

CHAPTER VI

Call to Potchefstroom – 1888, Convent of the Sacred Heart

1885 Ever since Dr FitzGerald had brought Kreli to visit the Mother House Mother Mauritia had secretly cherished the hope of founding a school for his people. In 1885 with Sister M Margaret McConville she visited the Lovedale Institute to study the methods used by the missionaries there. On her return, fired with enthusiasm, she opened at the King Convent a boarding school for Amaxhosa. This was a lean-to at the back of the kitchen. The first pupils of this extraordinary venture to adopt Lovedale methods were Anna and Lizzie. No surnames were given; but they were known as the children of Klaas – again no surname – the Convent servant.

Lizzie was a complex character and on more than one occasion defied her mistresses. She would refuse to eat lettuce at dinner declaring that she was not a sheep and so could not be expected to eat grass. Finally one day after an unusually bad outburst of passion, she ran away. This made Mother Mauritia realise that the Lovedale type of school was not suitable to her natives and the experiment was temporarily abandoned. The indefatigable Mother tried again later at Izeli with better results. So 1885 closed with 150 boarders at the Mother House. These were composed of European boys and girls and Anna and Lizzie were not included.

Father Allen

Apart from boarders the year was marked by other arresting events. In Holy Week the Sisters, duly instructed by Dr Allen, sang the Office of Tenebrae with the Priest in choir. They conceived so great a love of the Divine Office that they continued to recite it during the whole of Eastertide. Finally they petitioned Bishop Ricards to allow them to substitute it permanently for the Little Office of Our Lady. The request was willingly acceded to by the Bishop, ever ready to contribute to the joy of the Sisters. The recitation of the Divine Office was then continued until 1900, when, owing to the increase of work in the schools and to the Anglo-Boer War, the Sisters resumed the recitation of the Marianum according to the Dominican Rite.

Dr Allen was confessor both to the Mother House and to its filial at East London. So every week he had to travel to the sea-port on horseback. He was a prudent and wise director to whom the congregation owes much; for he put the stamp of solid practical piety on the religious of both the King William's Town Convent and its branch at East London. This stamp was to be handed down to future generations. He himself was a Franciscan, and he used to hold Franciscan meetings in the Convent Church. A window of St Francis of Assisi, near the Lady Altar, memorial to Mother Mauritia, commemorates him. It is fitting that his memorial window should be next to that of the nun whose spiritual guide he had been for so many years.

To the great grief of the Sisters, Father Allen was, in 1891, transferred to Queenstown, where he dedicated the Parish Church he was building to Saint Dominic, whose daughters he had spiritually fathered for twelve years. The altar of the Church was later given by the Parish as his memorial. In 1955 a more modern altar was erected; but the portion of the original altar on which his commemoration is gilded, is still retained beneath the new structure. However, he was not long in Queenstown. Under the strenuous work had had done, his health gave way, and in April of the same year as his transfer, 1891, he left South Africa and returned to his native Wexford, Ireland. There he lived in retirement. He died at Lightwater, Killinick, at the comparatively early age of 52, on the 4th June, 1902. Great, surely, must be the reward given to this holy and learned priest for the help he gave the Congregation during its critical embryonic years.

1883 After the opening of the East London Convent of the Sacred Heart, 1883, all events seemed to point to the apostolic life. Hitherto the Sisters had regarded themselves as nuns, more or less enclosed. In fact many believed they were enclosed religious of the second order. To meet the increasing calls for charitable activity outside the Convent, Mother Mauritia set aside two Sisters for external work. These were Sister M Frances Condon and Sister M Alexandra Delaney. They were solemnly clothed as Dominican tertiaries by Dr Allen. Though they lived in the Community and shared the lives of the Sisters, they dressed in black and wore a light gauze veil on their heads.

They were called upon to do any outdoor work so as to keep the other nuns enclosed. Thus they visited the sick and the poor in their homes, accompanied pupils on their walks, and when they were at home looked after pre-school children or performed any other needful work. However, in 1888 and 1889, after Dr Allen's retreat on the Apostolic Life, there seemed to be a persistent urge to a more active life for the enclosed Sisters. Letters from Bishop Ricards to Mother Mauritia gave increasing evidence that he relied on her and her Sisters for help in his herculean task of tending the spiritual welfare of his vast Vicariate. His missionary Priests were too few, and he pointed out that by putting Convents in a few centres, much might be done for the spread of Christianity. Other pastors of Christ's flock scattered throughout South Africa made similar appeals to Mother Mauritia and expected help from her. Requests poured in from the South African Republic, Rhodesia and Natal. The apostolic windows in the clerestory of the new Church seemed to point the way to activity.

The South African Republic was originally under the jurisdiction of the Vicar Apostolic of Natal but there was then no resident priest at Mooi River as Potchefstroom, the capital of the Republic was still sometimes called. Travelling priests belonging to the Natal Vicariate sometimes visited Potchefstroom and it is recorded that, in spite of the regulation that "no religion other than that of the Dutch Reformed Church was allowed within the South African Republic," a Mass was said there privately as early as 1854.

In 1868, Father Hondewanger visited Potchefstroom. On his arrival he was warned by the Government officials not to celebrate Mass under pain of being put over the Border. His remonstrances were answered by this threat being carried into effect. He was given twelve hours' notice and a Field Cornet was instructed to see him out of the country. However, in the very next year, 1869, this obnoxious regulation was repealed through the efforts of the Catholic residents of Potchefstroom. Probably the pending visit of the Catholic Governor of Qualimane in Portuguese East Africa, was potent in furthering the concession. Politically the country was a republic under the presidency of Paul Kruger, a staunch supporter of Calvinism.

On the 15th March, 1886 the South African Republic was separated from natal and made an ecclesiastical Prefecture under the Rt. Rev Odilo Monginoux O.M.I. 1886 – 1891. At his request Mother Mauritia in 1888 obtained permission from Bishop Ricards to send Sisters to Potchefstroom.

1889 On the 17th June, 1889, the Bishop said an early Mass at the Convent in King William's Town for eight of the King Dominicans who were leaving that day on the first lap of their journey to Potchefstroom. The pioneers, Sister M Bertranda Keller, Sister M Rose Niland, Sister M Imelda Ebner, Sister M Peter O'Connor, Sister M Ambrosia Offenwanger, Sister M Dominic Vogel, Sister M Vincent Schneider, and Sister M Constantia Frommknecht were leaving to open a new Convent at Potchefstroom. They would be accompanied by Sister Reginald. Punctually at 6 a.m. they left the Mother House. At Grahamstown, they spent two hours at Notre Mere's Convent, after which they entrained for Kimberley, which was the railway terminus for the Transvaal. As they sped along they said the Divine Office and other Community prayers, and arrived at Kimberley in time for early Mass on 19th June 1889. There they enjoyed the hospitality of the Sisters

of Nazareth and met Msgr Odilo Monginoux O.M.I. and also Father Peter Strobino. The former would travel with them to Potchefstroom by mule wagon.

Potchefstroom – Convent of the Sacred Heart

As it was at his request, as Prefect Apostolic, that the Sisters were going to Potchefstroom, Msgr Monginoux took keen interest in their comfort. At 3 a.m. next day, Sunday, they changed mules at a country hotel and, before leaving, had the blessing of hearing mass with the proprietor's family. On the morning of the 23rd June the mule coach arrived at Potchefstroom, and the driver kindly took the party to the door of their new home.

The house was empty of persons and of all furniture. There was nothing to welcome the Sisters but the bare walls and mud floors of a small cottage. They sat on their luggage and planned who should go shopping and what should be bought. Food was the first essential; so, in two groups, five Sisters went out into the unknown streets. Later they decided they would use a class room as a Chapel of ease on Sundays and have a small room for their own daily use. On the 24th June, 1889, Msgr Monginoux said the first Mass in the little improvised Chapel.

The shoppers bought two beds, one for the priest and one for Mother Mauritia. The rest of the Sisters slept on the floor rolled in their blankets. When shopping they had asked shop owners for the straw of their packing cases. With this they hoped to make mattresses for themselves; but this request was refused as the people were hostile to the arrival of the Sisters. Each morning the blankets were folded into a corner, and all available floor space was used for carpentry. Benches were made for the class rooms; and mud floors were replaced by wooden ones. Every Sister helped with the woodwork under the direction of the four lay Sisters/ after some weeks a friendly farmer brought them a load of straw with which they made mattresses. Thus towards the end of winter they could at least feel a layer of straw between their bodies and the hard cold floor.

A pathetic little incident occurred when Msgr Monginoux was asked to visit an old Irish lady. She told him that for thirty years she prayed that a priest would visit her before she died. Her prayer was now answered and she received the Last Anointing. She died a few days later. Msgr Monginoux conducted the funeral walking the streets of Potchefstroom in soutane, surplice and stole! Surely a hitherto unheard-of event! The old lady's daughter and six grandchildren became fervent Catholics after having been instructed by the Sisters.

Msgr Monginoux then took up temporary residence in Potchefstroom so that the Sisters might not be deprived of the blessing of daily Mass. He remained until the 23rd July when he arranged that Father Trabaud should take his place. On the 8th September, 1889, Father Isidore Tresch was ordained in Pietermaritzburg, and he then came to Potchefstroom as companion to Father Trabaud. These two priests, Fathers Trabaud and Tresch helped the Sisters in every way, even in the construction of their Convent. However, Father Isidore was, in 1892, transferred to Fordsburg and later to America. He died in Stanton, USA, 13th October, 1922. Father Trabaud continued to be both architect and contractor. The Sisters themselves worked under his direction. They mixed the mortar, made and laid the bricks, acted as carpenters and masons and did not even hoist the flag when they were roof high. Devoid of architectural beauty, the solid block of double-storey building which they themselves had built was right on the street. The rooms were spacious and well ventilated; the large room on the right of the entrance formed the Chapel. The rest of the block consisted of Convent, hostel and class rooms, all made and furnished by their devoted hands.

In the local paper the Potchefstroom Convent Chapel was advertised as opening on 16th July, 1889. The Sisters were violently opposed by several ministers of religion who called

them the “white-robed geese” who had got into the town without any noise. In spite of opposition the school was soon full to overflowing, and it became imperative to build. The Sisters again set about making bricks in the Convent grounds. Some helped to break down old walls others to build up new ones; but all helped, and soon the new building was rapidly growing. Mother Mauritia and Sr Rose Niland did the shopping and, when at home, they worked with the others. Even Msgr Monginoux lent a helping hand whenever he was there.

On the 22nd September, 1889, the largest of the new class rooms was chosen as a permanent Church and there, on opening day, Sisters Ambrose and Constantia, who were only novices, solemnly pronounced their vows in public in the presence of Msgr Monginoux. He was assisted by Father Trabaud. Such a scene had never before taken place in Potchefstroom and the Church was filled to capacity. The ceremony did much to lessen the bitterness of public feeling towards the Sisters.

In 1892, Father Schoch O.M.I succeeded Msgr O Monginoux as Prefect Apostolic (1892 – 1898). He found, on a visit to Potchefstroom, that Father Trabaud’s health, never very robust, had given way under the strain of pioneering work. He then arranged that, after a recuperative holiday in Natal, Father Trabaud should be transferred to Pretoria and should be succeeded in Potchefstroom by Father Serriere. Before leaving Potchefstroom Father Trabaud formed the first Parish Library. At Pretoria he worked energetically for his parishioners till in 1901 he was transferred to Natal. In 1921, he returned to his native land, France, where at Aix la Chapelle he died 19th August, 1937. Thus passed into eternity one of the earliest benefactors of the Convent of the Sacred Heart, Potchefstroom.

Meanwhile, Mother Mauritia had telegraphed to King William’s Town for two more Sisters to help the teaching staff. This resulted in the arrival at Potchefstroom of Sister Patrick Cosgrove and Sister Amanda Gately in October, 1889. They brought with them as an assistant Music Teacher, Sister Peter’s sister, Miss Kate O’Connor. At the end of October, Mother Mauritia and Sister Reginald left Potchefstroom after Mother Bertranda Keller had been appointed superior of the Potchefstroom Convent.

Before her departure an interesting event took place. A gentleman belonging to the German Lutheran Church became very ill. Dr. Mortimer of Potchefstroom said he would not answer for the man’s life unless a really good nurse could be found to take over the case at once. Enquiries were made and there was no trained nurse available in the whole of Potchefstroom, except Mother Mauritia, who besides her other accomplishments, was a fully trained nurse. However, she was only a visitor to the town and was helping her Sisters to form a Convent School.

Upon being approached Mother Mauritia and a companion Sister went to the hotel where they found the apparently dying man. The patient’s life had been given up twice in four days; but Mother Mauritia and her companion nursed him back to life and good health. The story was published by outsiders even in the Johannesburg papers; Dr. Mortimer and his patient were living witnesses of the truth, so the event did much to publicise the good work of the Sisters. In 1890 the Convent was completed, but each room had been occupied as soon as it was available so there was no need for a formal opening. This large barrack-like structure, built by the Sisters and Father Trabaud, served as school and boarding accommodation for nearly 30 years. It was demolished in 1928.

During the Anglo-Boer War the Sisters suffered great hardships especially from lack of food; but they persevered, bravely giving to others from the little they had themselves. At the close of the war boys and girls came from various parts of the Transvaal and the Orange Free State as, besides being the first and only English medium school in Potchefstroom, the Sisters’ school was then the only one throughout the Transvaal that did advanced educational work with boys. After leaving the Convent school many of the

lads held responsible positions, and often gave evidence of their loyalty and attachment to their former teachers. Girls, too, grown to womanhood, educated at the Potchefstroom Convent, are scattered far and wide, and carry with them wherever they go the happy results of their conventual training.

When once the Convent in Potchefstroom was firmly established the nuns felt they would like a Sister Convent nearby, as the Mother House seemed very far away. Father Schoch, Prefect Apostolic of the Transvaal, favoured Klerksdorp, where our former Convent, under Mother Rose Niland, had been closed by Bishop Ricards. His successor, Bishop Strobino, was averse to King William's Town bearing the debt of a new foundation; so Mother Euphemia Koffler, who had succeeded Mother Mauritia as Prioress General, in 1896 decided that the Convent should be opened; but that Potchefstroom and Klerksdorp together should shoulder the debt of the foundation. Five Sisters formed the pioneers with Mother Reginald as Superior. Father Hammer O.M.I. went with them and remained as their chaplain until February, 1897, when he was succeeded by a series of delicate priests who went to Klerksdorp to recuperate.

From 1901 to 1906 Father Jeremiah McCarthy was chaplain to the Sisters in Potchefstroom. They, in spite of the Anglo-Boer War, continued their educational activities and eked out their living by selling Art pictures and fancy needlework for a mere pittance. Among their many benefactors during the war years were Mr Duncan, Superintendent of the Burgher's Camp, who sent them rations when he could; Mrs P Ferrero, who, with her husband, was ever ready, from their own meagre means, to help with food and clothing; Xavier and John Baumann, who were never happier than when permitted to do any odd job for the Sisters; and last, but not least Captain Rowland, who frequently sent provisions.

In July, 1902, at the close of the War, Father de Lacey, Acting Prefect Apostolic of the Transvaal, sent a telegram to Mother Eleonora, the Superior of the Potchefstroom Convent, for Sisters who should replace for one month the Sisters of Charity who had left Braamfontein for their Mother House in Belgium. He stated telegraphically that this was not a request but an order. She replied that they were willing to obey; but must first have the sanction of Mother Jacoba Zirn who had succeeded Mother Euphemia as Prioress-General at King William's Town. Meanwhile, she planned to send three teaching Sisters and a Sister cook to Braamfontein. However, Mother Jacoba telegraphed that no permission was given for Sisters of the Congregation to go to Braamfontein; but she suggested that they should ask Mildred Sweetnam and Emma Teubes who were matriculation students in Klerksdorp and Potchefstroom respectively, to take the work for the month stipulated.

Accordingly these two young girls went to Johannesburg to look for the Convent. They were both converts to the Faith. After hours of aimless driving, for which they paid dearly, they at last entered the building. There they were faced by a blackboard on which was painted in white enamel one word, 'Silence'! This chilled whatever enthusiasm they had. However, they held the fort and taught 175 pupils for the month. After three weeks Emma's sister, Louisa, came, and then her mother and brothers were released from the concentration camp, and all of them came to live at the school. At the end of the month Mildred returned to Klerksdorp and left the Teubes family to run the school. When the Sisters of Charity returned Emma went back to Potchefstroom and then left for King William's Town to become a Dominican Sister. She took the name of Sister Mary Ambrose Teubes, later Mother Ambrose, and died at our Convent at Hinckley, England, 6th March, 1948. Mildred joined her at King William's Town, became Sister Mary Joseph Sweetnam, and together they made their vows 23rd July, 1905.

1903 On the 9th September, 1903, the foundation stones of the present main building of the Convent at Potchefstroom were laid, one by Bishop Caughren of Kimberley who in 1902

had taken over the administration of the Transvaal, the other by the resident magistrate, Mr J B Irving. In this main building for twenty years one large room still served as Convent Chapel and Parish Church. However, in 1924, Bishop Cox O.M.I laid the foundation stone of the new Church on the North side of the main building. Later he came to dedicate it. On the stone is: Church of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. This stone was laid by the Rt. Rev Bishop Cox O. M. I. 24th February, 1924, for the glory of God.

Great deeds originate in small beginnings and the present-day (1957) Saint Louis Bertrand Mission, with its thousand and more, neatly costumed, well-behaved pupils with their spacious and spotlessly clean apartments, had its origin as early as 1921 in a humble Mission, begun miles away, at Muiskraal by Father Pierre Mercur O. M. I.

He was priest-in-charge at Potchefstroom and also Convent Chaplain, so it was only once a month that, armed with his Mass equipment, he would entrain for Rysmierbult. There he would be met by Dominic Thale, and the two would walk the six miles to Dominic's house, Muiskraal, carrying the heavy equipment between them. There was a hut which served both as Church and small school where Joseph Ramchance taught some 25 children. A more ambitious outstation and school had been founded 12 miles away at Machavie by Father Chrysostom Egan O.P. and the teacher there was Sara Kekana helped by her husband, Henry. There were about 60 pupils.

Mother Dympna Doyle, Superior of the Potchefstroom Convent, anxious to have a mission nearer home, reconnoitred the location locality and found close to the location what she considered an ideal spot. On this stood what appeared to be an empty hall. She interviewed the town clerk and explained that she hoped to establish a Catholic mission. Would the municipality share in the good work and grant the land and the hall for this purpose? The department appeared willing; but explained that the property was being used by the Medical Officer of Health, Dr Friel. They added that their consent to forfeit the hall would be pendent upon the decision of Dr Friel who was away on holiday.

As soon as he returned Mother Dympna bearded the proverbial lion in his den and bravely asked for the property. Dr Friel pointed out that he could not possibly give up the locality, urgently needed for his location patients. He said his decision was final and that the property should not go to the Convent or any other Mission. Mother Dympna and her companion, Sister Adelaide Vorndran, returned from their fruitless visit, but were not downcast. "More things are wrought by prayer than this world dreams of" they pondered. The matter was referred to the Community and it was decided to make a novena of prayer for the ground. On the third day of the novena Mother Dympna's telephone rang: "Dr Friel here. I suppose you people are down on your knees storming heaven for my hall. This is to say you can spare yourselves the trouble for you are not going to get it." Sweetly Mother Dympna replied: "I think we are, Doctor. Time will tell." A laugh was the only reply as the receiver crashed down. On the eighth day Mother Dympna tentatively made an appointment with the Doctor for 11.30 a.m. he received her with: "Now don't imagine you are going to get my hall for you are not." "Oh, yes, we are," came the quick retort. "I know that Dr Friel has never refused me anything and that he will not start doing so today." The Doctor sat down and glared at her soft soap. "But surely you understand that I need the place for my own work. I won't give it up."

That evening Mother Dympna's 'phone rang again: "Is that you, Mother? Look here. You can have that ground and hall; but don't let us hear another word about it. I'll arrange the matter with the municipality. Good night!" Down went the receiver, as Mother Dympna sat dumbfounded for some minutes, quite unable to move. Next day she was notified that the property was at her disposal free of charge provided it was used as a Mission school.

A movable partition was put into the hall and one end was curtained off and gusto! The Mission was started with two class rooms and a sanctuary, nothing else. By this time

Potchefstroom had been given to the Dominican Fathers as a field of labour and so Father Oliver Clark O.P. laid the foundation of the new Mission, Saint Louis Bertrand, Buiten Street. Sister Borromea Allgäuer and Sister Ferdinand Faisst went in a gig each morning to teach, and later Sister Frances Moosman and Sister Floretta Hörle joined the staff; but both Priest and Sisters returned to their respective homes in the afternoon and did not sleep at the Mission. In 1932 Father David Donohue took over the work on lines similar to those laid down by Father Oliver.

On the 1st April, 1933, Father Nicholas Humphreys O. P. Arrived at the Mission. There were about 100 children at the school of whom only nine were Catholics. In the whole district of Potchefstroom there were 169 Catholics and Catechumens. Like his predecessors Father Nicholas slept and ate at the presbytery in town; but soon he moved to the Sacristy at the Mission and lived in that tiny space, 7' by 9', and went to town only for one meal a day. This was a big step forward for it made it possible to keep the Blessed Sacrament in the sanctuary, and to have daily Mass instead of on Sundays only.

In 1934, Mother Bertranda Miller spent about \$2400 building the present Church with two rooms attached for the Priest, one extra class room and a small Convent. Sandler and Thompson did the work and Mother Bertranda herself prepared the plans with a minimum of expense. In 1935 the Sisters moved in permanently. Sister Lioba Koch was Superior, Sister Anacleta Frizino, Sister Henrietta Kramer and Sister Colmar were teachers, Sister Justina Wurms was cook and Infirmarian.

In April Mother Augustine Geisel asked Father Nicholas Humphreys to be principal. He had been teaching since his arrival in 1933 and was a trained teacher before becoming a Dominican. For the next six years he continued as principal till Sister Fortunata Hummel relieved him of the official burden; but the zealous Priest still remained on the teaching staff. At this time there were 600 children in the school and the numbers of Catholics and Catechumens had increased immensely. Schools were established in 11 of the 23 outstations.

Father Nicholas used the bioscope to prevent crime over the week-ends and it was a well attested fact that as long as it was held no serious crime occurred in the location. In 1936, the school was registered by the Government. In 1944, good wood-working machinery was secured, and Sister Manfreda Daufratschofer did excellent work with the children. About 1946, the school was recognised as Secondary for girls taking Domestic Science as a subject. The Sisters then built a three-roomed Domestic Science Centre; Needlework, Cooking and Laundry. With Sister Colmar in charge of this, it was soon brought to a high standard and received excellent commendations from inspectors.

A large hall was the next addition. In this there was a second projector for bioscopes. Dances, too were held here over the weekend to teach the people that they could be well conducted with no fighting or roughness allowed. On Sundays Mass was said at the various outstations; and Roneoed sermons as well as copies of the Epistles and Gospels were read by the catechists on those Sundays on which Mass was not said. Thus Faith was kept alive and the people felt they had a church service on every Sunday of the year.

When Father Nicholas O.P. left in August 1948 there were about 1300 children in the school of whom some 450 were Catholics, and another 1000 in the outstations. He had baptised 3500 people, always after two years instruction except in the case of very old people, or those in danger of death, and also small children of convert families. His policy was to refuse to baptise children except in extremis, who had not at least one Catholic parent. Thus lapses were prevented.

At the time of his departure there were 2000 Catholics and catechumens in the district of whom 1200 were in the location. Practically all performed their Easter duties. Father himself ran the men's Praesidium; Sister Colmar the women's and Sister Fortunata the

Children of Mary. There were about twenty tertiaries and these had achieved so high a standard of liturgical perfection that Father Hilary Carpenter O.P. said they were the most moving thing he had seen in Africa.

In 1950 the long overdue boarding house, Fatima Hostel, with accommodation for 60 girls, was completed. In 1957 the Junior Primary has about 450 pupils on the roll, and the Senior Primary up to and including Standard VI with 550. Then comes the Secondary School for girls only, with four forms, I, II and III; Form III being the Junior Certificate Class. After passing the Junior Certificate many train as teachers, nurses, or Domestic Science Instructresses.

This the seed planted originally about six miles from Rysmierbult, has grown to a fruitful tree, which so far has given to the Church an African Priest, Father Motsuenyane, and three Dominican Sisters, as well as thousands of worshippers of Christ.