

Chapter 17 – Fort Beaufort

The Tenth Daughter-house

As early as 1838 Bishop Griffith, O.P. visited Fort Beaufort¹ where he met the Sub-chief, Makomo. The Prelate found the place fortified and guarded by 309 soldiers and there were, in addition, seventy civilians. The Bishop's diary states: "... Let a Vicar Apostolic with Priests who know the Dutch language go and fix himself at Fort Beaufort and thence let him announce the Gospel to the neighbouring tribes, and he shall not, perhaps, have uselessly carried the Cross into solitudes, until now, inaccessible to civilisation.

Later in that year he ordained, as priest, in the barrack room at Cape Town, Father Thomas Murphy and, early in 1839, sent him to the border as assistant to Rev Daniel Burke who, however, died a week later. So this young man of thirty-three years took charge of the newly-established mission with headquarters at Grahamstown. His mission included Fort Beaufort and any other military forts along the frontier. Thus he was a pioneer of the Church in the Eastern Province. Many of the settlers in this area had never seen a Catholic Priest, or had heard of one, only as a personality to be avoided. His flock comprised about a dozen scattered people and, to show the prejudice that prevailed there then, one need only recall that when the young priest knelt in sorrow beside the mortal remains of Father Burke, a field-cornet asked whether he had killed the man who lay there.

However, the good priest, in the spirit of Faith, lived down the violent opposition of the ignorant and he and his black horse became the pride and darling of the warm-hearted Irish soldiers. His noblest monument is the Pro-Cathedral at Grahamstown, which was dedicated on 21st July 1844. Often did he ride on his swarthy stallion to Fort Beaufort, a distance of 50 miles, barely resting the splendid beast while the soldiers were changing saddles and mounting their relays.

Father George Gibson, son of a Manchester cotton broker, was the first resident priest of Fort Beaufort and he arrived there in 1843. He was fired with missionary zeal; but found that, owing to the Frontier Wars, he was not able to go among the surrounding tribes of Hottentots and Xhosas. He certainly received no encouragement or assistance to build a church or even a residence at this fort. He occupied a room next to the Fort, the rent of which was so high that with a year of it he might have built a small chapel. Father Aidan Devereux was the nearest priest at Georgetown. He would have helped but was himself penniless and could do nothing. Hence Father Gibson was soon heavily in debt and had to resign his post. He returned to England where he was appointed to the pastoral charge of Hornby in succession to Dr John Lingard, the celebrated historian.

In 1844, when war was rampant round the Border Forts, the Imperial Government granted, as a gift in Fort Beaufort, the site on which St Michael's Church was built. In the Deed of Donation, one finds this clause: "... that the church or chapel to be erected should have windowsills at least six feet from the foundation". This wise precaution was necessary so that the building might easily be converted into a place of refuge for women and children in case of need during the frequent Frontier campaigns.

The appointment of Father James O'Connell in 1851 brought Fort Beaufort and the district the blessing of a permanently resident priest. For 40 years he laboured, in season and out of season, with love and devotion. He was the very model of a missionary priest. Alone, on horseback, he gave his services wherever he could, braving, for that purpose, all weathers and other dangers. He saw the need of having a

¹ *Founded as a fort in 1822 to help in safeguarding the Eastern Cape frontier. Named after the Duke of Beaufort, father of the Governor, Lord Charles Somerset, it became an important wool and citrus centre. The present township was laid out in 1837. In 1846 the "War of the Axe" began through a quarrel in a store at Fort Beaufort. A Black man was accused of stealing an axe from a frontier store. While he was being taken for trial to Grahamstown, a party of armed Xhosas attempted a rescue. The resultant costly war lasted for nearly two years. Sir Harry Smith was then governor of the Cape Colony.*

church at the Fort and, with characteristic energy, undertook the gigantic task of erecting it. Thousands of miles he rode about the district, crossing unbridged rivers, often at the peril of his life. Thus he collected his very limited funds. Sometimes he was refused outright and turned from the door; but he was always patient and gentle and grateful for even the smallest donation. The usually kindly men, ever ready to assist in their own area, stretched out their hands to him. Thus one finds Messrs Patrick Egan among the generous contributors. Subscriptions also came from Brown's farm, Post Retief and Mr J Niland of Hollywood.² At length the priest had the happiness of seeing the foundation laid.

The honour of laying the corner stone was offered to Bishop Devereux and so he left Grahamstown on 26th September 1853 en route to Fort Beaufort. Imagine the Prelate's disappointment when he found the Kanoop River, which he had to cross, a raging torrent. Pieces of driftwood were being carried seawards by the muddy waters. In vain did the Bishop and his companion pace the bank to find a possible passage for their horses. The sudden appearance of two floating animals made them realise the danger of an attempt to cross; yet they dared not turn back. So for days they waited for the flood to subside. They ate sparingly so as to make their provisions last the longer. At night their only covering was their coats as they lay on their kit bags with saddles for pillows. On 7th October the waters had decreased and on the tenth of the month they reached Fort Beaufort. The stone was laid under the invocation of the Archangel Michael. On 28th January 1857 the Church was dedicated by Bishop Patrick Moran, assisted by Fathers O'Connell and J D Ricards and three other priests.

As chaplain to the Forces Father O'Connell was well known and popular among the officers and persons of every creed. On one occasion he received an order from the Imperial Government stating that he should include in his duties official religious services at Durban in the morning and at Fort Beaufort in the afternoon.³ With characteristic good humour he replied he was willing to do this, provided the Government would supply a horse capable of doing this trip. He was equally respected by the indigenous peoples. Strict orders were given by the Xhosa Chief, Sandile, that the "Umfundisi" in white coat and riding a black horse must not be molested.

Father John Fagan became resident priest of Fort Beaufort in 1887 and worked there in the footsteps of those who had gone before him with zeal and devotedness. At his request Mother Euphemia sent Mother Reginald Fischer with a little group of Sisters to establish the tenth branch house of 'King' Convent at this frontier Fort. According to the "Kaffrarian Watchman" of 16th August 1899, the first public announcement of this took place at a croquet club where Father Fagan was asked to be present to accept a tournament purse and distribute prizes. He did so and in thanking the players for the purse he told them he had bought a house in Durban Street which he hoped to turn into a convent staffed by the Dominican Sisters. He added that the money just received would go towards that object. So on 27th September 1899 the nuns arrived. There being no railroad in those days, the Sisters travelled to their new home by ox-wagon from the Mother House.

The foundation began in a very humble, tentative way in a small cottage in Durban Street. In 1900 Mother Reginald was succeeded by Mother Dympna Doyle. In May of that year the Convent distinguished itself by its first concert. "The Advocate" of 11th May congratulated the nuns and the pupils, not only on the success of the entertainment but especially, on the happy inspiration that made them devote the entire proceeds to charity. The concert was given in response to Sir Gordon Sprigg's appeal to aid the widows and orphans of Colonists who had fallen in the South African War.

Soon the cottage bought by Father Fagan was entirely inadequate to house the nuns and their school for white girls and boys. So in 1910 a double-storey building was erected. However, even with this additional accommodation, facilities were still limited. The community suffered most as sleeping apartments were scattered and the rooms were too small for community life.

The following extract of a diary, kept to record the egress of the Sisters at that early period, describes a trip to the beautiful Hollywood Farm which belonged to the Niland Family near Fort Beaufort:

² *Father of the future Mother M Rose Niland O.P.*

³ *A distance of over 500 Km.*

“Dr Ross had declared that a change of air would be necessary for the Sisters. Consequently Mother Mauritia gave permission for some Sisters to accept Mrs Niland’s invitation to spend some days at their farm, near Fort Beaufort.

“With the sun’s first rays we arose. Rev Father Quirk said Mass at 5 a.m. and gave us Holy Communion. Mr Mullin’s large ox wagon arrive at the gate and was quickly loaded. After bidding good-bye to the remaining Sisters we started out on our journey. Ten oxen drew our wagon. Haec and Waterman, the front oxen, were directed by the shouts of the African leaders, Benjamin and Varnan.

“Miss Amy Cleary and four other boarders were waiting for us at the Buffalo Bridge. They jumped onto the wagon and amused themselves for fifteen minutes, expecting to meet another wagon to take them back, but no wagon appeared so they had to walk home, almost two miles.

“At the first outspan we met Father Fagan, Mother Prioress, Sister Jacoba and Sister Ursula, who had left ‘King’ a short time after us in Father Fagan’s cart. We greeted them and explored the country... Then the oxen were inspanned again. The clouds kept the burning rays of the sun away and a cool breeze refreshed the travellers. Some of us preferred to walk some distance. We passed mealie fields with a few acres of wheat between looking very poorly.

“Near Green River’s Hotel a Job’s messenger came to our wagon with the terrifying news that Father Fagan had inspanned, but before anyone had gone into the cart the horses ran away with the cart in great rage through the fields. Finally they turned towards the road and galloped back to town where they went straight to their stable at Father Fagan’s house. The two Sisters were upset. They knelt on the ground and prayed. Father Fagan borrowed a horse and rode back home to see what he could do. Happily Mr Kilduff, who heard about the arrival of the horses with the empty cart, brought them back and gave them to their master on the road. After an hour we had the pleasure of seeing the lost company near us again, safe and well, and our anxiety ended in thanksgiving to God for the signal protection of our companions.

“We reached Debe Nek at 7 a.m. At the same moment the post cart from Grahamstown arrived and on it was Miss Lucy Crowe who had been to see the Queen’s Jubilee Exhibition. She told us that our fancy needlework had won the first prize at the exhibition. Our friends entertained us for the day and Mr Crowe weighed us on a large scale. (was this the first instance of weight-watchers?) Mother Mauritia weighed 160 pounds; ; Mother Eleonora 115 pounds, Mother Euphemia 114 pounds and Sister Reginald 116 pounds...

“The setting of the sun behind the Amatola Mountain was beautiful; the gold and vermillion of the sky was in contrast to the dark green mountains covered with dense bush. A Native Chief on a proud horse rode past us to his home in the mountain fastness. His arms and legs were adorned with shining brass rings and blue beads. On his head he wore long feathers and a coronet of beads.

“Night came on; we said good-bye to Father Fagan who returned to town. Then we continued our journey. The Sisters slept in the large wagon and were rocked by its slow motion and often shaken when the wheels passed over big stones...”

In 1936 Mother Beata Straub remedied many of the defects of Fort Beaufort Convent as best she could by enclosing verandahs and adding a third storey to the back of the building. This gave the Sisters at least their own quarters and more adequate accommodation for both boarders and day pupils. A later Superior, Mother Jerome Mueller, built a swimming pool which, during summer months, was a valuable asset. When in 1956 the Missionary Priests of the Sacred Heart temporarily took over the pastoral duties of the district, the parish included Lower Blinkwater, Lovedale, Alice and Fort Hare.⁴

Departmental Examinations were taken at this convent school by most of the pupils of the Junior Certificate and Senior Certificate level. The commercial and music departments were equally well

⁴ *Established in 1847, it was involved in many border campaigns. It adjoins the town of Alice, and in 1916 Fort Hare became the site of the South African Native College. Now it is a University frequented mainly by the Xhosa students.*

attended and a considerable number of candidates passed the various grades of examinations each year. The convent school concerts became an annual event that was well patronised by the public year by year.

By the end of 1962, when the Secondary School and the upper classes of the Primary School were closed down, between two and three thousand pupils had gone through the school. The house was then kept open as a study centre for junior Sisters coming from overseas. Alterations were made to suit the new purpose and more than sixty of the nuns received their academic and religious schooling here in the following six years.

The Convent at Fort Beaufort was closed down completely as a religious institution at the end of 1968. The buildings were sold and turned into a boys' hostel for the Fort Beaufort Public School. So the corridors and cloisters of the sixty-three-year-old building once more echoed with the sound of youthful voices when the lads took up residence there in 1973.