

Chapter 32 – Mother Jacoba Zirn, O.P.

A Vessel of Election

Marie Zirn was born on 2nd February 1857 at Buebsheim, Wuerttemberg, of well-to-do parents and received her professional training chiefly as a teacher of music at the Convent of St Ursula, Augsburg. When twenty years of age and still only a postulant, she joined the six pioneer Dominican Sisters who set out for South Africa in 1877. She taught music and other subjects in her adopted country and had been Superior of the Convent at Albany Street, East London when, in 1890, she returned to the Mother House, a helpless invalid.

Father A M Daignault, S.J. asked the dying Sister whether she would go to the Zambesi Mission if she recovered her health. She consented and on 9th September 1890, at the close of a Novena of prayer, Sister Jacoba rose from her death-bed, a sound and healthy woman (cf. Chapter 11). On 7th March 1891 she left with a party of volunteer Sisters for Macloutsie. For seven years she and Mother Patrick Cosgrave and their brave band of nuns performed heroic services in the hospitals and on the battle field, saving many valuable lives of the pioneers of the Royal Chartered Company in Rhodesia. Mothers Patrick and Jacoba, Matrons of Salisbury and Bulawayo Hospitals respectively, were decorated with the Order of the Royal Red Cross in 1899 for their services during these stormy days of fighting. In the same year the two Reverend Mothers travelled to England to finalise their training as nurses, for the Rhodesian Hospital Boards demanded certificated nurses. During this time they also had an audience with Her Majesty, Queen Victoria at Buckingham Palace. After the graduation ceremony Mother Patrick journeyed to Ireland to find recruits and Mother Jacoba went to Bavaria to do likewise.

About October 1898 both Mothers and their eleven recruits left London en route for South Africa. At Cape Town the large party was entertained at dinner by the Honourable Cecil John Rhodes, who greatly valued the medical and social services of the nuns in his new country of Rhodesia.

It was at Cape Town that Mother Jacoba received the news that she was not to return to Rhodesia but was recalled to King Williams' Town by her Superiors. Thus it happened that Mother Patrick and her six Irish postulants undertook the long journey to Rhodesia and took Mother Jacoba's heart too – for she had helped to build up the young hospitals and pioneer schools for the young country and its people she had grown to love.

But man proposes and God disposes. Mother Jacoba and her five German recruits were welcomed at the Mother House. In 1899 she was elected Prioress General of 'King Convent and its branches. This was not an easy time for the South African War broke out and then followed the aftermath of trade depression and poverty. Nevertheless four new foundations were made during her sexennium: at Fort Beaufort, Cradock, Queenstown and Schlehdorf. It was also during her term of office that the wooden gate with the old monastic window was replaced at the Mother House with the handsome wrought iron gates that grace its main entrance in Queen's Road. Amid all the labours of her high office, this Prioress General found time to change the Horseshoe Farm, bought by her predecessor for mission purposes into a Sanatorium for ailing and aged Sisters. A quadrangle behind the homestead was planned, the west and east wings were built and a garden with miniature fountain was laid out. Another important step was taken when Mother Jacoba and Mother Eleonora Petitpierre went overseas to find a collecting house and noviciate for recruits from Europe, because the parent convent at Augsburg could no longer supply sufficient recruits both for its own needs and those of South Africa. The peaceful situation of Schlehdorf Convent in the lovely Bavarian Alps made a strong impression on the two Reverend Mothers and they arranged to purchase the property from St Ursula's in 1904.

During the centuries the ancient Schlehdorf monastery had a varied and sometimes tortuous history. Its tradition reaches back to the days of St Boniface, the English Monk who converted Germany to the Faith. Now it was to become the cradle of Dominican Novices for the South African Mission. (Very generously

St Ursula's Sisters also offered Mother Ludovica Zirn¹ to act as Superior for the newly founded house of Sancta Immaculata. Those privileged to know Mother Ludovica cherished fond memories of her kind and patient manner. When she entered the parlour, visitors often remarked that gentleness, happiness and holiness radiated from her mere presence).

In 1905 Mother Jacoba took Sister Aidan Kilbride with her to Schlehdorf where, for sixteen years, Reverend Mother was to be the Prioress and Sister Aidan the teacher of English to the Novices. It must be remembered that Sancta Immaculata was little more than a farm which had been neglected for many years when the nuns first acquired it. For the farm work they depended on hired servants and the recruits who might become Sisters. But Jacoba was a far-sighted woman who never shirked any work. She has been compared to a "competent general, always prepared to lead the army no matter how great the danger might be". So this Superior worked in the fields, visited the stables and considered no work too arduous or menial. The first thing to do was to procure some much-needed recruits for the South African Mission. They had to be taught English and trained for their various vocations. In 1906 the first set of postulants left for the Mother House. Year after year parties were sent out until World War I prohibited this emigration. In organising the farm Prioress Jacoba planned, not only for the present but, for the future, using the best material her limited means allowed. Schlehdorf owned acres of useless marshy land which had to be drained. For this herculean task she obtained the help of Russian Prisoners of War from the Government and so turned the bog into fertile orchards, gardens and pasture lands. Several buildings were also erected on the convent ground, the labour for which was largely voluntary. Mother Prioress' Nephew, an expert electrician, and Father Bernard Schmid, an adept at wood carving and carpentry, were among those who assisted with building. Timber was obtained from the nearby forest.

Those were hard and strenuous years and during the war of 1914 the Prioress braved many dangers. On one occasion she used the much-coveted Royal Red Cross decoration she received from Queen Victoria to gain special favours from the British Military Authorities for her stricken community at Schlehdorf.

One of Sancta Immaculata's many treasures is a life-like portrait of Mother Jacoba wearing her Royal Red Cross and Matabele War Medals. This was a work of appreciation of an Italian artist, Signor B Coletti, who had his studio in Munich. Annually he spent his summer vacation as Schlehdorf's guest. In return he gave the Sisters valuable lessons in the art of painting. (Schlehdorf's Golden Jubilee gift to the Mother House in South Africa was a set of large Stations of the Cross painted by Sister Constantia Feuerstein under Mr Coletti's tutelage. The canvas² for these pictures was woven by Mother Jacoba during the long winter evenings.)

In 1921 Mother Jacoba and Sister Aidan returned to South Africa with a group of novices. At King William's Town Mother Lucy Kaltenstadler – then Provincial General³ - assigned Mother Jacoba as Prioress of the Mother House. Together these two Reverend Mothers planned the handsome double-storeyed school and hostel known as LORETO. The building was made possible by a legacy from Mr Edmund Byrne who, after retiring from a lucrative law practice in King William's Town, returned to Ireland where he died in 1917. The foundation was laid in 1922 and the quadrangle completed in 1924. Mother Jacoba then laid out the gardens of Loreto. For this she engaged a horticulturist, Mr Sellman who, with his family, resided at what is now known as "Marydale". This property was originally acquired to stable the convent cows when it was lawful to have such domestic animals in town. Later the cows were transferred to the "Mater Infirmorum". Mother Jacoba's garden was so artistically laid out that passers-by in Albert Road used to stop to admire the fairy sight.

In appearance Mother Jacoba was tall, slender, with regal bearing and possessed a keen sense of humour. Though a strict disciplinarian, she was greatly loved by the Sisters and laity alike. Her wonderful energy and devotion culminated in the building of the Jubilee Memorial Chapel at the "Mater" during her last

¹ *Mother Jacoba's own sister. She was the Procuratrix of Schlehdorf Convent for many years.*

² *These stations were afterwards given to the Mission Church at Balassi.*

³ *The supreme authority of the "King" Dominicans was called Provincial General until Archbishop Gijswijk changed the title to that of Prioress General.*

Superiorship. At the opening of the church in 1927 Mother Jacoba, with jubilant heart, played the organ at the Divine Service.

Just as this noble woman had practically begun her adventurous, enterprising and well-ordered life on a bed of illness in 1890, so her last five years were destined to be a long period of external inactivity, but one of great interior occupation, for she prayed virtually without cessation. Bedridden, almost blind and racked with the pain of an incurable nerve disease, she uttered no word of complaint. It was God's Will and she, His humble handmaid. All that medical skill and friends could do was lovingly performed for the venerable pioneer. On 2nd September 1937 she died as she had lived, calmly and peacefully. The little donkey-drawn hearse took the mortal remains of this great but unassuming nun to their last resting place in the Sisters' consecrated cemetery.