

Chapter 22 – Mother Euphemia Koffler; Sr Gertrude Walter

Falling Petals

“We will remember her”

L. Binyon

Amalia Koffler was born at Ravensburg, Wuerttemberg, on 28th July 1831. She joined the Dominican nuns and on 30th October 1870 was clothed in the Habit of the Order as Sister Mary Euphemia by Mother Aquinata Lauter at the Convent of the Holy Rosary, Wettenhausen. She made her profession at Augsburg on 21st August 1872 under Mother Hyacinth Schippert. In 1877 she arrived at King William’s Town, South Africa, as one of the seven Foundresses of the new Dominican Congregation.

Delicately nurtured and well educated she was the musician of the new foundation. To her the works of the great masters were a sheer delight. She particularly loved Mozart and also took great pleasure in the Sonatas and Symphonies of Beethoven. “Her sight reading was amazingly accurate and, after a thoughtful look at a piece, she could play it with great feeling,” said one of her contemporaries.

Before entering the convent, Miss Koffler had spent some years in France. She became proficient in French which she taught in the schools in South Africa before the inception of Afrikaans.¹ In those days French or Nederlands was the usual second language in the schools in this country. No doubt French was partly due to the Huguenot immigrants;² but these eventually lost their language rights, although traces of French are still found in Afrikaans. Mother Euphemia, in her later years, also had private pupils who had studied French but wished to become more proficient in reading and writing. These ladies would relate that Mother sometimes dozed during the lessons as she listened. The pupils would then modulate their voices so as not to disturb her slumber. However, when a word was mispronounced or a phrase wrongly expressed she would awaken to correct it immediately.

One morning in her latter years, Mother Euphemia fell asleep in chapel during meditation. A young nun noticed her bending down so far and, thinking she felt indisposed and was about to faint, went to her side and assisted her to her room. When outside the chapel Reverend Mother smiled, saying: “Child, I only slept... I didn’t faint; but I was so ashamed that I let you take me out...” When she, reluctantly, retired from teaching she spent much time in prayer and spiritual reading. Mother Euphemia never wanted to be waited upon. Even shortly before her death she would forestall the young Sister who desired to set her room in order. In her eagerness to be on time at all conventual exercises she would often go to morning prayer stockingless, hoping it would not be noticed in her long Habit. If one remarked on it she would say with her mischievous little smile, as though caught in a childish prank: “The knitted stockings were so tight and I feared I might be late.”

As Prioress of Klerksdorp Convent she went through the Anglo-Boer War. Her Community had only the barest necessities of life for the town endured a three-months’ siege during which the water supply of the town was cut off. The convent had a good well and bravely the Sisters husbanded the water so that they might share their supply with the townspeople. The Convent dehydrated the fruit of their orchard then ground it to powder to use as ersatz coffee, for flour and other groceries which were prohibitive in price. During the epidemics Mother Euphemia turned nurse and often stayed all night with a bad case. In fact, like Paul of Tarsus, she believed in doing manual work to contribute her share to the labours of the community. Besides her duties as Superior and Teacher she installed herself as bee-keeper and she would don her quaint apiarist’s outfit to rob the hives.

¹ *This language developed from the Dutch dialect spoken at the Cape of Good Hope. It developed into a separate and recognised language within a remarkably short time.*

² *These immigrants arrived at the Cape in 1688. Although the number of Huguenots that came to South Africa was small, their contribution to the young country’s development was considerable.*

Mother Euphemia's great friend was Mother Eleonora Petitpierre, whom she sometimes visited at Potchefstroom, even during the war. These visits were fraught with danger but 'Little' Reverend Mother laughed at danger. She would ask what harm any soldier would do to her. True, she sheltered both Boer and Briton whenever they appealed to her. One man she hid and fed for weeks; and to the indignation of her nuns, she even housed a fugitive's horse, ignoring the fact that the animal might neigh; and the penalty for harbourage was very severe.

On one occasion she went safely to Potchefstroom during the war, but the return journey was unfortunate. The train left Potchefstroom with the usual precautions. A pilot engine went in advance to test the line over which the train might then safely pass. Besides the customary provision the Officer in Command had signalled to a comrade that he was responsible for the two nuns on the train in case of accident. Of this, however, the Sisters were quite unaware.

Suddenly a violent explosion occurred; the train stopped. A young subaltern came to the Sisters, saluted and asked them to follow him. Reverend Mother and Sister Veronica Gray followed nervously and a contingent of a half dozen men brought up the rear. The nuns were led to a tent which was being hastily erected in the veld and fitted with two camp beds for the night. The men told the ladies they had orders for their safety so that they had nothing to fear. Soldiers were picketed at some metres round the tents. By next morning the line had been repaired and the Sisters were escorted back to their train.

Before they left Mother and her companion went to thank the Officer in Charge for his kindness. Very characteristically the little Prioress thought this a good opportunity for rendering a benefit to her community. She had been expecting a large bale of textiles from St Ursula's Convent, Augsburg and had recently heard that the goods were commandeered by the army. She now pointed out her loss to the officer and explained that the material would be useless to the military for it was meant to make Habits for the Sisters and she showed the material of her own dress. The O.C. gave a hearty laugh, saying: "Reverent Mother, be sure it has already been cut up to make saddle cloths for the horses."

Then after the siege the British, under Major Coleridge, entered Klerksdorp, Mother Euphemia wrote to him and explained that her Sisters had no food, his aide supplied what he could. He even supplemented the usual bully beef with six live sheep that could meanwhile graze in the convent grounds. Kind Major Coleridge fed the community as long as he was at Klerksdorp.

Mother Koffler had hardly taken up the reigns of office as Prioress General when a very heavy cross fell upon her shoulders. Another virulent outbreak of enteric fever struck the district of King William's Town. Notwithstanding their best efforts to combat the disease, death stalked about in the convent carrying off many promising Sisters. The epidemic reached its zenith in 1895, which was afterwards spoken of as 'the fever year'.

The "Cape Argus" reported on 16th July 1906 that "a very sad case of sudden death took place yesterday in Arthur Street, King William's Town. While Sisters Colman and Vincent of Nazareth House, Port Elizabeth, were collecting subscriptions to that institution, the first-named became suddenly ill and had to be taken to one of the houses nearby. Dr Pringle was at once summoned, but the Sister expired very soon after his arrival..." On hearing of the tragedy, Mother Euphemia immediately had the body brought to her convent where it was arranged, provided with a coffin and transferred to Port Elizabeth for burial. The Superior General of Nazareth House at Hammersmith, England, wrote a touching letter of thanks to the Dominicans, "... for your goodness to my children in Africa, living and dead..." Some time previous to this there had also been an accident near Barkley East, with the horse and cart used by the Nazareth Sisters. At this time no one was seriously hurt but the Sisters were fetched to Queenstown Convent to be nursed over the shock and bruises until they were able to return to Port Elizabeth.

Mother Euphemia had seldom been ill but, when her last illness came upon her at the Mother House, she realised the full meaning of physical pain. On the 8th November 1909 she was suffering very much and the usual injection was given for her relief by the Sisters' friend, Dr Carl Schulze; but the patient did not regain consciousness from its effects and went to her eternal reward at 9 p.m., when the bell gave the signal for the profound conventual silence.

Mother Eleonora wrote: "... On Wednesday 10th November, the funeral procession advanced slowly to the Sisters' cemetery... Mother Lucy followed the coffin as the chief mourner and next to her was my poor self, carrying a wreath of ever-green with white lilies and roses. Tears were streaming down my face; and how could it be otherwise but very painful to be parted from my dearest friend and faithful companion throughout my convent life? Dear Mother Euphemia was laid to rest on All Souls' Day of our Holy Order..."³

A True Gem – Sr Gertrude Walter

Born on 7th April 1845 at Unteroth, Bavaria, Kreszentia Walter was a gay-hearted girl who loved life and was liked by her friends. Under usual circumstances she would have looked forward to a happy marriage and a family. She was brought up strictly by a pious mother who trained her young children to make sacrifices for the conversion of sinners and pagans. Consequently Kreszentia grew up accustomed to exact obedience and self-denial and to the consideration of the less fortunate than herself.

It is, therefore, not surprising that she answered the call of grace to enter the religious life. She received the Habit of a Lay Sister at the Dominican Convent of Sr Ursula, Augsburg on 14th September 1871 and made her profession into the hands of Mother Hyacinth Schippert on the same date two years later. Sister Mary Gertrudis Walter also generously offered herself as pioneer with Mother Mauritia Tiefenboeck for the African Mission in 1877.



*Sr M Gertrudis Walter, O.S.D.
(Pencil portrait by Sr M Digna
Guenther, O.P.)*

At King William's Town she led a hidden life as an active worker in those hard pioneering days and she was sorely missed by the entire community when Mother Mauritia chose her for the newly-founded convent at Oakford, Natal in 1889.

Sister Gertrude, our first lay Sister, was not only a competent cook but she also excelled in joinery, carpentry and house painting; skills which she taught to the younger nuns who worked with her. It was well known that whenever a new foundation was started Sister Gertrude would go with the first batch of Sisters to fix windows, make cupboards and school desks,⁴ and thus cut down initial expenses. However, Oakford afterwards remained her permanent home except for these pioneering breaks in the interest of the Congregation.

As she grew older assistants were given her but she always reserved the hardest work for herself although she was of small stature. At prayer she was equally devoted. Her life was saintly. She continued to spend herself at prayer and toil until a few weeks before her end. Mother Joseph Ryan, Prioress General of Oakford, wrote to announce Sister Gertrude's demise to the Community at King William's Town as follows: "... She had a beautiful "home-going" as she herself called it; and in her coffin there was peace and happiness on her face... She was conscious up to the last and, judging by her expression, we thought she had a vision of great beauty, just for a few moments before she breathed her last.

"I need hardly say we miss her greatly... She was a true Gem. May she continue to watch over us, especially during these anxious times. And, when our hour is run, may she be our advocate for as happy a passage into eternity as was hers..."

Sister Gertrude completed her earthly course on December 4th 1918 and was buried at Oakford.

³ According to the old Church Calendar.

⁴ Some school desks she had made can still be seen at Oakford Mission.

A Champion of the Truth

John Fagan first saw the light on 19th January 1837 in the city of Dublin. Though somewhat delicate in health he began, at an early age, to prepare himself for the sacred ministry at the renowned Missionary College of All Hallows, which was then situated at Stillorgan in County Dublin. He was adopted as a clerical student for the Eastern Cape Vicariate by Right Rev Patrick Moran. In the “S.S. Kaffraria” of the Diamond Navigation Line, Mr Fagan reached Port Elizabeth on 3rd April 1865. On 3rd December of the same year he was ordained priest at Grahamstown.

Except for a few years spent in Port Elizabeth, Uitenhage and Fort Beaufort, Father Fagan was in King William’s Town throughout the whole of his ministry. Among the achievements to his credit are also the building of the Dominican Convent of the Sacred Heart Church in that town.

Barely a year after his ordination Father Fagan was appointed to the sole charge of a mission. He knew that education, though not a panacea for all life’s ills, is nonetheless a source of great blessings to mankind. So the young pastor commenced to teach school himself at Uitenhage.

Transferred to King William’s Town he struggled hard to keep his parochial school going; and after herculean labours he succeeded in erecting the Convent of the Sacred Heart which will ever be regarded as a monument to himself. With the approval of Bishop Ricards he brought out the Dominican Sisters from Augsburg who did so much for the young Church in South Africa. Later he also established the Teaching Brothers of St John De La Salle in King William’s Town, so that the boys of his flock might also be provided for.

“Priest in Charge of King William’s Town”... How simple the words now sound: But what a meaning they conveyed to those who knew the conditions in the Cape Colony a century ago. They meant that he had spiritual charge of the cast area extending from the Keiskama to the Bashee, and from the Orange River at Aliwal North to the mouth of the Buffalo River. In the present age of railways, telegraphs and motor-cars the dangers and hardships of those far-off days can hardly be imagined. One might picture to oneself the trials of the devoted priest, perhaps in indifferent health, setting out on a sick call fifty or even a hundred miles away, riding on horseback or driving in a Cape Cart under the burning sun or in torrential rains over wretched roads, crossing unbridged rivers in flood at the peril of his life.

The words of the Apostle “I have fought the good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the Faith,” are a condensed history of Monsignor Fagan’s life. What a struggle he waged against ignorance and vice; what hardships he encountered in the discharge of his duties! In recognition of his great services to the Church in South Africa the Holy See, in 1890, conferred on him the dignity of a Domestic Prelate to the Vatican. Monsignor Fagan also had the comfort of seeing, during his lifetime, the vast expansion of the Church, not only in his own district but all over the southern continent. On an anniversary of his first Mass, the 8th December, this zealous priest ended his days peacefully at King William’s Town.⁵

The attendance at his funeral was a remarkable testimony to the esteem and affection in which the venerable Prelate was held by all classes of the public. Flags were at half-mast in the town and Bishop MacSherry received a telegram from the Provincial Secretary in Cape Town, conveying the Provincial Administrator’s regret at the passing of Monsignor Fagan, and giving permission for the internment to take place within the walls of the Parish Church. There was a singular appropriateness in this, since the fine edifice was erected mainly through the efforts of the deceased. On 10th December 1919 the Divisional Council of King William’s Town postponed their meeting for an hour to enable the members to attend the obsequies. The church was literally packed for the solemn function, those present including many past members of Monsignor Fagan’s flock now living in other centres and many representative

⁵ *In his will, Father Fagan bequeathed to the Mother House of the Dominican Sisters the property known as “Avoca”, which had been given him in 1915 by the Catholics of the parish on the occasion of the Golden Jubilee of his Ordination. This house, for a time, also accommodated the School for the Deaf, hence its name given it by the Dominican Sisters.*

residents of the town. Owing to the large concourse, it was not possible to admit children and a special service was held for these at which they prayed the Rosary for the happy repose of their beloved Monsignor.

At 9.45 a.m. Right Rev Bishop MacSherry, attended by seventeen priests, entered the Parish Church by the south door and proceeded to the Sanctuary where they recited the Office of the Dead which was followed by a Pontifical Requiem Mass. When this was completed the Bishop and his attendants advanced to the catafalque in the main aisle of the church immediately in front of the Sanctuary. Here the tomb had been prepared and the coffin was lowered into it. A marble slab, suitably inscribed, marks the resting place of the Father and Founder of the Dominican Congregation of King William's Town.