

## Chapter 30 – Convent of St Pius V, Cambridge, East London

### *Named for a Dominican Pontiff<sup>1</sup>*

Entering East London from King William's Town, the national road passes through Cambridge.<sup>2</sup> Here the Holy Cross Sisters bought two plots of ground to found a convent. However, after 21 years of educational work there, the nuns found that this, their only House in East London area, was isolated from their other convents in the Northern Cape. Besides this, the buildings were old and repair would be very costly. Furthermore, it was rumoured that De La Salle Brothers were about to open a boys' school at East London and it was feared this would deplete the number of their boy pupils. So, after consultation with Bishop MacSherry and Bishop F Demont, S.C.J. at Aliwal North, permission was obtained to sell "Cambridge" to the Dominicans.

Accordingly, during the Holy Year, on 23<sup>rd</sup> May 1933, Mother Augustine Geisel handed the cheque for the property to Mother Provincial M Dominic Goebel of the Holy Cross Congregation. When the Dominicans took over, Father Barnard Schmidt had already, in 1928, built the parish church adjoining the convent grounds; but, as there was no oratory for the Sisters, the first thing they did was to choose a small room for a private chapel and the rest of the old convent was divided into conventual quarters, hostels for small boys and girls and classrooms. The grounds were large as Father Schmidt allowed the pupils to use part of the parish ground. No building changes on any large scale were effected until 1954, when the Sisters built their own oratory, attached to the parish church and paid towards extending the sanctuary of the parish church. Otherwise they continued to live in the old building even though, after rain, some rooms were several centimetres under water.

The pioneer Dominicans arrived in small groups within a few days of each other. Sisters Margaret Mary Knobel and Rosaria Galonska came first and the community of eleven was completed in March 1933. On 8<sup>th</sup> April the Blessed Sacrament was brought to the chapel. In July school opened with 22 boarders and 56 day pupils; by the end of the year the roll had mounted to 118. In 1941 and 1942 essential repairs were done to make the place more habitable.

On 2<sup>nd</sup> February 1943 Father Schmidt arranged for a procession with lighted candles. As he brought up the rear of the procession and entered the back of the church he intoned the "Nunc Dimitis".<sup>3</sup> To those who listened the words seemed awe-inspiring and prophetic. This was the priest's last Mass at Cambridge. That very day he went as a patient to St Joseph's Hospital, Port Elizabeth and, on 11<sup>th</sup> May, he died. The death of this popular pastor cast a gloom over the whole parish.

In 1939 Mother M Pius Galvin became superior of Cambridge Convent, now named for her patron, Pope Saint Pius V. She loved the children and they reciprocated her affection by confidently bringing her all their little troubles to be assuaged and their difficulties to be solved. Bernie, aged three, one day asked her if god made everything, even cats, dogs and... he seemed to want to say more but could not. So Reverend Mother told him that God had really made all the animals. With a burst of confidence Bernie said: "He should not have made the oxes!" Poor little man, he used to run as fast as his short legs would carry him the moment an ox came in sight.

Mother Pius was greatly helped by her two brothers who lived in Cape Town. At their expense Father Schmidt had carved a beautiful altar for the Sisters' tiny chapel. They also helped by donating educational material. The grounds were now tidied. When, in July, Mother Pius was elected as one of the councillors

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<sup>1</sup> *Michael Ghislieri, born in Piedmont in 1504, of a noble Bolognese family, became a Dominican and acquired distinction as a preacher. He advanced from Bishop to Cardinal and, in 1559, was elected Pope. Thereafter he was known as Pius V. He put into practice the reforming decrees of the Council of Trent. To his endeavours and prayers is due the great naval victory of Lepanto in 1571, by which the Turkish menace to Christendom was definitely checked.*

<sup>2</sup> *Now a suburb of East London, but was founded as a separate town in 1856 and named after the Duke of Cambridge, the son of Queen Victoria.*

<sup>3</sup> *The canticle of the ancient Simeon: Luke 2.*

of the Prioress General she had to leave Cambridge, to the great sorrow of all who had lived with her. Her place was taken temporarily by a series of Sisters in succession.

On 16<sup>th</sup> November 1954 Mass was said for the last time in the Sisters' chapel. Thereafter the nuns used their own oratory for all devotions. The altar in the old chapel was taken to the newly-opened House of Studies, Calaroga II, at Grahamstown. Today the old dilapidated buildings that formed the Convent have vanished and are replaced by a stately double-storey building. This transformation took place under the able direction of Mother M Carmel Kampfert when she was prioress of Cambridge. The large new convent was officially opened by Bishop EA Green in the presence of many pupils and well-wishers in 1957.

The Catholic Order of the Knights of Da Gama promoted and sponsored East London's first Debutantes Ball in June 1963. It was hoped that this would become an annual event. His Lordship EA Green, Bishop of Port Elizabeth thoughtfully condescended to travel all the way from his residence to spend the evening with his flock at East London. Among the dignitaries present were the mayor and mayoress of East London, Cllr. and Mrs Leo Laden, the Chief Magistrate, Mr GM St Leger Daines and, representing the South African Police, Warrant Officer JH Vorster. The opening of the evening ceremony was impressive as the executive Knights, in full regalia, escorted the Bishop to the dais in the presence of about 350 people. The Grand Knight, Francis Greene, introduced the Bishop and spoke on the significance of the occasion. The two score debutantes, drawn from the senior pupils of the Sacred Heart and St Pius Convents, represented the flower of our Christian womanhood. Elegant in their white gowns, the debutantes courtesied gracefully as each one was presented to the Bishop.

Two Standard Six pupils of St Pius School, Brenda Hormann and Wendy Hunter, both aged 13, gained an 'A' Distinction in all five subjects they wrote in 1963. Brenda had the added credit of being the only Standard Six pupil in East London to write Latin as well as her normal five subjects and obtained a distinction in it as well as the congratulations of her examiners.

There was, again, proud rejoicing among the scholars of St Pius Convent (Cambridge) when the news came that Natalie Dobson had won East London's Shakespeare essay contest on "Romeo and Juliet". On the Bard's 400<sup>th</sup> Birthday, April 23<sup>rd</sup> 1964, she received her prize in the form of two tickets to the gala performance of the play and later she was presented with Shakespeare's complete works at a cocktail party in honour of the cast of the play. A few days later she received another reward for her study of Shakespeare's works. This time it was an honour medal to commemorate her representing St Pius Convent in the South African Shakespeare scholar contest sponsored by the Cape Argus.

In a letter to the parents the principal of St Pius School had to inform parents of the decision to close down the school. This resolution was made because of the chronic shortage of Sisters. Ever since 1893 the Dominican Sisterhood has been serving schools and hospitals in East London. The Sisters have mainly been drawn from overseas countries. All over the world the number of religious vocations has plummeted. In the past the devoted band of Sisters has educated thousands of children in their private schools without State assistance. There were, at this time, still two convent schools in the town, staffed by the Dominican Sisters: St Anne's Primary School and the Sacred Heart at 24 Hudson Avenue. A large number of the girls from St Pius' Convent would go to these schools but some would be absorbed by the public schools of the city. So, from December 1971, the buildings of Cambridge Convent would, in future, serve as a Retreat Centre and as a Home for retired members of the Sisterhood.