

## Chapter 23 – Second decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, changes

### *A Mottled Sky*

In October of 1918 the blight of the influenza, called the “Spanish ‘Flu’”,<sup>1</sup> fell heavily upon South Africa. At first people were not alarmed because they felt they knew the disease which occurs periodically and was known to be dangerous only for babies and the aged. But this usually mild disease now became a great killer and carried off people in their prime. Owing to the complaint not being a notifiable one the Public Health Authorities had no idea as to the number of cases which occurred, but it was estimated that no less than 50 000 people died of the malady in this country and 21 million succumbed over the whole world. A local newspaper said: “The epidemic had, within a week, assumed the dimensions of a pandemic, spreading with a rapidity and violence hitherto not experienced in South Africa.”

The onset of the illness was sudden, so that the patient might be overcome in the street. Doctors advocated strict isolation of patients and the generous use of disinfectants. They also advised sufferers to go to bed at once; and even if they could not get medical attendance, to remain in bed until the temperature returned to normal range. The gloomy records of the cemeteries, mortuaries and hospitals gave added gravity to this warning, for patients readily developed pneumonic complications which proved very deadly. In some private homes all the occupants were down and these could often but place the bodies of their dead on the pavement to be picked up by the mortuary cart.

Despite the tremendous pressure of work, medical practitioners, nurses and chemists worked day and night with unselfish devotion. The hospitals could not possibly accommodate all the cases, so schools and town halls, etc., were equipped as emergency hospitals and soup kitchens. Similar depots with medical necessities and comforts were organised in the Non-White Townships where white volunteers assisted whoever came for aid. In the commercial field perhaps the most alarming feature of the calamity was the paralysing effect of the disease on all business and mining activities. Steps had also to be taken to close down cinemas, churches and other places of public gathering; even shopping hours were curtailed. The one pleasing element in regard to the spread of the epidemic was the spirit of co-operation displayed by all classes of the public. The nuns were everywhere called upon to nurse the plague-stricken population in their homes and hospitals. Thus the white Dominican Habit became a familiar sight in streets and private homes as the Sisters went about their daily errands of mercy.

Bishop MacSherry had given “his Dominican daughters” permission to go out of their convents for this work of charity, dispensing them, as he said, “from everything except the Ten Commandments and their Vows”.

In King William’s Town, as in other centres, some people were assigned to investigate which families were in urgent need of help. From such a home a twelve-year-old lad was sent to ask assistance from the Convent. There a Sister found three beds in one room occupied by children, each suffering from the disease in various stages. In another room the mother was prostrate with high fever, while the father earned a few shillings a day as a labourer. In the kitchen the week’s laundry was soaking in a tub, waiting to be washed. After attending to the needs of the patients, Sister rolled up her sleeves and began on the washing... Everywhere the Sisters rendered their services of charity with most generous self-sacrifice, doing the most menial services for rich and poor, of all races and all creeds without distinction. Many a deathbed was blessed by the presence of a daughter of St Dominic in that dreadful time. Prejudice was broken down and souls won for heaven. Thus did Almighty God in His mercy and wisdom draw spiritual good from the frightful material evil.

The epidemic left behind it a trail of misery which baffled description. Numerous families had been deprived of their bread-winner and countless children were left orphaned or destitute. These cases of

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<sup>1</sup> *Influenza owes its name to Italian astrologers of long ago who blamed the disease’s periodic appearance on the “Influenza”, or influence of the heavenly bodies, as they believed. This remained almost as good an explanation as any until 1918.*

acute distress were at first helped by private citizens and then taken to orphanages or taken care of by the Government Authorities.

... Very Rev Father Hilary Carpenter, O.P., one-time Provincial of the English Dominicans and later Assistant to the Master General of the Order of Preachers, said that he would “select the work of the religious orders in this country as the best example of what the Catholic Church was doing for South Africa. Amongst these the Dominican Sisters of King William’s Town could claim very striking success.” The original band of seven Sisters from Augsburg had come to the Cape Colony to teach in white schools, but when the need arose for nursing Sisters and for mission work among the Non-White races, they turned also to those works and did them equally well.

After the Dominicans in Rhodesia had become independent of their mother convent at King William’s Town the latter Institute reverted to teaching as its principal occupation. From the beginning they offered courses in embroidery, painting, domestic science as well as in foreign languages which were not at that time taught in the State Schools and they won early popularity even with Calvinist parents in the educational field. Within a few years of their arrival the Dominican nuns saw the need to train lay teachers, as well as their own Sisters, and between 1897 and 1914 their schools had won over 500 Teachers’ Training Certificates in the State Examinations. In July 1914, mainly through the influence of Father James Fitzhenry, an educational expert and close friend of the King William’s Town Convent, a Teachers’ Training School was formed in that town by amalgamating the Pupil Teachers of the Convent School with those of the Girls’ High School, and Miss A Emery, L.L.A.,<sup>2</sup> of the convent training staff was appointed the first Principal of the new College. Sir Thomas Muir, the Superintendent General of Education of the Cape Province, personally conducted the negotiations for the establishment of the Training Centre and he, moreover, granted the Prioress General the right to free tuition for her nuns at this College.

The King William’s Town Convent was from the first recognised as a hostel for the College students in that town. As a result, numerous Catholic girls, and not a few religious of other Congregations, were in residence there and were given the added advantage of special courses in Doctrine and Psychology conducted by the Convent Chaplain with the view to counteracting any danger of mere secularism in education.

In 1917 Prioress General Clare Huber made arrangements for her Sisters to attend Degree Courses at Rhodes University College, Grahamstown, as it was then called. Bishop MacSherry put at the nuns’ disposal a house adjacent to the Assumption Convent, giving it the title of “Calaroga House”,<sup>3</sup> in honour of St Dominic.

The Bishop, moreover, put the library in his house in Beaufort Street at the service of the Sisters and lent them his own Encyclopaedia and other reference books for the pursuit of their studies. The Prelate continued to take a kindly interest in the hostel and its residents until it was closed down in 1922. (The Dominican Sisters of Cape Town and Port Elizabeth sent several of the nuns to “Calaroga”.)

Father H. Fitzhenry had been among the Priests who welcomed the first seven Sisters from Augsburg in 1877. For 42 years he had readily given valuable advice and assistance in educational matters. Even when enfeebled by age he loved to visit the Student Sisters at “Calaroga”. When he had not succeeded in obtaining all the tuition grants he had asked for from the University Authorities, the good priest, unwilling to disappoint Mother Clare, quite unknown to anyone, for two years paid the tuition fees out of his own slender purse.

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<sup>2</sup> *On the advice of Bishop Strobino Miss Constance Fox and Miss Emery were invited from Britain to help the nuns re-organise and improve the tone of their schools in South Africa.*

<sup>3</sup> *Some of the Congregation’s most outstanding teachers of that time were residents at Calaroga: among these were Sisters Paula Wahlspeock, Amica Gebhart, Alacoque Brien and Sister de Victoria Sporrer, an outstanding botanist; “Calaroga II” was established in Grahamstown from 1954 to 1972, also as a hostel for the student nuns. This house was situated at 24 Hill Street.*

A dearth of vocations was felt from 1913. Owing to World War I, no postulants could be admitted to the Union of South Africa from Schlehdorf and in this country no young women seemed to receive the call to enter our Institute for some years. Things looked threatening for the future of the Congregation, so Mother Lucy Kaltenstadler, who had succeeded Mother Clare in July 1918, sent two Sisters to Ireland. As a result some 20 zealous Irish girls were recruited for the Noviciate. At the end of 1919 candidates at Schlehdorf, some of whom had been waiting nearly ten years for admission to the Noviciate, at last received permission to sail for South Africa. Great was the joy when the ceremonies of Reception and Profession could once more be celebrated in the Convent Church at King William's Town.

The Masters General of the Order of Preachers have, from time to time, given practical proofs of the paternal interest in the Congregation of King William's Town. In 1908, the saintly Father Hyacinth M Cormier, O.P., formally affiliated the Institute to the Dominican Order.<sup>4</sup> Accordingly, in that year, the Congregation held its first General Chapter at the Mother House. Prior to this the Sisters elected the head of their Institute by postal vote triennially.

From the Most Rev Louis Thiessling, O.P. the Sisters received the "Dominican Sisters' Prayer Book". He recommended that they substitute the "Lady Office" for the lengthy Divine Office which they had been using.

It was Father General Bonaventura Garcia Paredez, O.P. who, in 1927, authorised all Dominican Sisters to add the letters O.P. to their signatures. This holy man was one of the members of the Order who laid down his life for Christ during the Spanish Civil War in 1936.

That the most Rev Father Aniceto Fernandez, O.P. was also no unmindful of his large religious family in this country we know from the ardent interest he manifested in the establishment of the Federation of the Dominican Order in South Africa – FEDOSA – in 1974. For the inauguration of the Federation Father General sent his Assistant, Very Rev Father B Farelly, O.P., to South Africa.

As a result of the coalition, Sister Mariette Gouws was asked to take charge of the Montebello Mission Hospital of the African Dominican Sisterhood in Natal during 1975, in order to enable their Matron to further her studies. The year concluded with the Hospital attaining second place in the Republic at the Examinations of the South African Nursing Council for Auxiliary Nurses, when 7 out of the 13 Montebello candidates passed in the Honours Division.

It was further advocated that new Prioress General be found to bridge a gap in the Montebello Congregation for a certain period. For this the Congregation also magnanimously lent Sister Fromunda Zimmermann to them; a post which she filled with competence. These two appointments were the first fruits of the closer co-operation and mutual goodwill between Dominicans within the new Federation.

A new era began for the Religious Institute of King William's Town in the opening years of the second decade of this century. This period was destined to link the Dominican Sisters in South Africa more closely to the other branches of their great Order and to bring about among them greater uniformity of Dominican observance. In 1920 the number of Sisters in the King William's Town Institute was 315 and they were distributed in 13 Houses, ten of which were situated in the Eastern Cape Vicariate, one in Europe and three in the Transvaal. In 1921 Mother Lucy Kaltenstadler invited two of these priests to preach the annual retreats at the Mother House to the pupils and the Community. This was the first time that priests of the Order had conducted a retreat for the "King" Dominicans in South Africa. The event, which was something of a stir, filled the nuns with a great desire for more accurate observance of the ceremonies and customs of their Order, thus paving the way for the changes that were soon introduced.

The first important change consisted in all Lay Sisters of our Congregation being raised to the status of Choir-Sister on 1<sup>st</sup> July 1924.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> *Documents of Affiliation to the Dominican Order cf. Constitutions and Directives of 1969, page 40, and cf. Rule and Constitutions of 1939, page xix.*

<sup>5</sup> *Cf. Acts of the General Chapter, 1928.*

A Lay Sister made religious profession and served the Convent, but was exempt from most of the religious services and studies required of the Choir Nuns. Thus the Lay Sisters did not recite the Divine Office; instead they were enjoined to pray the “Pater Noster Office”, or the Rosary, as they went about their tasks. This custom also prevailed in our Congregation until Mother Jacoba Zirn began teaching Latin to the Lay Sisters to enable them to join in the celebration of the Divine Office.

Some nuns, by the very nature of their work and achievements, have been more in the public eye and there are a few who gained open recognition for their efforts. The vast majority, however, never come into the limelight, but they press on in their various responsibilities, faithfully doing what they consider is the duty God requires of them, expecting neither praise nor earthly reward.

The Blessed Virgin Mary only lived at Nazareth; only went about the simple duties of a mother and housewife; yet, by supernaturalising everything, she lived the life that pleased God most of all lives ever lived by a mere creature.

Similarly the Lay Sisters, who may be called the ‘unsung heroines’ of the Convent, have mingled self-denial and prayer with their unceasing toil in the cloister, unknown to the world. Yet, to these too, belongs the honour due to the holy ones of God. They have been the devoted housekeepers, gardeners, seamstresses, even carpenters – yes, the competent doers of all the many tasks that have made our Convents such neat and comfortable homes for the Communities. Accepting the Lord’s Mother as their model in all things, many of these handmaids of Christ have preceded us on the highway of sanctity... “Henceforth then,” said the Constitutions, “for the sake of perfect union of mind and heart and for greater charity in the Institute, its members are to form only one class of Sisters.

Mention must also be made of the “Music Makers” of the Congregation. It has been seen that the first of these were among the Foundresses: Mothers Euphemia Koffler and Jacoba Zirn. Then came our great Cecilia Engerer whom on Sister described as “a star that glittered among the splendid musicians of our Congregation... She possessed not only superb mastery, but also a great love and an infectious enthusiasm for her art”. She brought with her from St Ursula’s Convent the traditions of both sacred and profane music. It was Sister Cecilia who prepared nearly all our music teachers of the past generation for their Associate and Licentiate Diplomas. Just to mention their names makes quite a list: Sisters Peregrine and Carmella Schneller, Angelica Schiele, Lydia Maestrelli, Liguori Connellan, Euphemia Weber; Rosaria, and Magna Galonska with the golden contralto that charmed even her examiners; Sisters Gottfrieda Frommknecht, Ancilla Mayer, Cletus and Alfreda Lampka, Austin O’Breirne, Prisca Leitner, Louise Wagner, Dolores Hocke, Mary of the Sacred Heart McDaniel, Auxilia Bader and much loved Sister Claudia Kusterer and Mother Augusrtine Geisel. Most of them have now passed to their heavenly reward. They built up our Congregation’s reputation for music. Their pupils are scattered over the whole of South Africa, while some, like our internationally-known Mr Jack Aronowitz, now live in the United Kingdom.

The musicians of our congregation have had special charge of the Choral Office and have been indefatigable in their zeal for the rendering of the Chant and the celebration of the Liturgy with due solemnity.

In 1922 the Holy See sent out the Very Rev Father Bernard Jordan Gijlswijk, O.P.<sup>6</sup> as Apostolic Visitor of all the Dominican Sisters in Southern Africa. He brought Very Rev Father P Termaat, O.P. with him to act as his secretary. The visitation began at our Mother House on 6<sup>th</sup> August 1932. Having completed his tour of visitation the Apostolic Visitor returned to Rome where he was consecrated Archbishop on 7<sup>th</sup> December, and sent back to South Africa as the first Apostolic Delegate. His excellency landed at Cape

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<sup>6</sup> *This Prelate had been made Titular Archbishop of Euchaita and his tenure of office coincided with the period of the pontificate of Pius XI, the “Pope of the Missions” which in this country as elsewhere was one of fruitful growth. South Africa benefited from the wise counsel and direction of this great man. He is still remembered for his untiring work in distributing messages received through Vatican Radio to next of kin during World War II. By this charitable work His Grace made the Catholic Church more widely known and appreciated in South Africa. Born in Holland in 1870, Archbishop Gijlswijk died at Bloemfontein where he is buried in a special vault in the Church of St Joseph.*

Town on 30<sup>th</sup> April 1923 and arranged to reside in Bloemfontein at 29 Park Road. (The Apostolic Delegate's residence was transferred to Pretoria by Archbishop M Lucas, S.V.D.)

Shortly after his arrival the Archbishop made known that on 6<sup>th</sup> January 1923 the Sacred Congregation of the Propagation of the Faith<sup>7</sup> had taken under its immediate jurisdiction all the Dominican Sisters of South Africa and appointed him as its representative. Consequently the obedience hitherto given to the Local Ordinaries as the Ecclesiastical Superiors of the various Dominican Sisterhoods in this country was transferred to Archbishop Gijlswijk.

Notice was also given that an Elective General Chapter was to be held at the Mother House, King William's Town. At the assembly Mother Lucy Kaltenstadler was re-elected as Prioress General for six years and confirmed in office by the Apostolic Delegate. Also, in compliance with the wish of "Propaganda Fidei", that the Dominican Sisters under its care in South Africa should be governed by the same statutes, the Apostolic Delegate compiled for them a "Directory and Customary" in accordance with the Codex of Canon Law. These regulations of the "Dominican Sisters forming the African Congregation of St Catharine of Siena" came into force on 1<sup>st</sup> July 1925. A year later each Sister was given a copy of these Constitutions and the first quinquennial report of the state of the Congregation was sent to the Holy See. The Congregation then had twenty Houses; thirteen of these were in the Eastern Cape District, three in the Transvaal Vicariate, one in the Lydenburg Prefecture, two in the Northern Transvaal and one in Europe.

The Prioresses General of the various Congregations which accepted the regulations promulgated by His Excellency, Archbishop Gijlswijk were requested to make notes and suggestions for necessary alterations "... with the view to preparing properly and unitedly for the final approbation of the Constitutions by the Sacred Congregation of Religious"<sup>8</sup> in Rome.

As the new statutes required the Noviciate House to be situated in Europe, the hitherto-existing Noviciate at the Mother House closed down.

The temporary approval of the constitutions was the most important event of the year 1926. A letter from the Apostolic Delegate, dated 15<sup>th</sup> December of that year, brought the glad tidings so long looked for, that the Holy See had "approved the regulations for seven years. The Sisters, however, were to remain subject to the Sacred Congregation of the Propagation of the Faith". The status of the Institute was now raised to pontifical right. This made certain alterations necessary in the text. Which the Apostolic Delegate undertook to amend as early as possible.

The year 1927 marked the fiftieth anniversary of the coming of the Dominican Nuns to King William's Town. The chief event in the programme of the celebrations was the consecration of the Jubilee Memorial Church at the Mater Infirmorum Convent. The foundation stone was laid by Bishop H MacSherry on 23<sup>rd</sup> April in the presence of a large gathering of Sisters, pupils of the Jubilee Memorial Church at the Mater Infirmorum Convent. The foundation stone was laid by Bishop H MacSherry on 23<sup>rd</sup> April in the presence of a large gathering of Sisters, pupils, past and present, and friends. The Church was consecrated in honour of Our Lady of the Rosary on 14<sup>th</sup> September, the anniversary of the departure of the first seven Sisters from St Ursula's in 1877.

Congratulations and messages of appreciation of the work of the Sisters during the half century were received from Bishops, Clergy and Laity in every part of South Africa. Among the letters was one from the Earl of Athlone, the Governor General of the Union of South Africa, addressed to Mother Jacoba Zirn, congratulating her on the occasion of the Golden Jubilee and, to quote his exact words: "... on the excellent work you have done in this country. I well remember meeting you when I was sent out in South Africa during the Matabele War..."

A large number of Priests honoured the Sisters by coming to the Mother House for the Golden Jubilee celebrations. At the Pontifical High Mass, celebrated by Bishop MacSherry, there were fifteen Priests in

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<sup>7</sup> A Committee of Cardinals in Rome in charge of the Foreign Missions.

<sup>8</sup> Quotation from the Apostolic Delegate's letter.

and around the Sanctuary. There was a great reunion of the past pupils, many of whom had most generously contributed to the Jubilee Fund for the building of the Memorial Church, besides presenting the silver sanctuary lamp, the stained glass window and the great bell, which was afterwards consecrated by Bishop MacSherry.

Among the chief consolations of the Jubilee day was a brief from His Holiness Pope Pius XI, granting a Plenary Indulgence to the religious and their pupils who should visit the Convent Church and also imparting the Apostolic Benediction. Earlier in the year the Sisters working in the Prefecture of the Northern Transvaal had received the Holy Father's blessing through Monsignor Salvator van Nuffel, O.S.B., who had mentioned to His Holiness the Sisters of King William's Town working in the missions in his Prefecture with great zeal for souls.

On 5<sup>th</sup> May 1927, Very Rev Father James de Groen, O.P. arrived at King William's Town. He had been sent by the Apostolic Delegate to teach the Dominican chant to the Sisters and to instruct them in the more exact observance of the ceremonial of the Order in Choir and refectory, etc. The priest spent three weeks carefully teaching the communities at the Mother House, Izeli and the "Mater" and at East London. On 28<sup>th</sup> May he left for Queenstown from where he also visited our other convents in the Cape Province and later on the Houses in the Transvaal. Everywhere the Sisters showed great zeal for the liturgy of their Order and, in a few weeks, all the ceremonies were being attentively carried out. The first "Missa Cantata" with accompanying ceremonies of the Dominican rite<sup>9</sup> was sung at the Mother House on Whit Sunday of 1927. The boarders, too, learned the chant and joined in the singing of the Mass. Another means had thus been given the Sisters of promoting the Catholic spirit in South Africa by training their pupils to love the liturgy of the Church.

As mentioned previously the "King" Dominicans now ceased to be a diocesan Congregation directly subject to the Vicar Apostolic of the Eastern Cape. Unfortunately, despite Bishop MacSherry's great generosity and fine qualities of mind and heart, His Lordship failed to see that this change came about through the action of the Holy See. He looked upon it as a repudiation and an act of base ingratitude on part of the nuns, principally of the head of the congregation. Nothing Mother Lucy<sup>10</sup> did could heal the breach. With the passage of time the estrangement between her and the Bishop only widened, so that she felt obliged to tender her resignation from Office six months before the expiration of her second sexennium. In consequence thereof, an Elective General Chapter was convened in January 1928 at which Mother M Augustine Geisel was chosen as the seventh Prioress General of the Institute.

Mother General Augustine sailed for Europe in April 1932. She had the happiness of assisting at the great Eucharistic Congress in Dublin. Reverend Mother and her companion, Sister M Pius Galvin, were present too, at the Solemn High Mass celebrated at Blackfriars, Oxford, in honour of St Albert the Great, then recently canonised and proclaimed a Doctor of the Church. A unique event took place the same afternoon, when Father Bede Jarrett, O.P. introduced the representatives of the three South African Congregations of Dominican Sisters,<sup>11</sup> with Houses in England, to the nuns of the Order at All Souls' Priory, Headington. The whole Order seemed to be gathered together in that little guest-room. These nuns continued to interest themselves in the work of the Order in South Africa and in that of our Congregation in particular, as their letters testified. The Sisters of the English Congregation of St Catharine of Siena, saintly Mother Margaret Hallahan's daughters, gave our Sisters hospitality at their Mother House in Stone.

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<sup>9</sup> *From the earliest times of the Dominican Order it had its own liturgical rite, which remained in use throughout the centuries until it was abrogated when the new liturgy was introduced after Vatican II.*

<sup>10</sup> *Mother Lucy Kaltenstadler was one of the best known and oldest Sisters of the Congregation when she passed away in 1959. She entered the convent at the age of 16 and, in 1884, made her profession. Being a skilful teacher and administrator, a born mathematician and prayerful religious, she held posts of responsibility during almost all her religious life. (At Potchefstroom she also taught Latin to the two sons of Dr Oswald Pirow, for they intended to study Law.) She was appointed Principal of several schools, then Prioress and three times she held Office as Superior General. From 1928 she served as a member of the General Council for 24 years until ill health forced her to retire to the "Mater Infirmorum". But even in retirement the Congregation the Congregation and its past pupils as a whole were ever in her prayers and thoughts.*

<sup>11</sup> *The Prioresses General of the Congregations of Oakford, of Newcastle and our own.*

The descriptions given in Mother General's letter of those Dominican gatherings, and the family spirit which filled the hearts of all who joined them, and made them one in the love of the Order and of their glorious Father, St Dominic, brought joy to our Sisters in South Africa. After these visits to England and Ireland, Mother General crossed over to Schlehdorf. From there she made a pilgrimage to Lourdes. From that sanctuary she sent a cable of congratulation to the three surviving pioneer Mothers at King William's Town – M Clare Huber, M Reginald Fischer and M Eleonora Petitpierre – who celebrated the Diamond Jubilee of their Profession on 21<sup>st</sup> August, 1932. But Mother Eleonora's grave illness changed this happy prospect into sorrow.<sup>12</sup> Mother General returned to South Africa towards the end of 1932.

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<sup>12</sup> *She died on 29<sup>th</sup> October 1932.*