

Chapter 13 – Mother Mauritia Tiefenboeck

*Matushka*¹

“She will be called mother, for all will be her children.” Ps 87

Teresa, daughter of Anton Tiefenboeck and Cartharine Alteneder, was born on 22nd February 1835, in the Bavarian village of Grafenau near Passau. The strong religious spirit of her parents may be inferred from the fact that they gave one of their sons to the Priesthood, the other to the no less noble profession of medicine to serve suffering humanity and their only daughter to minister to the poor and ignorant in the cloister. At the age of twenty-one “our Teresa”, as her brothers called her, went to the Dominican Convent of St Ursula at Augsburg to prepare for the teaching profession. Having duly qualified she was received as a postulant. The decision of this lively young woman, with her great capacity of mind, to become a nun was a surprise to all her friends. On 22nd September 1858, the Feast of St Maurice and his Theban Legion,² Teresa was “clothed in the white wool of St Dominic” and named Sister Mary Mauritia.³ In the following year on 19th October, she made her religious profession into the hands of the saintly Mother Aquinata Lauter.⁴ Sister proved an earnest religious and conscientious teacher, yet no one could then have foreseen that she was destined by Providence to become the spiritual mother of the white-robed throng. Her great love for children soon won their hearts and with kindness and firmness she trained their minds and characters on Christian principles.

Six years after her profession Sister Mauritia was chosen as a foundation member of the new filial at Wettenhausen, but when this became an independent unit she returned to the mother convent at Augsburg.

In the midst of all this activity a distinguished friend, Herr Anton Max Fraundorfer, called with his family to bid farewell on the eve of their departure for South Africa. Sister Tiefenboeck, who was always outspoken, remarked: “I cannot understand your going to such a God-forsaken country. It is a mystery to me!... In 1869 this same gentleman, on a visit to his former home, naturally called on Sister Mauritia. He expatiated on the apostolic work done by the Bishop and priests in the far South, and this time Sister agreed: “Yes, the dear God is everywhere – even in South Africa...”

Eight years later, on 3rd May 1877, Herr Fraundorfer called once more on his respected friend. This was an epoch-making occasion. He was the bearer of a commission from Right Rev. J. D. Ricards, his Bishop, to obtain a staff of Sisters for the King William’s Town Mission. A convent was already being built by the devoted priest, who yearned to see religious teaching his flock. And lo, Sister Mauritia, who had formerly discouraged her friend from living in a pagan land, was kindled with zeal at the thought of evangelising the South. Untold sacrifice would be involved, but she now longed to save the souls of pagans and of the Christians who were drifting from their Faith. She eagerly summoned her Prioress, Mother Hyacinth Schippert, and told her of the Bishop’s need. Moved by sisters’ plea, Mother Schippert laid the project before their Bishop, Right Rev. P. von Dinkel, who gave consent to the undertaking, and then seven Sisters volunteered for the new mission. Sister Mauritia was appointed the leader of the little band of missionaries. The next morning, however, Mother Hyacinth wavered and, had she not been finally convinced by Mauritia’s faith, the hopes of the apostolic Bishop might never have been fulfilled. Under the protection of the Fraundorfers the courageous Sisters set out on 14th September 1877, and after thirty days on the high seas they reached South Africa.

¹ *Russian, meaning “Mother”. Cf. Biographical Sketch of Mother M. Mauritia, O.S.D.*

² *The Emperor Diocletian sent his soldiers to quell an insurrection in Gaul in A.D. 287. In crossing the Alps an order went out that the entire army should join in a sacrifice to be made to the gods of Rome for the success of the Imperial arms. The Theban Legion under Maurice, composed almost entirely of Christians, refused to attend. The savage Maximilian Hercules, who was in supreme command, had the legion ruthlessly exterminated to the last man.*

³ *Cf. pages 7, 8.*

⁴ *Cf. page 16.*

In appearance Mother Mauritia was of medium height, somewhat overmass in later years, brusque in manner, quick-witted and forceful. Her dominant characteristic, however, was greatness of mind, heart and soul – a heritage from St Dominic, St Catharine and that remarkable woman, Mother Aquinata Lauter who had formed her in the religious life and inspired her pupil with her own high ideals. The last words of Mother Aquinata found their echo in the heart of Sister Mauritia. The dying woman said: “...My dear Sisters, love one another very much; be entirely obedient in total commitment; practise self-denial and preserve yourselves holy in great humility and all other virtues. Never despise the poor and orphans; labour as apostles... Dearest to me after God is my Community... Give my love to all whom I have known, loved and spoken to during my life, who have loved me or who have done any good work for me or my House at any time. Greet them all once more from me in the love of Christ.” These words embodied the ideal and goal towards which the great matriarch Mauritia was ever urging her Sisters. In her exhortations to the Community, her theme like St John’s, varying seldom if ever, each address was prefaced by the opening words of the Rule of St Augustine: “Above all, most dear Sisters, let God be loved and after Him our neighbour...”

Her greatness of soul revealed itself in her enlightened and magnanimous devotion to God’s cause and her large-hearted charity to all redeemed by the Blood of Christ. Her unbounded trust in Divine Providence was the outcome of a child-like intimacy with her Heavenly Father to Whom she turned in every perplexity, serenely confident that help would come. And at times the response seemed miraculous. On one occasion a delivery man stood at the convent door demanding payment of four shillings and six pence. On opening the family purse Mother found only ten pence. This she offered him, but the man, unmolified, refused to budge. Other money there was none – unless, by chance, school books had been sold that morning. The Prioress turned her steps to Sister Raymond Whyte’s classroom. “Sister, I need three shillings and eight pence.” “I am sorry, Mother, the box is empty.” “But my child, I need the money; go and look.” Obediently Sister looked and, to her amazement, found money in the box. She counted it, exactly three shillings and eight pence...

At another time, during the great drought, the Sisters’ underground tank was dry. A poor Xhosa woman came to Mother Mauritia asking to fill her bucket from the Sisters’ pump. Mother Mauritia’s heart was filled with pity. Did she breathe a prayer... ? However, the story goes that water flowed for the indigent woman. More such legends have been told of this great woman’s faith.

It was the Foundress’ own holy life and the God-centred lives her Sisters led that drew vocations to King William’s Town. They came from her own native Bavaria, from Germany, England, Ireland and even from South Africa, where Catholics were still few, to join the white-robed legion. An incident comes to mind which was typical of Mother Mauritia: Although she always encouraged her nuns to live only for God, she would add: “But none of you need be a canonised saint; it is far too costly and we could never afford it. We should have no money left for any apostolic work.” When the Sisters first planned to lay out a new cemetery at the Mater Infirmorum, permission was obtained from the civil authorities to exhume the Sisters buried across the river at the Izeli and to re-inter them in a new graveyard. Work on the project had hardly begun when one Sister’s body was found in a wonderful state of preservation. “What?” exclaimed the startled Prioress and a happy smile wreathed her countenance as she murmured: “We have a saint in heaven...” Then suddenly the smile left her and she continued with great earnestness: “But, my Child, we have no money to have her canonised... Just cover her up! Let her rest in God’s peace; she will pray for us... and don’t speak of it to anyone!” After this nothing more was done to transfer those bodies and they are still sleeping their eternal sleep on the rise above the Buffalo River.⁵

The training Mother Mauritia received in the cloister would be considered very rigorous by present standards. In the pioneering work she did in South Africa she drove herself relentlessly and, by example, imposed the same spirit of diligence on her nuns. She could correct faults in a subordinate with the sharpness often at the command of an energetic temperament. Should her reproof give rise to hurt feelings, she would endeavour to make amends saying: “If I did not love you I would not correct you. I

⁵ After Mother Mauritia’s death Sister Arnolda Schmidt related the story.

want you to be every inch a Dominican.” Indeed her Sisters considered their Foundress a saint despite her strictness, for they knew her great heart was brimming over with love for all her children. Shortly before her death she dictated the following letter to the Superior at Potchefstroom: “My dearest Eleonora... How are you keeping, my poor children so far away and exposed to this terrible war?⁶ At night I am often unable to sleep because my heart keeps turning to the Transvaal... Our river is completely dried up. Even the water for drinking is finished. I do not know what we shall do if rain does not come soon. We have forgotten the taste of vegetables...”

During the fifteen years that Mother Mauritia governed the Congregation, seven daughter houses of the Institute had sprung up in the sub-continent, dotted from the mouth of the Buffalo River to Matabeleland in the North. The mustard seed she had sown had developed into a sturdy tree. In these large ramifications the controlling hand of the great woman was visible everywhere; her master mind directed and administered all. In difficulty she was never appealed in vain. No hardship or reverse could daunt her child-like trust in God. One season, rust and floods would destroy her crops, at another time drought parched them; cattle sickness and locusts would carry off her animals and the last blade of grass from her farm; but she struggled on bravely, teaching children, irrespective of colour or creed, to be useful to their fellow men. She laid out lands for crops, fruit and vegetable gardens, and her staff of sisters worked these under guidance as no white or black man would have done. Their loyalty was her remuneration.

Early in 1900, Reverend Mother’s health began to fail and her Sisters felt it was only her strong will and indomitable faith that sustained her. However, in October she had to give up the fight. She lingered a few days but up to the last her thoughts were only for others. One of the priests wanted to console her with the promise of his prayers. Weary grey eyes looked at him through steel-rimmed glasses; then came the characteristic reply: “...Yes, that is all very well, Father; but I would rather you gave me sixty pairs of new trousers for my poor boys for Christmas.” Word of this reached King William’s Town, where some of her friends immediately took steps to procure the desired garments and sent them to her for approval.

On the eve of her peaceful death Mother Mauritia still listened with warm sympathy to the cares of the troubled Sister Gardener who wept over the ravages caused by the locusts and the long drought. Mother bade her take heart: “The first thing I will do when I come to God is to ask for rain,” was the promise.

And indeed, scarcely had she breathed her last when clouds gathered and soaking rain fell as the district had not had for nine months.

The Dominican Sisters’ first Mother died on 24th October, 1900 at 4.00 p.m. Such was the unrest in the country that the sad news was made known to the communities in the Transvaal through a cable from St Ursula’s Convent, Augsburg. And the particulars of the event were announced by Mother Superior of Nazareth House, Johannesburg, to whom a letter was sent by hand from King William’s Town, as the line of communication with the convents at Potchefstroom and Klerksdorp remained broken for considerable periods during the South African War.

“...Mine is the task”, wrote Sister Pius Galvin from the Mother House, “to convey to you the tidings of the death of our good Mother Mauritia. That noble life is ended, and the great heart at rest... It seemed a special reward for her unceasing goodness to priests that there were so many to assist her with their prayers in her last hours. Her death was in accordance with her life – thoughtful of others to the end; repeatedly she asked Mother Jacoba (Prioress General) for the special things she wanted for her Rosary Children. There was no struggle; not even a twinge of the muscles, just a gradual shortening of the breath until it ceased. She was perfectly conscious – knew and spoke to everyone.

“At 1.30 p.m. she fell into a state of coma and remained so until God took her to Himself at 4 o’clock. As soon almost as she had passed away a steady rain set in and continued all night and next day...”

The funeral ceremony took place at the convent farm. The weather was most unpropitious, rain falling in torrents. Yet this did not deter all the Sisters and most of the leading citizens of King William’s Town

⁶ *The Anglo-Boer War.*

from travelling out in the heavy storm to pay their last respects to the memory of the departed. She lies buried among the Sisters she loved so well. A small stone cross marks her place of rest. Bishop

MacSherry concluded the panegyric with these words: “She needs no memorial⁷ for her works live after her. Of her it can be said, as of the great Sir Christopher Wren: “If you are seeking a monument, just look around.”

⁷ *The marble Lady Altar at the Mother House was afterwards erected to her memory by friends. The statue was a gift from the family of Sister Paula Wahlspeck, O. P.*