

XXI – *Evaton*, District Vereeniging

Our Sisters came to Evaton,¹ in the district of Vereeniging, in 1933. This mission owes its inception to a former pupil of ‘King’ Convent, Mrs F Lidgertwood, nee O’Gorman. She had married Mr Adams, who owned a farm at Evaton. The lady then used to drive to Vereeniging in a donkey or horse cart to attend Mass on Sundays. Afterwards, now and again, a priest said Mass in her dining room. One could see how happy and proud she was of this privilege.

After Mr Adams’ demise she married a Mr Lidgertwood who, soon, left her, again, a widow. Mrs Lidgertwood marked off a plot of land for a mission, had bricks made and built a church and a little school alongside it. Evaton was a large African area and, when the mission was built, Mrs Lidgertwood thought of calling the help of nuns and, therefore, applied to King William’s Town Convent.

On 18th August 1933 three Sisters were motored from Belgravia to Evaton by Father L Muldoon O.M.I., the priest in charge of the area. It was a silent drive for Father Muldoon carried the Blessed Sacrament intended for a dying man whose confession the priest had heard the previous day. On arrival the patient was found already dead so Father telephoned Bishop O’Leary for permission to reserve the Blessed Sacrament in the church near which the Sisters would be housed. His Lordship readily consented and the pioneers had the privilege of themselves bringing the Eucharist to the new mission. Mother St James Bildstein, Prioress of Belgravia, who had accompanied the pioneers, was delighted that the first filial of her convent should have so rare a privilege. When she left that afternoon, Sisters Majella Kaiser, Magdalen McLeod and Gisela Greissel got ready for the night. The priest had a room at Mrs Lidgertwood’s for the present.

The house in which the sisters lived was very small so, in 1934, a chapel and extra room were added. Then the Sisters had the Blessed Sacrament reserved in their chapel and they had the joy of a conventual Mass once a week. On other days Mass was said in the church which was ten minutes’ walk from the convent. Towards the end of 1934 Father J Buckley O.M.I.² arrived as the new priest for Evaton. A room was added to the church where the priest took up his abode.

The Sisters still lived in cramped conditions and Sister Theresa Schusterbauer had the convent enlarged again. There were quite frequent changes of staff at this mission, but the little school continued to grow. By 1945 there were seven teachers on the staff: 2 Sisters, 2 African male teachers, trained at Pietersburg and three young women who had qualified at our College in Village Main. Children and adults kept coming for religious instructions to be received into the Church. In the meantime Mrs Lidgertwood had a neat cottage built for herself and gave her house to the Bishop as a presbytery.

Mother General Demetria had a roomier convent built and provided the Sisters with better living conditions and, at least, a minimum of comfort. At first progress was slow but, in time, the mission grew and the number of pupils reached nearly the six-hundred mark at this Primary School. A few African Sisters were also stationed at Evaton, working side by side with the European nuns.

Unfortunately time and space does not allow one to recount some of the very interesting stories of remarkable conversions that took place here, as well as at our other mission stations. But these demonstrate very clearly that God is not a respecter of persons and that He often bestows wonderful graces on those who are considered weak in the eyes of men, that He may confound the strong. That the nuns who worked in turns at this St Francis Xavier Mission did their duty valiantly is also recorded in the reports of school inspectors who regularly visited the school.

In 1965 Evaton was declared a Bantu Area and the European Sisters were obliged to leave the township. Four African Sisters, including Sisters Peter Pakose, John Masibi and Cabrini Motsuenyane, remained at this mission for a while longer. The following year the Department of Community Development offered to purchase the ground that comprised the mission property because the school in that situation interfered

¹ *St Francis Xavier Mission.*

² *Some Oblate Priests who worked with our Sisters at Evaton were Rev Fathers Dubois, Buckley, Bindeman and Marino.*

with their plans for the development of the area. The transaction was concluded in 1967, so the African Sisters also left Evaton and the mission was closed down.

XXII – *St Mary's Clinic, Sutterheim*

On Saturday afternoon, 8th April 1936, in the presence of one of the largest gatherings ever witnessed in the little border town, Msgr F J Vogel opened the newly-constructed mission hall, school and medical dispensary at Sutterheim. The Dominican Sisters not only taught white children in this town but spent themselves also for the welfare of Non-Europeans. The Priests of the Pallottine Congregation provided the little clinic, chiefly for out-patients, but it also had about a dozen emergency beds. By this time our St Dominic's convent was so far established that it could supply, free of charge, two white Sisters³ to help staff the clinic, as well as the food for patients and personnel. Several charitable ladies of the white parish formed a "Dispensary Committee" that very generously provided the most essential medicines. The Doctors supported the venture and the work progressed. The going was hard, but the clinic did untold good to bodies and souls of many poor sufferers during the twelve years of its existence until the State made accommodation available for Non-Europeans at the town hospital.

XXIII – *Payneville, Springs Area*

At Springs there was also great work to be done for the African people. Some Blacks – all men, mainly Zulus, Pondos and Basutos – came from their mine compounds to attend a special Mass said for them on Sundays at the little church in town. An altar was erected for the priest at the church door, while the congregation knelt or stood outside, because the church could not hold their numbers.

Another section of Africans consisted of men, women and children who lived at Payneville Location, where Father Bannister O.P. also hoped to build a church one day. There the priest said a second Mass on Sundays in the surgery of a Jewish Doctor who lent the room for the occasion. (Sister Evarista Scharf usually attended Mass at this surgery as she acted as sacristan.) The many who could not crowd into the room, surrounded the door. When Fr Bannister left Father Coyle O.P. succeeded him. The new priest did not know the African language so he preached in English while Francis, a Black man, and an official court-interpreter, translated the sermon for the congregation. This man was quite a character; when he did not consider the priest's words strong enough, he would enlarge upon them at his own discretion, judging that he knew what was good for his audience.

Our Sisters were anxious to evangelise the Africans, so two European Sisters from the Convent in Springs went to Payneville to begin the St Louis Bertrand Mission School. They were, at first, joined by two African Sisters of our Congregation and, later, also by a couple of African secular teachers. In time the Dominican Fathers were anxious to make of St Louis Bertrand Mission an experiment. In 1954 a small convent had been built next to the location school. The Priests now asked Mother General Aquilina Spiegel to withdraw the white Sisters from the mission staff and to replace them with African Sisters only. The Apostolic Delegate, Archbishop C J Damiano and Bishop Whelan of Johannesburg, also gave their consent to the scheme. The Prioress General agreed to staff the convent and school with our African Sisters in so far as Sisters were available. This was decided upon in 1953 and the following year the experiment came into operation. The Priest of the mission was appointed as manager of the school.

At the end of three years' trial the school had eight teachers, all paid by the Bantu Education Department. Of these three were nuns, one of whom was Superior of the convent and also Principal of the school; the

³ *Sisters Cortona Haas and Simonetta Knoll. When the latter died in 1946 Sister Alba Folger carried on the good work*

remaining five on the staff being African teachers. The roll of 371 consisted of both boys and girls from the Grades to Standard Six inclusive – all day scholars.

This venture at Payneville had been so successful that, in 1957, St Louis Bertrand Mission had a filial school at Kwa Thema Township. Every day Sister Pius Phelelo went there as teacher and sacristan, taking with her one of the secular teachers. This somewhat reduced the roll of pupils at Payneville as those children nearer to the new school naturally attended it.

Owing to the Group Areas Act the Payneville Convent and School had to be transferred to Kwa Thema, where the community of African Sisters of our Congregation continue to work for their own race.

By 1958 these African Sisters became the independent Sisters of St Martin de Porres until they returned to us in 1971. Today there are 56 African Sisters in the Province at Woodlands.

XXIV – *St John's Convent*, Middleburg, Cape Province

It had long been Msgr F W Demont's intention to establish a residential mission at Middelburg, Cape, in order to cater for the needs of the European and Non-European Congregations there. On 31st May 1933 Rev Father J Beirle S.C.J. left Aliwal to take up the task. A piece of ground and a house had been rented.

In September of the same year a site to be used for religious and educational purposes was acquired in the Location. A temporary wood-and-iron structure was erected to serve as church and school and, on 5th November, Msgr Demont officially opened the mission school of Christ the King.

Meanwhile four Dominican Sisters from King William's Town were welcomed to the mission to conduct a European Kindergarten in town and a Mission School at the Location.

In 1934 a piece of ground was obtained from a Mr Grobbelaar and Rev Father J Cassidy and some seminarians came from Aliwal to erect a church and presbytery in town and a church-cum-school in the Location. In the interim the Priest-in-charge had been occupying a wing of the temporary church, his "room" being separated from the Sanctuary by only a curtain. In June 1936 Father M Hahn S.C.J. succeeded Father Beirle and, at the end of the same year, Father X Bea was appointed assistant priest.

From the time of their arrival the Sisters had been living in various rented houses until 1947, when they acquired their own Convent and named it after the Apostle, St John.

A larger house opposite the new convent was later purchased. Part of this served as presbytery and the part formerly used as a shop was demolished and a small but attractive church arose on the site.

Today, Sisters Lauretana Hauser and Odalinde Heiss, though no longer young, continue working for souls with zeal. They visit the sick of all races and prepare the Catholic children for the reception of the Sacraments.

XXV – *Zigudu*, Queenstown Area

This mission of Christ the King is in the district of Queenstown, not very far from Keilands. At the request of Msgr F J Vogel P.S.M., head of that Vicariate, Mother General Augustine Geisel, in July 1934, sent Sisters Camilla Klostermeier, Yolanda Sauter and Ruperta Nitzinger to begin work at this lonely mission. Some time later the community was joined by Sister Fidelia Grohe. The buildings were at first only a cluster of huts. In time the zealous Priest, Father Peter Graeff S.A.C. replaced these primitive shelters with better buildings for the school, convent, presbytery and quite an imposing church. Msgr Vogel had chosen an ideal country place for this mission. The wide open spaces of Africa have a fascination all their own; the sunsets are most varied and glorious and, after dark, an almost tangible silence pervades the veld.

The missionary spirit of our Sisters has always been admirable and they displayed a cheerful acceptance of conditions as they were, looking upon it as permitted by the Divine Will. Their varied and humble duties were performed with zeal and they showed themselves ready for any sacrifice as became true daughters of St Dominic. Wherever the Sisters of King William's Town came, in the towns or at isolated missions, they always took care of the Priests – a tradition that had been begun by Mother Mauritia, our Foundress.

Here, at Zigudu, the Sisters taught in the school, tended the mission garden for flowers to deck the altar and for the needed vegetables for the table, and also visited the Africans in the vicinity to impart to them the Gospel message. When the Priest said Mass in an African village at some distance from the mission one or two Sisters often accompanied him. Grass mats were placed on the ground for the Sisters to kneel on, while the rest of the congregation squatted or knelt on the mud floor of the hut. It was a touching scene: the priest at the poor, improvised altar; the Xhosa people attentive and praying devoutly...

Here, too, the rainfall is often unpredictable and the Africans sometimes blamed the missionaries for the failure of their crops. However, the Priest and nuns worked on for these people and the mission grew as in 24 years hundreds of Pagans were steadily received into the Church. In 1958, by arrangement with the Bishop of Queenstown, our Sisters were withdrawn from Zigudu and their work was taken over by a community of African Diocesan Sisters known as Daughters of the Mother of Divine Love, that had been founded by Bishop J B Rosenthal S.A.C.

XXVI – *St Patrick's School*, Ginsburg, King William's Town area

After Mother Mauritia had transferred her African School to Izeli nothing further was done by the Congregation for Bantu education in King William's Town. After the death of Msgr Fagan Father H Frese became the town's parish priest. In 1935 he was succeeded by Rev Dr M V Prendergast who, for many years, had been in charge of the Izeli Mission. There he had ample opportunity of studying the Xhosa language and customs and, in 1940, he built a church in the Leightonville Township. This was to serve as both church and school.

At his request Mother General Augustine gave two teachers, Sisters M Oliver Murphy and Concordia Buehl to start the school. Dr Prendergast paid the salary of one secular African teacher. In 1947 the number on the roll was eighty. Daily the two Sisters trudged through the streets of King William's Town in all weathers, worked at the township all day and returned to the convent in the late afternoon. In the following year Sister Oliver contracted Ludwig's Angina of which she died at Grey Hospital.

Mother Demetria Hemmer, who had succeeded Mother Augustine, bought from the local municipality the property adjoining the church and erected thereon a modern school. So the original building, which belongs to the parish could be used exclusively as a church. The students at St Patrick's, who wish to continue their studies beyond Primary stage must apply to some other High School.

So much in South African History hails from Scotland that it might be pardoned if we refer to something even at St Patrick's Mission that is more ancient than the time of Fairbairn and Pringle. There is a little sacring bell in St Patrick's church. It dates its history from the year 1351 when the Provost of Aberdeen in Scotland presented a great bell to the church of St Nicholas in his native city. It was christened "Bell Lawrence" and solemnly blessed. For nearly three centuries it called the people of Aberdeen to worship. Then it developed a cleft and had to be recast. The new bell was still the largest of St Nicholas' carillon and on it was written "Soli Deo Gloria. Micahel Burgehays me fecit". Then followed, still on the bell, an epitome of its history stating that it had been given by William Leyth, the Provost, to the church in 1351. Again it was blessed and renamed "Bell Lawrence".

In 1879 a great fire destroyed St Nicholas' church and the whole collection of bells was hurled to the ground. The fallen chimes were purchased by Messrs John Blaikie & Sons of Aberdeen. Very carefully

they preserved all the fragments of “Auld Lawrie” and made from these precious remnants a number of hand bells.

In 1914 a past pupil of the “King” Convent, Eleanor MacConnachie, later Mrs Jack, visited Aberdeen, the city of her forbears and obtained one of these bells, a direct descendant of “Auld Lawrie”. In 1942 she happened to take two Sisters to St Patrick’s in Leightonville. On arrival she found there was only a very poor apology for a bell, so she gave her bell to the church; so an offspring of “Auld Lawrie” came from Aberdeen to St Patrick’s in South Africa and now, in 1976, has the grand old age of 615 years.

St Patrick’s Mission School still exists and it is now managed by Catholic African lay teachers, while the Principal, Sister Agatha Manne of the Woodlands Community, is the only Religious left on the staff.