

XVII – *Qoqodala Mission, Queenstown*

In 1929 Msgr F J Vogel, Prefect Apostolic of the newly created Queenstown Prefecture, asked Mother Augustine Geisel to send a few Sisters to the isolated mission of the Sacred Heart at Qoqodala. There was a small school already established for the 20 000 Africans in the surrounding area.

On the 5th April of that year permission was given by Rome to staff the mission and on 1st May the four pioneer Sisters arrived.¹ Sister Pulcheria Witt was in charge of the little community. The Priest of the mission was Father B Stieler who, at first, also acted as catechist. A small cottage formed the convent and close to it was a very small church. Separate small huts were occupied by the Priest and the Pallottine Brothers.

This mission is in the African Reserve, therefore no Europeans except traders could settle here. When it was bought by Msgr Vogel the place was a trading station and it would have to remain such if Europeans were to live there. Sister Columbiere was made chief seller in the shop and, at once, determined to give her customers some picture preaching. A large portrayal, in colour, of some Bible scene was placed in a conspicuous spot, and this proved a source of interest to the Africans when they assembled in front of the shop at their weekly visit.

The two teaching Sisters had one secular male African to assist them. Among their pupils they found three children who, during the Influenza Epidemic, had been baptised Catholics by some passing missionary, but who knew nothing of any religion. The Sisters also perceived that these children were quite unlike other Africans they had previously taught. They appeared to have no fixed religious principles, worshipped no particular god and seemed to live only to eat and enjoy themselves. Judged by their standard of living the people were wealthy and had been given land by the Government. This they tilled and their cattle had multiplied. They had no desire for knowledge for themselves or for their children who roamed about tending herds of goats and cattle.

Sister Pulcheria conducted a small clinic from which she doled out simple remedies. Unfortunately she upset a kettle of boiling water which scalded her foot very badly and she was forced to return to the Mother House as a patient. Although the Sisters had been sent here to teach in the mission school, none of them knew the Xhosa language. This hindrance to their progress was removed when the Superior was now succeeded by Sister Anna Kugelmann who spoke the African language so well that the people looked upon her as something super-human. On her arrival there were only 25 pupils in the school and they had increased to 79 when she left two years later on transfer. The number did not, however, rise above eighty because there were several state-aided schools in the vicinity, conducted by Africans.

Sister Anna prepared the first children who received the Sacraments at Qoqodala. This was not an easy task as voluntary acknowledgement of guilt was something not akin to their nature. They, by instinct, hid their faults. The mystery of Holy Communion was difficult to bring home to them. Similar difficulties obtained in school: “A ladder has so many rungs... A tower or two-storey house is so many metres high...” These children had never seen a ladder; a tower was equally meaningless to them for the only house they had ever seen was a hut or the Sisters’ cottage... Yet the Qoqodala people had one striking characteristic: They had great respect for the Sisters² and were anxious to co-operate with them in any work they did at the Mission. Several times, when the Sisters were delayed on an urgent sick call late at night two women or girls would be sent to escort them to the Mission. This was done without any request from the Sisters and solely on the initiative of the family they were visiting. So, too, when the catechist or even the Priest failed to convince a dying person of the seriousness of his condition a visit from the Sisters usually had the desired effect of a deathbed conversion.

As the mission grew the Brothers took over the shop. However, by 1957, there were only two Dominican Sisters left at Qoqodala; one acted as cook and the other as housekeeper and sacristan at the handsome church which had replaced the first small one. After our Sisters were recalled from this mission in 1959

¹ *Sisters Pulcheria Witt, Philippa Oberlaender, Colombiere Steinert and Emma Wellein.*

² *One of the missionaries, who worked for many years at Qoqodala, is Sister Dilecta Kley who became known as “Sister Qoqodala”.*

their duties passed on to a community of African Diocesan Sisters that had been founded by Bishop Rosenthal. These have their headquarters at Ntaba Maria³ in the district of Queenstown.

XVIII – *Lumko*⁴ Mission, Queenstown

A mission dedicated to St Michael and all the Holy Angels was opened at a place known as Lumko, situated about seven kilometres from the village of Lady Frere. It was begun in January 1930 by the Pallottine Priests of Queenstown. Rev Father Vay S.A.C. was put in charge of it, and three Dominican Sisters were sent there from King William's Town in order to minister to the material needs of the Priest, Brothers and African helpers. Theirs was a hidden life. They did whatever came their way each day to further without ostentation the cause of Christ among the Bantu people.

On 17th February 1952 Sister Lambertina Lippert was busy with her usual homely occupations. She rang the evening Angelus and then went into the Sisters' little refectory presumably to lay the table for supper. Instead she sat down and leaned forward to rest her head on her arms on the table. When her companions entered they found she had winged her flight to heaven. The doctor's verdict was: Death as the result of a heart attack. Sister Lambertina lies buried in the mission cemetery at Glen Grey Hospital.

In 1966 Bishop J B Rosenthal converted this mission into a much needed Missiological Research and Training Institute and established it as a Religious House of the Missionary Priests of the Sacred Heart. As a result of this change the Dominican Sisters were recalled to King William's Town.

XIX – *Pimville*, St Peter Claver, Kliptown

The mission of St Peter Claver at Pimville, where our story begins, has a long history going back to the days when the people were removed from what was formerly the Municipal Market of Johannesburg. This removal was due to a small-pox epidemic in 1905. From all appearances this was a haphazard operation. The site, Kliptown, was badly chosen in the first place, for it was near the municipal sewerage farm. The housing was pitiful: mere tin shanties. Water taps were placed at various points and public toilets, also very primitive, were provided. As time moved on the people themselves built wattle-and-daub huts, not things of beauty but at least an improvement on the tin shacks that had been supplied. In those early days the life of the Catholic Church here was a hard one. For over 25 years its needs were supplied from the Church at Shervel Street, Doornfontein – later Village main. Father Goodfriend O.M.I. and his catechist, Mr Pius Gillenge, visited the area. Father W Schwerte O.M.I., who followed, said Mass regularly in the home of Mr William Langa, a tailor living near the rocky central area of Klipspruit, often called Maseru. It was a small house but it was surprising how many could crush into it on a Sunday morning. Like so many of our missions in their beginnings, the strength lay in the spirit of the pioneers.

The leaders of the people who kept the mission going seven days of the week are also deserving of credit. Men like Pius Gillenge, Johannes Ndose, Denis Moendane, Charles Dlamini, Julius Timba, Thadeus Chinaba and women like Esther Mkize, Emmerentia Gillenge, the Gwales, Madondos, Mtetwas, Moelases – all these families had their share in preparing the way for the Mission that came to be.

Finally, in 1929, Bishop David O'Leary O.M.I. had the first church built at Klipspruit, later renamed Nancefield and finally Pimville. For a few months Mass was said here only on Sundays. The school was opened in January 1930. Mother General Augustine Geisel sent two Sisters⁵ from Belgravia Convent to begin teaching there. To assist them there were Teacher Ambrose Zondo and Mistress Elizabeth Letsoalo. The little Primary School soon proved its worth but some initial difficulties had to be overcome.

³ *Xhosa, meaning Marymount.*

⁴ *Derived from a Xhosa word Lumka, meaning 'beware'*

⁵ *Sister Floretta Hoerle and Colman Feeny.*

To begin with there was the Sisters' transport problem. Living at Belgravia Convent they had to entrain every morning at 7 o'clock from Jeppe Station. In ordinary circumstances they should have arrived at Pimville at 7.30, in time for Mass and for opening school. But in those days the transport system was poor. The Vereeniging-Johannesburg railway line was single. From it a line branched out at Nancefield Station to the location. Consequently, if the Vereeniging morning train was late, which occurred frequently, the location train from Jeppe was also late. It happened often that the train arrived after 8 o'clock, thus causing confusion in the school timetable. Owing to this difficulty the School Inspector, Mr Achterberg, delayed registration of the mission school until 1934.

There was only one way out of the dilemma – to rent or get a house near or in Kliptown. Eventually a place was secured about a mile from the school. It was an old garden-house in a bad state of repair. It took some time planning to make the house, in any way, habitable. The roof, which was badly holed, was covered with some kind of composition. As the house consisted of only one large room with a verandah on two sides it had to be divided up into a chapel, a dormitory, dining-room, kitchen and bathroom. The largest room, thus made, was set aside for a chapel. The rondavel next to the house was occupied by the Priest, Father J Delajod O.M.I. and, after him, Father A Paulsen O.M.I. On visiting the place, Father Martindale S.J. remarked that it was 'the poorest convent he had seen in all his travels'. Sister Niceta Pichelmeier now also came from Belgravia to keep house for the missionaries. The two teachers left the 'Convent' at 7 o'clock, cycled to school, where they taught until 2.30 p.m. and reached home again only at about four o'clock in the afternoon. Later kind Father Rupert O.S.B. provided the nuns each with a motor for their bikes, which made travelling much easier, although they were exposed to the inclemency of the weather. But with stout hearts and smiling face the Sisters braved the heat, cold, wind or rain to reach their mission.⁶ Notwithstanding the very considerable help received from the successive Prioresses at Belgravia, Mothers Aidan Kilbride and St James Bildstein, the Sisters at Kliptown, led a very hard life. Mrs Emmerentia Gillenge lived near the school and she very kindly allowed the Sisters to prepare a hot meal for themselves during the day in her kitchen. Trying not to be a worry to their Superiors the nuns concealed many of their difficulties and tried to solve them on their own. But for the generosity of Mr Jerry Sinovich, a farmer in the district, who supplied this little convent with free milk, meat and coal, things would have been much worse. Eventually the hardships told on the health of the missionaries and others, equally devoted, took their place and conditions gradually improved.

After about four years of pioneering in this way, Mother General bought Mrs Machado's cottage and named it the Convent of Sr Martin de Porres. Sister Floretta Hoerle, Nicola Spickenreiter and Niceta wrote in their chronicles that they took possession of this house on 30th March 1935. By 23rd July of the same year the Sisters received a "Government Grant" for the mission school. In September 1935 Sister Arsenia Mueller succeeded Sister Floretta and on the 11th of that month the Blessed Sacrament was brought to the chapel of Martin de Porres' Convent.

Today one hears much about 'working with and becoming part of the community one serves.' The Sisters at this mission were very much part of the Nancefield community. They fitted in quite easily – so much so that there was no publicity about their efforts. The women of the mission quickly realised that they had good friends in the nuns. Their first efforts centred on the material work. Soon Mrs Esther Mkize realised how poor the mission was. Gathering a group of women as devoted as herself, she organised Sunday 'parties' in different houses, at which each one present, including the children, put a donation on the table. The total was handed to the Sisters each Monday morning. From these parties a group of active Catholics emerged into a charitable organisation. They adopted no name but, basically, their object was to help anyone in trouble. On hearing of a family in difficulty through illness they appointed two of their number to make arrangements to help in looking after the patient or to assist with the cooking, washing or any of the many daily routine duties of a housewife. This system developed a strong community spirit among these Christians. Mrs Mkize, the driving force behind the movement also took it upon herself to be a kind of 'spiritual director' to the catechumens. When the Priest had finished his hour of religious instruction to the class, Mrs Mkize took these Catholics-to-be and drilled them in the manner one should go to

⁶ Some years later they were given the much-needed motor car.

confession, received Holy Communion and so forth. All in all, Pimville grew into a fine mission where the Sisters, teachers and parents worked together in a spirit of great harmony.

Two of the men, Johannes Ndose and Denis Moedane, took charge of the church choir. Mr Ndose had a powerful voice and used to the full. It mattered little if "Turner's Mass" had an extra note added here and there... They were serving the Church to the best of their ability. The Africans usually sang beautifully and they can harmonise to any melody, even to that of Plain Chant.

Although the Priest-in-charge always remained the Manager of St Peter Claver School and it never became ours, the Sisters literally slaved for this mission. Sister Xaverina Heiss was its energetic Principal for many years. Then came Sister Terese Meierer and after her Sister Cassilda Huber was appointed headmistress. The latter has worked at this mission more than 25 years. Her faithful companion today is Sister Alexia Besler.

Each year twenty or forty children were prepared for First Holy Communion and whenever the Bishop of Johannesburg came to Pimville His Lordship usually confirmed fifty, a hundred, or more young Christians that had been prepared for the Sacrament by the missionaries. Sometimes whole families of Africans came to receive instructions in the Faith.

An important survey of the position of the Bantu community in South Africa was carried out under the Chairmanship of Professor F R Tomlinson of the Chair of Agricultural Economics at the University of Pretoria. A Commission on the Socio-Economic Development of the Bantu Areas then produced an extensive report which envisaged the establishment of a number of more or less self-governing Bantu communities based on the existence of the Native Reserves, to which further zones were to be added. Following the Tomlinson Report the Group Areas system of land distribution, based on the principle of separate development of the various peoples of South Africa, was introduced by an Act of Parliament in 1951. The South African Government now took over all mission schools in the country. The Catholic Church wanted to retain its schools, but henceforth all state subsidies that had hitherto supported the mission schools ceased. This dealt the missions a mortal blow for now all funds for the maintenance of these mission schools had to come from private sources.

For a school like the one at Pimville it has been very difficult to survive. For, although the classes are badly overcrowded with the five or six hundred scholars, the fees have had to be kept low to remain within the means of the poor children attending this school; and the income from this source is entirely inadequate to meet even the minimal maintenance costs. The Diocese of Johannesburg, our Congregation and other benefactors⁷ make contributions to keep the school going, yet Sister Cassilda wages an unremitting uphill struggle to find only the needed money to pay the African teachers on her staff each month. However, despite these hardships, frustrations and anxieties, our valiant missionaries continue to spend themselves for souls without counting the cost.

In the near future Pimville will become an industrial area. In recent years the people who had settled there since 1905 have been removed to other African townships and the dilapidated old houses and shacks have been demolished. Nothing now remains of Pimville, except the old church and school built 48 years ago which still stand, with many memories of the past. These buildings, too, will soon disappear when permission and funds are obtained to build a church on another site.

In conclusion, a word of encouragement to those who laboured so faithfully at this mission may not be amiss. Let the missionaries remember that the poor Mission of Pimville is the 'mother' of quite a number of missionary posts on the Rand today. From Pimville began the missions of Evaton, Meyerton, Benoni, Germiston, Alberton and probably even others. Our Sisters thus helped to sow the seeds of Christianity in almost innumerable hearts and, at the eternal harvest, their reward will surely 'be exceeding great'.

⁷ Before World War II no monetary assistance was received from Europe for the Missions except small sums from Societies like that of St Peter Claver or of Munich and Aachen. Since the European economy recovered after the War, however, assistance has been given to various projects and to all donors the Missions wish to record their gratitude. Thanks is also due to charitable societies in South Africa such as the Catholic Women's League, the Society of St Vincent de Paul and others who have helped thus far to maintain this one as well as other missions.

XX – *Kliptown*, St Peter Claver, Kliptown

The following entries are taken from the Sisters' chronicle at Kliptown Convent: "... In 1944 Sister Nicola Spickenreiter had prepared three Coloured children for their First Communion and they received the Sacrament in our convent chapel...

"During May 1946 the Sisters received the first home letters from Germany since the war. Even this great joy of getting news from their relatives was mingled with sorrow because some of these missives brought the sad tidings that some dear ones had died. Other letters related stories of the privations of other sufferings endured in the years of strife..."

The lower part of the Sisters' ground at Kliptown was vacant and Father Paulsen suggested that we could build a school there for Coloured children. Bishop W P Whelan O.M.I., soon after his consecration, paid Kliptown a visit and gave permission that St Catharine's School could be begun. Mother General Demetria agreed to pay for the erection of a prefabricated school. On 4th June 1949 the school was at last complete and Fathers Pausen and Embo blessed the building. Sister Nicola and a young Coloured woman began teaching there from the Grades to Standard Two. When Sister Nicola took ill she was succeeded by Sister Alonsa Karpf as principal teacher. The prefabricated school hall was used as a church until the fine St Catharine's Church was completed. Now the hall is divided to form two more classrooms for the growing number of children.

The little school continued to grow and recently a small nursery department was added, so that the school has some 260 children on the register. A few Sisters still teach there, helped by several Coloured ladies. They are doing fine work for the children of the Coloured community of Kliptown.

In 1973 St Catharine's is also engaged in a new project, that of tutoring backward Coloured children who are debarred from entering and school because they do not possess a birth certificate. These children are given rudimentary schooling as a separate private group until the required birth certificates are obtained; then they can enrol at a recognised school.

A couple of Sisters from the community also join the Sisters of the Holy Cross Congregation who go to Diepkloof to give adult education there to Africans studying privately for the Standard Eight or Matriculation Examinations. This work has been interrupted by the sporadic riots that have broken out in the African townships since 1976; but as soon as order is restored the Sisters hope to resume their work of charity at Diepkloof.