

Chapter 8 – Natal

To the Garden Province¹

In the “Catholic Magazine of South Africa” one reads that Oakford was a wilderness. The priest² had sown the good seed – the harvest was promising. There was need of helpers to gather it; and turning his eyes to the already well-known convent of King William’s Town, he often in fervent prayers cried out: ‘Oh, that they would pass over to Natal and help us’. His Bishop saw the great need and sent a pressing message to his friend Bishop Ricards to obtain Sisters from the community over which Mother Mauritia presided. This stout-hearted woman responded with great generosity and set eight nuns aside to be the pioneers of the Church at that mission.

The result of the telegraphic communication between Dr Ricards and King William’s Town was that on 17th January 1889 Mother Mauritia, Sister Rose Niland and Reverend Dr Allen sailed from East London on the “Courland”. They went to interview the Bishop of Natal in connection with the request for Sisters to help Christianise the Zulu race.

Bishop Charles Constant Jolivet OMI thought they should open a mission at Oakford, a secluded spot near Verulam, about 35 Kilometres from Durban. It was a poor locality – hidden from the eyes of the world; but Prioress Mauritia was not looking for anything spectacular. She remembered the visit of Chief Frelie and how she had yearned to bring the Gospel to the Bantu people. Here was a race even more powerful than the Amakhosa and she gladly accepted the Bishop’s offer. It was suggested that, in order to pay their way, the Sisters might open a fee-paying school for Europeans. Bishop Jolivet could offer no monetary assistance.

On Mother Mauritia’s return to the Cape Colony she reported everything to Dr Ricards. Although the Sisters originally came from a Dominican Convent they were, by Canon Law, a quasi-diocesan congregation with Bishop Ricards of the Eastern Vicariate as their ecclesiastical superior. Dr Ricards approved of the arrangements made, but insisted that all buildings erected in Natal should be paid for by the Congregation and the documents must be signed in the name of the Institute and not in the name of whoever happened to be the superior at the time. A contract was then drawn up between Bishop Jolivet and Mother Mauritia representing the Sisterhood of King William’s Town. By this Mother Mauritia agreed to purchase the property at Oakford from the Bishop of Natal and to pay for the erection of the convent there. The buildings were constructed by the Brothers of the Trappist Monastery of Mariannahill. When volunteers were called for at the Mother House to staff the venture, the following were chosen:

Sister Mary Gabriel Foley (Superior)

Sister Mary Joseph Ryan

Sister Mary Hyacinth Hilkinger

Sister Mary Columba O’Sullivan

Sister Mary Gertrude Walter³

Sister Mary Beatrix Holdendried

Sister Mary Alphonsa Scherer

Sister Mary Raphael Walter

From this can be seen how the Dominican law of separation was

beginning its inexorable work and how this Foundress, like St Dominic, did not believe in hoarding up the precious grain but was prepared to scatter it to the four winds of heaven so that it might bring forth fruit for Christ’s young Church in South Africa. Mother Mauritia and all the Sisters of King William’s Town felt the parting very deeply, as if they knew by premonition these Sisters were leaving them for good. The

¹ Natal became known as the Garden Province of South Africa because of its majestic mountains, golden beaches and many other beauty spots.

² Rev L Mathieu OMI

³ The lay-sister who came with the pioneer Sisters to King William’s Town

pioneers arrived at Oakford on 25th March 1889 to begin the arduous task of opening a school for Zulu children. The difficulties were immense. The Zulu language was not known to any of them and the customs of this tribe differed very much from those of the Amakhosa. Natal, by comparison with the Cape Colony, seemed to the nuns almost tropical in climate and the damp heat sapped their strength. However, they knew that pioneers are meant to overcome such difficulties.

Soon the number of Zulu pupils increased to sixty and the language question was met by beginning at once with the minimum knowledge of the vernacular. An industrial school was started, at which practical handling of tools taught the scholars the names of equipment and how to use it, and the teachers learned to express these in an intelligible way.

In a short time a school for Europeans was also started. The area was expanding and new residents were settling in the locality. Parents of moderate means found it difficult to send their children to school at Verulam and Durban. Thus a local school, run by the Sisters, was desirable. For this purpose another staff of Sisters arrived from King William's Town. Parents soon begged the nuns to educate their sons as well as their daughters. Boys of under fourteen years were then admitted and accommodation had to be provided for these also. Both schools were patronised by even more distant parts of Natal.

Bishop Jolivet insisted that still more buildings were to be erected at Oakford; among these His Lordship "stables". Doubtless these needs were there, but the financial resources of the King William's Town congregations were, by this time, strained to the utmost and unable to bear greater costs. So here was an impasse. It would be very naïve to believe that differences of opinion and tensions do not arise among religious. These have indeed occurred even among saints. The Bishop and Mother Mauritia were both human and therefore not perfect. Yet they were also considered very devout religious. Both were energetic, strong-willed and zealous for good; but neither could see the other's point of view in this matter. Nevertheless God can make use of even human frailties to fulfil His providential designs.

While the dispute continued the sisters in Natal were puzzling their brains how they could staff the new foundation which was planned for Newcastle, Natal. Under the circumstances it was obvious that they could not expect recruits or financial aid from King William's Town. So Mother Gabriel and Sister Joseph Ryan, with the consent of Bishop Jolivet, undertook a journey to Europe. In their absence Sister Rose Niland was appointed Superior at Newcastle.

To cut a long story short, the disagreement between Mother Mauritia and the Bishop of Natal was not resolved. At length, with a heart full of sorrow, Mother Mauritia had to agree that the Priory at Oakford be severed from her Congregation in March 1890. Over and over again she had implored God to send another solution to the difficulties, but no other way was found. It was naturally very painful for Mother Mauritia to part with her Sisters to whom she was united with ties of deep love and personal sacrifice. But with her characteristic generosity she surrendered them to the Will of Divine Providence.

The Sisters, having volunteered freely to go to Natal, would have been entitled to return to their mother convent if they so desired. But Bishop Jolivet was averse to it and the nuns themselves, seeing their new mission so full of promise, could not conceive that God wished them to abandon it.⁴ Mother Gabriel Foley then became the first Prioress General of the newly-created Congregation of Oakford and Bishop Ricards transferred his jurisdiction over these Sisters to the Vicar Apostolic of Natal. Under Mother Gabriel's guidance the new foundation took root and in time prospered to become a flourishing branch of the Dominican Order.

Not long after this the Newcastle Community, under Mother Rose Niland's command, also became an independent unit with the approval of Bishop Jolivet.⁵ Both these Dominican congregations thus owe their inception to the missionary zeal of Sister Mauritia Tiefenboeck, who was destined to become the Mother of a "White-robed Legion".

⁴ Letter of Sister M Gertrude Walter to Dr J D Ricards, Vol III, Diocesan Archives, Port Elizabeth.

⁵ Letter of Mother M Gabriel Foley to Bishop P Strobino, Vol III, Diocesan Archives, Port Elizabeth