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Myles L. Fay

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BISHOP SHANAHAN (1871-1943) 'PROTECTOR OF THE OPPRESSED AND LIBERATOR OF SLAVES'

Myles Fay, cssp.

Christmas Day 1943. I was a junior scholastic at Blackrock College, home on holidays for Christmas. A perfect family Christmas Day was finishing, one that furnishes memories of peace and joy for a lifetime. Someone turned on the 10 p.m. news on the national radio, and the announcement came across: 'The death took place today in Nairobi of Bishop Joseph Shanahan of the Holy Ghost Congregation'. I remember the spot in the room where I was standing. It was a big event for Ireland and for the Congregation.

FAMILY ROOTS

Of the 32 counties that make up Ireland, Joseph Shanahan was born in the one whose name is known world-wide, Tipperary, in the centre of the country, in the heart of rich farmland known as the Golden Vale. It was 6 June 1871. The Shanahan family had lived in the parish of Glankeen since the 16th century, generations of big strong people known as the 'mountainy men', although they had moved down from the mountains to level ground. His parents were Daniel Shanahan and Margaret Walsh.

The first church had been built at Glankeen in the 7th century by St Cuilan in an area of great beauty - the name Glankeen means 'beautiful glen'. The faith had been kept strongly in Tipperary throughout the centuries. Joseph was baptized in the chapel of Borrisoleigh the Sunday after he was born. Thus began his own Christian life, the beauty and privilege of which was to haunt him all his life with the passionate desire that the millions deprived of this privilege should have it.

Joseph was extremely proud of his father, a big man skilled in 'breaking' horses. He took an interest in politics, and saw the remedy for Ireland's ills of the time not in 'agitation', as he said explicitly, but in education. He would finish an argument with the words, 'I say: educate, educate'. He would check all the children's home-work every evening, and give prizes for the best at the end of the week. Joseph's later interest in education as the key to progress, materially and spiritually, in Africa consciously owed much to his paternal inheritance.

And Joseph was thinking of his mother when he wrote in later years, 'God's life is revealed to us in the hearts and lives of our mothers; aye, and of our sisters too'. Every night there was te family rosary around the open turf fire, followed by 'trimmings' – personal intercessory prayers for big or small intentions – that could take half an hour; then the mother would tell a gospel story, and add: 'Now, children, talk to God'. And, with eyes closed, they would.

SCHOOLDAYS IN IRELAND AND FRANCE

At the age of twelve, Joseph entered Rockwell College as a junior scholastic. Rockwell College is near Cashel in the same County Tipperary, therefore not so far from the Shanahan home. It had been opened by the Holy Ghost Fathers in 1864, the second Spiritan foundation in Ireland. At this stage it would have been manned almost entirely by French Holy Ghost Fathers. Joseph was probably influenced in his decision by the presence in the community of his uncle, Brother Adelm Walsh, C.S.Sp., his mother's brother, who died later in Nigeria and is buried there near the bishop. Adelm was a frequent visitor to the Shanahan home while the children were young, telling stories of Africa, where he had already worked.

Within a year, an unusual and difficult proposal was made to the young Joseph, that he go to France for his secondary studies. It cannot have been easy at the age of 13. Off he went, not to return to Ireland until the age of twenty-five, after school, novitiate and philosophy studies. He began in France at the headquarters of the Archconfraternity of St Joseph in Beauvais. That was 1884. Eight years earlier, in 1876, Beauvais was one of the places where a triduum of thanksgiving had been organized on the occasion of Pius IX declaring Fr

Libermann 'Venerable'. He made Oblation at Cellule on 29 June 1890.

LIBERMANN AND FRENCH INFLUENCE

Joseph Shanahan would have listened to the 'Spiritual Letters' at breakfast in various Spiritan houses during his twelve years of formation in France. His life, ideals and writings show a thorough Libermannian influence as well as an understanding of France and the Church in France. In Shanahan, I would single out Libermann's reverence for God, his appreciation of baptism and the Christian life, his love of Our Lady, his zeal, humility and simplicity.

He returned to Ireland for his theological studies at Rockwell, combining these with some teaching in the school. His biographer, Fr John Jordan, who knew him well and worked with him in Nigeria, says that the young man of 25 returned to Ireland 'still high-souled and filled with the missionary idealism of his boyhood, but now having in addition the charming elegance of French manners, the clear conceptions of French religious thought and the adventurous temper of French apostolic zeal'.

This long formation in France as a young man was providential in preparing him for his role as superior and bishop among missionaries who were mostly French and for his dealings with the superior general and council. This first Irish Spiritan bishop must have felt at home in the Rue Lhomond!

Fr James Mellett, a veteran missionary, whose autobiography was published just before he died in 1964 at the age of 78, writes of his own boyhood in Rockwell at the turn of the century:

Among the teachers there was one in particular who impressed me in a special way. I was in his French class in my first year. He spoke French fluently, had the gracious manners of an aristocrat and discoursed so freely and feelingly on French Catholicism and of France that we were sure he was a Frenchman. By patient investigation, however, we discovered that he was a native of Templeberry in North Tipperary. . . . He was Joseph Shanahan, whose magnificent bearded figure, beloved of African and European alike, was destined to become a symbol of Irish missionary effort in Nigeria, and no one who ever spoke with him could fail to concur with the

sentiment expressed by a ship's captain – a non-Catholic – who regarded him with reverential awe: 'That', he said, 'is the most Christ-like man I have ever met'.

ORDINATION AND AFRICA

Shanahan made his first profession in Rockwell in 1898 and was ordained priest at Blackrock by Mgr Allgeyer on 22 April 1900. He took perpetual vows the following year. Meantime he received his first appointment – to the Province of Ireland. In fact he went back to teach in Rockwell.

Father Shanahan was to spend only two more years in Rockwell, but he did not know that at the time. One story is always recounted of the period, to show his initiative. A school football team was to play in Cork, 70 miles south of Rockwell. They missed the train. Fr Shanahan ordered a special train to be sent down from Dublin, 100 miles north; it arrived after two hours, the team boarded and the match was played as scheduled. Not only that, but the Rockwell team won!

The incident that changed Father Shanahan's life may be told in Fr Mellett's words, still writing of his boyhood in Rockwell:

It was in 1902 that I heard for the first time, at first hand, of the African missions of the Holy Ghost Fathers. An Alsatian Father from Nigeria, Fr Lichtenberger, was invited to give the boys a talk. For an hour the bearded visitor spoke to us of the... terrible adversities suffered by the first missionaries to West Africa. He told us of Sierra Leone – the 'White Man's Grave' – and of the founding of the mission to Nigeria in 1885. He told us of (two Brothers) who had gone to Nigeria from Rockwell... It is no exaggeration to say that the effect of Fr Lichtenberger's talk was sensational. It ran around the school next day like fire in dry grass.

'Even as I left the Mother House', the missionary concluded, 'the Superior General was wondering if he could get a couple of Irishmen prepared to seek martyrdom in Southern Nigeria!'

Fr Jordan goes on: 'Southern Nigeria'! The words thundered in the brain of young Father Shanahan. The mission about which he had heard so much talk during his studies in France! The mission from which missionaries hardly ever

lived to return, the despair of the weak-kneed, the inspiration of the brave and strong. And the Superior General wanted Irish volunteers? Well, he would get them. He sat down and wrote a letter. Three weeks later came the General's reply, consigning him to southern Nigeria. The martyr's crown was definitely in sight, Life had begun . . .

THE MISSION OF SOUTHERN NIGERIA

At the end of this year, 1985, the Spiritan Province of Nigeria and the Catholic Church of eastern Nigeria is celebrating the centenary of the arrival of the Holy Ghost Fathers, the first Catholic missionaries. The first missionary to obtain accurate information about the area around the mouth of the Niger was the Holy Ghost Father, Fr Léon Lejeune, who paused there on his way to Gabon. Propaganda Fide in Rome invited the Congregation to undertake the evangelization of the Lower Niger tribes. It became known in Ireland as Southern Nigeria, and in France as 'le bas Niger'. Fr Joseph Lutz, still known today as an apostle of eastern Nigeria, and Fr Jean Horne, Brothers John and Hermas, all young men in their prime, were picked. From the beginning they went through appalling hardships. Two months after leaving the Mother House they arrived at the Niger mouth, and on 26 November they began the journey up the river by boat. On 5 December they reached Onitsha, fever-stricken. On the feast of the Epiphany 1886 they settled on the land where the cathedral stands today. The lives and deeds of these men over the next fifteen years before Fr Shanahan's arrival in 1902 are truly heroic. They all died young. Fr Lutz survived ten years, a record; his successor, Fr Pawlas, less than two; Fr Léon Lejeune took over in 1900 and buried one of his missionaries two days later, the sixth death that year. Only two Fathers were now alive in the Mission. Despite their heroism, their work did not bear much visible fruit, largely because the subsidies sent to them by Propaganda Fide in Rome were stipulated to be used only to buy redeemed slaves. These were duly bought, baptized and died. This was the heroism and the hopelessness Fr Shanahan stepped into in November 1902.

In his retirement, Bishop Shanahan was induced to tell the story of this part of his life *verbatim* to Fr Jordan, his biographer, who reports it thus.

Away back in 1902 people [in Europe] were inclined to pity the man who volunteered for Africa. The country had a dreadful name... Southern Nigeria in particular had an unenviable reputation, even amongst those who knew from experience what Africa was really like. It was regarded as the most hopeless mission in the whole continent, or in the whole world for that matter. Man after man had gone out there determined to do or die - and had died...

I first turned my face towards Nigeria, having volunteered for this apparently God-forsaken mission in accordance with the spirit of the Holy Ghost Congregation, which directs its members 'to have a preference for the most abandoned souls'... The mission consisted of a few handfuls of slaves, bought by the Fathers (there were only a few of them alive) at two shillings and sixpence each from slave-ships passing down the Niger...

Fr Lejeune was one of the finest and bravest missionaries I have ever known... He conceived the project - hitherto undreamed of in that part of Africa - of building in brick. Fr Lejeune slaved like a Trojan, and expected me to keep pace with him. When he got dead tired he would just plunge into the Niger and emerge quite refreshed...

Fr Lejeune returned to France broken in health and died in 1905 at the age of 45, but not before asking the Superior General to make Fr Shanahan his successor. 'The saddest day of my life', the new Prefect Apostolic always called the day he received the news of his appointment.

THE BIG DECISION - SCHOOLS

The heritage Shanahan stepped into was the twofold, tradition of redeeming slaves and of the Christian village cut off from the world around. The few redeemed slaves who lived were a poor foundation for building a Church, and the Christian villages were not being a leaven in the community; far from it. There remained the school, and this he opted for. The old people in Nigeria told him: 'We are too old to change now; why does Father not try the children?' In his own words:

I suddenly realized that when the children had been baptized in the schools, they would go back to their pagan homes, full of the life of God, and carrying with them his intimate presence and all the radiance of the supernatural. Who could doubt that through these tiny apostles mothers and fathers would come to know God?

A real apostolate of the school would have to be initiated. There would be the drawback of lack of teachers, but the best and oldest children in the existing schools would be prepared for a teaching career.

As on many another occasion in his life, he asked himself what St Patrick would have done. Again we have his own words:

Suddenly the vision of my native land came before me, and I saw how akin Patrick's problem was to mine. He had a country peopled by a wild pagan tribe. So had I. He had one great river and a few smaller ones for communication. So had I. But he did not content himself with trying to convert a few towns along the Shannon as I was doing on the Niger. He struck boldly into the heart of the country to bring home the mystery of the Holy Trinity to all and sundry. He prepared the land for the coming of Catholic schools. I resolved to do the same.

His biographer writes: 'This was the most epoch-making decision made in his whole life... It implied a completely new vision of things'. The schools would be open to all, rich or poor, slave or free. It was a plan for the very transformation of the huge Igbo nation living in the interior of the unexplored country. Shanahan's plan was to advertize a monster meeting, address it himself, outlining the values of a school in the area, and get the support – often financial as well – of the local chief. In December 1905 he wrote to Propaganda Fide for support for the schools, but none was forthcoming. He came to France to attend the General Chapter of 1906, leaving written instructions for the work to go ahead in his absence, especially the training of teachers. Back in Nigeria, he set off at the end of 1908 on an extended trek of a couple of months into the interior, covering hundreds of miles, making the Catholic faith known where no visitor had ever gone before. It

was on seeing the magnificent specimens of manhood at this time – especially in the common wrestling-matches – that he made the comment: **‘Magnificent people, it is a shame to see them without the faith’**.

One of his achievements was to get many of the chiefs on his side, and some of them to become Catholics. With no written code to guide him, it took a while to sound all the people’s reactions to his propositions, but one of his strong points was to deal sensibly with those having authority. Later, he said of the Igbos:

Certainly the Igbos are a wonderful people. They deserve to get on, because they miss nothing God sends them. And they nearly always remember to thank him for his gifts. There is a fundamental common sense about everything they do. They have a pronounced sense of humour, and are cheerful and gay. As for goodness, they have a real fund of it, if you know how to look for it in them. A fine people, delightful really. Lovable, most lovable!

The teachers became colleagues in his missionary endeavour. He spoke of them very highly:

The Catholic teachers are men of whom the mission has every right to be proud. They are men of sterling honesty. They help to preach the gospel without counting the cost. If it had not been for their devotedness, their zeal and their self-sacrifice, the Fathers would have achieved very little. I salute them, and pray God to reward them.

Shanahan understood the apostolate of the laity long before Vatican II! And whether he knew it or not, he had Fr Libermann’s blessing on his approach to the people in the missionary world. Fr Libermann wrote, half a century earlier:

It is the task, nay, the duty of the missionary to work at it, not only insofar as morality is concerned, but also in its intellectual and physical aspects, i.e., in education, agriculture and technical knowledge. . . . If the missionary takes charge only of the moral aspects of civilization, without worrying about the rest, others will take over. (ND VIII 248, 249).
You say that the missionary is not a school-master.

I understand that it will cost the missionaries, but it is urgent to take these steps to consolidate the missionaries' efforts. (ND IX 50).

'ONE GREAT STRUGGLE AGAINST SLAVERY'

Fr Shanahan continued trekking, sometimes spending weeks in places 60 or 70 miles from Onitsha and setting up schools there. In the six years after 1906, 43 new schools were opened, with about 60 children to each of 132 teachers. But he was badly hampered financially. Back in Rome, Cardinal Gotti of Propaganda Fide insisted that the annual subsidy was for buying slaves, in accordance with the wishes of the donors. Finally Shanahan wrote a masterpiece of an annual report in 1913.

Your Eminence desires a special report on the spending of the 20,000 francs given to this Mission for work among the slaves. You really embarrass me. During the eight years I have been in charge, I have regarded the work of the mission as one great struggle against slavery. The results achieved show beyond doubt how well the mission has fulfilled its duty as the protector of the oppressed and the liberator of slaves. . .

One should be careful not to mention this question of slave and free-born at all; the school ought to be open to all, without any distinction. . .

I am confident that in view of the work that is being done, Your Eminence will not withdraw the subsidy. The Africa of today is not the Africa of twenty years ago. Those who hold the school hold the country, hold its religion, hold its future.

The subsidy was not withdrawn.

Some statistics may give an idea of the rest of the story of the schools in Nigeria. In 1920 there were 559 primary schools; 12 years later there were 1386. By 1960, shortly before the Holy Ghost Fathers' missionary work in eastern Nigeria was completed, the four Spiritan Districts operated 2,364 primary schools, 83 colleges, teacher training schools and technical schools, with a student body of nearly half a million and a staff of about 14,000 teachers. The number of

Catholics had reached one million. (Koren, *To the Ends of the Earth*, p. 413). In Fr Lutz's annual report of 1888, shortly after he arrived, the number of Catholics had been 180.

BEGGING ON HIS KNEES FOR PRIESTS

Fr Shanahan left Nigeria for Ireland in 1913, mainly to procure priests. He speaks himself:

Right before our eyes, we watched a whole people, with the most wonderful qualities of any people in the world, slip through our grasp through lack of priests. . .

I went to Rome, and Pius X was all one could have wished in understanding and sympathy. His eyes glowed at the mention of the children as apostles. . . At the end I knelt for his blessing. To my astonishment he was instantly on his knees beside me; his hands were on my shoulders, and his eyes, with tears plainly falling, were looking into mine. 'Let us thank God together for what he has accomplished in Nigeria'. We did so, and he handed me his crucifix as we arose.

'Holy Father, where am I to get priests for my people?'

'You are a Holy Ghost Father. Go to your Superior General. Tell him I sent you'.

The story continues at the Rue Lhomond, with Mgr Le Roy.

'Très Révérend Père, if we get ten more priests our conversions will be multiplied. Will you not give them?'

'I cannot. They do not exist.'

'But the Holy Father said -'

'The Holy Father cannot expect me to work miracles. There are no men to give.'

At that I threw myself on my knees. In the name of the thousands of children who would die without Baptism, of the hundreds of thousands so near Him and yet so far away, of the fellow-workers

giving their sweat and blood along the Niger, I begged. Yes, I am not ashamed to say I begged, and on my knees'.

It was of no avail. . . . He would write to the Irish Provincial. In Ireland, the Irish Provincial declared that the limits of sacrifice had already been reached. Shanahan said in retrospect: *'I shall never forget the feeling that crept through my soul like paralysis as I came to the conclusion that human help for my mission was not forthcoming'*. He went back to Nigeria alone.

THE GREAT TREK TO THE CAMEROONS

In 1918, at the age of 47, Father Shanahan accomplished the most heroic trek of his career, known as the Thousand-Mile Trek, from Onitsha on the Niger eastwards into the Cameroons. The previous year, Propaganda Fide in Rome had asked him to take over ecclesiastical administration there, parts of which had been without a priest for four years. A map looked at in Rome will show the Cameroons bordering Nigeria but it will not indicate the human hardship involved in getting from one to the other by foot in 1918 through uncharted forests, rivers, mountains and valleys, through animals, reptiles and fighting peoples. As he himself said: *'I might as well have been ordered to visit the Man in the Moon, for all I knew about the place'*. The monster trek lasted four months, beginning just before Christmas 1918. *'I entered the Cameroons as an apostle, with the teaching authority of Christ to sustain me. I entered it, too, like the Good Shepherd seeking out the sheep that needed pasture so much'*. Once again, the lack of missionaries to continue the good work tore his heart out. Of one town where he stayed for two weeks, he wrote in his report to Rome:

The people in this place took it for granted that I had come to stay permanently. When they heard that was impossible they were grief-stricken. They crowded around the little hut when I went in to remove the Blessed sacrament and a dreadful wail rose from them when the tabernacle door was closed for the last time. The little altar-lamp was extinguished. . . . For the second time in ten years

tears cameto my eyes. The first was when no priests could be got for the Ibos in 1913.

Three months of dreadful hardship took its toll in the form of a growing abscess and severe internal pains. He ended up in the hospital in Douala, where the doctors told him to lie still or risk his life. *'I stuck it for three days and then I decided that 'the flat' was no proper place for a missionary. . . . So I gripped the rails of the bed, closed my eyes and jerked upwards violently right on to the floor. The abscess burst, of course, but outwardly, and I was saved'*. He returned to Calabar, part of his Mission, by boat, but so weak that he contemplated resigning. At this stage there were still only 17 Fathers – most of them French, indeed Alsatian – for a population of 9 million, whom Shanahan saw as ready for evangelization and conversion.

It was events like this which assured Bishop Shanahan's place in the Irish missionary movement of the 20th century.

A Bishop Shanahan Day was held at Maynooth in 1971 to celebrate the centenary of his birth. Mgr Patrick Corish, Professor of Church History in Maynooth, gave one of the talks, in which he concluded:

May I say, as an outsider and in all humility, that I sincerely believe Bishop Shanahan to have been one of the great ones of the modern Irish missionary movement, whose life belongs not merely to the past, but also stands as an inspiration for the present and a guide to the future.

ST THÉRÈSE OF LISIEUX

Father Shanahan spent several months in hospital in Dublin in 1919-1920, and had a severe operation. As soon as he could, he used the time putting missionary fire into the hearts of all he met, telling especially of the Great Trek. He spent the early months of 1920 trying again to get priests and Sisters for Nigeria, but in vain. He went to France, but still in vain. Here St Thérèse of Lisieux enters his life.

One day (while in France) I got a letter from a great friend of mine (in Ireland). She told me I should go to Lisieux while I was waiting, and there mention my requests at the grave of a young nun who had died a very holy death and had been grant-

ing extraordinary favours . . . I suggested the visit to one of the priests who was with me. 'Go to Lisieux, indeed', he said. 'What would people say if they saw two hardened old missionaries like us going off on a pilgrimage to a convent where some little nun with a lovely face died? Go to Lisieux! Arent't there plenty of Saints to pray to where we are?' . . . and I wrote to my friend in Ireland (saying No) . . .

Well, I got back a letter – such a letter! – telling me I had better make reparation for the things I dared to say about someone God had evidently destined to be a Saint . . . Neither of us was very enthusiastic, and, lest anyone might know we were doing such a foolish thing, we got the very earliest train we could without saying a word to anyone. Well, we arrived at Lisieux and went straight to the public cemetery. There sure enough we saw a grave, decorated with little medals and things and we rightly guessed that it was the grave of the Little Flower. I shall never forget to my dying day the impression both of us got at the grave. We felt we were in a very supernatural atmosphere . . .

We went to the Carmelite convent. There we spoke to the four sisters of the young nun at whose grave we had been praying and I insisted on telling them all that we had said. They just laughed and laughed . . .

When I got back to Paris I had a lovely letter from one of them and in it she said, 'I am sure my little sister will obtain your requests'. And how marvellously she *has* obtained them!

After Lisieux, he addressed all his audiences (and they were many) by the words, 'My dear fellow-missionaries', and he refused to use any other form of address. It was a moment when missionary zeal was running high in Ireland, as elsewhere.

A Spiritan coincidence is that Fr. Brottier had first gone to Lisieux six months earlier, in June 1919. St Thérèse was taking an interest in the Holy Ghost Congregation!

THE BISHOP

At this opportune moment, Father Shanahan's appointment as bishop was announced. He decided to attack Ireland at its ecclesiastical roots by being ordained in Maynooth. St Patrick's College at Maynooth, twelve miles from Dublin, has been the national senior seminary in Ireland since 1795, and has produced thousands of priests for Ireland and the English-speaking world since that date. It is the symbol – a huge Neo-Gothic structure by Pugin, with a consistent enrollment of about 600 students – of Irish ecclesiastical life. Shanahan began by getting himself invited to a dinner with Cardinal Logue and the assembled bishops of Ireland at their plenary meeting. The President of the College, a friend of his, put him beside the Cardinal, to whom he outlined his plan of getting diocesan priests to come out to Nigeria for three years. 'Why not make it five?', said the Cardinal,

The cardinal rose and called for silence. He introduced me to the assembled bishops, and told them I had something to say to them. Here was my chance, and standing up I faced all the bishops of Ireland, and spoke as never before or since. When I had finished they agreed to my proposal, and gave me permission to meet all the Maynooth students and to seek volunteers among them. Afterwards, when I told the Holy Father of this incident, he was deeply touched and declared that such generosity had not been heard of for a long time in the Church.

Shanahan was ordained bishop in St Patrick's College, Maynooth, on 6 June 1920, his 49th birthday. The newly appointed bishop impressed people. In his biographer's words:

His likeness to St Patrick, so often remarked by those who knew him well, was now doubly emphasized by the mitre and crozier. Many wondered why it was that this man exercised such a fascination over all who saw him. He attracted and held individuals and audiences, through some magic quality in his make-up. . .

Physically, he was a fine upstanding specimen of Irish manhood; tall, broad-shouldered, erect of figure and carriage. His movements were never hurried... Gestures he had in abundance, vibrant, spontaneous gestures with hands and arms, with lift of eyebrow and toss of head and shake of beard... In repose, his face held a strange, grave dignity and nobility... With his commanding presence, his strong leonine head with its broad, large brow, well-chiselled features, flashing grey eyes and trimmed, square, white beard, he looked a prince among men, a real statue of Saint Patrick come to life.

He was a fine conversationalist... That smile was the most wonderful thing about him, and gave life and tone to the abrupt, clipped sentences spoken in a rich throaty voice that was music in itself...

To talk to him was to feel the charm of his personality...

Bishop Shanahan was received in audience by Pope Benedict XV. The Pope made a wonderful impression on him and he often said in later life that 'he was just as much a missionary Pope as his successor, the Pope of the Missions' (Pius XI).

I presented to His Holiness a summary of the sacred returns for the years 1910, 1915, 1920. He read them with intense interest and great satisfaction... He blessed my Christians and catechumens. 'In this world', he said, 'I shall never see them or speak to them, but I wish you to convey my blessing to them in each one of your 700 school-churches'.

The bishop received a tumultuous welcome back in Nigeria. The development went on apace, in figures hard to conceive. One mission, Emekuku, for instance, had 200 outstations and 40,000 catechumens. As the bishop wrote, 'there is a motor-cycle in practically every station now.' Soon some armchair strategists protested against the motor-cycles - the missionaries should travel on foot like Christ and his apostles! Shanahan mentioned it to Pius XI on his next ad limina visit. The Pope answered: 'Nothing could be too modern on a mission in the 20th century; if you have motor-cycles, look forward to cars; when you get cars, think of airplanes; all the time, think of souls'

'LORD, THAT I MAY SEE'

But early in 1922, when he was less than two years a bishop, Shanahan's sight began to trouble him seriously, and he had to return to Ireland for treatment. His episcopal motto had been, '*Domine, ut videam - Lord, that I may see*'. *To see the world through Jesus' eyes was his aim.* He wrote of Jesus:

He loved all the works of his heavenly Father. He gradually gives to each one of his missionaries to see persons and things in the loving, lovable light in which he saw and loved them. The whole world changes and becomes so beautiful when seen and loved with eyes and heart animated with a soul where God dwells.

Now he was paying for the vision of faith his beloved people were receiving by the loss of his own sight. He never lost it completely but he suffered greatly from defective sight for the next twenty years of his life. This, too, was a turning-point in his life, a union with Christ on the cross. '*It is glorious to see our body break down in the service of Jesus Christ*', he wrote later. We might compare Shanahan's loss of sight while in full flight in his apostolate with Fr Libermann's epilepsy on the eve of his ordination or with his persistent migraine to the end of his life. They are the sufferings of the Saints.

'There are sufferings and trials before you, as before all missionaries. But remember, it is Christ himself who sweats in our sweat, who burns in our fevers, who aches in our tired limbs, who continues his sufferings in ours.'

FOUNDING THE HOLY ROSARY SISTERS

From the beginning Bishop Shanahan had seen the plight of the women in Nigeria and the need for missionary Sisters. He had tried in vain among religious Congregations, but all were short of personnel for that mission. He asked Pius XI

for his blessing and received it. Although he had no elaborate plans, he had some vocations immediately among lay women who had been in Nigeria and were interested in religious life. The Dominican Sisters undertook to train them, and the Bishop of Kilmore in Co. Cavan gave them a house at Killeshandra, a good-sized manor on the top of a hill. He said later: 'It cost £ 5,000 and I had not 5,000 shillings'. He bought it on borrowed money. He wanted to name the Congregation 'Missionary Sisters of the Holy Ghost', but Rome said that name already belonged to another order of nuns. The title, 'Missionary Sisters of the Holy Rosary', was suggested to him and he accepted it. . . .

He had high ideals of womanhood and high ideals for the Holy Rosary Sisters.

The Catholic Sister is the highest type of Christian womanhood. She is to express in her person, in her life, in her thoughts and in her actions the living type of the supernatural woman - the woman who has our Blessed Mother as model of her 'divinized' womanhood.

Little girls were all right up to a point. Past seventeen they should become women as the Mother of God was a woman, fearless, compassionate and understanding. Think of Mary travelling across the countryside to visit her cousin Elizabeth in a time of need - fearless!

HUMANITY AND HOLINESS

Paradoxically, this led Bishop Shanahan to be very human and loving, perhaps the traits of his character and activity that have been singled out by those who knew him personally, especially, the early Holy Rosary Sisters.

We must perfect the human and the natural. Reach for complete and perfect maturity as man or woman. Be yourself, one whole being. Direct your impulses to do as you ought. . . . God will do the rest through love. He will sanctify us wholly. The more human we are the better.

Speaking to the Sisters in Nigeria he said:

Be perfectly human, perfect the human and the natural, be fully a woman (or a man). Do not be afraid of your little heart, it is made to be used. If it becomes too exuberant it can be cut back, pruned and remain a healthy organ, very useful. You cannot say you love God and remain aloof from your neighbour.

'The African woman is never an occasion of sin for a good man', he once said to the Irish scholastics. 'Virtue and vice are always from within. If you really want to be a good missionary, women will not hinder you'.

He often spoke of affection: **'But there is one thing I ask you to believe, and it is my affection for you. . . Is it any wonder I love you as I know God wishes me to love you'.** He pictures Christ on the cross saying to each Sister: **'You know I love you; and I know you love me. Won't you come with me to Africa. . . and tell her that I love her? . . . Oh, I thirst for the soul of my child, Africa'.** The obverse of love is the pain of separation, a sacrifice well-known to the missionary. Bishop Shanahan spoke feelingly of **'the pain of being separated from those we loved. To be separated from God! . . . How infinitely awful it must be. . . Since even the pale shadow of its shadow on earth is torture'.**

This led him to a respect for all human cultures that is truly worthy of Fr Libermann:

Be both sympathetic and understanding to African people, especially the women; meet the people of Africa with courtesy and respect; never do for them the things they can do for themselves. Teach, demonstrate and encourage them to develop, but let them develop in their own way. Do not usurp or supplant them in anything. Be ready to move off as soon as your missionary work is done. Do not dig in permanent roots – that is not your function as missionaries. While leading others to Christ and the true Christian spirit that Christ is bringing to them through you, be always careful to respect their pagan customs as an expression of the human spirit.

The missionary's work was to be 'in Christ':

We lead a wanderer's life going from village to village, from tribe to tribe, ever with Christ, letting him have the full use of our feet and hands, and lips and heart and soul, to do with them as he wishes; to make himself known to our fellowmen in the depths of the African forest.

Bishop Shanahan insists on holiness for the missionary. In words very reminiscent of Fr Libermann, he said to the first Sisters in Killeshandra:

The missionary has to impart divine truth and divine life to beings the furthest on earth removed from both, to transform souls steeped in paganism and make them Christian. The end is a supernatural one and must be achieved by means that are eminently supernatural. The missionary cannot sanctify others unless she herself possesses the spirit of sanctification, unless she herself is filled with the Spirit of Christ. . . . The means to do it is that of religious life.

To a Sister approaching religious profession:

Is it any wonder that your heart and soul are overflowing with joy at the very thought of it, with that joy poured into your whole being by the Living, Loving Spirit of Jesus Christ, by the Holy Ghost.

The Spirit of sanctification is the Spirit of mission:

God's own Holy Spirit (is) given to us on the day of our Baptism. With the gift of his own self, God bestows on us that most glorious and inexpressible of gifts, namely that of co-operating with him in preparing other human souls for the reception of God's own self in baptism and the other sacraments.

It was a spirit of boldness and of weakness, as is evident from his life.

THE GLORY OF GOD

The over-riding aim in Bishop Shanahan's life was to glorify God. *'I will continue to pray for the Congregation (of the Holy Rosary Sisters) that it may ever retain its spirit of... intense loving zeal for the realization of God's greater glory'* In the first school he blessed for the Sisters in Nigeria he wrote in the visitors' book: *'The object of the school is to honour and glorify God by teaching every pupil to know, love and serve him here below, and then to share with him his happiness forever in heaven'*. On driving through the Irish countryside he reflected that the people there all *'know, love, praise and bless God... This is man's sublime function in and with Jesus Christ'*. He saw his missionary work as enabling other peoples to do likewise. His last address to the Sisters at Killeshandra is often quoted:

Let us throw all - our sins, our faults and all besides - into the boundless ocean of God's mercy and love and let us say, 'My God, I give thee all'. Glory be to the Father, and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost. Our life is a psalm. At the end of every psalm, and often in the liturgy we say, Glory be to the Father... We shall say it for all eternity. My dear Sisters, accept all - your weakness, imperfections, trials and difficulties, and offer all to God. Above all, do not be proud. Love God, praise God, trust God...

GRACE AND GLORY

The means of to accomplish God's glory was the divinizing of humankind. Here I must mention Fr Edward Leen, who accompanied the newly ordained Bishop Shanahan to Nigeria and back in 1920-1922. Leen had come under the influence of J. B. Terrien's *La Grace et la gloire, ou la filiation adoptive des enfants de Dieu* (two volumes, paris 1897). During an illness, Leen says,

In the library I lighted on Père Terrien's *La Grace et la gloire*... Scarcely had I read the first chapter

than I was gripped, and read through the two volumes with intense interest. I there and then formed the resolution to give to the ordinary Catholic reader, should I ever get the chance, a glimpse into the wonderful life that God offers to souls.

Leen introduced Shanahan to this book. We have an eyewitness account of their journey home together by boat from Calabar to Liverpool.

Their whole mornings were given to reading and the study of how best to give to the catechumens and new Christians an ever deeper understanding of the nature of the new life in their souls and an appreciation of it. They read and discussed 'La grace et la gloire', and seemed to go into a kind of ecstasy about it. Sanctifying grace seemed to unfold new and deeper meanings to both of them at the same time.

Shanahan took to heart the Gospel phrase that Terrien uses in his Introduction: 'If you knew the gift of God' (Jn 4:10). He wrote:

Once a man has tasted God, the experience takes the savour from all other joys. When he has lived in the midst of life, of the life of God in the souls of men as rich and luxuriant as the life of prodigal nature in these tropics – above all, when that man has been the vessel chosen by God for his scattering of this exuberant life, and has been given a grace of paternity deeper and closer than what is merely human – that man, I would say, would be less than human if his heart-strings did not pull him almost irresistibly back to where the title of father has most meaning for him.

He uses the strange and striking phrase, 'deified gods':

Preparing other human beings for the ineffable dignity and glory of becoming deified gods. . .

Like the rose and the lily make their author known by being perfect roses and lilies, so let us, 'deified gods', make God known by being Christ-like during our short span of existence in this world.

SUCCESS AND FAILURE

The miracle of the conversion of Nigeria continued. In the six years, 1920-1926, the number of Catholics trebled. He addressed the General Chapter of the Congregation in 1926, begging for more missionaries. He kept thinking of what had *not* been accomplished. The call for priests recurred in every letter, article and speech that came from him between 1913 and 1930. He constantly referred to his three great models in the apostolate: St John the Baptist, St Paul, St Patrick: all Christ-centered and sharing Christ's sufferings, men of prayer, indefatigably zealous.

From the beginning of 1926 he was to enter more fully into the 'divine companionship of Jesus' (his own words) through trials and afflictions and disappointments. He had always been a man of prayer. A Father sleeping in the next room to him in Onitsha said: 'How often have I heard him leave his office near midnight. Yet he was always in the Chapel in the morning for meditation at 5.15 a.m.' He got through office-work sedulously but never liked it. 'If there is one man glad to get off into the bush, I am that man. I never wish to see again a desk or an office. In heaven there won't be any!' Towards the end of 1925 he got a dispensation from the Divine Office through sheer inability to read it. By early 1926 he prepared himself for semi-invalidism and probable total blindness. In July he came to Paris to see eye specialists, who told him his left eye was shattered beyond repair, and the optic nerve in his right one attacked. He went to Lisieux for another miracle. Pope Pius XI told him to go back to Nigeria and gave him an able coadjutor in the person of Bishop Charles Heerey.

His mission now had 1,000 primary schools but no secondary schools. He tried hard to remedy this but had not enough trained personnel. He told Cardinal Van Rossum that the new Society of St Patrick, then being founded from the volunteer Maynooth priests, would fulfil a need. 'The Irish Province of the Holy Ghost Fathers is not able to meet the demand for personnel in this Vicariate'. When the first Holy Rosary Sisters arrived in 1928 they were immediately put at educational work. Bishop Shanahan ordained his first native Igbo priest in 1930, who was later to become Bishop of Enugu, Mgr John Anyogu. It was the first of one of the richest

flow of priests in the Church in the past 50 years. It was also Bishop Shanahan's swan-song. He tendered his resignation a second time to Rome, it was accepted, and he returned to Ireland early in 1932.

LAST YEARS: 'MY SECOND NOVITIATE'

Bishop Shanahan took up residence in Clareville, a house in the grounds of Blackrock College. Here he did what he called 'my second novitiate', overwhelmed with a sense of uselessness. It was his 'dark night'. 'Christ will continue to be crucified in us, and we in him, till the last soul is saved', he said.

God has shown me that my few little activities are to consist in getting back to the strict practice of community life, and that means to a life of prayer. In his goodness, God has given me ample time to pray. And prayer means apostolate, apostolate in Nigeria. . .

The sufferings of Our Lord on the cross are being filled up in me. . .

In 1935 he was invited to go back to Onitsha for the consecration of the cathedral on the banks of the Niger, where Fr Lutz had landed fifty years previously. He was enthusiastically welcomed back, and thought he might be able to stay and die there, but he had to return after a few weeks. 'I shall never see Nigeria again, it is the last great sacrifice God asks of me, to die far away from my own, it is for souls'.

In the autumn of 1938 Bishop Heffernan of Zanzibar (which included Kenya at that time) invited him to Nairobi. He felt Bishop Shanahan would then be in Africa at least, even if it was not Nigeria. The bishop gladly went, never to return until he died five years later. Testimonies are abundant from this time of his edifying life, blind though he nearly was, and doubly exiled, as he felt. He said Mass daily for a convent of Carmelite enclosed Sisters. Throughout 1943 his health deteriorated. He asked the divine Child to come for him on Christmas Day - which he did.

Thirteen years later, his body was brought back to Nigeria and Onitsha; it reposes in the cathedral. Pope John Paul II prayed at it on his visit to Nigeria.

THE MISSION AND THE MAN

When I was a novice – in 1946 – Bishop Heerey, Bishop Shanahan's successor, gave us a talk in which he said Pius XII had greeted him as leader of the most flourishing mission of the Church. At the outbreak of the Biafran war – in 1967 – we were 300 Irish Spiritans working there. In the Diocese of Owerri we were averaging 1,000 baptisms a week. Today Eastern Nigeria provides one of the major provinces of the Congregation, and the one with one of the biggest numbers in formation.

The area of which Bishop Shanahan was bishop now comprises 14 dioceses, 13 of them with Nigerian bishops – one a Spiritan – and the remaining diocese has an Irish Spiritan bishop. The Catholics are close to 6,000,000 and the number of Nigerian priests about 600. Statistically – and, let us hope, spiritually – it is one of the success stories of Catholic mission history.

Like the rest of us, Bishop Shanahan was a man of his times. The theology of grace and the theology of salvation have developed, but his basic intuition – that the missionary had something positive to offer as an enrichment even of this life, a life of intimacy with God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit in the Church – remains perfectly sound. His spirituality – a total trust of the human, which by becoming more perfect will share in the sufferings of Christ, the human – remains sound. The enrichment the missionary brings is both human and divine. As far back as 1913 he was writing to Propaganda Fide: 'I have regarded the work of the mission as one great struggle against slavery. The results achieved show beyond doubt how well the mission has fulfilled its duty as the protector of the oppressed and the liberator of slaves': it reads very modern. In his desperate appeals to have dedicated and holy priests as missionaries, in collaboration with dedicated and holy Brothers, Sisters and lay people, he was faithful to both Fr Des Places and Fr Libermann and the whole Spiritan tradition. In this centenary year of the arrival of the first Holy Ghost Fathers and Brothers – all from continental Europe – in Nigeria, we can thank God for the blessings he has given that mission, and in particular for its first bishop, Joseph Shanahan.

Myles L. Fay, C.S.Sp.

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