

## The Friday Focus

In this new monthly column, OLA Sisters and guest writers take turns in sharing their experiences on different themes over the next 12 months. As October is Mission Month, the first article in the Friday Focus series is by Sr. Rosarii O'Sullivan. Sr. Rosarii recently took some time to reflect on her life as a missionary.



Sr. Rosarii O'Sullivan from Athea, Co. Limerick became a Missionary Sister of Our Lady of Apostles in 1944 and set out on her first 'missionary journey' into Africa as a teacher in 1951. Sr. Rosarii is now retired at Ardfoyle Convent in Cork and from the banks of 'the Lovely Lee' she looks back over the years with boundless energy and joy as she recalls the years among the peoples of northern Nigeria where she spent some 40 years as a missionary. In her own simple and humble way Sr. Rosarii sums up the story of her life in two words 'Deo Gratias' – thank God.



*Sr. Rosarii O'Sullivan*

*"Bliss it was in that dawn to be alive, But to be young (and a missionary) very heaven"* (with apologies to Wordsworth, the parenthesis is mine). That is how I felt on the 21st of November 1951 as I landed with four OLA companions in Lagos, Nigeria where the Sisters of Our Lady of Apostles were the first missionary Sisters in 1873. As if touched by the Pentecost flame that changed fearful fishermen into fearless apostles, young French and Irish girls responded to the urgent invitation of the SMA pioneer priests: *"In Lagos you die, let them come quickly those who want to bring Jesus to souls and souls to Jesus"*.

Some (missionaries) survived a few months, the longest two and a half years in what was then a cluster of fishermen's huts, a paradise for mosquitos and according to a British surgeon, *"the father and mother of all fevers"*. On her first return journey, Sr. Antoine Fuohy from near Abbeyfeale, died at sea in 1907, while Sr. Salese, Ellen Leahy, from Athea, worked in Lagos from 1908 to 1935. Of course the discovery of quinine (used to prevent/treat malaria) and the introduction of Christian Education have brought about far reaching physical and social changes since then.

### **Dancing mosquitos**

Tis well I remember the first night in Lagos, we were met by two OLA Sisters and we edged our way through the throng of bright eyed, dark, friendly faces to a rickety lorry which brought us with our fourteen well packed crates to St. Mary's Broad Street, Lagos. To my joy I met up with my sister Liam (O'Sullivan) that evening. We talked well into the night sharing home news in dim lamp light at 90 degrees while mosquitos hissed and danced around us. Heading 600 miles north for Kaduna, the capital of the north next day where I was to spend the next 30 odd years. Kaduna was even then a mosaic of many of ethnic groups of diverse origin, religion, language and tribal customs, and they somehow managed to live in relative peace and harmony. I set foot in Sacred Heart College, Kaduna, one of the first to train primary teachers. It was run by Sr. Gregory Dillon from Abbeyfeale, a woman of faith, vision and courage. Long before Vatican 2 declared that "schools served not only to form Christian youths but also to raise human dignity and promote human conditions" our Sisters had embarked on programmes of education, especially for women that gave them a new self-awareness and enabled them to express their personal and national hopes and aspiration in their own rich cultures.

The day's routine began at 5.15 a.m. with Morning Prayer, mass, hostel work; breakfast and classes up to 2 p.m. followed by lunch and the evenings were devoted to games, athletics, red cross, girl guides, various societies and library, all part of building up good inter-religious dialogue and interpersonal relations! On Saturdays there was preparation for teaching practice, home science classes and the cleaning of the parish church! The Legion of Mary, Bible study, home visitation, hospital and prison visits were all part of the school curriculum. Life could be tough too, especially for the women who spent long hours farming and harvesting or, with a baby on the back, carrying loads to the market returning home to spend long hours preparing food for the extended family - family life and values were always a priority.



Sr. Rosarii's past students take great delight in greeting her. Image courtesy of the OLA Provincial Archive.

## High praise

I spent the next six years in Queen of Apostles College, Kakuri, and the first girls' secondary school in the north of Nigeria. So that indigenous girls may prepare for secondary education, St. Anne's Primary School was built and we scouted far and wide to fill it! Sr. Philomena Woulfe, also from Athea, was in charge of the project. One morning she found the dormitory empty and the girls trekking happily along the railway line back home. (Education for girls was not well established in those early days.) With some encouragement they returned and years later they were the first educated women and the nucleus of Christian homes. I recall the 6 man team of Her Majesty's Inspectors who pried into our hostels, classrooms, office and games' field for three days, their report was quite favourable and senior Cambridge results matched it. The school's emphasis on the extracurricular activities such as debates and quizzes Christmas plays and operettas, netball matches and sports got high praise.

## Ups and downs

Another major historical event celebrated with great pomp and pageantry was the Queen's visit to Nigeria in 1956. And of course Independence in 1960 was another major historical and unique Celebration. Excitement, joy and happiness, pride and self-confidence filled the air – unforgettable moments. But we had our sorrowful moments too. Soon afterwards Sr. Assumpta Cronin from Cork nearly died of meningitis, a little boarder searching for water was drowned and I got news of my mother's death. All happened together!

As missionaries we are forever on the move to where the need is greatest. And so I was on the road again to Marymount Secondary School in Benin in the Mid-western region of Nigeria where I was to spend the next two years in the education and formation of young women and children: I was soon recalled to OLA Training College, Akwanga, in the north, to give a helping hand in the college which was being upgraded. This coincided with the period of the civil war in Nigeria and we were privileged to share the little we had to the many in need of medication, food and shelter as they were fleeing for safety from perilous roads and situations.



***Sr. Rosarii with Sr. Lucy Guidado of the Sisters of Our Lady of Fatima. Sr. Rosarii was involved in the formation of the indigenous Congregation.***

I was privileged to be part of the formation of The Sisters of Our Lady of Fatima - an indigenous group of Sisters in Jos, from 1975 to '78. Now a thriving Congregation the Sisters involved in education, medical work and a wide range of pastoral work all over northern Nigeria. My journey continued and this time it was down to Shendam Government Girls' Secondary School. It was still in its infancy and of non-denominational multi-ethnic groups. The heat was oppressive, the hostels were disused houses, and the classrooms vacated offices! Students fetched river water and studied by limp light. Things began to take shape and we were greatly assisted by many parents and husbands of past students who had not forgotten our industrious and economical mission methods! Meantime Government took over all mission schools, and Queen of Apostles College became Queen Amina College. I was happy that one of my past pupils was appointed Principal of the college.

I returned to Jos in 1981 where preparations were in full swing for the first National Eucharistic Congress where Papal delegate, hierarchy, clergy and religious plus thousands of laity assembled for three days and nights around the Eucharistic King in adoration, praise and petition in the finest African tradition. A year later we had a similar experience in Kaduna with the visit of Pope John Paul II. It was good to be there, they were great days! And my final teaching post in Nigeria was in the Minor Seminary in Jos with two other OLA Sisters, preparing young men for the priesthood – a great privilege indeed.

Today Nigeria has a well-established and vibrant Church with enthusiastic laity and many vocations to the religious life. So, like Ulysses, *"I'm part of all I've met"*, enriched and energised by these cheerful, friendly people, generous in poverty, patient and hopeful in adversity and always grateful. As I look back over the years all I can say is *"thank God"*.

- *Sr. Rosarii O'Sullivan*