

# MARIANHILL MONASTERY, 1882 — 1982

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Mariannhill, near Pinetown in Natal, one of the largest and best-known mission stations in the Republic, celebrated its centenary on 27 December 1982. The monastery was established by Father Franz Pfanner and a group of thirty Trappist monks, most of whom were German-speaking and from Central Europe. Before coming to Natal the party had battled unsuccessfully for two years to establish a mission farm at Dunbrody on the Sundays River in the Eastern Cape but, defeated by drought and environmental factors, they moved to Natal where they were given permission by Bishop Charles Jolivet to open a mission among the Zulus.<sup>1</sup> Pfanner was determined to avoid another failure and declined to take over the existing mission station of St Michaels in the Highflats district, as the bishop requested, and instead bought the farm Zeekoegat from the Natal Land and Colonisation Company on 20 December 1882. The name Mariannhill was given to the new mission in honour of the Virgin Mary and her mother St Anne. Pfanner's reasons for buying this farm were its plentiful water supply and its situation, which was convenient both to Port Natal and to the railway at Pinetown. Mariannhill was enlarged in 1886 when Pfanner bought the adjoining farm Klaarwater and a few smallholdings to give a total land holding of 12 000 acres or 4 500 ha.<sup>2</sup>

The Trappist monks, thirty in number, who had been camping at St Francis Xavier Mission on the Bluff awaiting Pfanner's decision, placed their belongings on ox wagons and set out for Pinetown as soon as the purchase was concluded. Some accompanied the wagons while others travelled by train, arriving at Pinetown on 26 and 27 December 1882. The German Lutheran missionary at New Germany, the Rev. C.W. Posselt, described the interest and surprise their arrival at Pinetown caused, because of their unusual clothing, their large number which he put at "about fifty", and their apparent inability to speak, except for one friendly young brother who spoke German.<sup>3</sup>

## THEIR MISSIONARY METHOD

From the first Mariannhill was unlike other Christian missions, both in its foundation and in its missionary method. The Trappists followed the centuries-old Benedictine system of cultivating a large and productive monastery farm before undertaking any direct evangelization. According to custom buildings are erected to provide accommodation and workshops, followed by a church for daily worship and a gatehouse where visitors are received. The land is cleared and prepared for planting, each monk exercising his special skills. The aim is to attract the people living near the monastery by the silent example of work, prayer, and dedication. From these people a Christian community is eventually built up. Pfanner had earlier established the impressive Maria-Stern monastery in Bosnia, then in the Ottoman Empire, and he perceived his new Zulu tenants as being similar to the Bosnian peasants among whom he had worked. Both, in his view, were in need of the discipline of work and the Christian message which he saw as interrelated and interdependent.<sup>4</sup> In Africa Trappists were running a successful mission in Algeria<sup>5</sup> on the same lines, and in Europe the Benedictines had used this method since the seventh century; Pfanner thus had no doubt about its efficacy. The way of life, too, of the Trappists had not changed down the centuries. The original Cistercian order was founded by Bernard of Clairvaux in the twelfth century to reform the monasteries of his time; after the wars and upheavals in France in the next few centuries there was need for further reforms. These were introduced by Abbot Rancé of the La Trappe monastery and from this monastery the Trappists took their name. Trappist monks take the three vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience and follow the Cistercian Rule which enjoins silence. The day starts at 02h00, or 01h30 on Sundays,

with Matins followed by Mass. Each monk is obliged to spend the day in prayer or contemplation and in manual work, nine hours for brothers and six hours for choir monks, who are ordained priests. The monks dedicate each task, however menial, to the glory of God. Only those brothers who are responsible for business matters and for receiving visitors are allowed to speak; at Mariannhill three brothers carried out these duties.<sup>6</sup>

Abbot Franz Pfanner, founder of Mariannhill.

PHOTOGRAPH: FATHER L.A. METTLER, C.M.M.



Bishop Paul Mngoma, present bishop of Mariannhill.

PHOTOGRAPH: FATHER L.A. METTLER, C.M.M.

## ZULU TENANTS

In Natal the Trappists, unlike most other mission societies, were able to select and purchase their land in a convenient place and were not dependent on a Government grant which would require them to occupy a mission reserve perhaps far from the urban centres. They could also make their own terms with their tenants. Pfanner was anxious to encourage Zulu families to settle on the mission lands and he charged no rent in the first year, during which each family was required to erect a strongly-built hut, preferably square, with a door and at least one win-

1. A.A. WEISWURM, *The Dunbrody episode 2* (Mariannhill, 1975).
2. J.B. BRAIN, *Catholic beginnings in Natal* (Durban, 1975), pp. 165–167.
3. *Missions-Berichte der Gesellschaft zur Beförderung der evangelischen Missionen unter den Heiden zu Berlin*, 23 u 24, 1883, pp. 453–454.
4. *Fliegende Blätter* 12, 1883.
5. W.E. BROWN, *Catholic Church in South Africa* (London, 1960), p. 104.
6. BRAIN, *Catholic beginnings in Natal*, p. 167.

dow.<sup>7</sup> The monastery carpenters offered to build simple tables and chairs for £1 if the tenants could not do this for themselves. Tenants might have only one wife, but those polygamists who were already settled on the land were allowed to remain provided they did not take any more wives.<sup>8</sup> The men were encouraged to improve their plots and shown how to do so. Some of the tenants found Pfanner's demands that they should remain sober, live a moral life, and conform to high standards of hygiene unacceptable.<sup>9</sup> It was these ideas when put into practice that caused a strong critic of Christian missions to write that the Trappists were "acknowledged to be the most successful mission in raising the native."<sup>10</sup>

## THE TRAPPIST WAY OF LIFE

In 1883, the newly-arrived monks, following the Benedictine motto *Ora et labora* (Pray and work) set to work to cultivate the farm. The need to cultivate the lands was made more urgent in that the monks were vegetarians, eating no meat, fish or eggs and taking neither tea nor coffee, no sweets or condiments, and abstaining from alcoholic beverages. Their diet depended on a supply of fresh vegetables and fruit, cereals, and coarse brown bread, and with a party of thirty to feed, considerable cultivation had to be undertaken quickly. The whole party was engaged in clearing trees and bushes and preparing the soil; it is said that the Zulus from the surrounding area were in the habit of watching in amazement as these groups of White men worked for hours in the sun, in complete silence.<sup>11</sup> As soon as the preparation was completed and the crops planted the work of road and bridge building began. By 1885 5.6 km of road was ready and stone bridges had been built over the Umbilo and the Umhlatuzan rivers. At first temporary buildings were put up, but soon bricks were made for the permanent monastery buildings and by 1885 1 060 square metres of buildings had been erected.<sup>12</sup>

Among the monks was an unusually resourceful engineer, Brother Nivard Streicher, who became well known in the colony as a consultant. It was Bro. Nivard who was responsible for the water supply, bringing piped water to the monastery. He also erected the mill on the river bank and designed many of the monastery buildings. In 1885 a visitor to the mill wrote "The Trappists are keeping pace with the times; they employ the vortex turbine which is set in motion by a few turns of a small wheel, and it moves the machinery almost as quietly and smoothly as a sewing machine. Although the turbine is 18 h.p., it is served by a pipe of only 14 in. diameter ..." He

continued with a lengthy description of the engine (invented in England in 1852) presumably because it was unfamiliar to Natal farmers. In addition to the usual activities of a mill, the building also housed a wool-spinning, weaving and dyeing workshop, producing a good quality cloth used for the monks' habits. They had also built a large dam near by for irrigating the lands.<sup>13</sup> For the convenience of the men employed, and sometimes living, at the mill, a small stone chapel was erected and this is still in existence though no longer used as a church. Recently the old mill building and the disused chapel have been renovated for the use of the Coloured community living at Mariannridge, a residential scheme built on former mission property.

## AGRICULTURAL INNOVATIONS

In the agricultural sphere Mariannhill was known throughout Natal for its innovations and experiments as well as for efficient crop production. An article in the *Natal agricultural journal*<sup>14</sup> listed some of the unusual products found at Mariannhill, such as wine made from grapes grown on the farm, sauerkraut from home-grown red cabbages, arrowroot, and oilcakes. They also specialised in making clay drainpipes and in adapting wagons to spread liquid manure. Many crops for which the climate of Mariannhill was unsuitable were grown on the many extensions or daughter houses which sprang from the original foundation after 1886. The first of these was Reichenau on the Polela River where "all varieties of European and African species of cereals and fruit trees were grown".<sup>15</sup> Within a few years of its establishment Mariannhill was virtually self-sufficient for all its needs.

## RECRUITS FROM EUROPE

The continued rapid growth of Mariannhill after the initial stages can be attributed to the large number of recruits who arrived from Europe to work on the mission and farm, and to the generous donations of money received. Pfanner, who was promoted to abbot in 1885, was a man of energy and foresight, while his dynamic personality drew others to him. Starting in 1883 he made regular visits to Europe, preaching and addressing meetings to explain his objectives, to talk about the Zulus and their spiritual needs, and to appeal for helpers and funds. These visits were remarkably successful. Men of all stations in life and from several nationalities volunteered to work on the Trappist missions in Natal; in 1898, with 285 monks, Mariannhill had become the largest abbey in the world both numerically and in the number of its extensions.<sup>16</sup> Although many of the newcomers volunteered

Monastery church, begun in 1887.

PHOTOGRAPH: FATHER L.A. METTLER, C.M.M.



7. *Des Trappisten-Missionskloster Mariannhill* (Freiburg im Breisgau, 1907), pp. 115–116.
8. B. HOFMANN, *The founder of Mariannhill* (Mariannhill, 1947), pp. 39–40.
9. *Natal Mercury*, 20.7.1887.
10. 'Native missionaries', *Mosquito and African sketch*, 7.9.1905, p. 7.
11. F. SCHIMLEK, *Mariannhill: a study in Bantu life and missionary effort* (Mariannhill, 1953), pp. 49–50.
12. J. DAHM, *Mariannhill, seine innere Entwicklung ...* (Mariannhill, 1950), p. 47.
13. *Natal Mercury*, 1.12.1885.
14. Ergates (*pseud.*), 'Mariannhill Monastery', *Natal agricultural journal* 3, 1900–01, pp. 427–431.
15. *Mariannhiller Kalender*, 1893, pp. 40–41, and 1894, pp. 51–58.
16. R. KNEIPP and others, *Mariannhill and its apostolate* (Reimlingen, 1964), p. 61.

as novices, there were others who were laymen or diocesan priests, and for these Pfanner started an organisation called the Franziners. Franziners came for a year, followed a Rule, but took no vows; after this they either renewed their contract for another twelve months or returned to Europe at their own expense. Each had to have a skill or trade, had to be free of debt and of good character. The first women volunteers came in 1885; they were given a uniform, one was appointed superior, and they began to work on educational and domestic projects. These women laid the foundations of the Congregation of Missionary Sisters of the Precious Blood, which at the present time works in many parts of the world. Donations for the Mariannahill missions were received all over Europe by collecting brothers. Pfanner was careful to keep up the enthusiasm for this work by writing regularly to donors and by sending copies of the periodicals printed on the mission press. Each year donors received copies of the *Mariannahill Kalender*, of which 100 000 were printed in 1890.<sup>17</sup>

## EDUCATION AND EVANGELIZATION

In 1884, when Mariannahill had been in existence for two years, formal mission work began. In that year the first Zulu men arrived at the monastery to ask for work, and were put to road-making; to Pfanner this was an encouraging sign that the patient example of manual work had been noted. Then a Basuto catechist, Benjamin Makhaba, arrived to offer his services, and since he spoke fluent Zulu and had been trained by Catholic missionaries in Basutoland, he was an asset indeed. Benjamin began by visiting each kraal in the vicinity to inquire whether there were any small boys willing to attend school; five came forward. Later, when the chief ordered each kraal to send two boys to the school, the numbers increased. There were 215 pupils in 1895.<sup>18</sup> The curriculum consisted at first of the three R's at rudimentary level, and the teachers were Benjamin and Father David, better known as A.T. Bryant, the only Englishman at



Boys' School Advanced Group, under Father David or A.T. Bryant.

PHOTOGRAPH: FATHER L.A. METTLER, C.M.M.

Mariannahill at this time. It was Bryant who introduced the idea of the divided curriculum; mornings spent in the classroom and afternoons in the fields or workshops, where industrial education, so beloved of the Colonial education authorities, was taught by the many skilled brothers.<sup>19</sup> Pfanner's educational ideas, which he explained both in the mission journal *Natal Record* and in the public press, were unorthodox and caused considerable controversy in the Colony. His experiments with boarding school education brought strong criticism on his head from the Chief Inspector of Native Education.<sup>20</sup>



The tailoring shop.

PHOTOGRAPH: FATHER L.A. METTLER, C.M.M.

Pfanner believed that the boys who returned home every afternoon quickly forgot all they had learned, putting it aside with the clean white shirt supplied by the monks and worn during school hours. He therefore built a hostel and arranged for the pupils to sleep at the mission, returning home only for the holidays. The Zulu parents were quite unprepared for such an innovation, some complaining to the magistrate at Umlazi while others removed their children from the school. A number of changes had to be made in the conditions, hours and degree of supervision exercised before the experiment succeeded.<sup>21</sup>



The blacksmith's shop.

PHOTOGRAPH:

## EDUCATIONAL AIMS FOR ZULU GIRLS

Girls were educated at Mariannahill after 1885, spending half their time in the classroom and the remainder in domestic tasks including needlework of various kinds. Pfanner's educational aims were unpopular with the authorities and with many of the colonists because he believed, like many missionaries, that education should be a means of introducing the African child to western civilization and Christian moral values; he saw it as character-building as much as career orientated. His aim for his pupils was to turn out good agriculturalists and artisans but good Christians first of all and to produce "useful girls and honest wives."<sup>22</sup> His refusal to supply or recommend domestic servants for the colonial homes did not

17. J.B. BRAIN, *Catholics in Natal II* (Durban, 1982), p. 160.

18. *South African Catholic magazine* 5(54), 1895, p. 337.

19. A.T. BRYANT, Some sweet memories (unpublished), p. 4.

20. *Natal Government Gazette* 41 (2384), 1.10.1889.

21. BRAIN, *Catholics in Natal II*, pp. 141-144.

22. *Natal Mercury*, 8.7.1889.



Mariannhill photographed from the air, 1980.

PHOTOGRAPH: FATHER L.A. METTLER, C.M.M.

please the colonists, and it was not long before the efficient industrial training given to the boys made him unpopular with White artisans, who were afraid of future competition.<sup>23</sup> Nor did he believe that the girls should be highly educated, believing that the Zulu man should have support in his home, not rivalry.<sup>24</sup> Mariannhill received a grant of £100 from the Council of Education; in 1889 alone they spent £6 300 on educational and boarding expenses, most of the money coming from benefactors in Germany, Austria, Poland, Hungary and Switzerland. Ten pupils had reached an advanced stage by 1889 and were promoted to a "sort of university or high school."<sup>25</sup>

### FIRST CONVERTS

The first converts at Mariannhill were four of the original schoolboys who were baptised in December 1884, just two years after the foundation of the mission. The number grew steadily after this, 510 baptisms being recorded in the next five years.<sup>26</sup> By 1895 there were 2 200 names in the baptismal register.<sup>27</sup> Zulu boys were admitted as novices as early as 1887, and in that year three girls applied to be exempted from native law to join the Missionary Sisters of the Precious Blood as postulants.<sup>28</sup> The first Roman Catholic priests among the Zulus were products of Mariannhill, being ordained in Rome in 1898 and 1903.<sup>29</sup> Catechists and teachers were trained from the early years of the mission, and under Fr Bernard Huss St Francis' College for teacher training built up a high reputation. At the present time the Mariannhill vicariate has a high proportion of Black priests, brothers and sisters, and almost all the teachers and catechists are Black;

Mariannhill now for the first time also has a Black bishop.

### PROBLEMS WITH TRAPPIST RULE

The reader may well wonder how the monks could adhere to the strict Trappist rule mentioned earlier in the face of all the activities at Mariannhill and the necessity for communicating freely with schoolchildren, converts, tenants, officials, and visitors. By 1892 this had indeed become a problem and more and more dispensations from the rule had to be given to enable the monks to carry on their day-to-day missionary duties. In that year an ecclesiastical visitor from Europe arrived to inspect Mariannhill and to enquire whether the Trappist rule was being strictly observed. As a result Pfanner was suspended for a year, and before the year was up he resigned, taking up his residence at Emaus mission in the Umzimkulu district. The next superior, Abbot Amandus Schölzig, and his successors had the same problem of trying to reconcile the Trappist Rule with the active life of a huge mission station. Finally, in 1909, Mariannhill was separated from the Trappist order and became a separate missionary congregation known as the Congregation of Missionaries of Mariannhill.

23. *Natal Witness*, 17.2.1893.

24. *Natal Record*, 12.3.1889.

25. *Natal Advertiser*, 10.1.1890 and 30.1.1890.

26. *Chronik Mariannhills* (MS), p. 64.

27. *South African Catholic magazine* 5(54), 1895, p. 329.

28. BRAIN, *Catholics in Natal II*, pp. 147–148.

29. *Ibid.*, pp. 252–255.

## SOCIAL WORK

In addition to schools for children of all ages Mariannahill from the earliest times undertook social work of various kinds. There is now a fully equipped hospital (opened in 1928) which developed from the monastery clinics and now serves the Mariannahill district. As the number of Christian converts increased the Trappists, like other missionaries in Natal, required that polygamists put aside all their wives save one. To provide for these unfortunate women the monks built an *Altweibertröst* or shelter; here also were placed young girls in need of care.<sup>30</sup> Orphans and abandoned children were taken into St Vincent's Home to be cared for in Abbot Pfanner's time, and this institution is still flourishing. There is also a home for old and invalid members of the Mariannahill congregation. Lay men and women have the use of the mission house where retreats are held regularly and there is a modern guest house.

*Campanile and cloisters, built in 1907.*

PHOTOGRAPH: FATHER L.A. METTLER, C.M.M.



## MARIANHILL TODAY

In 1921, when the Natal vicariate was divided, Mariannahill became a separate vicariate, comprising southern Natal, East Griqualand and the Transkei, under Bishop Adalbero Fleischer. This was subdivided in 1930 and again in 1935 when the Umtata and the Kokstad vicariates were formed; in 1954 the Umzimkulu diocese was detached. At the present time the Mariannahill vicariate covers 12 612 km<sup>2</sup> and has 245 400 Catholics, nearly all Black.<sup>31</sup> Despite the greatly reduced number of brothers and priests there are still extensive vegetable gardens, while workshops for tailoring, bookbinding, leatherwork, carpentry, wood-turning, and carving are kept busy. There is also an active printing press, where the weekly newspaper *Umafrika* is published. Much of the original farmland has had to be given up to provide residential land for various population groups, and a much smaller farm is in operation.

Mariannahill missionaries are at work not only in Natal and the Transkei but also in Zimbabwe, New Guinea, and Brazil. ■

30. KNEIPP and others, *Mariannahill and its apostolate*, p. 59.

31. *Catholic directory of Southern Africa*, 1981.