

III – *St Joseph's School*, Durban Street, King William's Town

When the school building in Durban Street had been vacated and the De La Salle Brothers were teaching the boys in Glendower House the vacated buildings were used as a school for Coloured children. Zealous missionary as Monsignor Fagan was, he declared he could not meet his God before he had done something for the moral and educational uplifting of his Coloured parishioners.

It was, therefore, a happy day for Father Fagan when he could turn the fine stone building erected by the Catholic soldiers in the previous century, and known as St Joseph's Hall, into a school-house.

Mother M Clare Huber of the Sacred Heart Convent was approached and in the Dominican tradition of spreading the Truth to all nations, she readily consented to take charge of the proposed mission school. The evil one, however, did not intend to let so good a work escape his malice and, as soon as Monsignor Fagan's plan became known, a veritable storm of opposition arose from certain influential townsmen and, when the Priest could not silence them, he just said calmly: "Nevertheless I mean to go on."

Accordingly, on 14th July 1913, two Sisters were to begin the school. Was there any prospect of pupils? They did not know. Would public opposition again make itself felt? They did not care. How were they to act? God would show the way... As they walked down the street to begin their mission a terrible windstorm arose, blowing clouds of dust into their faces, while they could scarcely keep on their feet. "The devil is evidently very angry at the work we mean to do", said one nun to the other as they laughed at the irate elements.

Arrived at the school-house the Sisters looked round for their pupils. Not a soul was to be seen. Vainly did they cast their glances up and down the street; vainly did they accost an occasional Black passer-by... there was no sign of a scholar. Should they go home and give it up? Oh, no! "Let us pray the Rosary; the Good God will send the children," So, taking up their beads, they began the joyful Mysteries. As they paced up and down reciting their "Aves" many a glance did they cast at the door but the silence remained unbroken... At last there was a footstep – the teachers' hearts beat high – but it was only the Convent messenger, old Adam Manele, looking in to see the new school. Disapproval marked every feature of his face as he gazed at the bare walls and the few empty desks that stood in the centre of the room. "Adam, send to this room all the little black boys and girls you meet on the road," said the nuns. But Adam shook his head. "No! This school no good. Where Jesus? Where Maria? ..." This was a good hint to the Sisters and the next day the walls were adorned with a crucifix and pictures of Saint Joseph and the Blessed Virgin.

After Adam's departure the nuns proceeded to say the Sorrowful Mysteries of the Rosary. They had gone halfway through the chaplet when the door opened and a Coloured¹ woman came in to ask when the school was to begin. Delighted at the prospect of pupils at last, the Sisters told her that the school had in fact begun and bade her hasten home to bring her offspring and all the children she could find. She obeyed and they continued the Rosary. Scarcely had they finished when three children timidly climbed the steps – two boys and a little girl of four years. Joy filled the teachers' hearts at the sight of their first scholars and, at once, they began to question the poorly-clad little firstlings about the good God. The children knew nothing of Him; had not even heard His Name. So the Sisters found a congenial task telling these little ones of their Father in Heaven. Three pairs of shining eyes were fixed on the nuns as they listened for the first time to the story of God's love for them.

Soon the Coloured woman returned with her two children and the Sisters playfully called their first pupils the "Five Joyful Mysteries". About noon four African lads, about ten to twelve years of age, joined the class. When Monsignor Fagan came down to see how the Sisters were progressing, they joyfully

¹ *The Coloured population of South Africa numbers about two million. Collectively they constitute the third largest population segment. They are of mixed parentage from Whites with Bushmen, Hottentots, Negroid Slaves, East Indians and Africans/ About 90% are settled in the Cape Province. Their way of life is rooted in Western culture.*

introduced him to their “Nine Choirs of Angels”. At the end of the week the scholars numbered thirty-three. Thus, under the patronage of St Joseph and Our Lady, was sown the mustard seed of the St Joseph’s Mission School in King William’s Town.

The following January the school was recognised by the State and began to receive a small annual income of Fifty Pounds. This would not go far but the Sacred Heart Convent promised to make up the deficit. Most of the scholars were extremely poor and Sisters Norbertha Rieble and Camilla Klostermayer were often at a loss where to procure a “wedding garment” for the sixty little waifs of the “Highways and Byways”. Yet it was wonderful to see the improvement that took place in the children with regard to cleanliness and neatness of person; and they gradually became accustomed to habits of order and discipline. They were also greatly attached to their teachers; thus the soil was well-fitted to receive the good seed of a Christian education.

Every Sunday Mass was offered up in the school-house on a neat wooden altar made by Sister de Pazzi Barth, the convent carpenter. After the service catechetical instruction was given to adults and children by the Sisters. The religious and moral training of the children was the teachers’ chief aim; but they also laboured diligently to give their charges a good elementary knowledge of secular subjects. It was, therefore, a matter of sincere thankfulness to God when, at the first annual inspection, Mr Bond M.A. expressed himself well-satisfied with the children’s progress and the condition of the school.

As a small reward for the diligence the children were promised a Christmas party. It was conducted on unconventional lines, but it was very successful for all that. For some weeks before the great day the tables in the Sisters’ Common Room at the Convent were strewn with a heterogeneous collection of gifts received from kind benefactors for the mission school. Clever fingers also dressed dolls, so dear to childish hearts. Sister Ceslaus Riedl, the Convent Cook, was asked to lend her aid and contributed a goodly share of cakes and sweet meats for the feast. Faithful old Adam Manele transported the precious burden to the school in a hand-cart and the Sisters set forth the wares on each child’s place. Then the door was opened and in trooped the pupils. Intense delight and surprise were written on all the faces as each proceeded to examine what treasure had fallen to his lot. It was touching to see the joy of a little lame girl as she clapped her hands with glee and cried: “Oh, sister, just look at my beautiful, beautiful doll!” So much gladness to be got from so little...

A rather amusing episode occurred at the end, when an absentee was noticed: “Where is Ali?” asked Sister. “But Sister, he does not keep Christmas; he’s a Turk”, was the somewhat startling explanation. The good nun surely did not anticipate when she left her Fatherland to spend her life in the mission field, that it would be within her scope to include a Turk in her missionary efforts. The absentee’s portion was saved for him; and one is inclined to think that the following year Ali kept Christmas in as orthodox a manner as the rest of the variegated little flock.

The Mission continued to grow into a High School where pupils took the matriculation Examination. After some years the Bantu pupils were transferred to their own school in the African Township and “St Joseph’s was henceforth reserved for Coloured children only.

The Coloured parishioners, a mere handful in Monsignor Fagan’s time, now number over six hundred. They have their own parish priest and also their sodalities for men, women, boys and girls. An Active St Vincent de Paul Society helps needy cases.

As time went on staff problems caused the high school standards to be suspended in 1950. However, the school could continue as a secondary school. After passing their Junior Certificate Examination the pupils were encouraged to continue their education elsewhere or by correspondence courses. In 1952 the school also took over the old Catholic Church building opposite the original premises. The saintly and much loved Sister Ludwiga Heanan did long service as Principal of the Secondary School. After her demise the responsibility passed to Sister Domitilla Schuster. Eventually the secondary department also had to be discontinued and the institution carried on yet awhile as a Primary School under the direction of Sister Gunda Auer...

The Convent annals bear record that “some teachers of St Joseph’s Primary School wept unashamedly on 15th June 1970 when their school ‘broke up’ for the last time...” In the following term its over 500 children would join the Wilfred Scott Primary School in Schornville Township. This move had to be made in accordance with the Coloured Education Policy of the State. The new, combined school would have only Coloured teachers on its staff. Eleven of the sixteen teachers, who sadly witnessed the closing ceremony of St Joseph’s Mission, had been pupils there themselves before qualifying and returning to teach at their old school. How many Coloured people owe their education and good positions today to the foundation received under the patronage of St Joseph in Durban Street, King William’s Town?