



Bishop Joseph Shanahan

Brendan Comerford SJ tells the story of Bishop Joseph Shanahan, who played an important role in the Church in Nigeria.

I did my secondary schooling in Rockwell College, Cashel, County Tipperary. This boarding school is run by the Holy Ghost Fathers (now called the 'Spiritans'). On the walls of the 'Long Hall' are the pictures of distinguished past students, pictures of Spiritan missionary bishops being to the fore. Among these bishops was a very striking figure with a long beard – almost Saint Patrick-like! Below the picture was the name Bishop Joseph Shanahan.

Joseph Shanahan was born near Borrisoleigh, Co. Tipperary in 1871 and went to a local national school. An early influence on Joseph was his uncle Patrick, a religious Brother in the Spiritans (Brother Adelm). Patrick often talked of his desire to go to Africa to be a missionary there. Young Joseph listened to his uncle telling stories of the bravery of the French Spiritan missionaries in Africa and of how they were ready to live and die for their cause. The heroism of these missionaries began to fire his imagination. When he left national school, Joseph's dream – to be a missionary priest in Africa was clear – but the way was not.

His uncle Patrick was living in the community in Beauvais about fifty miles north of Paris, where the Spiritans ran St Joseph's Secondary School for boys. At Uncle Patrick's request,

Joseph was admitted free into the school. He learned French quickly and soon came to terms with the new culture.

Joseph pursued his studies in various Spiritan establishments in France. He was formally accepted into the Congregation and after some years of theological studies was sent back to Ireland to teach in Rockwell College. There he would teach French, Latin and Greek, and coach rugby.

After ordination in 1900 Joseph was sent back to Rockwell. In 1901, he made his final vows and then wrote to the Superior-General requesting that he be sent to Nigeria. He set out for Nigeria in October 1902.

Joseph's first posting was to Onitsha on the river Niger with the Igbo tribe. The Spiritan missionaries shared the poverty of the poor, living in mud huts with palm-thatched roofs, caring for widows, orphans, lepers and unwanted people.

Soon Joseph was sent to the nearby town of Ogboli. He learned Igbo from the children, and knew it was time for a school. With the boys he erected a rude structure of mud and thatch. "He was a man without boundaries," remarked one of the early pupils. Another said, "People were drawn to him more than to others because he was good." Before the mid-year vacation



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On 26 September 1905, Joseph was appointed Prefect Apostolic, with the title of 'Monsignor'. His territory was twice the size of Ireland, with only 11 priests, 2 of them Irish; 9 Brothers and 10 Sisters. The rivers were the only means of communication. The vast unexplored territory of the hinterland was untouched. People there had never seen a white person or a missionary. By the year 2000, it had become 19 dioceses!

Fr Shanahan decided that the few missionaries he had must go to the unexplored interior and bring Christianity to the mainstream of Igbo

life. His method was to speak to the chief of each village telling him the advantages of having a school in the village. If the chief were in agreement he would sell the idea to his people, give a piece of land for a school, and labourers to clear the bush and help with the building.

In his talks to the people he always emphasised that the purpose of the school was not just to educate but to Christianise, to open minds and souls to the Word of God. As the children got to know the missionary, he was accepted by the parents. In a report to Rome in 1912, he wrote: "The school keeps the missionary in contact with the people, because the children give

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them free entry into every house. He is no longer a stranger but a member of the family.”

Shanahan opened the first teacher training college in Igbarim in 1913 with secondary schools from the 1930s onwards. In the meantime he had acquired a motor cycle, his ‘iron horse’, which, at times, nearly cost him his life!

It was the boys who came to the schools. The parents saw no need of education for girls. They got married at an early age and left the family. The fate of girls concerned Fr Shanahan. At this stage, however, he was ill and worn out. Returning to Ireland he was admitted to hospital in Dublin. Before his convalescence had ended he received word from Rome that he had been appointed the first bishop of Onitsha. He chose Maynooth for the ceremony of his ordination as bishop in 1920. He used the occasion to launch the idea of laity as missionaries.

In 1924, Bishop Shanahan founded the Holy Rosary Sisters (Killeshandra). Four years later he welcomed the first group of Sisters to Nigeria. Through schools and colleges they prepared girls for life and helped them play an active role in nation-building. In delivering health care at various levels in hospitals and other institutions they taught Christianity in action.

In 1927, Bishop Shanahan offered his resignation to Rome but Pope Pius

XI did not accept it. Instead he was told to choose a coadjutor (a bishop with right of succession). His choice was Fr Charles Heerey, a Cavan man, who succeeded him five years later. When he left Nigeria, the number of Christians was over 94,500 and over 116,000 s preparing to become Christians.

Bishop Shanahan retired to Blackrock College, Dublin. He gave retreats occasionally and talks on the missions. In 1938, he accepted an invitation from Bishop Heffernan of Zanzibar, East Africa, to go to Kenya. He was overjoyed to return to Africa. He was chaplain to a newly-opened community of Irish Carmelite nuns who, would refer to him as ‘our saint’. One of the nuns wrote: “When you met him, it was as if meeting our Lord.”

Though happy in Kenya, he felt isolated. Not knowing the language, he could not have much contact with the people, nor engage in active ministry. His health continued to deteriorate. He died on Christmas morning 1943 and was buried the next day in the mission plot in Nairobi.

The Igbo people of Onitsha were not happy that their spiritual father was not buried with them. So in 1955, Bishop Shanahan’s remains were exhumed and brought back to Onitsha. He was buried in the cathedral he had consecrated twenty-one years earlier. 