

Chapter 12 – Izeli, Convent of Our Lady of the Rosary

A Castle on a Hill

At the Mother House, King William's Town, religious life had gone as usual. The year 1890 was marked by a papal tribute to Father Fagan when Pope Leo XIII made him a Domestic Prelate of the Vatican with the title of Monsignor. This honour bestowed on their founder was greatly appreciated by the nuns.

In the early days this Dominican Congregation, with the sanction and approval of Bishop Ricards, had unanimously extended Mother Mauritia's tenure of office from term to term for fifteen years. Now, however, to satisfy canonical requirements, a change had to be made. On 14th January 1893, Mother Euphemia Koffler was elected head of the Institute and Mother Mauritia as 'Sub-Prioress' was given charge of her Izeli¹ foundation.

Foreseeing the termination of her time of office, Mother Mauritia had looked for a farm on which to accommodate her Rosary Children. On a lawyer's recommendation she bought a property in the Izeli valley. It had belonged to Colonel F Schermbrucker who, on his election to the Cape Legislative Assembly, moved to Cape Town and sold "Wittelsbach"² to Mr Karl Kuhn from whom Mother Mauritia acquired it in 1891. About 9 Km from King William's Town, on a hill overlooking the Buffalo River, stands the Convent of Our Lady of the Rosary today. That pile of buildings dominates the landscape and when one has climbed the steep hill to the top, the world is at one's feet. Down below flows the river which irrigates the fruitful farms in the neighbourhood. A quiet healthy place it is, and in those days, an ideal site for an Orphanage and Children's Home.

At the beginning this convent was indeed an unique foundation in so far as the first community were practically all novices. The Sisters walked all the way to King William's Town on Saturday afternoon to attend Holy Mass on Sunday. None of the original band is alive today, but they had many a story to tell of those difficult pioneering days. A few months after the Sisters had taken up their residence at Izeli the famous Father James O'Connell, who had already been labouring fifty-five years in the Eastern Province, came to act as Chaplain of the nuns, and there closed his life by a holy death in 1893.

There was only one well-built cottage on the property, the farm dwelling now named "Manresa", which accommodated the first chapel and the resident priest. The out-houses were utilised for the children and thus the hay loft became the first dormitory of the Sisters. The first Superior was Mother Clare Huber who, a little later, went to Rhodesia. She was followed by Mothers Agnes Vordermaier and Augustine Schaeffler.

In 1893, on the expiration of her term of office as Prioress General, Mother Mauritia herself came to Izeli as its Superior and remained there till her death in 1900. When the Foundress left the Mother House Bishop Ricards paid this tribute to his staunch helper: "... Looking back on these fifteen years, I must confess that I am filled with wonder at the good which she and her nuns under her direction have effected. It would seem as if the Almighty had guided her every step in all her great undertakings..." The Prelate referred to her as "the good Mother, highly esteemed by myself and my clergy and people", and added that this statement but feebly expressed his estimate of "her remarkable worth and devotion to the service of God and His young Church in South Africa".

Mother Mauritia was a woman of large ideas who understood the needs of this country. She was not content with founding only educational centres; here she would establish an industrial school for boys and girls that would become almost entirely self-supporting at a time when many men in the neighbourhood gave up farming in despair. In achieving this she met nearly superhuman difficulties with the magnanimous charity that knew no distinction of race or creed. To be in need was in itself a sure claim on her kind relief. She dedicated herself to her waifs and orphans to whom she proved a vigilant and tender

¹ Pronounce: 'Izeeli'. Derived from a Xhosa word that may be translated as "replete!" or "abounding".

² Named after the Bavarian Royal House.

mother. To feed and clothe her two hundred charges she had to contend with great obstacles aided only by her many kind friends.

On the Foundress' arrival at Izeli she hastened the completion of the convent. It is built in Gothic style with a frontage of 40 metres. Its windows were taken from the consecrated church of St Anne in Durban Street, King William's Town, when it had to make room for a larger church. On the 10th August 1893, only a few months before his demise, Bishop Ricards blessed the new convent chapel, dedicating it to Our Lady of the Rosary. The chapel was expandable by folding doors which opened into the Sisters' refectory when the large number of worshippers could not find room in the church proper.

Eager to sow the seed of religion among the Black people, Mother Mauritia opened a school where they were supposed to pay a nominal fee. When, however, the locusts, rust, drought and the rinderpest devastated the district and the Africans were penniless, the good-hearted Mother kept these children gratis until times improved. Notwithstanding these reverses the noble woman struggled on bravely.

The rapidly developing mission work undertaken by the "King" Dominicans among the Bantu was balm to the heart of Bishop Ricards.³ He wrote: "The zeal of the Dominican Sisters should inspire our Priests to do all they can for the missions." Dr Ricards had introduced to his Vicariate these Sisters, as well as the Marist Brothers, the Sisters of Nazareth, the Jesuits and later the Trappists to Dunbrody with the view to conversion of the African races. Owing to various difficulties the Trappists' venture failed in the Vicariate and Abbot Francis Pfanner removed the foundation to Mariannahill, Natal. Soon afterwards the Bishop was obliged by ill health to give up all business. He died on 30th November 1893 and was buried at Grahamstown. His successor was his co-adjutor, Right Rev. Peter Strobino, Titular Bishop of Pompeipolis.

The press in South Africa poured forth numerous encomiums on the good and useful life of Bishop Ricards, Titular Bishop of Retimo and Vicar Apostolic of the Eastern Cape District. Flags flew at half-mast in most towns in the Cape Colony and throughout South Africa the general idea felt and expressed was that a great man had passed away. It has been said that each of Bishop Ricards' enterprises would have been the life work of an ordinary man.

A Manager for Izeli farm was sorely needed but could not be found because the Europeans were at this time more interested in mining gold or diamonds than in husbandry. The Sisters then quietly but determinedly began cultivating their fields with the help of African labourers. When Dr Frederick C Kolbe⁴ visited the Izeli he was filled with admiration at what he saw, saying: "... The Prioress of this convent is endowed with uncommonly good sense. The training given these children is surely the solution to our poor-white problem, for work is still the best remedy for most human ills... After an inspection tour of the school, vineyards, orchards and fields with growing crops, I was conducted to the local carpentry shop and smith where their implements can be made and repaired without delay..." The Sisters had advertised for a blacksmith but the man had let them down. Again, nothing daunted, a Sister learned the art of farriery. At the time, when horses were the principal means of transport and his horse was often a man's proudest possession, farriery was a respected and specialised trade. Here Doctor Kolbe saw "... Sister (Walburga Schwager) shoeing a horse as deftly as any man. The animal was tied up to a strong rack, but it sensed the lady's gentle and sure skill, so it stood perfectly still while the operation lasted.

Instead of going about the country like the Suffragettes shrieking their equality with men, the Sisters of Mother Mauritia quietly settled down to prove it." Small wonder that the saying went around that South Africa had three great men: President Krüger, Cecil Rhodes and Mother Mauritia!

³ Bishop Ricards had been offered a bishopric in Australia which he declined in order to work among the people he loved in South Africa.

⁴ Born in the Cape Province, the son of a Protestant Minister, he became a Catholic. He took his doctorate of Divinity in Rome and returned to South Africa in 1882. Of great intellectual brilliance, he was not only eminent in the Church but was a leading figure in University circles. He was created a Monsignor and died in 1936.

The Foundress of Izeli was sufficiently far-sighted to see that the new chapel⁵ would become too small for the increasing African parishioners. So she herself measure out the ground on which the future church was to be built. Thirty-three years after her death Bishop MacSherry consecrated the new building to 'Christ the King'.⁶ An act of kindness by one of the Sisters at East London procured for Izeli a life-long friend and benefactor in the person of Mr Hubert Klein. He came to the orphanage and spent the rest of his life building for the Sisters. Most of the buildings there, especially the handsome church, are memorials of his self-sacrificing labour. Despite failing health he continued with his herculean task until he died on 1st January 1932. Mr Klein died before the church was completed, so the work had to be continued by Mr A. J. Clur and the electricity installed by Mr A. Howes of King William's Town.

At St Catherine's Nursing Home, Queenstown, the Sisters one day admitted an elderly gentleman, Mr Saunders, a past pupil of Izeli. He never tired of telling the nuns how much he loved his teachers and that all the good he had in life he owed to Izeli. Mother Mauritia not only educated her Rosary Children, but also procured positions for them on leaving school. When the morning came for young Saunders' departure from Izeli he was proud of his achievements, yet afraid of the strange new world he now had to face. With his little portmanteau in hand and dressed in his Sunday-best the youth stood ready to bid Reverend Mother good-bye, when she asked: "... and Child, have you got a watch? You must have one or you'll be late for work." Naturally the poor boy had no such luxury. Mother Mauritia immediately took out her own little pocket watch given her by her family and, demonstrating how to wind it with the small appended key, she smilingly fastened the timepiece to the boy's waistcoat. "... It served me well for many years," said Mr Saunders, as he gave the watch back to the Sisters as a memento of their Foundress.

The following incident took place some years ago but it may not be out of place to relate it here: A gentleman and his wife called one day at the sisters' cemetery near Izeli, to place flowers on the grave of Sister Pauline Weng. When the nun, who was by chance present at the scene, asked whether Sister Pauline had been the visitor's teacher, the man replied: "No. She was more than a teacher; she was my 'mother'. My own parents died in my infancy and I was brought up at Izeli, where Sister Pauline had charge of the junior boys. Never can I forget her motherly solicitude for us..."

The farm, which was about 840 acres in extent, consisted of grazing land, forest, and about a hundred acres under cultivation. It was under the supervision of the Sisters themselves for many years, and the fields around Izeli recalled the olden days in Europe, when monks tilled the soil and taught the arts of peace.

While the Orphanage and Home for white children was the principal work of the Sisters forming this community, the Non-Whites were not neglected. They had their own school for some time on the hill and then at "St Theresa's some distance away, where they were given a thorough Christian training and an up-to-date education. When the Government's Group Areas Act reserved this locality for the residence of Europeans, the African pupils were transferred to African schools in the township of King William's Town in the Bantu Trust Area.

The buildings at St Theresa's were then renovated and thereafter served as a hostel for the senior girls of Izeli who go by bus to the convent High School in town as day scholars.

A clinic was also opened for the Non-Europeans in the vicinity. Some years ago the Nursing Sister of Izeli acquired a small car by means of which she could extend this medical service to a few of the neighbouring townships as well. One gets some idea of the extent of this work of mercy when looking through the statistics which show that twelve thousand patients were seen by this nurse in one year.

The Sisters at Izeli are justly proud of their past pupils. Some girls have become religious,⁷ while a couple of boys have tried their vocation to the priesthood and at least one has reached this goal. Many others

⁵ Now the Sisters' common room

⁶ It was designed by Brother Siegfried of Mariannahill and it was the first church dedicated to Christ the King in South Africa.

⁷ Sister M Ludwiga Heanan was one of these orphans. Her parents died of 'fever' on their trek to Rhodesia. The four children were then sent to Mother Mauritia at Izeli. Violet Heanan joined the Sisterhood and was trained as a

have even distinguished themselves in business – and what is vastly more important – they are noted for their sterling characters and deep devotion to the Faith. It is unnecessary to enlarge on the difficulties of this self-imposed task of the Dominican Sisters. Anxiety must often have filled their days, burdened as they were with providing food and clothing for such large numbers. In time the institution began to receive financial aid from the State, but gradually fewer orphans came to Izeli and children from broken homes were then sent there instead by the Child Welfare Society.

The beautiful church of Christ the King, so tastefully kept, indicates the source of the Sisters' courage for their task: Love of the Master, devotion to His cause, zeal for souls and a spirit of self-sacrifice are the only explanation of the success which has attended the Izeli in the seventy-four years of its existence.

We are, however, living in a period of change: There are now fewer religious vocations and the number of Sisters has dwindled. The nuns could no longer manage all the work on the farm, so the animals of the Izeli and the Mater Infirmorum were sold and the land let to neighbouring farmers. Moreover, this home where thousands of children have been reared, because of its situation out of town, is today considered too isolated for a modern school. The Sisters will, therefore, soon have to plan some other use for the Izeli.

teacher. Her last appointment was a Principal of St Joseph's School for Coloured Children at King William's Town. Two Sisters who visited her at Grey Hospital about two hours before her death testified that her countenance seemed to be invested, through a special grace, with supernatural radiance and beauty. Sister Ludwiga had acquired the reputation of being "the most charitable Sister in the Congregation." Those nuns who knew her well revere her as a woman of rare holiness.