

## The Shrine of Our Lady of Ngome (1985)

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the area around Ngome, about thirty kilometres north-west of Nongoma, was set aside for commercial farming. As a result, white farmers purchased the land and used it mainly for cattle ranching and timber production. Black families were allowed to live on those farms as tenants, providing the white farmers with an abundant labour force. Missionary work among these black families could only be done with the permission of the white farmer on whose property they lived.

After the Benedictines had opened a mission station at Nongoma in 1926, they began to establish a string of outstations in the district in order to win new converts and form them into communities. In 1944, they bought a 338-hectare farm at Ngome which was intended as a source of income for the mission station at Nongoma with its school and hospital. The farm, named Langewacht, belonged to the Vryheid district, but had a common border with the Zulu reserve where Whites could not buy farmland. The Benedictines, who called their new property at Ngome simply the "Ngome Farm", used the land mainly for cattle ranching. Later, from about 1976, the farm was leased. The rental was R 700 per annum in 1976. A small school was erected on the farm in 1946 (?) to enable the children in the area to get a basic education. It became known as the Mayime School. The building was in such bad condition by 1953 that it was decided to replace it. The new one, built by Bro. Jacob Riedmann between August and November 1953, was blessed and opened by Abbot Willibald Margraf of Schweiklberg (Germany) on November 25, 1953. One of the class-rooms was used as a chapel where the Catholics came together on Sundays to celebrate Mass or to participate in a service conducted by a catechist.

The number of Catholics at Ngome increased steadily until around 1970, when a new government policy put pressure on the white farmers to trim their black labour force and to send so-called surplus labour back into the Zulu reserves. This brought about a sharp drop in the number of black people living on white farms. By 1978, the Catholic congregation of Ngome had lost more than half of its members. In the early seventies a large tea plantation was started right next to the Ngome Farm and a village was built to house the workers. The Ngome Tea Estate employed a labour force of one thousand four hundred in 1994, but there were only a few Catholics among them. Ngome remained a tiny outstation, quite insignificant as far as the size of its congregation was concerned. There were about one hundred and twenty Catholics in 1970, eighty in 1985 and a mere forty-two in 1993. The future of Ngome would have looked bleak indeed had it not been for another development which all of a sudden focused the attention of many Catholics in Zululand, and far beyond its borders, on the little outstation, hidden away in the Ngome Forest.

The change came in 1981, shortly after the death of Sr. Reinolda May who had worked at Nongoma from 1938 to 1980 and who allegedly had had apparitions of Our Lady during that time.

Sr. Reinolda May was born on October 21, 1901, at Pfahlheim, a small village in the Diocese of Rottenburg in the south-western part of Germany. The following day, she was baptized and given the name Francisca. Her father had a small-holding and was the village cooper. He and his wife had ten children, two of whom died as infants (Two additional children had been brought into the marriage by the mother). Francisca was the youngest. After graduating from the local elementary school, she went to a girls' boarding school in Hochaltingen where Franciscan sisters taught domestic science.

The village of Pfahlheim had a very active priest at that time. He made every effort to get his parishioners actively involved in one or another of the many Catholic sodalities. Young and old, men and women, the married and unmarried were thus constantly encouraged to practise their faith and to fulfil their duties to the Church conscientiously. Each group had a special Sunday set aside when its members would go together up to the altar to receive holy communion. The Eucharistic devotion (especially in the form of the exposition of the Blessed Sacrament) and the devotion to Our Lady formed the most visible aspect of Catholic practice in the village. In particular, the devotion to Our Lady produced a whole range of colourful customs. The annual feast of the patron saint of each sodality was remembered with great solemnity. Participation in Holy Mass was invariably the highlight of the day. It is not surprising that such an environment produced a good number of religious vocations. Although there were only about one thousand Catholics in the village of Pfahlheim at the beginning of the 20th century, about three dozen girls entered the convent while Fr. Eugene Adis was the parish priest from 1910 to 1938 (cf. "Steine reden - Menschen handeln" - 100 Jahre Katholische Pfarrkirche St. Nikolaus Pfahlheim, Ellwangen 1992, pg. 81 ff.). One of them was Francisca May.

Because Francisca showed a keen interest in the missions, Fr. Adis advised her to join the Missionary Benedictine Sisters of Tutzing. Her first attempt failed. She was told that she was not healthy enough to go to the missions. The verdict seems to have been caused by a heart condition, although it could not have been all that serious in view of the fact that she was able to work hard all her life and that she died at the very respectable age of eighty as a result of an illness that was unrelated to her heart condition. On being refused admission to the Missionary Benedictine Sisters of Tutzing, Francisca was forced to return to Pfahlheim. People remember that she was then frequently seen during the day praying in the parish church. This must have struck the villagers as somewhat unusual. Otherwise they would not have taken any notice. Francisca's father was not at all sad about this turn of events. He liked the idea of his youngest daughter remaining at home. But Francisca's thoughts were firmly fixed on becoming a missionary. She travelled once more to Tutzing and this time she was accepted.

On March 1, 1922, she entered the convent of the Missionary Benedictines Sisters at Tutzing. Her religious profession took place on February 10, 1925. A few months later, she received the mission cross and left for South Africa on June 21, 1925. There she pronounced her final vows on February 12, 1928. For the first ten years she worked as a seamstress at the Emoyeni Mission, at Mbongolwane and for a while at Inkamana. Learning Zulu with great determination and an equal amount of enthusiasm, she used every opportunity to visit the homes of the Zulus in the area on horse-back or on foot.

After Rome allowed the Benedictine Sisters of Tutzing to assist women at childbirth, Sr. Reinolda became the first sister in Zululand to take a course in midwifery. In May 1938 she was awarded a

diploma as midwife from a government hospital in Pietermaritzburg. When the Benedictine Mission Hospital at Nongoma opened in June 1938, Sr. Reinolda was put in charge of the maternity section. It was a difficult beginning. The hospital had only the most basic facilities. Many Zulus were sceptical and did not want their wives to be admitted to a hospital for delivery. To crown it all, the district surgeon was opposed to the new hospital, fearing that he would lose patients. Sr. Reinolda had to suffer much under these conditions, but showed great mental and spiritual strength, never giving in to discouragement or despair. As always, she drew strength from prayer. In moments of crisis, she would spend long hours in prayer, very often at night.

Sr. Reinolda was a very determined person. Once she had set her mind on a task or was given an assignment, she would use all her energy to make the best of it. When she was asked to enrol in a midwifery course, she seemed an unlikely candidate for such a challenge. She had not had any secondary education, was already in her mid-thirties, had only worked in the sewing room and her knowledge of English was rather scant. But she worked hard and achieved very good results. She was a very self-disciplined and level-headed person, who did not panic in moments of crisis, but always remained calm and composed. People who knew her well frequently remarked that she had "both feet firmly on the ground." She was not a passive person who would simply wait for orders and react to events, as could be expected from a woman who had been formed by the constraints of religious life. On the contrary, she was quite capable of taking the initiative. She displayed a remarkable facility for dealing with problems and proved inventive in finding solutions. Her creativity and imaginative capability may well have been important factors in the development of her spiritual life, particularly in shaping her style of prayer. (Cf. statement by Sr. Maria Froning, 05-03-92; Ngome File)

Sr. Reinolda remained the head of the maternity section at the Benedictine Hospital for thirty-eight years, until June 1976, when the government took over the hospital. Some 28 000 births were registered during this time. Her professional competence and her enormous knowledge of nursing matters gained her the respect and admiration of all the doctors who worked with her. More than once they remarked that it was re-assuring to have her around when critical situations developed in the delivery room. Sr. Reinolda was at the same time a very humble person who never put the spotlight on her own achievements.

Over the years, Sr. Reinolda became one of the best-known Catholic missionaries in the area. The Zulus, who often give a person a name which exposes his peculiar mannerism or emphasizes a prominent physical feature, called her "mashiyane" because of her bushy eyebrows. It was not only her reputation as midwife which made her popular in the whole district of Nongoma but also her genuine interest in the welfare of the people. She was mild-mannered, gentle, friendly and compassionate especially with people in our society who are so easily overlooked: the children, the handicapped, the sick and those who are treated harshly in life. All this made it easy for people to approach her and to open their hearts to her. For numerous patients who came to the Benedictine Hospital, Sister "Mashiyane" was not only a competent nurse but, equally importantly, an understanding and caring mother. She remembered people's names even years after they had been patients in hospital and would often enquire after their well-being and help where help was needed.

There was an unusual missionary zeal in Sr. Reinolda. She felt urged to visit the Zulus in their homes, to look up the old and sick who could not come to church, to instruct catechumens and to prepare children and adults before they received a sacrament. She did the rounds on foot or on horse-back,

often accompanying the priests on their journeys to an outstation. She was instrumental in many people finding their way to the Church and was above all concerned about lax Catholics who had drifted away from the Church. Without putting pressure on anyone to be baptized, she never hesitated to talk to a person about matters of faith when she felt that that person was ready for it. Being a nurse and a missionary at the same time it is understandable that on her own initiative she performed many an emergency baptism, especially on new born children, if she thought that the patients were going to die. It must be said, though, that this did cause occasional problems when children survived and did not grow up in a Christian home. She herself did, however, always endeavour to follow up such cases and to try to get the parents involved to make sure that children who had been baptized as infants had a chance of learning more about the Christian faith.

To put herself completely at the service of others was the way she understood her missionary calling. Nothing was too much for her when helping those in need. When she distributed food and clothes, she always showed a genuine interest in the plight of each person who came begging. She often spent long hours at the bed-side of patients who were seriously ill. It is noteworthy that, in all the fifty-five years she had worked in Zululand, she never once travelled overseas on long leave and she hardly ever took a few days' rest from her work. To be a missionary was a deep-rooted commitment to her, a commitment that did not allow for any compromise.

In June 1976, at the age of seventy-four, Sr. Reinolda retired from her position as matron of the maternity section. She moved to the St. Alban's Convent, about one kilometre away from the hospital. Even then she walked over to the hospital every day to visit the sick and to be with the terminally-ill and dying. She had a unique gift to comfort those at the threshold of death and to prepare them for their last journey. Through her initiative, many were reconciled with the Church or received the sacrament of baptism before they died. In June 1980, it became obvious that she herself was a dying person. She was diagnosed as suffering from cancer of the colon. In August 1980, she was transferred to the infirmary of the convent at Inkamana. It was hard for Sr. Reinolda, who had been a very active person all her life to resign herself to the fact that she could no longer get up and do her daily rounds. It caused her a great amount of mental pain which she seemed to feel more intensely than the physical pain. She died on April 1, 1981. An unusually great number of mourners attended the Requiem Mass and the funeral service which was held at Inkamana on April 6. Among the mourners was a representative of the Zulu King Goodwill Zwelethini (Zulu custom forbids the king to be present at a funeral service). His presence gave credit to the friendly ties which Sr. Reinolda had cherished with many members of the royal family. With the death of Sr. Reinolda the Catholic Church of Zululand lost a well-loved and dedicated missionary sister.

Soon after her death, it became widely known that Sr. Reinolda had allegedly experienced visions of Our Lady. Based on her own notes and on the relevant documents in the Diocesan Archives, the following picture emerged:

#### 1. History of the alleged apparitions

Sr. Reinolda experienced the first unusual appearance on December 8, 1954, at the end of the exposition of the Blessed Sacrament. "I saw two figures at the table where everything had already been prepared for Mass. At the end of the table was a woman, dressed in white 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, holding something like an offering. Then something ascended towards heaven like incense. The figures disappeared as the priest took off his vestments. I could not see any meaning behind it all, but I also could not forget what I had seen. Not long afterwards, during holy communion, it became clear to me, as though somebody had told me: it is a veiled monstrosity."

Eight months after this inexplicable occurrence, Sr. Reinolda experienced something like a vision of Our Lady. More were to follow. She herself refers to the alleged visions as 'encounters'. The first such encounter between Sr. Reinolda and Our Lady took place during Mass in the sisters' chapel at Nongoma on August 22, 1955. It happened immediately after Sr. Reinolda had received holy communion. Our Lady revealed herself to Sr. Reinolda as "the Tabernacle of the Most High" and expressed the wish to be venerated under this title, emphasizing that more people should become tabernacles of the Most High. Sister was ordered to tell her priest and others about it.

The second (on October 20, 1955) and third (October 22, 1955) encounters had a similar message for Sr. Reinolda, but, in addition to it, Our Lady allegedly urged Sr. Reinolda to tell everybody about it.

At the fourth encounter (March 15, 1956), Our Lady pointing in a north-westerly direction (Ngome is situated north-west of Nongoma) allegedly asked Sr. Reinolda that "a sanctuary be built at a place where seven springs well up and meet." Graces would flow from that place and a great number of people would be converted and return to God.

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

On December 8, 1957, after she had visited a sick person at Ngome, Sr. Reinolda gained certainty that Ngome was the place where the requested sanctuary should be built. After consulting Fr. Ignatius Jutz, the parish priest of Nongoma, a number of wells were found in the forest below the Ngome School.

The eighth encounter between Sr. Reinolda and Our Lady took place on April 17, 1958. Sister then began to feel the need for a picture of "Our Lady, the Tabernacle of the Most High". With the consent of Bishop Aurelian Bilgeri of Eshowe and the support of Archabbot Suso Brechter of St. Ottilien, a Munich artist, Joseph Aman, painted the picture according to the instructions given to him by Sr. Reinolda. The painting was taken to Ngome on May 1, 1963.

Urged by Fr. Ignatius Jutz, Bishop Aurelian Bilgeri allowed Bro. Jacob Riedmann to build a tiny chapel at Ngome. Fr. Ignatius Jutz blessed the chapel on Pentecost Sunday, May 29, 1966. The picture of "Our Lady the Tabernacle of the Most High", which had been put up in the church at Nongoma first and then in the Ngome School, now found a permanent place in the little chapel.

The first pilgrimage to Ngome took place on March 15, 1966. The people who participated were mostly from Nongoma. Afterwards Bishop Bilgeri did not allow any more pilgrimages to Ngome.

Sr. Reinolda wrote about her ninth encounter with Our Lady in her journal: "It was at night on March 28, 1970. During the previous night I had a terrible apparition of the devil. It was all light when I was woken up. Who was at my side? It was Mary, the Tabernacle of the Most High. She took me in her

arms and comforted me saying: 'I know how you suffer. I am at your side.' Before she disappeared she said to me: 'Look over to the other side.' There was (the Archangel) Michael wearing a breast-plate and carrying a lance in his hands. At his right side was a cherubim dressed all in white with hands folded over his chest. After one or two minutes they disappeared and the bright light was gone, too. It was a great consolation for me."

The tenth and final encounter allegedly happened on Sunday, May 2, 1971, at the little chapel at Ngome. After Mass, she went back to pray with a few women in front of the picture of Our Lady, the Tabernacle of the Most High. "Suddenly I realized that the picture was alive. She moved a bit forward and her face was unbelievably beautiful. I was so excited that I shouted: 'Look at Mary!' I was convinced that the women, too, had seen Mary. I was so overwhelmed that I left without saying anything."

## 2. The Reaction of Bishop Bilgeri

Sr. Reinolda May talked about her experience with the priests of Nongoma, who were at first rather reluctant to see these visions as anything other than the intense emotional experience of a deeply religious person. She dismissed such arguments by saying: "The experience I had was a real experience. Nobody can talk me out of this" (letter of Fr. Norbert Röhm OSB to Bishop Bilgeri, 24-10-56). When she related the whole incident to Bishop Bilgeri, he adopted a similar attitude. He wrote to her: "As far as your personal experience is concerned I have thought a lot about it, but I cannot give you any other answer than the answer I have given you earlier. If the whole thing is genuine then Our Lady will assure its success. Keep your great love in your heart and keep your secret then you will gain great spiritual benefit through it. By submitting the matter to your spiritual director and to me you have done what you needed to do. Everything else you can leave in Mary's hands." (Letter of Bishop Aurelian Bilgeri to Sr. Reinolda, 14-11-56).

Sr. Reinolda kept on asking the bishop to believe in her alleged encounters with Our Lady and to do give permission "to tell all the world" about the message she had received (cf. letter of Sr. Reinolda to Bishop Bilgeri, 13-06-65). Although the bishop remained cautious and did not want the "Ngome Affair" to become public, he did allow a picture of Our Lady to be painted in 1962 and a small chapel to be built in 1966. But Sr. Reinolda wanted him to do more. She was thinking of building a proper church where the Blessed Sacrament would be perpetually exposed. "What would be a greater blessing for us and for our people...?" she told the bishop (letter of Sr. Reinolda do Bishop Bilgeri, 22-01-67). The bishop was not ready to make any further concessions. He remained firm on this until he died in 1973.

The Ngome Affair gained more and more publicity after Bishop Bilgeri's death. There were still few lay people in the Diocese of Eshowe who knew about Ngome. But the issue was relatively freely discussed by priests and religious in the diocese. Quite a few priests were inclined to see the Ngome Affair in a much more positive light than was the case with Bishop Bilgeri. Priests, sisters and lay people, too, began to travel to Ngome to pray at the chapel of Our Lady. Some of them fetched water from the springs in the forest below the chapel because they believed it had some curative power. At a Priests' Council meeting on March 7, 1976, it was decided to establish a commission which was to investigate the Ngome Affair. The commission, consisting of Fr. Michael Mayer O.S.B. and Fr.

Richard Multerer O.S.B., published their findings on May 10, 1976. They reached the following conclusion:

"It is the opinion of this commission that there are some facts which speak in favour of the Ngome story, for example the personality of the seer and the fact that the message is theologically sound. Not only do these facts not allow us to suppress the whole affair but they carry a special appeal. We should make use of this appeal. We think that Ngome could, without too great a risk, be developed into a spiritual centre which could influence and shape people's devotion to the Holy Eucharist and their devotion to Our Lady. A first step towards this goal would be to allow the veneration of Our Lady the Tabernacle of the Most High and to permit pilgrimages to that place. This would not necessarily mean that the visions, miracles etc. receive the official approval of the Church. It is important to stress only the essential and good things about Ngome. Sr. Reinolda should be told to remain in the background and the business with the Ngome water which allegedly works miracles should be left out altogether."

When the members of the Priests' Council met again on May 12, 1976, they discussed the findings of the commission, but were not prepared to endorse its suggestions. They felt that a more comprehensive investigation into the Ngome Affair was necessary before any recommendations could be issued. [Bishop Mansuet Biyase](#) was of the same opinion and therefore did not allow any pre-arranged group pilgrimages to be undertaken to Ngome (cf. chronicle of the Diocese of Eshowe, 1981, pg. 39; Minutes of the Priests' Council, 12-05-76).

The death of Sr. Reinolda May on April 1, 1981, brought the whole Ngome Affair once more into the spotlight. Mrs. Rose-Marie Foxon, a member of the Immaculate Conception Parish, Mtunzini (Zululand), took the initiative and published a report on the alleged visions of Sr. Reinolda, mentioning that further details could be obtained from the parish priest of [Twasana](#) (Zululand). The letter was sent to the Vatican as well as to the bishops and to many parishes in South Africa. The Ngome story had now become known far beyond the Diocese of Eshowe. It prompted Bishop Mansuet Biyase of Eshowe to publish the following statement on August 11, 1981:

"I am writing here on the above subject (the alleged apparitions of Mary to Sister Reinolda May at Nongoma) to clarify the confusion caused by a circular that has been distributed in the Diocese of Eshowe. In fact this circular has also been sent to some places in the country as well as abroad. The gist of it all is the report on the alleged apparitions of Our Lady to a certain Sister Reinolda May O.S.B., who is now dead. The first apparition is said to have taken place on the 22nd of August 1955 at Nongoma Benedictine Hospital, and the last one, the 10th,...on the 2nd of May 1971.

Now, with regard to stories of this nature, the Church usually adopts a policy of 'watch, wait and see' until there is proof beyond doubt. The Church does this because, in her long history and experience, a multiplicity of such stories has been told, and in many cases when proper investigations were made, they have proved to be made-up stories. Though I am not implying that this particular one is a made-up story, it belongs to the category of so-called apparition stories. And therefore we must be careful in the way we treat it.

Because there is no clarity about its evidence, my predecessor, Bishop Aurelian Bilgeri O.S.B., did not allow this story to be published. Even the so-called miracles that were said to be connected with these

apparitions could not reasonably be accepted as such. As a consequence, this story could not be handed out to Catholic Church circles as being true and proved.

Yes, it has happened that these circulars have been written and circulated, but may I make it clear that this has been an irregularity. According to the law of the Church, such a step on such a matter cannot be taken without the approval and consent of the local bishop or ordinary. In this our particular case, believe me when I tell you that, I was not told beforehand, neither was a copy sent to me. The first copy that landed in my hands, was sent to me by a bishop from another diocese, who was already making enquiries from me about these alleged apparitions. Soon after this one, a number of other similar enquiries poured into my office from this country as well as from overseas. They did this, because they all know that the right source and channel of such news is the local bishop. I have to tell them that this is one of the stories difficult to accept.

In view of my predecessor's policy with regard to these alleged apparitions, and since even I myself have not found any clear proofs in support of this story, I hereby, in virtue of my duties as the bishop and ordinary of the Church in the Diocese of Eshowe, formally forbid anybody to publicize this as a true story. Neither do I allow any mass public pilgrimages to be organized to Ngome near Nongoma."

The bishop's statement made it very clear that no "mass public pilgrimages" to Ngome were allowed. However, privately people travelled to Ngome as before. There was even a marked increase in the number of people who went to see the place after all the publicity which Ngome had received. In 1982, Mrs. Rose-Marie Foxon published the following letter in THE SOUTHERN CROSS:

"The first of April was one year since the death of Sr Reinolda May, the German Benedictine missionary to whom it is alleged the Blessed Virgin appeared ten times.

"Sister Reinolda nursed at the Benedictine Hospital in Nongoma, KwaZulu, for many years and was greatly loved by those who knew her.

"She said our Lady asked her to reveal her message to the world, but that when she tried to tell people she found that no-one believed her.

"Then Mary asked that a shrine be built at a place where seven springs meet. This place was found by Father Ignatius Jutz at the end of 1957, and a shrine was built.

"Archabbot Suso Brechter of St Ottilien ordered a picture painted according to the description Sr Reinolda gave of the apparition. The painting was brought from Munich to the shrine in 1963 and placed above the altar.

"The good sister died at Inkamana on April 1, 1981, and was buried there.

"Those who visit the shrine, at remote Ngome in KwaZulu, should not be disappointed to find a humble, dusty building in the midst of the poverty of our Lady's children." (THE SOUTHERN CROSS, 11-04-82).

Adding to this letter, the editor of THE SOUTHERN CROSS gave further details about Ngome:

"According to the report, Sr. Reinolda said that she saw the Blessed Virgin standing 'upon the globe, robed in shining white...on her breast rested a big Host surrounded by radiant light.'

"Sister reportedly said the Blessed Virgin had asked to be invoked as the 'tabernacle of the Most High', adding: 'you are also such a tabernacle.'

"Sister Reinolda reportedly said that on other occasions the Blessed Virgin had warned of 'terrifying things' if people did not turn to God." Editor.

In 1984, Bishop Mansuet Biyase gave permission for a bigger chapel to be built at Ngome. Fr. Albert Herold who was parish priest of Nongoma started a building fund. Donors from overseas contributed the bulk of the money due to the efforts of Fr. Albert Herold, Fr. Justus Gämperli and Fr. Meinrad Gerstl. Fr. Conrad Heckelsmüller of St. Ottilien (Germany) drew up the plan and Lawton Construction of Durban was given the contract. The church, built in an hexagonal shape, is situated on a solid rock overlooking the Ngome Forest, about fifty metres away from the tiny chapel erected in 1966. Bishop Biyase blessed the church on August 31, 1985. The painting showing our Lady as the Tabernacle of the Most High was taken from the little chapel and put up on the wall behind the altar in the new church which is named after the Blessed Virgin Mary without the addition of a particular title (cf. letter of Fr. Michael, 24-05-88).

Gradually the number of people making a pilgrimage to Ngome increased. Pilgrims came by private car and on bus tours to Ngome. On September 8, 1988, an article appeared in the DAILY NEWS, headlined "Shrine set to become another Lourdes:

"The age of miracles has not passed, says Mrs Cullis of Durban, who has organized a number of pilgrimages to a remote shrine in Zululand which she believes may become 'another Lourdes', the famous place of healings in France.

The shrine is at Ngome - near Nongoma - at a spot where Mary, the mother of Jesus Christ, is said to have appeared to a German Benedictine nun in 1971.

A number of pilgrims who have visited the site have claimed miraculous cures, says Mrs Cullis, a well-known Catholic who has also organized tours to Lourdes and Fatima (Portugal), where the Blessed Virgin Mary is said to have made similar appearances.

Mrs Cullis said that she was keeping a record of claimed healings at Ngome and would present the information to the Catholic Church in due course for investigation...

Mrs Cullis, telling the story of Ngome said: "Mary appeared on ten occasions between 1955 and 1971 to Sister Reinolda May, who worked at the Benedictine Hospital at Nongoma as a midwife. The appearances took place at the hospital except for the last one at Ngome.

"Sister Reinolda said that on the first occasion she had just received Holy Communion when Mary appeared before her bathed in a beautiful light, more radiant than the sun. She was robed in white, with a flowing veil. On her breast rested a big Host (Communion bread) surrounded by light...

Mrs Cullis said: "Sister Reinolda's priest believed her story because she was such a practical, down-to-earth nursing sister. She didn't have hallucinations..."

Mrs Cullis, who is...also a traveling agent specializing in pilgrimages, said she had arranged a number of non-profit pilgrimages to Ngome..." (THE DAILY NEWS, 08-09-88).

In 1988, Fr. Michael Mayer invited "priests (of the Diocese of Eshowe) who support the Ngome Pilgrimage" to come together and "reflect on the rôle it could play in the life of the Church in our diocese". The meeting was held at [Mahlabatini](#) on June 6, 1988. As a result, a Ngome Shrine Committee was established under the chairmanship of Fr. Michael Mayer. However, some of the priests remained sceptical. They were concerned that the increased publicity accorded to Ngome might confuse people.

The Ngome Affair came once more under scrutiny at a deanery meeting which was held at Inkamana on August 22, 1988. Bishop Mansuet Biyase was present at that meeting. When he was asked about "the official attitude of the Church" with regard to Ngome, he said: "When I blessed the new church at Ngome, I made it very clear that the building must not be considered as a Shrine of Our Lady, but simply as a church catering for the needs of the people at that particular outstation. However, I find it difficult to suppress the Ngome Affair altogether. The past years have shown that the idea of Ngome does not die. I cannot prevent anyone from going to Ngome. Pilgrimages have been organized right under my nose without my knowledge...I waver in the whole issue. I feel that if there is any truth in it, Our Lady should come out with it. I am aware that the responsibility rests with me. Even if it had not been suggested by this meeting, I would have decided anyway to hand the whole thing over to the apostolic delegate" (minutes of the deanery of Inkamana, 22-08-88).

The bishop's statement at the deanery meeting on August 22, 1988, was followed by a lively discussion about Ngome. Concern was expressed about the fact that pilgrimages to Ngome were organized on a commercial basis, and this in spite of the fact that the only official statement by Bishop Mansuet Biyase of August 11, 1981, expressly forbade pilgrimages of that nature. It was also pointed out that a declaration allegedly made by Our Lady during one of her "encounters" with Sr. Reinolda contained a theological error. According to Sr. Reinolda, Mary had said (at the encounter on April 17, 1958): "Hurry, the hour is fast approaching. I am forced to keep back the streams of graces because you do not make any effort to help me. I desire you, the chosen ones, to help me." Referring to this it was said that, in theological terms, Mary is not the person who can withhold divine grace. At the same deanery meeting it was stated that "even the assurance that the bishop was fully in the picture does not dispel a certain uneasiness about the activities of the Ngome Shrine Committee" (cf. minutes of the Inkamana deanery, 22-08-88).

Shortly after the deanery meeting at Inkamana, the members of the Diocesan Priests' Council dealt once more with the issue. It was suggested that the whole Ngome Affair be thoroughly researched and documented. Bishop Mansuet Biyase agreed and asked Fr. Michael Mayer to make sure that everything connected with the Ngome story would be published in due course. Fr. Michael agreed to do this (cf. minutes of the Priests' Council, 19-09-88).

Early in 1989, the Ngome Committee compiled a small booklet about Ngome and distributed it among the priests and religious in the Diocese of Eshowe early in 1989. A Zulu version of the booklet came

out in 1990. Ngome prayer-cards and postcards of "Our Lady, the Tabernacle of the Most High" were published in English and Zulu in 1989. The postcards were sold for 20c each and the prayer-cards for 5c.

During 1989, Bishop Manuset Biyase and Fr. Michael Mayer met with Fr. Paul B. Decock O.M.I., the chairperson of the TAC (Theological Advisory Commission of the South African Catholic Bishops' Conference), to discuss the Ngome Affair. At their request, Fr. Paul B. Decock compiled the following statement about Ngome:

"There is nothing objectionable in this (the promotion of the sanctuary at Ngome and the veneration of Our Lady under the name of Tabernacle of the Most High). One does not need divine sanction to start a sanctuary and venerate Our Lady. Pilgrimages could be allowed even if we are not sure of the 'authenticity' of the visions...The content of the visions is doctrinally acceptable. These views can be put forward in sermons and leaflets...Holiness and the mental sanity of the person (who allegedly had visions) are no proof that the visions are genuine. The only objective criterion would be a miracle, which is seldom ascertainable...At this stage the visions cannot yet be declared worthy of credibility." (Cf. Paul B. Decock, The Ngome Visions, 07-05-90; Ngome File).

On November 13, 1990, Fr. Michael Mayer 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 at Ngome will be an opportunity to work and pray for peace in our country...The story of Ngome began thirty-five years ago. Many believe that the Marian shrine at Ngome is the work of Our Lady." This was followed by several similar letters, announcing various activities and events taking place at Ngome. (Cf. circular letters of 22-08-92; 01-09-92; 02-02-93; 25-04-93).

In the meanwhile, the significance of Ngome as a shrine of Our Lady and a special place of prayer in the Diocese of Eshowe was further underlined by decisions and steps taken by the bishop. In December 1991, he incorporated Ngome into the sacred Heart Parish of Inkamana. Fr. Michael Mayer, the parish priest of Inkamana, now acted as the custodian of the shrine. More and more pilgrims, especially those from the Johannesburg area, would come to Inkamana first, stay overnight at the monastery guest-house and then proceed to Ngome. Fr. Michael would take care of these guests and, whenever possible, would celebrate Mass for them at the shrine.

A very important day in the annals of Ngome was Saturday, October 3, 1992, when Bishop Manuset Biyase blessed the open-air altar. It was built on a platform attached to the southern front of the church. The bishop celebrated Holy Mass with several hundred pilgrims who had come from the Diocese of Eshowe and from farther away. He used this opportunity to declare the Marian Shrine at Ngome a place of prayer. Ngome had thus become, to all intents and purposes, a sanctuary of Our Lady which has the approval of the Church. It meant that pilgrimages to Ngome were no longer merely condoned but could now be actively promoted. Fr. Michael rightly calls this a historic day, saying: "Our Lady and Mother, the Tabernacle of the Most High, has worked wonders. We thank her. We ask her to show many people the way which leads to her at Ngome...to make her shrine known in our beloved country" (cf. Fr. Michael's circular letter, 22-08-92).

Many of those who visited the Ngome shrine also walked down to the Ngome forest, the place of the springs, mentioned by Sr. Reinolda in the documents about her alleged encounters with Our Lady. The

springs form a small pool in the thick forest, about two hundred metres below the Ngome Chapel. In 1989, a pathway was laid out with steps leading down to the pool. A large wooden cross and benches were put up on the edge of the water. All this made the place more attractive and easier for people to reach. It has also given additional significance to an aspect of the Ngome story which had not received all that much attention before.

This newly acquired status of Ngome allowed Fr. Michael to organize pilgrimages on a bigger scale. On February 2, 1993, he sent out another circular letter explaining: "In our Diocese, the Marian Shrine at Ngome has become a gathering place of pilgrims for the glory of Our Saviour in the celebration of the holy eucharist...In the name of the Bishop, I am inviting you to a eucharistic celebration of our Diocese at Ngome. It is desirable that each parish be represented." The first major diocesan pilgrimage to Ngome took place on Saturday, March 27, 1993. In his invitation to the priests of the diocese, Fr. Michael said: "I am asking you to inform your parishes of the diocesan pilgrimage in March...You may not be in favour of pilgrimages to Ngome. Your parishioners, however, may like to go to Ngome. It has been declared a place of prayer. It is going to become a religious centre. Recently, the bishop of a neighbouring diocese celebrated holy Mass there." (Cf. Fr. Michael's circular letter, 04-02-93).

A few months later, on Monday, May 31, 1993, another diocesan pilgrimage was held at Ngome. "I have been asked to invite the diocese," explained Fr. Michael (Fr. Michael's circular letter, 25-04-93). "Father Bishop has promised to celebrate holy eucharist again together with representatives of the parishes in our diocese. Years ago, people began to go to Ngome especially on May 31, the Feast of the Visitation of Our Lady, a public holiday." Again, several hundred people followed up this invitation and travelled to Ngome on May 31.

Bishop Mansuet Biyase of Eshowe took part in three major pilgrimages to Ngome in 1993. Each time between three hundred and five hundred people gathered around the shrine. Bishop Hubert Bucher of Bethlehem (South Africa), South Africa's national delegate to the Eucharistic Congress in Seville 1993, was the main celebrant at a "Eucharistic Pilgrimage to Ngome" on Saturday, October 30, 1993. A Mass of thanksgiving was held at Ngome on May 31, 1994, after the first free general election had been conducted peacefully in the country. The vicar general of the Diocese of Eshowe, Fr. Johannes Kubheka, was the main celebrant at that Mass. Earlier in the year (1994), pictures of the fourteen Stations of the Cross, cast in brass, were put up on massive poles marking the path from the church to the wells in the forest. Bishop Biyase blessed the Stations of the Cross at a pilgrimage on August 14, 1994, the eve of the Feast of the Assumption of Our Lady.

All these events clearly indicate that the Ngome Shrine in honour of Our Lady has become a genuine place of pilgrimage for the Catholics in the Diocese of Eshowe and for many others in South Africa.

#### Custodians of the Shrine at Ngome

1. Fr. Albert Herold OSB Aug. 1985 - Jan. 1988
  2. Fr. Joseph Rosa-Gomes Jan. 1988 - Oct. 1991
  3. Fr. Victor Makhetha Oct. 1991 - Dec. 1991
  4. Fr. Michael Mayer OSB Dec. 1991 -
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