>th</sup> December 1924. Msgr van Nuffel met them at the railway station and explained that they still had a four-hour drive before they would reach M'Phatlele. A crumb of comfort eased their homesick hearts for the son of Col Style, mayor of King William's Town, was at the station and offered to drive the party to their destination.

The Prefect and Dom Victorin Laenens welcomed them to their new home which was an empty semi-detached building. The only furniture was a bedstead and one mattress. They had brought with them only a small stove and a few cooking utensils so they fully realised they must be up and doing to acquire the essentials of simple housekeeping. From their lunch basket they warmed up a supper of sorts; the pan was then placed in their midst as they sat on the floor and each one took what she felt she could eat from the pan. Too tired to think of what they would do on the morrow they then spread their blankets on the floor and slept the sleep of exhaustion.

Next day a room was chosen as chapel and the Sister-carpenter got busy preparing this, while the cook looked for food and kitchen utensils and Sister Engelberta Fischer, the nurse, went off to visit a sick African. The four Sisters were well occupied. When they had finished their own special duties they would repair to the garden and the small field. There they cut grass for the winter and cultivated the piece of ground. The evening recreations were spent together, mending clothes or doing exercises in Sesotho.

Things moved rapidly for the Sisters had not only to furnish and supply a house but also to prepare for Christmas which was only four days off. There was not time to compare the Christmas to be with that of the previous years, for after Midnight Mass the Blessed Sacrament would be reserved in their new home, so altar and tabernacle had to be ready.

The day after Christmas the mayor and Mayoress of Potgietersrus paid the Sisters a visit and it was with difficulty that they found cups and plates to match but they were clean. Black baby twins happened to be brought in for baptism during the visit, so Msgr van Nuffel suggested that the visitors should stand as godparents to the children. This they willingly did.

A day or two later the heavy luggage at last arrived from King William's Town with all the carefully packed necessities and the next few days were very busy ones. The Africans were delighted and showed their pleasure in having the Sisters among them by willingly helping in a small way. They brought their babies and others to be attended to and told the Sisters where to find the aged and ailing. As many as 800 were assisted with medicines and treatment in six months and this in spite of the fact that the Sisters were themselves stricken with malaria and had still to become acclimatised to tropical surroundings. Father Victorin and Sister St Louis Wilhelm, who was Jack-of-all-trades, made a table which transformed the verandah into a parlour where visitors could be received. They also made an altar and a tabernacle for the little chapel.

The pantry served also as a shop where the Africans bartered for tea, coffee, sugar, salt, soap, paraffin and matches. As these were mostly bartered the only source of income for the Sisters was to sell children's clothes which they had made.

There was a large Government school with several African teachers for 500 pupils in the location, yet many children were growing up without education. The Sisters dearly hoped to be allowed to open a mission school to remedy so great a need. However, the Chief declared that though he and his councillors had approved of a clinic they would not give their consent to the foundation of a school. They persisted in their refusal and thus unknowingly sounded the death knell of their dressing station.

By contract between Msgr van Nuffel and Mother Lucy the Sisters were to stay at M'Phatlele for five years. During that period they and their zealous priest, Father Victorin, saw the little children growing to adulthood without any high ideals. They imparted what knowledge they could to individuals and trusted to Providence to lead the way.

In 1929 a lapsed Catholic lay seriously ill in the Pietersburg Hospital. He asked to see Msgr van Nuffel and promised that if he recovered he would donate to the Prefecture a large portion of his farm for missionary purposes. To the surprise of everyone he was soon up and about and the land, only 23 miles from Pietersburg was duly handed over to the Priests. So the mission station of St Maurus was transferred from M'Phatlele to the new locality, which was also known as Subiaco, where the Sisters would nurse the sick and educate children as well.