



AT AFIKPO, EASTERN NIGERIA, 1958. MOTHER MARY FLAVIA, REV. MOTHER MARY RONALD,
MOTHER MARY BRIDGET, MOTHER MARY PERPETUA - ALL FOUR FROM U.S.A.

Women in the Mission Field

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THE recent missionary activities of our Catholic religious Sisterhoods are both striking and consoling.

After all, is not this movement a return to primitive practice? The New Testament graphically describes the services rendered by holy women in helping to spread the Kingdom of God during the lifetime of Our Lord, services multiplied later in the missionary fields of Apostolic labour. "That great champion of missionary ideals and their zealous and active apostle, St. John Chrysostom 'would fain make it an obligation for every member of the Church to take an active part in the conversion of all souls outside her influence. From this sacred and bounden duty, he would exempt no one: neither the ignorant, nor slaves, nor the sick, nor women.' Why, not even women? Because, he adds: "In the combats for the Faith, a woman may prove to be possessed of more courage than men." (G. Goyau, Missions and Missionaries).

Pope Gregory XVI launched the movement for associating Catholic womanhood with active missionary work. France has led in that movement; the Sisters of the Immaculate Conception, known also as the "Blue Sisters," being the first in the field at the beginning of Pius IX's pontificate. The best known and most numerous are the Missionary Sisters of Our Lady of Africa, founded in 1869 by Cardinal Lavigerie. A summary of their work indicates the common work of all our missionary nuns. They teach, nurse the sick, care for the poor and aged, manage dispensaries, orphanages and training schools. In the interior of Africa, these "White Sisters" exercise a wonderful influence over the native women.

Through the example of the nuns and under their guidance, native Christian girls aspire to the religious state and one of the greatest and most consoling results of the missionary efforts of our Sisters is the formation of communities of native nuns.

Such is the work of the Sisters of the Holy Child Jesus who are already firmly established in Nigeria. Those volunteering for the work undergo a practical training in England and the United States during which they are taught the remedies for diseases prevalent in tropical Africa, the ways of caring for the sick, and methods of teaching handicraft. An incident in the preparatory training of one of the volunteers

from my own parish * school staff here in New York is not without interest. As we Catholics have no Trade School, this nun was obliged to go to one of the public Trade Schools for a course in manual work. There she received not only courteous but most cordial attention. The teaching staff from the Head down placed themselves at her service; boys were detailed to accompany her to the trolley; the teachers even came to the Convent after the sessions to give intensive instruction; and, as it was known that she was going to Nigeria, the staff presented her with a complete outfit of tools and necessary material to enable her to begin at once her work for the little Africans. And that enthusiasm is typical of what we find in all who come in personal contact with these devoted nuns.

This spirit among our Catholic people is most consoling. It is growing apace as the needs of the missions are brought home to them.

For those who call attention to the urgent needs of our own home missions, the retort of Our Blessed Lord is apt: "*Haec oportet facere et illa non omittere.*" These things must be done and those not neglected. And it is found that what is true of the marvellous charity of the poor towards those poorer than themselves, is likewise true in regard to the missions. Generosity towards them is required by improvement in home conditions.

When it is pointed out that there is an alarming leakage from the Church, that there are multitudes of indifferent and negligent Catholics to be reformed, that millions of non-Catholics surround us, all presenting tasks to absorb the energy and tax to the utmost the resources of our clergy, the answer can be varied. St. John Chrysostom may be quoted: "If each and every Christian were but willing to bear testimony for the Faith that is in him, most of the pagans would be converted". And we have the example of Our Blessed Lord Himself when a certain village sought to detain Him, and He excused Himself because others were calling. Above all, this answer is crushing: these have had and still have their opportunity: the Gospel has been preached to them: if they wish they can learn the truth: but, unhappily, it is a repetition: "He came unto His own and His own received Him not". Finally, the call to support the missions is fundamental alike to those who devote their lives to the work and to those who should provide for their material support. Every day we pray "*Adveniat regnum tuum*" (May Thy Kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven). Why then should we not do what lies in our power to spread that Kingdom and advance its interests on earth? We may envy those who hear the call and give their lives to the advancement of that Kingdom. But it is only to chosen spirits that the call comes. Humbly but eagerly we can help in the various ways open to us according to our circumstances - if not with personal service yet with our prayers and such material offering as conditions permit. These will be eagerly offered if we take to heart the burning words of Our Lord: "I am come to cast fire on the earth: and what will I, but that it be kindled?" (Luke XII, 49). It is the privilege of us all to help kindle that fire in the mission field. Let us pray that in the new province of the Kingdom of God in Nigeria, the alumnae, friends and followers of the Sisters of the Holy Child may contribute many sparks so that the fire may leap from stubble to stubble until the whole field be kindled.

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* Our Lady of Lourdes.