

Chapter 9 – Potchefstroom, Transvaal

Northward Ho!

The Transvaal Republic was originally under the ecclesiastical jurisdiction of the Vicar Apostolic of Natal, but there was no resident priest at Mooi River, as Potchefstroom¹ was formerly called. In spite of the regulation that “no religion, other than that of the Dutch Reformed Church, was allowed within the Transvaal Republic”, a Mass had been said there privately as early as 1864. (The Afrikaner people abhorred the Catholic Faith, for they regarded it as the religion of anti-Christ.) In 1868 Father J Hoendervangers, a Belgian Premonstratensian from the Orange Free State, visited this old capital of the Transvaal. On arrival he was warned by the Government Official not to celebrate Mass under pain of being put over the border. His remonstrances were answered by this threat being put into effect and a Field Cornet was instructed to see him out of the country. However, in the very next year this regulation was repealed,² probably due chiefly to the impending visit of the Catholic Governor of Quelimane in Portuguese East Africa.³

On 15th March 1886 the Transvaal Republic was declared an independent ecclesiastical prefecture under the Right Rev Odilo Monginoux O.M.I. The Catholic Church was established in Potchefstroom in 1889. At the request of the Right Rev Monginoux, Mother Mauritia obtained leave from Bishop Ricards to send a community of nuns to Potchefstroom. His Lordship celebrated an early Mass on 17th June at the Mother House for the eight Dominicans who were leaving on the first lap of their journey to

After spending two hours at Notre Mere’s convent at Grahamstown, they entrained for Kimberley which was the railway terminus for the Transvaal. As they sped along they recited the Divine Office and other Community prayers. Kimberley was reached on 19th June, 1889 in time for morning Mass. Here the travellers enjoyed the hospitality of the sisters of Nazareth and met Monsignor Monginoux who would accompany them to their destination.

Their mule wagon arrived at Potchefstroom on 23rd June 1889 and the driver kindly took the missionaries to their new home. The house, recently acquired by the Dominicans, being quite empty there was nothing to welcome the Sisters but its bare walls and mud floors. The people were hostile to the nuns’ arrival, making their beginning in a strange land doubly difficult. Yet, despite opposition, the convent school opened on 15th July 1886 with an enrolment of 18 scholars.⁴

A pathetic little episode occurred when Msgr Monginoux was asked to visit an old Irish lady. She told him she had prayed for thirty years that a priest would visit her before she died. Her prayer was now answered and she received the last Anointing. Msgr Monginoux conducted her funeral, walking through the streets of Potchefstroom in soutane and surplice – surely a hitherto unheard-of event.

The Prefect then took up temporary residence in Potchefstroom so that the Sisters might not be deprived of the blessing of daily Mass. He remained until he could arrange for Father Trabaud OMI to take his place as chaplain.

Before Mother Mauritia’s return to the Cape Colony an interesting event took place. A gentleman, belonging to the German Lutheran Church became ill. Doctor Mortimer said he would not answer for the man’s life unless a really good nurse could be found to take over the case at once. Enquiries were made

¹ Potchefstroom was founded in 1838 and was the first capital of the Transvaal Boer Republic. The origin of the name is disputed. One explanation is that it derived from the Voortrekker Leader, A H Potgieter, Chief of the Pioneers who settled beside the Mooi River (stroom, meaning ‘stream’)

² Father le Bihan OMI also worked for the abolition of this law.

³ Later known as Mocambique.

⁴ There were abundant stories of the violent dislike which the Boers or Afrikaners had for the Catholic religion. It is understandable: they had usually never met a Catholic before and they had heard from their forebears – Huguenots and other Protestants – stories of their sufferings under papist rulers in Europe. These accounts were often exaggerated, omitting the violence of the 16th century revolts against the traditional order; but these stories were accepted by the Boers without further question.

but there was not a single trained nurse in town. Mother Tiefenboeck, on hearing of this need offered her services for, among this phenomenal woman's accomplishments, she had also some experience in practical nursing. With a Sister as companion, Rev Mother went to the hotel where they found the man in practically a dying state, for his life had been despaired of twice in four days. The two nuns followed the Doctor's orders meticulously and nursed the patient back to health. This story was published by outsiders even in the Johannesburg papers, so the event did much to publicise the work of the nuns.

In a short time the increased number of pupils made it necessary to build. Father L Trabaud OMI, the priest of the mission was a wonderful friend and benefactor to the Sisters, acting as both architect and contractor of their school. The building was constructed from bricks, burned in the back yard of the convent. The nuns shared in the labour by rising very early each morning to carry the bricks to the building site. The double storey building was right on Berg Street.⁵ The rooms were spacious and well ventilated. The largest on the ground floor formed the chapel. The rest of the block consisted of convent, hostel and classrooms, all made and furnished by the Sisters' devoted hands. The new school was opened in 1890, with the pupils numbering two-hundred.

Finance was another problem which faced the first Sisters here. Their income was small and their expenses considerable. The Government of the "Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek" was applied to for a grant-in-aid which was given by President Paul Kruger. He laid down one condition though, that Dutch was to be taught at the school. This was done for some time till the pioneer spirit asserted itself and the nuns decided to relinquish the grant but retained the Dutch language on the curriculum.

From the outset the new school was popular and was well patronised by people of all denominations in Potchefstroom, including the Boer citizens.⁶ The nuns' reputation for providing a good Christian education became so well known that the institution's fame spread beyond the borders of the town. The result was that parents sent their sons and daughters to the school from all over the Transvaal and Free State. Until the establishment of the "Potchefstroom Boys' High" the Convent was the only school that did work with boys beyond the primary stage. It was also the first English Medium School of the town. Many men and women, some of them in senior positions, had been alumni of this Convent School. Former girls, also, were scattered far and wide with many having sent their children to their old school.

The gradual development of the Convent is full of interest. The early annals relate: "Mr Xavier Baumann drove nine of the sisters over to Klerksdorp and back again in the Royal Hotel 'Omnibus' drawn by four horses, on 16th July 1899. We left after early Mass to spend Mother Euphemia's feast-day with her. After a lovely drive of seven hours we arrived at 2 p.m. and received a hearty welcome from Reverend Mother and her Sisters. Even during this visit joy and sadness were mingled; for we had come to Klerksdorp when the convent received a letter from the Mother House in which the deaths of Sister Ludwiga Kaltenstadler⁷ and Sister Carmella Kuehne were announced... On 18th July we had to say farewell again and reached home in the afternoon".

War clouds were gathering and the storm broke on 10th October 1899, when Britain received the final Boer ultimatum...⁸ During the Anglo-Boer War this school of the sisters was kept going almost entirely at the expense of the nuns. Under the guidance of Mother Eleonora Petitpierre splendid work was done during that trying time, with many boarders remaining at the Convent while their parents were refugees in

⁵ Later re-named Van Riebeeck Street.

⁶ Dutch descendants in South Africa.

⁷ Mother Lucy's sister.

⁸ It may be said that no country was less prepared for war than the little South African Republic. Yet the early stage of the war was an almost continuous series of disasters for the English. Then the arrival of large British reinforcements brought on a reversal of the Boer fortunes. Despite the Boers' gallant and skilful fighting the main English forces crossed the Vaal River on 27th May 1900. The Boer administration now moved into the *Eastern Transvaal and the campaign took on a guerrilla character, in which the genius of General Christiaan de Wet won him international renown...*

The British annexation of the two Boer Republics, Transvaal and Free State, did not diminish the severity of the fighting. When General Buller and, a while later, Lord Kitchener, proposed to discuss terms of peace, this was at first rejected by the Boers.

the Cape Colony and other parts of the sub-continent; for it was erroneously believed that the war would be over within a couple of weeks.

In Mother Eleonora's exquisite copperplate writing can be found many entries of gifts received from friends as well as from the military of both factions. She opened her account as follows: "...10th October 1899: The Transvaal and England are at war! What is to become of the 21 Sisters and 50 Boarders (22 girls and 28 boys) of this Convent? ... Mrs Connolly wanted to console me saying that the Sisters will be under the protection of the German State. But I say, rather, we are first and foremost under the protection of God! Of course the Sisters will remain neutral. It is true that the Dutch Government has been less fair and tolerant of Catholics than the English, yet many individual Dutch have also been very good to us...

"The majority of our well-paying boarders have left with their parents. Those remaining with us are mostly the poorer ones...

"May 1900 – The loving Providence of God for us has become manifest most wonderfully by the very many donations received in this time of danger and want. At times there are no provisions left in the house and we are often hungry, for naturally we first provide for the children from what we have; but the Lord always sends us something by some kind soul. Full of gratitude towards Almighty God I have written a detailed donation account as a lasting testimony to His loving Providence and the generosity of our benefactors...

"Last Sunday Captain Baillie came to the rescue in our distress. He came on horseback accompanied by a small wagon on which he brought us quite a lot of tinned beef, dripping and a bag of potatoes...

"July 25th, 1900: It is the feast –day of our dear Mother General Jacoba Zirn; and what a dreadful day it has been here! Not far from the town the English and Boers are fighting and we hear cannon booming. At 3 p.m. a terrible thunder storm broke over us. The sky became dark and soon rain and snow poured from the clouds in streams while an icy wind was howling. We pitied the poor men in the trenches, both Boer and Briton, exposed not only to the cruel cold and rain but also to death. The Sisters took it in turns to keep an unbroken vigil of prayer in our chapel for three successive days and nights while the fierce fighting raged... "Sacred Heart of Jesus once in agony, have pity on the dying!"...

"August, 1900: There was great alarm in town because it was announced that the Boer Warrior, General de Wet is coming. At 4.30 p.m. a small cavalcade went past our convent; the General is a fine stately warrior of about 40 years, riding a beautiful white horse.⁹ Our boys greeted him with 'Hurrahs', and he lifted his hat to them. Near the court house he held a speech saying: 'It is being said that I have 5000 men to fight for me. As you see I have only five, and I am now dodging the English... If I have to lay down arms I shall do so, but willingly I will never do it...'

"...Meal now costs 92 shillings per bag: in any case it is unobtainable for all the shops are empty. What was our surprise to find a bag of unsifted meal in the passage this morning when we came from chapel. May God reward the anonymous giver!...

"The English suddenly had to break up camp outside the town. Mrs van der Hoff heard that they had left hundreds of loaves of bread with the baker which had been ordered for the soldiers; so she went there and brought us a number of loaves. It was bread made of Kaffir Corn meal.¹⁰ It is black as earth and tastes like sand, but we are glad to have bread of any kind. Then soaked in 'ersatz' coffee it is edible...¹¹

"The Dutch rode into town this morning and a soldier handed the following note to me: 'This house is not to be searched.' Signed by Commandant A H Hennieke."

Despite the poor Sisters' plight the following entry in Reverend Mother's journal makes one smile: "We were in need of candles and soap and none could be had in town. I then bought a goat from our

⁹ Named Fleur.

¹⁰ Ground millet.

¹¹ Most groceries, especially sugar, coffee, etc., were unobtainable. People made a brew from roasted millet or dried beans, etc., that were ground, to serve as coffee.

neighbour, Mrs Bothma, for a pound. But the animal had practically no fat on it so that Sister Wendelina could only make three and a half tallow candles from it.”

The convent record continues: “Mr Stanley Ford came to ask us to supply daily two bottles of milk to the little Red Cross Hospital where there are four soldiers suffering from Typhoid fever and one Native with a broken leg. Hetty our heifer has calved and we agreed to give four bottles, because we must also help where we can.

Lord Roberts has been recalled and Lord Kitchener is now Commander-in-Chief of the British forces, because the Boers refused to accept the terms of surrender to the English. Although the struggle seems hopeless for the Boers, who are completely by an Empire, can one blame them? Naturally they want their independence. Now Kitchener has adopted very harsh measures against the Boers, setting fire to their homes, destroying their farms and leaving the women and children exposed to starvation or taking them away to internment camps. We feel very sorry for them. What misery has come upon this unfortunate nation! May God have mercy on them! ...”

At another time the English had slaughtered an ox and sent the hide to the Sisters. Mother’s journal continues:

...No shoes can be bought in town. One of the soldiers is willing to take the hide to our convent at Klerksdorp where Sister Blandina Zeiler will make ‘veld-schoens’¹² for us from it... “Speaking of this many years later Sister Blandina said she had no idea how to mend or make a shoe when Mother Euphemia begged her to try, because she so badly needed shoes for the nuns. Sister told her plight to an English officer who was her friend. He supplied her with some leather, a last and some nails and taught her the rudiments of the cobbler’s trade.

“On the 14th February, 1902,” says the Convent chronicle, “we were commandeered by six armed Boers to give them meal. When they saw we had only ground millet they were satisfied with taking only two bags which they loaded on to their cart. They had no note from their Authorities but said Mr Francis is their Commandant. It may well be that they were not sent by him, but the poor people are desperate...”

By now the Boers were indeed in desperate straits, yet they still carried on using supplies they could take from the British and inflicting what damage they could. The Superior concluded her account of the war saying: “On 31st May 1902, Peace! Wonderful Peace has come to the country at last. May God be praised! How often the Sisters spent entire Sundays in prayer, begging the Lord to send peace to this stricken land...”

After hostilities ceased, the number of pupils increased at such a pace that it became necessary to expand once more. On 9th October 1903, the foundation stone was laid of the main convent building, which was erected at a cost of £6000. Two foundation stones were laid, one on each side of the main entrance, by Bishop M Gaughran, OMI and Mr JB Skirving, the Magistrate. The ceremony was attended by a large number of people. Under each foundation stone “coins of the realm”, copies of the local newspapers and a record of the dedication inscribed in Latin and a photograph of the reigning Pontiff, Pius X, were placed. In this building for twenty years one large room served as both convent Chapel and Parish Church. However, in 1924, Bishop C Cox omi, laid the foundation stone of the Parish Church on the north side of the convent grounds.

By 1913 it became necessary to build again and an excellent block, in which senior and junior pupils, day scholars as well as boarders, could be accommodated, was erected under the supervision of the architect, Mr J A Moffat.

The school continued to thrive and it was for about thirty years under the direction of that brilliant scholar and humble religious, Sister M Amica Gebhart.¹³ At the closure of this convent, in December 1972, Sister Margaret Mary Larkins gave a brief resume of the institution’s history, saying she “felt awed” as she

¹² Home-made shoes of soft leather.

¹³ She was awarded the MA degree at Rhodes University College, “*summa cum laude*” and was offered a bursary for further study, but her health did not allow her to make use of the scholarship.

fingered the yellow pages of the examination results of 1899. The pupils then wrote examinations conducted by the University of the Cape of Good Hope in the elementary and higher grades.

“... Frank Morris and Abraham Arenstein obtained first class passes in Nederlands. In the College of Preceptors, London Certificate Examination, Ruby Hartley, Winnie Slade and Barry Barrett passed with distinction... The first accountancy, typing and shorthand examination showed that seven pupils obtained a speed of 90 words per minute...” Prize-giving was very important in those days, as it was usually an all-day affair, preceded by a school exhibition in the morning. “... Our present school colours,” continued sister Margaret Mary, “were decided upon and introduced in 1936 under the Superiorship of Mother Ignatius Naegele. The former colours were red and black.” A prophetic little note appears in the annals in 1948: “The Dominican Priests who have been in charge of Potchefstroom now for a good number of years, have decided to withdraw and hand the parish back to the Oblates. This is the beginning of the end of the Dominicans in Potchefstroom...” (As from the third term of 1963, the boy boarders of the convent school were transferred to St Louis Bertrand Convent where the mission had been formerly. This hostel was maintained until 1971, when it was closed down.)

The last assembly of the Sacred Heart School was held on 1st December 1972, after it has had almost 8300 pupils on its register in a life span of 92 years. One may wonder why the school had to be discontinued after the nuns have tended the sick, enriched the minds and heart of youth and have penetrated into the affections of those to whom they were sent. From the previous pages it is clear that in the past Convents were established more or less at random according to the needs of the people, or in answer to the pressing demands of certain persons of influence. Now times have changed and, through a variety of circumstances, religious are being forced to seek for new types of evangelisation while endeavouring to remain true to the charism of their Founders. Among other reasons, the dearth of Sisters has compelled the Convent Authorities to close the school.¹⁴ However, Potchefstroom was not just abandoned, but some friendly contacts remained with the parish. Once, every month, for about two years, a couple of Sisters travelled by bus to Potchefstroom on a Saturday afternoon and returned on Monday. These Sisters organised the Sunday catechism classes which were attended by 120 pupils from the various schools in town, including the De Kock School for Backward Children. Classes were being taught by some past pupils of the Convent. On Sunday morning before the second Mass the two Sisters gave demonstration lessons to the catechists. “... it was a joy to see their regular attendance and their enthusiasm to learn...” The Priests were grateful for this help given to the parishioners and felt that the presence of the Sisters and the stimulation they provided was responsible for the continued success of the project.

Before the Potchefstroom Community dispersed the music teachers had also prepared three organists. Thanks to these the parish singing is also taken care of.

Over and over again parishioners expressed their appreciation of what the Sisters have done and speculate on their possible return to the Convent some day in the future...

¹⁴ *When the Sisters vacated the Convent, the University of Potchefstroom rented the place as residential quarters for some of the students.*