

Chapter 19 – St Immaculata Convent, Schlehdorf

A Citadel of Prayer

The Convent at Schlehdorf,¹ Bavaria, St Immaculata, has been in the possession of the Dominicans since 1904, but its history harks back to the 8th Century. The giant peaks of the Bavarian Alps, in all their grandeur, tower over the peaceful valley and, on a fine summer day, the mountains, trees and sky are reflected in the Kochel Lake which skirts the assemblage of houses. It is a setting to bring joy to the heart of an artist. In winter, however, the climate can be harsh when deep snow covers the land for months and fierce storms sweep down from the powerful beauty of the Jochberg and Herzogstand, threatening to annihilate the buildings that appear small and vulnerable in the valley below...

In about 740 A.D. the monks from nearby Benedictbeuern erected a monastery, presumably on stakes, upon the marshy shore of Lake Kochel. For it was the sons of St Benedict² who sowed the seed of Christianity in this part of Europe. Thirty years later the monastery of Scharnitz was closed down and its monks were drafted to the Schlehdorf community. The new-comers brought with them their greatest treasure, the relics of two early Christian Martyrs,³ according to tradition, entrusted to evangelise the North... One can now imagine dulcet psalmody echoing in the valley where praises of the true God had never been sung before the advent of the monks.

When the Hungarians invaded Germany in the 10th century this convent was entirely destroyed, so that today only a plain wooden cross marks the spot where the building had been. Other religious houses seem to have recovered quickly, but Schlehdorf lay in ruins for over two centuries before a new but unpretentious Convent was erected there by Bishop Otto I of Freising. It was near the site now occupied by the village hospital. Here the Prelate established about a dozen Augustinian Canons Regular, entrusting them with the spiritual welfare of the Christians living in the surrounding villages of Grossweil, Unterau, Sindorsdorf, Ohlstadt, Zell and Arndorf. In time this monastery proved inadequate and plans were prepared for the erection of a third Convent at Schlehdorf. The proposed edifice was destined to occupy the hill above the village where a chapel of pilgrimage had stood since the 14th century. The Canons occupied their new building in 1742. The erection of the spacious parish church was entrusted to a young architect, Johann Michael Fischer. This church of St Tertullin was completed in 1780. However, the monks' sojourn in their new home was but short-lived. The French Revolution triggered off the confiscation of monasteries all over Europe. In 1803 the order of dissolution was served on the Augustinian Community, dispersing the Canons and leaving the house desolate.

The Monastery and its lands had been sold and re-sold several times when it was acquired by the Dominican Nuns of Augsburg a century later, with the view to re-establishing this property as a religious house.

Up to the time of the South African War all postulants from Germany had been sent to King William's Town from St Ursula's, and from the Convent of the Rosary at Wattenhausen while Mother Aquinata Lauter was Prioress of the latter house. Though the South African Community was made independent from its Mother Convent as early as 1878, the Sisters of these two Convents in Germany generously supplied the mission with vocations. For all those sent to the new Congregation, the 'King' Dominicans owe eternal gratitude; gratitude for the very existence of their Institute in South Africa and also for the great help given during the Congregation's first difficult twenty-five years. A beautiful window, depicting Our Lady and Saint Dominic, in the sanctuary of the Mother House at King William's Town, reminds members of the Congregation to pray for St Ursula's Convent.

¹ The village was named after the Blackthorn or Sloe that abounds in this area.

² Benedict, the Patriarch of the Western monks, was born in the 6th century at Norcia, central Italy, of the noble family of Anicil.

³ The relics are now enshrined in the Parish Church which adjoins the Convent.

As stated above, Schlehdorf Convent⁴ and its lands were bought by the Nuns of Augsburg, but it was not immediately occupied. In South Africa there were already eleven daughter houses to be supplied with staff, so one of Mother Jacoba's last acts before relinquishing her Office as Prioress General, was to purchase Schlehdorf Convent, which would henceforth be known as Convent "Sancta Immaculata". Prioress Jacoba had discussed her plans with the Bishop of Augsburg, who induced St Ursula's to sell their newly-acquired property to the South African Mission. The transaction was arranged for Mother Jacoba by Canon Bernard Keufel, friend of the Prince Regent of Bavaria and henceforth a great benefactor of our Congregation.

Very generously the Augsburg Sisters also offered Mother Ludovica Zirn, sister to Mother Jacoba, as Acting Superior to the young recruits whom they hoped would go to King William's Town. With further help from St Ursula's the stage was set on 25th August 1904 to receive postulants at Schlehdorf. They came; three or four of them, but found the life too hard. And no wonder. The house had stood deserted for a century. Layers of dust and cobwebs gathered in the empty rooms, weeds choked the once beautiful gardens and the Sisters were very poor. In fact, the Convent had to be paid off by instalments spread over many years. At first, rough packing cases had to serve as tables and chairs. On some days there was hardly enough food to sustain the community. But the next group of recruits persevered. So the community, placing their trust in God and working hard from early morning till late at night, gradually restored Schlehdorf Convent to its former beauty. It became, once more, a citadel of prayer, drawing vocations for the mission field in South Africa.

One of the first novices, Sister Nepomucine Knupfer, said she knew nothing of gardening and stood perplexed, surveying the land that was given to her charge, when Dr Riederer came along and asked her what she wanted to do. "To plant a tree", was the reply. The doctor laughed and said no tree would grow if planted like that. He showed her what to do and later, after surgery hours, he often came and taught her his hobby of gardening.

One day there was great news... Mother Jacoba was coming to be their Superior. She had just ended her sexennium as Prioress General and 1905 found her in Schlehdorf, to the great joy of the candidates. Her brilliant example gave the girls new zest for their life of prayer and work. She tended them in sickness, was always ready to help all and sundry who came to the convent. She inspired her nuns to live their lives for God and was herself a living model of what she taught.

In 1910 the building of the priests' house in the convent garden was begun and when completed Father Bernard Schmidt moved into it. Mother Jacoba's uncle Mr Bauer, and his son, greatly helped as carpenters, locksmiths and electricians. These and other friends aided in the erection of the building. Father Schmidt was himself no mean architect; so, in spite of having no money, the house went up with gifts of material and professional help.

Aided, too, by the Department of Agriculture, parts of the grounds that were marsh lands were drained and transformed into fertile fields and gardens. Russian prisoners of war helped in this herculean task when the farm-hands had all be conscripted during World War I and the nuns had to learn the art of self-help. The Sisters were still poor but very happy in their vocation. Truly Mother Jacoba's spirit lived after her when she had returned to South Africa. The Community did what it could and trusted St Joseph to send the handyman that was needed. Thus Schlehdorf became the Congregation's first recruiting centre for vocations from Europe. The North wing of the convent, that had been planned by the Augustinians, was at last begun in 1927, to mark the golden jubilee of the Congregation.

During Mother General Augustine Geisel's last visit to Europe in 1937 it could already be foreseen that a war in Germany was inevitable and it was thus urgently necessary to send all the available young Sisters to take their place in the South African mission field before it was too late. A trustworthy friend of the Convent arranged for Mother General to interview the representative of Adolf Hitler in Munich, "Gauleiter" Richard Wagner, the Administrator of the District. It needed more than merely human

⁴ *The Augustinians built this monastery with a crypt which is still being used for burials. About two dozen Sisters have been interred there since the Dominicans possess it.*

courage for her to call at the “Brown House” to beard the lion in his den. But this unusual woman’s noble charm, her masterly arguments and captivating gift of gentle persuasion were rendered irresistible by the invisible force of Almighty Providence. Despite himself, something deep down in the Administrator’s soul was stirred by this courageous visit from a Religious. Mr Wagner proved kind and sympathetic and undertook to give all the help that lay in his power. With his assistance and the campaign of prayer organised by Mother General, the young people of Schlehdorf embarked for South Africa in groups during 1938 and the early part of 1939.

Britain declared war on Germany at eleven o’clock in the morning and France at five o’clock in the afternoon of Sunday, the 3rd September, 1939. Europe was now plunged into a phase of destruction and slaughter unprecedented in history.

The Nazis⁵ had looked at Schlehdorf Convent. Its size and beautiful setting attracted them. It would be an ideal place to establish their proposed “Jugendburg”⁶ where they could indoctrinate young people with their ideologies. Why should the hated Nuns and the Catholic Church be allowed to retain such valuable property? When the actual notice of evacuation was served on the Sisters, Prioress Dominica Zucktrigel informed the officer in command of the friendly assurance “Gauleiter” Wagner had given Mother General; and to the amazement of the community the order was rescinded. During those difficult war years Mother Dominica acted in everything with great prudence, and even the Nazis were impressed by her unflinching courtesy and dignity.

Still the nuns were regarded with grave suspicion and animosity by the Nazi Authorities. Mother Dominica was constantly importuned with detailed questionnaires from the State wanting to know how she occupied the young nuns in her convent. When the Military Authorities discovered that Schlehdorf Convent was a dependency of the Mother House in South Africa the Sisters were labelled ‘traitors of their country’ who were to be opposed by every possible means. Here, as on previous occasions, Right Rev. Johannes Neuhaeusler, Suffragan Bishop of Munich, proved to be a friend indeed. He stayed up all night, working with the utmost speed to redraft the Dominican Sisters’ Constitution. This document was despatched forthwith, by hand, to Rome for Pope Pius XII’s signature, declaring Schlehdorf Convent an ‘Autonomous Province’ in 1940. In this way the community was saved from certain dissolution. In this war, as in World War I, all connection with the Mother House at King William’s Town was severed and only in 1950 could normal communications with South Africa be resumed.

In April, 1941, His Eminence Cardinal von Faulhaber decreed that the neophytes⁷ with their mistress⁸ be transferred to the former Jesuit College at Pullach on the outskirts of Munich. This latter institution had been converted into an auxiliary hospital to take the overflow of patients from the large “Schwabinger Krankenhaus”. There the novices could help nursing and this would satisfy the military authorities as a service to the Fatherland. In this way the novices’ religious vocation was safeguarded.

In the meantime the Schlehdorf community received orders to vacate the south and north wings of their convent in order to accommodate a large group of Ukrainian refugees. Thankful that they were allowed to remain in their convent, the Sisters complied. Air raids on Munich increased, so the Ukrainians were removed to make room for the evacuated “Hitler Youth”. These young people were insolent to the sisters and anything but pleasant guests in the convent.

In 1943 the temporary hospital at Pullach was extensively damaged by bombs and Munich looked like a heap of rubble. Swiftly arrangements were made to transfer these patients to nearby Schlehdorf Convent and the evacuees there sent elsewhere. The Dominican Novices could now return to Sancta Immaculata to continue their Novitiate and nursing at home. Several trained nursing nuns of the Order of St Vincent de Paul were sent along with the patients to help organise the emergency hospital at Schlehdorf, for too few

⁵ *National Socialist party in Germany under the Hitler regime.*

⁶ *A citadel of youth.*

⁷ *Sisters Hildegard Steiger, Paulina Bayer, Theoberta Ebert, Josefita Eder, Magna Foag, Beatina Gamringer, Rolanda Grill, Bernwarda Hefe, Herma Rehm, Edwin Schneider, Ewalda Spies.*

⁸ *Mother Bertranda Schmid. O.P.*

of the Dominicans had, as yet, completed their hospital training. But here, too, the Sisters would spend countless nights in mortal terror in the cellars whither they would have to transfer their patients for safety, while fire and destruction rained from the skies.

Like many other people, the Sisters did heroic work on the meagre rations received by the civilians. They not only feared that a stray bomb might fall on their house, but there was great danger of the neighbouring Hydro-electrical Works of the Walchensee Lake being bombed. If the walls of this large mountain lake were broken, half of Bavaria would have been swamped and countless lives lost.

When Mother Dominica's term of office expired in 1947 she was succeeded by Mother Agnella Dirr. After the war life in the towns and villages of Germany underwent a great change. The convent on the shore of Lake Kochel also shared in this new phase of life. The present was dark – the future fraught with care, but the new Superior took up her duties with generous resolve and unbounded trust in the aid of Divine Providence; for she was destined to shape the history of this Institution for nearly two decades.

In 1949 Mother Agnella admitted to her Convent a group of nine Dominican Sisters from Schwichteler in the North of Germany, who had asked and obtained leave through His Eminence Cardinal M von Faulhaber of Munich, to be united to the community at Schlehdorf.

By 1952 the emergency hospital at Sancta Immaculata was no longer needed, so the last patients were removed to Munich. The intrepid Superior now set about altering the building to include a boarding establishment and Secondary School for girls. One must see the thickness of the walls of the old convent to appreciate the formidable task that it was. Another part of the convent was to house a Domestic Science School, classrooms for a course on Nursery Management and also for Needlework. The latter had been begun by Mother Dominica and was placed under the direction of Sister Mercedes Hoessle, an expert in church embroidery. The art of making church vestments was also taught to young Sisters who were destined for South Africa. Sister Xavier Burkhart surely made countless vestments for churches and missions while she was stationed at the Mother House for so many years. Sister Bernardis Kriener and Sister Hermana Schwager now exercise this skill. The latter is stationed at the House of the Generalate in Parktown, Johannesburg. Here she often holds exhibitions of church vestments she has made and receives many orders of work, even from other denominations in Johannesburg.

All educational amenities complied with the standards demanded by the Bavarian Education Department.⁹ The Novitiate, too, was remodelled on modern principles and a special post-novitiate course introduced. On account of the scarcity of farm-hands available after the war the Convent purchased a number of modern time-saving machines. The whole agricultural enterprise, which is a big item in Schlehdorf, could now be done by mechanical aid under the supervision of a couple of people. Modern equipment for Laundry and Kitchen was also provided.

Having thus far set her household on a sound footing, Mother Agnella, who had many of the qualities which made Mother Jacoba Zirn such a remarkable woman, now turned her attention to establishing branch convents in her own country. In so doing she built up a new Province for her congregation, of which she herself became the first Prioress Provincial.¹⁰

The first postulant from the town of Gaildorf, Wuerttemberg, came to Schlehdorf in the person of the future Sister Magdalenis Staab in 1948. Mother Agnella acceded to the request of Rev H. Schairer to establish the small convent of St Dominic in his parish the following year. Sister Assumpta Bernemann was sent to begin work there as a district nurse. It was very hard going at first, walking or cycling from house to house in all weathers to visit the patients. But her valiant efforts bore fruit. In time our district nurse acquired a small car which greatly facilitated her task.

⁹ Sister Palmeria Heigel, Headmistress of the Secondary School, received one of the highest awards of Federal Germany – the Cross of Merit with the Ribbon of Merit. For many years Sister has assisted the Ministry of Education in an advisory capacity as regards the various aspects of the education of girls. Sister Gonzaga Huber, the youngest of 23 Principals, also received the Cross of Merit. She is headmistress of our Domestic Science School at Schlehdorf.

¹⁰ The Bavarian Province of our Congregation was officially erected in 1940.

Sister Assumpta's successor, Sister Christiana Weiss, became known as "The Angel of Gaildorf". A kindergarten was soon opened here as well. Sister Pancratia Schmid now not only teaches the infant class and prepares children for First Holy Communion, but has also begun a "hobbies' evening" for elderly ladies of the parish. The get-together is already a great joy to these grannies; but being able to make attractive and useful gifts for their grandchildren has visibly rejuvenated these senior citizens.

Bishop Neuhaeusler was desirous of beginning a *Youth Centre* at **Petersberg** in the beautiful Glonn Valley. While the Prelate was imprisoned in the Nazi Concentration Camp at Dachau he had resolved to inaugurate such a service for re-Christianising the youth of his country, when he should be set free. In 1953 a small community of nuns from Schlehdorf went to staff this house to assist the priests and other lecturers by caring for the material needs of the students attending retreats and other courses at this centre.

Two aspirants for our Novitiate arrived at Schlehdorf from the Northern districts of Germany, namely the future Sisters Eusebia Pahls and Anselma Nienaber. This gave Mother Agnella the idea of establishing a filial in Oldenburg for the purpose of collecting recruits in that area. Accordingly, then, Mother Innocentia Spaeth was sent as Superior of the Convent of St Jordan¹¹ at Holdorf on 16th April 1954. This community was to open a Kindergarten and a Primary School. For some time they also trained "Nursery Attendants" here, until this syllabus was abrogated and the training school closed. The Convent, however, remained open to carry on its other functions. As a result of this foundation a number of young women from Oldenburg and Westphalia have joined the ranks of the Dominicans at Schlehdorf.

A small staff of Sisters also worked at a filial in Buemerstede, Germany from 1956 to 1960. In the following year a couple of nuns also went to help for a time at a Hostel for Catholic Students at Pasing, Munich, until they were withdrawn in July 1971.

At Schorndorf, an industrial town with about 30 000 inhabitants of which approximately a quarter are now Catholics, there stood the little church of St Martin of Tours.¹² This church became too small and was replaced by a larger one and St Martin's was converted into a neat little convent for our Sisters in 1960. These Nuns are doing similar work as their companions at Gaildorf. In recent times they also expanded into parochial services such as visiting and caring for the sick and aged of the parish. At both these outposts of the Wuerttemberg "diaspora" the Dominicans have helped to build up flourishing Catholic parishes whither thousands of refugees from the East had come in the post-war years.

The Students' Hostel, known as Johanneskolleg,¹³ in Munich is also fortunate to have a few Sisters from Schlehdorf to help with the domestic management of the institution. Likewise the Dominican Friary of the Holy Cross at Cologne was given three Sisters on 1st September 1959 to care for the material welfare of our brethren.

In 1956 Mother Emily Russ was appointed to succeed Mother Agnella Dirr as Prioress Provincial of Sancta Immaculata. She laboured without ostentation but with zeal to consolidate the foundations laid by her predecessor.

The Convent chronicle says: "... the Monastery of Schlehdorf had never become wealthy and therefore had retained its fervent monastic spirit..." Our own Sisters of this Province, by their lives of prayer and sacrifice, continue to draw generous young women to follow Christ more closely in the religious life.

The foundation of DOMINIKUS-HAUS in Switzerland came about because the Second World War closed the sources of personnel and other assistance from Schlehdorf for our mission field in South Africa. While on her visit to Europe in 1947 Mother General Demetria Hemmer explored the possibility of continuing the flow of recruits from Europe, yet she realised that conditions in Germany offered little hope of any computable help from that country for many years to come. Nevertheless the need of recruits was pressing, death and old age having taken heavy toll during the past years. The house that had been

¹¹ *Jordan of Saxony, St Dominic's successor as Master General of the Order.*

¹² *Born in Hungary, he was very popularly honoured in the early Middle Ages. He is famous for his legend of having shared his military cloak with a beggar and in a subsequent dream saw the beggar was Christ in disguise.*

¹³ *Named for Pope John XXIII*

opened before the war in the Netherlands had brought a certain amount of relief, but not enough. So Mother General and her companion, Mother Alacoque Brien, visited Switzerland and discussed the problem with friends in Basel. From this city had come a call in 1946 to undertake welfare work in one of its suburbs. Finding conditions favourable for her plans of securing new vocations for her Sisterhood, Mother General accepted the invitation to parochial work at Riehen.

Not far from Basel, known as “The Gate of Switzerland”, there nestles between fertile fields, meadows and orchards the town of Riehen. The area is famous for its cherry trees which enhance the beauty of the surroundings by the blossoms in May. Here, at Riehen, a modern and larger church had been built under the direction of the parish priest, Rev Dr HA Metzger, so the old one, together with the presbytery, could be taken over by our Congregation. Some technical difficulties, however, arose in connection with the transfer of the money for the payment. But Lord Samp of the American Express Company, with his ready courtesy, came to Mother General’s assistance and the transaction was happily concluded.

For many years passed the Lutheran Deaconesses have lived in these parts and, through their Mother House, have done great work among the invalids, the sick, the mentally retarded and the aged. When, in the year 1950, a few Swiss Sisters¹⁴ were sent from King William’s Town to open a convent dedicated to St Dominic at Riehen, they were received with great kindness by all.

The beginning was not easy. Sister Cecilia Mueller, who had been a successful music teacher in South Africa, used her various talents in giving lessons in music and languages as well as lecturing at many centres in quest of vocations, while Sister Editha acted as district nurse in order to gain a livelihood. The people were very good to them and brought many a welcome gift to Sister Alfredina who was the housekeeper of the little group at number 30 Chrischonaweg.

Already in the second year of the Sisters’ sojourn at Riehen they had the joy of receiving their first novice, Sister M Pirmin Bislin. A number of Swiss girls have followed her into the ranks of the “King” Dominicans. Some of these completed their training in England while others joined the Novitiate in South Africa.

The little band of nuns at Dominikus-Haus tried to face the year 1966 bravely although they knew that their Sister Cecilia was mortally ill with leukaemia. She never spared herself, and under this debilitating illness one marvels how she kept on working almost to the last. At the beginning of February of that year the former Prioress General, Mother Demetria, arrived as their new Superior in succession to Mother Madeleine Stamm. On 14th February Sister Cecilia went to her eternal reward and was laid to rest beside the saintly Sister Nepomucina Knupfer who had preceded her into eternity eleven years before.

For the past 7 years the chief material preoccupation of the community at Riehen was their projected Home for the Aged. It was found that this would involve the demolition of the existing house and church and their great concern was where they would live during the time of building.

Early in 1967 Sister Madeleine accompanied her postulants on their annual pilgrimage to the famous shrine of Mariastein. About a fortnight later she sustained a bad fall and the consequent pain seemed to indicate some internal injury, but to the dismay of the community malignant disease was diagnosed; and she passed away on 16th July, the Feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel.

So Sister Madeleine was taken from the community when the long-planned project was beginning to materialise. But God would provide a solution to Mother Madeleine’s problem concerning temporary quarters for the Sisters. Another Order of nuns, who were to have taken charge of a Home for the Aged at nearby Aesch, were prevented at the last moment from doing so. Our Sisters could thus move thither and run the Home for 2 or 3 years, which would give their own building time to be completed.

Owing to advancing years Sister Editha needed help on the district by 1960. Sister M Polycarp Strobel¹⁵ was sent from South Africa as assistant district nurse. On arrival in Switzerland she took a further course

¹⁴ *Sister Cecilia Mueller (Superior) and Sisters Editha Seiterle and Alfredina Bertschmann.*

¹⁵ *In Switzerland she was known as Sister Annemarie*

and when the community moved to Aesch she was appointed Matron of the Home and later also of the new establishment at Riehen. Thus she, who had spent many years assisting at the birth of babies in Africa, now found herself caring for the aged and infirm, preparing for their last journey. The angel of death was again to visit this community when he called away the much-loved Sister Annemarie in 1972.

The new Dominikus-Haus faces Albert-Oeri Street: a modern, well-equipped Home with a charming chapel where the Sisters and their patients can find Christ's welcome whenever they enter the Royal Presence.