

## Nigeria

The Sisters' first foundation in Nigeria was in Jalingo in 1983. Since then, communities have been established in Yola, Ganye and Jos. As well as formation and education, the Sisters are involved in catechetical and pastoral work. Two Kindergarten schools have now developed into full primary schools under the management of the Sisters in Ganye and Jalingo.

In November 2008 the Sisters celebrated 25 years in Nigeria.

When missionaries first went to Nigeria, they usually established schools for the purpose of evangelisation. A few years after independence, the Nigerian government took over all the mission schools. They allowed schools solely for the purposes of training priests and Quaranic schools for Muslim children. For this reason the diocese of Yola was able to have its own 'secondary school' or minor seminary. When girls wished to enter religious life they were allowed to attend this diocesan school to complete their education.

Agreement was reached with the bishop that some Infant Jesus Sisters would teach in this school in Yola. In the meantime the sisters in Jalingo and Ganye reached out to the youth in local secondary schools and villages. They provided literacy programmes and skills in small centres for women in those areas. From the beginning, all the sisters have been involved in catechetical and pastoral work.

In the late 1980s, the government re-opened the door to the establishment of Christian schools, recognising the quality of the education given by the missionaries. This allowed our sisters to work with the diocese in setting up small kindergarten schools, both in Ganye and Jalingo. With time these have grown into full primary schools under the sisters' management.

In the early 1990s the people in the Jalingo area suffered greatly from ethnic clashes and land disputes, which led to the destruction of property and facilities, including schools and hospitals. As a result many more girls grew up without education, which led to abuse, forced marriages, early pregnancy and exploitation.

During his pastoral visits, the Bishop of Jalingo became aware of the plight of these girls. He had seen the work already being done by the sisters, and having shared his vision with them, they decided to open a larger centre for young women in Jalingo – the Women's Vocational Training Centre. This is now flourishing, with a two-year programme for about 77 young women from the villages.

From the start, one of the pastoral concerns of the sisters was the plight of prisoners, many of whom were innocent and left without trial for 10 to 12 years in very harsh conditions. Over the years, some sisters visited the prisoners regularly, helping with medical problems, running prayer groups and even working with the prison authorities to provide basic facilities such as water. In some cases, they organised legal teams who fought for justice for these prisoners.

As the number of young Nigerian women called to join the Institute increased, the need was felt for a formation house in Jos. Here they can join other young religious for courses while being involved in mission locally. The sisters are currently running a diocesan Catholic primary school in Jos. They instruct children and adults preparing

for the sacraments and foster their spiritual life. They have been involved in setting up a number of small basic Christian communities. They also participate in local support groups for people living with HIV/AIDS, sickle cell anaemia and mental health problems.

### Update

The Nigerian District Chapter took place on 18<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> October 2013 in Jalingo. The theme of the General Chapter "Choose Life: Giving shape to our Vision 'as clay in the potter's hands'." Jer. 18:6 challenged the Sisters to have greater trust in God, to choose life, to see as God sees the events in their life and to see the face of God in all faiths and cultures amidst the tension and polarization in our country.

After the presentations by the sister delegates on the process and orientations of the General Chapter, the Nigerian sisters felt challenged to choose life especially in the Nigerian context at this period of history when they are living in fear and uncertainty about the future.

The attacks by a religious fanatic group are increasing, with villages being wiped out and families losing their loved ones who die innocently. The attacks have a great impact on the sisters as they know the victims. They are aware that the attackers are living among them in Yola. In the face of all these realities, the voice of the Church through the Archbishop of Jos, has given hope to the people. He appealed to the people not to retaliate but to continue to pray and to work for peace through reason and dialogue. The sisters, too are experiencing fear, but their trust in God, their only security keeps them going as they work to promote peace, forgiveness and tolerance among people of different ethnic and religious backgrounds.

At the Chapter, the facilitator, Sr. Maire McGann, an Irish Mercy sister, helped the sisters to identify the emerging needs of the people especially in the areas of migration, trafficking of women and children, people with HIV/Aids, and children with little or no educational opportunity and who are vulnerable, with no child safe-guarding policies in place, and people's security and safety in the presence of religious fanatics.

The sisters realized that they needed to upgrade their educational level and be trained professionally as educators so as to serve the people better. In the area of leadership, there is also a need to move away from power struggle.

The need to be anchored in God and to see the face of God in all faiths and culture amidst the tension and polarization in the country is paramount.

A three day live-in experience for the younger members of both countries of Nigeria and Cameroon was held.

Their suggestions included:

- the exchange of sisters between the two countries
- a joint programme for initial formation
- the annual retreat together
- a foundation in Senegal
- working towards self-reliance.

The Sisters saw the need to learn both French and English to be able to communicate effectively with one another and with the Sisters in the Institute.

The desire to improve the quality of their relationships challenged the Sisters to recognize, appreciate and affirm each other and at the same time to welcome and respect the diversity of gifts and differences among them. They recognized the need to make the effort to be fully present to the other and to people they encounter daily and to listen deeply to what the other is communicating.

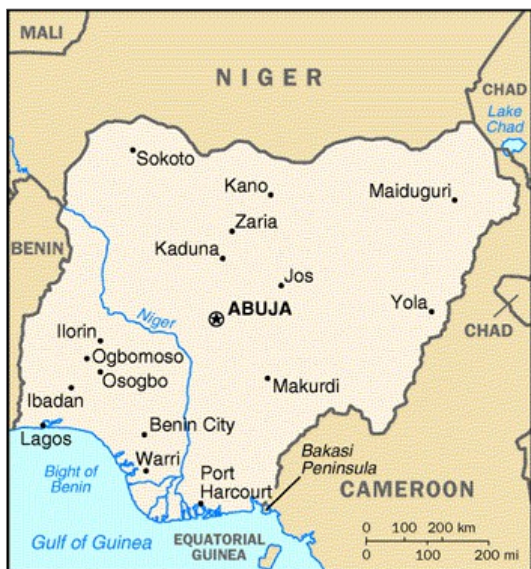
They feel called to share their IJ Spirituality with the lay people who work with them in their mission, in small Christian communities and support groups for HIV/AIDS.

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The Sisters are grateful to

- the Archbishop of Jos for the gift of a piece of land in Rukuba, outside Jos, about 50 minutes drive from Bukuru.
- the friends of Nicolas Barré in Ganye who are building a two roomed house for a blind man, Filibus.
- Misesan Cara for building 6 extra classes for the secondary school run by Sister Anna Patrick in Ganye.

Three young women have made their first profession as IJ Sisters – Sr Maureen Agwagu, Sr Juliet Shima and Sr Martha Pius. This took place in Nov 2014.



The sisters today continue to respond to the needs of their people to the best of their ability, working in close collaboration with lay people and with other organisations. Their hope is to grow in numbers and in strength, and to continue to be an effective witness to the presence of God among the people.

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***2015 Update by Sr Georgina Clarson, one of the pioneer IJ sisters who started the mission there.***

In February 1980, our Infant Jesus Sisters went on an exploratory journey to the vast country of Nigeria, with a view to setting up a community there. It was strange the way it happened.

We had been invited by the bishop of Enugu in the south-eastern part of the country. The Irish Bishop, Joseph Shanahan, and many other missionaries had worked there from 1905 planting the seeds of the Gospel. Divine Providence had something else in mind for us and due to unforeseen circumstances, our sisters went instead to answer another appeal from the bishop of Yola in a semi desert region of the northeast. Here they discovered a much poorer diocese, the size of Ireland, where the first Mass had been celebrated just 40 years before. As yet, there were very few local priests and no local sisters. The needs were great and a vast field was ripe for the harvest. One of the first questions the bishop asked them was, "Are you willing to receive local girls into the

Institute and train them for the Consecrated Life?" It was our own big desire and from the start it has been a priority for the sisters.

Now, just 35 years later, the Nigerian sisters have grown to 14. They have already taken on the leadership of their district and have their own formation team. Time given to their personal professional and spiritual formation always includes presence among the people and awareness of their needs.

Having begun in Jalingo, the sisters now live in 4 communities in 3 dioceses, From the start, education, especially of women and girls, was seen as the best way to tackle the root causes of the problems of the society. At present, the sisters with their lay collaborators are responsible for two primary schools, one secondary school, one "Women's Centre" while they also work in other schools, villages and parishes.

For a number of years now, the teachers, pupils and sisters live in constant danger where terrorists have declared war on schools and all forms of "western education". They experience first hand the appalling massacres of innocent people when violence erupts around their houses leaving many dead and mutilated. Trusting in the same Divine Providence, they continue their work sharing the lives, the dangers and hopes of their people. They continue to pray, to reach out to others of all denominations and cultures, to promote peace, to create support groups for those traumatised by violence or suffering from AIDS.

Seeing this, a steady trickle of young women comes to join the Infant Jesus Sisters and year-by-year the Lord adds to their number. The mustard seed planted less than forty years ago has already grown into a tree bearing its own fruit where many can find shelter and encouragement for life's journey. Thanks be to God.

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