

Chapter 24 – Witbank

A Prayer is Heard

The early history of the present Diocese of Lydenburg¹- Witbank² is part of the story of the Transvaal Vicariate in the care of the Oblate Fathers. They did their best to keep the few dispersed White Catholics together. Many hundreds of miles were covered by the travelling priest on horseback, but the flickering torch of the Faith was kept alive.

In the little town of Lydenburg there was already a Convent School run by the Loreto Sisters of nearby Glen Cowie, a Catholic Church and a resident priest³ when, in 1923, by Papal Decree, the Eastern Transvaal was given to the care of the Sons of the Sacred Heart and named the Lydenburg Prefecture. Under the leadership of Very Rev Daniel Kauzcor, F.S.C., two priests⁴ sailed from Cairo for South Africa. They were obliged to leave their former mission field in the Sudan, where some of their Society sacrificed life for the Faith. In the newly created Prefecture there were about 420 000 Africans of different tribes. Through the zeal and industry of the Missionaries, Catholic Schools, workshops, hospitals and mission stations would spring up with astonishing rapidity to Christianise the aborigines. Yet it is an easier task by far to gain Bantu converts than to preserve the Faith among the few scattered White Catholics, some of whom had often not seen a priest or a church for years. In the early days the few isolated Catholic churches in South Africa were poor and miserable. The missionaries from abroad sadly missed the beautiful and grand parish churches of even little villages 'at home'. These lovely churches they had inherited from their devout forebears in a land where the Faith had already been established for centuries. In a mission country like South Africa the most needful requirements had first to be supplied with meagre finances. At a later date larger churches would supplant these humble places of worship.

At Witbank, too, a priest visited the dozen Catholics about once a month. Father Klassert related that a benevolent Jewish lady, Mrs Katz, offered him hospitality in her home on these first visits. The priest would then say Mass in the Masonic Hall or in a classroom of a local public school kindly put at his disposal by the principal. There was, at that time, still a great dearth of schools for white children in the Prefecture. Under these circumstances Monsignor Kauzcor asked Mother Lucy Kaltenstadler to open a school of her Congregation at Witbank. He had put his request to several other Institutes, but all had to decline owing to other commitments. So it was that Mother Lucy and Sister Liguori Connellan came from Johannesburg to view the site for the proposed school offered by the Witbank Colliery through the efforts of Mr EA Harvey. I was a barren, rock-strewn hillside, situated in the centre of a growing new township... Sister Liguori

¹ *Founded by the Voortrekkers in 1847. Here they set up a small independent Republic which was, however, soon merged with the Transvaal. The name recalls the sufferings of the pioneers. A little gold and other minerals were discovered in the district as far back as 1870. Several battles were fought in the vicinity during the Native Wars and the South African War. It is still a very sleepy little town, therefore, the Local Ordinary transferred his residence to Witbank.*

² *Founded in 1890, it is situated in the midst of the Transvaal coal fields. It is now an important industrial centre, with one of the main stations of the Electricity Supply Commission.*

³ *Rev A van Hecke, O.M.I.*

⁴ *Fathers Joseph Klassert and A Ipfelkofer, Other brethren soon followed.*

and Miss M Barry⁵ sat on a boulder while Reverend Mother wandered off to pray for guidance. (As they sat there, Miss Barry related that her sister had long ago knelt on the ground where the convent now stands to pray that Sisters should come to Witbank.) After almost an hour Mother Lucy returned and said she had decided that her Dominicans would come to the town. So the child's prayer was answered!

A suitable architect and contractor were found and building operations commenced without delay, for it was hoped to open the school on 22nd July 1924. When it became known that the Earl of Athlone and his consort were to visit the town, one of the leading Catholics, Mr J McKenna suggested that His Excellency the Governor General should be asked to open the Convent. Mother Lucy agreed and so Mr Corlett and his workmen speeded up the building to be ready by 15th June, thus anticipating the date by more than a month.

Meanwhile a staff of pioneer Sisters⁶ had been appointed, with Mother Lioba Koch as Superior. The annals state that several friends, including the Katz and Berlein families lent their best silver cutlery and crockery to the convent for the luncheon given at the inauguration of the school. Mr J McKenna and Mrs R Horsfall acted as hosts on the occasion. At 9 a.m. on 15th June 1924, the Governor General was handed a gilded key with which he unlocked the door at the main entrance and then declared the St Thomas Aquinas Convent to be open. His spouse, Princess Alice, was presented with a sheaf of choice flowers. This took place in the presence of Mother Lucy, the staff of the new school and a goodly representative assembly of the town's citizens.

The school, one of the very few double storeys at the time in Witbank, commenced with the new term on 22nd July, as originally planned. There were 37 children present on the first day. Under the patronage of Saint Thomas,⁷ the brilliant Dominican scholar, the nuns strove to provide excellent tuition as well as imbue their young charges with sound Christian principles. This was the first secondary school of the town. It offered the first Commercial Courses in the Eastern Transvaal, as well as the Joint Matriculation Board and the College of Preceptors Examinations. It should be remarked that at the outset the St Thomas School was planned only for day scholars. However, within a short time of its inauguration the Sisters realised the need to make provision for boarders as well. After that the numbers increased rapidly and already before the end of the first year it was found necessary to provide accommodation and tuition for all classes from the Kindergarten to Matriculation. As the work increased the Mother House supplied the necessary willing helpers.

As soon as the machine of learning had been well run-in, music and singing lessons were introduced. From the earliest days Sister Ancilla Mayer, and her able successor, Sister Cletus Lampka, set the high standard which has been faithfully upheld as through the years the Convent pupils have taken top honours in the music examinations. In Eisteddfods and similar contests the School has taken many prizes. Elocution and dancing lessons were also begun. Academically the convent likewise proved itself capable of holding its own with any other school in the district. Its examination results have been gratifying every year, and compositions from this institution entered in competitions in essay-writing also frequently carried off trophies.

⁵ *The first Witbank girl to take up nursing. She attended the first tent school in the village in 1905. Though now retired from nursing she still takes a keen interest in welfare work and the youth. She had initially interested Mr Harvey in the proposed idea of the convent school.*

⁶ *Sisters Consolata Kaiser, Sixta Schmitzeer, Bernard Rinkes, Meinrad Schwoerer, Theophila Schneider, Seraphia Kasek, Consilia Eiss and Ancilla Mayer.*

⁷ *He was one of the most marvellously gifted of thinkers and became the chief exponent of Scholastic Philosophy, which is based on that of Aristotle, brought into harmony with Christian belief.*

During the war years the convent school did very valuable work as well. It not only won the first prize in the Transvaal inter-high school knitting competition, but dispatched numerous parcels to those who needed them at the front, through the medium of the Red Cross Society. Large contributions were sent to the U.N.C.A., and War Funds and woollen clothes to children in Europe after the War. It can thus be said that Witbank Convent has a distinguished 'war record'. Even a scrap book made during the Health Week in 1948 was, at the request of the Red Cross Society, sent to Geneva, where the book was exhibited at the Society's International Headquarters.

Facilities for sport were likewise given due attention. As early as 1926, the first tennis court was acquired through the efforts of Mr Hamin. Other branches of sport such as hockey, netball, softball, swimming, etc., were also provided for.

Through the intervention of Mr J McKenna the T. and D.B. Mining company offered the priests a plot of ground on the outskirts of the town for a mission. When the missionaries first came to Witbank they had an immense work to perform with practically no funds. The Convent helped the priests in every possible way to plant the Catholic Church in this virgin soil. Sister Bernard Rinkes and others would walk all the way to Driefontein Mission to help teaching in the school. The nuns also took care of the altar linen and directed the church choir.

After some years the Convent procured a motor car in order to reach the other mission stations – some as far away as Balmoral, Kendal and even Middelburg. As these outstations became more self-reliant the schools were handed over to the local people. The Dominicans, however, continued to teach catechism and needlework and direct the choir at those stations in their neighbourhood. Driefontein mission is now staffed by a community of African nuns strained by the Loreto Sisters.

Meanwhile improvements continued to be made at Witbank Convent. When the institution was first opened it was the only private school in the Bethal-Witbank area and formed, therefore, a vital link in the educational scheme. On 21st September 1932, Right Rev Monsignor Aloysius Mohn, F.S.C. blessed the foundation stone for a new chapel. As the number of pupils increased new classrooms were planned and the building was completed in 1948 by Mr H Geigenberger and his Partners. The Parent-Teachers' Association came into being in 1957, with Messrs D Horsfall and Fennegan as foundation members. In 1966 a fine hall was erected at the end of the grounds where the pupils could entertain their parents and friends with the delightful concerts for which the school has gained quite a reputation. To mark the fiftieth anniversary of the Convent's foundation the scholars staged an outstanding concert which took place on 25th June 1975. The programme consisted of two parts: Before the interval, various standards presented speech choirs and songs. The percussion bands were excellent, as were the choirs with emphasis on the Senior Choir. The Sisters who trained them were enthusiastically congratulated on the singing and acting on all levels. After intermission, a Roman play, "NEMESIUS"⁸ was presented. This was an

⁸ *The play was written by Sister M Raymond Whyte, O.P. Born in Ireland in 1859, she came to South Africa at the age of five. She was educated at the Dominican Convent at Cape Town and joined the Order at King William's Town in 1883. Hers was a striking personality. Erudite, widely-read, endowed with many gifts, "great-hearted, great-minded, great-souled", she exercised a strong yet gentle influence over many. There was a certain virility about her, not of body but of spirit. Like Shakespeare's Portia, she had a man's mind, if but a woman's might. These qualities fitted her pre-eminently for her chief work in life – to be a teacher of boys or, as it has been more accurately put, a moulder of men. "She knew her history of Rome as only a scholar can; she knew Scott's works almost by heart and the geography of every nook of the Scott country; she could discuss any queried line in Shakespeare. Yet she was not old-fashioned, not merely classical in her tastes. She could debate on topical events and she could keep pace with Chesterton and Belloc." Another former pupil wrote: "... I can remember Sister Raymond at English literature lessons where but a few cared about books in the beginning but where, under her*

ambitious effort. The play is of a religious nature with a human angle and it ends on a note of triumph when the one actor described the victory of the Christian martyrs over Death. The hero and heroine “took full honours, which meant something in a cast of the calibre of this play”.

As scientific subjects gained increasing importance in the school curriculum the nuns, with the help of their generous friends, took steps to provide their school with a modern science block. This was completed in 1970 and, at the opening function, the parents and friends were full of admiration of the superb equipment supplied for the younger generation’s advancement.

The Sisters who have been associated with the school have done their best to maintain the prestige of their institution. In 1974 the Order of Preachers also celebrated the seventh centenary of the illustrious Dominican, St Thomas Aquinas, after whom the school is called. One cherishes the hope that Witbank Convent will always be worthy of the great name it bears.

guidance most learned to love Literature. To those little Philistines she would read slowly, explaining each word and each reference and showing a knowledge that was encyclopaedic... Yes, indeed, many men and women are better for having known and loved Sister Raymond. And now that she has gone to her heavenly reward there are many who will say with the writer: ‘She has not only been a good teacher but, although she left not much in the printed word, she has left a message in the book lovers her leadership into the realms of literature has created’ ...” Some of Sister Raymond’s poems were collected and printed with a special memoir by the “Silver Star” Committee.