

VII – *M'phatlele Clinic*, Molepo, Potgietersrus, Northern Transvaal

On 22nd December 1910 the Northern Transvaal was erected into a Prefecture by Decree of the Propaganda Fidei in Rome, with Right Rev D Ildefons Lanslots O.S.B. as first Prefect Apostolic. In 1921 he was succeeded by Dom Salvator van Nuffel of the same Order who, on 11th November 1924 visited King William's Town. He was accompanied by the Apostolic Delegate, Archbishop BJ Gijlswijk O.P. and asked that Sisters of our Congregation might take over a mission he had already established at a place known as M'Phatlele, some forty-two miles from Pietersburg. This was a clinic and dressing station for the Africans at which Government would supply medicines but which must otherwise be self-supporting. Mother Lucy Kaltenstadler, then Prioress General, appointed Sister M Angela Hanshuber as Superior and gave her a staff of three additional Sisters. They left King William's Town by train on 19th December 1924. Msgr van Nuffel met them at the railway station and explained that they still had a four-hour drive before they would reach M'Phatlele. A crumb of comfort eased their homesick hearts for the son of Col Style, mayor of King William's Town, was at the station and offered to drive the party to their destination.

The Prefect and Dom Victorin Laenens welcomed them to their new home which was an empty semi-detached building. The only furniture was a bedstead and one mattress. They had brought with them only a small stove and a few cooking utensils so they fully realised they must be up and doing to acquire the essentials of simple housekeeping. From their lunch basket they warmed up a supper of sorts; the pan was then placed in their midst as they sat on the floor and each one took what she felt she could eat from the pan. Too tired to think of what they would do on the morrow they then spread their blankets on the floor and slept the sleep of exhaustion.

Next day a room was chosen as chapel and the Sister-carpenter got busy preparing this, while the cook looked for food and kitchen utensils and Sister Engelberta Fischer, the nurse, went off to visit a sick African. The four Sisters were well occupied. When they had finished their own special duties they would repair to the garden and the small field. There they cut grass for the winter and cultivated the piece of ground. The evening recreations were spent together, mending clothes or doing exercises in Sesotho.

Things moved rapidly for the Sisters had not only to furnish and supply a house but also to prepare for Christmas which was only four days off. There was not time to compare the Christmas to be with that of the previous years, for after Midnight Mass the Blessed Sacrament would be reserved in their new home, so altar and tabernacle had to be ready.

The day after Christmas the mayor and Mayoress of Potgietersrus paid the Sisters a visit and it was with difficulty that they found cups and plates to match but they were clean. Black baby twins happened to be brought in for baptism during the visit, so Msgr van Nuffel suggested that the visitors should stand as godparents to the children. This they willingly did.

A day or two later the heavy luggage at last arrived from King William's Town with all the carefully packed necessities and the next few days were very busy ones. The Africans were delighted and showed their pleasure in having the Sisters among them by willingly helping in a small way. They brought their babies and others to be attended to and told the Sisters where to find the aged and ailing. As many as 800 were assisted with medicines and treatment in six months and this in spite of the fact that the Sisters were themselves stricken with malaria and had still to become acclimatised to tropical surroundings. Father Victorin and Sister St Louis Wilhelm, who was Jack-of-all-trades, made a table which transformed the verandah into a parlour where visitors could be received. They also made an altar and a tabernacle for the little chapel.

The pantry served also as a shop where the Africans bartered for tea, coffee, sugar, salt, soap, paraffin and matches. As these were mostly bartered the only source of income for the Sisters was to sell children's clothes which they had made.

There was a large Government school with several African teachers for 500 pupils in the location, yet many children were growing up without education. The Sisters dearly hoped to be allowed to open a mission school to remedy so great a need. However, the Chief declared that though he and his councillors had approved of a clinic they would not give their consent to the foundation of a school. They persisted in their refusal and thus unknowingly sounded the death knell of their dressing station.

By contract between Msgr van Nuffel and Mother Lucy the Sisters were to stay at M'Phatlele for five years. During that period they and their zealous priest, Father Victorin, saw the little children growing to adulthood without any high ideals. They imparted what knowledge they could to individuals and trusted to Providence to lead the way.

In 1929 a lapsed Catholic lay seriously ill in the Pietersburg Hospital. He asked to see Msgr van Nuffel and promised that if he recovered he would donate to the Prefecture a large portion of his farm for missionary purposes. To the surprise of everyone he was soon up and about and the land, only 23 miles from Pietersburg was duly handed over to the Priests. So the mission station of St Maurus was transferred from M'Phatlele to the new locality, which was also known as Subiaco, where the Sisters would nurse the sick and educate children as well.

VIII – *Subiaco Mission*, Pietersburg, Northern Transvaal

There was no building on the new property so priest and nuns worked together and soon a small house had been erected. It contained no architectural beauty but gladly they transferred their belongings to the new dwelling. Field mice formed their most frequent and informal visitors. An army of these would arrive at mealtimes and would come also to share the missionaries' beds at night. Water had at first to be carried in buckets from a distance of three miles.

On 14th April 1930 school opened with 21 children who seemed shy and afraid of these strangely clad white people. To the surprise of their parents and of themselves the children returned to their homes in the afternoon alive and well... and even happy in their description of all that they had seen and heard. So every day the number of pupils increased and soon it was evident that a special sister-teacher must take over the school. For this Sister Lucina Waas arrived from King William's Town and for seven years gave unstinted service in God's vineyard until she became a victim of pneumonia. At first she seemed to rally but fell ill again and was the first missionary to be buried at Subiaco.

The buildings increased in proportion to their needs. A small church was erected opposite the Sisters' little convent; but this proved quite inadequate for the rapidly growing congregation so, early in 1937, a spacious church went up. All, both priests and nuns, could say that they had literally helped to build the church. They had themselves made and burnt the bricks, helped with both masonry and carpentry during all their spare minutes for four years.

Among the many who came to see and admire the new church was the eight-year-old son of the Headman of the Location. Full of wonder he ran home and fetched his mother and two sisters, one of whom wore the grey habit of the Sisters at Bethany, known as Handmaids of Christ the King. The mother explained that her daughter had been betrothed to a man who already had four wives. As she was then a Christian she fled before marriage although the lobola had already been paid. She became a nun at Bethany and the enraged suitor demanded heavy compensation. Her elder son, Dominic, and his sister both worked at Pietersburg until their salaries had liberated their sister who, in the meantime, had become Sister Mary Vivina at Bethany Mission.

Just as the church had needed enlargement so, too, the schoolrooms built in 1930, had to be considerably extended in 1941, for the roll had mounted to almost four hundred. In 1935 the Superior was recalled to King William's Town and Sister Magdalen McLeod replaced her until the end of 1937, when Sister

Margaret Mary Knobel took over these responsibilities until 1956. Beside Sister Lucina two other Sisters of our Congregation lie buried at Subiaco: Sister Ivo Huber and Sister Ethelreda Koppold. When Sister Margaret Mary left, Sister St Louis, who had been one of the pioneers, was given charge of the community.

During the thirty-two years in which our Sisters had worked at the M'Phatlele and Subiaco Missions Father D Victorin was their friend and advisor. He and his assistant, Rev Father Chrysostom Guns, did much of their mission work over trackless mountains on horseback, visiting the various outstations as often as possible.

At Bethany Mission, Pietersburg, there was a Mother House and Novitiate of African Sisters. This mission had been established in 1936 and was a well organised concern. However, the Group Areas Act caused it to close down at the end of 1957. Bishop Clemens van Hoeck, the new Diocesan Superior, had now to find a new home for these Sisters. At the same time the three original members of the Subiaco community, Sisters St Louis, Engelberta and Notburga Birzer, were worn out with thirty-three years of strenuous work in the Northern Transvaal. Mother General Aquilina did not know how to replace them. On a visit to the Superior of St Pius' Academy at Pietersburg, Mother Aquilina heard of the Bishop's predicament for find a new home for the Handmaids of Christ the King. Mother General then interviewed the Abbot Nullius and offered to withdraw her nuns and give their present home to the African Sisters.

When our Sisters were informed they were glad to hear that their own existing small structures would be replaced by a commodious building to be the new Mother House and Novitiate of the African Congregation and they rejoiced that their labours would be efficiently continued. On 30th December 1957 the Dominican Sisters left their old familiar haunts with hopeful hearts as the African Sisters took over Subiaco Mission.