

**Sr. Reinolda May, OSB**  
1901-1981  
A Missionary Benedictine in South Africa

**1. Our Lady of Ngome**

(From “The Benedictines of Inkamana” by Fr. Godfrey Sieber, OSB – 1994)



At the beginning of the 20th century, the region around Ngome, about 30 km from Nongoma, was designated for commercial agriculture. The result was that white farmers bought the land and used it primarily for livestock and the production of construction and commercial timber. Black families were allowed to live on these farms as renters who were taken care of by the farmer with a surplus of workers. Missionary work among these black families could be done only with permission of the white farmer on whose property they lived.

After the Benedictine monks opened a mission station in Nongoma in 1926, they also founded a string of outlying stations in this district in order to win new Christians and form them into parishes. In 1944 they bought a 338 hectare farm in Ngome intended to be a financial help for the Nongoma mission station with its school and hospital.

The farm, named Langewacht, belonged to the Vryheid District but had a common boundary with the Zulu reserve where whites could not buy farmland. The Benedictine monks, who called their new property simply the “Ngome farm”, used their property mainly for livestock. Later on, the land was rented in 1976.

A small school was built that was known as the Mayime School. One of the classrooms was used as a chapel where the Catholics could gather on Sundays to celebrate mass or participate in a Service of the Word led by a catechist.

The number of Catholics in Ngome increased steadily until 1970, when a new government policy brought pressure on farmers to reduce the number of black workers and to send the so-called surplus back to the Zulu reserve. This brought about a sharp reduction in the number of blacks living on white men’s farms.

By 1978 the number of Catholics was reduced to less than half. Ngome remained a tiny outlying station, totally insignificant as far as the number of Catholics was concerned. In 1970 there were about 120, 80 in 1985, and only 42 in 1993.



Ngome's future would have looked bleak had it not been for another development that quite suddenly drew the attention of Catholics in Zululand and far beyond its borders.

The revolution occurred in 1981, shortly after the death of Sister Reinolda May, OSB, who served as a Missionary Benedictine Sister in Nongoma from 1938 to 1980 and who allegedly during that time had apparitions of the Mother of God.



Sr. Reinolda May OSB

## 2. Who was Sister Reinolda May?

Sr. Reinolda May was born on October 21, 1901, in Pfahlheim, a small village in the Regensburg Diocese in the southwestern part of Germany. The next day she was baptized and received the name Francisca. Her father had a small estate and was a cooper. He and his wife had ten children, of whom two died young. Francisca was the youngest. After completing her primary education, she went to a girls' boarding school in Hochhaltingen where the Franciscan Sisters taught her domestic arts.

At that time the Pfahlheim parish had a very active priest. He made every effort to get his parishioners to join one or the other Catholic sodality. Young and old, married or single, men and women, he encouraged to practice their faith and carry out their duties conscientiously. Each group had a certain Sunday on which they went as a body to the altar to receive communion. Eucharistic devotion, especially in the

form of exposition of the Blessed Sacrament, and devotions to the Blessed Mother formed the predominant aspects of church practices in the village. The annual feast of the patron of each sodality was celebrated with special solemnity. Participation in the holy mass was the highpoint of the day.

It is not surprising that in such an atmosphere a large number of religious vocations sprang forth. Although at the start of the 20th century only about a thousand Catholics lived in Pfahlheim, about three dozen girls entered convents while Eugene Adis was the pastor. One of them was Francisca May.

Because Francisca showed great interest in the missions, Pastor Adis advised her to enter the Missionary Benedictine Sisters of Tutzing. Her first attempt to enter failed. She was told she was not healthy enough to go to the missions.

Since admission to the Missionary Benedictine Order was refused her, she was forced to return home to Pfahlheim. The people there still remember that she could often be seen praying in the parish church during the day. That must have struck the villagers as something unusual, otherwise they wouldn't have noticed it. Francisca's father was not at all sad about this outcome. He preferred that his youngest daughter remain at home. But Francisca's ideas

were firmly fixed on becoming a missionary sister. So she traveled to Tutzing once again and this time was accepted.



After Rome allowed the Tutzing Missionary Sisters to attend women in childbirth, Sister Reinolda was the first sister in Zululand to take a midwifery course. In May 1938 she received a midwifery diploma from the state hospital in Pietermaritzburg.

When the “Benedictine Hospital” opened in June 1938, the maternity station was entrusted to Sister Reinolda. It was a difficult beginning. The hospital had only the least facilities. Many Zulus were skeptical and didn’t want to bring their women to the hospital to give birth. Moreover, in this regard the doctor

himself was against the new hospital because of fear that he would thereby lose patients. Sister Reinolda suffered much under these circumstances, but showed great spiritual strength and never gave way to discouragement or doubts. As always, she was strengthened through prayer. In moments of crisis she spent long hours in prayer, many times during the night.

Sister Reinolda was a very determined person. When she once took hold of a task or when one was entrusted to her, she made every effort to achieve the best results. When she was asked to take a midwifery course, she appeared to be an unlikely candidate for this task. She had no higher education, was already in her mid-thirties, had worked only in the sewing room, and had seemingly scant knowledge of the English language. But she worked hard and achieved good grades.

She was very self-disciplined and balanced, did not panic in moments of crisis, and remained calm and tranquil. People who knew her well often remarked, “She has both feet on the ground!” She was not a passive person who simply awaited instructions; on the contrary, she could take her own initiative. She also had a noticeable talent for dealing with problems and showed inventiveness in seeking solutions. Her creative and inventive capabilities might well have contributed to the development of her spiritual life, especially in the form of her prayer.



Sister Reinolda remained in charge of the Benedictine Hospital’s maternity station until June 1976 when the government took over the hospital. Over 28,000 births were registered during that time. Her professional competence and her enormous knowledge of nursing matters won

her the respect and admiration of all the doctors with whom she worked. More than once they remarked that it was comforting to have her in the delivery room in critical situations. But Sister Reinolda was such an equally modest person that she never put herself in the spotlight for her accomplishments.

Over the years Sister Reinolda became the most famous missionary in this region. The Zulus, who often gave a person a name indicating their special manners or physical characteristics, called her “Mashiyane” because of her bushy eyebrows.

It was not only her reputation as a midwife that made her popular in the whole Nongoma district, but also her genuine interest in the welfare of the people. She was gentle, friendly, and solicitous especially towards the people in our society who are easily overlooked: the children, the handicapped, the sick and those treated harshly and roughly in life.

All of these qualities made it possible for them to approach her and open their hearts to her. For many patients who came to the Benedictine Hospital, Sister Mashiyane was not only a competent nurse but also an understanding and caring mother. Years later she could still

remember the names of patients who had been in the hospital, and she inquired about their condition and about the help they possibly needed.



Sister Reinolda was filled with an extraordinary missionary zeal. She felt moved to visit the Zulus in their homes, to look after the sick and elderly who couldn't come to church, to instruct catechumens and to prepare children and adults for the sacraments. She made rounds on foot or horseback, and often accompanied a priest to the outlying stations. She was instrumental for many to find their way into the church or to bring lax Catholics back to

church. As a nurse and missionary, it was understandable that she did many emergency baptisms, especially of newborns, if she believed they would die without being baptized. It must also be acknowledged that this sometimes created problems when the children survived and were not raised in a Christian family.

Placing herself totally at the service of others was the way in which she understood her missionary vocation. Nothing was too much for her if she could help someone else. When she distributed food or clothing, she was always genuinely interested in the need of every person who came begging to her. She often spent hours at the bedside of seriously ill patients. It is noteworthy that during the fifty years she worked in Zululand, that she never took a home leave and scarcely took a few days off from her work to rest. Being a missionary was, for her, a far-reaching obligation that allowed no compromise.

In June 1976, at the age of 74, Sister Reinolda retired and withdrew from her maternity station. She moved to St. Albans convent, about a kilometer away from the hospital. But even from there she went to the hospital daily to visit the sick and be with the dying. She had a unique gift for comforting people standing at the threshold of death and preparing them for

their last journey. Through her initiatives, many were reconciled with the church or were baptized before they died.

In June 1980 it was obvious that she herself was dying. The diagnosis: colon cancer. In August 1980 she came to the Inkamana convent infirmary. It was hard for Sister Reinolda who had been so active her whole life, no longer to be able to get up and make her daily rounds. It caused her great spiritual pain that she found more difficult to experience than physical pain.

She died on April 1, 1981. An unusual number of mourners took part in the Requiem and burial in Inkamana on April 6. Among the mourners was a representative of the Zulu king Goodwill Zwelethini (Zulu custom forbade that the king would attend the funeral in person). His presence confirmed the friendly relationship Sister Reinolda had with the royal family. With the death of Sister Reinolda, the Catholic church of Zululand lost a beloved and devoted missionary.

Soon after her death, word spread widely that Sister Reinolda apparently had experienced apparitions of Our Lady. On the basis of her own notes and the respective documents in the diocesan archives, the following descriptive picture emerged.

### 3. History of the Apparitions

Sister Reinolda experienced the first extraordinary apparition on December 8, 1954 at the end of exposition of the Blessed Sacrament.



“I saw two figures at the table where everything was prepared for holy mass. At the end of the table was a woman in a white garment with a long white veil. In her right hand was something covered. It could have been a shield. Opposite her was a monk dressed in black, with raised hands as at the consecration, with something held in his hand like an offering. Then something rose heavenward like incense. The figures disappeared as the priest put on his vestments. I could make no sense of it all, but I also could not forget what I had seen. Not long thereafter, during holy communion it became clear to me, as if someone said to me: It is a veiled monstrosity.”

Eight months after this unexplainable event, Sister Reinolda experienced something like a vision of the Mother of God. More would follow. She herself referred to these alleged visions as “encounters”.

The first encounter between Sister Reinolda and Our Lady took place during holy mass in the sisters’ chapel in Nongoma on August 22, 1955. It happened immediately after Sister Reinolda had received communion. Our Lady revealed herself to Sister Reinolda as “Tabernacle of the Most High” and expressed the wish to be called upon under this title. She emphasized that more people should make efforts to become Tabernacles of the Most High. She ordered Sister to make this known to her priest and to others.

The second encounter on October 20, 1955 and the third on October 22, 1955 had similar messages for Sister Reinolda, with additional urging to make them known to everyone.

At the fourth encounter on March 15, 1956, Our Lady pointed in a northwest direction (Ngome lies northwest of Nongoma) and allegedly asked Sister Reinolda "that a shrine be erected for me in the place where seven springs come together." Graces would flow in abundance from this place and many would be converted and return to God.

There were further encounters between Sister Reinolda and Our Lady on June 5, 1956, March 15, 1957 and May 24, 1957.

On December 8, 1957, after visiting a sick person in Ngome, Sister Reinolda got a strong urge that Ngome was the place where the desired shrine should be erected. After she spoke with the Fr. Ignaz Jutz, the pastor of Ngome, a large number of springs were discovered in the forest below the Ngome school.

The first pilgrimage to Ngome took place on March 15, 1966. Most of those who participated were from Nongoma. Afterwards Bishop Bilgeri allowed no more pilgrimages to Ngome.

Sister Reinolda wrote about her ninth encounter with Mary in her journal: "It was the night of March 28, 1970. During the previous night I had a horrible appearance of the devil. I was woken from my sleep. All around me was light. Who stood at my side? Mary Tabernacle

of the Most High. She took me in her arms and consoled me, saying: "I know about your anxiety. I stand by you. I shall not abandon you. I will complete my work victoriously." Before leaving me she said: 'Look to the other side.' There stood the Archangel Michael in armor and a lance in his hands. On his right stood a cherubim robed in white, his arms crossed over his breast. After about two minutes they disappeared and so did the brilliant light. This was a great consolation for me!"

The tenth and last encounter apparently took place on Sunday, May 2, 1971 in the small Ngome chapel. "After holy mass I went back to the chapel with a few women in order to pray with them before the picture of the Tabernacle of the Most High. Suddenly I noticed that the picture was very much alive. Mary stepped forward and was immensely beautiful. In my excitement I shouted, 'Look at Mary!' I was convinced that the women, too, saw Mary. I was so moved that I walked away silently."

erste Begegnung mit Maria  
22.10.55  
Kurz nach Empfang der hl. Kommunion  
stand Maria in unmittelbarer Nähe  
von mir.  
(Was im Geiste gesehen) Wurde in eine andere  
Atmosphäre hineingezogen.  
Maria zeigte sich im wunderbarsten Licht,  
schien als die Sonne. Sie war ganz in  
weiß gekleidet. Wallend und schlank vom  
Schestel bis zur Sohle. Auf der Brust trug  
eine große Kiste, umgeben von einem  
strahlenden Kranz, Leben ausstrahlend. Sie  
war eine lebendige Marienstatue.  
Maria stand schlicht auf den ledernen  
Süßeln und Füße nicht gesehen.  
Es war mir als ob ich in eine Wolke  
zuerst einging, angezogen von Maria  
weg von der Erde. Ich hatte die Augen  
geschlossen, aber ich sah soviel Licht,  
das ich mehrere Tage lang geknebelt war  
von der Schwärze und dem Licht der

#### 4. Ngome today

After lengthy examination by the diocese, venerating Mary under the title “Tabernacle of the Most High” was allowed in Ngome.

On November 13, 1990, Father Michael Mayer, OSB, published a circular in which he wrote:

*“The Marian shrine at Ngome is a sign of the presence of Our Lady in the life of the local church. Devotion to Our Lady of Ngome will be an opportunity to work and pray for peace in our country.”*

