

Chapter 1

Catholicism at the Cape of Good Hope in the Early 19th Century

Before 1838, merely sporadic attempts had been made at establishing the Catholic Faith in South Africa. The Dutch, who were the first Europeans to make a settlement at the Cape of Good Hope, were intensely hostile to the Catholic Church, and while all denominations were tolerated by the authorities of the Dutch East India Company, the Catholic religion was definitely excluded by law. When a French ship, the “Mirachal”, was wrecked at Salt River mouth in 1660, a Bishop and some Priests, who were among the passengers, were allowed to live in tents on the shore for a time, but on the strict condition, laid down by Governor Jan van Riebeeck, that no assembly for divine worship according to the rites of the Catholic Church should take place. In 1685, six Jesuits visited the Cape on their way to Siam, where they were being sent by Louis XIV on a scientific expedition. Simon van der Stel received them courteously enough, but had them closely watched to prevent them from holding religious intercourse with the few Catholics in the settlement. Some of these managed to make their confession in French, and the Fathers succeeded in unostentatiously visiting the Catholics in their homes, and the sick in the hospital. But Mass could only be said on board the French ship, and the Catholics were forbidden to go to the ship to assist at Mass. In the following year, some Portuguese Priests were wrecked in Table Bay, but no leave was given them to celebrate Mass.

From that period up to 1804, nothing is heard of the Catholic Church in South Africa. In 2805, as the result of a decree issued by Commissioner General de Mist, promising religious toleration, three Catholic Priests arrived from Holland: Johannes Lansink, Jacobus Nelissen and Lamberrtus Prinsen. A room in the Castle was put at their disposal for use as a chapel. This joy was short-lived. The Cape was ceded to England in 1806, and Sir David Baird, being a Scots Presbyterian who felt at one with the Calvinist Dutch were the Catholic Church was concerned, lost no time in expelling the priests. Not until the British possession had been confirmed by the treaty of 1814, was an attempt made to find a successor to the Very Reverend Prefect Johannes Lansink.

By an apostolic letter dated 8th June 1818, Pope Pius VII appointed the Right Rev. Dom Edward Bede Slater, O.S.B., first Vicar Apostolic of the Cape of Good Hope. But the government in London forbade him to go there, so that by a decree the Congregation of the “Propaganda Fidei” his appointment was extended to make him in addition the first Vicar Apostolic of Mauritius. In 1820 Bishop Slater, on his way to his headquarters at the last-mentioned place, left Father Scully at Cape Town, where there were seventy-five Catholics. Owing to differences between Priest and people, the former resigned. For two years the Catholics were again without a priest. In answer to a request sent to the Archbishop of Mechlin for Dutch Priests, the Rev. Theodore Wagenaar arrived in 1826. In 1827 Father Thomas Rishton O.S.B. of Ampleforth Abbey, came out to take charge of the Catholic soldiers on the frontier. Owing to ill-health, he remained at Cape Town and was eventually obliged to retire. The Catholics of South Africa were then the most abandoned in the world. No priest is heard of again until 1836, when a Dominican from Manila, Father Thomas Morel of Burgos, arrived at Cape Town, and was invited by the government to remain as acting Chaplain to the soldiers. Though not really conversant with English, the priest consented to stay for a year, seeking out the scattered Catholics, administering the Sacraments and strengthening all he met in the faith. In 1837, Lord Glenelg requested Archbishop Murray of Dublin to propose a suitable man for the office of Bishop and Vicar Apostolic of Cape Town, which had now been declared an independent Vicariate by Pope Gregory XVI. The Rev. Patrick Raymond Griffith O.P. was

appointed. Soon after his consecration in Dublin he set out for his distant Vicariate and landed in Cape Town on Holy Saturday 1838, with two other priests, Fathers George Corcoran and Burke.

The new Bishop had come to work in a country where there were no clergy and no church to welcome him: only a few scattered Catholics – most of them negligent, and even ashamed of their religion. Trusting Providence to supply the means he lacked, the zealous missionary set to work without delay. The first little Catholic Church which had been erected by some soldiers in 1820, now lay in ruins, so a room in the barracks was given him for divine service. This room he also used as a school. For a long time this was the only Catholic Church in his vicariate. Writing to a friend the Bishop said: "... You have no idea what I have to contend with. There are about 500 Catholics in the whole district and most of them poor enough. On Sundays our collection does not average thirty shillings (Three Rand)... I do not intend to ask for any clergy nor do I want any one but Mr Devereux, my faithful helper. The reason is I have no means of supporting them..." From this unpromising beginning grew the Catholic Church in South Africa.

After the death of Bishop Griffith in 1862 his successor, Right Rev Thomas Grimley, brought the Irish Dominican Sisters from their Mother House in Cabra to Cape Town in the following year. He was also the means of winning for the South African Mission the services of Mr John Fagan, M.A. then an ecclesiastical student from Ireland, who was destined to become the founder of the future Dominican Convent of the Sacred Heart at King William's Town.

The enormous vicariate of the Cape of Good Hope was divided into two parts in 1847 to be known as the Western and Eastern Vicariates respectively. The first Bishop of the newly-created Eastern Vicariate was Dr Aidan Devereux¹ who had been the right hand of Bishop Griffith. Realising the immense importance of education for Catholic children in this country, Bishop Devereux was anxious to secure the services of teaching religious for his vicariate. In 1849 he introduced the first community of nuns to this southern continent, establishing the Sisters of the Assumption at Grahamstown under the direction of Mother Gertrude de Henningsen², who became known by that sweet name of "Notre Mere".

In 1856 Right Rev Patrick Moran succeeded Bishop Devereux, but he was transferred to Dunedin, New Zealand in 1870. The third Bishop of the Eastern District of the Cape was Right Rev James David Ricards. He had been working for twenty-one years as a missionary priest in the vicariate when he was appointed to govern it in 1871. Born in Wexford, Ireland, he answered the invitation of Dr

Devereux to come to South Africa and arrived with the first nuns in December 1849. He was then only a sub deacon and was ordained priest at Grahamstown in January 1851.

His first years were spent as teacher, editor and travelling missionary as well as military chaplain at the Frontier. Father Ricards had frequently to travel through the length and breadth of the Vicariate. Unbridged rivers, bad roads, occasionally inhospitable people who abhorred a Catholic Priest, were all difficulties in the way. Dr Ricards was a man of outstanding ability and remarkable talents. He acquired quite a name as a lecturer on the scientific subjects then so popular, and by his public readings. There were frequent, very laudatory references to his eloquence in the secular papers of that time. While still a young priest and editor of "The Colonist"³ Reverend Ricards enjoyed the reputation of being the best preacher in South Africa.

On his simple missionary journeys, on horseback, he came across persons with thoroughly Irish names, descendants of Catholic soldiers who had never been instructed in their Faith. He found Bavarian Catholics belonging to the Crimean British German Legion who were drifting from their Church owing to

¹ *Consecrated Bishop by Right Rev P R Griffith OP*

² *She came from Belgium to Grahamstown, South Africa. Grahamstown was the academic centre of the Eastern Province. Rhodes University College was founded there in 1904 and it attained University status in 1951. The main University building was designed by Sir Herbert Baker. St Patrick's Catholic Pro-Cathedral, with its battlements, sheltered women and children during the Frontier Wars.*

³ *Founded by Bishop A Devereux.*

the fewness of priests and lack of Catholic Military Chaplains. A life-long friend of Bishop Moran's, he succeeded him in 1871 and was ordained Titular Bishop of Retimo at St Patrick's Church, Grahamstown by the, then only, Catholic Bishop in South Africa, Right Rev Jean Francois Allard OMI Vicar Apostolic of Natal.

To the new Bishop this loss of Faith among his flock was a poignant grief. The remedy seemed to him to be in securing a good education for the children of the immigrants. He accordingly exerted himself to increase the number of schools in his Vicariate, and to this end he brought out the Jesuits to Grahamstown, the Marist Brothers and the Sisters of Nazareth to Port Elizabeth, the Dominicans to King William's Town and the Trappists to Dunbrody whence the latter afterwards moved to Mariannahill.⁴ Bishop Ricards, incidentally, also helped to identify the first diamond found in South Africa.

One would not expect such a busy Prelate to find time and opportunity for writing, yet he wrote several books in which he showed his zeal for souls in extending his missionary work among the African aborigines.

King William's Town with its gentle circlet of the Amatola Mountains was founded in 1835⁵ as a military station and as the capital of the Province of Queen Adelaide. With astonishing lack of foresight the British Government decided to give back this colonised territory of the Eastern Cape to the Xhosas, who promptly destroyed the village. In 1847 it was re-established by Sir Harry Smith who proclaimed it was the capital of British Kaffraria. It also became the headquarters of the troops engaged at the frontier in keeping at bay the fierce Xhosa hordes ensconced in the thick bush and mountain strongholds of the Amatola range. As capital of the crown colony the town and its surroundings saw stirring times during the Frontier Wars and the "The Great Native Rebellion" in 1850 and 1853.⁶ When the Crimean War came to an end the soldiers who had been enrolled in Germany and were known as the British German Legion, were allowed to emigrate and settle at King William's Town and the neighbouring villages. About 500 German Agricultural families were induced to come to Kaffraria. As a result nearly 5600 souls came to the district. A large portion of these were Catholics, and in 1852 there were about a thousand Catholics in King William's Town. The Catholic Mission there was founded in 1851 with Rev Pierre Dubois, the first priest ordained in the Eastern Vicariate, in charge of it. He was succeeded by Father James Watkins who built the little church in Durban Street and dedicated it to St Anne in 1857. During Rev John O'Neil's tenure of office the Irish soldiers of the garrison built the hall which was later used as a church for the Coloured Community. The next priest in charge was Rev J J de Sany, O.Pream.,⁷ from Belgium. He was followed by Father Fagan.

John Fagan was born in Dublin on 19th January 1837. As a boy he was apprenticed to a trade but continued his education by attending the night school kept by Rev Thomas Grimley, afterwards successor to Bishop Griffith at the Cape of Good Hope. On 3rd April 1856 Mr Fagan, then an ecclesiastical student, arrived at Cape Town from All Hallows' College, Dublin. After his ordination at Grahamstown⁸ by Bishop Moran on 3rd December 1865, Father Fagan was at first appointed assistant to Father Thomas Murphy at Port Elizabeth. On 22nd June 1869 he was given charge of the mission at King William's Town and at the same time he was the Military Chaplain.

Fr Fagan's name will be ever associated with the Catholic Church in that frontier town and with the Convent of the Sacred Heart, the Mother House of the "Dominican Sisters of King William's Town".

⁴ *Dunbrody was found unsuitable for the work of the Trappists.*

⁵ *The Rev John Brownlee established a mission station at the site. There was no white community until ten years later when Sir Benjamin D'Urban laid out the village and named it after William IV, the reigning sovereign.*

⁶ *The fifth Frontier War.*

⁷ *The first Norbertine Priest to come to South Africa. He lies buried at King William's Town.*

⁸ *Founded in 1819 by Colonel John Graham. It became the centre of the area where the 1820 Settlers were established.*

For it was he who built the convent for the pioneer Sisters from Augsburg, and he is rightly regarded by the Institute in a special manner as its founder and spiritual father. Among the chief memorials of his activity are also the Presbytery acquired in 1871, and St Joseph's Hall completed in 1873, which was later used as St Joseph's Mission School for Coloured children; also the melodious bell that rings out the Angelus in the town ever since 1874.