

## Chapter 5

### *Growth of the Community*

On 21<sup>st</sup> November 1877 the first clothing of a novice in the Habit of St Dominic took place in the convent chapel, which was filled to the utmost of its small capacity with visitors eager to witness the novel ceremony. Bishop Ricards who officiated gave Miss Marie Zirn the Latin form of his name as her title in religion and was henceforth known as Sister Mary Jacoba. On that day it may be said that the Psalmist's prophecy "After her shall virgins be brought to the King" was literally fulfilled; for since that Feast of Our Lady's Presentation in 1877, more than a thousand young women have consecrated themselves to God in the ranks of the Dominican Sisters of King William's Town.

The first South African postulant entered the convent on 8<sup>th</sup> January 1879 in the person of Miss Mary McConville of Cape Town, directed to the Dominicans by Notre Mere. Mary was the leader of a number of others from the Western Province, who proved most valuable members of the young institute. Two days later the first profession ceremony was held at the Mother House when Sister Jacoba pronounced her vows. On the same day the first two postulants to join the nuns in this country received the Habit of the Order: Miss Ellen Foley, a born Londoner and brought up in Cape Town, became known as Sister Mary Gabriel. She later became the first Prioress General of the independent Congregation of Oakford, Natal. Miss Brigid Kiernan, who was named Sister Mary Ursula,<sup>1</sup> was born in Trim, Ireland. For twenty-five years she served Mother Mauritia and her successors as secretary and died in 1906 on the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of her religious profession.

A month later the first four recruits arrived from Germany. They were Sisters Aquinata Frei, Hyacinth Hilkinge, Dominic Vogel and Arnold Schmidt. The King William's Town foundation became independent of St Ursula's in 1878, but the Mother Convent and the branch at Wettenhausen very generously supplied vocations for this African mission until the acquisition of Schlehdorf in 1905 as a collecting house for new recruits.

In the new wing of "King" Convent, transformed into a chapel for the occasion, Sisters Gabriel and Ursula, together with the four novice from Germany pronounced their vows of consecration on 11<sup>th</sup> August 1880. On the same day Miss McConville was received as a novice and named Sister Margaret. The seven Sisters who knelt in the improvised sanctuary that morning showed forth, as it were prophetically, the cosmopolitan – or rather "Pentecostal" – character of the new Institute<sup>2</sup>. In it there has always been found a commingling of the best qualities of the many nationalities that comprise the Congregation. To the happy combination of its diverse national virtues the Institute doubtless owes its special fitness for the complex work assigned it by Providence in a multi-racial country like South Africa.

Among the subjects received by Mother Mauritia in 1880, there were two more destined to play an important role in the extension of the Dominican Order in Southern Africa. The one was Miss Agnes Niland, afterwards Mother Rose of Newcastle, Natal; when Prioress General of that section after it had been severed from its mother convent, she founded houses in South Africa, England, America and Rome. From blitzed England, living underground, during the Battle of Britain, she still continued to direct her nuns in their far-distant and more peaceful homes. The other Lady was Mary Ann Cosgrove. As Mother Patrick she was awarded the Royal Red Cross by Queen Victoria for services to the sick and wounded in the Matabele-Mashona Wars in Rhodesia. To this day her name is a household word there. In 1970 the Posts and Telecommunications Corporation of Rhodesia issued a special stamp of Mother Patrick, the fourth in its "Famous Figures' Series".

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<sup>1</sup> Aunt of the future Sister M Alacoque Brien OP

<sup>2</sup> A its centenary the Congregation could count about twenty different nationalities in its register.

Miss Cosgrave, with her friend Teresa Doyle, well-known and loved in after years as Mother Dympna, were the first recruits to come directly to King William's Town from Ireland. They hailed from County Wexford and, enveloped in bonnet and shawl to conceal their extreme youth, travelled under the aegis of Bishop Ricards, himself on his return voyage from Europe in 1880.

The first pupil of the Convent to enter religion was Teresa Hartwanger,<sup>3</sup> in the Convent known as Sister Aquinata, whose promise was cut short by an early death in 1887. After her a thin but continuous stream of past pupils of the 'King' Dominicans swelled the tide of vocations to this congregation or to the other Sisterhoods in South Africa.

Father Arnold Widdershofen SJ, the first chaplain to the community, was recalled by his superiors to St Aidan's College, Grahamstown, in 1879. He was the first link between the Sisters of King William's Town and the Jesuits, to whom the nuns owed much spiritual assistance especially in the early years. The new chaplain, Reverend John Allen D.D., continued in office for twelve years. He was the trusted friend of Mother Mauritia as well as the able instructor of the teaching Sisters in classics, mathematics and the other branches of higher education then becoming necessary owing to the extension of the school curriculum. He was a wise and prudent spiritual director to the community, for he put a decided stamp of solid piety on the souls of the young religious, who were themselves to found the traditions of the Institute. Twice a year he preached the customary retreat of five days to the Sisters. The manuscript of these sermons is still preserved in the Convent Archives. He wrote several small spiritual books specially for his spiritual daughters. He also translated the Constitutions from German into English, as well as a treatise on the Rule of St Augustine by Rev Weiniger, SJ. His working knowledge of German also enabled him to give spiritual aid to the German Settlers in the Buffalo valley. In addition to this, Father Allen obtained for the Sisters from Bishop Ricards the hitherto unheard-of privilege of receiving Holy Communion six times a week. How great was the joy of the nuns for this unusual favour! At that time Communion was allowed, even to religious, only about three times a week.

In 1891 Dr Allen was appointed mission priest at Queenstown, where he laid the foundation stone of the church dedicated to St Dominic. The altar of the church was later given by the parish as his memorial. In 1955 a more modern altar was erected, but the portion of the original altar on which his commemoration was gilded, was retained beneath the new structure.

Under the strenuous work he had done, Father Allen's health gave way and in April 1891 he returned to his native Wexford where he lived for some years in retirement, dying at Lightwater, Killinick, at the age of fifty-two on 4<sup>th</sup> June 1902. Great, surely, must be the reward given to this holy and learned priest for the help he gave the Congregation during its critical embryonic years.

Towards the end of 1883 it became evident that God was soon to call the first Dominican Sister of King William's Town to her eternal rest: Sister Mary Aquinata Frei. During her illness she edified all by her patience and even joy, despite her sufferings. When she died on 21<sup>st</sup> January 1884, Mother Mauritia acquired a plot of ground in the town's cemetery where the first ten Sisters to enter eternity were laid to rest. After the acquisition of the convent farm in the Izeli Valley the nuns were buried on this property, except those who died in branch houses far removed from the mother convent.

At the beginning of 1884 the community's annalist records that "...In six years our community was multiplied six times..." that is, six times the original number of seven Sisters.

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<sup>3</sup> *Aunt of the future Sister M de Sales Hartwanger OP*