

CHAPTER XXX

Springs, Brakpan and Nigel

On a wind-swept area of the East Rand known as "*The Springs*" Mother Augustine Geisel purchased land from Messrs Rennie and Co. the town had a resident Priest, Father Julian Bannister O.P. who had dedicated his wood and iron Church to Our Lady of Mercy; but, though there were many Catholic families flocking to the gold mines of *The Springs*, they knew nothing of their religion, nor in fact of any religion. Many could not recite the Lord's Prayer and but few could say the Creed. They had been drawn to the locality by the report of its fabulously rich gold fields and only a sprinkling of some 8 or 10 persons came to Sunday Mass at the Church of Our Lady of Mercy.

Springs – Convent of Our Lady of Mercy

At the request of Bishop O'Leary Mother Augustine sent a staff of her Dominican Sisters to open a Convent at The Springs. By this time so many people had settled in the neighbourhood that *The Springs* article was dropped and the growing town was simply called **Springs**. Mother Winifred Simpkins was chosen Superior and given as staff Sister Praxedis Tutzer, Sister Theresina Ullrich, Sister Inviolata Killermann and Sister Alana Göttlinger. Two more Sisters later brought the staff to seven.

Rumour travelled far and wide that at Springs, five minutes walk from Selection Railway Station, a stately Convent of cast dimensions to accommodate 200 children, had been built. Crowds flocked to see the new building. Alas! The first sod of the convent had not yet been turned, and they found out that Father Bannister had given his own small newly built cottage to the Sisters and that the shed-like Church was used as a school house during the week and turned into a Chapel of Ease only on Sundays.

Such was the housing condition in the early days. Father Bannister lived in his car; even his garage was a class room. At the back of the tin Church, that gloried in the name of Our Lady of Mercy, was a ramshackle lean-to, divided into three tiny divisions. One was used by the altar boys as vestry and also by Mother Winifred as a classroom for her five senior pupils. One in the matriculation class, two in Std IX and two in the Junior Certificate class. The other was, at least on Saturdays, a confessional where the Priest could sit not on a chair, but on an old packing case. The apartment was so small that there was hardly room to hold Priest, penitent and box, so Father cut a hole in the tin wall of the Church where the penitent could kneel to make his confession, leaving the tiny cubicle to the Priest and his box seat.

Between Mother Winifred's class room and the confessional was the tiny sacristy, which was also the resting place of the Blessed Sacrament when the Church was being used as a school. Here the Sisters would come individually to obtain grace from their hidden God.

The Church used in succession each week as Church, Parish hall and class rooms, entailed work for the Sisters that can be better imagined than described.

1930 The pioneers arrived on 27th January, 1930 and on 3rd February School opened with 30 pupils nearly all Catholics, ranging from 1 in the Matriculation class, two in Std IX, two in the Junior Certificate Class and so on down to Kindergarten. The seniors were taught by Mother Winifred in the lean-to of the Church. Mrs Murray from Brakpan, Father Flynn's sister, came over every day to give Afrikaans lessons to all the standards. Her service was gratis and she declared she loved every minute of the day when she was helping the Sisters. Nor did she ever come empty handed. There was always a basket with eggs for the cook or scones for the morning tea, or fresh fruit in season. Rain or shine made no difference in her arrival. With her splendid Irish Faith she would say: "It's all God's wealth and we must take it as His Will." She lived her Faith.

Father Bannister had arranged with the municipality that buses should bring the children to and from the school at scheduled times; some of them lived five or six miles away from the Convent. This bus service was still available in 1957. The number of pupils increased rapidly and by the end of the year there were about 100 on the roll. Besides the Convent property was becoming the centre of a crowded area. Building was the order of the day. Fortunately on one side was mine property and thus congestion was avoided in that direction.

Mother Winifred wrote saying that whereas in January, 1930 there were not more than 10 people at Mass on Sunday, on the same date a year later there was a congregation of nearly 300. The Parish was very scattered extending for a radius of from 25 to 30 miles and the inhabitants were largely Catholics. Most of the children taught the catechism they learnt at school to their parents at home. The little ones were happily proud to tell their teachers that daddy and mommy could now say the Our Father, the hail Mary and the I Believe with them at home.

There was great work to be done for the Natives as well as for the Europeans. Some 300 Natives came from the compounds. They were of a variety of races and were controlled by their compound managers. They had a special Mass on Sundays and an altar was erected for the Priest at the Church door, while the Natives – all men – knelt or stood outside. There was no room in the small Church. The communicants knelt on the door steps and returned in orderly manner to their places. They were mainly Zulus, Pondos or Basutos. All were controlled by one European, a Mr Northmore, whose unostentatious method of managing human beings was a lesson to all who saw him.

The other section of the Natives, consisting of men, women and children, were at the location where Father Bannister was trying to save money to build a Church. There Father said a second Mass on Sundays in the surgery of a Jewish Doctor who lent the room for the occasion. It was just a hut with a mud floor. The many who could not crowd in, surrounded the door. Here, in such stifling air Father said Mass and preached a sermon, then hurried back to the Convent Church to assist with the compound Natives. He usually arrived in time to read the epistle and Gospel in Sesutu or Zulu. He spoke both languages and if he was too late to give the sermon in one of these, his two interpreters, Francis and Thomas put Father Coyle's sermon into the native language.

These two Natives were great characters. Father Bannister did not need them but when Father Coyle preached in English and the interpreters did not think his words strong enough, they enlarged upon them at their own discretion. As Francis was the official court interpreter he knew what was good for his audience. He would be the ordinary preacher when Bather Bannister would go on his six months' leave to the Continent. Before obtaining his official position he had been a school master and was fluent in English, Afrikaans and Zulu.

The seven Sisters were housed in Father Bannister's tiny cottage and a large printed notice outside bore the imposing name: Convent – Our Lady of Mercy. Towards the evening they would carry their bedding about and place it just wherever there was room enough to lie down. They had no bedsteads or mattresses. There were only four beds and these just fitted into the small bedroom with no space between them; so No. 4 had to walk over the beds of Nos. 1, 2, and 4 to get into her corner. The writer slept in No 4 as a visitor and will never forget the purgatorial hours of that night, but at least she had a bed to lie on.

1931 Mr Fitzsimons of Benoni drew the plan of the new Springs Convent; the contract was signed by Mother Augustine and given to Mr Muldoon on the 29th January 1931. A tin shed was erected on the premises for workmen's tools; timber and other building material accumulated and work was begun in the following March. A large double-storeyed

building enclosing three sides of a quadrangle was the result. Its central feature was a beautiful conventual Chapel. The frontage of the Convent opened on Derby Avenue; the South wing formed the Convent proper; the North wing contained the class rooms. Thus the Sisters quitted the presbytery and the Church ceased to be used as a class room.

- 1934** As the town grew numbers on the roll increased. Pupils came from Nigel and Brakpan and in a very short time it was found necessary to build Convents at these two towns to relieve the over-flow of pupils at Springs. At a gymnastic display given by the pupils under the direction of Major Collard V.D., the Mayor, Mr Geo. Sutter M.P.C. and later M.P., congratulated the Sisters upon the minute precision of the Swedish exercises, including tableaux of pyramids and fans, and even a Baby Percussion band. He remarked that it did not seem more than 12 months since he had walked with Father Bannister over that same site where there was then nothing but sand and grass. Now, in 1934, he said the Convent stands as “the finest institute in Springs.” 230 children took part in the display and another 200 were engaged in games.

When Father David Donohue was Parish Priest the old tin house was replaced by a very beautiful Parish Church facing Derby Avenue and occupying the space between the presbytery and the Convent. This was designed and the work was also supervised by Father Humbert Smetryns O.S.B. With its 70 foot tower at the entrance and its dome 48 feet high and 32 feet in diameter, resting on 16 columns and arches, it is, from an architectural point of view, one of the finest of its kind on the Reef.

In October, 1935 Bishop O’Leary blessed the Church in the presence of representatives from Johannesburg, Pretoria and all the Reef towns including 15 Priests. Very Rev. Father Essex, Principal of the Dominican Order in South Africa, delivered the address in which he praised the pioneers who had suffered many hardships in establishing the Catholic Faith on the Far East Rand. He praised the Priest-in-charge, Father D Donohue, who had laboured to secure the erection of the Church and he thanked the Town Council the Public of Springs for the support they had given.

After the Pontifical High Mass a luncheon for 100 guests was spread at the Clarendon Hotel. Bishop O’Leary presided. Speeches were made by the Mayor of Springs, Mr Geo Sutter, and by the Prefect Apostolic of the North Transvaal, D S. van Nuffel O.S.B. and by others.

The Dominican Fathers were anxious to make the Payneville Mission an experiment in a great venture. The Congregation had built a Convent next to the location school. Father Bannister’s dream of a Church had materialised and the little Convent was situated between the Church and the school. The school had been run by two of the Dominican European Sisters from Springs and two African Sisters and a couple of African secular teachers. The Principal was a European Sister. The Sisters lived at the Convent and went to school each day; on Saturdays they prepared the Church and on Sundays helped with the choir and catechism.

- 1953** Fr Synnott now asked Mother Aquilina Spiegel to assist in his great venture. He suggested that the European Sisters be withdrawn from the St Lewis Bertrand Mission at Payneville and be replaced by African Sisters only. He thought if he had about five of these they might run the Convent and school without any European assistance, except that of the Parish Priest. The matter was laid before the Apostolic Delegate, Archbishop C J Damiano, who gave his consent to the venture. The Bishop of Johannesburg, Bishop (later Archbishop) Whelan also concurred and Mother Aquilina, Prioress General, with her Council, agreed to loan the Congregational rights to the Mission on condition that, should the venture fail, the rights would revert to the Congregation. She also agreed to staff Convent and School with African Sisters of the Congregation in so far as Sisters were available. This all happened in 1953, and in 1954 the great venture was begun.

At the end of three years trial the school had, in 1956, eight teachers, all paid by Government. Of these three were Sisters in religion, one of whom was Superior of the Convent and also principal teacher; the remaining five were all Native secular teachers. The roll of 371 consisted of both boys and girls, from Sub A to Std VI inclusive, all day pupils.

The Conventual staff was:

Sr Stella Hlatshwako, Superior and Principal;
Sr Pius Phelelo and Sr Angelina Tuari, assistant teachers,
Sr Ann Mfaledi, cook and housekeeper;

Father F Synnott acted as manager.

The venture of Payneville has been so successful that in 1957 St Louis Bertrand's Mission had a filial school at Kwa Thema. Every day Sister Pius Phelelo goes there as teacher and sacristan and takes with her one of the secular teachers. This will somewhat reduce the roll of pupils at Payneville, as those children nearer to the new school will naturally attend it. However, the Kwa Thema school shows the marked success of the Dominican venture to make a self-governing Bantu Convent and School.

Brakpan – St Hyacinth Convent and School

The Brakpan Convent began as a filial of Convent of Our Lady of Mercy in Springs when Mother Winifred Simpkins was Prioress at Springs. Father Murray, Parish Priest of Brakpan complained bitterly that Mother Augustine had by-passed Brakpan giving Springs the preference of having a Dominican Convent. Mother Augustine then purchased a small property at Brakpan and a school was started there in a cottage while Mr Muldoon built the Convent.

1932 On 23rd January 1932 Bishop O'Leary blessed the small house with its added class rooms. Benediction was given. Among those present were Fathers Revill, Murray, Coyle and Harrison, also Mother Augustine Geisel, Mother Winifred Simpkins, Mother Aidan Kilbride and Sister Clement Lynch, all Dominicans. It was decided that the Brakpan staff would stay at Springs and come over each morning to school in the Springs car.

School began on 1st February, 1932 with about 40 pupils. By the end of the year the number had almost doubled itself and 24 pupils made their First Holy Communion. In September 1934 the foundation stone of the new building was laid. As soon as rooms in this were available the children took possession of them without any formal opening and in 1935 the Sisters came to stay. They were: Sister Clement Lynch, Superior, Sister Alban Middlebrough, Sister Symphorosa Engelmann, Sister Regula Schelle, Sister Judith Richtsfeld, Sister Trinita Haag and Sister Ella Rehrl.

The children were prepared for College of Preceptors Examinations and also for the Junior Certificate Academic Course. They did very well. Sister Symphorosa was in charge of the Kindergarten and one little child told her mother that her teacher had a party face every day, not only when she went visiting. As the mother could not explain this to her little child next day the wee mite asked Sister how she did it. The query made the face blush deeper; but the owner had noticed the little ones wasting their bread, so she was equal to the occasion. "I think," she said, "It must be because when I was a little girl I ate the crusts of my bread and did not throw them away." The lesson went home.

1938 In 1938, the University of Witwatersrand offered a three-weeks vocational refresher course in Botany. This was the first of its kind and Sister Alban Middlebrough was among the 54 nuns who availed themselves of the opportunity. In 1939 classes for commercial students were begun at the Convent and Sister Marianna Wandinger was in charge of that department. On St Dominic's Day of the same year the Sisters surprised

Father Synnott by singing a Missa Cantata, complete with sequence, without any instrumental assistance.

On 24th August, Sister Clement was taken by ambulance to the East Rand Hospital. The Sisters thought the illness was a passing cold; but it proved to be Pneumonia of which she died on the 28th September, to the great sorrow of her Community. Her body was brought back to the Convent, from which later her funeral moved to the East Rand Cemetery. Sister Alban succeeded her as Superior.

However, the incredible happened on the next 4th August; on that day Sister Alban was not at Mass. Fear clutched the hearts of the Sisters as they heard Dr Beckett diagnose double Pneumonia and very little chance of recovery. She was moved by ambulance to the Caerglow Nursing Home at Springs and for nine weeks she heroically fought for her life and seconded the efforts of Matron Thanin. The Pneumonia passed but left her in so weak a condition that she was unable to cope with the complications that set in. Her last days were brightened by visits from her Sisters and also from Dominican Priests stationed on the Rand. She died on 26th October, 1940 and was buried near Sr Clement in the East Rand Cemetery.

Sister Symphorosa became Superior. The year 1941 was opened by a grand mayoral service when Holy Mass was said for the first time in the Brakpan Town Hall. The impressive ceremony was attended by, among other important persons, the Mayors of Johannesburg, Nigel, Springs, Boksburg, Randfontein, Roodepoort and Krugersdorp. They, with their attendants joined the Mayor of Brakpan and other distinguished guests in the colourful procession to the Town Hall, the entrance of which was guarded by a group of firemen.

Every available seat was occupied and hundreds of Brakpan citizens listened to the profoundly moving Catholic ceremony which was explained in the running commentary by Fr Synnott. In his address Father declared the purpose of the service was to ask God's blessing on the execution of civic duties for the year. He pointed out that every function of human life was of deep interest to God and they were there to call down God's blessing on the new Mayor, Mr J Freel, and upon those who would have to co-operate with him. The keynote of his speech was: Christian peace is built on an incessant struggle for justice to all. He called for social and racial justice.

In 1942 the Community was increased to 22 Sisters when Father Revill opened his new Parish hall and the Convent pupils staged "The Cup of Coffee" to a delighted audience. January, 1944 found everyone busy with long overdue interior and exterior house repairs and school opened with a roll of 288. In the following year Sister Gervasia Krämer replaced Sister Symphorosa who was transferred to Potchefstroom. The roll mounted to 360. In 1954 there were minor house repairs and Mr J Freel, now ex-Mayor, donated an annual prize of £3.3.0 to be given either to an English-speaking pupil who showed proficiency in Afrikaans or to an Afrikaans-speaking student who showed proficiency in English. The decision was left to the Principal.

At the end of her term of office Mother Humberta Kaiser replaced Mother Gervasia as Superior. She had the misfortune to fall and fracture her arm. This necessitated hospital treatment at Johannesburg. But she was back at her post when in 1955 Bishop Boyle paid his first visit to Brakpan and confirmed 40 Convent pupils.

About two miles from Brakpan there is a Native Mission. The Dominican Fathers asked Mother Augustine Geisel to supply a staff of her Sisters; but as this was not possible she promised to pay £4 per month for a secular Native teacher at the Mission. The Congregation still does that in 1957 and in addition every Saturday two Sisters go to Brakpan to prepare the altar and Church for Sunday's Mass at the Mission.

Nigel – St Hyacinth's Convent

In 1933, and part of 1934, the Parish Priest of Springs Father David Donohue O.P. used to visit Nigel regularly to say a second Mass there. Two Sisters from the Convent accompanied him to act as sacristan and catechist. Mass was said in a fairly large wood and iron shed which was bitterly cold in Winter and intensely hot in Summer.

1934 In May, 1934 Mother Augustine Geisel bought a property at the end of Commissioner Street and later added an adjoining building bought from Mr Cantamess. However, there were no Sisters to staff the potential Convent so Mass was said on the verandah of the empty house and thus, in open air style, the Catholics heard Sunday's Mass kneeling or standing in the adjoining garden. There was no seating accommodation and after Mass was over, the Priest had breakfast at the house of a Catholic family while the Sisters taught catechism to the children. They often returned to Springs only just in time for the midday meal and they were still fasting.

Helped by Sister Cornelia Huber the Superior of Springs, Sister Lioba Koch and Sister Fulgentia arrived at Nigel on the 1st November, 1934, as the pioneers of St Hyacinth's Convent. They found two or three cottages all in great disrepair and also some ramshackle outhouses. Sister Lioba was a woman of few words. She sadly shook her head as they went through the neglected place. From Heidelberg Brother Robert of the Servites arrived soon after the Sisters. As the spiritual care of the Catholic residents of Nigel was now given to the Servite Fathers he had come to do what repairs were absolutely necessary to make the place habitable.

The three religious worked together and after a few days were joined by Brother Lücke of the Pallottini and Mr Hans Geigenberger, both professional builders. Meanwhile the ladies of the town had heard what was happening and joined forces to help the Sisters.

Stables and outhouses were soon demolished by the builders and on the 15th November the first sod of the new Convent was turned. The Sisters meanwhile lived in one of the cottages. As there was no Church or resident Priest they turned their front room into a Chapel and for 10 days spent their time furnishing the house to the best of their ability.

On the 11th November, Father A. Botha O.S.M. came to say Mass and reserved the Blessed Sacrament. After Benediction on the same afternoon, 15 local ladies gave a high tea as their official welcome to the Sisters. Delicacies were served and the crockery used was left as a gift to the Convent. At Mass on Sunday the 18th November the tiny Chapel was filled beyond capacity by about 50 people.

After Mass a German farmer and his two sons presented themselves to the Sisters. They formed part of the Vogel family and had come on horseback from their home 15 miles away to hear Mass. Speaking German they greeted the Sisters with the age-long salutation "Praised be Jesus Christ!" spoken in the Sisters' own home language it warmed their hearts as they replied in the same tongue "Praised evermore!" the visitors presented them with gifts of their farm product: milk, potatoes, mealie meal and a fowl. It was touching to see how each horseman had carefully carried his share of the gifts. Mr Vogel later became a frequent and generous visitor.

The Sisters Chapel became the Parish Church and remained so until the arrival of Father P Nolan who brought with him two Servite Brothers to aid Brother Lücke.

Meanwhile class rooms had been built and in January 1935, with Sister Elvira Redler as Superior and also music teacher, Sister Candida Kamin as Principal, Sister Teresina Ullrich, assistant, Sister Fulgentia Pallauf, cook, and Sister Emelina Kaltenstadler, Laundress, school was opened. Desks and school furniture had not yet arrived so the children sat on the floor. Some of the more adventurous brought in building blocks or logs from the grounds; but all were happy to be with the Sisters. Under such

circumstances the 60 pupils on opening day had to be classified. By the end of the week the roll numbered 86.

The Sisters had asked to have a bus service to and from the school, but had not received a favourable reply. They explained their difficulty to Mr Dennehy, a mine manager. Thinking sadly on opening day how difficult it would be to get pupils without a bus, they were surprised to see two smart buses arrive at the school empty. They hooted triumphantly and the drivers called out: "Coming again at 1.30." true to their word they were there again to take the children home and thus the bus service was inaugurated. Many years later Dr Pat Dennehy Jnr. gave one of the Sisters great relief in what had previously been considered an incurable disease. The Congregation was grateful to him.

In August the first boarders arrived and by that time all was set for a high school and boarding house. In 1936 the commercial department was opened under Sister Annunciata Asple and in 1939 Brother Lücke completed the school with its central quadrangle. In 1941 the Parish Church of Our Lady of Sorrows was built, so that the Sisters' Chapel ceased to be open to the parish and was used only for themselves and their pupils. However, since that date it had twice to be enlarged to cope with the increased number of children and Sisters. In 1948 a large hostel was erected by Mr Castellani.

In 1940 St Hyacinth's Convent was raised to Priorial status and Sister Auxilia Bader became its first Prioress. She proved to be an energetic pioneer; repairs and renovations were the order of the day. She was followed by Sister Boniface Vatter who continued to cope with the rapidly growing Convent until her health gave way. In 1957, with Mother Espina Seidl as Prioress and a roll of 225 pupils the Convent offered academic and commercial courses in the higher standards while music and sports upheld art and athletics in all courses.

1953 On the outskirts of the town of Nigel is the Monte Berico African Mission founded in 1939. It is conducted by the Servite Fathers who also have five outstations at which mass is said at regular intervals. Adjoining the Monte Berico Mission is a property two morgen in extent which was donated to the Congregation on condition that the Sisters would open a Mission there. There was no house properly so-called thereon, but a man, Petrus Chuby and his wife were allowed to live there to keep away trespassers. This proved a very unsatisfactory arrangement and Petrus went to work at Glen Cowie leaving his wife to live in the shack which was made of corrugated iron and hessian. In this undesirable state of affairs Mother Aquilina Spiegel, acting with her Council as Prioress General donated the property to the Johannesburg Diocese and it now forms part of the Monte Berico Mission. The transaction was a legal one through the lawyer at Nigel and took place on 25th September, 1953.