

The Story of the Sisters of Mercy, South Africa

"One of the great areas of Catholic expansion in South Africa in the last quarter of the nineteenth century was that which included the Boer republics between the Orange and Limpopo rivers. In this case the missionary priests and nuns followed on the heels of the immigrant miners, although the way had been prepared by the Premonstratensian Father Hoenderwangers." After the discovery of diamonds the diggers came to the "New Rush" fields, where the new town of Kimberley was named in 1875. There were soon ten thousand Europeans at work as well as three times that number of Bantu.

The missionaries set up temporary churches of canvas, and later of wood and iron and started rudimentary schools for the children. There was little planning because no one believed that the diamonds or the population would continue for long. Bishop Jolivet organized the vicariate and was able to report to the Congregation of Propaganda that "this Orange River and diamond fields area, the Republic and Griqualand West which was annexed to Cape Colony, had more Catholics and Catholic-oeuvres than Natal and the Transvaal combined." Many of the Catholic population were of Irish origin and Bishop Jolivet urged again and again that a new vicariate should be erected in this district and placed under an Irish vicar apostolic.

The discoveries of gold at Barberton and De Kaap in 1884 brought a new flood of immigrants from Kimberley and later from overseas and there was every likelihood that they would be able to support Catholic schools and churches. On this advice the Congregation of Propaganda took action and a papal bull of 4 June 1886 created both the vicariate of the Orange Free State to include that Republic and Basutoland and the Kimberley district, and the prefecture of the Transvaal, to include the lands of the South African Republic. The vicariate was entrusted to Bishop Anthony Gaughren, an Irishman.

Mafikeng



In the account which Rev. Father Porte O.M.I. wrote to Bishop A. Gaughren of his visit to Bechuanaland in 1894 urges the necessity of a Convent School for girls at Mafikeng. He says many, non-Catholics as well as Catholics, were not only willing but desirous to have such a school for their children, and would give it their whole-hearted support. Mafikeng was a small military and trading station to which the railway from Cape Town was completed in 1894. The Bishop had a Church built there in 1896 and set about looking for Sisters for the project. He approached the Holy Family Sisters in Kimberley for help. They were not able to give Sisters, as they had made many foundations in the previous decade, but the Superior, Mother Xavier Garland, suggested the Convent of Mercy in Strabane, where she had been to school. When Bishop Gaughren visited Ireland in 1897, one of his first visits was to the Bishop of Derry, and then to Strabane Convent after the Bishop's sanction was obtained.

He pleaded his cause so eloquently that many volunteers came forward. Five were chosen: Mother Teresa Cowley (former Superior of Strabane, who was to be the Superior of the group), Mother Magdalen Dunne (Bursar, in Strabane), Mother Stanislaus Gallagher (Novice Mistress in Strabane), Sr. M. Evangelist McGlynn (the Community Nurse), and Sr M. Gonzaga McDonagh, the youngest of the group, who was a gifted linguist and musician. The young superioress of Strabane, Mother M. Joseph, is recorded as reproaching the Bishop, with the words, "My Lord, you are taking the best of the Community". His Lordship, with disarming amiability declared he wanted only the best, and spoke so convincingly of the work to be done in some neglected part of his large Vicariate that all opposition was overcome. As he was leaving, his Lordship, standing on one of the terraces allowed his gaze to rest on the valley whose cornfields, orchards and meadows were then beautiful with the promise of a rich harvest. (It was July 1897).

The contrast between this scene and that of the desert-like spaces of Bechuanaland must have been vividly before him; but when someone asked if the scenery of South Africa compared with

that spread out before their eyes he answered promptly, in what has become a time-honoured phrase "More extensive, but not varied!". It must have brought many a wry smile to the first arrivals.

The Bishop would not be able to return to South Africa for several months, perhaps a year. (Besides Ireland, he was going to Europe and to the USA). It was decided that the Sisters should leave as soon as possible though work would not be begun in Mafikeng until the beginning of 1898.

The approaching departure of the Sisters to a country very little known at the time was freely discussed by the pupils and three girls from the Boarding School, each without the knowledge of the others, applied to the Mother Superior for leave to go home to consult her parents about accompanying the Sisters to South Africa.

Though all the relatives at first opposed the idea, because of the distance and unknown country, all eventually came round and gave their blessing. The three Postulants were Margaret Coffey (Mother Magdalen's niece), (later Mother M. Joseph); Helen Byrne (later Mother M. Patricia, Novice Mistress), and Brigid McGlinchey (Mother Evangelist's niece), (later Mother M. Columba). There was a fourth girl, who was to be a lay Sister - Sarah. She did not stay very long and returned to Ireland. The parents of these girls gave generous gifts towards the expenses of the new mission. A crowded six weeks followed, outfits had to be made, farewell visits to be paid. Finally came the day of parting.

The Sisters travelled via Dublin, Holyhead to London. Here, they were the guests of the Sisters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary, Hamerton Convent. The Superioress, Mother Angelina, was a past pupil of Strabane Convent. Sr M. Laurence of the same community was a cousin of Mother Teresa. A record kept by one of the travellers says that the hospitality and friendliness of these Sisters was beyond belief. A number of Sisters were sent to take the travellers round London and show them places of interest. On the morning of their departure, the 24th September 1897 - feast of Our Lady of Mercy - they had Mass at 6h30, followed by Benediction, and the hymn "Mother of Mercy" sung specially for those leaving. They sailed on the "Arundel Castle". The Captain was a Cork man who was very friendly to them and on board they met a South African priest, Fr. Quirke, returning after a holiday. He was of Irish descent, but born in South Africa. He proved a most entertaining travelling companion and gave much information about the country to which the Sisters were going.

The voyage was pleasant but uneventful. The Captain and officers were most courteous, and the health of the party excellent - with one exception. Sr M. Gonzaga, who had been in poor health before the voyage, contrary to expectations, did not improve. In fact, he was worse on October 17, when the "Arundel Castle" arrived in Cape Town. It was Sunday morning. Rev. Fr. McCarthy, D.D. came to meet the Sisters on board, and took them to the cathedral for Mass at 11.00a.m. Dr Kolbe was the preacher. Afterwards they enjoyed the hospitality of the Dominican Sisters at St. Mary's Convent, Bouquet Street.

The following evening they began the journey to Kimberley. In Kimberley they reached the end of their travels for the time being. Fr. Lenoir, O.M.I. and Rev Brother Mullen, Superior of the Christian Brothers, met them. They were taken to the Holy Family convent in Currey Street, and Rev Mother Xavier and her Community welcomed them with the most affectionate kindness. It would be impossible to give an idea of the pains the Holy Family Sisters took and what inconvenience they put up with for the sake of their guests during the weeks the Sisters of Mercy spent at the Convent waiting for a suitable house near the Church. The Sisters said that the hospitality of the Holy Family Sisters towards them should never be forgotten by those who came after them.



Sr. M. Gonzaga's health grew steadily worse and then it was proposed that the Sisters should go to Taungs where they would find ample accommodation, Mother Xavier and her Sisters pleaded so eloquently to be allowed to keep them a little longer for the sake of the sick Sister that they remained.

A house was rented in Currey Street, and here, in spite of the most devoted attention of Dr Ashe, and all his medical skill, given unstintingly and without remuneration - he resolutely refused all payment - Sr M. Gonzaga died on 2nd January 1898.

People showed great sympathy to the Sisters in this sorrow. Sr M. Gonzaga was buried in the Nazareth House plot in Kenilworth cemetery, Kimberley.

Fr. Ogle was the Parish Priest in Mafikeng. The Sisters went to visit Mafikeng, and with him, they secured a site for the new Convent. On 15th February, 1898, the Sisters arrived in Mafikeng. Rev Fr. Ogle had travelled down the line and escorted them to St. Anthony's Church, where he celebrated Mass. They were the guests of Mr. and Mrs. Hampson for breakfast, and then went to look at the proposed site. Though it looked unpromising, it turned out very suitable. However, the Convent was not begun until some months later.

Meanwhile the Sisters lived in a rented house and another house was secured for a school. About 40 pupils attended, - as many as their limited accommodation would allow. Not many of these pupils were Catholics, and those who were, were very ignorant of their religion.

On June 24th, 1898, the postulants received the habit of the Sisters of Mercy and took the names of Sr. M. Joseph, Sr. M. Patricia and Sr. M. Columba. "Rev. Fr. Ogle performed the ceremony at St. Anthony's Church, which could not contain all those who came, out of devotion or curiosity. In an eloquent sermon Rev. Fr. Ogle explained the duties of the religious life. The music was supplied by Mr. and Mrs. Hampson and Miss Hampson and Mr. Pat Carroll".

His Lordship approved of the site selected for the Convent. (It was given by the municipality, free, except for £50 transfer fees). Rev Fr. Ogle set to work to clear it. In the warm sun he toiled, chopping trees, rooting out stumps, raising and levelling ground, working with the natives as well as directing them. Fr. Lenoir drew the plans of the Convent, and the contract for the building was given to Messrs Grant and Pennycook of Mafikeng.

Work was begun in November 1898, and on June 1st, 1899 the Convent was ready for occupation. In July school opened with about 50 day pupils and 5 boarders. Rumours of war probably hindered many from sending pupils to board. It was soon plain to all that war was imminent. Women and children left the town. The boarders went home with the utmost haste, and on October the military took possession of the Convent.

A bomb-proof was made for the Sisters in the adjoining Hospital grounds. Here they lived during the seven months of the siege, when not on duty in the Hospital wards.

On the outbreak of war the Bishop had wired the Sisters to come on to Kimberley, if they wished, or to stay and help with the nursing or anything else. They all chose to stay. Just before the war there had come news that two postulants were sailing on the "Avondale Castle", leaving on 8th September and arriving in Cape Town on 1st October. (These were the two Mahers - later Sr M. de Sales and Sr M. Agnes). Through the good offices of Fr. Ogle the Sisters managed to get the postulants met and brought to the Holy Family Convent in Kimberley where they stayed till after the siege of Mafikeng was raised in the following May. The story of the seven months siege

The story of the siege has been told in detail elsewhere, and it is not possible to include it here. By the time the siege was raised on 17th May 1900 - one of the historic dates of an older pre-world war era - Mafikeng had become a household word all over the English-speaking world.

When communication was restored after the Relief of Mafikeng letters of congratulations were received from the Bishops of South Africa, cables from friends overseas, and boxes of provisions from many Convents, as well as pressing



invitations to the Sisters from all the Religious Orders who had houses at the Coast. The Government offered the four Senior Sisters free passages to Europe. Mother M. Teresa and Sr M. Evangelist accepted and left South Africa early in July. The remaining Sisters with Mother M. Magdalen and Mother M. Stanislaus went to the Dominican Convent, Wynberg, where they were received with "sisterly affection and nursed back to (almost) robust health."

On 29th June 1900 the two postulants who had been in Kimberley since the previous October arrived in Mafikeng. There were only two Sisters in the Convent -Mother Magdalen and Sr M. Patricia. The latter had gone over to the hospital to help (they were still in demand at the hospital for extra duties) and M. Magdalen was alone. She sent a Mr. and Mrs. Quinlan - two Catholic friends - to meet them, but they were expecting nuns and returned to the Convent alone. However the two, directed by the station-master, came on and found their escort before reaching the Convent. They had got the postulant's cap before Sr. M. Patricia returned from the hospital that evening. (The above is too long, I know, but it is so removed from to-day's world that is tempting to linger over it. There are no more tales of like quality throughout the rest of the 'story'.)

On August 28th 1900, Mafikeng and district were swept by a cyclone. The convent, shell-shattered as it was, offered no protection against the torrential rain which poured through the perforated roof as through a sieve. There was nothing of value left to be spoiled except some Church vestments and fancy needlework brought from M. Magdalen's sister by the two postulants. Walking in the flooded corridors was a novelty for the postulants but those who had been through the siege wondered if the elements meant to complete the ruin begun by the war.

When the report of this new disaster reached Bishop Gaughren he left Kimberly for Mafikeng as soon as possible to hasten the repairs undertaken at the expense of the Government.

In October, exactly a year after the schools had been closed down; they were re-opened, only 20 pupils being present. Gradually the former residents returned to the town and the attendance at school improved.

Meanwhile Mother M. Teresa and Sr. M. Evangelist had arrived in London where they were the guests of the Sisters of Nazareth. Through the kindness of Lady Sarah Wilson who had been through the siege of Mafikeng herself, a sum of £2000 was give to the Convent from the Mafikeng relief Fund. This was used to pay the debt on the original building. They were in communication with some of the families of the officers who had been in Mafikeng, and visited one whose nephew had been killed. They were received in audience by Queen Victoria - on, of all days, the 24th September. (The day on which they had booked their return passage which they had cancelled on hearing of the audience). They had got many good gifts in Ireland too, and in fact they were much better off after the siege, and as a result of it, than they had been before. Another result of their trip was even better. Sr. M. Pilkington, of Cahir Convent Co. Tipperary, accompanied them back to South Africa. (They had appealed for professed Sisters and this was the only response). She was a musician, just the person needed to fill the place left vacant by Sr. M. Gonzaga's death.

The dawn on 1901 was very fair. The future looked particularly bright after the trials of the past. But there were more sorrows to come. On January 4th, His Lordship the Bishop had written from Pokwani to Mother Teresa in connection with the transfer of the Convent property to the Sisters of Mercy. Eleven days later they received the news of his death. They had lost their best, perhaps their only friend in the country. The Bishop had hoped to be able to officiate at the profession of the three novices who were in retreat at the time of his death. The Rev. Fr. Sechet performed the ceremony on January 23rd.

The work of the Sister increased - the schools grew, classes in catechism and instruction of converts went on - visitation of the sick and the poor in their homes. There were not so many poor among the Europeans, but visitation of the poor coloured people were at first resented by their own Church workers.

School for Coloured at Convent



In 1902 a school was opened for coloured Catholics in premises at the convent. The number fluctuated very much, then dwindling to two or three as the vicissitudes of life or the migratory spirit favoured Mafikeng or elsewhere. Its existence was so precarious that Mother Teresa decided to close it for the time being, and Catechism classes were held three evenings in the week. In 1913 so many Indians and coloured children were in town that the need of a permanent school building was evident. Rev.Fr. O'Leary, O.M.I. was keenly interested and St. Frances Xavier's school was begun. On 1st August 1913 School was opened in a disused fruit store, lent for the purpose by Mr. Rodgers, an Indian whose wife and children were Catholics. The new venture was placed under the patronage of St. Francis Xavier. Seventeen pupils attended on the opening day, twelve of whom were Catholics. The numbers increased slowly, owing to the determined opposition of the Wesleyan School teachers, and the persecution of the non-Catholic pupils who attended the Sister's school. However, in spite of this opposition, of the poverty and the lethargic indifference resulting from it, the school progressed. In 1913 Sr. M. Baptist was brought back from Johannesburg to take charge, and in the following year, 1914, Fr. O'Leary succeeded in getting a government grant for one teacher. Since that day, Sr. Baptist devoted her whole life to St. Francis Xavier's school and to the coloured people of Mafikeng. Determined to overcome all obstacles she threw herself into the work.

When the fruit store became too small to accommodate the pupils, a tent served as an additional classroom. After seven years the Municipality granted a site, and in 1920 the permanent St. Francis Xavier School was opened.

In the early stages the coloured pupils were still few, but the school had admitted African pupils and when St. Mary's Mission School was opened Sr. Baptist saw more that a hundred children transferred to the new Mission school. From then on she dedicated her life to the spiritual, educational and material welfare of the coloured community. After her long hours of teaching she would trudge on foot through the ill-made streets, visiting the poor, the sick and the destitute. In the early days she had an assistant teacher and companion, Sr. M Brendan Regan. Sr. Brendan did not live very long, and after her death, many different sisters helped Sr. Baptist, until Government regulations enforced the appointment of coloured assistant teachers.

When the walking got too much for Sr. Baptist she got a cart and two donkeys and this cart, packed with baskets and parcels became a familiar sight in the coloured township. She had at last overcome the hostility and distrust of earlier times; she was a welcome visitor in every home.

Poverty was extreme in the township. For the benefit of the poor Sr. Baptist begged, far and wide, not only in Mafikeng, but in Johannesburg and Durban and Cape Town and Australia and Ireland and USA. She must have been an excellent beggar for few could resist her appeals for help. Up to the time of her death she was receiving cash and parcels from many lands.

When the time came for her to retire from teaching, she continued as manager of the school. No other white person would be admitted as teacher after the organisation of coloured education undertaken by the Government. But Sr. Baptist continued her work, giving all her time to charitable and social work, when she was no longer engaged in the classroom.

After her retirement as teacher and principal Sr. Baptist was made manager of the school and was in charge of all the administrative and financial side of the work. It was a life-time assignment, with the proviso that Sr. Baptist would be the last to hold it. After her the school would be controlled by the coloured officials themselves.

A clinic was opened and staffed for a number of years, but eventually passed out of the sister's control. However the works of Mercy in all their forms were Sr. Baptist's province and she never

let up or left off until her death. The work was carried on by the community for some years, until with the provision of a new school for coloureds by the Government, St. Francis Xavier's was no longer needed, and in 1968 the convent itself was closed, and the sisters sent to Johannesburg and Pretoria where the need was greater.



From the beginning of their work in Mafikeng the sisters had tried to help the Africans-(they speak of them by their tribal names, in early records, as 'Africans' did not come into general use until much later)- but in spite of many attempts they failed. The chiefs had promised the Wesleyan missionaries, who had been working among them for many years that they would preserve their monopoly on the Christianising of the Africans, and the sisters failed to alter the arrangement. Several attempts are recorded on visits to chiefs and headmen, always with the same result. However, Africans coming from Rhodesia to work in the mines in Johannesburg often stopped and stayed in or near Mafikeng, to get work or to stay for sufficient time to get passes to work in the Transvaal. The sisters used to visit these, instruct them in the faith when possible, say the Rosary with them and help. Sr. Berchmans Bolger was particularly devoted to them-and in fact, on her arrival, a fresh attempt was made to secure an African school. To no avail. But she did a lot of catechising work among the adult Africans. When the Holy Cross Sisters opened St. Mary's Mission the Africans were adequately cared for, and the Sisters of Mercy devoted all their care to the coloured and Indians in Mafikeng.

This has taken us far from the arrival of the so-called 'Noble Eight' (postulants) with Bishop Matthew Gaughren in 1906. The eight all persevered in religion, one died in 1911 but all the rest live to our times. In fact there are two still with us, Mother M. Bernard and Mother M. Brigid.

Bishop Matthew Gaughren was consecrated at Leith Scotland about the middle of March 1902. His Lordship showed the same fatherly interest as his deceased brother in the Mafikeng Convent.



In June of this year (1902) Mother Teresa was decorated with the Royal Red Cross for services rendered during the Siege. The ceremony took place in the convent grounds. A detachment of military and all the principal residents were present. Colonel Vyvyn, a most kind friend of the convent, represented the reigning sovereign. Baden Powell's brother, Mr. Frank Baden Powell, was one of the many visitors to the convent that year.

In 1903, a branch convent was opened in Vryburg. School there was very successful, but the number of Catholics was so small that the work did not justify the presence of a resident Priest, when more populous towns were understaffed. The convent was closed in 1911.

Four postulants had arrived at the end of 1901 with Mother Magdalen and Mother Stanislaus, who had been home in Ireland. These four were (in religion) Sr. M. Berchmans Bolger, Sr. M. Alacoque Carey, Sr. M. Aloysius Duggan and Sr. M. Xavier Murphy (who died quite soon). Sr. M. DeSales and Sr. M. Agnes were professed on 23rd January 1903, and the four above in 1904. When at the end of 1906 Bishop Matthew Gaughren returned from Europe and was accompanied by eight postulants, the community numbered twenty, including the four in Vryburg.

Johannesburg: Braamfontein



In 1907 His Lordship Miller, Bishop of the Transvaal, expressed a wish to have Sisters of Mercy in Braamfontein, Johannesburg. Bishop Gaughren readily gave consent and arrangements were made. Early in 1907 Mother Teresa and

Mother Magdalen visited Johannesburg to confer with Bishop Miller about the proposed foundation. They had to travel via De Aar the first time, but in July 1907 the railway was completed from Johannesburg to Zeerust, having done the 40 miles from Mafikeng by cart. (Motors were rare in those days). Mr. McLaughlin on several occasions drove the sisters from Mafikeng to his hotel in Ottoshoop, where they stayed overnight and he brought them to Zeerust early next morning to catch the train to Johannesburg.

The railway line was completed to Mafikeng only in 1912. This saved Mafikeng people 247 of rail journey to Johannesburg.

The first foundation of the Sisters of Mercy in Johannesburg was opened in Braamfontein on 24th September 1907. A school which had been run by the Ursulines was taken over. At first the sisters occupied a small house, and some slept in the basement under the Church. In 1912 a convent was built and occupied. The school flourished. A large number of the children were Catholics and a Sodality of children of Mary was founded quite soon.

In addition to teaching the sisters were able to do many of the works of Mercy here. They visited the sick in their homes and in the hospital. They provided relief for the poor, who were numerous. There is in the records a letter from the St. Vincent de Paul Society welcoming the sisters to Braamfontein and hoping much from their coming.

In later years Sr. Augustine used to visit the African hospital where she baptised hundreds of babies in danger of death. Before the hospital had moved, she had baptised over 1000. The sisters also visited Hope Home and taught Catechism there. Instruction over converts was another work which went on more or less constantly. In addition the sisters of Braamfontein used to teach Catechism in Parkview and Parktown North for years before the established of Rosebank Parish.

Braamfontein at the time when the sisters came there first was a suburb of mixed residential, commercial and industrial buildings. The two districts of Auckland Park and Melville supplied most of the early pupils. For years the sisters taught Catechism to junior children on Sundays in a catholic home in Auckland Park. There were two factories, a brewery and a cold storage quite close to the convent. There were some small shops, a post office, and a few hotels. The streets were neatly paved and well kept.

Some of the more important buildings of the city were on the borders of Braamfontein - the General Hospital; park Station, the Sports Grounds, the Museum, the Medical Research and later the University.

The chief cemetery of the city several acres in extent, made a picturesque garden shaded with graceful trees at the spot where Braamfontein merges into Auckland Park. The Sisters became well acquainted with it and with the graves of the holy dead, for they walked across it twice a day, to and from Fordsburg on the other side of the city.

Fordsburg: Mayfair

That brings us to the second foundation in Johannesburg. From the beginning of 1908, in response to another request from the Bishop, the Sisters of Mercy began to teach at a small school in Crown Road, Fordsburg. The Holy Family Sisters had been teaching there but could not continue to go from End Street, and were short of Sisters because Parktown Convent had been opened a short time before, leaving them very short. At Fordsburg the classes were taught in a large hall lent by Mr Arthur Connolly a baker and confectioner.

This large room was well ventilated and when the Sisters took over on January 29th, 1908 the walls had been freshly coloured and the floor scrubbed white. The seating accommodation was enough for about 40 children. All classes were taught in this same room. For the first six months the Sisters walked daily to and from Braamfontein. The Catholics of Braamfontein considered the walk too much for the teachers, and organised a concert and dance which realised sufficient

funds to buy a pony and trap. The pony was kept at the stables of Lion Brewery, the Manager of which was a Catholic. The African driver had little experience and the pony fell one day! (The poor pony). While his knees were being treated an "animal" (I suppose another pony) was lent from the brewery stables.



The Fordsburg district was a very poor one, but nearly all the pupils who attended paid a few shillings a month in fees. The Priest lent a room where music lessons were given twice a week at first, but later the numbers required two additional days and an additional Sister. Those who started Fordsburg were Sr M Evangelist, Sr M de Sales and Sr M Gerard, and Sr M Frances who taught music. In 1909 Mother Columba was sent to Fordsburg as principal and Sr M de Sales replaced her in Braamfontein. The surroundings were really unsuitable for a school, but many attempts to get a better site were in vain. However, in 1913, through the influence of Mr Sheridan of the Revenue Department, whose sister was a member of the Mafikeng community (Sr M Ignatius Sheridan, who died in 1909) the present site in Mayfair was bought at a very reasonable price. There was not a single house then between the mine dumps and the Convent. Later the district grew into a populous suburb. Here, as in Braamfontein, many of the works of Mercy were undertaken. The teaching of

Catechism, both in Mayfair itself and in outlying districts was one of the principal occupations of the Sisters. Mayfair was and is, probably one of most cosmopolitan centres of the Sisters of Mercy, people of all races and colour seemed to mingle quite happily in any gathering in or connected with Mayfair. Catechism classes were held at Martindale -before the Notre Dame Sisters established a school there - and Newclare every Sunday, and visiting of the sick and poor. Catechism was also taught at Block B and many classes were conducted in the parish itself. Parish catechism still goes on I'm sure.

In 1938, a school for the Lebanese was opened in Mint Road. Sr M Agnes was the principal. Sisters M Assumpta and Attracta were her helpers at different times. The school continued for many years, and Catechism was taught for children not at Catholic schools. The golden jubilee of Mayfair was celebrated in 1964. At the time three of the Sisters who were in the Convent at the opening date were still in Mayfair -Sr M Agnes, Sr M Alacoque and Sr M Angela. The school which has been changed to a primary school only is still flourishing and all the works of mercy are being carried out.

To return to Mafikeng, after following those two branches -in 1909 the Community lost its most generous benefactor, Mr. Pat Coffey, Fethard, Co. Tipperary, brother-in-law of Mother Magdalen and uncle of Mother Joseph. Not only did he and Mrs Coffey supply money and gifts when the Sisters left Ireland in 1897, but every important event in the Convent was afterwards made a pretext for sending a considerable donation. First Communion ceremonies, successful examinations, patronal feasts of the Sisters, always brought the cable announcing a remittance in favour of the community. In fact, were it not for the Coffeys, it would have gone very hard indeed with the young Community, as they had quite literally no source of income at all. It was the Coffeys and other relatives of the Sisters in lesser degrees that were the benefactors who enabled them to carry on their mission of mercy. Lack of money was a constant difficulty in the early days, and its hampering effect on expansion was often regretted by the early writers. Mr Coffey bequeathed much of his property to Mother Magdalen and Mother Joseph. Mrs Coffey died in 1914 and her dying wish was that a Chapel might be erected. This was badly needed, for the room used had become much too small for the growing community and the children. The building was begun on July 2nd, 1917. Mr. McInerney of Johannesburg was the Contractor. The foundation stone was laid by Bishop Cox in September and the Chapel was opened in October of the same year.

Even after the siege the Sisters had continued to give help in the hospital when there was pressure of work, and when the influenza epidemic broke out in 1918 the hospital became

overcrowded, the whole staff except the matron and one nurse were ill. Some Sisters were able to give help as day and night nurses and others attended the sick in their homes. Schools were closed but the boarders, except those in the immediate neighbourhood, remained. None of the inmates of the Convent contracted the disease. One doctor and one nurse died in the hospital. The greatest kindness was shown to the Sisters and the gratitude of the people was unforgettable. To show their appreciation of the Sisters' work the Board of the Victoria Hospital and some private persons gave a donation to the Convent funds. (Only three Catholics were in the hospital during this time).

Pretoria: Iona

The next foundation was in Pretoria. Fr. Tom Ryan, C.M.I. bought a site for a church in Capital Park, a district to the north of Pretoria. At that time Capital Park was outside the municipal boundary. (The time was in the early twenties). It was a very thinly populated district, and the greater part of the land beyond the church site consisted of blue-gum plantations. Fr. Tom Ryan asked Mother Magdalen to send a foundation to Capital Park. She agreed and purchased land from the Capital Park Estates. Fr. Ryan proved himself to be a man of foresight and shrewd judgement, for he realized that the district would grow and expand. Despite the discouraging view taken by many who spoke of the proposed Convent as a "House of Retreat" or a "voice crying in the wilderness", the foundation prospered exceedingly and in later years more than justified Fr. Ryan's and Mother Magdalen's enterprise.



The new Church was opened on 11th February 1923. The Church was dedicated to Sr Columba and at Fr. Tom's Ryan's suggestion it was decided that "Iona" would be a fitting name for the new Convent. The Superior of the new foundation, Mother M Joseph, accompanied by Sr M Alphonsus, came from Mafikeng to attend the opening of the Church. They returned to Mafikeng after the opening ceremony, until the Convent would be ready for occupation. It was expected that the building would be ready in March, and in fact the opening of the school had already been advertised.

Then came a disappointment. The contractors who had been entrusted with the building went bankrupt. This necessitated a new contract, and resulted in a delay in the opening of the Convent. When at last on 8th April, 1923, the two pioneers arrived from Mafikeng, the building was still in a very unfinished state. There were no doors in the house and an emergency door was erected in one room so that they might take possession of the house. Also, there were no cooking and culinary utensils provided and so the first purchase that had to be made was that of knives and forks.

Some weeks later Sr M Bernard and Sr M Dympna joined the other two. As yet there was no water laid on, and as the stove was one dependant on hot water installation, no cooking could be done in the house. The meals had to be cooked on a fire in the yard.

Mass was said daily in the Parish Church. It was arranged by the bishop that Mass should be said daily on condition that the Sisters provided transport for the priest. This however was never necessary, as many priests kindly gave their services. They used the cycle out from town until a resident priest took up his abode in Capital Park.

The school was opened on 23rd April. Twenty-one pupils attended on the opening day. Though they were of different grades, all had to be accommodated in one room - the room which was intended for the dining room. A piano was hired and the teaching of music was begun within a short time.

Many kind benefactors came forward to assist the little Community during their early struggles. Gifts of many kinds were constantly and generously given. One benevolent Catholic lady

deserves special mention. She proved herself a benefactor in more ways than one. She lent a sum of money to the Community, free of interest, and by so doing, enabled them to layout the garden and make many improvements. Mr Wickens, who was the gardener at the Union Buildings, Pretoria, designed and planned the garden, donated the shrubs, trees, flowers, and was always ready with help and advice long after the first difficult days were over. Two tennis courts were built and a Catholic gentleman of the neighbourhood donated two tennis nets and a wheelbarrow.

During all this time the little Community was struggling under a heavy burden of debt. The high rate of interest to be paid on the bond (for the building) proved a heavy yoke. Fortunately the burden was considerably lightened by a bequest of £2000 by Mr Coffey to mother Joseph.

The number of pupils increased rapidly. Very soon there was a flourishing commercial class and the school began to grow. It was, however, only during and after World War II that the numbers increased rapidly. The population of Pretoria itself shot up during those years. After World War II the school had upwards of 600 pupils for many years. It was in fact the most successful of all the schools founded, until very much later Rosebank began to grow, and eventually surpassed Iona in numbers.

Parish catechism, visitation of the sick, especially visitation of the hospital, and visitation of the state prison, were undertaken and carried on in Pretoria. At first the Sisters visited only the European Hospital, but later began to visit the African Hospital as well. Catechetical work in Mamelodi was started some years ago, at the request of Fr. Webber. A good deal of adult education of Africans is at present going on - Sisters teaching all day give their afternoons and evenings to adult education.

Mafikeng

Again a backward glance -the year 1914, though of such worldwide importance, was important too, in a sad way for Mafikeng Community. The dangerous illness of Mrs Coffey brought Mother Magdalen and Mother Joseph to her side, just before she died in July. Bishop Matthew Gaughren, who had written his last letter, with the permission for the Sisters to go to Ireland, died himself on 1st June. And in November of the same year Mother Teresa who had been declining gradually, died at 4.00 p.m. on 28th November. Fr. O'Leary, O.M. I. was the priest in charge. He preached at her funeral and thanked the Military and Defence Forces for their presence. He was a great friend to the community during his time in Mafikeng and afterwards when he was Bishop - Vicar Apostolic of the Transvaal.

Rosebank

For many years the Sisters had been considering moving the Novitiate out of Mafikeng. The number of deaths from TB among the young Sisters was alarming. Moreover they needed better educational facilities for the novices; Mafikeng was too far out of the way. Bishop O'Leary got a house in Sturdee Avenue, Rosebank, where a new parish was started. The priest at first lived in Kerk Street and came out to say Mass. Later Braamfontein presbytery served until the presbytery was built in Rosebank.

Permission was got from Rome to move the novitiate and Mother House from Mafikeng to Rosebank. The house in Sturdee Avenue was a single storey one, surrounded by a beautifully kept garden. The addition of a second storey spoiled the appearance of the house, but was necessary to accommodate the Sisters. Even after some years of comparative neglect -Convent care was very far from the care given by enthusiastic gardeners -the place was still a picture of beauty in 1934. There was an old sun-porch at the side leading into a rose-garden, which miraculously had survived. But that's anticipating. Mother Joseph and Mother Magdalen came to Rosebank in January 1930. Sisters M Frances, Camillus, Aquinas and Assumpta came next and began a school in the garage on 28th January. Bishop O'Leary himself said daily Mass in a room in Sturdee Avenue. Three classrooms were built (George Beckett was the builder) and opened on 20th April. Sr Camillus was transferred to Pretoria, and Mother Joseph took her place in school. The garage was converted into a Chapel which was opened on 14th May, Ascension Thursday.

The second storey of the house was completed in March. The schoolrooms were used for Mass on Sundays -the partitions opened back and the whole length of the building was used. Here, until the opening of the Church in 1936 the Rosebank Congregation worshipped.

The Novices came later in the year. Mother M. Patricia, the Novice mistress got pneumonia and died in Mafikeng Hospital in May 1930. In July Mother Stanislaus was appointed as Novice Mistress. Mother Joseph became Rev. Mother the same year. In Sturdee Avenue there was really no provision for a community at all. The second storey had two large dormitories and a large room for a Novitiate, but downstairs, there was only a desk in a corner of the lounge for Rev. Mother Joseph. And the lounge was the only way you could get upstairs to it. Sr. M. Frances had a music room, and I suppose Mother Stanislaus could take refuge in the Novitiate, but they had really nowhere except their cells to go. They generally sat in the refectory or the lounge for night recreation, and Mother Joseph and Sr Frances went out for a walk during day recreation.



St Theresa's Convent, Rosebank

The district was quiet and secluded. There was not a shop or a building of any kind, other than private houses, anywhere. The street of shops on the right side of Seventh Avenue, facing down, was there, not much different from today, but all the rest was a kind of sylvan retreat. It is hard to remember now how quiet and secluded it all was. The ordinary work of parish catechism was undertaken. The Sisters visited outlying districts, especially Craighall - a very poor district in those days - and from the 1940's taught Catechism there at the house of the Maddens - a Catholic family.

Throughout the whole history of the Sisters of Mercy in South Africa, two problems seemed to stand out - one, lack of money - fairly general among all orders I suppose - and the second, lack of Sisters. There was no settled source of postulants - the nuns went home and brought some girls back, or the Bishop went or some girls came on their own because they had heard of the Sisters or known them. But during World War II there was no possibility of anyone going home or coming out and a long period with no postulants at all ensued. In 1946 Rev Mother Alphonsus and Mother Joseph went to Ireland to try and get postulants. Mother Alphonsus was sick, and during her stay in the Mater Hospital she heard of the Limerick Sisters of Mercy. They were actually looking for some foreign Convent to help! It seemed providential. An agreement was made with the Limerick Sisters of Mercy that they would receive postulants in Ireland for us, would train them till after the Spiritual Year and then send them out. It was probably the biggest single blessing of our whole history, for looking back now, it is hard to see how the community could have survived without the help given by Limerick. Sisters Magdalen, Xavier, Veronica and from then on a steady stream of postulants arrived year after year till the seventies. Some of the South African postulants went to Limerick for training and returned with the Irish Sisters. 28 Irish Sisters in all have come from Limerick and are with us today, and some South Africans were trained there too.

Mother Alphonsus became Rev Mother in 1936. During the three years following the two properties adjoining 21 Sturdee Avenue were bought - Roggies - where St. Catherine's is now, and Foster's where St. Teresa's is. The present Convent in Keyes Avenue was begun and finished in 1938. The foundation stone laid in -and the Sisters who had been living in Foster's

house (21 Sturdee Avenue had been let for the time being) since the beginning of the year, moved into the new Convent at the end of 1938. Three new classrooms were attached to the Convent, and the school expanded. The Convent Library was built as a Novitiate, and the upstairs classroom was for the novices. Later, additions were made - the typing and duplicating rooms were a new novitiate at first and later extra classrooms were added. The little Chapel was the present lounge, and the existing Chapel was built and opened in 1952.

Craighall

A Church was built in Craighall in 1938 and the Sisters went out weekly to teach Catechism and to do the sacristy. In 1956 Craighall School was built and opened. By that time the character of Craighall had changed completely - for many years the poorer people had been moving away, and by 1956 it was a prosperous, growing suburb.

South African Sisters



For many years we depended almost entirely on Ireland for postulants. But two South African Sisters had entered before the transfer to Rosebank. Sr M Aquinas came in 1926 and Sr M Dominic in 1931. Both had been, for a time at least, pupils of the Sisters of Mercy. The next South African to come was Sr St. Anne in 1942. Then, with the entry of Sr M Goretti in 1955 (she spent her first year and a half in Limerick) a steady number of South African girls began to apply. All of them were either pupils or teachers or in contact with teachers of our own schools. Altogether there are at present fourteen white South African Sisters, and Sr Martina and Sr Cecilia are the two representatives of their African countrywomen. (But more of them later)

Moroka - St. Matthew's

In 1961 the Sisters of Mercy were asked to staff St. Matthew's School in Moroka. Two Sisters were appointed, one principal and one teacher. Sr Maria Goretti, Sr St. John and Sr M Josepha have been the successive principals, and their helpers have varied. In 1968 it was decided by the Chapter that a start could be made with a novitiate for Black postulants.

African Novitiate

Sr M Patricia was appointed superior of the little community which included two professed Sisters and two Black postulants. They lived temporarily in Parktown West, and in 1972 moved out to the "Cottage" in Moroka - a large house belonging to the diocese where the Oblates lived -which was offered by Bishop Boyle for the use of the Sisters.

The house was enlarged and renovated and was in use until June of last year when the Sisters moved in to Rosebank because of the disturbances. The first two postulants did not stay but others came, and I've mentioned our two at the moment, Sr Martina in De Wildt and Sr Cecilia in the Novitiate in Rosebank.

St. Catherine's Novitiate

In 1962 -3 a new Novitiate was built in Sturdee Avenue -St. Catherine's. The Novices moved in on 10th April 1963. The old house in Sturdee Avenue had been demolished years ago, and a swimming bath occupies most of the original garden. There were now two communities in Rosebank, the Novice Mistress was superior in St. Catherine's. The Rev Mother remained superior in St. Teresa's.

Coolock

Another foundation of a different kind from any hitherto made was begun shortly after St. Catherine's. Early in the sixties Sr M Patricia asked the Bishop of Marianhill if there was any place where a holiday house for the Sisters could be established. He offered to sell some of the ground belonging to the Marianhill Provincial House at Melville. Sr. Patricia accepted and the building of the house began. The name Coolock was given in remembrance of the house in which Mother McAuley lived. The house was opened in April 1965. A staff of four Sisters was appointed, and the house was advertised. It was meant for Sisters only, but gradually other people were taken -priests have often used the house, especially for retreats.



Up to this time all foundations in South Africa remained branch houses, completely under the authority of the Mother House. In 1966 through the kind offices of Bishop Bokenfohr a union was formed and a Generalate established. Mother Gabriel was the first Mother General. At the same time new constitutions were sent from Rome to be used in experiment until such time as new constitutions could be adopted. Moreover the new constitutions (experimental) made provision for a General Chapter, which every Religious Order was ordered to hold, by Vatican II. The first General Chapter was held in 1968 -9. It was decreed that the Mother General should reside in a Generalate (still to be built), and that a local superior should be appointed for Rosebank. Additions to St. Catherine's were made so as to form a small resident section for the Mother General. At the 1968 Chapter also the establishment of a black novitiate was decreed. Interim constitutions were drawn up, to be used experimentally until the next Chapter. In 1974, the second Chapter was held, and at the Chapter the Constitutions of the Irish Sisters of Mercy were accepted. New statutes were drawn up, and these are still in force, as the community prepares for the next General Chapter.

At the 1974 Chapter a request from the Stigmatine Fathers to establish a foundation and high school in De Wildt was discussed and acceded to, and in 1975 Tsogo High School was opened with Sr. Majella and Sr Myra as staff. They lived in Iona and went out every day. Later on Sr M Rita was appointed as principal of the existing Primary school on the Mission. Towards the end of 1976 Sr M Xavier was appointed as the new Superior and she took Sr M Rita's place as principal of the primary school. Sr M Rita went overseas for a teacher's course. A small section of the High School building was adapted for use as a Convent and the Sisters moved out to live there. The opening and blessing of the High School took place in April. Sr. Marilyn was appointed to the High School staff at the beginning of the year.

One other development must be added to complete the picture. At the 1974 Chapter a request from the O.F.M.'s for a Sister to help in the Adult Education Centre in Boksburg was granted, and Sr. Magdalen was appointed. At the beginning of this year the Centre was taken over by the Government -as an experiment for 3 years -and Sr Magdalen was appointed Principal. Up to this year the workers gave their services voluntarily, and without pay. Now, the salaries are paid by the Government. A number of Sisters give one night's teaching a week.

That brings the developments to an end. There are however several bits and pieces to be tidied up. Mafikeng, after the removal of the Novitiate, continued to flourish for many years. However, as it was increasingly difficult to get specialist teachers for the higher classes, and as the number of Sisters decreased, it was decided that it would be best to close the school and Convent and free the Sisters for work elsewhere. The coloured school passed out of the Sisters' hands about the same time. So, sadly, but resignedly, the Sisters said goodbye to their first foundation in South Africa in 1968. (It was the first of many closing-downs all over the country. Shortage of Sisters and Brothers is worldwide). The Convent in Braamfontein was likewise closed, but in a different way. The place had got so busy, and the lack of space for children to play was such a drawback to a school that the Sisters had to look for another location for the Convent. A site was got in Parktown West and the building completed in the mid-sixties. The Community and children moved over a period of a year, and the school grew rapidly. Today it is a most flourishing establishment.