

CHAPTER XXII

Witbank – St Thomas Aquinas Convent

Ermelo – Convent of the Sacred Heart

1923 In 1923 by Papal decree the Diocese of Lydenburg in the Eastern Transvaal was given to the care of the Congregation of Missionaries, Sons of the Sacred Heart. It then became known as the Lydenburg Prefecture with Msgr Daniel Kauczor as Prefect Apostolic. There was at that time a great scarcity of schools for Europeans in the Prefecture and at Witbank, one of the towns in the area, the accommodation for school children of any denomination was totally inadequate. True the town possessed two commodious government school buildings but there was no available accommodation for boarders.

Under these circumstances Msgr Kauczor requested Mother Lucy Kaltenstadler to open a Convent of the King Dominicans at Witbank. A suitable property of 12 acres had been purchased in 1922 and in 1923 tenders were called for building the Convent. Mr Corlett was the successful contractor and it was hoped to have the building ready to open school in the second term beginning with 22nd July, 1924. However, the official opening had to be anticipated.

It was known that the Governor-General of the Union, the Earl of Athlone and Princess Alice would presently visit Witbank and Mr Joseph McKenna, the leading Catholic citizen of the town suggested that the royal personage should be asked to open the Convent. Mother Lucy agreed and so the building had to be speeded up to be ready for opening on the 15th June, thus anticipating the date by more than a month. Mr Corlett got busy and in 1923 and 1924 he built the Convent, Sisters' Chapel, Schools and Hostel for girls. In 1925 the outhouses went up. This was in keeping with the general growth of the town. Every available plot in the vicinity of the Convent had been sold and the Convent was soon the centre of the rising township. Town offices and a General Hospital went up in the neighbourhood and a park was laid out.

A contract was signed by Msgr Daniel Kauczor and Mother Lucy. According to this:

1. The Sisters would provide for the maintenance of Priest and Brother-in-Charge of the Mission or pay the sum of £60 per annum.
2. Laundry for presbytery and Church would be done by the Sisters who would also keep vestments in repair.
3. The Prefect Apostolic would supply both ordinary and extraordinary Confessors at the Convent.
4. The Blessed Sacrament would be preserved in the Sisters' private Chapel where Mass would be said once or twice a week and weekly Benediction given.
5. The Sisters would take over the choir in the Parish Church until such time as the Parish is able to supply its own.

Meanwhile Mother Lucy had appointed a staff of pioneers with Sister Lioba Koch as Superior. There were 9 Sisters and on secular Halina Teresinska. Sister Consilia Eis, Mother Consolata Kaiser, Sister Sixta Schmitzer, Sister Bernard Rinkes and Sister Meinrad Schworer were teachers, Sister de Pazzi Barth was carpenter, Sister Theophila Schreiber, Cook and Sister Seraphia Kasek, housekeeper.

At 9 am on the 15th June 1924, the Governor General was presented with a golden key with which he opened the door at the main entrance and then declared St Thomas Aquinas Convent to be open. Princess Alice was given a sheaf of choice flowers. This was done in the presence of Mother Lucy, the Sisters forming the staff and a goodly representative assembly of the residents of Witbank. On the 27th of the same month the Convent was blessed by the Prefect Apostolic assisted by Father Klassert.

In 1922 Mother Eleonora Petitpierre had celebrated her Golden Jubilee of Profession and her brother, Mr Anton Petitpierre, sent her an artistically wrought silver sanctuary light supporting the large red glass. This Mother Lucy now presented to the Sisters' small Chapel as a precious gift from the Motherhouse.

School opened with the new term, as originally decided, on the 22nd July, 1924. There were 37 children present. The numbers rapidly increased and already before the end of the year it was found necessary to provide accommodation and tuition for all classes from Kindergarten to Matriculation. This necessitated a staff of at least 15 and there were 40 boarders to be looked after. The Motherhouse sent the necessary willing helpers.

At that time water was the most pressing need of the Sisters; so already in August diviners were busy looking for it on the Convent grounds. This at times necessitated boring through solid rock but at last, at a depth of 90 feet water was struck and the Convent had three, four hundred gallons of clear fresh water per day.

The manager of the *T & D B Colliery* offered the Sisters a plot of ground for a Zulu Mission. This entailed the study of the Zulu language in which labour they were greatly helped by Father Klassert and his assistant Father Joseph Angerer. The method of teaching was mainly oral and the Sisters had soon memorised a number of useful sentences with pertinent remarks.

On the 4th October, 1924, when the Apostolic Delegate, Archbishop B J Gijlswijk visited Witbank he found an imposing Convent School with boarding accommodation which had cost £10 000 and which possessed educational facilities of a very high order. The Convent had kept pace with the growth of the town which had constructed the Victoria Falls Power Station to supply the whole of the Rand with electricity and a water scheme which placed Witbank in the unique position of having an abundance of cheap electrical power, coal and water.

1930 By 1930 Mother Athanasius Zeck, the then Prioress, could count a roll of 115 with 40 boarders. These numbers have steadily increased. At the *T & D. B. Mission* there were 132 Zulu pupils, 22 of whom were Catholics. Both schools had done well in school examinations and other public functions, and had received great appreciation from the residents of the town.

The Sisters' Chapel was soon too small so Mr Lamb, a resident Catholic builder, erected a new one. This was blessed by Msgr Mohn on the 11th November, 1932. At the end of 1933, Mother Athanasius was transferred to our recruiting House at Schlehdorf and was replaced at Witbank by Mother Pius Galvin. In 1939 to June, 1946 Sister Cordiana Dietzel was Superior.

1947 In January 1947, Sister St John Pienle was made Prioress. World War II was now over and the school had a roll of 221 with 61 boarders, so there was a big demand for more extensive accommodation. The Convent was fortunate enough to secure the services of Mr Hans Karl Pollobauer. They got busy in repairs, renovations and building and by 1951 Father (later Bishop) A Reiterer, in the presence of the Mayor and Mayoress and other well-wishers blessed the new school.

Of course the Convent did not find everything plain sailing. Twice there was a police case among the pupils, once a mysterious disease attacked 20 children. This baffled the doctors and made bus drivers refuse to take the pupils as passengers. Once lightning struck the façade of the Convent. However, on each occasion the Sisters put their trust in God and soon the silver lining of the cloud became visible.

Owing to shortage of staff the Convent could not permanently stay at the Location to act as Missioners. However, two Sisters always accompanied the Priest when he went to say Mass for the Natives. They acted as Sacristan and Catechist. This was continued until the

Priest secured the services of the Servite Sisters who now have every prospect of making the place a flourishing and large Mission.

Ermelo – Convent of the Sacred Heart

1925 On the 19th August, 1925 at Ermelo in the same Prefecture of Lydenburg, Mother Lucy Kaltenstadler bought two adjacent properties from Mesdames Adendorff and Nicholson. Her object was to found a second Convent in the Prefecture as Witbank had made good headway.

There were two good, though small, cottages on the combined 9-acre property which was about 10 minutes' walk from the centre of the town. The place (Ermelo) already possessed a High and a Primary School, and also a Normal College.

In 1926 the Apostolic Delegate gave permission for the foundation, so in February, 1928 the Convent of the Sacred Heart was opened with a staff of 10 having Sister Paula Wahlspöck as Superior. She, with two other Sisters arrived on the 20th December, 1927. Mrs Cooke, mother of Sister Convivia, acted as their first benefactress. She helped in every possible way, not only by supplying their needs but also by introducing them to desirable shops and other business places. In these new surroundings the Sisters prepared for Christmas.

It was only shortly before their arrival that the Priest, Father Hugh Ille had a presbytery. Formerly Mass was said in the house of a private individual with whom the Priest stayed during his visit to Ermelo. When the Sisters came one small room in the Priests' house formed the Parish Church and there the Crib was prepared. Rivalling its original at Nazareth, everything was primitive in the extreme; an electric bicycle lamp gave light, but love in the hearts of the Sisters burned even more brightly.

The Convent consisted of a small cottage, a two-roomed outhouse which had been as used as a fowl-run, and a barn. The cottage had a front room which served as parlour and music room by day and as a bedroom for two Sisters by night. Every evening they brought their blankets in and spread them on the floor. They had no mattresses. Opposite the parlour was a tiny Chapel so small that only 4 or 5 persons could be in when the Priest was officiating. The rest of the community would hear Mass in the passage. This is reminiscent of many of our first Chapels. However, Mass was said on Sundays for the Parish in the Children's dining room; though this making of a Chapel-at-ease was very inconvenient, yet it lasted till the 7th June 1930, when the Sisters Chapel in the new Convent was opened to the Parish. Of the three remaining rooms one was the bedroom for the other eight Sisters with a small portion screened off as bathroom, the other was occupied by the first boarders and the third room was the kitchen; but its chimney smoked so much that during the first month the cooking was done outside. As soon as possible the outhouse was cleared of its lumber and fowls were housed in an enclosure. The kitchen was transferred to one room in the outhouse and the other was used as the Priest's dining room.

The fowls resented the change and whenever the dormitory window was open in they flew and laid their eggs on the Sisters' beds. This proved very unhygienic.

Mrs Cooke acted as Father Christmas and brought the dinner, complete with goose and mints, ready cooked. A spacious cottage half an hour's walk from the Convent, down a shaded avenue, was hired as a school and in May Mr Martens started building the present (1956) imposing three-storeyed Convent. Father H Ille said the first Mass in the Sisters' cottage on 8th January, 1928. He gave Benediction with the ciborium as they had no Monstrance; then that ciborium of consecrated Hosts was reserved in the tabernacle.

The Sisters were fortunate in having large fruit and vegetable gardens which were in good condition; so fresh fruit and vegetables had not to be bought. There were also three

boreholes feeding two underground tanks. A coal mine was nearby and a truckload of this indispensable commodity could be cheaply purchased. They residents were friendly and anxious to help. Among them was a goodly sprinkling of Lebanese who heartily welcomed the Sisters.

However, the people did not realise that wholesome food was sadly missing because the Sisters had no money. Several of our Convents sent useful gifts, but few thought of adding groceries. The walk to school and back meant an hour a day then there would be five to six hours of teaching with choir duties at the Convent, as well as other community exercises. This at the mere bread line could not last long.

The pioneers were Mother Paula Wahlspöck, Sister Natalia Kaltenstadler, Sister Vincentia Dilger, Sister Rita Kugler, Sister Ancilla Meyer, Sister Maria Devrooy and Sister Alexis McLoughlin, all teachers. These were ably supported by Sister Augusta Daisenberger, Infirmarian, and Sister Henrietta Kramer, cook and Sister Friedberta Seibel, Laundress.

On the 30th July, 1928, death stalked into the Convent and carried off Sister Vincentia with sudden heart failure. She was buried in the Ermelo cemetery. Her place was taken by Sister Antonina Schellhammer who found 36 little boys and girls to greet her in the Kindergarten.

On the 15th August, 1928, Msgr A Mohn laid the foundation stone of the imposing, well-planned building. Made of Kempton Park brick with large steel windows and a frontage of 130 feet, it was capable of receiving extensive additions. At the ceremony the town was well represented by the resident Magistrate, four municipal councillors, Mr and Mrs Cooke and many other leading citizens. Msgr Mohn cited the foundation stone as a symbol of the erection of a house of education and science, a home for the formation of character. He quoted "mens sana in corpore sano" as the condition of the ideal human; but added that education should include moral training and that too, the Sisters would give.

Already on opening day, 1st February, 1928 there were 16 pupils, four of whom were for Std VIII and 21 Music pupils of all grades up to and including the Associate. By the beginning of 1930 the roll was 150 including 66 boarders. In this year it was essential to increase accommodation and Mr Lamb undertook to have the new wing ready after the Easter recess. This did not prove possible, so at Easter, instead of having the Altar of Repose in a recess of the new Chapel, the Sacred Host was enthroned in Sister Thomasia Knopfle's class room. Practically all the Catholics went to their Easter duties to the great joy of the Parish Priest. When the new wing was ready in June the Sisters moved into it as being more conventual than the cottage which was turned into Commercial and Music Rooms. On Easter Sunday, 1930 Sister Thomasia and Sister Ferrer Darman took a two-hours' walk to the Location known as the Ermelo New Township and were received by the Natives with exuberant pleasure as heralds of a Church and school which they hoped would be opened in the near future. The Fathers of the Sacred Heart had started Mission work there as early as 1929 but during the difficult years of global warfare some of the Priests were interned so the Mission did not become a permanent one, which is what the Natives desired.

Father Wieler, 82 years of age, was not interned and so acted as Parish Priest. He had to say Sunday Mass regularly at the Mission. Sister Procla Elbs drove him to the various outstations, and often lost the way, thus arriving late. At Holbank Mass was said in a dilapidated hut with a door so low that Priest and Sisters had to bend low to enter. The air was anything but conditioned; however, the zealous Priest went through Mass and sermon without any ventilation but a door at which parishioners crowded.

On one occasion an aged Native went to the altar for ashes at the beginning of Lent. He thought the procedure was the same as receiving communion, so he knelt with protruding tongue while the Priest put the ashes on his forehead. At Communion he put his penny on the paten but his neighbour quickly corrected the mistake.

Later Father Morscher earnestly desired to have a Convent at this Mission; but owing to shortage of staff this was impossible. However, in spite of difficulties the Franciscans are doing good work both in Ermelo and its outstations. At the Location there are some 300 Native children on the roll and they are taught by four Native secular teachers.

1934 By the time Mother Paula's six years of office had passed she had completed and furnished the first section of the Convent, hostel and school. Sister de Aza Braun replaced her in 1934. She laid out the grounds, built a laundry and added a second storey to the Sisters' part of the Convent. The Chapel was transferred to this new section, and as the new Parish Church had been blessed on the 9th December, 1934 the Sisters' Chapel ceased to be the Parish Church.

In 1936, death from Pneumonia struck the principal teacher, Sister Stanislaus Bartle.

1949 When World War II ended it was difficult to bring into South Africa more Fathers of the Sacred Heart from Germany so in 1949 the Apostolic Delegate, Archbishop Martin H Lucal S.V.D. welcomed the arrival of five Franciscan Fathers from the English Province for the Lydenburg Prefecture. Father Klassert remained a month at Ermelo to initiate the new arrivals, who came on the 24th March, 1949.

In 1940 World War II had hindered building on a large scale but the grounds were laid out. There were 125 boarders and even the corridors were converted into dormitories. By 1939 the boarders had increased to over a hundred. Without any attempt at proselytising, three of our pupils joined the Church and became nuns: Sister Joachim Meerkotter, Sister Marietta Gouws and the third joined the Sisters at Krugersdorp. She is today, in 1956, a happy nun though her father had threatened to shoot the whole community at Ermelo when she joined the Sisterhood. So many were from Lourenco Marques that two Sisters regularly accompanied them to and fro for the school vacations. One of these pupils won the much-coveted overseas Music scholarship.

Deep sorrows rested upon the Sisters in 1955 when their loved Bishop J Riegler, who had been consecrated on the 23rd January 1949, developed a painful and incurable illness. He died 6th October, 1955 and was succeeded by Bishop A Reiterer.

In 1942, on the 25th July, Sister Gonsalez Wiendl died after a short illness and was the third Sister to be laid to rest in the Ermelo cemetery. In illness Dr Juriaanse, a Hollander was an outstanding benefactor of the Convent. He attended the Sisters patients and when he suspected that wholesome food was insufficient he brought them milk and other light food. He spoke German fluently and often his jokes repeated at recreation cheered the community. In 1938 one of the Convent boarders died and the Sisters were accused of neglect; he strongly advocated the cause of the Convent and made it clear to the medical circle as well as to the Ermelo world that the child had not died of neglect. The Sisters owe him a deep sense of gratitude. May God bless him and all other benefactors of our Convents!

In 1943 the University of South Africa granted two bursaries of £10 each to two of the Convent J C Pupils for their excellent work in 1942. In 1947 Mother Consolata Kaiser became Prioress. A projector was obtained and thereafter both educational and entertainment films were regularly shown.

In 1948 the Convent Std VI won the Malan Floating Trophy for the best results in the Taalbond examinations. This is given by the Suid-Afrikaanse Akademie vir Letere en Kuns.

In July, 1951 Sister Procla sickened. She was taken to the Mater Infirmorum Sanatorium at King William's Town but died within 10 days of her departure from Ermelo. Mother Philippina Mayer replaced Mother Consolata, and effected many internal repairs that were long overdue. Both in 1952 and 1953 the University of South Africa again awarded £10 bursaries to Convent pupils for excellent work. In 1954 Mr P Weidner of Warmbad S.W.A. made a very fine gesture. His three daughters Tessie, Cecilia and Minnie had been pupils of the Ermelo Convent. He now suggested that, as the Convent needed a hall, he would donate towards it £1000 for each of his daughters, £3000 in all as a token of gratitude to the Sisters. Later he offered even further assistance if the Sisters would expedite the building. This act is reminiscent of the very early days of Ermelo Convent when Mr Weidner's young son, Peter, was the right hand of the sacristan, Sister Procla, helping her with carpentry or any odd job on hand. He even attempted to build a swimming bath for the boarders who then had only an improved bath room. However, his immature efforts were swept away by a violent storm.