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VINCENTIAN PRESENCE IN NIGERIA 1960_1994

Richard Ikechukwu Diala, c.m.

A RESUME

The Irish Province of the Vincentians came to Nigeria on November 1st, 1960, exactly one month after Nigerian Independence, at the invitation of Bishop James Moynagh of Calabar diocese. Fathers Frank Mullan CM, Harry Morrin CM, and Paddy Hughes CM, were the first set of explorers.

As soon as they arrived, and after their orientation and apprenticeship courses, they set up a temporary house together in the township of Ikot Ekpene. Around this temporary abode were built the presbytery and St. Vincent's parish church, in 1963 and 1965 respectively. These structures were sponsored by the generous people of Phibsboro, Dublin, Ireland. This first group of Irish Vincentians had its early remarkable sad moment when, at the end of May 1965, Fr Harry Morrin suddenly died of a heart problem. Nevertheless, by 1966 there were about seven Irish Vincentians, including Fr Frank Mullan CM who in later years became Provincial.

Most of them were mainly involved in mission and retreat work, in parishes, to priests and religious, schools etc. They criss-crossed the length and breadth of Eastern Nigeria, especially Igboland. By the time the Nigerian crisis started in July 1966, with massacres in the northern part of the country and progressed into a civil war in May 1967, the Vincentians had gone to Abakaliki in the then Ogoja diocese, Uzoagba and Atta in Owerri diocese.

The Nigeria--Biafra War, as it was called, halted the progressive expansion of the Vincentians into other parts of the country, especially when most of the missionaries in the Biafran side were forced to leave, either owing to the intensity of the war, or by the Federal Government, between 1967 and February 1970.

However, at the end of the Civil War in January 1970, with the intervention of the Apostolic Nuncio in Lagos, seven Irish Vincentians left Dublin: Fathers **Roderic Crowley, Frank Murphy, Pdraig Regan** and **Bill Clarke**, for Port Harcourt diocese in the east, while Fathers **Vinnie O'Brien, Tom Devine** and **Tim Casey** left for Makurdi diocese, a new expansion towards the middle belt of Nigeria.

The Vincentian missions and retreats were appealing to young Nigerians and, as early as 1968, some had started showing interest in becoming Vincentians. By late 1970, the first two Nigerians to be accepted, and sent to Ireland for novitiate and seminary training, were Timothy Njoku and Anthony Njoku.

In Makurdi diocese the Vincentians were involved in the training of catechists, "*Church Leaders*", and eucharistic ministers, and in missions and retreats. Fr O'Brien became the Principal of Emmanuel College, Obokolo, in January 1973. St Vincent's Parish, Ogobia, was also assigned to the Vincentians. At Port Harcourt the Vincentians were involved in the Minor Seminary, in Our Lady's Parish, Creek Road, as well as in preaching retreats.

The end of the crisis saw the Vincentians return to Ikot Ekpene, where they had started in 1960. Thirteen years later, in 1973, a remarkable joyous moment came when the first Nigerian Vincentian, Fr Timothy Njoku CM -- having completed his novitiate and studies in Ireland -- was ordained by Bishop Dominic Ekandem, the local Ordinary. This joy was to be climaxed ten years later (in the same Ikot Ekpene, in 1983), when the "*foundation novices*", who were totally trained in Nigeria, were to be ordained, on July 16th, by Dominic Cardinal Ekandem. Thus Fathers Richard Ikechukwu Diala CM and Michael Ime Edem CM were to become the litmus test for locally trained Vincentians.

The year 1975 is also special in the annals of the history books of the Vincentians in Nigeria. This year saw the ordination of the second Nigerian, Rev. Anthony Njoku (who is seen by some as being on loan to the Owerri Diocese), and the opening of the Nigerian Vincentian Novitiate at Ogobia, Makurdi diocese. Fr Paul Roche CM (the great builder), the first Novice Master, with the three "*foundation novices*", Richard Diala, Michael Edem and John Amadi (who left after some years), started the novitiate programme in August/September 1975.

In 1974 and 1976 respectively, the Vincentians were involved in the formation of the local clergy, in the largest seminary in the world in recent years, the Bigard Memorial Seminary, Enugu and Ikot Ekpene. Fr James Cahalan, "*Papa*" as he was fondly called by his students, of blessed memory, was at Bigard, Enugu. Fathers Myles Rearden and Roderic Crowley were at Bigard, Ikot Ekpene. The two campuses of theology and philosophy would number more than 700 students.

By 1979 the Vincentians had been invited by the Archbishop of Onitsha, Francis Arinze, to come and run a new parish at Oraifite, which eventually formed the base of the retreat team for the coming years. The Vincentians also established a vocational school for girls there. In order to consolidate the community and Vincentian spirit among the seminarians a student house was built at Abiakpo, Ikot Ekpene diocese, in 1982, from where they were attending lectures at the nearby Bigard Seminary, Ikot Ekpene campus. In 1990, a hostel was hired at Enugu for the theology students studying at Bigard Seminary, Enugu. Prior to this, the Vincentians had built and opened the Regional House in Enugu in 1988. The proposed Retreat/Pastoral Centre, at Oraifite, archdiocese of Onitsha, is still to be realized.

There is no doubt that the Vincentian charism and apostolate are much appreciated by many members of the Nigerian ecclesiastical authorities. There are a lot of invitations from dioceses and provinces for the Vincentians to come and work, either in parishes or seminaries, but unfortunately the Little Company has not

been able to answer most of them owing to lack of personnel and qualified manpower. So, the Vincentians' preoccupation in Nigeria is not so much what to do, as the personnel to do what is available, and also what lies ahead. The numbers are yet few, which makes it even more difficult to send confreres for specialised training.

In spite of all, there is progress and hope - the "*slow motion*" notwithstanding - and it is believed that the Irish Province would, like the local dioceses and other religious communities, cash-in on the vocations boom in Nigeria now, because the Nigeria of tomorrow could be like the Europe and America of today, with few vocations. Today, there are nineteen Nigerian Vincentian priests, one brother and thirty-one students and novices.

Having been involved myself in vocation and retreat works in this Little Company, it is true to say that the Vincentian charisms of care for the poor and the preaching of the word, among others, appeal to many African youths, more than other charisms would. That accounts for the many applications we receive each year.

Looking back over thirty-four years of the Vincentian presence in Nigeria, one could say that something has been achieved. Nigerians know that the Vincentians exist and that they are a group that preaches the gospel for the upliftment of the poor. Nigerians have also experienced this Vincentian involvement in the prison apostolate, even as seminarians; also chaplaincy work with the Society of St Vincent de Paul at both diocesan and national level; the rehabilitation of the homeless, care for the disabled etc.

It is hoped that, before the year 2000, the Irish Province would consolidate the more her missionary activity in Nigeria by increasing the number of physical structures and local personnel, in order to establish a formidable base for the birth of a Nigerian Province. Nigerians will ever remain grateful to our Irish confreres, both the living and those who have gone before us, signed with the sign of peace.