

XV – Umhlanga¹ Mission, Aliwal North

After having made several attempts to start a mission at Umhlanga in the district of Aliwal North the Sacred Heart Priests were finally allowed to open a school there in August 1928. Two huts were rented, one of which was to serve as school and the other for accommodation for an African teacher. On 22nd August the St Augustine School was opened. The following day there was a meeting of Chiefs and African men of the district to discuss the matter and they agreed to give a piece of ground on either side of the road beside the school to the mission. But the consent of the Magistrate, who was also the District Commissioner, was necessary for this and he was reluctant to grant his permission. However, after repeated petitions and protests from the Africans, he finally consented.

On 2nd September 1929 Rev Brother Augustin S.C.J. arrived to commence the first building which was completed in June 1930. On 15th July of that year Sisters Honorata Albrecht and Rufina Maier travelled some 20 miles from Indwe to this new mission. Here they found the new building to include school, church and convent all in one, to replace the scattered huts formerly in use. One room of the sisters' house was fitted up as a chapel which would serve both the nuns and the parish; some of the other rooms were arranged as classrooms. This left the huts empty for builders' tools and other purposes.

This new convent had been opened at the request of Monsignor F Demont of Aliwal.

Sister Rufina was installed as cook for the Priests, Brothers and Sisters and, as such, she did excellent work. Sister Honorata taught during the morning and visited the sick in their homes in the afternoon. The people were scattered over a wide area and this entailed much walking in all weathers.

Brother Augustin and his workmen completed the school building and it was officially opened on 19th March 1931. After this they started on the church building. By December of the same year the church was blessed. With the gradual increase of staff the Sisters now occupied the entire conventual section.

On the outbreak of World War II in 1939 many of the German Priests and Brothers were interned as aliens. This caused difficulty throughout the ecclesiastical territory and overwork for those who were not interned. Indwe and Umhlanga had only one Priest between them. Father T Lighton, a South African by birth, would stay at one of these stations from Saturday to the following Saturday and then move over to the other mission, giving it the next week of his services. This he did for two whole years during which the nuns at these missions missed the Sunday Mass of alternate weeks.

Meanwhile the community had also grown. Sister Sienita Kohl came to join the staff and, later, Sister Frances Moosmann arrived as Superior, assistant teacher and missionary. Large lands in front of the house were laid out so that Sister Honorata, during her stay of sixteen years, and Sister Sienita, who was there for eighteen years, saw the mission grow from a small cottage to a large self-supporting farm which could minister to a wide Bantu area. At the end of 1956 the Dominican Sisters were withdrawn from Umhlanga, which was then taken over for a time by the Coloured Sisters of the Sacred Heart from Aliwal North. In time lack of staff also forced these Sisters to close down the convent at Umhlanga or, more correctly, 'Mhlanga, and the house stood vacant for a while...

On Tuesday 21st January 1975, the Feast of St Agnes of Montepulciano, Mother Provincial Regula Schelle and Sister Beatrix von Felten accompanied three African Sisters² from Woodlands to the Mission of St Augustine at 'Mhlanga which was to be reopened. On their way the travellers called at Glen Grey where they found their pastor, Right Rev Monsignor M Koelbl, ill in hospital. From there Father W Tratz led the way for the road was very bad and they had to make a detour. They reached their destination too late to find the Headman and his men still there to welcome them. The cook, a man, and a few lads helped them unload their luggage and then they could sit down to their first meal in their new home.

¹ The name is a Xhosa word for the species of reed found in the area.

² Sisters Bernadette Mohlaphing, Clemntia Buqwana and Michael Shude.

The next few days were spent from morning to dusk preparing for the great day when the convent would be blessed and opened officially; small wonder then that the church was packed with people from far and near. The prayers of thanksgiving were heartfelt and sincere and the Xhosa sermon spoke to the hearts of all. After Holy Mass refreshments were served in the hall.

When Mother Regula and Sister Beatrice had to bid the three pioneers farewell there was, fortunately, plenty to be done and there was little time for tears of grieving.

On the following Sunday, after Mass, members of the parish welcomed the Sisters with speeches and promised to give them a reception later on. Things started to happen almost at once. The next morning one of the Catechism experts arrived from Lumko to give the nuns a week's course on "How to train adults to instruct their children". Since that day the nuns have been kept busy all day long. Patients came to the clinic, telephone calls had to be answered and people had to be helped with postal matters, the garden had to be tended, children to be kept off the fruit trees, fowls had to be fed and a dog and cat to be cared for. On Sundays two of the Sisters visit the homes of the people in the vicinity while one looks after the Chiro children when one of their leaders is away from home. Thus Dominican Sisters are again active at Mhlanga, spreading Christ's teaching among their own people.