

MARIANHILL IN THE NETHERLANDS

Mission House St. Paul Arcen 1911-2022

A review

1911



1914



1974



Frans Lenssen c.m.m.

Mariannahill Arcen

2022

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PREFACE

The foundation of the mission house St. Paul in 1911 in the Netherlands was intended as a formation institute of the new Congregation of the Missionaries of Mariannahill in Europe. This new foundation was meant to take over the task of the formation of new members of the Mariannahill Monastery in South Africa.

The articles collected in this book describe the course of this foundation from different angles, which inevitably leads to overlapping of certain episodes and topics under different aspects. A century of St. Paul's history shows that the purpose of the new foundation certainly has been met. Numerous missionaries have started their formation in this house and have contributed substantially to the growth and flourishing of the Catholic Church in various countries worldwide.

Frans Lenssen c.m.m.

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MISSION HOUSE ST. PAUL

111 years Mariannahill Mission in the Netherlands

LOCATION OF THE MISSION HOUSE ST. PAUL



At the exit from the National Road Venlo-Nijmegen near Arcen, a large crucifix catches the eye at the entry of the Mariannahilldreef. This road leads to the Mission House St. Paul. This crucifix was erected in October 1933 and blessed by visiting bishop Emanuel Haenisch, Vicar Apostolic of Umtata, South Africa. In his speech he praised the people of the province Limburg for their deep sense of faith expressed by planting field crosses. The 'Nieuwe Venlosche Courant' of 07.11.1933 wrote: „The bishop thanked the initiators

and collaborators for this great work. The place where this stately Cross was erected has been chosen by the Divine Providence as it stands near the great Mission House, where still young men are being trained to plant new fieldmission crosses in the vast field of the Vicariate of Umtata. There were three groups of men under the cross on Golgotha. These groups of men still continue to exist; those who love the cross, carrying and follow it; those who do recognize the cross, but whose worldly worries move them ever farther and farther from the cross; and those who hate and persecute the cross. Back to Christ and his cross gives new courage for life and gives help in this difficult time. Hereafter the Bishop performed the ritual of blessing. In the meantime, the community of St. Paul sang the hymn „The Cross“, after which the students of the religious formation college chanted their hymns.”

THE BEGINNING

Origin of a missionary vision

'If no one wants to go, I go'. Every Mariannahiller knows at least two statements by Abbot Franz Pfanner, the founder of Mariannahill. He uttered the first sentence when, in September 1879, the South African bishop J. D. Richards came to ask at the General Chapter of the Trappists in Sept Fons in France for volunteers to start a monastery in his diocese. „If no one wants to go, I'll go,“ Franz Pfanner said. He had just built the huge Maria-Stern Monastery in Bosnia. The request of the South African bishop (an Irishman) was not as strange as it may seem. Thomas Merton writes in his book about the Trappists/Cistercians 'The waters of Shiloh' that Pope Leo XIII had informed the Cistercians that he longed very much that they would found monasteries in mission areas: in Africa and in the Far East.

In July 1880, the 55-year-old Fr. Franz arrived in South Africa with thirty-one monks. Bishop Richards assigned them to Dunbrody where they moved into a shed of corrugated iron in a deserted and parched area with thorn bushes and cacti. The monks started building and cultivating. But it remained dry, almost nothing grew, and the bishop hardly gave any help. It must have been hell there. Many monks fell ill, and some died.

„Get out of your country.“

In 1881 Fr. Franz went to Europe to consult with his superiors during the general chapter of the Trappists. In the meantime, he sent two Brothers to Natal to ask Bishop Jolivet if he wanted a Trappist monastery in his diocese. The bishop said yes, and informed Fr. Franz who telegraphed his second historical sentence from Europe to South Africa in August 1882: 'Exi de terra tua' (Go out of your land), the words God spoke to Abraham.

This time the monks appeared to have better luck. A few kilometres from Pinetown, the monastery 'Mariannahill' (Maria-Anna Hill) arose. Silently, praying and working, a growing number of monks built large

monastery.. Silently, as the rule of one of the strictest orders of the church desired, these monks wanted to bring Africans closer to Christ through the example of prayer and work (‘ora et labora’). It was not at all clear in the beginning – strange as it may sound – not even to Fr. Franz, to what extent they would go as monks and missionaries in a direct sense. In any case, they wanted to create a kind of radiance through their lives and their presence. In this way they could be compared with the Benedictine monks who converted Northern Europe in the early Middle Ages. Thomas Merton also says in ‘The Waters of Siloë’: „The most remarkable thing about this new mission was that it worked entirely according to Benedictine methods. It was an apostolate of prayer and manual labor, of the liturgy and the plough.“ In 1883 Franz Pfanner wrote: „Our presence and our silent diligent work appears as an example before the eyes of the local people and as a school and sermon for the children.“ According to the Mariannahiller Fr. Franz Schimlek, the missionary method developed by Abbot Franz in a short period of time, differed emphatically from that of Cardinal Lavigerie, the founder of the White Fathers, who came to Africa at the same time as Franz Pfanner. Fr. Lavigerie decided to form African laymen, who in turn were to become missionaries among their own people. Franz Pfanner’s tactic was to buy much land, to establish black as ‘tenants’ who often lived already on the purchased land, and then convert them. These Christians would then carry Christianity among their people. Everyone could count their fingers that Trappist ideal of silent witnessing would come into conflict with the harsh South-African reality.

In the first place, as Thomas Merton also writes, the strict Trappist rule was never intended for life in the tropics. Secondly, conversions on the one hand and the need for development of the Africans on the other hand, the monks were forced to come out, and to take the rule with an ever-increasing grain of salt. A huge conflict could not be avoided, and certainly with the fierce Franz Pfanner. But before it came to final choices in that conflict, Mariannahill had to go through a few more years of stormy development and growth.

The Mariannahill monastery was erected with sweet delight. A school for boys was built after only two years, in 1884, and the following

year a school for girls. In 1886, delegates from Zulu leader Sakayedwa came from 200 km. far, and asked abbot Franz to start a school in their area. The school was built here, as well as an-out station. Before 1890 there were already seven of these outposts, even up to 300 km. from Mariannhill. In 1884, the first Africans were baptized. In 1890, Mariannhill alone had 500 baptized people.

In 1885, permission came from Rome to promote Mariannhill into an abbey, and Fr. Franz was elected abbot. The 31 monks of the beginning were 130 five years later. In the meantime, Franz had already founded a Sister congregation. Later they would become the Sisters of the Precious Blood. Monks and Sisters were recruited by Fr. Franz himself to a large extent on his many trips to Europe.

Black and white

But the Mariannahillers also put a lot of bad blood in their environment.

The local middle class of neighbouring Pinetown apparently felt the competition of the monks with their many businesses and spoke ill of the Trappists. But many Zulu parents also became angry, because their daughters went to Mariannhill Abbey to get an education. African chiefs and village leaders also became jealous on the influence that the monks had on their people. And then more and more people looked with suspicion at the extensive land purchases of the Trappists – with money from European benefactors – throughout Natal around their mission posts. Soon the Trappists had many parts of land of Natal in their hands! Many vicious and accusatory articles against the abbot and his monks appeared in the South African newspapers. Now Abbot Franz was certainly not an easy lord and his monks were not all equally meek, but there was more to it. The most serious reproach of the white settlers and the press was the fact that the monks in their schools let black and white children sit next to each other, without distinction of colour race or creed. In 1884 Franz Pfanner had drawn up an educational program, which, in addition to an unequivocal preference for poor children and orphans as pupils, also stated the following: „We make no distinction

in colour or religion. All boys in our institute receive room and board and education without distinction of person, whether he is pagan, Muslim, Protestant or Catholic or white or coloured, British or Dutch, German, Italian or African”. And then he continues: „The blacks in South Africa, it seems, are considered as half a human race and they can be treated like cattle. When we here (at the request of the bishop of Natal) saw that the first white orphans had nothing better to do than scold the Bantu boys and throw stones at them, I immediately healed them of that delusion with water and bread and the threat of a firm spanking. Contempt and disdainful treatment of blacks are not tolerated with us.“ Then a storm of protests broke out against the abbot. Some representatives of the white race came to Mariannahill to point out to him the terrible, even „monstrous“ of his performance. In the end, Abbot Franz had to give in to the pressure of public opinion and henceforth limited himself to raising only blacks. The inevitable conflict with the order erupted in 1890. At that time Mariannahill had more than 200 monks and 127 Sisters, and ten missionary stations. There was a letter with serious accusations against Franz Pfanner. The abbot would have misused mission funds by erecting useless and luxurious buildings. He would have deprived his brothers of proper nourishment and support and neglected the moral and spiritual guidance of the monks and Sisters entrusted to his care. Fr. Franz reacted: “The blacks in South Africa, it seems, are considered half a human race and think they can be treated like cattle. When we here (at the request of the bishop of Natal) the first white orphans accepted, we thought that they had nothing better to do than scold the Bantu boys and throw stones at them. I immediately healed them of that delusion with water and bread and the threat of a firm spanking. Contempt and disdainful treatment of blacks are not tolerated with us.“ Then a storm of protests broke out against the abbot. Some representatives of the white race came to Mariannahill to point out to him the terrible, even „monstrous“ of his performance.

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It was clear that evil tongues had done their job. Abbot Franz accepted his suspension without complaint. But Mariannahill's Council indignantly rejected the defamatory accusations against the abbot and acted as one man behind him. The letter from the chapter council led to further research in Europe. The accusations proved unfounded and Abbot Franz was rehabilitated. But two years later, in 1892, a strict Visitor arrived, who again suspended the abbot. Accusation: he had allowed novices to work outside the monastery and the rules about the silence and clothing of the monks had been violated arbitrarily. Abbot Franz withdrew. But his work continued. Five years later, in 1898, Mariannahill was the largest Trappist abbey in the world with 285 monks. His successor, Abbot Amandus Schoelzig, who died in 1900, and his successor, Abbot Gerard Wolpert, who resigned in 1904, remained very good friends of their old predecessor and founder. Following in the footsteps of Abbot Franz, both made – unsuccessful – attempts to get a training and novitiate house in Europe. But that could only come about when the conflict between Mariannahill and the Trappist order, between action and contemplation, had been fought out. In 1909, the year Franz Pfanner died, the separation between Mariannahill and the Trappists also came about. In that year Mariannahill had 49 mission stations. It was high time to look to Europe.

1911 – THE FIRST ST. PAUL

Foundation of St. Paul

It was by chance that St Paul was not built in a region in Germany near the Dutch town Oldenzaal. It took a dentist – somewhere in a German train – to propose the Trappist Notker Vorspel to go to North Limburg in the Netherlands before Christmas 1910. He went to look he estate Klein Vink near Arcen which turned out to delight him completely. „Something I wouldn't have dared to expect. A nice, still fairly new tenant house, fields and meadows... and also clear drinking water.” The monk forgot all of de land in Germany near to the Dutch border where he actually had already an appointment with a notary about a block of heath land. Only a few days later he was able to telegraph from cold Walbeck to sweltering South Africa that he had succeeded to find a place for a house of formation in Europe, near Arcen in the Netherlands, thirty years after the foundation of Mariannahill in Africa (1882).

Also, before 1900, Abbot Amandus had tried to establish a novitiate in Bavaria. And his successor, Abbot Gerard Wolpert, personally tried for a year in Germany to get a novitiate off the ground. He had something in mind in Bavaria in particular, namely an estate near Deggendorf, and in northern Bavaria a property of Prince von Löwenstein. But he had to return to South Africa without having succeeded to find a suitable place for a new foundation in Europe.

Why didn't that work? The main reason must have been that the Trappist order had not such construction. Novices were supposed to be trained in their monasteries. It was not until 1909 when Rome authorized Mariannahill's secession from the ancient Trappist order that the way was open for the establishment of a novitiate in Europe. A house in Germany was obvious. But then they encountered the second barrier: the 'Kulturkampf', which put a lot of control over ecclesiastical affairs with the state, and the fact that the brand-new missionary congregation Mariannahill was not yet officially recognized in Germany. That was the reason why a place was sought just across the border with Austria or the Netherlands.