

ST JOSEPH'S CONVENT AND SCHOOL, Potgietersrust

(compiled in January 2019 from several Archival Documents)

On 11th November 1924 Msgr van Nuffel had asked Mother Lucy Kaltenstadler to let him have some Sisters to begin a School in Potgietersrust in the Northern Transvaal.

Most beginnings are difficult. "Yes", said the pioneer Sisters and the foundation members, "But we were happy."

They were indeed happy even if there was little to eat, much work to be done and no comforts to be enjoyed. God helped them and their spirit of sacrifice bore abundant fruit.

The Pioneer Foundresses, Mother Humberta Kaiser, Mary of the Sacred Heart McDaniel, Ethelreda Kreppold and de Pazzi Barth left from Jeppe Station, Johannesburg and arrived in Potgietersrust on 12 February 1925 to be met at the station by Msgr van Nuffel who took them straight to the small, neglected Church for Mass and then to the Priests' House for a simple breakfast.

The plot on which St Joseph's Convent and School stands was bought in 1925 by Msgr van Nuffel from Mr de Boer. An old farm building became the Sisters' home, Chapel and School. What had once been a garden, had now become a wilderness of weeds, making it impossible to wade through the backyard. The house was sparsely furnished, there being only a table and four chairs. On that first day the bedsteads which were still in storage at one of the local shops had to be carried to the Convent and set up which, with the help of Fr Lawrence, a Benedictine Father, was soon done. There was no stove in the house.

Sr de Pazzi soon set to work supplementing the furniture with wardrobes and cupboards and also an Altar and Tabernacle for the Chapel and furnishings for the Sacristy, using wood from packing cases acquired from the local shops. The gardens were cleared of weeds with the help of Mr Emmerich and his son, Catholics from the town. Mr Emmerich also gave the Sisters presents of fowls and later, a Friesland cow, thus ensuring the Sisters a supply of eggs and milk.

Water was supplied twice a week by the Municipality to be channelled into earlier prepared furrows for the watering of the fields.

Potgietersrust, in those days, was a very primitive town. The Sisters, living on the outskirts among the farmlands often lost their way between their home and the town.

The people of the town were mostly Dutch and not inclined to be friendly towards the Sisters. The Catholic population was very small. Through the efforts of Fr Peter O.S.B., who succeeded Fr van Geest, a new Parish Church was later built across the street from the Convent. Although very modest, it afforded enough room for the Sisters, the children and the people of the town.

The official opening of the Convent, in the presence of Rev Mother Lucy Kaltenstadler, who had arrived two weeks after the first four Sisters began their mission, took place on 1st March 1925, when the Blessed Sacrament was brought from the little Church to the Sisters' Chapel.

School began with only 15 children but by the end of the year the number had increased to 40 when St Joseph's Convent School became an officially registered private School. The town itself had an Afrikaans Medium School with about 800 pupils and the small number of 40 did not seem too promising. Still it worked satisfactorily and the Sisters plodded on, Sr Borromea Allgaeuer teaching Grades I and II; Sr Humberta teaching Std I and II; Sr Gisella Greissl teaching Std III to VI; Sr Annunciata came a little later as Commercial Teacher and Sr Alfreda Lampka taught music and took charge of the boy boarders.

In 1926 the foundation stone was laid for the present building which included the school and a boarding house for girls. In January of that year Mother Gonzaga Ziegler was appointed Superior and Sisters Arsinia Mueller and Humberta cared for the girl boarders.

In 1927 a Chapel was built for the Sisters, and in the same year, with the intercession of St Joseph, their Patron Saint, water was found on the property and they had the best bore-hole in Potgietersrust supplying more water than was necessary.

In 1928 the new foundation became a Priory. Notwithstanding the Sisters' hard work, the school did not seem to flourish; the role never was above 60 and, in 1935 Mother General seriously considered selling the property. The fact that Potgietersrust was a centre for a number of Mission Stations such as Setali, Subiaco, Molepo and M'Phahlele, kept the school going through very hard times until, in 1935 the grant had been given to accept committed children. That brought the pupils up to 94 by 1939.

In the meantime electric light had been brought to Potgietersrust and new music rooms had been built. Alterations and renovations were made to the Sisters' quarters and laundry.

1942 saw the building of a Boys' Boarding House.

After World War II many improvements were brought about. In 1950 a small but beautiful Hall was added to the main building, also two classrooms for senior pupils were attached to it. Later the whole Convent was renovated and made more comfortable; playgrounds were enlarged, courtyards cemented and the sport facilities were increased.

In 1961 a Kindergarten classroom was added, a room that became the envy of all.

After several years, when many of the difficulties had been overcome the number of children at St Joseph's Convent School had increased to 140 with 60 boarders, giving the school a homely, pleasing atmosphere. At various times it had been considered that the Convent and School should be closed and this finally and sadly became a reality in 1969.