

Chapter 34 – San Salvador at Hyde Park

Life-long Care

The family of a mentally retarded child is faced with a tremendous problem and responsibility: a problem which usually persists for the life of the parents and which often places a severe psychological burden on the other normal children in the home.

Four decades ago there was a great need of a local institution for mentally defective boys and girls and the parents longed to have their handicapped children under the Sisters' care. Mother Winefride Simpkins,¹ the first Superior of St Vincent's School, finally admitted a few retarded children to the school for the Deaf on trial; But it was soon evident that mentally defectives need their own special type of tuition and that their education cannot be thought of in terms of an ordinary academic curriculum. Their course of instruction must conform to the slow growth pattern of the child and not to that of normal individuals.

Mother General Augustine Geisel, ever ready to come to the aid of the unfortunate, decided to found a Home for the feeble-minded. At Hyde Park Estates, in the North of Johannesburg, a suitable property was purchased. This consisted of a large double-storey house in 13 acres of ground. Here, on 7th July 1936, the "San Salvador Home" was opened with Sister Josephine Hagan as Superior and a carefully selected staff of Sisters.² Those who care for the mentally handicapped not only fulfil a deep human need in our society but also witness to the Christian concept that human life is sacred and euthanasia is not justified.

The pioneers here had serious difficulties to contend with: an almost unfurnished house and a wilderness from which to make a garden. In those days Hyde Park Estates were divided up into agricultural holdings; consequently such houses as there were had neither electricity nor running water installed. But time brought a solution to problems like these.

At first boys and girls were admitted to the Home, but it was soon found that more help could be given the girls if the institution was conducted exclusively for them. The work at San Salvador calls for much self-sacrifice, but the Sisters chosen to mother these unfortunate children were not lacking in generosity. The intelligence quotient of all these children is at the present moment below forty, so they are not really educable though they can be trained to some extent.

For 26 years the work was carried on in the original quarters and, as the number of girls increased, accommodation became very cramped. The architect, Mr M Waterkeyn, drew up a plan for extension of the premises and Mr A Bottom was entrusted with its execution. In December 1964, during the Superiorship of Sister Margarita Lyons, the attractive new quarters were ready for occupation.

The training given here is religious, mental, moral as well as practical. The receptivity of the individual naturally varies. Many of the girls are mongoloids, while others are even less trainable. A few can be taught to read and count, and a fair number join Sister Godeline's weaving class and carry off many trophies for their handsome exhibits at the annual City Show. In 1976 they gained eight first prizes, five second prizes, five third prizes and the silver medal. Some can make rugs, others knit jerseys for themselves and do a little tapestry and fancy work.

The Home, which at present accommodates some fifty girls, has been registered under the Mental Disorders' Act and it is regularly visited by the Superintendent of the Sterkfontein Mental Hospital. The Inspectors have always expressed their complete satisfaction with the hygienic and orderly condition of

¹ *Born at East London, she entered the Convent in 1894. She always shunned the limelight and, despite frail health, she was the inspirer of the buildings at Melrose, Springs and San Salvador and watched their growth with loving devotion. At San Salvador, after Sister Josephine's demise, Mother Winefride poured out her love of little children on the inmates of the home, where her care and tenderness brightened the lives of these handicapped children.*

² *Sisters Catherine Heinz, Antoinette Grabher, Protasia Baeurle and Godeline Rid. Sister Polycarp Strobel had charge of the boys. The community was joined later by Sisters Waltraud Mueller, Elsbeth Naegele, Frieda Ziegeltrum and Justina Schilling.*

the institution. Recently the children between the ages of six and eighteen years have been assessed and six of these were considered teachable in terms of an amendment to the Mentally Retarded Children's Act. Since the beginning of 1976 these six girls attend a special remedial school, Casa do Sol, in Linden. The pupils are fetched by a school bus every morning and brought home at noon. The teachers at Casa do Sol have remarked on the San Salvador children's good conduct and the excellent tuition they had received from the Sisters.

At San Salvador the girls also learn to give a helping hand, and it is quite touching to see the protective care shown by some for the weaker ones. Apart from enjoying themselves on the playground or in the recreation room they take turns to acquire a little experience in the kitchen, laundry and garden. All show a happy sense of contentment and security and this is well, for they usually remain for life under the Sisters' care, except for the short periods some visit their parents or relatives. Several of these girls are over fifty years of age, but to the devoted staff they are still "our children".