

## **VILLA ASSUMPTA (PIETERARITZBURG, SOUTH AFRICA) CELEBRATES A PLATINUM JUBILEE!**

**September 2022**

Villa Assumpta, we are told, was a fine house on 19 acres of land, about two thirds of the way up World's View Hill, the former home of an architect, and was purchased for the grand sum of £16 000. The dogma of the Assumption of Mary into heaven had been proclaimed by the Church in 1950, so the name met with approval. The first Sisters arrived on the 5 August 1952 to open Villa Assumpta as a home for elderly ladies, and on 16 August the first resident arrived. As could be expected there were donations of furniture and various household goods at different times from Oakford, Genazzano, Marifont, Marymount, Mazenod, Rosary Lodge as well as from Khale. The official opening of the house was on the feast of the Holy Rosary in October. And sitting down to Christmas dinner that year there were the small community of Sisters and five residents.

The original property was a farm and included land where today there are the houses along Villa Assumpta Place. A request to the Council to be allowed to keep cows on the property was turned, down but chickens were permitted! The Sisters tackled the grounds to establish an orchard and vegetable gardens, and the nephew of one of the residents presented a lawnmower as a gift. We even read of vegetables being sold at the market despite the menace of monkeys!

Interestingly, an initial signed agreement between Archbishop Hurley and the Prioress General of the Congregation, Mother Paula Hebel, making provision for the establishment of Villa Assumpta as a convalescent home for elderly ladies had two conditions attached. One was that student sisters from Congregations other than Oakford be given board and lodging if they were studying at the University in Pietermaritzburg, the other that some of the land be kept for the possible building of a church at some future date! In 1970 the local authorities determined that the word "convalescent" be dropped from the name on the gate. In the same year, the Archdiocese of Durban decided it did not need a church on the Villa Assumpta property. 1972 saw the registration of Villa Assumpta as a home for the aged. The eucharist was celebrated at Villa Assumpta whenever there were resident

priests among the students or when St Mary's parish could accommodate the request. At times, over the years there were also Anglican and Methodist services.

The first two students named in the annals are Srs Anne and Evangelist who after many years of service in South Africa and Swaziland are among the residents of Villa Assumpta today. Sr Hermine who died recently at Villa Siena did practical teaching in domestic science at Girls High School. Student Sisters taught catechism at St Anthony's Church. Sr Jacquie was also a student, and completed her driver's licence while at Villa Assumpta. Sisters Natalie, formerly the matron, and Celine, who died recently, spent time at Villa Assumpta on nursing courses. Gradually the student Sisters were phased out to make space for more residents.

In the 1960s there were plans to extend the home and a new building was roofed on 25 August 1967; and at the beginning of December the same year, part of the verandah was enclosed. The annals also tell us that in 1968 the old chapel was converted into a two - roomed flat for Baroness d'Adrian de Werburg. Building operations to increase the capacity of Villa Assumpta as a home for the elderly continued over several years, with renovations and extensions eventually making way for single or double rooms with private bathrooms. June 1975 saw the opening and blessing of the new wing with the celebration of the Eucharist by Archbishop Hurley on the lawn. But, in the 1970s it was also decided to let go of some of the property. Exorbitant rates on the property played at least a part in that decision. A road was cut through the property, today's Villa Assumpta Place, and individual lots across the road were sold. A letting go of some history!

We read in the annals that many of the residents had previously had connections with Oakford Sisters, at Oakford, in Greytown, in Johannesburg and elsewhere. Family members of several priests and bishops were resident at Villa Assumpta, among them Bishop Kevin Dowling's mother. Archbishop Hurley's sister Eileen was the first resident of Villa Siena, and Bishop Barry Wood's sister Eleanor the last resident of Villa Siena before the house was occupied only by Sisters. In 1972 Villa Assumpta admitted the first gentleman as a resident when Mr and Mrs Hook arrived. Remember not too long before it had been a convalescent home for elderly ladies!

Storms aren't a new phenomenon in Pietermaritzburg. We are told that bad hailstorms damaged much in the garden. There was fire in a resident's room after wires were incorrectly connected. During building operations, a water pipe was hit, and it just happened to be the day before Ascension Thursday which in those days was a public holiday. There were electricity failures. It is certain, current residents at Villa Assumpta know what all that drama is like.

The statue of our Lady of the Poor in the garden was a gift of a pastor in Banneux, Belgium. The statue of Mary in the Villa Assumpta chapel came from Neustadt in Germany, the crucifix in the lounge from Walsingham in Durban. The stained-glass windows in Villa Siena chapel are the original windows from the first chapel at Genazzano, and the stations of the cross were made by Sr Liboria for Osindisweni Chapel. The St Catherine and St Dominic windows in the upstairs workroom are from Marifont. Brothers Hermann (Sister Fabiola's cousin) and Konrad from Mariannahill designed and built the altar for the Villa Siena Chapel.

Over the years voluntary helpers organised bake sales, a Petticoat Lane sale of goods, bazaars, open days which included the sale of crafts and goods, a bridge drive, all to raise funds for Villa Assumpta. There was an Easter bunny hat parade, and a donkey derby race on the lawn. Sisters and residents and won prizes for craft and handwork in Pietermaritzburg shows. Contributions and donations of various goods were made to Marian House for its opening on the premises of the former Villa Aquinas in Alexandra Road. Esigodeni Pastoral Centre was the recipient of furniture not needed at Villa Assumpta.

In 1987 the number of residents reached 40. A board of management was established for the first time. In 1992, Villa Assumpta was a voting station for the referendum and in 1994 for South Africa's first democratic elections. More recently of course Villa Assumpta was also a site for Covid vaccinations.

In 1998, the building site for Villa Siena was cleared, and the following year Villa Siena was ready for its first occupants, among them the twins Sisters Dominic-Mary and Mannes. Sr Paula was the temporary cook at Villa Siena.

In 2002, Cardinal Napier celebrated the Eucharist for Villa Assumpta's golden jubilee. Among other celebrations was one for Sr Clare's 100th birthday, attended by Sr Ann-Maureen, now resident in Villa Assumpta, and

Elias the cook from Koinonia in Johannesburg where Sr Clare had lived for many years. Four years later Bishop Barry Wood celebrated Sr Clare's 104th birthday Mass. Sr Cosma celebrated her centenary, and was taken on a visit to the Lion Park to meet an elephant for the first time! Or so they say! Srs Dominic Mary and Mannes were honoured with the Indondo Award for outstanding community service at Villa Siena. Sr Rita Diel was the first sister to be cremated, and the memorial wall was blessed in February 2012. In 2014 the Oakford Congregation celebrated its 125th jubilee, beginning a pilgrimage at Villa Assumpta to places associated with the early history of the Congregation.

2013 saw many changes re the restructuring of the whole of Villa Assumpta/Siena and in 2014 Capitol and Select were engaged to provide catering, care, and cleaning services to the home. In 2016 Villa Assumpta bade farewell to Matron Wettergreen and Eddie Sandells was appointed manager. In 2019 Sr Natalie, matron, moved to Ekukhanyeni, and Sr Celia was appointed local prioress. Her big challenge was dealing with the Covid lockdown and everything around keeping everyone safe. The Congregation continued its negotiations with PADCA to take over the management of Villa Assumpta, and In January 2021 Sr Cheryl Sayago-Rodriques as Matron took over as Manager.

And now, after the pandemic, the Congregation, PADCA (PADCA stands for Pietermaritzburg & District Council for the Aged which is an old non-profit organisation that provides management for a number of old age facilities here. They have an Association and a Trust), residents and Sisters look back over seventy years with gratitude for what has been, and in hope for the future collaboration of all who make up our Villa Assumpta family.

Ad multos annos!

*Dominican Sisters of Oakford/Natal*

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