

IV – *St Francis Xavier Convent*, East London

In 1913 Monsignor James Kelly started, on a very small scale, a school for Coloured, Indian and Chinese children at East London, where no educational facilities existed for these races. Sister Gabriel White was the principal teacher and her classroom was the tiny library of the St Vincent de Paul Society, situated where Saint Anthony's Boys' School for white children was erected later. Here Sister endeavoured to instil into her polyglot group of boys and girls "the three Rs" as well as lessons in cleanliness and order.

In 1921 the Indians and Coloured were removed to St Francis Xavier Mission School in McLean Street.¹ At first this school was occupied by the Sisters only during school hours; but in less than ten years it had a resident community of eight nuns. (After the disastrous fire of Duncan Village in 1952 only two European Sisters lived here with five African Sisters until St Peter Claver Mission was rebuilt and handed over to the Sisters of Bl Martin de Porres in 1958.) The Chinese children were transferred to a spacious new school of their own in St Peter's Road during 1941. This did not belong to our Congregation, but two Sisters from the Convent in Albany Street taught the Chinese children there during school hours and in the afternoon these were tutored by their own Chinese teachers.

St Francis Xavier Mission became a flourishing concern and hundreds of Indian and Coloured children owe to it their entire education. The Christian Faith also spread among these races and their Legion of Mary Praesidium was very active. Dr Bruce Bays M.D. was a great benefactor of our Sisters in East London. The Doctor had come to South Africa after graduating in London. For over a quarter of a century he played a prominent part in the development of East London and also became a member of the local School Board.

The Convent Annals relate that "the pupils of St Francis Xavier's, accompanied by their teachers, went to Terminus Street in town where, with scholars of other schools, they awaited the arrival of His Royal Highness Prince George in 1934."

The Mission did excellent work as a Primary School. Mr Bowden, the Inspector, wrote this report: "... The School buildings are in good condition. Registers are in order and schemes of work have been well prepared in all the subjects and records of work are up-to-date. The work throughout the school is of a satisfactory standard. The teachers are conscientious and painstaking with the result that good progress has been made by pupils in all classes. The written work is neat and it is evident that corrections of exercises and the supervision of pupils are done with care. The teachers are to be commended for their zeal and efficiency..."

School concerts were also staged annually and "The Daily Dispatch" had this to say of one entertainment: "... 'The Madonna in the Woods' was very cleverly staged and acted... Several of the performers had excellent voices and rendered their parts admirably... The grateful thanks of the Indian and Coloured communities is rendered to the Sisters who worked so hard and willingly to make the entertainment the great success it was..."

Great excitement prevailed at St Francis Xavier Mission as the community and the pupils prepared to move to their new and larger premises at 41 Beaconsfield Road, near the North End, on 17th June 1961. Plans for the new Convent and school had been drawn by Mr W.P. Osmond. The new buildings were blessed by Bishop EA Green D.D. of Port Elizabeth who, in an enthusiastic address, thanked the Dominican Congregation for its missionary zeal which in the past had done so much pioneering work in South Africa. "... And even in these difficult times the Sisters are not less courageous in their work for all sections of the population..."

The visitors were allowed to view the Convent before the Sisters took up their abode therein. Everyone was delighted with the tasteful decorations and the refreshments that had been prepared by the ladies of the Coloured community.

¹ *The school hall of this Mission was a memorial to Mrs Knobel, a benefactor and mother of Sister Margaret Mary, the first Superior of the Mission. She was succeeded by Sister Romualda Steinhart.*

- The present North End of East London was once a settlement of Europeans who undertook to develop it into a harbour town. Port Rex.² As it was then called, has since developed into a city of over 160000 inhabitants of different races and languages. It so happened that the town spread mainly in the easterly and southerly direction, hence North End is no longer in a central position. In all likelihood it will become an industrial area and the Coloured communities living there have been moving out steadily to Pfefferville, the Coloured Township.

The new Mission of St Francis Xavier became a centre of social and educational activity for the Catholic Coloured and Indian communities of East London. On 1st July 1959 the Mother General received permission from Rome to establish a Novitiate House at St Francis Xavier Convent and Sister Veritas Strasser was appointed Mistress of Novices. For a number of years Sisters Gottharda Weng and Clemence Winkelhofer, in turn, presided over the convent as Superior. Sister Julitta Einweg has been teaching some of the novices, and also some seculars, music and sewing; while Sister Ulrich Stephan helped the young Coloured Sisters improve their general education. When the State provided public schools for the Coloureds and Indians in East London, most of the pupils of St Francis Xavier transferred to these new institutions. Several teachers on the staffs of these State Schools had been pupils at St Francis Xavier. This latter school now conducts only a small junior school.

On December 16th 1975 Bishop John Murphy happily ordained the first vocation to the priesthood from St Francis Xavier Parish, namely Rev Lewis Marshall.

Over the years the community of this convent has changed, of course, and the Sisters there now are all well past their prime but they are still doing great work for souls and the scope for apostolic activities there remains limitless. One task might begin with a cold and hungry child at the kitchen and stretch over hundreds of homes of North End, Parkside, Buffalo Flats, Lloyd Township and Pfefferville. The Sisters visit the homes to help in various ways. Sometimes there is a wayward child who needs encouragement; or there is a lonely, helpless old man whose day is brightened by a visit from the nuns. Giving advice with regard to budgeting on a small income, or how to obtain a pension or support from a Welfare Society are all part and parcel of the Sisters' apostolate. Sister Marion Haasenstab has also begun visiting the prison to pray with the inmates and to console them. She is probably the first of our Sisters who has gained access to a penitentiary for the purpose of doing mission work.

On their rounds in the townships the Sisters also came across an old lady, supposedly a centenarian, Mrs Rachel Spandiel. The patient had been confined to her room for many months since she became too feeble to walk. For her the Sisters hired a wheelchair from the South African Red Cross Society in order to take her into the fresh air. How happy she was to be out of doors and always looked forward to the Sisters' visits. Gradually she grew weaker and eventually went happily and peacefully to a better world.

Much time is given to adult converts and to instructing Confirmation Classes. It would be quite impossible for the few Sisters to teach catechism to the hundreds of children, so it has become imperative to train lay Catechists; for, in spite of the best efforts, many children slip out of the Sisters' hands when parents neglect sending them to the instruction classes.

It took the young people some time to grasp the meaning of team work outside sports circles – but now the Christian Life Groups are well on their way to making a fine contribution to the Parish. A great asset is also the Catholic Women's League that bears fruit in humble work done among the women.

At the Sisters' Novitiate there was much 'coming and going' of novices over the years; however, the nuns' labours and prayers have not been quite fruitless as a community of Coloured Sisters now resides in the Convent of St Rose of Lima at Michausdal, Cradock. And, although at present vocations are slow in coming, there is hope that, in God's good time, the people around St Francis Xavier, basically

² *Original name of East London, named after George Rex who was reputed to have been the son of George III of England. While he was Prince of Wales the young George married Hannah Lightfoot, known as "The Fair Quakeress". The prince came to South Africa as George Rex in 1795, was treated with great respect by the authorities and was appointed Marshal of the Admiralty Court. He settled at Knysna where his grave is still to be seen. He encouraged the development of Buffalo River Mouth as a sea port.*

religious and God-fearing but burdened with many handicaps, will yet become a fertile seed-bed for religious vocations.