

### XIII – *Noodshulp*, St Benedict’s Mission, near Magoebaskloof

Prior to 1927 the Benedictine Priests had an Industrial School and Orphanage for Bantu<sup>1</sup> children at St Benedict’s Mission, Noodshulp near Magoebaskloof,<sup>2</sup> in the eastern part of Pietersburg District – one of the most beautiful areas of the Transvaal. The mission was begun in 1919 by Father Ambrose Glainser O.S.B., helped by the Dominican Sisters of Newcastle. When these nuns were withdrawn in 1927 the Congregation of King William’s Town was asked to staff St Benedict’s. They did so when, on 25<sup>th</sup> July of the same year, Sister Majella Kaiser arrived with three companions.<sup>3</sup> There were eventually 56 boarders and Father Rupert Sailer, now in charge, was indefatigable in erecting classrooms and boarding accommodation.

St Benedict’s celebrated Good Friday of 1933 in a unique way. A cross, 37 feet high, was carried up the hill behind the mission by a congregation of about 150 people. The highest point was reached after a climb of about an hour and a quarter. When the cross had been blessed it was erected,<sup>4</sup> and thereafter followed a sermon in two African languages by Father Rupert.

The Sisters’ chronicle relates that “lions still roamed the neighbourhood of Noodshulp, wreaking havoc on the surrounding farms in the ‘kloof’, but hitherto our mission has been spared...

“In September 1927, a dangerous veld fire threatened the mission. One of the Sisters had the bright idea to ring the church bell for a long time. This alerted many people in the vicinity, who came to help extinguish the flames and the mission was saved...”

On several occasions very ill Africans asked to be brought to the mission in order to receive Baptism before they died. Similarly, two white men brought a young man who had been struck by a falling tree, sustaining fatal internal injuries, although he remained conscious for a while after the priest had administered the Sacraments of the dying.

On 14<sup>th</sup> November 1929, Pope Pius XI appointed Father Frederich Osterrath, O .S.B., Abbot and Prefect in succession to Monsignor Salvator van Nuffel who had resigned his office. Bishop Osterrath chose Saint Benedict’s as the site for his Abbey, so the Priests and Sisters with some sixty boarders were transferred to Setali on 23<sup>rd</sup> September 1940, leaving behind them the grave of our Sister Bernadette Enderle who had died there in 1937.

### XIV – *St Scholastica*<sup>5</sup> Mission, Setali, North of Noodshulp

Two Benedictine Priests had begun this Mission of St Scholastica about eighty miles north of Noodshulp. However, they repeatedly pointed out that they could make no headway there unless they could get Sisters to help them. Mother General Augustine Geisel, therefore, allowed Sisters Humberta Kaiser, Gisella Greissl and Eligia Friedrich to go from Potgietersrus as pioneers to Setali<sup>6</sup> in 1929. Reverend Mother herself and Monsignor van Nuffel accompanied them. The party travelled by train as far as Pietersburg; from there they and all their belongings proceeded by motor lorry to their destination. After

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<sup>1</sup> The work ‘Bantu’ means ‘people’. It is also used to describe the family of African languages – well over 200 – spoken over a very large area of the Southern continent.

<sup>2</sup> Derived from ‘Maxoba’, name of an African Chief.

<sup>3</sup> Sisters Arsenia Mueller, Berthildis Mueller and Notburga Birzer.

<sup>4</sup> Senior Sisters related that Mother Mauritia also had a large cross erected on the summit of the hill behind the Izeli Convent.

<sup>5</sup> Sister to St Benedict

<sup>6</sup> Native expression for a ‘stable’, because the mission was founded on a farm.

passing Soekmekaar<sup>7</sup> the road, or rather its absence, made unpleasant travelling with bumps so violent that the piled up luggage fell upon the Sisters who sat in the back of the vehicle. Bruised and sore they tried to make light of their discomfort.

The Sisters' new home was a thatched cottage devoid of ceiling. A couple of huts served as bedrooms for the Priests and a small church completed the complex. It was evident that cooking had to be done out of doors, at least for the present. Drinking water had to be hauled from a stream three miles away. Mother General discussed the water problem with Monsignor van Nuffel and agreed to pay to have the thatched roof replaced with one of corrugated iron with a tank to catch the rainwater for domestic use. At first the Sisters shared the dining room with the Priests, a neighbouring schoolmaster and an occasional policeman who happened to pass that way.

“... Unfortunately the rain came before the new roof was on the cottage and the rooms were anything from 2 to 15cm under water... Late one evening Father Lambert arrived on foot because the lorry had broken down. The next day a repairing gang managed to tow the lorry to Setali. Now, at last, the roof could be completed and the tank fixed, mainly by Father Urban's consecrated hands. Only after this could the Sisters begin to make the dwelling habitable. “The self-sacrificing spirit of the Benedictine Priests was admirable, for they were not at all accustomed to this rough kind of work”, wrote the mission annalist.

As soon as life at this mission began to run on regular lines Father Urban collected some African children from the neighbourhood and the Sisters were only too happy to teach the little Pagans who, in turn, brought their parents to learn about the Christian religion. The chapel was now both church and school and, on Sundays, it soon proved too small for the many who accompanied the children, and a larger church had to be planned.

When the nuns and pupils arrived from Noodshulp in 1940 those Sisters who had been working at Setali withdrew and the mission was carried on by the newcomers. Mention should be made of a few of our Sisters who gave almost a lifetime of missionary service to the Northern Transvaal: Sister Notburga Birzer spent forty years of her life in this part of the Transvaal. One of her beautiful apostolates was to sit with the sick and dying for hours, when she would read to them or pray with them. When she was transferred to the Mater Infirmorum, at the age of seventy-seven, she would still not be idle but willingly lend a hand with the various household chores. A couple of years before her end the amputation of a leg tied her to a wheel-chair and from there she continued to exercise the apostolate of prayer and suffering until God called her home. Sisters Francina Kley, Niceta Pichlmeier and Richard Diepold also spent many years at this mission and, though well past retiring age, they still generously contribute their share towards the maintenance of the mission.

Mr Benedict Risimati, a widower and father of three children, decided to prepare for the Catholic Priesthood. He studied at St Peter's Seminary at Hammanskraal and was ordained in the presence of 2000 people, some of whom had travelled very far to attend the celebration on 24<sup>th</sup> May 1970. After the ceremony the customary feast was held. Unfortunately, however, after only a few years of pastoral work among his people, he suffered a stroke. Though he survived that illness he remained an invalid until his death in November 1976.

In 1952, after more than thirty years of strenuous labour, the Benedictine Priests handed Setali Mission to the Irish Fathers of the Sacred Heart. Our Sisters are still working there, though they have replaced one another over the years. One Sister acts as cook, a couple are teachers and Sister Stanislaus Draexl now has charge of the clinic which was begun in 1957. About a thousand patients are seen at this clinic each month. In 1971 all the clinics in the country were grouped under the supervision of the nearest hospital and, ever since, this mission clinic has been visited by medical staff of Elim Hospital.<sup>8</sup> This has helped greatly to bring efficient medical care to all sections of the community, especially as the preventive aspect of the medicine is emphasized. Vaccinations are given, malaria carriers are tracked down, milk is supplied for children and health education is stressed.

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<sup>7</sup> *The name of the village derived from an incident when the surveyors became separated in the mist and had to seek each other. The little town lies in an area of cattle-breeding and general farming.*

<sup>8</sup> Belonged to the Presbyterian Church until it was taken over by the State.

With the erection of the separate 'Homelands', Setali was classified as belonging to Vendaleland<sup>9</sup> and should really be supervised by Tshilidzini or Siloam Hospitals. However, these latter hospitals are situated at the other end of the homeland, so the State Health Authorities decided that Setali clinic should remain under the care of the doctors of Elim Hospital who have been most helpful to our Sisters there.

In 1972 Pope Paul VI, by canonical decree, established the Diocese of Louis Trichardt-Tzaneen, in which area St Scholastica Mission is situated, and placed Bishop John Durkin M.S.C. at the head of the new ecclesiastical territory.

Reports of various inspectors visiting the mission school all expressed satisfaction with the progress made and with the encouragement the Sisters gave the African staff to become good teachers. An African Industrial Teacher was engaged to instruct the pupils in gardening and handicrafts, while a Sister always had charge of the sewing classes. The work done in these subjects is of a high standard so that exhibits have often gained handsome prizes at inter-school shows.

Sister Terese Meirer, and then Sister Theresia Nadler have been the Principal Teachers at Setali Mission within recent decades. It is a private mission school. In 1962 a hundred pupils had to be transferred to Molema Bantu School which was favoured by the African Chief. In 1970 St Scholastica's School, which was registered as "Isizwe Bantu School" had to be closed down, including the orphanage when, according to the Government's Group Areas' Policy, that part of the country was proclaimed the Venda Homeland. This seemed to be the end of the mission school here. However, the missionaries were permitted to reopen their school provided it was run for Venda children only. This entailed a great change as the Venda language would henceforth be taught in this school. However, with hard work and perseverance, the staff managed and, early in 1972, the institution was re-registered as St Scholastica's Catholic School. Though it is only a Primary School the Sisters hope to gain at least a few religious vocations from this solitary Catholic School in all Vendaleland, so that they may carry on the mission work when the European Sisters are obliged to move out. One girl has apparently a religious vocation and had hoped to go to Ramanchaane Mission to attend the secondary school there. However, as she would be the only Venda pupil there and, in that area, would be obliged to learn the Tswana language, it seems doubtful whether she will manage to pass Tswana at the Standard Seven level. For this reason she has joined a state school in her homeland and still hopes to become a Dominican Sister when she has completed her schooling.

The Fathers and Sisters have worked zealously at this mission, so that improvements succeeded one another over the years. In time candles and paraffin lanterns made way for electricity. However, a vexing problem constantly plagued the missionary post in the form of shortage of water. In the course of the years about ten bore-holes were made, with varying success. These all tapped the sources in the vicinity of the school and the plateau below, so all these springs near Saint Scholastica's dried up in succession, obviously exhausted. The idea of getting water from the Suketsi River seemed, at first, impossible as regards cost and the drop from the mission to the stream is at least 300 metres. Advice was sought from competent engineers and Misereor in Germany, as well as other benefactors, contributed the necessary funds so that the scheme was finally executed. A good pump now sends up adequate water to large reservoirs which supply the mission. As long as we are able this mission will be maintained to help the Africans and to spread Christianity among the Bavenda people.

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<sup>9</sup> The Bavenda tribe numbers only about 800000 and reputedly came to this region at the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century from Central Africa. They practise both cattle-breeding and agriculture. Formerly they were skilled in smelting metal, but this ability is gradually dying out. The tribe believes in Raluvhimba, a monotheistic deity, practises an elaborate ritual of rain-making and regards the crocodile as sacred. For the erection of the Homelands, farms were bought by the State and the white people had to vacate the areas.