

Chapter 25 – Potgietersrus

On the Great North Road Again

When Monsignor van Nuffel visited King William's Town in 1924 he had a second request. He also asked Mother Lucy for a staff of Sisters to open a school for white children at Potgietersrus.¹ He had started a mission there which he called after St Helena. This was in the days when the 'King' Congregation was flourishing, so Sister Humberta Kaiser and three companions² set out for the Northern Transvaal and arrived on 12th February 1925. They were to set the place in order before the arrival of the rest of the teaching staff.

The Sisters' train was met by Father Prefect, who gave them a hearty welcome. A taxi took them to St Helena's Church where they assisted at two Masses. Tears flowed when the Sisters saw the mud house in which the Blessed Sacrament was reserved. It had formerly been a dilapidated old shop where mineral waters were sold. A few withered flowers were on the altar; white ants were busy destroying the mud walls and floor on which mushrooms grew in profusion. The ceiling had long since rotted away and an old greyish-looking canvas had taken its place.

Father van Geest O.S.B. then invited the party to breakfast at his presbytery where he himself had cooked porridge in a frying pan over a primus stove. In the kettle with water for the tea he had boiled six eggs. Fortunately they were hard-boiled as the six people had only one teaspoon among them. They then went to the house which was to be their temporary convent. Around it weeds had grown to the height of two metres. Priests and nuns worked to clear a passage to the house and then unpacking started in earnest. The house was composed of two semi-detached cottages which had been used as a public school. The floor and walls had large ink stains and it had been empty for many a year.

In preparation for the arrival of the Sisters Monsignor van Nuffel had kindly asked painters and plasterers to clean the place but its condition can be better imagined than described. The painters, in the absence of a foreman, had painted over vermin-infested papered walls. The floors still bore their splashes of ink. The grounds were the haunt of mambas³ and other reptiles and the weeds had to be cleared away, of course.

Water was a problem which the Sisters thought they had solved when a man asked if they needed furrow water. They gladly accepted the offer. At four o'clock in the morning they were awakened by the roar of a stream flooding the grounds. No furrows had been prepared and soon it was WATER, WATER EVERYWHERE... They were literally shut up in the house unless they would wade through slush and mud.

One room was chosen as a chapel and the Sister-carpenter was soon busy making an altar. Other articles of their first furniture were made from packing cases which they obtained from the local shops. At 9 a.m. on 1st March Father van Geest said Mass in the poor parish church. At this the Sisters were present and at 8 p.m., on the same day, he brought the Blessed Sacrament from the parish church to the convent chapel. The seven Sisters donned their choir cloaks and went in procession to meet the Priest half-way, to accompany the Eucharist in triumph to their little chapel in St Joseph's Convent.

Next day, March 2nd, 1925, Monsignor van Nuffel said the first Mass in the Sisters' chapel. It was a votive Mass of the Holy Spirit. School opened on the same day with 15 pupils, three of whom were boarders.

¹ Originally Piet Potgietersrust (*rust* means 'rest' in Dutch). The town was established in 1854, named after the Voortrekker Leader, Commandant Potgieter who was killed by the Bantu under chief Mokopane. The outbreak of malaria caused the first settlement to be abandoned in 1874 and it was not re-established until 1890. The town became a centre of prospecting and mining activity during the platinum boom of 1925.; but it is now noted for trade in sub-tropical produce.

² Sisters Arsinia Mueller, Berthildis Mueller and Notburga Birzer.

³ "Dendrapis angusticeps" group of highly venomous snakes. Their venom is likely to cause death within a few minutes.

Before the end of the month the teaching staff had been completed. On week-days Father van Geest said Mass in the Convent chapel and only a few Indians represented the parish. On Sundays the Sisters prepared for Mass at St Helena's which had now been cleared of ants and mushrooms and also the worst blotches on walls and floor. In the midst of these improvements Father van Geest received news that he was recalled to Europe. He sold his few personal belongings which the nuns purchased and he left for Holland after Easter. Father Lawrence Schueling O.S.B. succeeded him and gave the Sisters their first day of Exposition of the Blessed Sacrament on the first Sunday of June. About this time the parishioners, urged by Father Lawrence, began to think seriously of a new church to replace the mud structure.

The years 1926 and 1927 were occupied mainly with opening the mission schools at Makapan⁴ and Noodshulp. In August 1926 Father Lawrence opened a mission school at the first-named place. It was dedicated to St Terese of Lisieux and Sisters Gisella Greissel and Xaverina Heiss were the teachers. They taught under canvas roof; two chairs and a small blackboard were the only articles of school furniture; the children sat on the floor. To this mission the Sisters travelled each morning in a donkey cart to teach in a school that was as poor as the cave of Bethlehem. Often they had weary walks over rugged and trackless hills to visit the sick and bring them what simple remedies they possessed or to administer baptism where there was danger of death.

After the morning session the teachers became builders and helped the priest erect a more stable classroom and church. There was no money but Father Lawrence trusted in Divine Providence. Bamboo reeds formed the walls, a tent sail the roof and an altar was made out of packing cases. Such was the first chapel at Makapan Location.

When Father Clemens van Hoeck took temporary charge, the bamboo church had begun to grow dangerous rents in the sail roof and white ants were devouring the reeds of the walls. So the zealous priest decided that a stone church had to be built. Again, trusting in Providence, he quarried stones and put up a larger church. This was completed and blessed in September 1929. At Christmas 1930 the entire community of St Joseph's Convent was present at High Mass at Makapan. About a hundred Black parishioners were there as well and each received a small material gift from the Sisters.

In January 1931 Sister Arsinia Mueller and Sister Finbarr Dargan moved into the new school with 20 pupils. By March there were thirty-eight. As the donkey cart had literally fallen to pieces these two Sisters travelled to school by bicycle. This mode of transit continued until July. Then it happened that, one evening, Monsignor van Nuffel said jestingly: "Father Peter, don't you think you ought to get a car for your Sisters?" A few days later Father Peter returned from Pietersburg with a small second-hand Austin car. Great excitement prevailed among the nuns but history is silent as to what Monsignor van Nuffel said when he saw the car...

The Africans showed their gratitude in their own way. When Easter of 1932 came they whitewashed the walls of their church and decorated the floor according to their own artistic ideas; curves mingled with the forms of animals and plants such as one finds in the local caves. Easter Sunday brought great comfort to the missionaries as many of the Africans had travelled long distances to perform their Easter duties, some on foot, others by ox-wagon or bicycle. After the Benediction service the Black people sang hymns in their own language. For them time had ceased to be and the greater part of the day was spent in vocal prayers and hymn singing.

However, after some time the Sisters ceased their daily visits to Makapan. The distance from the Convent presented difficulty of conveyance and the additional walks to various huts proved too strenuous for the Sisters; so it was decided to leave the mission at the Location to the Priest, his catechist and an African teacher.

Meanwhile St Joseph's Convent received a bell from Sister Humberta's mother in Germany. This was hung on a tree until such time as it was possible to give it a belfry. From its lowly height on the tree the

⁴ Named after Mokopane, an African Chief who used the caves near Potgietersrus as a hiding place in his wars against the Boer Settlers. The caves are known to contain fossils dating from very early periods in man's history.

bell called the Sisters to assemble for the various duties. On 8th September 1926 the foundation stone of the new school and hostel was laid. Monsignor van Nuffel explained to the representative gathering the purpose of the nuns' work and congratulated the town on having the services of the Sisters. The Deputy Mayor and others added their good wishes to the nuns and assured them of all the help they could give.

Two years later St Joseph's Convent was raised to the status of a Priory with Sister Reparata Keilbach as its first Prioress. By August of the same year the old mud church of St Helena had been replaced by a fine erection from a plan drawn by Monsignor van Nuffel who himself blessed the church assisted by Fathers Victorin and Lambert. The new patronal dedication was to Saints Peter and Paul. St Helena was made patroness of the new church in the Non-White Township. In October of this year too, for the first time, the Rosary was recited in the evenings before the Blessed Sacrament Exposed.

School closed in 1929 with only 68 pupils on the roll, twenty-one of whom were boarders. This meant that St Joseph's Convent, though doing good mission work, was not an economic success. By 1933 the establishment was so completely a financial failure that Monsignor van Nuffel very reluctantly gave permission for the property to be sold.

Several suggestions were made: among others it was thought the Convent might be used as a Home for deviate children or as an industrial school. Years passed in this state of uncertainty. It seemed as though St Joseph was unwilling to give up this only house of the congregation dedicated to him. In 1943 and afterwards some additional buildings were even erected by Mr H Geigenberger.

August of 1961 brought a panel inspection to the school, at which amusing incidents occurred. One of the Inspectors, a big man, wanted to elicit the idiom "Unity is strength". "If I were to fall on the floor", he said, "and ask one of you to pick me up, could you do it?" "No, of course not!" "If I asked tow of three of you?" "Perhaps..." "If I asked all of you together?" "Yes, sure." "All right: Now what is the idiom?" A hand shot up from the back row. "Sir, let sleeping dogs lie!"

By 1951 all prospects had brightened temporarily and the boarders numbered over seventy. About this time the convent was honoured by a visit from the famous scientist, Henri Brueil, who was inspecting the caves near Potgietersrus and who had come to South Africa as the guest of the Witwatersrand University. Fourteen years later, however, it became evident that time for the existence of St Joseph's Convent was running out. Lack of vocations and shortage of staff made the Sisters realise that they could not maintain the school beyond the end of 1969. Nevertheless the nuns were grateful to God that the little barque had survived its many storms unbeaten. St Joseph's had been a happy and homely haven for all who worked there or passed through on their way further North.

The Priests felt the closing of the Convent keenly since the sisters had formed the connecting link between the Clergy and the people, Catholics and non-Catholics alike. They prayed that the spirit of the nuns might live on in the living tabernacles that have passed through the Sisters' hands, spreading Charity and Truth among men for the greater honour and glory of God.