



# AFRICAN MISSIONARY

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## OLA — SMA - TOGETHER LET US PROCLAIM THE GOOD NEWS



Dromantine, SMA Fun Day © John Toner



Fr Augustine Planque SMA, 1826 – 1907

This year is a special one for the Sisters of Our Lay of Apostles (OLA) and for the Society of African Missions (SMA). 2026 is the 150th Anniversary of the Foundation of the OLA in 1876, the 170th Anniversary of the SMA's foundation in 1856 and, linking these two is the 200th Anniversary of the birth of Fr Augustine Planque SMA in 1826.

Fr Augustine Planque is central to all these Anniversaries. It was he who took over leadership of the Society of African Missions in 1859 when five of the first group of six SMA missionaries to reach Africa, including the Founder, were struck down during an epidemic of Yellow Fever in Freetown Sierra Leone. The young Society was then left with just three priests, a brother and five seminarians. Under Fr Planque's guidance, advice to dissolve the new but decimated SMA was rejected and, in the following decades, and due to his determination and faith, the Society of African Missions, founded by Melchior de Marion Brésillac, was both firmly established and its mission in Africa grew. During this time Fr Planque came to realise that, while the SMA missionaries were able to work with African men, there was also a need to reach out to African women and for Missionary Sisters "to ensure the indispensable presence of women in the work of the Society of African Missions."

To answer these needs, he founded the Sisters of Our Lady of Apostles in 1876. What began as a small missionary community in Lyon, France, has, over the last 150 years, grown into an international presence spanning 21 countries across Africa, Europe, Asia, and the Americas, one that continues to respond to the call first heard in 1876: to witness to God's love across cultures, languages, and generations.

The groundwork of Fr Planque also led to the fourth significant anniversary being celebrated in 2026. This is one hundred years of SMA presence in Dromantine, Newry, County Down. Under Fr Planque's stewardship the Society grew, leading to the establishment of an Irish Province of the SMA in 1912. This, too, flourished and to cater for the growing number of students a Seminary at Dromantine, County Down was opened in 1926. Since then it has been a place of faith, learning and welcome. Until 1972 Dromantine was the place where generations of SMA members were trained for mission, and from where they went out to work in Africa.

Today Dromantine continues to play an important role in the life of the local community and the Church in Northern Ireland as a place for Retreats, Conferences, and events such as the SMA Open Day, pictured above and the Summer Camps. It is a place of prayer, tranquillity, natural beauty and spirituality – a place where SMA Missionaries are present bringing an on-going awareness of mission and promoting support for Mission in Africa. We celebrate Dromantine's 100 years of welcome, faith and service.

**Through the person of Fr Augustin Planque and a common mission in Africa the OLA and the SMA have, since their very beginnings, deep shared roots. Today, we draw strength from these roots and together continue to proclaim the Good News.**

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# MARKING A MEMORABLE MILESTONE

By Fr Peter McCawille SMA



1926 – the first group of Students and Staff in Dromantine with Bishop Mulhern flanked by Fr William Butler, Seminary Superior and Fr Maurice Slattery, Provincial Superior.



A view of Dromantine House with the over 300 year-old Oak Tree referred to in the text in the foreground.

As we travel along the pathway of life there are many milestones which we scarcely notice, but, occasionally, we are reminded of a milestone we cannot and should not pass by without pausing to reflect on its significance. This year the SMA Irish Province is approaching such a milestone when we prepare to celebrate the centenary of the opening of Dromantine House as a Major Seminary on 29th September, 1926. While we are commemorating a mere hundred years of its existence the building is steeped in history and boasts a rich multifaceted heritage whose origins can be traced back to the 12th century, when it belonged to the Magennis clan. It was then purchased by a Scottish family named Innes who made numerous additions and alterations to the building while residing there until 1922.

The Society of African Missions (SMA) was founded on the 8th December, 1856, in Lyon, France. It established its first presence in Ireland in Cork city in 1878 and its first official Major Seminary was established at Blackrock Road, Cork, on 20th September, 1909. Hitherto students went to a seminary in Lyon, France, to pursue



Fr. Maurice Slattery, SMA      Bishop Mulhern, DROMORE

Manor of Clanagan, Dromantine, as purchased by Fr. Slattery in 1926.



their studies. On the 15th May, 1912, Bishop Paul Pellet, the SMA Superior General, formally erected the SMA Irish Province as a separate branch of the Society. The SMA Superior in Ireland since 1910, a Mayo man, Fr Stephen Kyne, resigned due to ill-health and was replaced by Fr Maurice Slattery, a native of Kerry, who later became the first Irish man to be elected the SMA Superior General, serving from 1937-1947.

A century ago, it was the foresight, diligence and determination of Fr Slattery whose keen intellect and warm personality impelled him to look for a suitable location to replace the Seminary at Blackrock Road which was no longer adequate to cater for the increasing numbers of students applying to join the Society. When an exhaustive search throughout the 4 Provinces proved to be fruitless, he sought divine intervention and organised a Novena in January, 1926. A few months later news reached him that a suitable site in the Diocese of Dromore was for sale. He sought and received the permission of Bishop Eugene Mulhern to establish a new theological seminary in the Diocese. He purchased Dromantine House and, after necessary renovations were completed, 47 seminarians moved from the seminary at Blackrock Road to take up residence in the new Major Seminary at Dromantine on the 21st September, 1926. The official Opening took place on 29th September, 1926. Fr William Butler, SMA, a native of Kilkenny, was the first elected SMA Provincial Superior in 1918 and was also the first Superior of Dromantine.

It is not an exaggeration to say that, when the SMA purchased Dromantine House and established it as a Major Seminary, it was a pivotal moment for the SMA here in Ireland and for the Diocese of Dromore. The prestigious Manor, which hitherto housed members of the landed gentry, was being transformed into "a spiritual powerhouse, an academy out of which go forth ambassadors to win new worlds for Christ". (Quote from Dromantine Annual, 1943-44, page 8). Eleven such ambassadors were ordained to the priesthood by Bishop Eugene Mulhern at St. Patrick and St. Colman's Cathedral, Newry on the 16th June, 1927, and for the next 46 years a total of 571 students were ordained to serve as missionaries in Egypt, Nigeria, Ghana, Zambia and Liberia, where they left a lasting legacy. Many are still remembered and admired long after they have gone back to God. Largely unknown in their own country, they were regarded as giants on the mission fields of Africa, in the manner of the little acorn that has grown into the impressive oak tree and occupies a prominent position, standing guard for centuries at the entrance to Dromantine, to welcome its many visitors.

From the mid-60s onwards there was a significant rethink of the entire priestly formation process, in response to the insights of the Second Vatican Council (Vatican II, (1962-1965). This led to a

fundamental change in seminary formation from an overly academic classroom-centred approach to a model which placed greater emphasis on human, spiritual and pastoral development. Vatican II was seen as a watershed moment in the history of the Catholic Church. It sought to move the Church away from a defensive and isolationist posture towards a more active engagement with the modern world. In the light of Vatican II, and in keeping with this prevailing fresh thinking, a decision was made to move SMA students into mainstream seminary formation at St. Patrick's College, Maynooth. After 46 years as a Major Seminary, Dromantine gradually closed its doors and the historic move to Maynooth began, starting with a few classes in September, 1969, to be followed by the remaining classes in 1972.

Another new era for Dromantine was about to begin.  
*(This story will continue in the Autumn edition of the African Missionary)*



Student life in Dromantine



# A NEW HORIZON OF HOPE: THE OLA SISTERS' MISSION IN LIBERIA



OLA Sisters, Sophie, Nathalie, Perpetua and Maureen with Fr Fachtna O'Driscoll SMA in Bomi, Liberia.

The presence of the Missionary Sisters of Our Lady of Apostles (OLA) in Liberia is a narrative of resurrection and renewal, nurtured in prayer and hope for over twenty-five years. It is a mission born from a long-cherished dream to serve the Liberian people and was finally seeded in a nation still recovering from the deep scars of civil war, a devastating Ebola epidemic, and the global coronavirus pandemic. Today, the OLA presence represents a new beginning, characterised by the OLA charism of presence, compassion, and missionary zeal to serve where the need is greatest.

## The Call

The formal journey toward this mission began in 2018, following an appeal from Archbishop Lewis Jerome Zeiger, which reached the OLA Sisters through the Society of African Missions. The Archbishop sought a dedicated presence in Monrovia to assist in the local Church's work. This vision became a reality on January 20, 2021, with the arrival of four pioneering Sisters.

This new mission, an extension of the Ghana Province, is characterised by its international character. The first community in Liberia reflected the universal character of the Church, consisting of four Sisters from diverse West African backgrounds.

The Sisters' initial integration was supported by their SMA brothers, who worked to ensure their living quarters were prepared with essentials, including solar power, allowing the community to turn their attention to the work at hand. This work began with an intensive period of discovery: learning the local culture, understanding

the socio-political context, and meeting with leaders of various ministries and youth movements.

## Educational Leadership in Bomi County

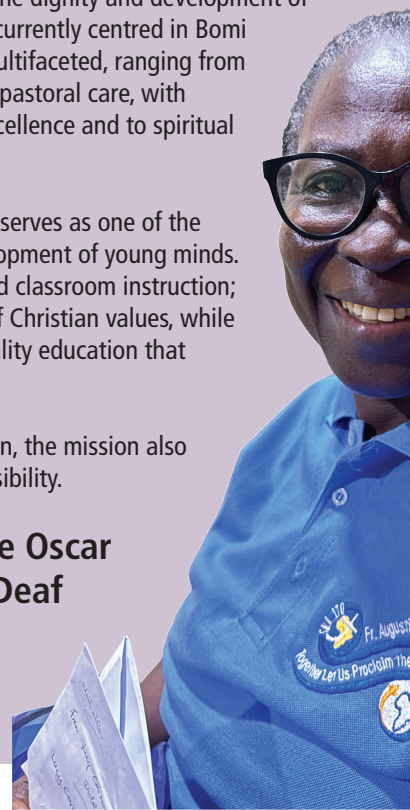
Education serves as a primary pillar of the OLA mission in Liberia, viewed as a vital tool in supporting the dignity and development of women and children. The mission is currently centred in Bomi County, where the Sisters' work is multifaceted, ranging from administrative and teaching roles to pastoral care, with attention given both to academic excellence and to spiritual growth.

At St. Dominic School, an OLA Sister serves as one of the administrators, overseeing the development of young minds. The Sisters' approach extends beyond classroom instruction; they strive to nurture a framework of Christian values, while ensuring students receive a high-quality education that prepares them for the future.

Within this broader work in education, the mission also embraces a more specialised responsibility.

## The New Chapter for the Oscar Romero School for the Deaf

Perhaps the most specialised aspect of the OLA mission is their management of the Oscar Romero



School for the Deaf. Originally established in 2008 by Mary's Meals Liberia, the school entered a significant phase in August 2024, when the OLA Sisters officially assumed its management.

As a coeducational boarding institution, the school provides a supportive sanctuary for children with hearing impairments. It is a place where pupils are encouraged to learn, and to grow and thrive socially and personally. Under OLA leadership, the school has already seen expansion. It previously served students from junior level to Grade 8; more recently the Sisters have added Grade 9 for the 2025/2026 academic year.

The Sisters operate with a clear vision: to make Oscar Romero a model of collaboration where deaf and hearing individuals live and work together. By sharing skills and experiences, they aim to expand access to equal opportunities, ensuring that deaf students receive a meaningful education that will allow them to participate fully in the life of Liberian society. This work is guided by a set of core values, including self-esteem, dignity, good stewardship, accountability, creativity, and mutual respect.

## Pastoral Care and Social Outreach

The Sisters' impact extends far beyond the classroom. They are deeply immersed in pastoral and social ministries, bringing guidance and tangible support to poor and marginalised groups in Bomi County. Their daily life involves constant engagement with the community, including work with youth groups and various local movements. By living as a consistent presence of compassion, they provide stability and mentorship. Their ministry is one of practical assistance, offering tangible resources and counselling to those in need.

## Building for the Future

Despite the milestones achieved since 2021, the Sisters remain attentive to the growing needs of their pupils. At the Oscar Romero School and across the wider mission, several priorities have emerged. There is an urgent need for additional infrastructure, including new classrooms, administrative offices, and essential facilities such as toilets. Educational resources must also be strengthened through the provision of furniture, equipment, and materials to establish a library and a dedicated computer complex. Alongside this, the Sisters envision the development of a multipurpose vocational centre, equipped with learning materials that will enable students to acquire practical, life-sustaining skills.

Through these efforts, the OLA Sisters continue their work of faith and perseverance in Liberia. In responding to this call to mission, they remain dedicated to sharing God's love through service, guided by their motto, Cum Maria Matre Jesu – With Mary, the Mother of Jesus. In Bomi County and beyond, their charism is made visible in daily commitment, in the sustained labour of education, accompaniment, and care.



Children from the deaf community proclaim their disability does not mean inability.



Classrooms and Administration Block, Oscar Romero School for the Deaf, Bomi County, Liberia.

Sr Teresa Kusi OLA, Administrator of the Oscar Romero School.



# A BEGINNING CARRIED FORWARD 150 YEARS

By Michelle Robertson

We must be nothing else but apostles of truth and of divine love.”  
~ Fr. Augustine Planque

The words were written into a landscape already known for fever, isolation and early death. West Africa in the nineteenth century was not imagined romantically; it was described in missionary reports with stark clarity. Many did not survive long.



2025 OLA Sisters at Ouidah, Republic of Benin – where the OLA Mission began 150 years ago.

The Society of African Missions had established a presence along the coast, but the limitations of that mission were soon apparent. Schools required women. Healthcare for women and children required women. A Church taking root needed a presence able to enter domestic and communal spaces inaccessible to men.

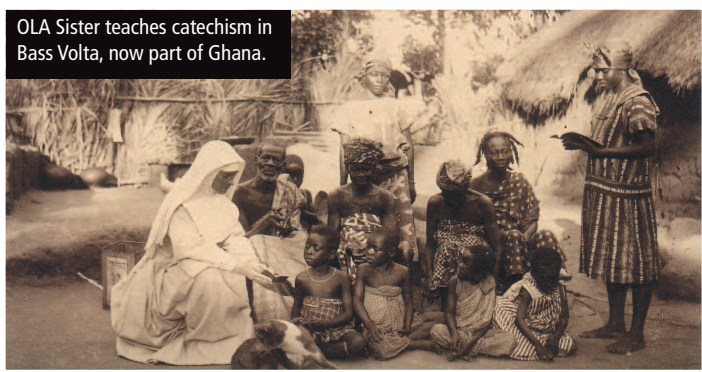
Fr Augustine Planque understood this. For years he appealed to established congregations to send sisters into conditions already associated with high mortality. Each request was refused. Eventually, a small group of Franciscan Sisters from Couzon in France agreed to go. From 1868, they taught and nursed in Porto-Novo and Lagos. They buried companions. They learned, in their own bodies, what mission in West Africa demanded.

The losses were severe. The Franciscan community could not sustain them indefinitely.

In Rome, Fr Planque was told: “You want Sisters... well then, make them.”

On 1 May 1876, the Sisters of Our Lady of Apostles were formally established

OLA Sister teaches catechism in Bass Volta, now part of Ghana.



in Lyon. Six of the sisters, already serving in Dahomey and Lagos, chose to remain and form the nucleus of the new congregation. The OLA did not arise from an abstraction. It grew from women who had already stayed long enough to know what staying required.

The congregation was entrusted to Mary, Queen of Apostles. Cum Maria Matre Jesu became its motto. Formation, back in France, followed the same logic as mission. The sisters slept on straw mattresses in bare rooms. They supported themselves by sewing for local linen shops. Poverty was not symbolic; it was preparation. Their bodies were trained to endure heat, hunger and uncertainty.

Irish women were present almost immediately. In 1877, OLA sisters came to Ireland at the invitation of the SMA, and were housed within the SMA seminary on Blackrock Road in Cork. Women entering the congregation travelled to Lyon for formation until a novitiate was opened in Cork in 1890.



1897 – OLA Sisters at Ouidah, Dahomey (now Republic of Benin) with hospital patients.

Ireland became a place of preparation and continuity. Young women trained as teachers, nurses and midwives, studying tropical medicine because survival depended on it. Many left for West Africa in the decades that followed. Some remained for most of their lives. Others survived only briefly. The work continued because it was taken up again each day.

Ardfoyle, purchased in the early twentieth century, became the centre of the Irish Province, formally erected in 1933. From there, decade after decade, Irish sisters departed for Nigeria, Ghana, Benin and beyond. They built schools and dispensaries with limited resources. They worked among women and girls whose lives were narrowed by poverty and cultural expectation. They collaborated closely with SMA priests, sustaining communities through teaching, tending and daily labour.

Independence across African nations altered the missionary landscape. Schools and hospitals founded by missionaries passed into state hands. The buildings remained; the sisters moved on. Many went to remote regions where infrastructure was sparse. They lived in villages without electricity or running water. They walked long distances to reach scattered communities and continued the labour of catechesis, healthcare and accompaniment.

As the congregation matured, leadership increasingly reflected the contexts in which it served. Nigeria was erected as a Province in 1990; Ghana followed in 1996. The women assuming responsibility were Nigerian, Ghanaian and Beninese, formed within the mission itself. The Congregation's centre of gravity moved from Europe and Ireland to Africa.

In 1991, sisters from the Irish Province opened a dispensary in Mwamapalala, Tanzania, later established as a Region of the Irish Province. Vocations flourished in African contexts even as they declined in Ireland. In 2024, structural changes recognised that both Tanzania and Ireland now function as Districts within a wider international congregation.

The shape of mission has broadened. Sisters still teach, provide catechesis and healthcare. They also work against human trafficking, accompany refugees and engage in interreligious dialogue where belief defines belonging. While tasks, and work surrounding mission have developed; its substance remains grounded in action and closeness to the communities where OLA Sisters work.

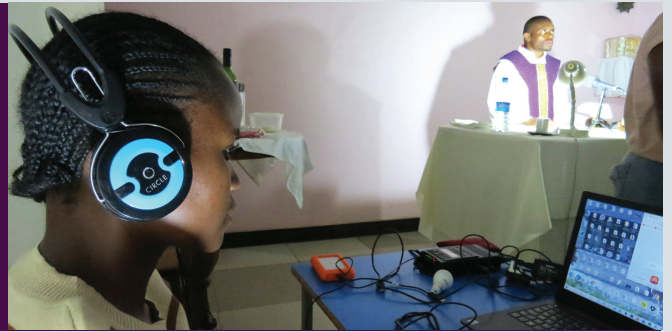
In May 2025, members of the OLA and SMA family gathered in Ouidah, Benin, at the landing site where missionaries first came ashore. Inscribed there are the names of Fathers Borghero and Fernandez, who arrived in 1861, and Sisters Monique, Cypren and Dominique O'Riordan, who arrived in 1877. The story and commitment they began are still in place.

One hundred and fifty years after its foundation, the congregation looks different. Communities are intercultural and mission moves in more than one direction.

What began in fragility has endured through change. Across continents and generations, the pattern remains steady: women who chose to remain and who, with faith and determination, began again each morning.

# SMA MEDIA CENTRE NDOLA, ZAMBIA

Fr Tom Casey SMA



Catherine Mulenga, Media Centre staff member recording at an SMA event.

*The SMA Media Centre, Ndola, Zambia, was founded by Fr Tom Casey SMA in 1999. Since then it has served as a vital hub for communication and evangelization by producing religious, catechetical and educational programmes to be used in Zambia and beyond. Here, Fr Tom shares an account of the Centre's beginning and development over the last twenty-seven years.*

My media journey began in 1998 with a year of studies in radio and television production at Kairos Communications, Maynooth, in Ireland. On returning to Zambia the following year, the Bishop of Ndola Diocese, offered me a position with Radio Icengelo. This marked the start of my involvement in media ministry.

From the early days until 2007, I focused on producing radio programs. In addition to homilies, religious topics, material for Lent and Advent, these programs also covered a wide range of subjects, including witchcraft, the plight of widows, the education system, alcoholism, drug abuse, and child abuse. From a Christian perspective, this diverse programming aimed to raise awareness of pressing societal issues and, ultimately, to promote positive change.

A milestone for the Media Centre occurred in 2006 when, in collaboration with the Franciscan Media Centre, a short video was made on the life and work of Fr. Fergus Conlon SMA, who had died in January of that year. This, our first video production, marked the beginning of a new era which recognised the potential and value of using this medium. With the assistance of Irish supporters, equipment was acquired and this facilitated the establishment of a dedicated video production section at the SMA Media Centre.



Initially our main subjects for video productions were NGOs and SMAs involved in project work in Zambia, for example, Father Anthony Kelly's project for housing widows and orphans in Kitwe. The videos we

produced supported fundraising efforts for this and for other important initiatives. Our experience also grew through providing video coverage for events such as graduations at the university in Kalulushi, the 25th anniversary of St. Dominic's Hospital and various SMA occasions such as Ordinations and celebrations of SMA Foundation Day. A comprehensive video commemorating 50 years of the SMA in Zambia was made, featuring interviews conducted both in Zambia and Ireland, particularly with the founding fathers of the SMA mission in Zambia.

A major project, spread over many years, was the writing, recording and editing of Sunday Homilies for the full three-year Sunday cycle of Church readings – 156 recordings in all. Each sermon was produced in both audio and video versions. This dual-format approach is intended to allow an outreach to as wide and diverse an audience as possible. The videos have been distributed via Facebook, YouTube and Email. The Audio versions have a much wider outreach and, in 2024, were broadcast on 11 local Radio Stations in Zambia. For many years the homilies page on the SMA website ([www.sma.ie](http://www.sma.ie)) has been its most visited page, often achieving thousands of visits each week. Two different homilies are offered on this page – a written homily from Fr. Michael McCabe SMA and the audio recording from SMA Media Centre Ndola. These provide spiritual support and guidance to many people all around the world. The SMA Media Centre, Ndola is also engaged in other areas of work. It has organised and facilitated live conferences (via Zoom) between schools in Zambia and Ireland over the past three years. These gave students in both countries an opportunity to meet, interact and experience one and other's culture and daily life. These collaborations required substantial preparation and coordination with school authorities in both countries. In Ireland Mr. Paul O'Flynn, who works with the SMA Communications Office, has been invaluable to our efforts, bringing his expertise from years of service with Ireland's national media outlet, RTE.



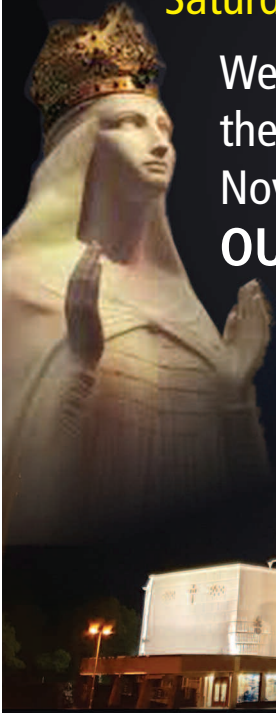
Ernest Katema, Henry Kangwa and Jonathan Chibwe, students from the SMA House in Kabwe who completed a training course at the SMA Media Centre

In a conscious effort to educate new communicators and media personnel the SMA Media Centre has since 1999, trained over 200 students in radio and TV production. Among these are students from the SMA formation house in Kabwe. The photo here shows Ernest Katema, Henry Kangwa and Jonathan Chibwe who attended an intensive course on audio and video production. While doing this, they produced a short audio documentary and also a video about life as an SMA student. This experience and training will help to prepare them to be better communicators and, therefore, better missionaries, able to use modern means of communication effectively. The training of these students is also essential for the continued operation of the Media Centre. Hopefully some of them will, as missionaries, be actively engaged in media ministry and future managers of the SMA Media Centre.

# SMA PILGRIMAGE TO KNOCK

Saturday 23rd May 2026

We invite you to join us for the closing day of our Annual Novena in honour of **OUR LADY**



Ceremonies begin at 1pm

## REMEMBER THE MISSIONS IN YOUR WILL

By remembering the SMA and OLA in your will you can help the mission work of the SMA and OLA to continue after you.

For more information contact the SMA or OLA House nearest to you.



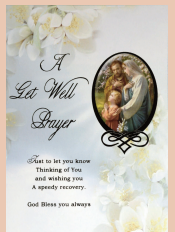
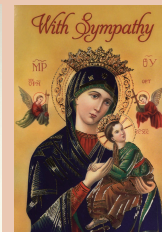
## ORDER CARDS ONLINE

Sharing in the Masses and prayers of the members of the Society of African Missions (SMA) is a meaningful way to remember a deceased loved one, to celebrate an occasion or to let family or friends know that they are in your thoughts and prayers.

You can now order cards for various occasions via the SMA website [www.sma.ie](http://www.sma.ie)

Individual and packs of 10 Christmas Cards available.

Cards can also be ordered by phoning the SMA House nearest to you – see telephone numbers on the bottom of this page.



## Eternal rest grant unto them O Lord

Please pray for our OLA and SMA missionaries, and our deceased supporters.

Sr. Mary Barron (Carrigcloney, Glenmore, Co Kilkenny) who served in Nigeria and Ireland and died on 17 January 2026 aged 86 years.

Fr Michael McGrath (Abbeyshrule, Co Longford) who served in Nigeria and died on 28 January 2026 aged 85 years.

Sr Catherine Donovan (Leap, Co Cork) who served in Nigeria and Ireland and died on 28 January aged 82 years.

Fr PJ Gormley (Ballinagurra, Augher, Co Tyrone) who served in Zambia and Ireland and died on 12 March 2026 aged 81 years.

Lord God, welcome our deceased supporters, benefactors and missionaries into the peace of your Kingdom. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

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