



Overview of the Century

In 1904 because of the growth of the population in the Transvaal, a newly appointed Bishop was named to be responsible for that part of the country.

Bishop Matthew Gaughren who had been Apostolic Administrator was left in charge of the Kimberley – Bloemfontein area. He had already invited Sisters of Notre Dame who were teaching on a mission, Empandeni, in Rhodesia, to send Sisters to South Africa and he repeated his request, suggesting that Kroonstad be the place to which they come. This small town had begun in 1855, had become a municipality in 1875, and had a very small Catholic population at the beginning of the 20th century, but was quite well situated as far as railways and roads were concerned. In December 1906 five SNDs left England having been named to be the first SND missionaries to South Africa. They were Srs Louise of St Frances, Joseph of the Holy Cross, Thérèse of the Presentation, Anne of St Gregory and Anne Editha. Most of them are buried in the little cemetery adjacent to the Convent on the Hill.

These first Sisters wasted no time. They quickly opened a small school in the railway camp for the children of Railway workers, and a Primary Day School in the town. They found a site outside the municipal boundary and bought land from Mr Castignani for a secondary boarding school for 'young ladies'. They set about learning Sotho to be able to communicate better with the African people who lived outside of the town. After quite a lot of negotiating with the Notre Dame Superiors in England and Belgium, in 1916 they opened a school for African children in the area known as Old Cairo, 'B' location.

The early days were not easy. A fire destroyed the Convent on the Hill the night before the Sisters were due to move into it in June 1908. Two other fires destroyed significant sections of the Boarding School in 1967. Because the convent and school

were beyond the municipal boundaries, and despite water rights for the Valsch River which bordered the south of the property, an adequate supply of water was always difficult to obtain. The Railway School never really took off, and was closed quite soon, pupils transferring to the Day School. An outbreak of Spanish influenza in 1917 did not bypass the Boarding School. In the 1930s attempts by the Sisters to build a convent near their school in the township were thwarted and refused by the authorities. This dream was realized in another way in 1996 when Sisters bought a house in Maokeng and moved into it to be more closely involved in the lives of the families whose children attend St Peter Claver's.

Between 1930 and 1963 different Sisters assisted in the Blessed Julie Farm School built on Bishop Klerlein's Riverside Farm, an opportunity, they saw, to work among the really poor, work so loved by their Foundress, Julie Billiart.

Radical changes in the life of SNDs were to come about after the Second Vatican Council, 1961 – 65. A Mission Statement that they drew up for themselves in 1971 committed SNDs to look hard at how they were living their charism and serving the neediest sections of South Africa's people. The Boarding School was closed at the end of 1972. A small community took up residence in Turner Street to continue working at St Peter Claver's and to find a new way of being involved in the life of the local Catholic Community.

Another landmark was reached in 1998 when the Free State Public Works Department offered to return to the Sisters the very vandalized buildings that had been their much loved Convent and Boarding School. From this offer came into being the Northern Free State Institute for Community Development (NFSI), a collaborative undertaking between the Diocese of Kroonstad and five Religious Congregations, and the Jala Peo Trust, committed to provide skills training and employment opportunities for those in need of these.

Much has happened in these first 100 years. The pages of this flier attempt to capture some important moments of the story, in the hope that by studying the past, we can better understand the present, and plan a meaningful future.