

## **The suspension and resignation of Franz Pfanner, first abbot of Mariannahill**

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### *Abstract*

This article focuses on an episode of the history of the Mariannahill monastery, by far the most successful Catholic missionary enterprise in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, about which there has long been uncertainty: the suspension and resignation of Franz Pfanner, the founder of the monastery and its first abbot. His downfall was the direct consequence of a visitation conducted by the abbot of Oelenberg, Franciscus Strunk, between January and July 1892. To restore the observances which had been relaxed to enable mission work and to bring down the pride of an abbot who was accused of buying too much land and recruiting too many monks, the visitor asked him to submit to the authority of a Mission Council made up of influential members of the monastery. Convinced that this proposal was not practical, Pfanner continued to make decisions on his own, as prescribed, in fact, by the Benedictine Rule which the Trappists never ceased to follow. He was sanctioned for disregarding the visitor's orders. Suspended for a year, he offered his resignation a few months later, in January or February 1893, and this was accepted by the abbot general of the Trappist Order. For his remaining years he lived the life of an ordinary monk, in relative isolation, at Emaus, a remote mission station in the Drakensberg area. That was not an exile in the proper sense, but until his last day he suffered from a deep sense of injustice.

### **Introduction**

In January 1892 Franciscus Strunk, the abbot of the Trappist monastery of Oelenberg in Alsace, arrived at Mariannahill, a monastery of the same order in the Natal Colony, to conduct the canonical visitation of the community at the request of the General Chapter of the Trappist Order which had met in Rome a few months before. By then Mariannahill, a monastery founded only ten years earlier and recognised as an abbey since 1885, was flourishing, with

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several buildings in construction, ten mission stations and a population of more than a hundred and fifty monks and a hundred sisters. Its reputation went far beyond the confines of the Roman Catholic Church. Protestant missionaries and colonial officials considered with a mix of admiration and disquiet its rapid growth, its success among black people and its innovative educational and farming methods. Through his publications in religious and secular media, his fundraising tours in Europe, his personal charisma and his flair for public relations, Franz Pfanner, the Austrian-born abbot, was the driver of Mariannahill's expansion. Yet, as a result of Strunk's visitation he was suspended for one year in October 1892 and he resigned a few months later. He spent the rest of his life in reclusion, at Emaus, a small mission station some distance from Umzimkhulu. In July 1909, two months after Pfanner's death, a decree separating Mariannahill from the Trappist Order, was published in Rome. A new congregation, first called Religious Missionaries of Marianhill (RMM), then Congregation of Marianhill Missionaries (CMM), was established, this time with a clear focus on missionary work and no longer the obligation to follow the Trappist Rule to the letter.

Four years ago a book, which the author, University of KwaZulu-Natal academic Michael Cawood Green described as "creative non-fiction", revealed to the public Pfanner's dramatic turn of fortune.<sup>1</sup> Under the title *For the sake of silence*, it explored, on the basis of a considerable amount of archival and printed material, the paradox of a monastic community vowed to silence for the sake of God, which was devoured by internal conflicts. If Green was well informed, he tended to unnecessarily dramatise the history of Mariannahill – after all tensions and contradictions have always been part of Christian life, which for this very reason is supported by a theology of redemption – and on a central point – the claim that Pfanner's problems were compounded by the fact that he never took his final vows – he was mistaken, as he remarked himself in a postscript.<sup>2</sup> By and large his account of Pfanner's suspension and resignation is faithful to the sources but, on account of the book's literary genre, these are never quoted.

The same applies to the work of authors linked to the Congregation of Mariannahill – Timotheus Kempf,<sup>3</sup> Alcuin Weiswurm<sup>4</sup> and Ludwig Balling<sup>5</sup> –

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Cawood Green, *For the sake of silence* (Roggebaai: Umuzi, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 552.

<sup>3</sup> [Timotheus Kempf], *Unter Christen und Muslims. Ein Vorarlberger Priester und Klostergründer, Wendelin P. Franz Pfanner 1825-1880* (Rome: Congregation of Mariannahill Missionaries, 1981); *Der Herold Gottes in Südafrika*, vol.1: *Die missglückte Abtei* (Rome: Congregation of Mariannahill Missionaries, 1980); vol. 2: *Mariannahill ist sein Name* (Reimlingen: Mariannahill Mission Press, 1983); vol. 3: *Abt Franz unter dem Kreuz* (Reimlingen: Mariannahill Mission Press, 1984).

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or the congregation of religious sisters founded by Pfanner, the Missionary Sisters of the Precious Blood – Adelgisa Hermann<sup>6</sup> and Annette Buschgerd<sup>7</sup>. All are directly or indirectly related to the current process of beatification of Abbot Franz Pfanner, formerly opened in 1963, revived in 2004 and still in progress. The documents compiled on this occasion into a collection of sixty cardboard boxes in the CMM Archives in Rome with a copy in the Mariannahill Archives lay the foundation for new research into Pfanner's life,<sup>8</sup> but the books published so far, useful as they are, lack academic rigour. The best in this respect, with a coherent referencing system, is Anton Roos' fifty-year-old doctoral dissertation, translated into English under the title *Mariannahill between two ideals*.<sup>9</sup>

Leaving aside Pfanner's missionary ideas and his original approach to the "native question", a topic which also deserves scholarly attention,<sup>10</sup> this article focuses on the first abbot of Mariannahill's suspension and resignation, an episode about which uncertainty remains. What chain of events led to the unfortunate visitation of 1892? Why did the General Chapter of October 1892 sanction an abbot who had brought so much fame to the Trappist Order through his missionary work? Was he "summarily suspended from office", as Green suggests?<sup>11</sup> Is Balling's claim that Pfanner resigned in direct contra-

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<sup>4</sup> Alcuin Weiswurm (ed.), *The Dunbrody Episode. The futile attempt to establish the Trappists in the Sundays' River Valley of the Cape Province, South Africa. A documentation in three parts* (Mariannahill: [Mariannahill Mission Press], 1975).

<sup>5</sup> Adalbert Ludwig Balling, *Der Apostel Südafrikas oder Gott schreibt gerade, auch auf krummen Zeilen* (Würzburg: Missionsverlag Mariannahill, 2011).

<sup>6</sup> Adelgisa [Hermann], *100 years Mariannahill Province. History of the Congregation of the Missionaries of Mariannahill in the Province of Mariannahill* (Mariannahill: Mariannahill Mission Press, [1984]).

<sup>7</sup> Annette Buschgerd, *For a great price. The story of the Missionary sisters of the precious blood* (Reimlingen, Mariannahill Mission Press, 1990); *A man of faith and action, 1825-1909. The life of Abbot Francis Pfanner* (Reimlingen: Mariannahill Mission Press, n.d.).

<sup>8</sup> I acknowledge here the contribution of the members of the Historical Commission for the Cause of Beatification of Abbot Frantz Pfanner and of Fr Henry Ratering CMM in particular. Without them this paper could not have been written.

<sup>9</sup> Anton Roos, 'Mariannahill zwischen zwei Idealen. Entwicklung Mariannahills von Trappistenkloster zur modernen Missionskongregation 1886-1936', unpublished dissertation, Innsbruck, 1961. English translation by Adelgisa Hermanns: *Mariannahill between two ideals. The inner development of Mariannahill from a Trappist Monastery into a Mission Congregation, 1884-1936* ([Mariannahill, 1983]).

<sup>10</sup> See Marc-André Heim, 'Tätigkeit der Mariannahiller Mission unter ihrem Gründer Franz Pfanner bzw. bis zu dessen Tod 1882-1909', unpublished Masters dissertation, University of Vienna, 2009; Philippe Denis, 'Mission, civilisation and coercion in colonial Natal. Abbot Frantz Pfanner and the African 'Other' in Mariannahill (1882-1909)', *Lithuanian Catholic Academy of Science Annuals*, vol. 37: *Studies in Church History*, vol. 6, 2013. Christoph Rippe, doctoral student in cultural anthropology at the Institute of Cultural Anthropology and Development Sociology at Leiden University in the Netherlands, is currently writing a thesis on Mariannahill's photographic production.

<sup>11</sup> Green, *For the sake of silence*, p. 381.

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vention of a General Chapter's order valid?<sup>12</sup> Can one speak, as Buschgerd does, of a "tacit dismissal"?<sup>13</sup> In *Mariannahill between two ideals* Roos discusses these issues but he fails to give a full account of Pfanner's suspension and resignation as abbot of Mariannahill.<sup>14</sup>

### The growth of Mariannahill

Everything went quickly that week of December 1892 when Franz Pfanner disembarked in Durban after a year-long stay in Europe to sort out ecclesiastical matters and raise funds for mission work. The other monks had already arrived from Dunbrody, the ill-fated mission station in the Eastern Cape where the Trappists had tried to establish a monastery, and they were about to leave for St Michael's, a farm on arid land put at their disposal by the bishop of Natal, Charles Jolivet. On the 17<sup>th</sup> the Austrian monk met Jolivet in Pietermaritzburg, on the 23<sup>rd</sup> he bought the farm Zoetegaat near Pinetown and on the 26<sup>th</sup> he celebrated Mass there for the first time with the rest of the community. The farm was renamed the farm Mariannahill in honour of the Virgin Mary and her mother Ann.<sup>15</sup> This time with the right type of land, a solid financial foundation and the support of the bishop, Pfanner was in a good position to achieve his goal – building a genuine Trappist monastery and converting hundreds of souls to Christ.

By then he was fifty-seven years of age. The son of a Catholic farmer from Voralberg, the westernmost part of Austria, he had already served as vicar in an Austrian parish for ten years and chaplain to nuns in Croatia for three years when, moved by something inexplicable as he related in his memoirs, he decided to join religious life.<sup>16</sup> Received in the Trappist monastery of Mariawald near Aachen in Germany in 1862, his determination, his work ethic and his integrity soon designated him for leadership positions – as sub-prior and master of students – but his criticisms of older brothers who were lax in the respect of the Trappist observances attracted the hostility of Ephrem van der Meulen, the abbot of Oelenberg, who happened to be the vicar general of the Trappist congregation to which Mariawald belonged. In 1865 Pfanner was sent to south-eastern Europe to found a new monastery, and was afterwards summarily dismissed. Rather daringly, he appealed to the Congregation of Bishops and Religious in Rome and was reinstated, to Abbot Ephrem's utter dismay. He then went to Banjuluka in Bosnia where he

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<sup>12</sup> Balling, *Der Apostel Südafrikas*, p. 280.

<sup>13</sup> Buschgerd, *For a great Price*, p. 625. See also pp. 320-321.

<sup>14</sup> Roos, *Between two ideals*, pp. 96.

<sup>15</sup> Abbot Francis Pfanner, *Handwritten memoirs, Mariannahill, 1888*, translated into English by Wolfgang Zürrlein (Rome, 1999), pp. 196-198.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54.

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founded the Trappist monastery of Mariastern, which, less than ten years later, already numbered a hundred monks. In 1879, as he was about to become the abbot of Mariastern, he caught everybody by surprise, at the General Chapter of the Trappist Congregation of Rancé, by responding positively to the call of James Ricards, the bishop of the Eastern Cape, who wanted to establish a Trappist monastery in his vicariate. As we have seen, the plan did not work out because of the weather conditions in this dry part of the Cape Colony and also because of the lack of funds. A disagreement on an advance of 2000 pounds – a loan according to the bishop and a gift according to Pfanner – poisoned the relationship between the two men for more than a decade. In the end the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith in Rome arbitrated the matter in Ricards' favour.<sup>17</sup>

In 1882 Pfanner's position as prior of Dunbrody had started to be questioned when news of an opportunity in the Natal vicariate reached him. This is how Mariannahill came into being. The new monastery grew rapidly. Thanks to an active media policy recruits and funds for the purchase of land in the neighbouring areas were always in good supply. Within five years the number of monks had risen to 150.<sup>18</sup> A boarding school for boys opened in 1884 and a school for girls in 1885. The same year the monastery was raised to the status of abbey<sup>19</sup> and Pfanner was elected abbot. In 1886, in response to a request from a local chief, Sakayedwa, he expanded the monastery's missionary outreach by establishing a mission station at Reichenau, at a day's ride from Mariannahill. He founded nine other outstations in the following five years: Einsiedeln, Loreto, Mariathal, Oetting, Kevelaer, Lourdes, Centocow, Maria Ratschitz and St Michael.<sup>20</sup>

On 1 September 1885 a group of five German female volunteers arrived at Mariannahill to assist the monastery in its missionary enterprise. Their first assignment was to run the girls' school. They were soon given a red uniform – to distinguish them from other female missionaries and as a reminder of the Precious Blood of Christ – and in July 1886, in consultation with the bishop, Pfanner gave them their first rule.<sup>21</sup> The Red Sisters, as they were called, would only gain full recognition in 1906 but, to all intents and

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<sup>17</sup> Judgment of the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith, 28 June 1896. Copy in Mariannahill Archives, Abbot Pfanner Papers, Document 27036.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 159.

<sup>19</sup> See the decree of approval, signed by Cardinal Simeoni, 25 February 1885 in Kempf, *Der Herold Gottes in Südafrika*, vol. 2, pp. 176-177.

<sup>20</sup> On Mariannahill's first mission stations, see Francis Schimlek, *Mariannahill. A Study in Bantu life and missionary effort* (Mariannahill: Mission Press, 1953), pp. 90-97. Plans were made in the late 1880s for a mission station for Indians, but they did not materialise (*ibid.*, p. 97).

<sup>21</sup> Text in Buschgerd, *For a great Price*, pp. 74-77.

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purposes, they constituted a fully-functioning congregation of religious sisters at a much earlier date. By 1888 they already numbered 100.<sup>22</sup>

At the end of this first decade the abbot of Mariannahill could not hide a sense of pride in considering the work done, as this letter to his family reveals:

Fourteen sisters are being sent out, several wagons go time and again, more than two dozen of postulants are on the way coming to us [...] a coming and going ceaselessly, a permanent pressure on Fr. Franz. [...] You can believe me: to command and organize all this does not need a crosier, but sometimes also a stick would be needed. It won't work without discipline. Only with a sharp grip can one direct such a work, about 600 people daily to be supervised, fed, and instructed. [...] Thanks be to God I am still healthy. [...] At the palm procession today with more than 1000 people I thought: to bring them all into heaven, and to come there myself [...] to enter with that glorious procession through the gates of the heavenly Jerusalem that will be the blessed gathering which we aim at.<sup>23</sup>

Manual labour was highly valued at Mariannahill. It became a key component of the monks' education system. Their industrial schools were seen by the colonial government as a model to emulate.<sup>24</sup> When Hosiiah Tyler, a Congregational minister, visited Mariannahill in 1890, three hundred native boys and girls were under tuition. 'Very little knowledge is imparted except industrial,' he observed. 'Zulu boys who have been there three or four years have become in many instances good masons, blacksmiths, carpenters, shoemakers, and printers. The girls are taught to sew, knit and cook.'<sup>25</sup> In his memoirs Pfanner contrasted the variety of trades practised in Mariannahill with the emphasis laid on agricultural work in most monasteries around the world:

There are Trappist monasteries, where there is no other work for choir religious but work in the fields or in the garden, and

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<sup>22</sup> Pfanner, *Memoirs*, p. 159.

<sup>23</sup> Pfanner to his family, 14 April 1889. Copy in Mariannahill Archives, Abbot Pfanner Papers, Document 07009.

<sup>24</sup> Pfanner to Ludwig Haitinger, 21 March 1903. *Ibid.*, Document 10006. On Mariannahill's education system, see Marc-André Heim, 'Tätigkeit der Mariannahiller Mission unter ihrem Gründer Franz Pfanner bzw. Bis zu dessen Tod 1882-1909', unpublished Masters dissertation, University of Vienna, 2009.

<sup>25</sup> Hosiiah Tyler, 'The Trappists in South Africa', *The Missionary Herald*, vol. 86, No 2, 1890, pp. 55 ss.

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this is the case in almost all of them. Only ours in South Africa is an exception. There, besides work in the fields, there are numerous other possibilities, for example in the printing department, in the typesetting room, and in the excellent bookbinding department, where about 20 different machines (almost all are running by water) must be operated by people. Furthermore, in the zincography, in the lithography, in the photography department, in the painting department, in the graphic and drawing department, in music, in the editorial department of the various newspapers (German and English), in the painter's department, in the graphic arts and drawing and designing department, in the correction and proofreading department, in the newspapers mailing department, in the elementary schools as teachers, especially in the mission in the strictest sense of the word as catechists and preachers, in bookkeeping, in the big clothes room and clothes depots (for more than 500 people), as well in the department of making clothes for many naked people. Therefore we can use and employ all kinds of people.<sup>26</sup>

**An impossible dilemma**

This gigantic project attracted various types of criticism. Bishop Jolivet was reported as saying that it was a mistake to give "too much" to the black people because that would make of them "bread Christians".<sup>27</sup> A man by the name of Mxakaza accused the Trappists, in a letter sent to a Natal newspaper, of "seducing the natives" through their kindness in order to convert them and bring them to submission.<sup>28</sup>

From within the Trappist Order, particularly in the early 1890s, a different kind of criticism was expressed. As the visitator stressed in his report in 1992, Pfanner modified the delicate balance between prayer and work which had characterised monastic life for centuries: instead of *ora et labora*, as in the Trappist motto, it became *labora et ora*. To ensure the success of his missionary enterprise, in the monastery itself and in the various mission stations, Pfanner felt the necessity to relax certain requirements of the Trappist Rule. Due to the pressure of work the time allocated to the novitiate was considerably shortened. David Bryant, for instance, did a

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<sup>26</sup> Pfanner, *Memoirs*, p. 80.

<sup>27</sup> M. Notker, 'Urteil zweier Bischöfe über unser System', *Familiäre Mitteilungen aus Mariannahill*, vol. 1 (1 June 1889), pp. 11-12.

<sup>28</sup> Quoted in Hosiash Tyler, 'The Trappists in South Africa', *The Missionary Herald*, vol. 86, No 2, 1890.

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novitiate of five months and Gerald Wolpert, a future abbot, of six weeks. Many novices spent most of their novitiate in mission stations, away from the mother house. According to the Rule, choir religious were to spend seven hours in choir and three hours, unless exception, at work. Pfanner authorised six hours of work and gave permission to say part of the office individually. Crucially, he invited all the candidates deemed apt for work to become brothers rather than choir religious so that they would not be obliged to spend time in the choir during day time. To allow longer hours of work the abbot also mitigated the penitential observances. He obtained permission from the general chapter of 1886 to give breakfast to the choir religious throughout the whole year, and not only on certain days as prescribed by the rule. Later he granted them a second breakfast. He never compromised on the interdiction of meat, fish, eggs and butter, but he increased the quantity of food authorised per meal. And lastly, he relaxed the rule of silence by increasing the number of officials who could authorise the brothers to break their silence for reason of work.<sup>29</sup>

As indicated earlier, to respond to the needs of the mission, Pfanner established mission stations at several days' walk from the monastery. This created a situation that the Trappist Rule had not foreseen. The mission stations were too small to become priories but their superiors could not receive daily orders from the abbot as in a monastery. To manage the situation Pfanner created a dual structure of authority in the mission stations: the rector, by definition a priest, had spiritual oversight over the mission while the manager, always a brother, was responsible for all material and financial matters. Like the rector he reported directly to the abbot, who, in this way, kept the government of the monastery and of the mission stations firmly in his hands.<sup>30</sup>

### The visitation of 1892

This mode of government had the disadvantage of undermining the authority of the priests in the mission stations. In the early 1890s they started to agitate for a change of structure. It was at their instigation that Abbot Strunk, the visitor appointed by the general chapter, ordered that Abbot Pfanner's prerogatives be reduced in 1892.

Until 1890 the abbot seems to have enjoyed the full support of the vicar general and the bishop. When, in February 1890, a volunteer priest from America, Fr Adolf, attacked the abbot in a letter to Propaganda for spending large sums of money on embellishing the monastery while the mission

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<sup>29</sup> On the relaxation of the observances at Mariannahill, see Roos, *Mariannahill between two ideals*, pp. 21-37.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 37-43.



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stations were deserted,<sup>31</sup> all monks and sisters came to his defence. On 14 October 1890 Pfanner was appointed vice-vicar general of the Trappist Order for South Africa.<sup>32</sup> But in November the missionaries requested to see the bishop in the absence of the abbot. Drawn into the internal quarrels of the monastery, Jolivet realised that many irregularities had been committed. Presumably because he had at heart the success of the mission to the natives, he listened to the complaints of the missionaries and gradually withdrew his support for Pfanner. The monastery, he wrote to Propaganda in June 1891, was economically solid despite some unnecessary expenses and the mission stations were flourishing, but the abbot was not selective enough in the admission of candidates. Some of them had been dismissed without reason and the Oblates had to pay for their repatriation.<sup>33</sup>

Meanwhile, Pfanner went to Rome in April 1891 for the general chapter. On account of the distance, he had been authorised to attend only one chapter every five years. This explains why, despite abundant reports, the government of the Order knew little about the state of affairs at Mariannahill. When Pfanner mentioned the concessions he had made to the rectors of the mission stations, the chapter members protested vigorously. To calm their anxiety the Austrian monk suggested that a visitor should be sent to Mariannahill. He was confident that an eyewitness would understand the motives for his actions. Apart from Fr Bonaventura, now abbot of Mariastern, the only German-speaking abbot who could do the visitation was Franciscus Strunk, the abbot of Oelenberg and, previously, the prior of Mariawald.<sup>34</sup> Given the history of mistrust between Abbot Ephrem, Strunk's almost immediate predecessor, and Pfanner, who was blamed for diverting to Africa the funds and candidates which might have gone to the German monasteries,<sup>35</sup> this was an unfortunate choice. The relationship between the two men would inevitably be clouded by prejudice. In the dramatic events that followed, personal factors played an important role.

And indeed Strunk misjudged the situation at Mariannahill. He underestimated the difficulty of combining the spirit of monasticism and the requirements of mission work, a challenge Pfanner had tried to face, as best

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<sup>31</sup> A. Adolf to Cardinal Simeoni, 17 February 1890. Copy in Mariannahill Archives, Abbot Pfanner Papers, Document 28039.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., Document 1044b.

<sup>33</sup> Bishop Jolivet to Propaganda, 3 June 1891, quoted in Buschgerd, *For a great price*, pp. 208-210. On Bishop Jolivet's visits to Mariannahill in 1890 and 1891, see Eric Bouille, ed., *Journey of faith. The Journals of Bishop Charles Jolivet OMI, Vicar Apostolic of Natal 1874-1903. Translated from the French and followed by commentary and biographical notes* (Dorpspruit, Jennydee Publications, 2013), pp. 79-80, 83.

<sup>34</sup> Acta Capituli Generalis 1891, quoted in Roos, *Mariannahill between two ideals*, pp. 53-54.

<sup>35</sup> See Pfanner's dictated memoirs of 1908. Copy in Mariannahill Archives, Abbot Pfanner Papers, Document 14005b. See also Buschgerd, *For a great price*, p. 239.

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he could, since 1880. As could be expected, the visitor was shocked to see how much Mariannahill had moved away from the Trappist model of monastic life. Over the years, the abbot had liberally granted dispensations for the sake of the mission. The Trappist observances were no longer followed faithfully. But, at the same time, the visitor lent an ear precisely to the missionaries who, year after year, had called for more dispensations. He probably took a lead from Bishop Jolivet who, since 1891, had been siding with the missionaries in their conflict with Pfanner. As a result Strunk decided to reinforce the power of the Mission Council, an institution created by Pfanner in 1889 to involve the missionaries in the running of the mission stations, but which had never been very effective.<sup>36</sup> The avowed purpose of the visitor's reform was to break the unlimited power Pfanner had exercised over his monks – a practice, ironically, in full conformity with the Rule of St Benedict from which the Trappist Rule was derived – since the foundation of the monastery. He felt that the only way of restoring peace in the monastery was to bring down Pfanner's pride and to drastically reduce his prerogatives. He did not see that by giving more authority to the missionaries he would create the conditions for a further erosion of the observances, the restoration of which was the very purpose of his visitation.

The visitation started on 8 January 1892. According to the rule, it should have lasted three days, but because of the distance between mission stations, the need to consult the bishop, Pfanner's sudden illness, his conflict with the visitor and the latter's hesitations as well as his own infirmity, the process dragged on until the 25<sup>th</sup> of June.<sup>37</sup> During the entire length of the visitation the abbot of Mariannahill stayed away to give space to the visitor. On 28 March Strunk went to Mariathal where Pfanner was recovering from typhoid to present him with the conclusions of his visitation and obtain his consent. Apart from restoring the observances, regarding the duration of the novitiate in particular, they consisted in re-establishing the Mission Council with the possibility, for the three missionary representatives, to outvote the abbot on certain matters and to impose a ban on further expansion, both in terms of acquisition of land and of recruitment of postulants. The visitor also wanted to authorise the eating of meat and the calling of a medical doctor in cases of sickness, two rather trivial measures but which Pfanner,

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<sup>36</sup> Roos, *Mariannahill between two ideals*, p. 42.

<sup>37</sup> The main sources of information on Abbot Strunk's visitation are his account of the visitation in the 6<sup>th</sup> volume of the *Chronik von Oelenberg* (copy in Mariannahill Archives, Abbot Pfanner Papers, Documents 19007 and 19008), his letters of 25 and 26 April 1892 to Propaganda (*ibid.*, Documents 43003 and 43004), the visitation report of 25 June 1892 (*ibid.*, 43006), Pfanner's dictated memoirs (*ibid.*, Document 14005a) and his letter to Brother Nivard of 6 June 1892 (*ibid.*, 12005). See also Roos, *Mariannahill between two ideals*, pp. 59-83.

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given his own medical history,<sup>38</sup> felt were abhorrent. On hearing Strunk's report he immediately came to the conclusion that, if implemented, the visitor's recommendations would lead to the ruin of Mariannahill. The two men argued for several days without coming to any agreement, an experience the Austrian monk later described as "torture".<sup>39</sup> Strunk having impressed on him that he had the power to dismiss him, Pfanner replied: "Depose me if you can!" Emotionally drained, he abruptly left Mariathal, on the morning of 3 April, with a note saying that his conscience did not allow him to implement the visitor's decisions and that he submitted his resignation.<sup>40</sup> "I oppose him where he wants to attack my function and the wellbeing of the monastery", he wrote to Brother Nivard a few days later. "We remain faithful to the Rule and do not want anything new."<sup>41</sup> Strunk sent two emissaries to the recalcitrant abbot, but in vain.

In June, on the vicar general's instructions, Strunk refused Pfanner's resignation and went ahead with the printing of the *carta*, as the visitation's report was called.<sup>42</sup> At that point, Pfanner appeared in the monastery. To everybody's surprise, he prostrated himself before the visitor as the *carta* was read in the chapter hall. As the events of subsequent months demonstrated, this posture did not imply that he accepted the conclusions of the visitation. It meant that, as stipulated in the Trappist Rule, he was doing penance for having disturbed the ordinance of the visitation through his obstructive behaviour.<sup>43</sup> He prostrated himself at the feet of the visitor, he explained in an autobiographical text, "to do rather too much than too little".<sup>44</sup>

### **Pfanner's downfall**

The abbot's good will was soon put to the test. "Soon", he claimed in the same document, "it appeared that it was impossible to live under the

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<sup>38</sup> He had suffered from illness since the time of his studies for the priesthood.

<sup>39</sup> Pfanner, Dictated memoirs. Copy in Mariannahill Archives, Abbot Pfanner Papers, Document 14005a.

<sup>40</sup> Chronik von Oelenberg, vol. 6, p. 265. Ibid., Document 19007: 'Conscientia mihi non permittit secundum vestra beneplacita procedure, potius debeo dare meam dimissionem.' See Roos, *Mariannahill between two ideals*, p. 52.

<sup>41</sup> Pfanner to Brother Nivard, 6 April 1892.

<sup>42</sup> *Visiten-Karte des hochwürdigen Visitors R.R.P. Franciscus, Abtes von Öttenberg, bei der I. Visitation des Missionsklosters Mariannahill unter seiner Filialen in der Zeit vom 11. Jan. – 25. Juni 1892* (Mariannahill: St Thomas Aquin Druckerei, [1892]). Text in Kempf, *Der Herald Gottes in Südafrika*, vol. 2, pp. 711-747.

<sup>43</sup> This point is developed in Roos, *Mariannahill between two ideals*, p. 73.

<sup>44</sup> Pfanner, Dictated memoirs. Copy in Mariannahill Archives, Abbot Pfanner Papers, Document 14005a: 'Als ich mich dabei for der ganzen Gemeinde prosternierte, um lieber zuviel als zu wenig zu tun, liess er mich am Boden liegen.'

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visitation *carta*.” A conflict erupted almost immediately on the school issue. For some time problems of discipline had affected the good functioning of the monastery’s school, then headed by Ambros Hartes, a man known for his leniency with the pupils. Without discussing the matter with the members of the Mission Council, as prescribed in the *carta*, Pfanner summarily dismissed the supervisor of studies, instituted a new school order and sent six troublesome boys home. The matter was raised at the Mission Council two weeks after the closing of the visitation. Challenged on his lack of consultation, Pfanner replied that he was not willing to listen to the advice of the three councillors – one of whom was Hartes, the supervisor of studies – and still less to follow it.<sup>45</sup>

The incident was brought to Strunk’s attention and discussed at the General Chapter of Rome in October 1892. It was at this gathering that the three branches of the Trappist Order amalgamated, at the instigation of Pope Leo XIII, to constitute the Order of Reformed Cistercians (OCR). Pfanner, who was too weak to travel, was replaced by Amandus Schölzig, the novice master. Strunk’s report was accepted despite its contradicting the Trappist Rule on the matter of the abbot’s power.<sup>46</sup> Noting that the visitor’s *carta* had not been implemented, the chapter suspended Pfanner for one year. The suspension order was accompanied by drastic measures. Pfanner was not allowed to have any contact with the priests, brothers and sisters of the monastery. He had to refrain from writing and was forbidden from any involvement in temporal affairs. Should he decide to offer his resignation, he should understand that it would not be accepted.<sup>47</sup>

On the recommendation of a hastily convened ad hoc committee, the chapter appointed Schölzig as administrator. A subsequent letter from Sébastien Wyart, the newly-elected abbot general, to Propaganda leaves no doubt as to the reasons for Pfanner’s suspension: “Fr Franz does not implement, to the scandal of his own religious, the decisions made by the visitor of Mariannahill.”<sup>48</sup> Bishop Jolivet, who fully supported the Trappist Order’s decision,<sup>49</sup> made the following comment in a letter to a Holy Cross sister: ‘Poor Abbot Franz would have spared himself and his monks many troubles and his mission work would have been the great benefactor of this vicariate if

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<sup>45</sup> *Die Stimme der Wahrheit*, 6 April 1893. Copy in Mariannahill Archives, Abbot Pfanner Papers, Document 58028.

<sup>46</sup> Because the report was too long to be read, it was only briefly presented at the chapter. This explains why some of its recommendations were not properly discussed.

<sup>47</sup> Decree of suspension, 13 October 1892. *Ibid.*, Document 35022. English translation in Buschgerd, *For a great Price*, pp. 302-303.

<sup>48</sup> Sébastien Wyart to Cardinal Simeoni, 16 October 1892. *Ibid.*, Document 36056.

<sup>49</sup> Later on Bishop Jolivet regretted having taken this position. He gave Pfanner, at their joint jubilee in Mariannahill in 1900, ‘touching proofs of his contrition’. See Pfanner, ‘Bitte ums Wort’, 26 March 1907. *Ibid.*, Document 14009.

*The suspension and resignation of Franz Pfanner, ...*

he had understood practically this elementary truth [that he had to implement the visitor's decisions], but unfortunately he listened only to his own judgment and so brought things to such a pass that he had to be suspended.<sup>50</sup>

Pfanner, who received the news of his suspension on Schölzig's return to Mariannahill in December 1892, never questioned the general chapter's right to sanction him. He found this measure unjust, but, unlike when he was confronted to the visitor's *carta*, he accepted it unconditionally. He left Mariannahill on 13 December for St Michael's and from there to Einsiedeln, where he symbolically hung his ring and his abbatial cross on the sceptre of the Black Madonna.<sup>51</sup> He spent the following months in Lourdes.

In late January or early February 1893, Pfanner sent a letter of resignation to the abbot general and to Propaganda.<sup>52</sup> Presumably because the suspension order had discouraged him from doing so, he did not send a formal letter of resignation, with the signatures of two witnesses as prescribed in the Rule, but only a "private letter" stating that "under the circumstances he could no longer govern the house".<sup>53</sup> For his part, Wyart understood that Pfanner had indeed tendered his resignation and he accepted it "without delay".<sup>54</sup> On 4 March 1893 a consultor of the Congregation for Bishops and Religious, Fr José Calasanz de Llevaneras, expressed the opinion that Pfanner's resignation could be accepted since proof was given that Mariannahill would remain economically viable after his suspension.<sup>55</sup> That the Trappist Order accepted Pfanner's resignation is also made clear in a letter from the abbot general to Pope Leo XIII, underwritten by Bishop Jolivet, in which approval was sought for the appointment of Strunk as abbot of Mariannahill.<sup>56</sup>

<sup>50</sup> Bishop Jolivet to a Holy Cross sister, 5 January 1893. Ibid., Document 41007.

<sup>51</sup> Pfanner to Brother Nivard, 28 May 1893. Ibid., Document 12006. See Roos, *Mariannahill between two ideals*, p. 92.

<sup>52</sup> Kempf, *Der Herold Gottes in Südafrika*, vol. 2, p. 813.

<sup>53</sup> Pfanner, Dictated memoirs. Copy in Mariannahill Archives, Abbot Pfanner Papers, Document 14005a: 'Unter solchen Verhältnissen kann ich das Haus nicht regieren.'

<sup>54</sup> Advice of Fr José Calasanz de Llevanera on the troubles of Mariannahill abbey, 4 March 1893. Copy in Mariannahill Archives, Abbot Pfanner Papers, Document 35025: "Hinc nuperrime Abbas [Franciscus Pfanner] rite definitivam renuntiationem fecit in scriptis cum Abbatis Generali, quae renuntiatio sine more admissa fuit." German translation in Kempf, *Der Herold Gottes in Südafrika*, vol. 2, pp. 841-849, here p. 848.

<sup>55</sup> Advice of Fr José Calasanz de Llevanera, 4 March 1893. This document also dealt with the problem of the monks who had not done a canonical novitiate and with the issue of whether the monks should know Latin.

<sup>56</sup> Wyart to Pope Leo XIII, 29 April 1893. Copy in Mariannahill Archives, Abbot Pfanner Papers, Document 37005: 'Hic nuper renuntiavit suae Abbatiae, et renuntiatio rata facta est.' German translation in Kempf, *Der Herold Gottes in Südafrika*, vol. 2, p. 818. In this document Pope Leo XIII was asked to approve Strunk's appointment, but the abbot of Oelenberg refused the assignment and the Pope accepted his reasons. Schölzig was then reinstated as administrator, under obedience. He was consecrated abbot on 25 April 1894.

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One cannot affirm, as has been said, that Pfanner was “removed from his office”.<sup>57</sup> He voluntarily resigned. The confusion comes from the manner, belated and clumsy, in which he was notified that his resignation had been accepted. By 3 May 1893 he was still waiting for a document proving “black on white” that he was out of office.<sup>58</sup> All he had received, at this point, was a telegram enjoining him to come to Rome immediately. He refused on the grounds that he would not survive the voyage.<sup>59</sup> Subsequently came, according to the dictated memoirs, a “decree” stating that his “resignation had been accepted”.<sup>60</sup> There was also, according to the same source, a “decree of dismissal”.<sup>61</sup> This is probably an abuse of language. There is no record of a formal dismissal process.

Meanwhile, on 20 May 1893, Pfanner made a brief appearance at Mariannahill to bid farewell to the monks and the sisters.<sup>62</sup> That some confusion regarding his status remained at the time is indicated in the letter he wrote to Brother Nivard four days later, on 24 May 1893. He was told that, as a suspended abbot, he was not allowed to talk to or have any relation with the community, but he contested this interpretation, being a “freely resigned abbot”.<sup>63</sup> Only at the following general chapter, in September 1893, was the matter brought to a close with the pronouncement that Pfanner might “for grave reasons no longer exercise his office” and that Fr Amandus Schölzig should be appointed as his successor.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> See for example Roos, *Mariannahill between two ideals*, p. 98: ‘That the Abbot of Mariannahill was removed from his office is a fact which cannot be denied. There could be no question of resignation in the actual sense, because the decree of suspension made it impossible.’ Schölzig’s letter to Brother Nivard of 23 April 1893, to which Roos refers to indicate that Pfanner was ‘finally removed from the office of superior of Mariannahill’ on 22 April 1893 (*ibid.*, p. 98), only stated that the administrator had failed to convince the Trappist authorities to reinstate the deposed abbot. Text in Kempf, *Der Herold Gottes in Südafrika*, vol. 2, p. 814. While noting that, by May 1893, Pfanner’s resignation had been accepted (*For a great price*, p. 321), Buschgerd also contributed to the confusion by speaking in her book of a ‘tacit dismissal’ (*ibid.*, p. 625).

<sup>58</sup> Pfanner to Brother Nivard, 3 May 1893. Copy in Mariannahill Archives, Abbot Pfanner Papers, Document 12022: ‘Ich bleibe hier unbeweglich als suspendiert, bis ich ein offizielles Schwarzes auf Weiss, dass ich abgedankt bin.’

<sup>59</sup> Pfanner, Dictated memoirs. *Ibid.*, Document 14005a: ‘Es kam aber eine Aufforderung an mich von Rom dass ich unverweilt nach Rome komme. Aber wegen meiner zu befürchtenden Seekrankheit gab ich zur Antwort: Impossible.’

<sup>60</sup> Pfanner, same document: ‘Bald darauf kam das Dekret folgenden Inhalts: Seine Demission is angenommen.’

<sup>61</sup> Pfanner, same document: ‘Das Absetzungsdekret kam bald darauf.’

<sup>62</sup> *Mariannahill Chronicle*, quoted in Kempf, *Der Herold Gottes in Südafrika*, vol. 2, p. 817.

<sup>63</sup> Pfanner to Brother Nivard, 25 May 1893. Copy in Mariannahill Archives, Abbot Pfanner Papers, Document 12023.

<sup>64</sup> Buschgerd, *For a great Price*, pp. 344, 625.

## Conclusion

In April 1894 a permanent place of residence was found for the former abbot: a remote area at two hours' drive from Lourdes by ox-cart to which Pfanner gave the name of Emaus.<sup>65</sup> It was there that he spent the last fifteen years of his existence in relative isolation. Apart from a few sisters and, during the year immediately preceding his death, a fellow monk, Joseph Biegner, he stayed on his own, sharing his time between manual labour, correspondence and prayer.

Was Pfanner "condemned" to silence after his voluntary resignation? The answer is no. The only form of silence to which he was bound was the one stipulated in the Rule. At Emaus he lived the life of an ordinary Trappist monk. As noted above, in October 1892 the General Chapter had forbidden him any contact with the priests, brothers and sisters of the monastery and asked him to refrain from writing. This stringent measure had been taken to avoid the disturbance which the capitulars feared Pfanner might cause by refusing to obey to its commands. In fact he had accepted the order of suspension without a word. This is why, after consultation with a consultant of the Congregation for Bishops and Religious, Sébastien Wyart, the abbot general, had decided to accept Pfanner's letter of resignation as early as March 1893, therefore lifting all the prohibitions listed in the order of suspension.

In a later document, a letter sent to Cardinal Ledóchowski, the cardinal prefect of the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith, in September 1896, Pfanner mentioned that his successor, Abbot Amandus Schölzig, had graciously allowed him to correspond "with the entire world without any hindrance" without having to submit his letters to abbatial censure as was expected from any monk.<sup>66</sup> This indicates that, as far as written communication was concerned, Pfanner benefited from a regime of favour in his abode at Emaus.

There is, however, a difference between the letter of the law and the way it is understood in practice. Because the community never received notification from the General Council that Pfanner's resignation had been accepted, the monks continued to ostracise him long after he had become an ordinary religious again. A climate of fear had developed in the monastery, preventing even his most faithful supporters from communicating with him. In January 1894 he shared with Brother Nivard his sadness at not having

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<sup>65</sup> According to Annette Buschgerd (*For a great price*, p. 353), the name does not derive from the biblical Emmaus but is a play on the word *e Maus*, which is the German dialect for *E'ine Maus*.

<sup>66</sup> Pfanner to Propaganda, 1 September 1896. Copy in Mariannahill Archives, Abbot Pfanner Papers, Document 03063.

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received any mail from his brothers as if he had been a criminal. He felt betrayed like Jesus in Golgotha. Were they afraid of being excommunicated? He accepted this suffering, he commented, as a penance for his sins. "My consolation is that my Redeemer is alive."<sup>67</sup>

Gradually, however, the situation came back to normal. At Emaus, with his abbot's permission, Pfanner's involvement in current affairs resumed almost as before. Between 1894 and 1909, the year of his death, he sent fifty-nine articles to *Vergissmeinnicht*, twenty-two to *Familiäre Mitteilungen aus Mariannahilland* a few more to secular newspapers such as *The Natal Witness* and the *Natal Advertiser*. He gave numerous advices on church matters, most notably the vexed question of the sisters' canonical status, a problem to which he devoted a considerable amount of energy and for which he received belated recognition.

All this shows that Pfanner's time at Emaus can better be described as a retirement than an exile. This being said, the pain of having been unfairly treated remained until the end. One of the last texts the "voluntarily resigned abbot", as he liked to describe himself in his correspondence, dictated to Angela Michel, the sister who looked after him in his old age at Emaus, was an account of the events leading to his suspension and resignation.<sup>68</sup> He wanted to put the record straight. He had been suspended for having refused to implement instructions he considered, in conscience, to be ill-advised and capable of precipitating the ruin of Mariannahill.

If Pfanner had attended the General Chapter of October of 1892, it is likely that he would have convinced the capitulars of the rightness of his cause. Unfortunately his health – seasickness caused him unbearable torments – prevented him from making the journey. One understands why these men, some of whom had esteem for Pfanner, sanctioned him. To disavow the visitor would have opened the door to all kinds of disciplinary problems. They followed an institutional logic. Meanwhile, they imposed an unfair treatment to a man who had contributed, more than anybody else, to the expansion of the Trappist Order in Africa. He had shortcomings, of course, some of them problematic such as tendency to decide without consultation or the haste to recruit brothers and to buy land without proper backing. But none of these errors justified his demotion. Ironically, the recommendations of the visitor's report, those for the disrespect of which he had been condemned, were never implemented by his successors.

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<sup>67</sup> Pfanner to Brother Nivard, 3 January 1894. Ibid., Document 12007.

<sup>68</sup> Copy in Mariannahill Archives, Abbot Pfanner Papers, Document 14005a.



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