



# Carmelite Spiritual Center

*Handwritten signature and date: 3-06*

8433 Bailey Road \* Darien, Illinois 60561 \* 630-969-4141

LIFE IS WORTH GIVING

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IN GREAT IRISH TRADITION  
ST. PATRICK'S MISSIONARY  
SOCIETY CELEBRATES 70TH

by Fr. Kevin ~~Connell~~ Shanley, O.C.A.R.M.

Virtually from the time that St. Patrick brought the Faith to Ireland in 432 A.D., the first missionary activity outside the confines of the Roman Empire, the Irish have been engaged in being missionaries throughout the world. And this is still true to this day and, please God, will be true until the end of time.

It might well be said that the Irish appreciated their gift of the Christian Faith so well that even during St. Patrick's time in the Emerald Isle, or shortly thereafter, the Irish decided to share their precious gift of Faith with people around the globe. Since that time Irish priests, brothers, sisters and laity are to be found in some of the most remote parts of the globe. This might well be considered as the "Spiritual Empire" of the Irish who conquered not with a sword but simply with the Cross of Christ.

The St. Patrick's Missionary Society

It is in this great tradition that the St. Patrick's Missionary Society was founded in 1932, some 70 years ago. The Society, with headquarters at Kiltegan, Co. Wicklow, Ireland, has missionaries in many parts of Africa <sup>(AND ELSEWHERE)</sup> who are spreading the Faith among the native peoples.

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Through the kindness and generosity of Fr. Gary Howley, the editor of the group's excellent "Africa" Magazine, much information is available. For example, the St. Patrick's Society has ordained some 526 priest members to date for the missions. Equally important, the group has some 59 (in Africa) students preparing to be missionaries. This bodes well for the future.

#### Founded in Ireland

While the St. Patrick's Missionary Society has grown out of the Church's missionary efforts in the 20th Century, it owes much to the example of Bishop Joseph Shanahan of the Holy Ghost Missionaries.

Born in Tipperary in 1871, young Joe Shanahan had a strong desire to be a missionary and to preach the Gospel in foreign lands. After ordination in France, he embarked for Southern Nigeria where he soon became known as an innovator and an inspired evangelizer. In his creative vision, he saw the need for an educational ministry. By 1905 he was in charge of the mission and established an educational system which not only aided the growth of the Church but also changed Nigeria greatly.

As the Nigerians gladly accepted both the Faith and a new system of education, there arose a greater need for missionary priests, brothers and sisters.

Return to Ireland

To resolve the problem, Fr. Shanahan determined to return to Ireland and the famed Maynooth College, Ireland's National Seminary and formation place for thousands of ~~missionaries~~ <sup>PRIESTS</sup> who labored to bring the Faith to so many nations. During World War I, in 1916, the Maynooth Mission to China became the Missionary Society of St. Columban. Rather than spending only a few years on the missions and then returning home, a life-long commitment was required. <sup>FOR CHINA.</sup>

In this circumstance, Fr. Shanahan sought missionaries for Nigeria. His first volunteer was a young seminarian named Patrick J. Whitney from the Diocese of Ardagh and Clonmacnois. This future founder of the St. Patrick's Missionary Society was a seminarian with seemingly fantastic energy and enthusiasm, along with great physical strength and dedicated perseverance. He would shortly be ordained a priest. Following ordination Fr. Whitney was joined by Fr. Thomas Ronayne of Dublin.

Return to Africa

Together with the newly-consecrated Bishop Shanahan, the trio returned to Nigeria in 1920. The following year, around Christmas time, Fr. Whitney conceived the idea of founding a new missionary society for the vast vicariate of Southern Nigeria. It was an idea whose time had come.

Initially, Fr. Whitney envisioned a diocese in Nigeria entirely staffed by Irish diocesan priests with a back-up organization in Ireland to give it support and direction. For the time, it was an extraordinary plan but it proved to be the basic foundation idea that would one day be realized in the St. Patrick's Missionary Society, and would have great influence far beyond the borders of Nigeria itself.

#### A Society is Founded

During his years in Africa, Fr. Whitney had been involved in fund-raising for the Holy Rosary Sisters headquartered in Killeshandra, Ireland, as almost a sideline activity. In this way he built up many contacts which would later benefit the newly-founded society of the St. Patrick's Fathers. He also started a magazine entitled the "St. Patrick's Missionary Bulletin" which is currently published as "Africa" Magazine.

The foundation date for the new St. Patrick's Missionary Society, appropriately enough, was Mar. 17, 1932. Fr. Patrick Whitney was chosen as the first Superior General of the group, and his wisdom and good judgement proved to be invaluable in many ways for the missionaries. In 1938, Msgr. Whitney, his new title, was made Prefect Apostolic of Ogoja in Eastern Nigeria. But due to his many years of strenuous labor in Africa, his health began to fail and in 1939 he was forced to return to the foundation house at Kiltegan, Co. Wicklow.

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There he continued to offer his wisdom and encouragement to the missionaries preparing for their future apostolates. The Lord called him from his labors on July 17, 1942. Msgr. Whitney is still fondly remembered for his personal piety and excellent leadership to those who knew him and worked with him in Africa. His memory is cherished to this day.

### The Society Today

Since those early days, more than <sup>15</sup> 800 priests have been ordained for the missions of the St. Patrick's Fathers. Some of its present membership of about <sup>(330)</sup> ~~350~~ still work in Nigeria but also in eight other nations of Africa, as well as Brazil and the Caribbean. One of the more promising developments in recent years has been the opening of new houses of formation (seminaries) in Nigeria and Kenya for students from the countries where the missionaries of St. Patrick's labor for the Lord. *A NEW HOUSE OF FORMATION WAS RECENTLY OPENED AT LUSAKA IN ZAMBIA.* In the 1950s, the St. Patrick's Society established houses in the U.S. with a very active group in Chicago who are ~~engaged~~ engaged in promotional work for the missions. Their house at 1347 W. Granville Ave. in Chicago is also a hub of Irish activities.

And all of this has been an extraordinary adventure since young Fr. Patrick Whitney thought up his great missionary idea almost 80 years ago. May it continue to flourish forever!