

XI – *Vleeschfontein*, Transvaal – St Peter Claver / Immaculate Conception of Mary

Situated not far from the junction of the Marico and Crocodile Rivers, about 160 miles North West of Johannesburg, was a mission station founded by the Jesuits as early as 1880, during the time when the Transvaal was known as the Transvaal Republic. The place had been the haunt of many wild animals, a veritable hunter's paradise, a "fountain of meat" as the name *Vleeschfontein* implies.

When our Sisters came to Johannesburg this Mission, at the time dedicated to Peter Claver, was already 29 years old. Originally it belonged to the Zambesi Mission and lay on the old main road from Kimberley to the interior. Thus it was used by the Jesuits as a halfway station for the missionaries of Zambesi travelling via Kimberley to Zeerust. The mission lost most of its importance to the Jesuits when the new main road went via Mafeking and also when the Beira railway offered an easier route to Zambesia. So, on the death of Father Bontempe S.J., in May 1894, it was settled that this mission should be taken over by the Transvaal Prefecture and that the Superior, Father Leboeuf S.J. should go on transfer to Zambesia after handing over his responsibilities to Father Noel O.M.I. The latter put the mission under the patronage of the Immaculate Conception of Mary and he was helped by the Holy Family Sisters. In 1928 these Sisters wished to withdraw so Mother Augustine Geisel was asked for substitutes from the ranks of her Dominicans. On 2nd July, with Sister M St James Bildstein in charge, a party of four nuns was sent to the already flourishing mission.

After 48 year of labour, however, the wild animals in the region had given place to cattle. The Sisters found their 130 Bechuana¹ pupils were more interested in how to snare birds for the pot than in their lessons. The lure of the veld was also strong in their parents, so the children could hardly be blamed. At harvest time the schools were empty and pupils would play hide and seek round the hay racks or follow honey birds to the wild bees' hives. Later in the year the School Inspector arrived; faces looked glum for at his last visit in 1928 he had declared *Vleeschfontein* to be the worst of his 150 Bantu schools. However, he was so pleased with the progress that had now been made that in April four teachers received Government grants for those teaching from the Kindergarten to Standard Four. Nor was this all: Sister Barnaba Brandstetter was also given a small grant to teach the children gardening.

Bishop D O'Leary O.M.I., visiting the mission at about this time, administered the Sacrament of Confirmation to 33 parishioners and ordained Rev Brother W le Dreau as priest. After his ordination he continued for 31 years to fulfil his priestly duties as an Oblate of Mary Immaculate in the Transvaal until he died at Pretoria in 1957.

On Christmas Day 1929 the register records that 220 Africans received Holy Communion. So the mission was growing. The Convent Chronicle states that "... by 1940 some 800 souls were attending the mission church. This included the Chief and his family. One of his daughters became a Holy Family nun and a niece tried her vocation with the Dominican Sisterhood. Unfortunately some of the people recruited to the Rand Mines were imbued with Communistic ideologies and, on their return, passed these on to their companions. In 1946 as many as 300 fell away from the Church in spite of the restraining influence of Chief Mokoko. After this the Communistic disturbances played further havoc among these people who then became split into two distinct parties...

"One group contested in a court of law the right of the Priests to own the mission station. In these proceedings it was discovered that the Africans had, in fact, no right to be where they were living, so the Government gave them notice to move to an area that had been assigned to their tribe. As a result of this exodus of the people there was not further need of the mission at *Vleeschfontein*, so it was closed down and the Sisters returned to the Mother House in 1950.²

¹ Now known as the Tswana Tribe.

² This information was obtained from Rt Rev Msgr H Hallett C.Ss.R

XII – Indwe,³ Aliwal North Diocese, near Queenstown

In October 1927 Father Joseph Hillekamp S.C.J. was appointed the first resident priest at Indwe⁴ in the prefecture of Aliwal North. A small church for the white congregation had been built there and in 1928 an African school for about forty children was started in the Township.

On 27th July 1929 Mother General Augustine Geisel accompanied the two pioneers, Sisters Honorata Albrecht and Rufina Maier, and saw them installed in their new convent home. The cottage in which they were to live and work had been donated to the mission by a pious Catholic. It had been his former home with a shop attached and situated near the railway station and was named the Mission of the Sacred Heart. Father Hillekamp lived in a small dwelling attached to the back of the church. At the far end of the block in which the church stood was a double-storeyed house that was being used as a Theological College, the students of which acted as sacristans and organists for the parish church. A Catholic lady, Mrs Venter, baked bread for the priest and did whatever she could to be helpful.

On their arrival the Sisters they found their cottage arranged for them. The largest room which had been the shop formed a classroom and there were also potential schoolrooms in the outhouses. A one-armed African teacher was also lodged on the premises. He acted as interpreter as well at Father Hillekamp's catechism lessons and sermons.

After the Benediction service the Sisters met the Catholic residents, some twenty-five in number; these proved friendly and at once made the Sisters feel at home. On the following Monday the nuns were introduced to their pupils. The classes included the sub-standards up to Standard Six. Very soon it became necessary to engage a young African woman to assist with the day pupils.

I was not long before the Sisters felt that something should be done for educating the Coloured children also and so a separate school was arranged in one of the out rooms. Sister Honorata supervised both schools but then taught mainly in the Coloured division. When the town Location was laid out the schools were moved to that locality and later the Sisters changed their residence to the back of the church. In 1930 both Sisters Honorata and Rufina were asked to go and open a new convent at Umhlanga Mission which also belonged to the Sacred Heart Priests. The work at Indwe was then carried on by Sister Philippa Oberlaender, Amadea Neumeier, Oliver Murphy and others.

In 1932 an epidemic of typhus broke out at Indwe which spread rapidly among the Africans. Sisters Philippa and Oliver, after teaching in the morning, spent the rest of the day visiting the sick, baptising those who were dying and doing all they could wherever there was a chance of recovery. They worked in conjunction with the priest and the medical practitioner and were very helpful to both.

On 2nd May 1932 Indwe took over a new outstation, Elunduni at "Wasnank" in the Drakensberg Mountains. The male teacher from Indwe was transferred to that place with his thirty-three pupils. The 4th September was a great day for Elunduni because on that day ten children and sixteen adults received the Sacrament of Baptism. Once every week the priest visited the station, accompanied by Sister Philippa and a companion. The nuns called on the sick while the Priest attended to his ministrations. The Sisters were untiring and answered every call for mission work with joy. At the end of 1934 Sister Philippa's term of Superiorship at Indwe ended and she was appointed to the Guba mission.

Early on the morning of January 2nd 1935 Father C Rosenbaum S.C.J. left by car for Guba. He took with him Sisters Philippa and Concordia Buehl and a couple of African youths to prepare a place for the new mission. After allotting their work to the youths the Priest and the Sisters walked from one kraal to another visiting the many sick, ministering to them and comforting them. Tired but happy they returned to their car and ate a few sandwiches before returning to Indwe.

³ A town in the Cape Province, founded in 1867 as a coal mining centre exploiting the low-grade local deposits which could not compete against those of Natal or Transvaal. Now chiefly engaged in dairy farming. The name is derived from the Xhosa name for the crane, a species of bird which flourishes there.

They had hardly started their journey when the rain came down. The road was bad at the best of times so they tried to get home as soon as possible. However, the car stuck in deep mud and all the occupants jumped out to help. Sister Philippa slipped and fell. When the Priest helped her up she said she was not hurt but she was unable to see anything. Back in the car she was supported by Sister Concordia while the Priest drove slowly. Then Sister Philippa said: "Father I must die here." Truly death hovered near. The Priest asked her if there was anything she wanted to say. Upon receiving a negative reply Father Rosenbaum gave her absolution and said a few prayers. Sister Philippa said she was happy and then quietly gave up her soul to God as she lay in her companion's arms. Upon arrival at home the doctor was summoned. On examination no bruise or mark could be found on the body. The diagnosis was: Death due to a stroke. She was buried at Indwe on the next afternoon at 5 o'clock. The mayor with his Councillors, together with a large number of Europeans and Africans, gathered round her grave to show their last respects to one who, in their little world, had been so universally loved. Rev Father Edward Cahill S.J. delivered the panegyric.

The quarters adjoining the church were found to be very cramped. The theological students were transferred to the seminary at Aliwal North and the Sisters were given the double-storeyed house which was now vacant, while the Priest moved into the small flat adjoining the church. In their new home the Sisters had room enough to open a small school for the junior pupils which augmented their small income. However, at the end of 1953, the Holy Cross Sisters from Aliwal North took over the Indwe Mission of the Sacred Heart and the Dominicans were free to take up duties elsewhere.