

## SMA celebrates 150 years of work



The Irish headquarters of the SMA on Blackrock Road, Cork. The Society of African Missions was founded by Mgr Melchior de Marion Brésillac in 1856.

# Proud history of a Mission

**O**NE hundred and fifty years ago, many young Irish priests and brothers who left for Africa as missionaries knew they would never come home.

Moving to what was then known as 'the white man's grave' along the west coast of Africa, those who joined the Society of African Missions (SMA) in those days were aware that with civil unrest and fatal diseases predominant, they would be unlikely to see home again.

But the organisation has gone from strength to strength and this week marked the 150th anniversary of its foundation.

SMA spokesperson Fr Tom Curran explains: "In the early times, they went out to Africa to die, they knew that. Most of them who went out in the early days were dead within two years."

But much has changed since then for members of the SMA—an international community of



**OLGA CRONIN**

Catholic missionaries who serve the people of Africa.

Since the SMA was founded in Lyons by Mgr Melchior de Marion Brésillac in 1856, conditions in Africa have changed considerably.

"African countries have moved from being colonised to being independent states," said Fr Curran, adding that while medical facilities are still sparse in areas, conditions have improved since 1856.

"There have been huge changes in Africa. For example, 50 years ago in Nigeria the population was 30 million, now it's 140 million."

With Ireland and other European countries experiencing a massive decline in vocations, fewer people from Ireland, Britain and all over Europe are going to Africa as

missionaries and the SMA have had to recruit new members from within Africa itself.

"The most recent big change for the SMA has been the bringing of members from Africa, India and Poland to the missions," said Fr Curran.

"For example we now have 110 African priests with the SMA."

The SMA has a multi-faceted role in Africa. Members preach the Gospel, educate, provide healthcare and aim to promote peace and justice. However, Fr Curran, said their methods have changed.

"Before, the SMA was about saving souls. Now we're about helping people in their whole being. There is no point in telling a person who is starving about the love of God until he is fed."

This more practical approach is no more evident than in the Lodwar Diocese in the Turkana Desert in Kenya, where Cork priest Fr Ollie Noonan is trying to build an irrigation system.

This practical approach with a focus on development work means that the SMA need a multi-skilled team and not just doctors, nurses and teachers, which is why the recruiting of lay people is now vital.

There are currently two Irish lay people volunteering with the SMA in Zambia and Fr Curran said he would welcome anyone, both male and female, who is interested in applying to be a volunteer.

"There is always a need for volunteers. We would certainly make assessments," he said, adding that they would welcome skilled people such as doctors, nurses, mechanics and carpenters.

"This is a very symbolic year for us because it's

a year for questioning ourselves.

"I believe the story of the missions has never been told.

"I think we have been reluctant to tell our story about the work of the missionaries in transforming this earth and I think it's time to acknowledge that."

Fr Curran added that the SMA have been acting as ambassadors for Ireland long before any official Irish ambassador was ever appointed.

It is believed that over the last 150 years, up to 800 Irish men have moved to Africa as part of the SMA.

The organisation currently has 944 members of the SMA from Africa, America, Asia and Europe and works in a number of African countries as well as Europe, the Americas, Asia and Oceania.

At present the SMA works in 51 dioceses in Africa.

"People need to know that great work has been done," said Fr Curran.



**ROBERT O'SHEA**

THE Rough Guide to the Airport:

**When to go:**

The Airport is a popular destination the year round. Summer though is an especially popular time for tourists to visit. Locals tend to be friendlier in the off-peak season.

**How to get there:**

Take the car. Car enthusiasts will love the long-term car park, with its hundreds of yards of different cars between where you park (E, or was it F?) and the terminal building. Taxis are a fine alternative, though they will charge that little bit extra than normal, but it's worth it when they ask you where you're going on your holidays and regale you with stories of their own.

**How to get around:**

The unique commuting system of the Airport trolley is the favoured transport of many visitors. This has the added bonus of being free. And it's simple: just lift the bar under the handles and prepare to veer left. Many of the top sights are within walking distance (see what to see).

**What to bring:**

It's wise to pack lightly. If there is one thing the locals hate, it's to see you lugging huge bags around on your shoulder. They hate it so much that they now feel it is only fair to charge you for their pain.

**People:**

Airport people can be deeply suspicious at first if they don't know you. They will probably be very up front about asking you for identification and are unlikely to even shake your hand.

They are very individualistic people and are often hostile if they find out that someone else has packed your bags. More than likely they will ask you to empty all your pockets so they can X-ray them (see Local Customs) to make sure you are not carrying a bomb or sharp keys.

If you are feeling rather lonesome, an easy way to make acquaintances very quickly is to leave your bag unattended for any amount of time.

Don't worry, you're not the loneliest person in the airport; those who write random surnames on pieces of paper and hold them up are. They love meeting new people. Introduce yourself and go along with their ruse that O'Keeffe is your name. Sure, they'd love to buy you a drink.

**Local customs:**

Airport people, though they can be gruff, are very curious about who you are and what is in your pockets. But because they are masters of reverse psychology they make you think that you would rather give them this information voluntarily.

So instead of them queuing up to meet you, they get you to queue to meet them. Queuing is the mainstay of Airport culture and if you are not willing to immerse yourself in their culture, you are unlikely to enjoy your stay.

**What to see:**

Gigantic windows offer outstanding scenery of both the car park (to front) and the runway (to rear). Is there anything more graceful in the technological world than an airplane coming into land? It descends and descends until its wheels suddenly kiss the runway tarmac. Then it decelerates and taxis. But look in the sky! Here comes another.

**Entertainment:**

Who doesn't love the magical mystery of the carousel? Which bag will do three revolutions of the conveyor belt before your own bag makes an appearance? This game could last for many hours and keep the kids intensely entertained. Who owns that bloody buggy?

**Nightlife:**

Who can resist the lure of the flickering arcade games? Oh, you can.

Don't spend too long in the bar. There are few more unpleasant feelings than waking up in a terminal at dusk, having no idea what you are doing there while people try to hoover under your feet.

**Public holidays:**

Good Friday and Christmas Day sees the biannual Gathering of the Alcoholics festivities in the bars.

**Shopping:**

Make-up shops dominate the Airport. Who buys it all? Air hostesses, of course. It may still be called duty free, but trust us, it isn't. Yet where else do you get the urge to buy two giant-sized Toblerones.

There is a glaring lack of second-hand bookshops in the airport.

**Where to eat:**

Although it is incredibly expensive, Airport cuisine is also incredibly crap. The cold tortilla wrap in air-tight plastic is a local favourite. Don't eat too much! You'll ruin your appetite for free peanuts.

**Where to stay:**

Looks like it's those uncomfortable steel benches for you and your wife and your three kids. Have you checked in your bags? Uh-oh! No pillow. Enjoy your stay.