

VI – *St Louis Bertrand Mission, Potchefstroom*

The St Louis Bertrand Mission at Potchefstroom had its beginning in 1921, when Mother Dympna Doyle was Prioress of the Convent of the Sacred Heart in the town. Fr Pierre Merour O.M.I. was priest-in-charge at “Potch” and also convent chaplain so it was only once a month that, armed with his Mass equipment, he would entrain for Rysmierbult. At the siding he would be met by Dominic Thale and the two would walk the six kilometres to Dominic’s home, Muiskraal, carrying the equipment between them. There was a hut which served both as church and small school where Joseph Ramohanoe taught some 25 children. A more ambitious out-station and school had been founded 12 miles away at Machavie by Father Chrysostom Egan O.P. and the teacher there was Sara Kekana, helped by her husband, Henry. There were about 60 pupils.

Mother Dympna, anxious to have a mission nearer home, reconnoitred the Location locality and found close to it what she considered an ideal spot. On this site stood what appeared to be an empty hall. She interviewed the town clerk and explained that she hoped to establish a mission. Would the municipality share in the good work and grant the land and the hall for the purpose? The department appeared willing, but explained that the property was being used by the Medical Officer of Health, Dr Friel. They added that their consent to forfeit the hall would depend upon the decision of Dr Friel who was away on holiday.

As soon as he returned Mother Dympna bearded the proverbial lion in his den and bravely asked for the property. Dr Friel pointed out that he could not possibly give up the hall urgently needed for his Non-White patients. He said his decision was final and that the property should not go to the convent or to any other mission. Mother Prioress returned from the fruitless visit but she was not downcast. The matter was referred to the community and it was decided to make a novena of prayer for the ground.

On the third day of the novena Mother Dymna’s telephone rang: “Dr Friel here. I suppose you people are down on your knees storming heaven for my hall. This is to say you can spare yourselves the trouble for you are not going to get it.” Sweetly Mother Dympna replied: “But I think we are, Doctor. Time will tell.” A laugh at the other end was the only reply as the receiver was replaced. On the eighth day Rev Mother tentatively made an appointment with the Doctor for 11.30 a.m. He received her with: “Now don’t imagine you are going to get the hall...” She replied: “Well I think we are, Doctor. I know that Dr Friel has never refused me anything and that he will not start doing so today.” The doctor sat down and said: “Surely you must see that I need the place.” That evening the convent telephone rang again. “Is that you, Mother? Look... you can have the hall; say no more about it; I’ll arrange it with the municipality. Good night!” Now it was the Prioress’ turn to sit down dumbfounded. For some minutes she was quite unable to move. Next day she was notified that the property was at her disposal and free of charge provided it was used as a mission school.

A movable partition was put into the hall and one end was curtained off and presto! The mission was started with two classrooms and a sanctuary, nothing else. By this time Potchefstroom had been given to the Dominican Fathers as a field of labour and so Father Oliver Clark O.P. laid the foundation of the new mission dedicated to St Louis Bertrand in Buiten Street. Sisters Boromaea Allgauer and Ferdinand Faisst went in a gig each morning to teach and later Sisters Frances Moosman and Floretta Hoerle joined the staff; but both Priests and Sisters returned to their respective homes in the afternoon and did not reside at the mission. In 1932 Father David Donohue took over the work on lines similar to those laid down by Father Clark.

On 1st April 1933 Father Nicholas Humphrey O.P. arrived at the mission. There were about a hundred children at the school of whom only nine were Catholics and Catechumens. Like his predecessor Father Nicholas lived at the presbytery in town; but after a time he moved into part of the sacristy at the mission and lived in that tiny space, going to town only for one meal a day. This was a step forward for it made it possible to keep the Blessed Sacrament in the sanctuary and to have daily Mass there instead of on Sundays only.

In 1934 Mother Bertranda Miller spent 2400 pounds building a new church with two rooms attached for the priest, one extra classroom and a small convent. Messrs Sandler and Thompson did the work and Mother Bertranda herself prepared the plans with a minimum of expense. In 1935 the Sisters moved in permanently. Sister Lioba Koch was to be the Superior of the community of five.¹ In April Mother General Augustine asked Father Nicholas, who had been a teacher before becoming a Dominican, to assume the Principalship. He performed this duty for the next six years until Sister Fortunata Hummel relieved him of it: but the zealous priest still remained on the staff of the school. At this time there were 600 children in the school and the number of Catholics and Catechumens had increased immensely. (Schools were established in eleven of the 23 outstations.)

Father Nicholas used the bioscope to provide recreation for the weekends and it was a well-attested fact that as long as it was held no serious crime occurred in the Location. In 1936 the school was registered by the Government. In 1944 good wood-working machinery was procured, and Sister Manfreda Daufratzhofer did excellent work with the pupils. Ten years later the Sisters built a Domestic Science Centre and the school was reorganised as a Secondary School for girls. With Sister Colmar Weber in charge of this, it was soon brought to a high standard and received excellent commendations from inspectors.

A large hall was the next addition. Bioscopes as well as dances were held here over the weekend to teach the people that they could enjoy themselves with no fighting or roughness allowed. On Sundays Mass was said in turns at the various outstations. Roneoed sermons and copies of the Gospel and epistle lessons were read by the catechist on those Sundays on which Mass was not said there. Thus the Faith was kept alive and the people felt they had a church service on every Sunday of the year.

When Father Nicholas left in August 1948 there were about 1300 children in the school, of whom some 450 were Catholics and another thousand in the outstations. He had baptised 3500 people, always after two years' instruction except in the case of very old people or those in danger of death. By this means many lapses from the Faith were prevented.

Father himself had run the men's Praesidium; Sister Colmar the women's sodality and Sister Fortunata supervised the Children of Mary. There were about twenty Dominican lay tertiaries and these had achieved so high a standard of liturgical excellence that Rev Father Hilary Carpenter O.P. said they were the most moving thing he had witnessed in Africa.

In 1950 the long overdue hostel with accommodation for sixty girls was completed. After passing their Secondary School Examination many of them trained as nurses, teachers and Domestic Science Instructresses. So the school continued to flourish by the grace of God and through the efforts of the missionaries.

Thus the seed planted originally about six miles from Rysmierbult had grown to a fruitful tree which gave the Church an African Priest, three Dominican Sisters, as well as thousands of members.

However, the time came when the long arm of the Law of Separate Development also reached St Louis Bertrand Mission. The African people were obliged to move to their own township where the State had provided schools staffed by teachers of their own race and the Dominican Sisters had to close down their flourishing mission in 1970.

¹ *Sisters Anaclata Frizino, Henrietta Kramer, Colmar Weber, Justina Wurms.*