

CHAPTER XXIII

Northern Transvaal

M'Phatlele / Subiaco, Molepo – St Maurus Mission

1924 On December 22nd, 1910, the Northern Transvaal was erected into a Prefecture by Decree of the Propaganda, with the Rt Rev D Ildefons Lanslots O.S.B. as first Prefect Apostolic. In 1921 he was succeeded by D. S. Salvator van Nuffel O.S.B., who, on 11th November, 1924 visited King William's Town. He was accompanied by the Apostolic Delegate, Archbishop B.J. Gijlswijk O.P., and asked that Sisters of our Congregation might take over a mission he had already established at M'Phatlele, 42 miles South West of Pietersburg. This was a clinic and dressing station for the Natives at which the Government would supply medicines but which must otherwise be self-supporting.

Mother Lucy Kaltenstadler, then Prioress General, appointed Sister Angela Hanshuber as Superior and gave her a staff of three additional Sisters. They left King William's Town by train 19th 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 at the station for the son of Col. Style, mayor of King William's Town, was there and offered to drive the party to their destination.

The Prefect and Father D 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 a stove, a frying pan and a water kettle so they fully realised they must be up and doing to get 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 kitchen utensils and food and the nurse went off to visit a sick Native. The four Sisters were well occupied. When they had finished their own special duties they would repair to the garden and the field. There they would cut grass for the winter and cultivate a piece of ground. The evening recreations were spent together, mending clothes or doing exercises in Sesutu.

Things moved rapidly for the Sisters had not only to furnish and supply a house but also to prepare for Christmas which was only 4 days off. There was no time to compare the Christmas to be with that of the previous year, for after midnight Mass the Blessed Sacrament would be reserved in their new home so Altar and Tabernacle must be ready.

The day after Christmas the Mayor and Mayoress of Potgietersrust paid the Sisters a visit and it was with difficulty that they found two unchipped cups. The saucers and plates did not 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 necessaries and the next few days were very busy ones. The Natives 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 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 veranda into a parlour where visitors were received. They also made the altar and a tabernacle for the little chapel.

The pantry served also as a shop where the Natives bartered for tea, coffee, sugar, malt, soap, paraffin and matches. As these were mostly bartered the only source of income for the Sisters was to sell clothes which they had made for the children. The Sisters lived chiefly on mealies, whether Cuba or Inkobe or Umgubo womba as they called mealie meal.

There were thousands of Natives in the location growing up without any education whatever.¹ 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 hospital 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 5 years. During that period they and their zealous priest Father D Victorin saw the little children growing to manhood without any high ideals. They imparted what knowledge they could to individuals and trusted to Providence to lead the way.

1929 In 1929 a lapsed Catholic, Irish by birth, 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 700 morgen of his large farm for missionary purposes. To the surprise of everyone he was soon up and about and the land, only 23 miles South-East of Pietersburg was duly handed over to Msgr van Nuffel. So the Mission Station of St Maurus was transferred from M'Phatlele to a new locality and became known as St Maur's Mission of Subiaco. There the work of the Sisters would be nursing the sick and educating the children.

There was no building on the property so Priest and nuns helped together and soon a small house had been erected. It contained no architectural beauty but gladly they transferred their belongings to the new dwelling. Field mice formed their most frequent and informal visitors. An army of these would arrive at mealtime and would come also to share their beds at night. Water had to be carried in buckets from a distance of three miles.

On the 14th April, 1930, school opened with 21 children who seemed shy and afraid of these strangely clad white people. To the surprise of their parents and also of themselves the children returned to their homes in the afternoon alive and well and even happy in their description of all that they had seen and heard. So every day the number of pupils increased and soon it was evident that a special Sister-teacher must take over the school. Sister Lucina Waas arrived from King William's Town and for 7 years gave unstinted service in God's vineyard when she became the victim of a relapse in Pneumonia and was the first to be buried at Subiaco.

1937 The buildings increased in proportion to their needs. A small Church was erected opposite the Sisters' little Convent; but this proved quite inadequate for the rapidly increasing congregation, so, early in 1937 a spacious Church went up. All, both Priest and nuns, could say that they had literally helped to build the Church. They had themselves made and burnt the 140,000 bricks and helped with both masonry and carpentry during all their spare minutes for four years.

¹ There was a large Government School with several Native teachers, for 500 pupils in the Location.

Among the many who came to see and admire the new Church was the 8-year-old son of the headman at the Location. Full of wonder he ran home and fetched his mother and two elder Sisters, one of whom wore the gray habit of the Sisters at Bethany, Handmaids of Christ the King. The mother explained that her daughter had been betrothed to a man who already had four wives. As she was a Christian she fled before the marriage although the lobola had already been paid. She became a nun at Bethany and the enraged suitor demanded heavy compensation. Her elder son, Dominic, and his sister both worked at Pietersburg until their salaries had liberated their sister who in the meantime had become Sister M. Vivina at Bethany.

Just as the Church needed enlargement so, too, the school rooms built in 1930 had to be considerably extended in 1941 for the roll had mounted to almost 400. In 1935 the Superior was recalled to King William's Town and Sister Magdalene McLeod replaced her till the end of 1937 when Sister Margaret Mary Knobel became Superior until she was transferred to East London early in 1956.

Beside Sister Lucina two other of our Sisters lie buried at Subiaco: Sister Ivo Huber and Sister Ethelreda Koppold – 6th February, 1943. When Sister Margaret Mary Knobel left Sister St Louis Wilhelm, who had been one of the pioneer Sisters, took over her responsibilities.

During the 32 years in which our Sisters have worked at the M'Phatlele and Subiaco Missions Father D Victorin Laenens has been their friend and adviser. He has done much of his mission work over trackless mountains on horseback visiting the various outstations as often as possible and returning to Subiaco worn out in body and mind. Father Chrysostom Guns was his understudy.

At Bethany, Pietersburg, there was a Mother House and Noviciate of Native Sisters known as Handmaids of Christ the King. This Mission had been established in 1936 and was a well organised concern. However, Dr Verwoerd's *Group Areas Act* caused it to close down at the end of 1957. Bishop D Clemens van Hoeck, the new diocesan Superior, had to find a new home for them.

At the same time the three original members of the Subiaco community, Sisters St Louis Wilhelm, Engelberta Fischer and Notburga Birzer were worn out with 33 years of strenuous service in the Northern Transvaal. Mother Aquilina Spiegel, the Prioress General did not know how to replace them. The Superior of St Pius Academy, Dominican Convent, at Pietersburg told her of the Bishop's predicament to find a new home for the Handmaids of Christ the King. Mother Aquilina then interviewed the Abbot Nullins, Bishop D C van Hoeck O.S.B., and offered to withdraw her Sisters and give their present home to the Bishop.

1957 When our Dominican Sisters were informed, they were glad to hear that their own existing small structures would be replaced by a commodious building to be the new Mother House and Noviciate of the African Sisters. They rejoiced that their labour would be efficiently continued. On the 30th December, 1957 the African Handmaids of Christ the King moved to Subiaco and the King Dominican community of five Sisters left their old familiar haunts with hopeful hearts.