

THE AUGUSTINIAN MISSION TO NIGERIA: FROM 1938 TO 2001

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Abstract

This paper is a historical study of the presence of the Order of Saint Augustus in Nigeria from 1938 to 2001. In relating the story of how our presence in Nigeria began as a response in faith to the call of the Church to evangelise Africa, and how we set out for the Province of Adamawa in answer to the call of the Holy See, we see how our being led 'from above' can lead to the most beautiful results for God, the Church and the Augustinian Order.

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Introduction

In his circular letter of 1st. November 2013, addressed to the brethren of the Province of St Augustine in Nigeria, Prior Provincial Very Rev. Fr. John Abubakar expressed the hope that the Diamond Jubilee [1938 – 2013] of our current presence in this country might “stimulate in us a greater appreciation of the missionary dimension of our Augustinian vocation, towards a more determined resolve to spread the Order where it is needed”. His letter ends with this challenging exhortation: “No one can predict to what heights one can soar, even you will not know until you spread your wings. Let us spread our wings so as to fly to our God-determined destiny as an Order, to the greater glory of His name”.

In relating the story of how our presence in Nigeria began as a response in faith to the call of the Church to evangelise Africa, and how we set out for the Province of Adamawa in answer to the call of the Holy See, we see how our being led 'from above' can lead to the most beautiful results for God, the Church and the Augustinian Order. One may, perhaps, wonder that it took all of sixty-three years before a fully autonomous Province *sui iuris* was established here and the umbilical cord with the Irish Province was severed, but that would show a short-sighted appreciation of the primary mission confided to the Irish Province

in 1938; namely, the evangelisation and establishment of the Church in Adamawa Province. And, as has been said on numerous occasions, Yola is to the Augustinians what Onitsha is to the Spiritans and Lagos and Shendam to the SMA.

Happily, the moral links between the Irish, Anglo-Scottish and Nigerian provinces remains strong, as should be evident from this work. Most of what follows here is culled from an earlier work, *The Irish Augustinians in Nigeria: 1939-1992*, prepared for another jubilee and published by St Patrick's College in Rome in 1994. It is a story, not an academic study, and so is happily bereft of footnotes and references, placed in the context of the world of that time, but also with some personal interpretations of events which may lead to debate. So let us gather around the fire – *cois ne tine*, as we say in Ireland – and listen to the story.

The decision taken at the Provincial Chapter of the Irish Province in 1936 to apply to Rome for a mission territory *(etc. as in text supplied, with amendments. Continue to end of p. 178 – as supplied – and then carry on, as follows]*

Augustinian Assistant General, and a number of former missionaries from Ireland. Among them was Fr Dan Kelleher, the first Principal of St Michael's Secondary School, who then spent some months helping out in the Cathedral parish in Yola. Fr F.R. O'Shaughnessy, Director of the Augustinian Mission Association in Dublin for the past 24 years, was also present. As such, he represented the thousands of Irish people who had supported the 'Adamawa Mission over the past fifty years and contributed, by their prayers and contributions, to its flowering and success.

Meanwhile, in Nigeria the number of indigenous members of the Vice Province was growing rapidly, especially from 1988, when three solemnly professed brothers – Anthony Edukore, John Okafor and Matthew Onaulogho – were ordained on the same day, 18th June. They were followed a year later by Frs. Bede Njoku, Jonas Gugong and Elias Goewam (who subsequently left the Order and became a diocesan priest). These were followed by Frs. Patrick Akinrimisi, John Dangmi, David Malam, and Peter Medugu. From the early 1990s the numbers increased – in 1993 there were five ordinations – and so the complexion of the Vice Province changed from being a mainly Irish enterprise to becoming an almost fully Nigerian body.

There were, of course, also departures and some heartbreaks. Hardest of all to take was the death of Fr John Dangmi, in England, on 4th March 1994. He had become seriously ill in Nigeria and was sent abroad in the hope that he might be cured. It was not to be, and he was buried in the grounds of Clare Priory, the mother house of all English-speaking Augustinians, having been established as early as 1248.

The increase in numbers meant that there could be further expansion of essential structures. What began, in 1989, as assistance to the staffing of St Thomas Aquinas Major Seminary in Makurdi, by Frs Denis Mason and Matthew Onaulogho, soon gave way to acquiring a plot for an Augustinian student house, adjacent to the Seminary. It would accommodate our students of Philosophy, who by then were already living in the Seminary. Fr Richard Hughes was called in to advise on and supervise the construction of the present Community structures, which would be even larger than the accommodation available in Jos. It was all in place by 1995 and the 'monastery' in Makurdi was first used for a major Vice-Provincial gathering when the Ordinary Chapter of 1997 took place there. There will be more on this major event anon.

By then the versatile Fr. Hughes had transferred to the sacristy of the old St John's church in Mararaba. This followed the purchase of a site for a Secondary School near New Karu [*where St Augustine's College now stands*] and the perceived need for a pastoral outlet nearby. Bishop Usuh of Makurdi, in whose diocese Mararaba then lay, indicated the growing suburb of Mararaba, where St John's had been opened as an outstation of Keffi and now came under New Karu parish. It may be recalled that Abuja had taken the place of Lagos as capital city of Nigeria in 1991 and its future importance for the Order was obvious. When the Apostolic Nuncio, Archbishop Carlo Maria Viganò, together with Bishop Usuh, visited St. John's on 21 March 1997, both were shocked by the Spartan conditions in which Fr Hughes lived. Soon afterwards a large site, nearer to the main road, was purchased by the Vice Province and earmarked for a new Augustinian residence and church.

We now turn our attention to the Diocese of Yola, where the southern part of the diocese had, on 3rd. February 1995, been constituted as the new Diocese of Jalingo. To the great joy of everyone in Yola, the former Vicar General of the diocese, Fr. Ignatius Kaigama (who hailed from Kona, a Jukun village close to Jalingo), was ordained as first Bishop of Jalingo on 23rd April that year. The new diocese would comprise the Mumuye area around Yakoko and Zing to the north,

and the vast territory to the south, stretching to Wukari, Takum and even Gembu on the Mambilla Plateau. Bishop Sheehan of Yola had, at this time, been instrumental in bringing a community of enclosed Carmelite Sisters to Zing, and that too would go to the new diocese of Jalingo.

Little did people realise at the time that Bishops Sheehan's days in Yola were numbered. To the surprise of all, and the consternation of some, it was announced, in June 1996, that he had been transferred to the Vicariate of Kano as Vicar Apostolic. Not even the Vicar General in Yola, Fr Declan Brennan OSA, was aware of the move, which was effected later that year. At the same time the Bishop of Minna, Most Rev. Christopher Abba [now deceased] was transferred to Yola and was installed there as its third bishop in December 1996. Bishop Sheehan's transfer to Kano was followed by the granting of a parish [St Rita's] to the care of the Augustinian Vice Province in early 1999, and soon afterwards by the elevation of the Vicariate to the status of diocese [22 June 1999]. Bishop Sheehan was then installed as first Bishop of Kano.

Outreach of the Vice Province in Africa

We can now revert to developments in Makurdi and, in particular, the holding of the Ordinary Chapter of 1997 in the new Student House there. This Chapter was truly historical, as it saw the completion of the mandates of the last Irish Vice Provincial, Vincent Hickey, and the swearing in of Fr James Daman as the first Nigerian head of the Order in this country. The Chapter took a number of significant decisions, in particular the appointment of an exploratory mission to the Republic of Benin (Frs. David Fitzgerald and Augustine Awoyemi), in response to an invitation from Bishop Antoine Ganyé of Dassa-Zoumé. This followed a number of visits to the Sisters of St Augustine in Cotonou, by Frs. Fitzgerald and Raymond Hickey (both were stationed in Lagos), and a visit by Vice Provincial Vincent Hickey for the celebration of their Silver Jubilee in 1993. Fr Lucien Borg OSA, of the Maltese Province, had also come there to conduct some courses in Augustinian spirituality for the Sisters.

Later that year, Frs Fitzgerald and Awoyemi set out for Dassa-Zoumé, where they were offered the national Marian Shrine and an adjacent pastoral area as their apostolate. Living at first in spartan conditions in the Cathedral parish, they set about their task, aided greatly by the Augustinian Sisters, and within two years a four-bedroom Priory was constructed on the site of the Shrine. Language was not a problem as a dialect of Yoruba was the mother tongue of the people and Fr. Fitzgerald had a good knowledge of French.

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Shortly after the Chapter held in Makurdi a parish was offered to the Order in Warri and Fr Peter Medugu was appointed to build it up. Warri was important for the Order, not least because of its link with the early Portuguese Augustinians. At the same time a site in Tudun Wada, Jos, large enough to house a new Novitiate, came on the market. The existing Novitiate was attached to the Priory in Iwaro-Oka, but it was not an ideal location and the accommodation there was inadequate. The matter was discussed and it was decided to transfer to Jos at the end of 1997. Our master-builder, Fr Hughes, was again called upon and he deftly adapted some of the buildings and constructed the present attractive chapel. The work was completed in early 1998 and the Novice Master, Fr. Bede Njoku, led the novices to their new home. At a later date it proved large enough to accommodate novice from Kenya as well as our own.

The question of the Vice Province's involvement in Kenya was somewhat controversial from the beginning. An appeal from the Italian-based Augustinian contemplative Sisters in Ishiara for pastoral assistance had been made to the General Council of the Order. It was passed on to the Irish Province and then, in 1989, to the Nigerian Vice Province. The matter was discussed at the Chapter held in Jos that year, but the project was deemed not to be feasible. There followed an open letter from the Prior General, Fr. Miguel Angel Orcasitas, to all the brethren of the Vice Province [31 January 1990], in which he outlined the problem facing the Order in Kenya and appealed for assistance in these words: *"I am now formally asking the Vice Province of the Order in Nigeria to accept this invitation from Bishop Njue"* [of Embu Diocese, where Ishiara is situated]. When Fr. Tom Sexton took up the challenge of Kenya in 1990, he did so in answer to the Prior General's appeal and the project came under the General Council of the Order. The Irish Province assisted it financially and the Nigerian Vice Province with personnel.

Prior General Orcasitas came to Nigeria on visitation in November 1993, soon after the Vice Provincial Chapter held that year, accompanied by Fr. Brian O'Sullivan of the Irish Province, the Assistant General. The said Chapter had again rejected a formal commitment to Ishiara, and in another Open Letter to the brethren in Nigeria [19 November 1993] the Prior General carefully pointed out that our involvement in Kenya should not be seen only in terms of the Sisters in Ishiara. He wrote: *"The main purpose is the re-establishment of the Order. The Council does not regard it as indispensable that we remain in a specific diocese. It is certainly conscious that, all things considered, the Order would in the future*

regret its departure from Kenya. For this reason we want to keep the dialogue open”.

In this way, the long-standing impasse between General Council and the Vice Province was broken; and when Fr Francis Vincent Aherne was appointed to Kenya in 1995, it was this wider mission (to re-establish the Order), rather than assistance to the Sisters in Ishiara, that guided him. It also provided the context for the appointment of the first Nigerian Augustinian friars to Kenya -- Frs. Barth Chidili, Francis Osula, Michael Boni and Moses Iyara – and since then there has always been at least one Nigerian friar stationed in Kenya. Kenya also gained from Nigeria the expertise of the late Fr Denis Mason in the year 2000, when he transferred from the Major Seminary in Makurdi to the staff of Tangaza College in Nairobi.

The Vice Province’s commitment to Kenya and Benin Republic underlined its privileged place in AFA, the Augustinian Federation of Africa. Since its inaugural meeting in Hippo, in 1979, AFA has met at four-year intervals, bringing together brothers and sisters of the Augustinian Family in many African countries. The meeting held in Jos, in 1995, had a somewhat restricted attendance because of visa difficulties but the meeting held in Nairobi in 1999 was fully representative. Since Nigeria was the only Vice Province of the Order in Africa at this time, the Vice Provincial was invariably the President of AFA.

From Vice Province to Province

Such was the state of the Vice Province when the Intermediate Chapter was held in the Monastery in Jos in June 1999. A photograph of the Chapter Fathers shows 14 Nigerian friars and 11 Irish. The latter includes the Irish Provincial, Fr Desmond Tom Foley. It was the last time that an Irish Provincial would be present, by right, at such a gathering -- as an Augustinian Vice Province remains juridically linked to its mother Province. The person of Fr Dominic Teddy Hegarty is, sadly, missing from the group. He, the first and only Prior of Jalingo, who was stationed in Gembu with Bro Giles O’Halloran, had died in Yakoko of malaria and complications on the 15th June. He, the last Irish friar to die in Nigeria, was buried in the grounds of the Augustinian House in Zing, which had been granted to the Order by Bishop Kaigama.

Further deaths of Irish Augustinians, who had contributed much to the growth of the Church and the Order followed. In a circular letter of 23rd. March 1999, Vice Provincial James Daman asked for prayers for his predecessor, Fr Vincent

Hickey, who had returned to Ireland from Kenya and was receiving chemotherapy. He also asked for prayers for Fr Michael Sexton, Prior of the Monastery in Jos, who was seriously ill in Ireland. In the event, Fr Hickey died in Ireland on 28th April 2000, while Fr Sexton lingered on in Ireland until 2008.

Preparations for the Chapter of 2001 followed the normal pattern and, after the first balloting it was clear that Fr James Daman was the choice for a second term in office. However, unknown to the brethren, other factors had been at work. All was revealed when it was announced in December 2000 that our Vice Provincial was to fill the vacancy in Jalingo, where Bishop Ignatius Kaigama had been transferred to the Archdiocese of Jos. Fr. Daman was duly ordained as second Bishop of Jalingo on the 24th February 2001, in the presence of Prior General Orcasitas and a large number of other Augustinians, from home and abroad.

In the interim period, and according to our Constitution, Fr. Patrick Akinrimisi took over as Vicar Provincial and another vote was held for the position of Provincial. Yes! It is not a slip of the pen, Provincial rather than Vice Provincial. For it was known that when the Ordinary General Chapter of the Order would be held in Rome in September 2001, Nigeria would be declared to be a full Province of the Order, the first ever to be erected in Africa. The Vicar Provincial, Fr Akinrimisi, then received a vote of confidence from the brethren, the General Chapter was duly held, Fr Robert Prevost (American) was elected the new Prior General and, on 20th September, the capitular fathers decreed the Erection of the new 'Province of St Augustine, Nigeria'. In the English translation of the Decree of Erection, we read: *This new Augustinian Province, the first to be established in the land of Africa, through the dedication and generosity of the Province of Ireland is to be solemnly inaugurated on the 27th day of November in the year of the lord 2001, to the great joy of the whole Augustinian Family united in thanksgiving and good wishes, and in the earnest hope that it may be a source of further fruit for the Church and the Order.*

The above has been taken from the Acts of the First Ordinary Provincial Chapter of the new Province, held in the Monastery in Jos from 27th November to 5th December 2001, a precious booklet which also contains the homily given by the new Prior General, Robert Prevost, and the Vote of Thanks from the first Provincial, Fr Patrick Akinrimisi.

With the Inauguration of the new Province of Nigeria, the juridical role of the Irish Province in Nigeria came to an end, and those members of the Irish Province in Nigeria, who hitherto had dual voting rights in both jurisdictions, were asked to choose affiliation with one or the other Province. It is therefore the

right moment to bring this particular chapter of the Augustinian presence in Nigeria to an end. Sixty three years had passed since the first Augustinians had arrived in Jos, in November 1938. With the inauguration of the Province of Nigeria in 2001 a new chapter in that story was about to begin.