

XVI – *St Peter Claver Mission*, East London

The East Bank Location on the fringe of East London was, in 1928, an accumulation of hovels without any of the amenities of life. These shanties teemed with children who, without parental control, literally brought themselves up, living in squalor and dirt. In order to counteract such shocking conditions Mother General Augustine established here a Catholic Mission dedicated to St Peter Claver.¹ She sent a small staff of Sisters to teach the children hygienic conditions and to raise their standard of living. At first school was held on weekdays in a barn-like room, and a sliding partition transformed the classroom into a chapel on Sundays. Father Augustine Dinter said the first Mass and held the first Benediction Service here in January 1929.

The Sisters went out in all weathers to this location-school from the Sacred Heart convent in Albany Street until January 1929, when the Municipality gave them leave to reside at Duncan Village. Year by year the number of pupils increased and a cleaner, healthier atmosphere emanated from the little mission. The children began to take a pride in their personal appearance. In orderly fashion they assembled each day in the quadrangle in the shadow of the large Crucifix which the Sisters had erected. They saw the flower and vegetable gardens at the little convent and were encouraged to cultivate similar plots at their homes. In 1949 the sisters opened at the same place the St Peter Claver Clinic for the people of the Township. This was a long-overdue necessity. At last the African mothers could bring their children to the nuns for medical attention which they received gratis. Sister Mary Aidan Quinlan, in charge of the clinic, was Irish by birth, a doctor who had graduated at the University of the Witwatersrand. With the assistance of an African nun, Sister Gratia Khumalo, Sister Aidan was, in truth, as her patients called her, their mother and friend. Hardest of all for her, in her life of sacrifice, was the glaring evidence of indifference and sloth in some that had no desire to make an effort to reform.

In 1951 the old church classroom became a schoolroom proper and a spacious church was built behind the quadrangle. The grounds were laid out with the hope that the example of making use of every inch of ground would be followed by the Africans.

At this time the teaching staff consisted of three African Sisters and four African secular teachers; in addition there were a couple of White Sisters with Sister Aidan in the community. In 1952 there were 350 pupils on the roll.

Then tragedy struck...

“Sister Mary Aidan Quinlan, Dominican nun and medical missionary was brutally murdered by a mob at Duncan Village, East London, South Africa on Sunday afternoon, the 9th November 1952”. Immediately the cruel news was flashed over the wireless and it is no exaggeration to say that it shocked the world. If someone with the gift of seeing the future had suggested to Sister Aidan that her obituary would appear in every newspaper in the world she would have greeted the prophecy with her characteristic smile and she would have made some short, simple remark expressing her obvious amusement and incredulity. For she was a simple person who could regard herself as only one of the many thousands of nuns going about their work, neither wanting nor expecting the world’s applause. The world loves self-advertisement but the nun has said good-bye to all that; it is the whole point of her life: that she is professing to follow a Master who told His disciples to rejoice, not because they were successful but, because their names were written in heaven.

Very much of the really permanent work of the world is anonymous. The common man, the unknown warrior, the craftsman who built our cities and cathedrals, made our roads and bridges – these are the hidden folk who do the world’s work and make history. And among these unnumbered nameless workers must be included all those devoted Religious women, at home and in the mission-field who, by their

¹ A Spanish Jesuit who lived in the 17th Century. He worked for the abolition of slavery and became known as the Apostle of the Negroes.

persistent silent labour build up, day by day and brick by brick, the holy City of God. Individually they are forgotten and unrecognised but remembered and appreciated as a type.

“... The unusually horrible circumstances of Sister Aidan’s death have compelled the world’s attention and have, if only for a brief hour, put before people’s eyes the reality of the type: the nun was brought into prominence and revealed in a clear light as a real live person whom all recognise as a character of rare nobility, following a great vocation”.

Elsie Quinlan, who was later to be known as the Dominican Sister Mary Aidan Quinlan, was born on 3rd December 1914. She was the youngest and fifth child of Thomas and Ellie Quinlan. Two brothers and two sisters were there to welcome the newcomer; and it is clear that the future nun was given an excellent start in life in that best of all schools, a good Christian home. After a few years the family moved to a large farm at Waterloo near Blarney about six miles from Cork. Here the child grew up amid ideal conditions for health and happiness. (More than once, when surveying the parched African veld, Sister Aidan spoke wistfully of the green and pleasant meadows where she had played as a child.) When Elsie was about ten years old the family moved again; this time into Cork city to a house on the top of Patrick’s Hill which dominates the city and overtops the famous steeple of the Shandon Bells which scatter their melody over the roofs and pinnacles of a lovely city and the pleasant waters of the River Lee.

Elsie was blessed with good health and an excellent constitution and she was of the active athletic type. Apart from the usual ailments of childhood she seemed immune from serious illness. At a certain date her diary records: “In bed with mumps; properly fed up; got barley water to drink; threw it out of the window”; - an entry showing scant respect for medical prescriptions in the future Doctor. In September 1929 she was entered as a pupil at St Aloysius Convent at St Marie’s of the Isle in Cork and here she is remembered as serious and hardworking, very thorough and painstaking in all she did, quiet and reserved. Out of school and on the playing-fields she seems to have been more conspicuous and she shone at games. She learned to drive her cousin’s car and mastered the mysteries of its inner working – knowledge which was to be invaluable for her future missionary work in South Africa.

Having passed her Matriculation examination she entered University College at Cork in 1933. She kept up her reputation for quiet industry. In due course she took her degree in Science and it was her intention to study for the Higher Diploma in Education. To the casual onlooker there was no obvious sign of her future religious vocation. So it came as a surprise to her friends when she announced her decision to make trial of her vocation and enter a convent. This was not the result of a crisis or sudden impulse but a reasoned decision made under the direction of one of the priests of St Mary’s Priory in Cork, Father McCourt O.P.

Elsie Quinlan was received as a postulant at St Albert’s Convent, Hinckley, England in January 1938. In April of that year she and two companions sailed for South Africa where she made her religious profession on 5th January 1940. Soon after this event she and a companion went to the Medical School of the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg where they both graduated as Doctors. Sr Aidan served her year’s internship at the Far East Rand Hospital near Springs and she also worked at Glen Grey Mission Hospital before finally establishing a clinic at St Peter Claver Mission on the outskirts of East London. Here she worked, almost continually, till the day of her death.

This township, known as Duncan Village, had at the time a population of about 40 000 urbanised Africans who made their living, for the most part, by working in East London. During the three years and a half that Sister Aidan toiled here she spent herself day in and day out for the African people. Her reputation spread; her skill became something of a legend and, of course, this meant that more and more crowds flocked to her little consulting room. She was in constant demand and it was only thanks to her iron constitution and amazing health that she was able to stand the strain. Her arduous day’s work began at 8 a.m. and went on usually until late in the afternoon. Sister Gratia Khumalo helped her as Medical Orderly. On Wednesday and Saturday afternoons Sister Aidan did not attend the clinic, but saw to other business and also lectured to Nurses in training at the Mater Dei Hospital which is run by her Sisterhood. Doctor Aidan did not usually visit her patients in their homes since, apart from the fact that her hands were full, she had no desire to trespass upon the practices of other professional doctors; although these

were by no means adequate to the needs of the teeming East Bank population. Before Mass was over and the clinic opened in the mornings the yard outside the little convent already thronged with patients. Some would have walked miles and would sit patiently waiting their turn. The average daily attendance at her clinic was 120 and on the Friday before she died she saw as many as 170 sick people.

Every kind of problem was brought to her; the hobo-type came trading on her sympathies: There was one memorable incident when she was attending the victim of a tribal faction-fight while the clinic was besieged by a mob demanding the man's blood and she telephoned for an ambulance and got him away from his enemies as if he were in 'extremis', whereas he was only slightly injured. She rarely had a dull moment and she often needed as much mother-wit and tact as medical skill.

There was no time to be squeamish amid the Squalor of the East Bank; more than a touch of heroism was needed to keep serene and there were times when the famous smile did not come easily.

In a sense one could say she was never off duty for she was at the beck and call of everyone day and night. Many of her charitable deeds were known only to Heaven as she often took an African in her car to town for E-ray or other specialist treatment. The babies and their mothers claimed her special attention and she did much to cope with the appalling infant mortality rate in the township. She was also responsible for hundreds of baptisms in "articulo mortis". Reverend Mother General, realising the intensity of the strain of such a daily programme of hard work, arranged little interludes when Sister Aidan would drive Mother Demetria on her visitation rounds to the Transvaal and other part of South Africa. But her heart always went out to her poor and sick and her life was a commentary on Christ's words, "When you did it to the least of my brethren you did it to Me."

The mystery of human life, which begins when God creates an immortal soul before birth, is the unfolding of a drama moving to that supreme and final act when the soul chooses God at the hour of death. All our human acts converge and contribute to that end. This faith inspires the dedicated soul and explains the nun's attitude to this visible world and the invisible world of God. It is terrible to think of how suddenly and unexpectedly this Sister was confronted with that crisis which all must face some day.

Since the riots in Port Elizabeth and Kimberley which had taken place a few weeks before there was a certain amount of apprehension in the little community of nuns living at St Peter Claver Mission; but the chief fear seemed to be that, for prudential reasons, the Government authorities or the Religious Superiors might decide to move the Community from the township. This might mean closing of the clinic and the end of the good missionary work of Sister Aidan and the Sisters teaching in the school.

Political unrest associated with the African National Congress and what has been called the Resistance Movement had been manifest for some months among the Black people by all sorts of signs. There was the gesture of defiance when young Africans would show the "thumbs-up" sign with the shout "AFRICA!": generally a whole crowd of youths would go through this performance when they were passed by a white man's car. But it was not taken very seriously and even the youths seemed to think it a piece of good-humoured nonsense. Certainly Sister Aidan did not take these things seriously. It was not so much that she did not think there was any occasion for fear. She had complete confidence in her African friends and she always laughed at counsel of caution. Perhaps she judged them all by the grateful men, women and children who flocked as patients to her clinic. Her religious habit and her medical status, she must have thought, gave her a kind of Red Cross immunity; besides, she was their friend and, surely, they would do her not harm. It was in that spirit of confidence that she innocently drove into the township to her death. But how did it happen that a defenceless nun was murdered in broad daylight on a fine Sunday afternoon in a little narrow street of crowded houses...?

It is necessary to know of the Resistance Movement being organised among certain sections of the African people. What began as Passive Resistance on the Indian model had got out of hand and became very active and riots had already occurred at Kimberley and Port Elizabeth. In consequence of the Port Elizabeth outbreak the Government, on Friday 7th November, issued a ban, prohibiting all open-air meetings in the Eastern Cape, where East London is situated. As a protest against this action of the Government a general strike of all African workers throughout the Eastern Cape was called for Monday 10th November. An organisation of the Africans in East London declared, through their chairman, that

East London would not join in the strike; but instead they would hold a prayer meeting in the township on Sunday afternoon the 9th November. The chairman of the African national Congress Youth League obtained permission from the Commandant of Police to hold this prayer meeting on the understanding that the meeting would be dispersed if it turned out to be political rather than religious. During Saturday afternoon and right up to three o'clock on Sunday morning this "prayer meeting" was advertised throughout the Location by gangs of young Africans, blowing bugles and making a racket which was anything but religious. This meeting was scheduled to start at 2.30 p.m. but it did not get going until two hours later. Police, White and Non-White, were present, watching the proceedings; and when they were well satisfied that the meeting was not a religious one, they intervened and ordered the crowds to disperse. This led to a clash and drastic action; the police were stoned, then shots were fired and there was bloodshed.

Shortly after 5 o'clock in the afternoon Sister Aidan returning, for some unknown reason, by an unaccustomed route, drove into the township and met this frenzied mob. She had apparently not been warned of any rioting and she reached the very centre of the troubled area when the fury of the crowd was at its highest. Some seemed to think that Sister was hastening back to the Mission for the Benediction Service; others again said that she was actually going to give first-aid to the wounded. Reports of the official police inquiry were published in the press and eye-witnesses have described Sister Aidan's death. Her car was stoned, held up by an angry, voluble African and brought to a standstill; the windscreen was smashed and she was beaten with sticks and stoned (fourteen large stones were found in her car later); she was stabbed and her body horribly mutilated and dismembered and part of it even devoured by some of the murderers. The car was then set alight and turned over. A Police Officer reported that he found the burning car lying on its hood in Bantu Street but was unable to remove the Sister's body from the car because of the flames. Later in the day he returned and found the car standing on its wheels and he then removed the charred remains.

The Sisters who knew her said Sister Aidan had a characteristic gesture; when she was faced with a problem or a perplexing situation, she would cover her face with her hands and pray for a moment. An African witness told the court that it was in this attitude of prayer with her rosary beads twined around her fingers that Sister Aidan met her death. The rosary was retrieved from the burnt-out car and the burnt finger bones were still cleaving to the beads. It was an insane crime, the result of mass hysteria. When the frenzied crowd had met Sister Aidan there was the shout: "Here is a white woman; let us kill her!" Her death was probably the means of saving the lives of the other seven African and White Sisters in the little convent and Father J O'Malley, the priest-in-charge of the mission. For two loyal African lads arrived at the church breathless and, finding one of the Sisters, gave the warning that the mob was coming to kill the nuns, "for the Sister Doctor has already been killed by our people", they said.

A police car happened to be passing and was hailed and it took the Sisters to the Sacred Heart Convent in Albany Street. Father O'Malley was able, at a few minutes' notice, to remove the Blessed Sacrament and the parish registers in his own car.

Buildings that had cost toil and money were a great loss to the Congregation, yet these could be replaced; but it would be difficult to find another Sister Aidan. "... Seventy-five years previously the first seven Sisters had arrived at King William's Town from Germany. During that three quarters of a century they had increased like the mustard seed of the parable. Four other Dominican Congregations in Rhodesia, Oakford, Newcastle and Montebello have stemmed from that parent tree and the contribution of the Dominican Sister to the Church in Southern Africa was incalculable..." The 'King' Sisters have built up a true solid missionary tradition and have won the universal praise of the Clergy for their willingness to adapt themselves to the needs of the missions rather than to be selective and choose the work that suited themselves. One has heard it on all sides that the 'King' nuns will take on any work that means the good of souls," wrote Father Bernard Delany O.P.

On 12th November 1952, in the Church of the Immaculate Conception at East London, a Requiem Mass was celebrated by the Most Rev Archbishop Owen McCann. A vast crowd also attended the Solemn Requiem celebrated by Sister Aidan's kinsman, Father John Power; and at the burial there was a throng

and scenes such as could never have been witnessed before in the Sisters' cemetery at "The Mater": Groups of African men and women, no doubt some of them were her former patients, grieving from their hearts for the good friend and mother they had lost by the insane action of their own people. Her grave was covered with a mountain of flowers – our poor inarticulate way of expressing our grief.

The little dispensary where Sister Aidan had worked had disappeared; convent, school, church and the priest's cottage – all were burnt out with diabolical thoroughness. One thin remained, standing out among the ruins, in what was formerly the schoolyard – the large crucifix, the wood of the cross charred but the figure almost intact. It was a symbol of the sacrifice our Sister had shared – a reminder that Divine Love alone can heal human strife and reconcile to the unity of truth...

In 1954 the Congregation of King William's Town rebuilt the school and Father O'Malley had the church reconstructed. However, the African Sisters who were to teach there lived at the St Francis Xavier Mission in McLean Street until they could move back to their own convent in Duncan Village in 1958. Only cement and steel were used in the structure of the new buildings. This was to prevent a second destruction by fire. There is no trust to be put in the type of hooligans who were responsible for the first conflagration.

(When the African Sisters became independent of their Mother Congregation in 1958 this convent was handed over to them by the Prioress General of King William's Town.) These Sisters of St Martin de Porres still continue to teach there and to help their people towards Christianity, education and civilisation.