

## Chapter 7 – King William’s Town, Motherhouse Extensions

### *Extended Activities*

The ever-growing schools and community at the Mother House made extensions necessary. Second storeys had to be built on the orphanage, the boys’ house and the girls’ hostel. By 1887 the number of Sisters and Catholic pupils there could no longer be accommodated in the chapel and Mother Mauritia realised the need to build a larger church. She set to work to obtain the necessary funds from friends in Europe. The response to the Sisters’ appeals were generous and stained glass windows in the church commemorate the principal benefactors.<sup>1</sup> By the 15<sup>th</sup> April 1887 it was possible to hold the ceremony of laying the foundation stone. Bishop Ricards, ever a kind father and interested in the progress of the nuns and their work, gladly came from his residence at Grahamstown. On 1<sup>st</sup> May Father Fagan offered the first Mass in the newly completed sanctuary. The plan had been drawn by Mr Adolf Grellert and Mr Charles Andre built it for the sum of 2700 Pounds. These sums of money now seem insignificant but they meant a fortune to the nuns at the time.

The high altar, in Carrara Marble and ornamented in sienna and black, was designed and made in Genoa, Italy, by Montersolo Vittorio. The reredos, a masterpiece in Roman style, is grey marble. The boxes containing it arrived at King William’s Town on 14<sup>th</sup> April 1890. But the packing had not been secure enough for that long journey and when the cases were opened the altar was found badly broken.<sup>2</sup> The disappointment was great. However, a local sculptor, Mr Dover, came forward and offered his services.<sup>3</sup> He carefully arranged the pieces, concealing the cracks as much as possible, so that one could hardly believe that such a structure had been made out of what had looked like builders’ rubble. The tiled floor in cream and brown seemed satisfactory; but the ceiling had given a deal of trouble and even when finished did not meet with Mother Mauritia’s approval.

On 28<sup>th</sup> April Bishop Ricards went through the entire ceremony of consecration according to the Roman Rite. He was ably assisted by Msgr Fagan, Rev Dr Allen, Fathers P Strobino, William Quirk, F Engels, S.J. and J Kelly. The consecration crosses, twelve in number, were blessed and were fixed to the walls. Next day the official opening of the church was performed in the presence of a large number of both Catholics and Non-Catholics.

Again the Bishop officiated and, in an appropriate sermon explained the meaning of a Consecration.<sup>4</sup>

Mother Foundress’ large-hearted charity to the poor found ample scope in the year 1884, when a financial depression struck the Cape Colony. Every day practically brought her an urgent appeal for help and Bishop Ricards, hearing of the Sisters’ straightened circumstances assisted them with the proceeds of his lectures and writings. Though the good Mother’s purse was slender, her heart was great; and she managed with the assistance of her friends and benefactors in South Africa and Europe to support a large number of poor and neglected children who, but for her, would have been completely destitute or lost to the Faith.

In 1885 she resolved to support and educate fifteen orphans in honour of the mysteries of the Rosary. These were known as the “Rosary Children”. In the course of time their number equalled the beads of the fifteen decades and provision had to be made for them on the convent farm. A boarding school for boys was also opened at the Mother House. When the boys’ department had grown beyond its limits, it too was transferred to Izeli farm.

Among Mother Mauritia’s boys was a deaf mute, Tom Moore. For his great need, too, the magnanimous Foundress provided by establishing a class for teaching the deaf at the Mother House. Sister Stephanie Hanshuber, who had acquired some training in the oral method of teaching the deaf while still in

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<sup>1</sup> *The stained glass windows came from Mayer’s Factory, Munich in 1888.*

<sup>2</sup> *For this reason the altar was not moved forward when the new liturgy was introduced.*

<sup>3</sup> *Mr Newell asked to be given the honour of paying for it and Mother Mauritia gratefully granted his request.*

<sup>4</sup> *In the early days the nuns occupied only the rear of the church where their pews were separated from the rest of the congregation by a grille. Here the priest also distributed Holy Communion to the Sisters.*

Germany, pioneered from this small beginning the first school of its kind in South Africa. She died nine years later without realising that she had planted the seed of what would become one of the best known schools in the country.<sup>5</sup>

The versatile artist, the late Professor W.G.G. Bevington of Cape Town, was an alumnus of the King William's Town School for the Deaf. At the age of nineteen, while still at school, at the suggestion of Mother Jacoba Zirn, Willie Bevington painted a portrait of Cecil Rhodes.<sup>6</sup> The picture was regarded as so outstanding a likeness that Willie was awarded a scholarship for advanced study in art at the Royal College of Arts, London, of which College he later became an Associate. He was the first, and presumably the only, Art student to win a Rhodes scholarship in that particular branch of study. What a credit to his former school, the Convent of King William's Town! Among this man's works in Cape Town are the wood carving of the South African coat-of-arms above the Speaker's chair in the House of Assembly and the roll of honour in the Standard Bank. There are several of Mr Bevington's paintings in the Town Hall at King William's Town as well.

The Congregation's first efforts for the education of the Bantu people was also begun in 1885. It was started with Lizzie and Anna, the daughters of the convent servant, Klaas. But these were complex characters who became a problem rather than a credit, and for the time being the project had to be abandoned.

During Fr Allen's temporary absence in Europe, Father Peter Strobino acted as chaplain to the Mother House. He founded the Sodality of the children of Mary, the first of its kind in the Eastern Cape, on 26<sup>th</sup> May 1895. When Father Allen returned he established also the Sodality of the Holy Angles for the junior girls on 8<sup>th</sup> December of the same year.

At the end of November Rev Dr Frederick Charles Kolbe, D.D, of Cape Town paid his first visit to the Convent at King William's Town. During his stay he gave the teaching staff valuable help, for this was prior to the days of refresher courses or summer schools. This visit was the beginning of the close association and lasting friendship between the Institute and this great convert priest to whom all the convent schools in this country owe a great debt of gratitude. Monsignor Kolbe had a master mind. Highly talented and well cultured, he was a giant in literature, art and science. Field Marshall J.C. Smuts considered Kolbe the greatest church-man South Africa has produced, and spoke of him as "the show-piece of our country..."

Between the years 1885 and 1887 several medals and diplomas for skill in needlework and embroidery were gained by the Sisters at various public exhibitions.

In November 1886, Bishop Ricards presented the Mother House with a printing press which was promptly used to make copies of the Rule and Constitutions and of several writings compiled by Rev Dr Allen, to be distributed among the Sisters. This press eventually found its way to Rhodesia.

Mention should also be made of one of the earliest benefactors of the Sisterhood: Most Reverend Anton von Steichele, Archbishop of Munich, who sent Mother Mauritia a hundred-and-fifty Pounds each year as alms for the mission work among the German immigrants. The Archbishop continued this generous gesture until his death on 9<sup>th</sup> October 1889.

Reverend Dr Allen was to conduct the Sisters' annual retreat in December 1888, for which he chose the theme "The Apostolic Life". The clerestory of the convent church is adorned with stained glass windows depicting the twelve apostles. All this was a fore-shadowing of the work God had in store for the Institute. Hitherto the Sisters had regarded themselves as Nuns, more or less enclosed. In fact many believed they really were religious of the Second Order of St Dominic. To meet the increasing calls for charitable work beyond the convent walls, Mother Mauritia set aside two Sisters for extern activities so as to keep the other nuns "enclosed". Sisters Alexandra Delany and Frances Condon<sup>7</sup> were solemnly clothed as

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<sup>5</sup> It was later transferred to Johannesburg and named St Vincent's School for the Deaf.

<sup>6</sup> Prime Minister of the Cape Colony.

<sup>7</sup> Sister Alexandra was later sent to the community in Natal;

“Dominican Tertiaries”. Though living in the community they wore a black garb with a thin veil. Every day these Tertiaries left the enclosure on their errands of mercy and business: visiting the poor and sick, accompanying the pupils on their walks and doing other things outside the scope of the enclosed religious.

This urge to a more active life, or rather, to a greater extension of the community’s activities, made itself insistently felt during the years 1888 and 1889. From various entries in Bishop Ricards’ journal it is evident that he was beginning to rely ever more on Mother Mauritia and her Sisters for help in supplying the spiritual wants of his Catholics scattered over the vast Vicariate. Even in the more populous parts the Catholics were usually too few and too poor to support a pastor. Moreover the number of missionary priests at the Bishop’s disposal was too small to cope with the work.

By putting convents in a few centres, this Prelate believed much might be done to stop the ever-growing leakage from the Faith. Then too, other Pastors of the scattered Catholic flock in South Africa began to turn their eyes towards King William’s Town whence, they hoped, help might come to them.

Thus, under the date 9<sup>th</sup> January 1889, Bishop Ricards records in his diary: “...I received a telegram from Mother Mauritia. She wants to go to Graaff-Reinet to establish a convent there. I reply ‘You may go to Natal. I have promised Bishop Jolivet’<sup>8</sup>...”

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*Sister Frances went to Rhodesia.*

<sup>8</sup> Successor to Bishop J. F. Allard, OMI