

## Chapter 2

### *Rising to the Challenge*

Already in his time Sir George Grey<sup>1</sup> had suggested that German nuns should be brought from Europe to teach the children of the German Settlers at the Cape. On 17<sup>th</sup> November 1864 Sir George McLean, G.B., Lieutenant Governor of British Kaffraria, gave six plots of ground bordering on Queen's Road in King William's Town, as a grant in freehold to Bishop Moran, in trust for educational purposes. On this ground the first portion of "King" Convent was built.

Bishop Ricards' plan for a convent school in that town was eagerly supported by Father Fagan, who began collecting funds for the project. In order to help, the Bishop first sold his carriage and pair given him by his Catholics. Later he also sold a farm granted him by the Government and gave the proceeds towards the erection of the Convent.

On 14<sup>th</sup> September 1876 the foundation stone was laid in the presence of a large assembly. So successful was Dr Ricards in appealing for the support of the public on this occasion that no less than twelve-hundred pounds<sup>2</sup> was "laid on the stone". Among the donations the Bishop's was leading with a hundred pounds and was followed by Notre Mere, the intrepid Foundress of the Assumption sisters of Grahamstown, who, out of their poverty, gave fifty pounds.

In an eloquent address His Lordship praised Father Fagan's efforts to obtain means for the building. The priest had travelled to the East, West, North and South of the land, enduring many hardships, and enlisting a host of helpers – many of whom were of other denominations – who all joined in this effort.

The building was going on apace, although the Bishop and Father Fagan still did not know where the Sisters for the new school were to come from. But those were the days of faith when men trusted that God could provide their needs. By the middle of 1877 the Bishop, seeing that the funds had nearly been exhausted, told Father Fagan that, unless two-thousand pounds could be guaranteed in two days' time, building operations would have to stop. How could the priest raise that large sum at such short notice? Yet he felt sure he had been guided by God to begin the building... and surely his congregation would not let the work languish after they had set such high hopes on it. And he was right. Ten of the leading Catholic gentlemen of the town immediately guaranteed a hundred pounds each. The names of these generous benefactors deserve to be recorded here:

Messrs E.J. Byrne, Rudolph Malcher, William Herley, Albert Deiringer, Thomas Logan, Patrick Mullin, Henry O'Donoghue, Edward Hartigan and Patrick Egan. The remaining thousand pounds were obtained from other contributors, notably Messrs Kilduff, Beet and Colonel Frederick Schermbrucker. His Lordship was satisfied and the convent was happily completed and ready for occupation by 14<sup>th</sup> September 1877: exactly a year after the foundation stone had been laid.

Meanwhile in Germany, when once the choice of the pioneer Sisters had been finalised, a contract was drawn up between Bishop Ricards and Mother Hyacinth Schippert. By this the latter agree to send seven Sisters able and willing to direct an institution for the education of young people. The Bishop, on the other hand, accepted the Sisters under his jurisdiction, promising to give them sustenance until they could support themselves, and to care for their spiritual welfare by appointing as their chaplain one who could speak German as well as English, and to lend them the necessary money for the voyage to South Africa. The nuns noted in their annals that the Bishop kept them going with the proceeds of his lectures and pamphlets for about a year, until their school was self-supporting.

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<sup>1</sup> *Governor of the Cape of Good Hope, 1841 – 1845*

<sup>2</sup> R2400.00 in 1977

All the other preliminaries having been arranged, the day for the Sisters' departure from Augsburg was fixed for 14<sup>th</sup> September 1877: another Feast of the Holy Cross, namely that of its Exaltation.<sup>3</sup> For the last time on that day the little missionary band knelt in their loved chapel at St Ursula's, offering themselves wholly to God for the work He was entrusting to them in far-off Africa. Mother Aquinata Lauter, who had received nearly all the members of the party into the Order, had written a touching letter of farewell from Wettenhausen.

Contrary to the custom then prevailing of donning secular garb for a long journey, the Sisters were as a special favour allowed to travel in the religious habit. After a tender farewell to broken-hearted but generous parents and friends, the seven pioneers passed out of the convent enclosure and drove away to the railway station, while the bell rang out the evening Angelus. Like Abraham of old, they had heard and responded to God's call to leave kindred and their father's house and go to the land He would show them. Canon Alexander Soratroy, always a faithful friend and benefactor, accompanied the Sisters as far as London where they joined Mr Fraundorfer and his family on board the sailing vessel the "Balmoral Castle".

The ship reached Cape Town on 11<sup>th</sup> October 1877, where Bishop John Leonard of the Western Vicariate went on board to welcome the missionaries and conduct them to St Mary's Cathedral<sup>4</sup> to greet their Lord for the first time on African soil. The Irish Dominican Sister who had come from Cabra fourteen years previously, gave their fellow Dominicans hospitality. After four days spent in Cape Town the voyage was resumed and they arrived at Port Elizabeth<sup>5</sup> where they were met by Bishop Ricards and their chaplain, Rev Arnold Widdershofen S.J., Father J Fitzhenry and Father Nicholas Fanning.

The mouth of the Buffalo River was reached on 19<sup>th</sup> October. As a special privilege the party was allowed to land on the Sunday evening. With eyes fixed on the shore they courageously boarded the Governor's tug. To their distress the travellers noticed a ship stranded on the rocks. As their tiny boat tossed like a cork on the stormy waters the Bishop prayed the Rosary for their safe landing and the difficult crossing was happily achieved. Had they landed the following day they might have shared the fate of some of their fellow travellers who were wrecked on the bar.<sup>6</sup> The Sisters were met at the harbour by the Catholics of Panmure, now East London, with Mr John Gately<sup>7</sup> at their head. They were taken to a small hotel where they were eagerly greeted by citizens of King William's Town who had travelled sixty kilometres to welcome them. After having heard Mass next morning at the little wood-and-iron church which stood at the corner of St Paul's Road and Chapel Street in the North End, the nuns were joined by Father Fagan.<sup>8</sup> The recently completed railway would take them and its first passengers to King William's Town on the Wednesday. It was well that the Sisters went this distance by train, for near the village of Berlin the wagon<sup>9</sup> that bore their heavy luggage stuck in the mud and was delayed for several days awaiting wheel repairs, for there was no such thing as a spare wheel in those days.

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<sup>3</sup> *Although none of our Convents has been named for the Holy Cross, the 'shadow of the Rood' was never absent from the many foundations of the Institute.*

<sup>4</sup> *Known as the 'Mother Church' to the Catholics of South Africa.*

<sup>5</sup> *Formerly known as Algoa Bay.*

<sup>6</sup> *Before the harbour of East London was completed, passengers from ocean liners were let down in a basket on the side of the vessel into a little boat that could reach the land. These little barques often capsized when the sea was very rough.*

<sup>7</sup> *The first Mayor of East London.*

<sup>8</sup> *Himself a Dominican Tertiary.*

<sup>9</sup> *The wagon belonged to Mr John McDaniel, grandfather of the future Sister Mary of the Sacred Heart, OP. By wagon the Sisters' luggage could go direct to its destination without need to transfer it to another train at Blaney Junction where the railway line turns off towards King William's Town.*