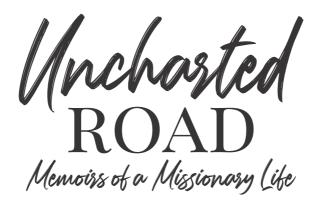
# THE Inchasted ROAD

Memoirs of a Missionary Life

Eithne Mac Devitt, OLA

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Dedication

To all those OLA Sisters who have gone before me.

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Foreword

My Memoirs were written for the Ardfoyle Archives and only later were submitted for printing and publication. They were written just as I remembered the past, and therefore some dates, especially with regard to the Civil War in Nigeria, may be inaccurate and subject to correction.

Thank you.

Sr. Eithne Mac Devitt, OLA

## PART ONE

My Early Memoirs

I was born in Limerick around 2AM on 24th February 1931. My parents, Joe and Agnes, had been praying very fervently for a baby as my mother had already had three miscarriages. And so I was welcomed with great gratitude, joy and love, a love that never failed as long as my parents lived. My father had invoked St. Anne with real confidence and for the rest of his life added five 'Hail Marys' to the trimmings of the Rosary – "in onoir Aine Naomta!"

My brother, Brugha, arrived two years later. We weren't long in Limerick as my father was in Insurance and was subject to transfers and promotion. Fermoy was the next appointment and it was there that the most significant years of my growth and awakening to life were passed. It was in Fermoy that I awakened to beauty and to the reality of mystery beyond what I could see. Of course, I could not articulate this, but my father put it into simple words one summer's evening as he, my brother and I lay on the lawn awaiting our picnic tea. As we looked into the blue sky he explained that God was not only in the church, but up there and here and everywhere in creation, and that we could call on him at any time.

My mother's spirituality was of a different brand: she taught me my prayers and made sure I 'said' them morning and night. She also supplied me with stories of Jesus and children's stories of saints as well as fairy tales. She had been a teacher and taught me to read, write and 'do sums', and so I was a voracious reader at the age of four and books were the only gifts I ever appreciated! Later it remained a mystery to me why my mother hadn't sent me to school until I was well over six years old. I sat in Infants' Class until the teacher discovered that I could already read and write and quickly moved me to my age-group.

Early in the year 1935 my second brother, Rory, was born. Sadly, he died at six months of age. I remember him as a smiling and laughing baby. My mother assuaged my grief by telling me that God had come for him and that he was now a little angel. At night they left for Donegal with the little white coffin for burial. (I had always understood that we were Donegal people, as my parents were both from the same Parish of Kilcar). It must have been a very sad journey for them. On 4th July, 1936, my sister Sile (Sheila) arrived. I remember my father's exuberant joy (and probably relief) that day. My mother who had a very weak heart had been warned after Brugha's birth that further pregnancies would be a risk. Nevertheless, she went ahead, so everyone present that day thanked God for the safe delivery. During my childhood my mother had heart attacks now and again and I remember my unease and anxiety when I would find her in bed and attended by the doctor, while my father hovered outside on the landing. As a child I did not understand, or want to understand, the seriousness of these attacks.

The years in Loreto Junior School were happy ones and I made good friends whom I would invite to my home on the beautiful Blackwater. While in Fermoy my father superintended the assistants and agents in North Cork, Tipperary and Waterford, so when he travelled, I frequently went with him and consequently learned a great deal of Irish history, especially recent history - 1916, the War of Independence and the follow-up. At that time, in the 1930s, my parents were strongly Republican and we children imbibed their ideals - and their prejudices. Later on they mellowed a great deal and we thought for ourselves.

I remember the outbreak of World War II in September, 1939, and pitied the children whose fathers had to go out to fight and perhaps be killed. My brother and I followed the war as best we could at our ages. We all listened to the news almost nightly thanks to Radio Eireann and there was always the newspaper. I could not grasp the Nazi policy at all. Sometime during that autumn, the Pearl Insurance Company and the Irish Assurance Company were amalgamated, and my father was transferred to Cork City. This meant that we uprooted and moved with him. It was a bigger uprooting, a bigger break than I realized at the time, for I left the most important phase of my childhood behind. The years in Fermoy were, I think, the most formative years of my growth as a person. Indeed I had times of distress, anxiety and sadness, but when I think of my childhood in Fermoy, I remember happiness, love and security.

My father's colleagues in Cork found a house immediately available in Barrington's Avenue, just over the wall from Ardfoyle, so we moved there in January, 1940. Schools had not been decided. One dark evening my mother and I were walking down to the Post Office in Ballintemple when I noticed a marble plaque on the big gateway saying, 'Ardfoyle High School'. I pointed it out to my mother who commented, "That sounds Protestant". I tripped across to the other pillar and read, 'African Missionary Sisters'. (I don't think that 'OLA' was included). My mother was a bit uncertain but, after her business in the Post Office, decided to investigate and there and then we went to the convent where my mother 'interviewed' the headmistress (Sr. Scholastica) and asked to see the School, which we did by candlelight. I was embarrassed by the whole

process and reproached my mother afterwards! However, Brugha and I were both enrolled and I was to continue the music lessons I had been having in Loreto. My father agreed that because it was so near it was good to give it a try. What a fateful evening that was!

The music lessons with Sr. Comgall had a big effect on me because as I emerged from the small parlour, an SMA priest was usually having tea after evening Benediction and one priest in particular would always stop me for a chat and happily, for I was very shy, he would do most of the talking, telling me about the missions and the wonderful children there. Then another SMA, Fr. Jackie Collins, in his week as chaplain, used to pass the school yard where we played before classes began. He would join our play and got to know us all. Before he left he would put his hand in his pocket and produce sweets enough for all there. One afternoon, we, five or six of us, met for Confession at the SMA Church. Fr. Jackie brought us into the little SMA museum which made an indelible impression on me. I felt the carved heads and figures from West Africa resonate with me and I never forgot the experience. Around that time, at a post-music lesson visit to the chapel with Sr. Comgall, I found myself praving very earnestly that one day I would be kneeling there, a nun. The Lord must have smiled, for that was what he had planned for me, anyway. I was to change my mind many times but the effect of that prayer remained rooted somewhere deep within my being.

During our second year in Cork, my mother was laid up more often with her heart problem. That summer we did not go to Donegal for the summer holidays as usual, but stayed at home because of my mother's condition. My mother's niece, Nora, was with us, as always, and was a valuable support. I remember the summer as peaceful on the whole and my mother seemed to rally. My father brought us to the seaside now and again, but never far away. In August he bought a bicycle, as petrol was being rationed because of the war and soon cars would be limited to doctors and priests (for sick-calls). I already had a bicycle and so he and I occasionally went for spins to places like Crosshaven which pleased my mother who seemed to be well again.

One day in October we children returned home for lunch and found an ambulance and cars outside the gate. The three of us rushed upstairs to our parents' room and found our mother waiting to be transported to the ambulance. When she saw us she smiled as she always did in times of physical crisis or danger and we watched in shock as she was carried down, my father guiding all the movements. That was a Friday and a special outing had been planned with our next door neighbours, the Ballesty children, for the Saturday. Mrs Ballesty very gently told me that it would be better to postpone it as I might regret it later. I knew she was telling me that my mother was dying but did not really believe it. On Sunday morning my father and I went to a 6 or 6.30 Mass in Holy Trinity Church and then to the Bons Secours Hospital.

That was my last time with my mother. She was smiling all the time and told me to 'be good' and to take care of Sheila. I assured her that I would be and do all these things. She embraced and kissed me for the last time. I turned back at the door and she smiled and raised her hand in farewell. I never saw her again. She died that night at 9 o'clock. It was the 19th of October, 1941.

Our neighbours were very kind to us and persuaded my father to leave us with them instead of bringing us to Kilcar for the funeral. I was all ready to go but said nothing as I didn't want to stress my father who was already grief-stricken. The cousins who were with us at the time went to the funeral. Several cars followed the hearse all the way to Donegal. My father would never forget the kindness of the people of Cork.

We all went to Donegal for Christmas and stayed as usual in Ballymoon, my mother's old home. I remember it as a bleak Christmas, although my aunt, uncle and the big O'Donnell family did their best for us. Some time earlier my father had decided that it would be better for us all if we were close to relatives and our roots (i.e. Donegal), so he had requested a transfer to the north and was told that his position in Letterkenny would be vacant in March, 1942. We returned to Cork after New Year's Day as my father had to finalize affairs in the Cork office. In March we packed, said goodbye to Ardfoyle School, our friends and our lovely neighbours and set off to Donegal. Nat

Ross, the furniture removal company, brought our furniture after us straight to Letterkenny where it was stored temporarily. It had been arranged that we children should stay in Ballymoon until my father found a house in Letterkenny. While there we attended the local National School. The headmaster was easy-going; the assistant, Mrs McCavitt, had been a close friend of my mother all through Secondary School and Training College, St. Mary's, Belfast; the third teacher had been a life-long friend of my father. So we were not among strangers. Besides, many of the pupils were cousins or relatives. While there I made my Confirmation. We remained in Ballymoon for about two months and Dad visited us every weekend. No house became available in Letterkenny so he decided that we should be together and brought us to O'Donnell's Hotel where in the dining room a picture and plaque commemorated the arrest of Wolfe Tone in 1798. (Unfortunately, about 30 years ago the hotel was demolished and replaced by a shopping centre). We were not more than a few weeks there and experienced great kindness from Mr O'Donnell and his sister who was called 'Auntie' by all.

There seemed to be no hope of a house in Letterkenny, so my father took a house in Rathmullan, 15 miles distant. It was war time so, as no cars were allowed to the generality, Dad cycled to and from Letterkenny Monday to Friday. In the evening I cycled out to Rye Bridge to meet him. We attended the local National School but did not take it too seriously even though a cousin of ours, Annie Brown, was one of the teachers. She was very kind and she and her brother, Colm, who had often stayed with us in Cork, brought us by the ferry and train to Derry on several occasions for shopping. We delighted in the closeness of the sea in Rathmullan and at full tide the sea lapped against the yard wall. We had a housekeeper who came every morning and did the cooking, but had limitations as a housekeeper.

In November of that year an apartment became available in Letterkenny and my father rented it for it was as roomy as a four-bedroomed house. We were sorry to leave Rathmullan but I was glad for my father's sake and to have again some semblance of permanence. From then on, we had steady schooling. Sheila and Lattended the Girls' National School run by Loreto nuns and Brugha the Boys' National School run by the Christian Brothers. I was very fortunate in my teachers: Miss Peg O'Donnell in 5th Class and Sr. Teresita in 6th Class. It was in 5th Class that my friendship with Rita Boyle began, a friendship that lasted until Rita's death more than sixty years later. Rita's father had died when she was two or three and an older brother had died in infancy, so she was practically an only child brought up by her mother (nee O'Donnell) and Aunt Rose who had lasting influence on her. My father knew the family when they were young as well as their brother, Dr. (Fr.) Michael O'Donnell whom he had admired greatly during his two years in Maynooth. Rita became practically a member of our family. Dad knew many families in Letterkenny, so we were never considered strangers.

When we had been in Letterkenny some time, my father married again. He had asked me how I would feel about his re-marriage. I thought about it and felt that on the whole it would be a good thing for him, for the family and the household in general. My stepmother was Nora Carr, my mother's niece, who had been with us since I was born and before that too. They were married in Dungloe by my uncle, Fr. Charles, who was stationed in Aranmore Island at the time. He had also married my parents some sixteen or seventeen years earlier in a little Church in Churchill, overlooking Garton Lake. A few weeks later Fr. Charles heard us calling our stepmother 'Nora' as we always had done, so he called us aside and explained that it would be better to start calling her 'Mammy' because she was replacing our mother. He also said that there might be other children coming along, so it wouldn't be right to have half the family calling her 'Nora' and the other half 'Mammy'. We agreed to try. Indeed Nora gave us as much love and care as our mother could have done. And when the second family of three girls and one boy was added to us three, they were our sisters and brother from the beginning. In order of arrival they were: Nuala, Fidelma, Kevin and Crona.

In the National School, Sr. Teresita was a wonderful educationalist. She worked us hard but gave us the incentive and tools to educate ourselves should we have to leave School at the age of fourteen. Some actually had to go into work when the National School programme ended, but no one could call them uneducated. A few of us went on to the Loreto Secondary School and others to the Tech: those of us in Loreto finished five years later. During these years my 'vocation' changed several times: I wanted to be a writer, a war reporter, a foreign correspondent and. occasionally, there surfaced the old desire to be a missionary. It was the last desire that won out in the end. My years in Letterkenny were mostly happy ones, with times of anxiety and worry which, however, did not dim the aura of general happiness. As a family, we were wholly at home there, although the bulk of our relations were in Kilcar and Carrick area. Nevertheless, I felt in a strong way that the hills were my hills. Later I learned that my greatgrandfather and great-great-grandfather had been hedge-masters in Glenswilly, so, in fact, some of my roots were in those hills! My father loved angling, and in the vicinity of Letterkenny there was an abundance of rivers and lakes. My brother shared his enthusiasm and, in the Easter, and summer holidays I sometimes accompanied them, especially when the destination was a lake, my favourites being Lake Garton and Lough Veagh. I have very peaceful memories of drifting up and down the lakes in the moonlight. This was very important to me as the hour of decision was approaching and I needed time to reflect.

In my last year at School, the conviction that God was calling me to religious missionary life had become

fixed. The difficulty was that I couldn't choose between Loreto and OLA! Sr. Teresita, who had followed us all discreetly from National School days onward, became my spiritual director in all but name and carefully avoided influencing my choice in the slightest way. When the Leaving Cert. Exam was over at the end of June, Teresita told me firmly that I would have to decide by the following day which group was God's choice for me, as it would only be fair to my father to let him know that I intended to enter religious life and what I felt was God's plan. I arrived next day with no decision made, but when Teresita asked I found myself saying "Ardfoyle" and, suddenly, I was certain that it was right for me. My director was delighted that the wavering was over and made me promise to tell my father that same night. I did, and as was expected, he was very sad but almost immediately acknowledged that God's will came first. He insisted on telling my stepmother, so it was a sad house that evening and many tears shed.

The holidays were spent as usual with some farewell visits to cousins here and there. My father wanted me to go to Lourdes (even though I was not overenthusiastic) and persuaded Mrs Boyle to let Rita go, too. So we did, and thoroughly enjoyed ourselves including Gavarnie in the Pyrenees in our pilgrimage. Nevertheless, the effects of Lourdes, of Our Lady, helped me during some difficult moments in the Postulancy. The last days at home were painful and I was sorely tempted as I had been periodically during the year. Yet, I was convinced that God was calling me. One the 5th September Daddy, Brugha and I left for Cork. As we were to spend a night in Dublin, we gave a lift to P. J. McGlinchey who was returning to the Columban Seminary in Dalgan. (He died recently in an Island off Seoul in South Korea, a missionary of long-standing). We had dinner that night in the Savoy and unexpectedly met some Letterkenny people there, including Ray McAnally who later starred in theatre and films, and had a major role in the film 'Mission'. I think we retired early as it had been a fairly traumatic day. In the late morning of the next day we left for Cork.

In Cork my father wanted to have a special meal, so he phoned Ardfoyle to say that we would be a bit late and was told to "come straight on now as it was getting late already". So that was that! Sr. Annunciata opened the door for us and Mother Patricia (the then Provincial Superior), Mother Brigid (the novice mistress) and Sr. Scholastica were around and eventually I was taken to the Novitiate to don the Postulants' garb. I don't remember a great deal of detail except that my brother turned his back when I entered the parlour and had to be persuaded to look at the new Eithne! At the door, my father embraced me with extravagant expressions of love and in tears said to Mother Patricia, "Be good to her Reverend Mother, you are getting a gem." They left quickly; I saw tears in Mother Patricia's eyes. My father saw them too, and was somewhat reassured. I still see the green car disappearing at speed down the old avenue.

Next day I met my companions in the Postulancy: Mary Cosgrove and Catherine O'Farrell. We began our Postulancy on the 10th of September as the 8th was Profession Day and the 9th that year was the Silver Jubilee of two Sisters, one of whom was, I think, Sr. Angela. The first weeks were an initiation into what we considered strange customs. We shared three days recollection with the community preceding the feast of Our Lady's Presentation on the 21st November. For us it was a full retreat which we remembered all our lives. It consisted of a talk in the evenings, given by Fr. Gill, an elderly man and, I think, a Vincentian. Two texts struck us particularly: one was Jeremiah 2:2b. I quote Fr. Gill's version: "I remember you for the kindness of your youth and the joy of your espousals, how you went after me in the desert, in a land not sown where no water was." The other was from St. John of the Cross: "At eventide I will examine you in love." These texts provided us with both consolation and challenge. The months passed quickly enough with the usual ups and downs. Many a time I had reason to be embarrassed at the memory of my father's last unconsidered testimony! A gem indeed!! On the 8th March, 1950, we were received into the Congregation and given the names Sr. John Vianney, Sr. John Baptist and Sr. Eunan.

Then our Novitiate began. We joined the novices and were initiated into the 'secrets' of the Novitiate and found that there was nothing that we hadn't guessed already. In September there was a change of novice mistresses: Sr. Brigid was sent on mission again and Sr. Monica was brought back to Ireland to replace her. Monica proved to be a very kind and understanding woman. She could also be very firm and knew how to undermine one's pride without damaging one's selfesteem ... if indeed it existed! In September of the second year Novitiate, Catherine and I, to our great surprise and amusement, were sent to teach in the junior School. I enjoyed the teaching and believed that it was the lovely simplicity of the little first communicants that I taught and loved that saved me from unnecessary strain and tension in the last six months of Novitiate. On the 8th March, 1952, we made our First Profession.

In the following September, we were separated for the first time: John Vianney was sent to Dromantine, John Baptist to UCC and I to Rostrevor to help with the Juniorate which was a new venture. The following year, I was sent to Digby-Stuart Training College in Roehampton, London - now a University. I thoroughly relished my two years there, and enjoyed every aspect of the training. There was a goodly number of student nuns there and most, like me, were boarders. Yet the number of women lav students far outnumbered us. I made very good friends in Digby-Stuart, friendship that lasted until now, sixty-five vears, later. My OLA community was in Eccleston Square, London SW1, and I spent my Christmas and Easter holidays there, and the occasional weekend also. I returned to Ardfovle in the summer.

In 1955, my days in London ended and I came home fully expecting to be mission-bound in the early autumn. In fact, the house superior, Sr. Columcille, said that I should begin my mission trousseau forthwith. Then the Provincial called me and told me that I would replace Sr. Dympna as music teacher and also as teacher in the School, as Dympna had already spent 13 years there and had always longed to go on mission. I recognized the justice of it but was extremely disappointed as at least a decade of music teaching stretched before me! However, I settled down and took over where Dympna had left off. Happily, the choir, which, as always, consisted of novices, had a number of very good voices and I took delight in training them further, a skill that I had learned in Digby-Stuart. We also did some music appreciation. In September, I returned to the School and was given the First Communion class as before, which pleased me. In the afternoon, the music pupils from outside occupied me most days. I must say that I enjoyed the School and choir. I now knew on a different level the Sisters I was working with, namely, Srs. Finbarr and Dorothy, and we had guite a bit of fun in the School. Nevertheless, the call of Africa remained very strong ... I was convinced that God had planned mission for me but only when he willed it.

## PART TWO

My Mennois of Mission

My experience of mission in many of its aspects, my reactions, personal reflection, references to the emergence of Nigeria from colonial dominance to Independence and aftermath

The day I was missioned in August 1956, was probably the most momentous in my life, a day of undiluted joy. For some months beforehand, I had been beset by fears that I was destined to be retained in Ardfoyle for the School, for music lessons and for the choir, as Sr. Dympna Smith who had been music teacher for several years, had recently been sent to Africa on mission. So when my turn came, rather unexpectedly in the end, my joy was so great that it left me reeling. The fact that the usual eight-day holiday at home had to be cut to six days did not touch me! This curtailment was because the usual retreat for the community, receptions, professions, etc., took place at the end of August and early September, and after that came the immediate preparation for mission. However, my six days at home were wonderful and left sweet, nostalgic memories to take with me always.

And so on 19<sup>th</sup> September, Catherine O'Farrell and I boarded the *Inishfallen* and sailed down the Lee on our way to mission in Nigeria. At that time, the boats for England and probably other places, left from the city and passed down the River Lee below Ardfovle. Habitually, when Sisters were travelling and the boat sounded the three hoots that signalled its departure, those in Ardfoyle hurried to the upstairs windows and waved sheets and towels to say a last goodbye. There were fewer trees then and no bushy ones along the glen wall, so the river was clearly visible. In our particular case the novices were permitted to line the lower wall of the glen which was even nearer the river. This was a concession, as my sister Sheila (then Sr. Riona) was among the novices. We responded with modest white handkerchiefs! Some of the parents of the children I had taught in the School, drove along the Marino and as far as the road allowed a view of the boat, the children waving vigorously from the

windows. It was very touching. Soon all known faces were left behind and we sailed past Cobh out to the open sea. We stayed on deck, straining for the last glimpse of Ireland – for some years? forever? We didn't know and were happy in the unknowing. After all we had youth on our side and with 'fire in our hearts and wings on our heels' we were eager to change the earth! We learned quickly enough!

In the morning we arrived in Fishguard, Wales, and took the boat-train for London. There we were met by Sr. Leo (then Mother Leo) and brought to our house in Eccleston Square which I was already familiar with from my years of training as a teacher in Digby-Stuart College, Roehampton. In the course of the following days we got the required injections not then available in Cork and were all set for our flight to Nigeria scheduled for 24<sup>th</sup> September, the feast of Our Lady of Mercy. Sr. Oliver Byrne, returning for the second or third time was to travel with us. When we arrived in London Airport (now Heathrow) we found with dismay that Catherine's booking had not been finally confirmed, so, much to our mutual regret, we had to leave without her at 2.30pm. At that time there was only one airline, B.O.A.C., flying between London and Lagos, and in our case it took 24hours to get there. This was considered quick as the boats took two weeks. By choice I would have preferred to travel by sea, but I was too happy to be going on mission to mind. A group of Sisters was leaving Liverpool by the Elder Dempster shipping-line almost

simultaneously, but we were almost 'experienced missionaries' by the time they arrived!

The journey by air was varied and interesting. Our first stop was Rome. (I think it was Ciampino airport which had been the military airport during the war). As we approached the city, the pilot told us what to look out for. It was night but parts of the city were floodlit. We glimpsed Sr. Peter's, the Capitol, the Colosseum and probably more. It was my first view of Rome and quite thrilling. Little did I think then that vears later I would become very familiar with it. We had a rich dinner in that airport - I remember mounds of ice-cream as dessert! - Which was probably our undoing! We boarded again and landed in Tripoli sometime after midnight. This time we had Turkish coffee at little tables in the sand under palmtees. It was a brilliant star-lit night and I remember thinking, "this is Africa ... I'm on African soil" as I shuffled my feet in the sand to bring the reality of it home to me. My joy was very deep and I was transfixed by the wonder of it. All this is indelibly engraved in my memory.

Our next stop was Kano which we reached at 7.00am or 8.00am. There the plane was welcomed by hornblowing from a ceremonially dressed Hausa on a tall camel. I found it very thrilling but poor Sr. Oliver was indifferent to it as she had reacted to the heavy dinner and the Turkish coffee and had had a miserable flight. We boarded again and found, somewhat to our dismay, that the next stop was Accra in Ghana. I don't think that any route plan had been given beforehand. I remember walking across the tarmac in Accra (clad in black habit, black stockings and black shoes) in the midday sun and finding it hard to breathe. "No air", I thought. Turning to Sr. Oliver I asked, "Is it always as hot as this?" She regarded me almost reproachfully and answered, "Hotter!" There and then I resolved not to mention the heat again for fear of being classified as a 'paper missionary'! And I don't think I ever did. Except perhaps in later years when there were waves of quite unusual heat. Climate change!

We arrived in Lagos about 2.00pm or 3.00pm and were met by Sr. Louis Bertrand whom I already knew rather well as we had worked together in Rostrevor. We were very glad to reach Maryland. Entering the gate today, one who did not remember the Maryland of 1956, could have no conception of what it was like then. Personally, I was spellbound by the beauty of it all. On entering the gate from the road (not then anything like an expressway) one was immediately faced by a broad sweep of mown grass between the convent and chapel on one side and the College building on the other. The lawn was ablaze with colour: there were flower-beds of all shapes, flowering shrubs of hibiscus, alamander, and crowning all were the big flame-of-the-forest (or flamboyant) trees. The convent and chapel walls were covered by fine ivy and on the convent purple, red and white bougainvillea grew as far as the first floor

windows. My first reaction was to ask myself, "Where am I?" It was not what I expected on the missions! I was to learn that one can either beautify or choose a grey austerity.

In Maryland we were warmly welcomed by Sr. Pius and others in the community which, besides Sr. Louis consisted of Sisters Margaret Mary Ryan, Una (Mary Alacoque) Nelly and, I think, Nora (Germanus) Culleton. That night in bed I was mystified by what seemed to me a kind of prolonged chanting and I wondered what it could be. Next morning I found out that it was simply the students praying the rosary and night prayers. No mystery!

On my first day in Nigeria I arrived at Mass in my black habit as there had been no time in Ireland to have white habits made. So after the breakfast, Sr. Louis lent me two of hers pinned up and in with safety pins, as she was taller and bigger than me. I was to inherit Sr. Máire Smyth's dresses in Ibadan, as Máire (Ailbe) was staving at home for further studies. When I seemed fairly respectable, Louis took me to meet the chief in the village, called Mende village, in the forest behind Maryland. The chief spoke English very well and was most gracious and welcoming. Nowadays, the same Mende village has grown into a fair-sized town and there is no 'bush' or forest around. At that time there was no house in sight. Maryland or St. Agnes' Training College was in solitary splendour in the bush! When Sr. Arcade Harding acquired the land

in the 1940s for the location of the growing St. Agnes Training College then in Yaba, she gave it the name 'Maryland'. The Sisters, hearing of the location of the new site, exclaimed "Why go so far into the bush?" If Arcade and the Sisters could see it today and the vast suburban and industrial development adopting the name! Maryland is very far indeed from 'the bush'.

While I was in Lagos I was brought to Sr. Mary's, Broad Street, to Ebute Meta (Mount Carmel) and to Yaba. All have changed their faces now and Mount Carmel no longer exists. The senior Sisters in each place, Sr. Celina and Sr. Malachy, had little bits of advice for the newcomer and I remember them to this day! On the upstairs veranda of the old St. Mary's (the second house on the site of the first which was destroyed by a storm) one had a fine view of the sea and could enjoy the refreshing sea breeze. Not so today – a new house replaces the old, but there is no open veranda and no view except of tall cement office buildings.

The next day, I think, I was taken to Abeokuta where I spent one night. The community included Mother Elie who gave valuable tips about the good things to eat and drink, a daily glass of palm-wine among them! Others in the community were Sisters Jarlath, Dunstan, Donatus, Consolata (the matron who died the following year) and Mary Goretti (Áine Cox) who had been a Novitiate companion. Here I was shown the Sacred Heart Hospital across the narrow road from the convent, all in Itesi, and recalled the story of Fr. Coquard, SMA, and the early Sisters. I was also brought to the Leper Settlement in an area called Lantoro. It was much later that I read of Fr. François, SMA, who had discovered the gathering of lepers among the rocks in Lantoro, visited them and tended to them as best he could, all secretly because of the terrible prejudice of those times. Now, Lantoro is the site of a much bigger Sacred Heart Hospital, including the Leper Settlement, now well established. I found everything fascinating but not strange. In those days there was no mission orientation as such. but we had heard the stories of early times in the Novitiate and from Mission Sisters on leave who were encouraged to share with us novices. As a result of this 'home orientation', I felt wholly at home in Africa.

On my first night in Abeokuta, I was seized by a lively awareness of, as it were, the presence of the Sisters who had lived, suffered and died there. And since then I never stayed in Abeokuta overnight without experiencing that same sense of their presence. In later years, this awareness was with me even in houses they had never lived in. This presence, real or imaginary (and I have a vivid imagination!) was never frightening, but peace-giving and encouraging.

The following day, Sisters Henrietta and Hilary arrived from Ibadan to bring me to what would be my home and mission for the next thirteen years. It was late afternoon when we left Abeokuta and almost

dark when we turned in at the gate of St. Teresa's College (STC), Oke Ado, Ibadan, so my first view of the lovely compound that was St. Teresa's was somewhat blurred. Sr. Imelda was there to welcome me as the other three members of the community were Sisters Henrietta, Hilary and myself. It was temporarily supplemented by Sr. Dorothy O'Brien who arrived a fortnight later to head the new Private Primary School which had opened in the compound in January 1956. Miss Pauline Gilmartin of Manchester had responded to Sr. Kathleen O'Regan's (Fachanan) persuasive recruitment and had arrived in the previous January to help for a time in the new School. Although she at first lived in the downstairs bedroom of the convent, she joined the community only for special occasions. When the Primary School relocated to Odo Ona (Maryway), Pauline remained in St. Teresa's and very successfully taught English to the four streams of Class one in the Secondary School until her retirement in 1969 when she reached her sixties. In February 1957, Sister Ethelbert Coleman joined us. She had been appointed novice mistress of the Novitiate which was to be opened in the first floor of the old convent, also located in the compound. In the meantime, she was part of the community. Sometime in February, Sr. Fiacre (Maura Halligan) joined us but left us again in the June of that year for further studies.

Other memorable members of staff were Cecilia Atiogbe, Eunice Iyasele and Marcellina Titcombe.

Cecilia and Marcie were past pupils of the early St. Teresa's which began in Lagos in 1913 and students of St. Agnes' Training College, then a highly recommended College. Eunice left after maybe two years, but Cecilia taught in St. Teresa's for forty years and, until her death in February 2012, was remembered with affection and gratitude by all her pupils and by the OLAs to whom she was always a good and faithful friend. I had the privilege of spending time with her when she was dying. Her huge funeral was a testimony to the regard in which she was held.

I think that the day of my arrival in STC must have been a Friday and about 27<sup>th</sup> September as the weekend was free for me to unpack and settle down. I know that on my first Monday I was in class. As said above, there had been no explicit orientation, no learning of the local language or culture. One was just sent and one managed. For my own part and thanks to the discreet and unpretentious preparation in the Novitiate, I felt at home from the beginning. I had no culture shock whatsoever. I had no difficulty in relating with the girls or in teaching them. What I did find puzzling was distinguishing between them, as at the beginning some of them seemed very alike. This problem passed quickly enough and soon I was able to recognise an individual at the other side of the compound by the shape of her head and her walk!

Up until the seventies when the Schools were taken from us, there was a close relationship between the Sisters and the girls; we knew the background and parents of each girl; they came to us in their needs and shared their troubles with us. I found this close relationship warm and comfortable. That gradually changed with the take-over of Schools when control of the intake was taken by the Government. Almost overnight the numbers of pupils multiplied and the possibility of intimacy diminished. In St. Teresa's however, something of the old spirit survived since a Sister, Agnes Hassan, OLA, and a past pupil of the School, remained as Principal until the 1990s when she retired. She maintained a good relationship with the pupils up to the present time. In the 1950s all that was in the unforeseen future

Looking back in later years, something that struck me was the easy way the girls of the 1950s and 1960s mixed together and formed a bond that lasted into their seventies and beyond. This I can vouch for: I have witnessed the reality of this bond among many who were pupils in my early days and before, who are now in their seventies and eighties. (They know each other's story and as a group come to the aid of one in financial or other needs, when things are difficult). In the forties and fifties a number did not start Secondary School early, so there was no great gap between the older ones and myself. I think it was at my Diamond Jubilee that one of them said, "The gap between us has narrowed!" What surprised me at the time about this easy relationship was the fact that they came from every level of society. Some from poor farming communities and others the daughters of big Chiefs and Government ministers, some the daughters of minor civil servants, workers and artisans and others from the professional class. They came from every corner of Nigeria and from as far afield as Ghana and Liberia to the West and Cameroon and Fernanda Po to the East. Sadly, this does not pertain in the same degree to the pupils of later decades. There hadn't been the same closeness in School because of the vast number of classes and also consciousness of ethnic origins had grown, partly, perhaps, as a result of the Civil Was (1967-70).

How were my first years in St Teresa's? Although I had hoped for a mission in 'the bush' and had been somewhat taken aback at the urban situation of St. Teresa's and the easy physical conditions there, I quickly adapted to life both in the School and in the community. My teacher's certificate from Digby-Stuart Training College in London qualified me to teach up to Class III/IV in a Secondary School, so the Class IIIs became the ground where I taught English, Religious Knowledge and occasionally History. Members of those same classes attended my Diamond Jubilee and we danced together in the offertory procession!

My great interest was choir and music. There were two practices in the week as well as the Church music

on Sunday mornings. Mrs Lucy Parker, the wife of the governor of the new University College Hospital (U.C.H.), had had the girls for singing for some years, so their voices were in the way of being trained. She had put on some musical performances including 'Hiawatha' and 'The Bohemian Girl'. We were subsequently to stage 'The Desert Song': 'Carmen' and 'Chu Chin Chow'. Then I managed a few with Nuala Harty's and Majella McCarron's help, both of whom came in the sixties. I struggled to maintain and even raise the standard. The girls responded valiantly and were really very good – and knew it! During my first three years in STC, I also went to Ijebu Ode at my novitiate companion, Catherine O'Farrell's urgent appeal to help with the choir of the School (opened in 1954) that was expected to take part in certain choral competitions. She was very well able to train it herself but lacked confidence. So on Friday evenings I took off and sometimes spent an hour or so that night and the same next morning trying to help the girls reach a good standard before returning to St. Teresa's for our Saturday afternoon special apostolate. Up to the time I left in 1969, I also gave music lessons (piano) and music appreciation to those who were interested and showed an aptitude and who in the end turned out to be few. Where the time came from I don't know. In later years I often wondered what really motivated me to fill the day, what, for example, drove me to seek perfection in choral standard – a perfection never quite attained! And I doubted very much if it was solely for the glory of God.

In spite of the OLA work ethic of that time, we certainly had time to relax and enjoy good things. We always had recreation at night, except when something was brewing, such as an opera in the School or the annual harvest concert which we put on every October and which included a play, dances and songs. I remember one evening someone spotted in the newspaper under the cinema listing, the film 'Bonnie Prince Charlie' to be shown locally that very night. Without more ado all five of us rose to our feet in readiness to take off. Sr. Henrietta called the senior prefect and told her to call Fr. Jim O'Hea, the Parish Priest, who lived over the wall, in case of emergency. So we went and hugely enjoyed it. Another time we went to 'Romeo and Juliet' in a cinema further afield but still in Oke Ado. We almost crept in at the last minute and sat in the back row, hoping not to be seen by anyone who might mention it in Mother Arcade's hearing. She was then the Ibadan superior and we weren't at all sure how she would view our 'levity'. Imagine our surprise when the lights went on and there was Mother Arcade and community and their Parish Priest ensconced in the front seats!

As a community, we also went for occasional picnics. Favourite venues were Oloko Meji by the River Ogun off the Abeokuta Road, or the Ibadan reservoir then outside the town. There were other places too. As a community we visited our other communities regularly and they us. During the holidays we each usually took a few days off. Just after my first

Christmas, I went to Maryland with Imelda for two days. I still remember the warm enjoyment of those two days in Maryland. The following Easter week a few of us and two or so from Oke Offa. Elizabeth Hayes and Anne among them went to Topo. Getting into the canoe at Topo Egun and crossing to Topo itself was thrilling for me as I had loved boats and boating. I remember especially our first evening on the beach where we had supper. The sea reflected the beautiful colours of the tropical evening, and, watching the waves break on the shore, all tiredness dropped off me and I felt an utter relaxation and oneness with everything around me. When I entered the convent, I thought that all this kind of enjoyment was behind me, so now it was with wonder and delight that I revelled in the sea, the sound and the whole scene.

It wasn't the only visit to Topo while the Sisters were still there, and even when the School and the College and the mission had evacuated, groups of us went to the convent, still furnished, for a break more than three times. To my mind, it was paradise. During the Civil War, the military government used it as a refuge for soldiers who had broken down during combat and who had left their mark in both convent and mission house. Later Archbishop Okogie (Cardinal) either reclaimed it or bought it back but it is still uninhabited at this present time (2015). We visited the island from the Novitiate in 2008 and 2009 and I personally was deeply saddened by what we found. The others hadn't known it in its heyday. However, the SMA in Badagry (Fr. Eddie Hartnett) had seen that the cemetery was cared for and the names of the SMA Fathers and OLA Sisters who had died there were clearly painted on the little tombstones. Now that the OLA Sisters are in Badagry, I am sure that they will cross over from time to time to continue this service to the memory of our dead.

It was the custom in all our communities to go on house-to-house visitation or engage in other apostolic work on at least one afternoon in the week. In School communities this was done on Saturdays. Personally, I never took to house-to-house visitation as I felt shy and embarrassed at entering the homes of the people I didn't know and inquiring about their Christian living. Besides, we of the younger missionary generation were not given the opportunity to learn the local language as we were missioned in answer to urgent need and went straight into schools or hospitals. So, on apostolic work we often had to rely on our girls for translation. The Sister Nurses did better than we in Schools did as they simply had to learn how to question the patients about complaints, symptoms and home circumstances. I tried to learn Yoruba from a grammar book and acquired only a very basic knowledge so that I could at least greet, answer greetings and ask some questions about family, health and work. I learned to 'hear' better than speak. (In time, instead of progressing I lost some of the little

I had. I looked on this dismal failure as a serous defect in my missionary life). There were groups of our student legionaries (Legio Mariae) doing Catechetics here and there in the town, so I joined them. In fact, what they did was to talk generally about God, about praying, and obeying the Commandments - being 'good'. The children we taught in certain parts of Ibadan, such as Isale Osi, Isale Bode, the very old parts, were of primary school age and mostly Muslim. Later, we also went to Kudeti where there were some Christians, thanks to the evangelization of the Rev. David Hinderer and his wife Anna, in the early 1850s. When we had visited there for a year or so, we dared to ask for a plot of land where the street petered into open country. (Nowadays, there is no sign of countryside; some twenty years later, an expressway was built and beyond it is a new and vast extension of Ibadan as far as the eye can see). I asked Mother Arcade to come with us to negotiate for the plot as she was fluent in Yoruba. She did come one Saturday and so charmed the men concerned that they gave the land free of cost. She must have succeeded in getting the transaction legalised as there never has been trouble or any palaver about it – as sometimes can happen. A small school was built thanks to Fr. Anthony O'Donnell, SMA, P.P. of St. Joseph's, Oke Ado, whose parish then stretched to that area and beyond. Occasionally, Mass was said there on Sundays and it was rated as an outstation of St Joseph's. Eventually, it was extended, became a Church in fact and was formally blessed and opened by the same Fr. Tony. The girls whom I had accompanied and others were there for the simple opening ceremony.

Imagine my shock and embarrassment when Fr. Tony announced that it would be called St. Eunan's, the patron of the diocese of Raphoe, his own diocese in Ireland and mine, too! Eunan also happened to be my name in religion at that time and of course the girls thought it was named after me! I tried to disabuse them in vain.

My favourite apostolate was visiting the Ebira villages beyond St. Teresa's upper hockev field. We heard about them and followed a path into the bush. Some of the villages were quite distant, but walking did not bother the girls or me either, as we were all young. The people in all the villages were very welcoming. Many of their babies were in a very poor condition and mortality rate was high. I acquired anti-malarial drugs and other medicines, ointments and tonics from Sr. Thomas Moore in Oke Offa which was then just a small clinic and also from Sr. Jarlath in Abeokuta. Many of the pregnant women were obviously suffering from malnutrition but there were no urgent persuasion or dire warnings that could get them to go to the hospital, even for free treatment. So we saw many infant deaths. Sometimes we had managed to baptize very ill babies earlier. This we did, the girls and I, very discreetly as the villagers were either Moslem or of traditional religion. I never thought of registering the baptisms and when the P.P. found out I was seriously rebuked! When babies died during the week, we were saddened. Having agonised over those deaths, I eventually came to the conclusion that I was entertaining a very false notion of God and became guite assured that the God of infinite love would never exclude any of his beloved, let alone innocent babies, from the joy of his presence in heaven. This was some years before Vatican II was convoked by the good Pope John XXIII and this kind of belief was then vindicated. Many of the villagers, men and women, suffered from open ulcers on their legs and I got great satisfaction from being able to treat them successfully, thanks to Sr. Thomas Moore's instructions and the book 'Where there is No *Doctor'*. They did agree to come to St. Teresa's for treatment, but no further. For some years, a small illegal and very basic 'clinic' flourished! Eventually these villages disappeared with the building of the Ring Road and the development beyond it. Where all the people went, I never found out.

The Church I found in 1956 was a conservative, almost Tridentine one which we missionaries had bequeathed to Nigeria, and since we came from a similar one in Ireland, it neither surprised nor disturbed us. Later, we were, I think, impatient with the slow acceptance of Vatican II. Ibadan in 1956 was a Prefecture with Mons. Richard Finn, SMA in charge. There were only three parishes and a fourth in the process of becoming one: Oke Padi (or Ogunpa) as we then called it, Oke Offa, Oke Ado and Mokola. The parishes were run by Irish SMAs and so were the Major Seminary of SS Peter and Paul and the junior Seminary of St. Theresa in Oke Are, the site of the first SMA mission in Ibadan. The only African priest in the Prefecture, Fr. Michael Sanusi, taught in the Minor Seminary. He was a gifted musician and most willingly helped us in STC a few times with Yoruba hymns and songs. We OLAs were the only Sisters in Ibadan with three convents: Idikan. Oke Offa and Oke Ado. We participated in the Harvest Festivals of all four parishes as well as those of the out-stations of Oke Ado, bringing our games, etc., with us. We also had charge of the sacristy, the altar linen and the weekly packing of Mass boxes. We took all this for granted and it was nearly two decades later that we decided that the priest himself should arrange that the parishioners would undertake that work and leave the Sisters free for other apostolates.

In January 1957, the Sisters of Idikan, Sisters Berardine, Cyrion, Hilda, Dorothy from STC and Sr. Arcade moved into a new house in Odo-Ona which Arcade called Maryway. Our first Ibadan house, Idikan, was given as a temporary residence to the Woods family. Some of us regretted the closing of Idikan, in the heart of the town and near Oke-Padi. Eventually, it became Ile Alafia, a Home for the Destitute and Aged, first, in the charge of OLA and then of the St. Louis Sisters who, with a lay committee, looked after it for more than thirteen years. Then the lay committee took over. In 2012, when we celebrated the centenary of our arrival in Ibadan, I looked for someone to photograph the old house, but found to my dismay that it had been demolished and a new building erected there. Later, I learned that the new four-floor building consisted of the ground floor divided into shops which are rented out to traders to generate funds for the Home, the first and second floors as a Home for the Aged and Destitute, and the top floor as a Convent for the Sisters responsible for the care of the residents.

In 1958, two important events took place: the first, important for our congregation and for the Church. was the opening on 11<sup>th</sup> February of the OLA Novitiate on the second floor of the old convent in St. Teresa's compound; the second, important to me, was the making of my final vows in Oke-Padi - St. Mary's Cathedral, then undergoing extension and other renovations. The School choir of STC sang beautifully. Just incidental to me was the fact that Sr. Hilda Egan was celebrating her silver jubilee on the same day. Sr. Catherine O'Farrell was also celebrating in Maryland, Lagos. We were sorry not to be together for the occasion but so it was. The Novitiate had opened with four Postulants, two of whom are our senior Nigerian Sisters today, viz. Sisters Mary Anthony Ogunkorode and Agnes Hassan, both still active missionaries. The others left at different times but all four were present at my final profession. Mary Anthony was present at all my subsequent jubilees -

silver, golden, and diamond as well as my eightieth birthday celebration and, sadly, for my final 'sendforth' some years later; as regards the time of my final profession, I remember it all, as if it were bathed in a kind of golden aura. In those days there was no specific preparation, no three months with a thirtyday retreat included. All we had was an eight-day retreat, usually private. Nevertheless, I still remember and cherish to this day the impact of that retreat, made privately in Oke Offa.

The Easter of that year was a significant one for me. During Holy Week, I undertook a major cleaning of the Parish Church, ceiling and all. The altar boys were there to help with the polishing of the sanctuary but that was the limit of their contribution. Of course, I could have detained them for other jobs but I let them go. The Sisters in turn offered their help but I declined it. Of course I could do it all myself! On Easter Sunday, I congratulated myself on my physical strength, but pride comes before a fall and mine was nearly a fatal one. That night I was on fire with fever. Since the first attack of malaria two months after arrival in Nigeria, I had been having a recurrence every six to eight weeks but recovered quickly enough. This one, however, was a major one, and poor Sr. Anne Barrett came about twice a day from Oke Offa to attend to me. During its course I was conscious all the time, could hear what was being said but was unable to answer or open my eyes. I so much wanted to say, "Yes, I can hear you", but was unable to

do so. I remember Sr. Ethelbert who had come up from the Novitiate, saying "I don't like what she is doing with her mouth. Sr. Mildred was doing the same before she died". I remember thinking "So I'm dying. Well, it's all my fault". The image of Sr. Imelda repeatedly begging me to let her help came back to me and my pride and independence declining her offer – she had her own work to do. I distinctly recall turning to the Lord and insisting that it was all my own fault and thinking that somehow this fact wiped out any good I might have done. I then made a sort of promise, while still prepared to pay the penalty for my pride, "Lord, if I do live, I will never again refuse an offer of help". I doubt if I always kept that promise.

When I recovered enough to get up, it was decided that I needed a long convalescence. So Sr. Louis drove me to Topo Egun where we took a canoe for Topo. This was to be a visit of three weeks. For at least one week I was too weak or lethargic to go to the beach, but the convent in Topo was very restful and the view beautiful, especially at sunset. I cannot remember the full community, but Sisters Ita Gilmore, Ephraim and Peter Claver Hurst were certainly there and I greatly enioved their company and learned a lot from each of them. Sr. Ita was an educationalist and I admired her innovative efforts in that remote Grade III training college, serving small villages along the shore edge of the lagoon. The Nursing Sister, who I think was Sr. Thomas Moore at that time, likewise visited the clinics, also by canoe, on a daily basis, sometimes a perilous undertaking, on crocodile-infested waters often roughened by strong winds. However, no Sister or SMA was ever drowned there. Sr. Peter Claver was involved in the training college and also used to travel up and down the creeks on teaching practice supervision. Ephraim was in charge of the Primary School and of the boarders, some of whom were orphans. Peter Claver and I shared a lot of jokes and had a lot of fun. Not knowing her condition of health, I really alarmed her one day by taking a canoe out on the lagoon by myself and pretending I couldn't get back. By that time my strength had returned and when the three weeks were up, the Sisters arrived to bring me back to Ibadan. Although it was a most memorable holiday, and the illness that earned it and its cause taught me a salutary lesson which I never forgot even when I wavered in my resolve. That whole period was a milestone in my missionary and spiritual journey.

Imagine my shock and disbelief when the following September news came of Sr. Peter Claver's death. She died peacefully in her sleep. The night before, she had been in great spirits, all ready for the teaching practice next day and, always ready to give joy, had even danced during recreation. It seems that she had had a serious heart problem but never had made any concessions to her condition nor imposed it on anyone. Her death was very sad and wholly unexpected. She was 43years old. When we visited a sadly desolated Topo in 2008, I said a special prayer by her lonely grave and for the other OLAs and SMAs buried there, the lagoon on one side and the ocean on the other. I also hoped that someday OLAs would return to Topo, even though we have opened a community in Badagry, just across the Lagoon.

I do not recall much else of note in 1958, except perhaps that we staged the musical '*Hiawatha*' in the harvest time with only the day-girls who had often complained that they never could participate in the musical and operas as the main practices were at night. We had great help from the Dawsons who worked in the U.I. Mrs Dawson was an excellent choreographer and Mr Dawson a marvel in stage lighting, e.g. sunset, twilight and night effects and snowfall when required. It was a notable success and the day-girls were pleased and proud.

Ibadan became a diocese in 1959 and in February Monsignor R. Finn was ordained bishop. Many bishops and archbishops from Nigeria, Ghana, Ireland and probably elsewhere came for the occasion. We in STC were asked to accommodate eight of them. So we had to vacate our bedrooms and community room and move across the compound to the big needlework room in the Home Economics block to sleep or try to sleep on the long tables without mosquito nets. We were an easy prey to the mosquitoes but got no malaria as a result. We had to set up a few altars in the Chapel and prepared them very early in the morning for Mass as concelebrated Mass was not practised in those pre-Vatican II days. School was closed for that week but not vacated by the boarders. At that time we could make our own arrangements as regards holidays, breaks, etc. We had help during that week: one SMA bought the drinks for the bishops' meals and instructed us as regards the order in which to serve them. We in turn instructed two young SMAs whose duty it was to serve at table. They were constantly forgetting and running to the kitchen to ask us for reassurance. There were many amusing episodes during the six days of the bishops' stay in our house but this is hardly the place to relate them.

When things had quietened down, we in STC were required to put on some kind of production in honour of the new bishop. Since I had done Drama as a major part of my training, it fell on me to find something suitable. As it was the Lenten season I chose the Passion play by R.H. Benson called *'The Upper Room'*. The girls entered into the spirit of the play in a wonderful way and the girl playing Mary Magdalene, although by no means a particularly pious girl, wept real tears which gave a very realistic atmosphere to the acting of the Passion. One elderly SMA told me that he also had wept. The play over, all returned to normal.

That same year I went on my first home leave. Sometime previously the Ministry of Education had decreed that expatriate teachers and medical personnel should go on leave every three years as they were not considered competent after that length of time in the tropics. It was probably a correct assumption, even though our Sisters had done five, seven, ten-year tour in the past and those due for leave before World War II broke out, thirteen-year tour. So I was somewhat ashamed to be going home after three years. In retrospect it was probably a good thing. I felt well but unfortunately did not look it, and rather alarmed some of the Sisters and my family. However, after a very good holiday and a whole month at home, I returned in late September.

On my return, life continued as before. In November, we combined STC's silver jubilee (one year late) and the annual harvest concert by staging *'Tales from Vienna Woods'*, a musical, or some such title. We were all aware that the following year would bring Independence from Britain on 1<sup>st</sup> October 1960.

When the New Year dawned, widespread preparations began all over the country. We, too, prepared in our different Schools and hospitals painting and refurbishing especially those parts of our compounds where we were told that the representative of the Crown would visit. There were to be military displays, sports, gymnastics and marches in the new stadium in the newly-named Liberty Road off the new Ring Road – the road that effectively wiped out the villages we used to visit. This stadium was within easy walking of St. Teresa's and convenient for practices. We soon heard that the Crown's representative was to be Princess Alexandra. We bought or were given the flags required for the occasion: the new Nigerian green-white-green, the Union Jack and the Irish tricolour.

The general atmosphere in the town was one of joyous expectation and everywhere there was goodwill and welcome for everyone. On the eve of the day, our girls were very excited and ran about putting finishing touches to the school and the compound. They prepared a huge bonfire in the middle of the hockeyfield (the one down near the boarding houses). Just before midnight, it was lighted and as midnight struck, the salutes and army bugles, drums, etc. sounded and the girls danced with great abandon round the fire to the playing of the new national anthem. They had yet to be taught that one stood at attention for anthems, not dance. The only ones in STC who stood to attention that night, were the Irish Sisters, the teachers who lived in the compound and a few better informed students.

Independence Day dawned at last. All I remember is that there were many displays, marches and such in the stadium and probably in other centres in Ibadan. We attended the stadium and didn't worry about what was happening in Lagos or anywhere else. It was a day of joy and hope. Celebrations went on for about a week. On one of the following days Princess Alexandra visited STC. The girls were thrilled. She was escorted to the hall where she was welcomed by two Yoruba songs sung by a specially selected group from the School choir. We had asked the lawyer from Abeokuta who was also a musician to harmonise the Yoruba songs and insisted that he should conduct the performance. I accompanied them on the good hall piano. (We had five good and less good pianos in St Teresa's at that time and an excellent organ/ harmonium in the Chapel – sadly, all now disused). The Princess was very gracious with her appreciation and walked up to me and to the conductor to greet and thank us, all unscheduled. She also spoke charmingly to the girls who were delighted. She took her time to walk around the School, followed always by her entourage. Again she moved unhurriedly and at her ease, though the lady-in-waiting, Lady Hamilton, was heard to whisper, "Ma'am, we shall be late", to which she answered, "What matter if we are".

Like all good things, celebrations ended and life continued as before. The only performance we staged that year was the usual harvest concert, always well attended. As usual, Sr. Celestine came up from Lagos to help us sell tickets to her Lebanese and Syrian friends who were then numerous in Ibadan. One whole street was called Lebanon Street because most of the shops (cloth shops and others) were owned by the Lebanese and Syrians. Now there are few of these nationals left in Ibadan or elsewhere in Nigeria. It is sad to think of what eventually awaited them, first in Lebanon and now in Syria with all its early Christian associations and relics, especially in Damascus and Antioch.

I remember very little unusual in 1961, except my personal experience of being sent by the combined persuasion of Sr. Anne Barrett and Mother Arcade to Jos for a four-week period of convalescence. It was like being in a different world climate-wise and scenic-wise, almost lunar. The Plateau is about 4,000 feet above sea-level, one-time volcanic, with most picturesque rocks and hills, wide, wide spaces, most wonderful sunrises and sunsets and an extensive view of the night-sky, none of which we had in the South. I had a great holiday, mostly in OLA, Jos, but with some time in Akwanga and Zawan. While in Zawan, I one day climbed the range of hills to the West and felt that I was on the roof of the world. In much later vears, I looked at those hills and marvelled at the energy of youth - and at what the years could do!

That same year Sr. Agnes Hassan left the STC community to study in University College Cork (UCC). Later in the year, Hilary left for home and, after Christmas, Sr. Loreta McCarthy joined us from Marymount, Agbor.

In the political sphere things seemed to be going smoothly, except for an undercurrent of discord regarding the choice of the country's first president. The choice seemed to be between either Ahmadu Bello, the Sardauna of Sokoto in the far North, and

Azikiwe in the East - or perhaps Awolowo in the West. All these had been engineers of Independence but the names that had been repeatedly shouted in jubilant acknowledgement during the independence celebrations were "Awo" and "Zik". Eventually, Tafawa Balewa from the North became the first Governor General, but Southerners were still suspicious of the Sardauna's influence on the country's governance. There continued to be pockets of unrest here and there which I think were due to local elections – perhaps local government elections. I remember once while driving from Abeokuta with Sr. Imelda, a rather menacing band of men appeared on the road ahead of us, waving sticks, green branches and other objects. Imelda said, "Slow down" which I did, almost to walking pace. However when the men saw the two Sisters, they made their way for us with cheers and greetings. Indeed, in my first six vears on the missions we never feared danger on the road or elsewhere. More than a few times I drove alone from Lagos, sometimes with cargo collected at Apapa wharf, and often from Ijebu Ode after dark. Far from fearing anything, I knew that if there was any problem with the car, I would get help, and no recompense asked or accepted when offered. A far crv from later decades! Young people today find it hard to credit that as a community we would take off for Abeokuta or Lagos for a special celebration in the evening and return much later that same night. Now one does not travel at night even in one's own town except for urgent and very special reasons.

In mid-1962, the then Provincial Superior, Sr. Kathleen O'Regan (then Sr. Fachanan) asked me to return to Ireland to study for my degree. I had been perfectly satisfied with my qualifications but had no choice but to go. Sr. Fachanan had seen the writing on the wall regarding the future in education: a Higher Schools class (A-Level) had begun in STC in 1958 as well as in Government Colleges. In fact, I had been teaching Scripture since its inception and had had to read very widely to keep up with the classes. Soon a degree was required by every Secondary School teacher, so Sr. Fachanan was wise to recall those of us with a Teacher's certificate to study for various degrees. In those years, there were twenty-two to twenty-four OLAs trooping out to UCC every day. Not all of us were 'Mission Sisters'; some were young Sisters recently professed.

The two years passed quickly enough and it was a pleasant enough time although I was longing to get back on the missions, preferably to STC to take up where I had left off. I most certainly had not learned to be detached from personal desires! In any case, I returned to STC in October 1964, armed with a degree in English and History and feeling hardly at all more equipped. I joined Sr. Nuala Harty (then Sr. Regina) in the Arts department, each of us taking different sections of the syllabus for English Literature and again I took Scripture although no better qualified than before. And so life went on. There continued to be a rumble of discontent in the country, which one didn't feel to be immediately menacing. After all, we were newly Independent and all was set for development and success. The first Governor General, Tafawa Balewa, seemed to be doing well enough, but ethnic rivalry persisted and the 'united brotherhood' sung about at the time of Independence remained an unrealised ideal. The Eastern Region thirsted for more control and continued to want Azikiwe as Governor General. And so the unrest and dissention grew. Then on the 16<sup>th</sup> January 1966, came the first coup with the assassination of Tafawa Balewa, Ahmadu Bello and Chief Okotie-Eboh who had been a minister in the government. Although we were all shocked at the violence and its implication, few were altogether surprised at the explosion of years of bottled resentment and anger.

I cannot remember exactly what happened after the coup but eventually General Ironsi became Governor General or State Governor and Colonel Fajuyi Governor of the West. The murmur of discontent became louder and more widespread. Parents of Igbo girls came to collect their daughters and bring them home to the Eastern Region. Sometimes when nothing happened they brought them back again. For us in Ibadan, School life continued as before. We even staged a performance after Easter, a musical called 'Lilac Time' a romanticised life of Schubert. For the first time, we had boys to take the roles of the male characters (and singers). They came from Loyola College at the other side of the town and then after the late evening practice, either Nuala or I drove them back. I remember that when it was over, and in spite of its success, I said to myself, "That is the last of the foreign productions as far as I am concerned". And so it was, at least in STC. The next one was a Ghanaian play by Aidoo called *'Dilemma of a Ghost'* for which we got much praise from academics and School Principals, chiefly, I suspect, because it was African.

In July, there was a second coup: General Ironsi and Fajuvi were assassinated in the forest outside Ibadan. There had been a suspicion that the previous coup in January had been carried out by Ironsi and five Igbo officers and was looked on as Igbo coup. This had been greatly resented. At the time of the second coup, Ironsi had been visiting Ibadan and was a guest of Fajuvi. The latter defended him, refused to hand him over, so both were taken to the forest and shot there. It is reported that on the morning of that day, Fajuyi declared to Ironsi: "I make bold to declare to you today that ... I am with you, spirit, soul and body. And mark my words, whatever happens to you today, happens to me". Both men were Catholics. I remember Fajuyi presiding at some ceremony in the Cathedral in Oke Padi. We all attended his funeral Mass in Liberty Stadium. It was a military funeral with full honours. At the end of the Mass, his coffin was borne off, preceded and followed by a military regiment in funeral march. It was very moving and many of us were in tears. That coup was generally considered wholly unnecessary as both were looked on as good men who had the stability of the country at heart. I was deeply touched by the solemnity of the dead march: it sounded something like a death-knell within me, an omen of worse to come. Fajuyi was buried in his native Ado Ekiti and Ironsi was taken back to the East and buried in Umuahia.

When things became relatively calm, General Gowon became State Governor and remained so until 1976. Gowon was a northerner and a Christian. His wife, Victoria, was a Catholic and a past pupil of QAC, Kakuri, then bearing its original name, Queen of Apostles College, later under Muslim influence in the North called Queen Amina College. Victoria kept up contact with the OLA Sisters, indeed until this present time, although I think that the only one now alive whom she knew is Sr. Rosarii O'Sullivan.

From then on, there was general unrest with some saying that there would certainly be war, and others (I think the majority) believing that the dissension would be ironed out by peaceful means as "no one wants a war". The next year, 1967, I was due for leave so I opted to go home early and so return before anything like a war would break out. Happily, Maura Hayes, who was then principal in STC arranged it. At that time, we had past pupils studying in the University in Cairo and they had been insistently begging us to visit them on our way home. Sr. Pius, a Provincial Councillor, then in Lagos, sanctioned it, so off I went to Cairo. The visit was satisfactory and I continued to Ireland arriving in Dublin on the Good Friday of that year. My brother and a very small niece met me and I spent Easter with the family, travelling to Cork on Easter Monday. I remember little about that leave but I kept my ears open for Nigerian news which was grim. There was a question of detaining any Sisters on leave but I made it. I left from home; it was the last time I saw my father. He died the following year on 1<sup>st</sup> June 1968. The funeral was already over when the news by way of cable reached me. That was the way of it at that time.

I arrived back in Nigeria the third week in June 1967. The atmosphere was tense, on edge. The Eastern region now under General Ojukwu was threatening secession from the Federation. The rest of Nigeria was determined that this should not happen. Nevertheless, the East having co-opted (I am not sure whether with or without consensus) coastal lands such as the present Akwa Ibom, Rivers State, Cross Rivers, and maybe Bayelsa too, non-Igbo territories belonging to the Efik people and other minorities and declaring it all 'Biafra'. Within a few days, war was declared.

By that time most of the Igbo girls had gone home but not all; the Ibo girls remained, i.e. those from Asaba, Agbor and surrounding areas, the Western Ibos whose territory was not in 'Biafra'. We were careful to

insist that all those who staved kept a very low profile. One or two past pupils, studying in Ibadan or Lagos, came to us for refuge. It was felt that the soldiers were gratuitously on the look-out for Igbos, male or female, and there were some unfortunate incidents. We were lucky at the time to have a Scottish doctor friend, Mrs Aileen Lowe who visited us and the girls quite frequently and prescribed for them when necessary. But as far as I can remember there were no serious illnesses during these years. One common complaint recurring among the Igbos was stomach ulcers, necessitating carefulness about diet. There were also bouts of keen anxiety and distress among them triggered by no specific reason; although I remember three cases where premonitions turned to have had real causes. One in particular was deeply distressed before the event, afraid to open letters from home. So some days later, when a priest from her home place came to see her, she knew that the news was bad: three of her brothers, one a nineteen vear old, had been killed in the Asaba massacre. Another of our pupils lost her father and elder brother in the same tragedy.

In Ibadan we were not near the front but were very aware of developments in the East and Mid-West, where our Sisters in hospitals were called on to treat patients of both sides and often to shelter refugees and fugitives. I remember seeing very young boys in Ibadan volunteering for recruitment in the Federal army. Watching them marching with obvious enthusiasm and pride, I wondered how long their eagerness for battle would last under fire. Not long, I think, for several of the youngsters tried to run away and some had mental breakdowns. Incidentally, at that time, the Island of Topo was taken over by the military government for treatment of the latter category. Travel was a hazard: road-blocks abounded, sometimes not more than a half kilometre apart. The soldiers could be quite aggressive and some of them drug-happy waving loaded guns about carelessly.

There was always the fear that they would press the trigger and kill indiscriminately and they sometimes did. There were some funny incidents, funny in retrospect but at the time not at all. Although it was a terrible time, and I believe that in later years on occasions when the outbreak of another civil war seemed threatening, the memory of the first one halted any movement towards a repetition. I remember that when the possibility of another was even mooted, people of all ethnic groups shaking their heads and saying: "Never again!" And so, we still pray.

When the outcome of the war became evident to both sides, Ojukwu surrendered and, in January, 1970 quickly left the country. Gowon was quick to declare: "No victors, no vanquished". What surprised me greatly was the quick return of the Igbos to their former homes in the West and even in the North where they had undergone a horrible pogrom before the war. There seemed to be no act of reprisal or genocide nor was there any need of such fear, especially in the West where ordinary people had deplored the tragic war and all that happened in its course, the high toll of deaths on both sides and the terrible starvation in the East and South-East. The return to normality, as far as one could see, was amazing.

In 1969, the OLA Provincial Council decided that the Province needed someone trained in Theology, and the feather fell on me. It was a shock to me as I felt settled and happily rooted where I was. A far cry from understanding missionary detachment! There was a good year's course in Catechetics held in Kampala in these years and I thought that that would be enough. But no, it was not what they wanted. So, months before the end of war, I went home after a severe attack of typhoid, and began my studies in the Gregorian University in Rome, in October 1969.

In 1970, the Irish Province got permission from the General Council to have a Provincial Chapter, the first in the OLA Congregation. Sr. Colombiére and I were asked to moderate or facilitate it. When I came home from Rome we asked Fr. Larry Carr, SMA, the Irish Provincial Superior, to help us with the preparation and running of the Chapter as neither of us had any idea of how to go about it. Sr. Rosarii O'Sullivan joined us. As the then Provincial, she would be

President of the Chapter. Fr. Carr gave us clear instructions and advice. So we began rather nervously, but were encouraged by the thought that none of the delegates knew any better, except the representative from the General Council, Sr. Andrée Rescanier, who helped us along. It was a good Chapter and we were almost sorry when it ended and we had to go our way. That was Part 1 of the elective chapter which took place in 1972, with Sr. Andrée again as official representative and Colombière and I again as facilitators. Colombière was elected Provincial and there followed the election of a new Council. As Colombière was the President, Sr. Una Nelly joined me as co-facilitator. It was a difficult Chapter, but some painful issues had to be faced. However, there were good moments too.

I was asked to bring the Chapter Document to Propaganda Fide or the Sacred Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples as it was now called, when I returned to Rome. The Monsignor who came to deal with me complained that we OLAs were too slow in asserting ourselves and so lost out on many chances and offers made to Missionary Congregations, etc., etc. I repeated all to the Superior General, Sr. Anne Marie Barbe, when she visited Rome. She laughed and said that she had heard the same when she had to go to Propaganda Fide. I think we OLAs felt it was part of our charism to be forgotten! Nevertheless, in later years when our Generalate moved to Rome and when Sr. Marciana O'Keefe became well known, there were no more complaints.

My five years in Rome were challenging, enjoyable and immensely enriching not only theologically but also spiritually, culturally and socially. I had arrived rather early as I had had to apply for admittance to the Greg and then inscribe, etc., and so found that I was alone in the pensione where a place had been booked for me. Only one by one the Sister residents arrived: they were already students in Regina Mundi, an Institute for Sisters. I was taken aback to find the I was the only one who would attend the Greg. They knew an Irish Sister who had gone to the Greg. from Regina Mundi to do a course. I sought her out to accompany me on my first day there. She was very friendly and informed me, to my confusion, that I would be the first woman to apply for a full course. The very first day I entered the portal of the awesome Pontificia Universita Gregoriana with Paula by my side, we heard a very English voice say quite indignantly behind us: "There's another of them! I told you it was only the beginning!" Paula turned and said guizzically: "Good morning to you". They were very embarrassed.

While in Rome I had opportunities to visit many interesting and beautiful places. I was just a few days there when I got the chance to visit Assisi: two English ladies on holiday had hired a car to bring them there (a four-hour journey) and wanted to share the car with someone. A mutual friend recommended me: I was happy to go and it was a wonderful visit. It was the first of three during my years of study, accompanying visiting OLAs on their way home from missions. In later years, I acted as a guide – and always pilgrim – to OLAs on free day excursions during Chapters and many seminars. Even as guide it was always a joy to return to Assisi. Ever since my first visit I have had great reverence and affection for St. Francis who ever since remains a gentle reproach and challenge to me.

Thanks to the Regina Mundi Sister students in the same hostel who always invited me to join the daytrips from this College, I had the privilege of visiting other places of interest and beauty such as Subiaco, Greccio, Pompeii and Naples, Sienna and Florence. The peak of all was one of my final study courses in the Holy Land where I went with my own class and others. We were twenty-seven in all, accompanied by two professors from the Greg. We had lectures from others in the Ecole Biblique in Jerusalem. I cannot undertake to describe here that experience which marked me for life: my travel experiences would need a separate document.

In my years in Rome I gained a good deal of knowledge from lectures, seminars and tutorials, but what I think made the deepest impression on me was the theology I absorbed from the liturgy in the Russian Catholic Church, the liturgy of St. John Chrysostom, so rich in the beautiful Eastern

spirituality and symbolism. Particularly important to me were the many friendships formed with my fellow male students from almost every part of the world, the Western World as well as the Far East, India, Africa and the Americas. The Sisters in the hostel (Via Marcantonio, Colonna 52) became my good friends, some friendships lasting up to the present day. Very precious to me then and now was my close relationship with our OLA Italian Sisters in three communities -Via della Nocetta (our Sisters working and resident in the SMA Generalate), Monte Sacro and Marino. Our Generalate had not vet moved to Rome. Marino was especially dear to me and I spent some long holidays, one retreat and several weekends there. I remember it as an oasis of peace and utter relaxation of mind and spirit which enfolded me as soon as I entered the gates. Sadly, all but one of the twenty-seven Sisters then in the community are now with God. It is also sad that the future of that beautiful place is now in question.

The years passed and in 1975 I returned to Nigeria, but in a different capacity. I was appointed to the Major Seminary of SS Peter and Paul where I taught Biblical Theology to the 4<sup>th</sup> year Theology students and another class as well.

For some time we had been repeatedly hearing from Fr. Vincent Brennan, SMA, about the need for Sisters, especially medical personnel, in an area far north of Ilorin. He kept emphasizing that a mission there would be entirely in accord with our charism, primary evangelization among the Kamberi people. The SMAs had been in the area for a number of years and ran three parishes there. In 1976, Fr. Vincent heard that I was a delegate to the Irish Provincial Chapter, and begged me to "come and see" and then at the Chapter, to present the case for a new mission in Papiri. Carmel agreed to accompany me, so off we went in in our little Volkswagen. Fr. Vincent joined us in his own car at Ilorin. We staved overnight in the mission house at New Bussa near the Kainji Dam. In the morning we went on and arrived at the first mission in Guffanti at lunch time. In the afternoon we saw Papiri for the first time. There was just a small clinic not too far from the road and a very small house used by a nurse who, I think, came only for a few days at a time. The remoteness of Papiri discouraged any permanent employment of lay personnel. We were intrigued by the Kamberis whom we met and by those whom we saw making their way towards a market in another village. Some of the men rode bicycles and were decorated with necklaces of different coloured beads and the same on arms and legs; the women, some of them obviously pregnant, plodded along carrying heavy loads, clearly less than 2<sup>nd</sup> class citizens. We were impressed by the needs of the women whom we found friendlier than the men. There were many children around, some very healthy looking and some malnourished but all excited by our presence. Little did we think then that one of these small children would one day replace Bishop Tim Carroll, SMA on his retirement, as Bishop of Kontagora Diocese including this whole area. Little Bulus couldn't have imagined such a thing, either.

The outcome of the visit was that the Chapter voted in favour of a new mission in Papiri. All necessary arrangements were made and the first Sisters went to Papiri in early 1978. They were Srs. Roisin Cox and Anne Barry. They lived in poor conditions and had a close relation with the people. The conditions gradually improved and successive teams of Sisters followed the pioneers. The Papiri of today is very different, with its Hospital, its Primary School and Secondary Boarding School, all run by our OLA African Sisters.

I had begun to feel at home with the students but I was uprooted at the Irish Provincial Chapter of 1976 when I was elected as a councillor. However, I was lucky that during my five-year mandate, I spent most of it in Africa, in Ghana, Zambia and mostly in Nigeria. We were still in Zambia at that time where the OLA community was in Luansha, the Ndola diocese in the Copper-Belt. In those years I had experiences of Africa that I might not otherwise have had. They were invaluable to me and taught me a lot about myself and others. As far as I could judge, the most valuable and enduring achievement of our time on the council was the organizing of the summer seminar and retreat in Rostrevor for our Sisters on home leave from the mission, and the same for Sisters based at home in the autumn or spring. The first and perhaps the most powerful was in July/August 1977 which had a farreaching effect on many, including me. We were deeply grateful to the priests, Fathers Luke Griffin, OMI, Kevin Scallon and particularly Chris O'Donnell, O.Carm., who led the retreat ending the three-week renewal period. At the end of this first seminar of its kind and almost as an affirmation of the movement of the Spirit among us, Sr. Sally Forde asked to make her final Profession, waiving the usual Ardfoyle celebration with the presence of family and friends.

When my stint in the Council ended with the Chapter of 1981, my years of travelling continued in a different context. Just as I had travelled with Fr. Louis Dolan. CSSP, Argentinian, to all our venues in Ireland, England, Nigeria and Ghana preparing for the new type of Chapter (the Berger Method), so now I had to re-visit them explaining the recommendations and the mandates in the Chapter document ('the Blue Book'!). That done, there was another post-Chapter assignment: the 'Dialogue Retreat'. This kind of retreat had been given to the Capitulars before the Chapter, and since the Chapter recommended that everyone in the Province should be given it, twelve or thirteen of us had undergone a brief training in the directing of that retreat and were then sent off in twos or threes to offer it in the different areas. I particularly remember the one in Ho, Volta Region, Ghana where Patricia McMenamin, Mary Connaughton and I formed the team. So many years later I can still see the

exhausted faces of the elderly Sisters who had travelled from the Cape Coast area, a long and tedious journey. These were Sisters Benigna Consolata (Ghanaian), Verona, Rosina and Georgina (Irish), and feel again the guilt I then felt, even though it was not I who had summoned them. However, they participated whole-heartedly. On the silent day of recollection and adoration, Benigna spent practically the whole day in the Chapel and at the end of the retreat she spoke of her sense of joy and deep peace. When a week later the news of her sudden death reached me, I again felt some guilt but was grateful that the day of adoration had been in some deep way a privileged day of preparation. All this was in late December and in the New Year of 1982, Benigna died peacefully in OLA, Cape Coast on 9<sup>th</sup> January.

In the preceding years some of the indigenous Congregations had asked my help with courses, etc., and the then Provincial (Colombiére) had promised them that when I was free I would do what I could. So in September of 1982, I was sent to Ijebu Ode which was to be my community and base for whatever journeys would be involved. Sr. Veronica of most happy memory, Superior General of the Eucharistic Heart of Jesus Congregation, had been foremost in her request for "whatever I could do". My first assignment therefore, consisted of some courses for their Novices in Ibonwon, twenty or thirty minutes' drive from Ijebu Ode. This would be from mid-September (approx.) until December. Sr. Mary Martin, E.H.J., was the novice mistress and offered me every facility. I must say I enjoyed it and enjoyed my community in Our Lady's Ijebu too. At this time, the community consisted of Anne McCormack, Sally Forde and me.

When December neared, Sally asked me to put on some Christmas performance in Our Lady's where she and Anne taught. So I pulled a pageant together and wrote the text. The Principal, Mrs Ilawo (a Muslim) was delighted, so I continued to produce something on the Christmases that I was there. Mrs Ilawo gave every encouragement and indeed was very sensitive to the Christian/Catholic ethos in the School.

In the December of 1982, I was asked to give a preprofession retreat to two of our novices, Elizabeth Erhunmwunsee and Assumpta Mordi, who came to Ijebu for the event. When the eight days were over on 8<sup>th</sup> December, we all went up to St. Teresa's Ibadan for the ceremony which took place that same evening. The parents, families and friends, including many OLAs and SMAs were present. It was a very happy event. During my years in Ijebu, I directed the preprofession retreats of our novices also in 1983 (the Ghanaian novices who were going home), 1984 and 1985.

Sometime in early February 1983, I went to Ghana to give a course to the Sisters of Mary Mother of the

Church (henceforth referred to as SMMC) in Dzelukope. I had been there several times since 1979 (a memorable and most enjoyable visit), although my first visit must have been earlier, maybe 1977. Sr. Patricia, novice mistress in 1983 (and had been for two years previously) succeeded in getting permission from Bishop Lodonu, who had assumed the role of founder when Bishop Konings died, for a vear's renewal for the first Sisters due for final profession. They had been absorbed in studies for the nine years since their first profession and needed time for reflection before the final step. I was asked to give the first three months beginning in October of that year. Credit is due to Sr. Dolores Davis who was the first novice mistress and laboured long years in Dzelukope trying to impart a religious and apostolic spirit in the young foundation.

I have omitted a significant part of my memoirs relating to the years 1980 and 1983. In 1980, Sr. Marciana and the General Council formed a committee to revise our OLA Constitutions, first approved by Rome in 1904 and then revised on trial in 1967. Now it was time to finalise them, to have them passed by the General Chapter of 1983 and then presented to the Sacred Congregation for the Evangelization of People (formerly Propaganda Fide, familiarly called Prop) for approval. The committee consisted of one from the French, Italian and Irish Provinces and two from the General Council: Maria Virginia Castelli (General councillor) and Marie Rose

Begué (General councillor), Françoise Delhaye, Marisa Bini and myself from the Provinces. We first met in January in 1981 and further meetings were scheduled for June and September and I have an idea that there was a fourth that year, the same for 1982 and for January 1983 which was to be the last before the Chapter of 1983. Those of us on mission, Francoise and I, found it difficult to make the journey to Rome so often, but make it we did! We had a Canon Lawyer to help us, Fr. Dortel-Claudot, S.J., who came for a session towards the end of each meeting. We worked in between the meetings and then coordinated what we had written with always some modifications. Fr. Dortel-Claudot scrutinised everything we produced and so carefully did he do this that when the Constitutions were finally submitted to the Sacred Congregations, no corrections were made. Before then they were presented to the Chapter of 1983 and thoroughly examined, criticised, etc. during the six weeks we spent in Chapter. Part of two articles were found to be too demanding (re mission ad extra) by a narrow majority and so were modified. At the following Chapter of 1988 or perhaps 1993, they were reinstated. The Constitutions were approved by the Archbishop Dermot Ryan, the Pro-Prefect on 8<sup>th</sup> December 1984, a beautiful feast.

A little note aside: one important advantage for me was that in January of 1981, Sr. Marciana, after the meeting, offered me the chance to join a course of Ignatian Spirituality then under way and I must have managed to do so. The most memorable part of that was the privilege of hearing the revered General of the Jesuits, Fr. Pedro Arrupe, who gave the closing talk. It must have been nearly his last talk before the stroke that left him disabled for the rest of his life.

The Constitutions had been written and finalised in French, then and now the principle language of the Congregation. Since I had worked on them, the work of translation into English fell to me. I had begun that task in Maryhill in September 1985 and when it was completed, I returned to Ijebu which continued to be my community and base. By then Elizabeth Erhunmwunsee had joined the former trio.

With the New Year of 1985, there was no longer any reason to postpone a long-standing request for a bit of service to formation in Ivory Coast. So in January I began preparation for the courses I would offer and went there towards the end of the month. I spent almost two weeks in Abidjan and then moved on to the OLA Francophone Novitiate in Abengouru where Sr. Christine Koffi was novice mistress. I was there for several weeks, more than a month. As far as I remember, I shared a little of Johannine spirituality and also something of prayer with the novices. Christine and I shared almost daily and I learned a lot from her. During or after my time in Abengouru, I was invited to a two-day OLA meeting in Yopougon, a centre outside Abidjan overlooking the lagoon. There I again learned much about the ongoing search of our Francophone Sisters for ever better ways of formation and mission.

When it was time I returned to Nigeria via Ghana laden with gifts. I was happy to share the consumables with the communities in Ghana that were still suffering some shortages in the ebbing famine years. Apart from the OLA communities in the Cape Coast area, I visited Dzelukope where Patricia described how the rest of the SMMC renewal year had gone. Fr. Hinfey, S.J. and others had given sessions. It had concluded with the final profession of all six Sisters, the foundation stones of the Congregation.

Back in Nigeria, it was time to give urgent attention to the Our Ladv of Fatima Sisters (OLF) in Jos. Since 1981, I had been with them many times each year. In 1984, there had been a three-week seminar concluded by the famous Dialogue Retreat. Agnes Haverty, OLA, came from Warri to share the direction of the retreat with me, she being one of those trained for it. Her contribution and support were simply invaluable, and I was sorry that she wasn't free to help with the Chapter scheduled for the following year. So now at Easter 1985, the OLFs were almost at the eve of the Chapter. I was helping them with their Constitutions which they were writing for the first time. I cannot remember what they used before that probably a Constitution based on our former one, since the OLAs had been training them since Bishop

Reddington founded them as a diocesan Congregation. Anyway, their Constitutions had to be scrutinised and suggestions made, and besides, the Sisters had to be oriented toward the Chapter, its meaning and its form, etc. It was scheduled from the beginning of July until mid-August, a long spell for the Sisters. Happily, School holidays were regular and predictable in those days, and since OLAs were still in OLA Hospitals in Jos and Akwanga, it was relatively easy to release the OLF nurses for the six weeks. All the professed Sisters and I went down to Shendam on the eve of the opening. Fr. Okove, CSSP, the then Spiritan Provincial, gave a preparatory retreat. I regretted missing it as I knew he was very good, but there were still papers, etc. to get ready and it was as much as I could manage to have things in order before the opening. I was the sole facilitator, by their wish, but I knew it was a mistake and felt very apprehensive. Bishop (later Archbishop) Ganaka came for the opening, and since it was also an elective Chapter, he would return for the actual election when we felt the time was ripe. On both occasions, he was very un-intrusive and simply lent his presence as a seal of approval.

The Chapter in Shendam was quite an experience. To be brief, it was hard work: during its course, the Sister Secretary of the Chapter and I worked into the night, almost every night, in order to be ready for the following day. We had these burning coils to fend off the clouds of mosquitoes that tormented us during the evening and especially after nightfall, not altogether successfully, I may add! As time went on, I wondered at my presumption in agreeing to facilitate the Chapter on my own without considering the possibility of an onset of malaria. Certainly, without the help of Sr. Josephine Eke (the Chapter Secretary) I should never have managed. In due course, we had the election of the first General Superior, Sr. Mary Patrick Dimlong, her assistant, Sr. Mary Martin and then two councillors. Then we moved on to the examination and eventual approval of the newly written Constitutions, the document was scrutinised paragraph by paragraph, sentence by sentence and even the appropriateness of words. However, it was finally completed.

Towards the end of the Chapter the sad news came of the death of a forty-year old priest, a native of Shendam. He was a cousin of Sr. Vincent, one of the new councillors, and had grown up in her home. His funeral Mass and burial were in Shendam. At the Mass, Bishop Ganaka (not then Archbishop) spoke of the first SMAs who had ventured into the Northern territory and settled in Shendam. They were welcomed by the chief and therefore by the people, but no interest was shown in a new religion for years. He spoke of the early deaths of two of the three missionaries, one of them aged 26 years, and of their successors. They were the seed, he said, who falling into the ground and dying, had brought forth much fruit, and looking round at the scores of priests and religious and parishioners filling the Church to overflowing, he declared, "You are the fruit".

(Much later, in 2007, I was privileged to attend the centenary celebrations of the arrival of the first missionaries in the North and was amazed at the huge numbers present of priests and religious from Shendam, the Plateau and further North. We thanked God for bringing forth the fruit of the seed sown in faith).

Another incident that I remember was my last Sunday in Shendam when, at the end of Mass, the priest thanked me for my presence among them during those six weeks. "You know who I am talking about," he said, "she is the only Baturi among us". I was surprised and somewhat gratified to realise that I hadn't adverted to the fact that I was the only white person there.

The Chapter finished, I soon left for Ibadan to do something or other, in a short month's course of preparation for the final vows of a small group of OLAs. It was during this course that I first met Sr. Ann Concannon, SSL (Sr. of St. Louis) who had come to help. I little thought that some years later we would be closely associated in the beginning of the Institute for Formators and good friends ever since. My next undertaking was the direction of eight novices for an eight day retreat in Bethany House, Maryhill.

It was when the retreat was over that I began the translation of the OLA Constitutions there in Bethany House. Sometime in September/October there was the usual Unit OLA meeting, this time to review our fidelity to the recommendations of the 1981 Irish Provincial Chapter. One that had not vet been fulfilled was the input that was to be given to the whole Province. I suppose it was natural that the lot should fall on me as I was the only one not tied down by hospital or school. I had been offered a short sabbatical at the end of 1985 but there was little option but to accept the job. So when the translation was complete, I returned to Ijebu Ode to write something on the Charism. The sabbatical could easily be postponed until the following October of 1986. I do not remember especially when I began the rounds, but by June 1986, four venues in Nigeria and three in Ghana had been covered. And I was free to go home in July for holidays and to arrange for the sabbatical.

Before I leave Ijebu Ode, there is one thing to be included: the following incident occurred in October 1984 and here it is somewhat in parenthesis. Although not extraordinary in itself, it was memorable for me and significant in many ways for me and others. When I returned from home leave in July 1984, I had gone straight to Jos for a session with the OLFs, then to Ibadan as mentioned above to direct a retreat for 8 novices, and, retreats and sessions finished, to Ijebu Ode. All my luggage, including the suitcases I had brought from home and indeed all my goods were still in Maryland, left there before I went on leave because there had been no decision about my destination on my return. So one day in October I set off for Maryland to collect the goods. Sally insisted that I should take the community car as the Volks I ordinarily used was somewhat unreliable. This I did reluctantly. All goods collected and packed in the car, I set off for Ijebu Ode about 4.00pm. I had the player on, Sally's best tapes, but when I came to the Shagamu turn on to the Benin expressway, I turned off the player so that the rest of the road could be spent in thanksgiving to God. The traffic was not heavy. About 30 minutes from Ijebu Ode, a car drew level with me and the driver pointed urgently at my front tyres. I suspected nothing and, if I had, would have pressed the accelerator. However I slowed up and was about to stop to have a look when the men in the cars jumped out, opened my door and shouted, "Climb down"! One man put in his hand, turned off the ignition and took the keys. I protested and begged that they shouldn't take the car. It was then that I saw the gun pointed at me. The man caught my wrist and forced me out. One man got in and inserted the key. I then begged for my books, tapes and files. For answer they pulled off my cross and watch. Then, leaving me on the side of the road, they drove off. I remember watching the car going up the road and saying, "Lord, please let this be a nightmare"! Eventually, I was picked up by a family travelling to Benin who wanted to bring me to the

convent, but I saw policemen at the crossroads and asked to be let down so that they would pursue the robbers. The gentleman driving did so, but the police had no transport. One policeman and I took a taxi and went to the house. Sally and Elizabeth were gardening and I remember their shocked faces when they saw me arriving as I did. All they were concerned about was that I was unhurt, which I was, even though it was reported in the papers that I had been 'manhandled'! I had to report to the police station that same evening and Sally, the policeman and I went there in the old Volks. They needed details of the car and a list of the articles lost, which were duly given.

That was a Friday and on the Monday two senior police officers arrived at the door with a roller containing my certificates which hadn't been included in the list given. They told me that there had been five car robberies on that same stretch of road during the weekend and that a clergyman who had resisted had been shot dead. They said I was lucky not to have pressed the accelerator. A Mayflower School teacher had lost his Volks which had been spotted in a side road and a few of my books and other things in and around it. They took me there to claim what I could. The Volks was badly damaged: windows broken, tyres gone, upholstery torn, but the teacher was glad to recover his car, wrecked as it was. All I got was a few files badly defaced by the weekend rain and two books, no cassettes, none of the gifts brought from home for the community, and none of my clothes. The handbag was of course missing, but it had only three Naira in it. All my files and all my works but a few had gone. I had previously thought that I could not manage without certain files and cassettes for my courses, but I don't remember ever having felt their lack. A lesson in the dispensability of goods as well as of people and in the goodness of God who more than supplies for our limitations.

In June 1986, my years in Ijebu Ode came to an end. How can I rate my time there? My experience of community was five star plus plus, beyond compare. My heartfelt thanks to Anne, Sally and, latterly Elizabeth for their warmth, interest and empathy, although my work was different to theirs. Unhappily, Sally cannot be thanked in person now as she went home to God in 2014. But I hope she knows that I was and am grateful.

I went home by Rome and in the Generalate arranged for the break from October until February 1987. During this semester I attended a course by Herbert Alphonso, SJ, on *Personal Vocation*, one on the Theology and Spirituality of Iconography, all in the Greg. And also a six-week course on Ignatian spirituality in the Ignatian Centre, given by several SJ specialists on the subject, including Alphonso, Aschenbrenner, Divarkar and John Navone.

When the sabbatical ended in February, my next mission was Cape Coast, Ghana. I had to wait for my

visa which arrived in March. I took off shortly after. My assignment in Ghana was the guidance of the Junior Professed Sisters (the JPs), and some service to the students in OLA training College. However it turned out that I had been appointed a full-time teacher in OLA, leaving me little time for the JPs. I managed well enough, using the holiday time for venues distant from Cape Coast, such as Ho and Hwidiem, the Cape Coast group at odd weekends. Unfortunately, my health was not great during that year, as I had a variety of illnesses including malaria, shingles and septicaemia and suspected diabetes and a few blackouts. The end of it was that both the Ghanaian Regional Superior, Rose Sumah and the Irish Provincial, Catherine O'Farrell decided that I should go back to Ireland for investigation and treatment. So in July 1988, I returned to Ireland. While I was at home, my younger brother (aged 39) died suddenly of a brain haemorrhage. Between everything, I did not return until November when I staved in Redco, our Accra house. I was scheduled for a course with the JPs in early January. Before I left Dublin, I was asked by Patricia McMenamin, General since 1988, to go to Rome when I had finished my commitments in West Africa, to do some research on our early Sisters, their mission and spirituality and also some translation. As well as the seminar in Cape Coast, I had commitment with the OLFs in Jos, Nigeria. So I packed my goods, files and some books in a big suitcase in Cape Coast and left it there indefinitely. (I actually recovered it in 1999 when

## Mary Anthony and I facilitated the Ghanaian OLA Chapter in Brafo Yau, Cape Coast).

I set off for Jos via Lagos in January 1989. I cannot remember much about the trip to Jos or what exactly I did with the OLFS but I finally left for Rome in March. I was no stranger to Rome or the Generalate, so I embarked on my work in the archives. I found the letters from our early Sisters captivating and the quite extraordinary courage and tenacity of their vocation more than inspiring and I never succeeded in conveying my perception of it in words. The mystery of their call to go into a wholly unknown land among an unknown people and to set about their mission as best they knew how, while enduring harsh conditions, privations, sickness and the likelihood of early death, enthralled me and still does. From my early days on mission, I have felt the presence and nearness of the Sisters who have gone before us, and have been encouraged and strengthened accordingly. Regarding my work, I decided to concentrate on the first 25 years of OLA mission and the spirituality that infused the Sisters. The eventual outcome of my time in the archives was the booklet called 'And their Cloak Fell on Us' which was published only in 2007, the year marking the centenary of Père Plangue's death.

In 1990, Sr. Patricia received a letter from the President of the Nigeria Conference of Women Religious, Sr. Veronica Openibo, SHCJ, asking if I could be released to form part of the team for the Institute for Formators (IFF) to be opened in the September of that year, I was delighted at the thought of returning on mission and happily Patricia believed the work of formation important enough to release me. So I returned to Nigeria in September, 1990.

Nigeria had become a Province of the OLA Congregation in May 1990. When I arrived I was met by Sr. Eymard from Maryland. She was holding the fort while the community had gone to Ibadan for the ceremonial handing back by the bishop of the proprietorship of Maryhill Convent School to OLA. Since the Institute was due to open or had opened, I left for Warri next morning on the Bendel Line. In fact, the bus did not leave Lagos until after mid-day (because of the environmental cleaning of streets, etc.). Mrs Bolaji Adenubi, a past pupil, had come to Maryland in the early morning to bring me to the bus station and stayed until the bus left. I still remember that journey. We, the passengers, were strangers to one another at the start but a great spirit of camaraderie developed and lasted until Warri. My luggage was at the back of the bus and I decided it would be easier to continue to the depot but one lady assured me that they would get the luggage out for me at the gate of Our Lady's. And so they very kindly did. However, I was stuck there for the gateman refused to open to me at this hour, a stranger as he thought I was. Poor man, his sight was failing and couldn't see I was a Sister. It was already dark and raining to boot. I demanded that he should call a Sister and so he did.

Assumpta, the junior member of the community, came to my rescue.

Next morning, I was brought to Agbarho, where the new Institute had temporary residence. The permanent building had vet to be built in Du, outside Jos. In the meantime, we were happy in Agbarho where Eileen Connell, OLA, was manageress and looked after us very well indeed. The PI was a horizontal H-shaped one-storied building. We, the staff and participants, occupied only one wing and we made the linking arm an administrative block including an office, a bedroom for visiting lecturers, a classroom and prayer room. A separate block nearer the gate contained the Chapel, community room, kitchen and dining room. After the IFF had left, a further separate block was added with a number of offices and bedrooms. It was in one of these offices that Eileen met her tragic death. The same room is now a Chapel.

To Ann Concannon, SSL, Coordinator of the Institute, had fallen the task of finding temporary accommodation for participants and staff. It wasn't easy to find either, especially staff. She and we were lucky to have been given by Bishop Fitzgibbon, SPS, a year's accommodation in Warri Pastoral Institute, (P.I.) Agbarho, a village about 12 kilometres outside the town. The PI was on the right side of the road to Port Harcourt and the village and Church just out of sight on the left. There was quite a lot of land both in front and behind the building and the back section went right down to the creeks. I think I was the only one who enjoyed investigating that part of the background. There was also a cemetery for the priests of the diocese there, and when Eileen died in 1995, Bishop Fitzgibbon wanted her buried in it but the OLA authorities insisted that she be buried with her Sisters in Asaba. But all that was later.

When I arrived in Agbarho that Sunday morning, I was welcomed by Ann and seven participants, the smallest group we were ever to have. The course was of two years duration. At that time, there was a third part-time member of staff, Sr. Janet HHCJ. As she was on their General Council she could only manage 10 days at a time. Then she travelled back to their Generalate in **Rivers** State for the rest of the month. It was a very demanding arrangement and when we went to Jos, she had to discontinue. Ann and I remained the basic staff. So my life in IFF began. I related easily with the staff and the participants. They were from different Congregations, four from the East, a Handmaid of the Holy Child Jesus (HHCJ), Daughters of Divine Love (DDL), Sisters of St. Louis (SSL), OLA, Society of the Holy Child Jesus (SHCJ), Holy Family Sisters of the Needy (HFSN), and Franciscan Missionaries of Divine Motherhood (FMDM). It was only in 1996 that men, religious and diocesan, began to come. I think some Congregations, male and female, waited until we proved our salt, as it were! While in Warri, some superiors thought we

should provide a degree course. So one day Ann and I went to Catholic Institute for West Africa (CIWA) in Port Harcourt to investigate the possibility of affiliation and what it would involve. We found requirements, such as exams and fixed courses, unacceptable for the purpose of the Institute, and we continued on our own road. The stress of exams would disrupt the reflective and formative character that we hoped the programme would have.

The building in Du was progressing slowly and Ann had to make a few trips north to urge the contractor (Italian) to make more haste as we hoped to occupy it in January in 1992. In November 1991, it was far from ready and we hadn't been given an extension in Agbarho. The Holy Child Sisters in Jos at the request of their Provincial, Veronica Openibo, very generously gave us the necessary six months accommodation in their centre there. Before the Christmas term ended in 1991, we packed the goods belonging to the Institute. We didn't have much and at this stage, I can't imagine how we filled our two cars, the 504 acquired a year previously, our old Volks and the bus lent to us for the purpose by the Religious Sisters of Charity. When we broke up for Christmas, Ann took the loaded 504 to Akure as she intended to leave for Jos from there. I was to drive the Volks, as I seemed to have the knack of restarting it when it stalled and Patricia Anyanwu, OLA, participant, was to travel on the RSC's bus. When the day of departure came, 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> January 1992, Nora Lucey of Effurun

community offered to share the driving and we set off for Asaba where we were to spend the night. However, we got no further than Agbor when the car gave up. The Sisters there called their mechanic who had to do quite on job on it. I think we spent the night there and set off for Jos in the morning. We reached Makurdi without any mishap, but we stalled once or twice on the escarpment. Our destination was Zawan until we eventually moved into the Holy Child centre. When Ann arrived, she investigated the building in Du. Eventually, we all moved to the Holy Child Centre in Jos for the beginning of the new term.

The Holy Child Sisters welcomed us warmly and never even hinted at the inconvenience our presence must have caused them. Our first set of participants had their 30 day retreat there, directed by Bob Hamm and Paul Maher, both SJs. I also had a Holy Child novice making the 30 day retreat. The first group ended their 2 year course programme and graduated in June 1992. That June I was due for home leave and left from Kano as I did until 1998. At that time Kano airport was far smaller and less stressful than Lagos. Later the point of departure for the North was Abuja, but I never took an international flight from there. Afterwards, it was always to be Lagos for me.

Shortly after the retreat, we decided to go on a picnic and chose as our venue the site of the new building in Du. It must have been a holiday for there wasn't a soul around the place. The building was only roof-high

and it looked very unready for occupation the following September. I think it was the first time I saw the site and I liked it very much, placed as it was under a huge rock or hill. Jos being a volcanic area there were similar rocky hills to our right but there was also a great expanse of plateau to our left and in front of us. There was also an immense sky-scape so we enjoyed the starry nights as well as glorious sunsets. I particularly loved the nights when the full moon floodlit the hills, rocks and the entire plateau even though the stars seemed dimmer. Altogether, it was a peaceful place and encouraged reflection and contemplation. On either side there were small villages: one, Kazong Madu, was the abode of the chief with whom we became very friendly. He assured us that we would have perfect security and every cooperation. It was he who recommended his adopted daughter as cook. It was arranged that she should go to the Pastoral Institute in Jos where she would get some training in the kitchen there. In the smaller village on the left, we found a man, Dabi, who would serve as driver for many years. This area was COCIN (Church of Christ in Nigeria) but the difference in confession made no impact on our easy and friendly relationships. When the Catholic Parish of Shen was launched in May 1992, the COCIN pastor attended and gave a generous donation. Du was quite near Zawan: about 10 to 15 minutes by car, depending on the season. The road between the Institute and the Du village was very rough with many potholes. Some of them were guite deep and, in the rainy season,

when they filled with water, one could never be sure that the car could make it. Zawan was my community and I visited when I got the chance, sometimes for weekends. I enjoyed many visits and celebrations there. It was my community, as Effurun had been in Warri. I always felt at home there. While I was in Du, there were always junior professed sisters (JPs) in Zawan, so I was their spiritual director. Some of them were able to motorcycle to Du, others I met in Zawan.

Life in IFF went on at an even pace. The only variation was in the second term: once in the two-year course, the participants had a 30 day retreat in February and had the Easter ceremonies in the first year, including the Seder or Passover meal. We went on a picnic once a year, usually to the Asaph Falls, a beautiful spot. The content of the course altered hardly at all, except that we had more external lecturers. For me, the years spent there were enriching and maturing. There were sad events too, some being the news of Eileen Connell's death and the very sad death of our little cook, Rose, who left behind a husband and four children. She is buried on the hill behind the staff house. We all sadly missed her pleasant presence and her caring way of looking after us. Life went on as it always does and good things come to an end in spite of us. In the end for me, it came when I realised that I had to resign as my health was causing anxiety to Ann and Mary in Zawan. The fact was that I was having repeated blackouts and never knew when the next would come. So in September I said goodbye to Du

and to the IFF as a permanent member and went on leave for further medical checks. However, I revisited Du in 1998 and gave a few weeks' course on Spirituality.

In the year 1997, I was asked to give input at the OLA formation session in Cairo which included a pilgrimage of 4 days to Sinai. I was delighted about Sinai as I had always wanted to climb that mountain. When I was in the Holy Land as part of my studies in 1974, it was impossible to visit Sinai because of the uneasy relations between Israel and Egypt. The session in Cairo was successful enough as far as I remember. We had Formators from every Province, not only OLAs but other Congregations as well. So it was a very international affair. Whether in the middle of the course or at the end, we set off for Sinai before dawn. It was bright by the time we reached the Red Sea, and crossed by the tunnel beneath it. We were of course in desert land, passing on our way the traditional sites of Massah and Meribah, spoken of in Psalm 96. The further we progressed, the more we appreciated the rebellion of the Israelites against Moses. Barren mountains, barren land, sand everywhere. We were riding in luxury in an airconditioned bus while the Israelites had been on foot and burdened by bundles of whatever possessions they could carry. Furthermore, before we turned into the depth of the Sinaitic desert, we stopped at a restaurant for a meal and especially for something to drink. (No water from a rock for us and no Moses to

strike it). It seemed a very long haul, South-eastwards to Sinai, although there was an oasis on the route we had taken and a monastery there that we visited. At last we arrived at Sinai in the desert twilight. Accommodation for pilgrims had been built near St. Catherine's monastery (Greek Orthodox) and it was quite adequate. After supper, we went out to view the environs. I was anxious to look at Mount Sinai itself. Fr. Jean Vincent, SMA, was with us and it was his 11<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup> visit to Sinai. We sat on rocks and gazed at the monastery. The lights were coming on and the monks presumably retiring. Fr. Jean assured us that the mountain we were looking at was only the starting point of Sinai. We were scheduled to climb that night at 12.00 midnight in order to reach the summit at dawn to see the sun rise over the desert to the East. After a short climb. I had to admit that I would find it very hard to make it. So I took a camel on offer that would carry me to the top. I shall never forget that ride and climb. The sky was ablaze with stars and there was a full moon which surprisingly didn't seem to dim the starlight. There was a clear view to the East and the austere mountains that ringed the valley far below.

To my surprise, lights appeared here and there in the mountain face over the valley and on inquiry, I was told that from time to time, monks climbed to caves there where they spent some time on retreat. The glory of the heavens, the depths of the valley beneath, the majesty of the craggy mountains, the evidence of persons in prayer and contemplation of the God of Moses and Elijah and of all who worshiped on the mountain, of all of us, all this created a reflective and contemplative mood. As for me, sitting at ease on the camel, I had the advantage of being free to contemplate all this beauty. On the way down in the morning by foot, when I saw where the camel stepped so daintily, I realised that I might not have felt so comfortable and secure the night before!

Half-way up, those on camels had to dismount at a camel station and start climbing. The climb was tough but we all arrived in time. There were other pilgrims from different European countries and USA who spoke encouraging words as they passed us. At the summit, we sat around waiting for the rising sun. It was very cold in the morning, the Sisters from West Africa were frozen. Coffee, sold at a little kiosk, helped and we found a place on the rocks for Mass. That was a very memorable occasion. Fr. Jean celebrated it beautifully, inducing reflection and deep prayer. Then began our descent. I was very slow and tried to persuade the Sisters who accompanied me to go ahead but Mary Crowley and Martha, SMMC, from Ghana refused to go. We arrived, had breakfast and were told that if we wanted to see the interior of the Monastery, we had to be ready in a short time. Almost all of us were glad to see as much of it as we were shown. Apart from the Church, we went further back and viewed many wonderful icons, dating from the early centuries. There I saw an icon of Christ which attracted me greatly. I procured a few copies in the shop outside when we left the monastery. I am looking at a copy now! We were free for the rest of that day and we needed that time to absorb the impact of the climb of Mount Sinai. And now, 23 years later, something of the sense of mystery in that impact eludes my power of expression, the sense of the then and the now, all one, as it is for the eternal God for whom all is NOW. I find that mystery transfixing and quite inexplicable as mystery always is and maybe this isn't the place for such ruminations anyway!

I do not remember whether it was the next day or the day after that we had an excursion to Sharm-El-Sheik, a resort in the South of Sinai. The hotel owner there was a relation of Sr. Irini, the Egyptian Provincial, and she had made arrangements for our visit. When we arrived, we found a long table beautifully prepared for us on the beach and a delicious meal ready. Some went swimming and then most of us went on a trip in a glass bottomed boat, so we had a view of Sinai from the sea and the distant desert hills of Saudi Arabia. Looking downwards we could see swarms of fish of every colour imaginable. Wonderful. We arrived back in Sinai by a different route. Eventually, we left for Cairo. Then, I think, we had a day or two before ending the Formation Course. Sr. Irini had asked Patricia if I could remain behind to give something or other to the communities. So until mid November, I remained in Egypt, spending some days in each community and travelling from Alexandria to Girgah, the most southerly OLA house. I travelled by train along the Nile and visited every house. It was quite an experience and demanding too. While in Girgah, I visited an ancient palace (or what remained of it) which the Sisters told me was on a par with some of the palaces in the Valley of the Kings. I never reached there and had no strong desire to do so. Just as well since a little later, not even a week later, there was the massacre of tourists, guides and whatever workers happened to be around by the infamous Muslim Brethren, a group of fanatics. They also had machine-gunned a class of First Communicant children near our house in Mensafis, a village South of Assiout. In Girgah, too, security was not absolute. I was warned that it wasn't safe to stav on the flat roof for a long period. "They could take a pot shot at you", the Sisters said. A pity, as there was a splendid view over the Nile to the Sahara which stretched flat and golden as far as the eve could see. It was in Girgah that I learned more about the injustice in law courts and other public services. One family that a Sister and I visited had a court case coming up. The couple were quite fatalistic and said, "We have everything on our side, but we are going to lose the case. It is always the way when our opponents are Muslim". Egypt is certainly a Muslim country. The Sisters always remind visitors that it was Christian in the first and second centuries and the faith continue to grow although speckled with heresies from time to time. It also had produced some of the greatest saints of the early Church - the Fathers of the desert such as

Anthony, Pachomius and others and those known as the Fathers of the Church who took significant parts in the Councils, Cyprian, Cyril of Alexandria and then later Augustine. The Egyptian OLAs explained that with the violent incursion of Islam, the Arabs settled in Egypt and established Islam. Many Egyptians remained faithful to Christianity and passed on the faith to their descendants. Therefore, the Sisters said, the Christians are the Egyptians of the Pharaonic line. It is probably substantially true.

When my 'mission' to the houses was completed, I returned to Cairo and visited the communities there: Choubran, Meadi, Zeitoun and, in the North, Alexandria. Then it was time for departure. The whole period in Egypt was most memorable and I carried away wonderful memories. Back to Ireland, I prepared for take-off for Nigeria. I had time to visit two dear friends who had been diagnosed with terminal cancer: Rita Boyle (my best friend outside the Congregation since childhood) and Sr. Áine Cox who was in Castlemagarret. Áine died the following year but Rita almost miraculously survived for nine years.

When I had retired from IFF, Du, it was tacitly understood that I would stay in Zawan where I would have medical care at hand and be a sort of resource person to IFF. There was also some undemanding Parish work on offer. However, when I arrived in Lagos, I learned that I was being sent to the OLA Novitiate in Ibadan. Mary Anthony assured me that dialogue would follow in September 1998, but it never happened! I was to remain there as a formation team member for eighteen years.

What can I say about my years in Maryhill? So many things happened that I am bound to omit some. I cannot hope to recount even half. When I first went in 1997, Sr. Josephine Enenmo was novice directress and Carmel Cox, her assistant, and in charge of the house. Jo had finished her training in Du in 1996 and had spent six months in the Postulate in Agbor, so she had newly come to the Novitiate. In Bethany House, where I was to reside, there were two school Sisters and a few student Sisters. It was not yet an established community for we ate and praved with the Novitiate. It became a community in 1999 and the number of students grew. There were so many changes of community there that I shall not try to list the members and the changes, though I remember the Sisters I lived with there with gratitude and affection.

Carmel went home finally in 1999 and her sister, Jo, arrived in her place in 2000. The two Jo's were easy to work with, though I didn't always agree with one or the other. However, we were always able to laugh and had a lot of camaraderie together. Jo Enenmo completed her eight years in the Novitiate in 2005 and left for higher studies in London. I visited her there several times on my way home. She is back in Nigeria and is running the IFF in Du with distinction. She is a very good friend. Jo Cox had to leave for health reasons but recovered well and has been working with Cuan Muire in Cork for many years. Jo Enenmo was replaced by Margaret Uhwache who took over the helm of the Novitiate in 2005 and very ably directed it for eight years also. To my regret, she too, left in 2013 and is now completing studies in Kenya. Bridget Okonye replaced Jo Cox in 2008 and took over from Margaret when the latter left in 2013. Sr. Faustina Annan came from Ghana to be the assistant novice mistress and take charge of the house. At the time of writing, they are still there.

The number of novices varied. Sometimes it fell to about thirteen or fourteen, other times it rose to sixteen or more. At present, there are twenty-two novices there. I grew to love the novices and felt rejuvenated and energised by them. They were wonderful young women, I thought, as I looked at them in class or going about their daily chores, trying to keep a timetable, fitting into a way of life they had never experienced before. Most of them had thirdlevel education of different categories, being either trained teachers or graduates, with a few nurses. Not so many nurses, as admission to the degree course demanded qualifications in Physics, Chemistry and higher Maths, subjects which many schools, especially girls' schools did not offer. There was always a sprinkle of girls with just School Cert and the required credits. All these young women had

prospects but heard the mysterious call and were given the grace and generosity to answer it.

Class with the novices could be invigorating - and it could be the opposite. I taught Spirituality, and OLA Spirituality, in particular, as lived and as in the Constitutions. We also looked at prayer and methods that might help one. Most years I had the second year novices for spiritual direction. There were other subjects, of course, and then there was choir and, and when possible, music. At Christmas there were plays and pageants to be staged. The practices were never dull to say the least of it! One night there could be war and the next night praise! The end performances were sometimes just passable and at other times very good.

Besides direction in the Novitiate, there were other people, Sisters of other Congregations and priests, who came for spiritual guidance and up to 2012 for retreats, too. The retreats were demanding, as there were the Novitiate classes at the same time. During my time in the Novitiate, I directed the 30 day retreat nine times and learned a lot myself. Four times (or five) in Iperu for Missionary Seminary of St. Paul (MSP) post-philosophy students, once in Ghana at the end of the 3 months pre-final vows preparation course for OLAs of all nationalities, the other times in Bethany House, one of these times being for a group of St. Louis Sisters. There were also weekend seminars, etc. to be given here and there, such as the St. Louis in Akure, the Eucharistic Heart of Jesus Sisters (EHJ) in Ikeja and OLAs in Maryland. So all my years in Maryhill were busy and enriching. Yet at no time had I the sense of being overworked nor was I. When I stopped having retreats in the house, the last two years were quieter, and I often felt that I hadn't enough to do, although I was aware that my energy was diminishing.

It was the custom in the Novitiate to go on a day's excursion twice a year: once with all the novices, and, before their profession, once with the second years alone. The novices were given their choice of venue which was nearly always the sea, Eleko beach, less often Tarkwa Bay or Badagry. These days were greatly enjoyed by all. Once we all went on pilgrimage to Topo, a visit I mentioned earlier.

My time in Maryhill was immeasurably enriching. I learned much and never ceased to marvel at the power of God's spirit at work in others, especially these young women, our novices. I was also given many insights regarding myself, unflattering ones which nevertheless contributed to my own spiritual growth - I hope. My overall memory of life at that time is of peace and joy -mostly. There were days of sadness, too, occasions when a novice whom we had watched struggle to adapt to our life, had to be asked to go, and days of bereavement. A huge shock to all of us was the short illness and death of our novice, Dorcas Adimah, on 4<sup>th</sup> May, 2009. We mourned her deeply and the grief remained with us for a long, long

time. Here I have to give credit to the novices who conducted themselves with dignity throughout the wake-keep and funeral.

While in Maryhill, I met many people, old friends and new, past pupils who were now my good friends, Sisters' families, families of our workers and teachers in the School and many other priests of the diocese and elsewhere, the priests in the Seminary who gave us daily Mass, various religious Congregations and Societies, male and female, special mention to OLAs and especially to our SMA brothers, both in the formation house and elsewhere in Ibadan.

In 2014 I had some health problems and near the time for my home leave, I had a nasty attack of malaria and was hospitalised for a week. When I arrived home in July, the Provincial Council decided that I should not return. I was shattered, the ground opened under my feet and all I could say was: "My dwelling has been removed from me like a shepherd's tent ... He has cut me off from the loom". (Is. 38:14)

However, I could see the reason for it but found it very difficult to accept as God's will for me that my mission ad extra should be ended. Eventually, grace prevailed and I bowed to His will. To my delight, the following February 2015, I was allowed back for the Silver Jubilee of the Nigerian Province and also the Silver Jubilee of the IFF. The invitation to return gave me the chance to say goodbye to many friends and my THE UNCHARTED ROAD: MEMOIRS OF A MISSIONARY LIFE

dear Sisters and finally to Nigeria, almost sixty years since my arrival there in 1956.

## PART THREE

Some Concluding

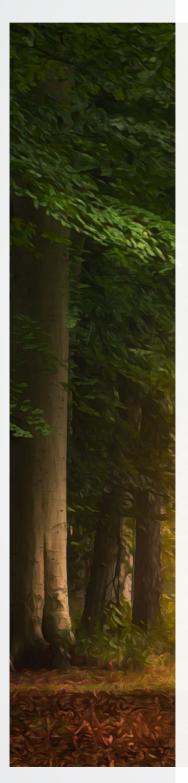
Now, within three days of my 90th birthday, I thank God for the gift of life, for the little good I may have done by His grace, and I leave my many failures to His mercy. Retirement is accepted gracefully by many; others have to struggle to find meaning in it and in the disabilities of old age. I find my own experience almost wholly expressed in a poem by Rabindranath Tagore and so I shall end my Memoirs by quoting from it:

Closed Path I thought that my path had come to its end At the last limit of my power ---That the path before me was closed

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That provisions were exhausted And the time come to take shelter in a silent obscurity.

But I find that thy will knows no end in me. And when old words die out on my tongue, New melodies break out on the heart; And where the old tracks are lost, New country is revealed with its wonders.





**Sr Eithne McDevitt**, a Sister of Our Lady of Apostles (OLA), now resident in Ardfoyle, Cork (Ireland), recently celebrated her ninetieth birthday. Still with a remarkable memory, she presents us in this book with an inspiring, insightful, informative and enlightening treasure.

It is the life story of a woman of faith, an Irish woman on a missionary journey, particularly in Africa. Sr Eithne's journey included over fortyfive years in Nigeria, two years in Ghana, a year in other West African countries, almost seven years in Rome, two years in London, and the rest - before, during and after her time in Africa - , in various parts of Ireland. She ministered in the fields of education, religious formation, spiritual direction, administration, religious leadership; she was a pioneer in many places, touched the lives of many people and was herself greatly enriched by all those with whom she shared this journey.

Her Memoirs serve as a source of historical insight for the Church in Nigeria and other places where she served, as well as providing a source of inspiration to many today who seek to find purpose and direction in life.