

## A ray of sunshine...

The OLA Sisters (Our Lady of Apostles) arrived in Egypt in 1881, seven years after the arrival of French SMA priests in Cairo. Today seven OLA communities care for several schools and clinics throughout the country as well as in Lebanon and countries south of the Sahara. Their focus is on education, healthcare, pastoral work and outreach to youths.

Our OLA presence has gone from strength to strength, with 9 communities and 25 Egyptian Sisters plus others from Lebanon, Nigeria and Togo. The SMA numbers have diminished with 8 SMA priests in three communities – Héliopolis, Choubra and Tahta.

In the midst of the present turmoil in Egypt – with Christian churches (Coptic, Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant...) attacked and clinics / schools destroyed, Egyptian Christians are living through an intense moment of suffering and persecution. For the most part, Christians live in peace with their Muslim sisters and brothers but, sadly, there are some who are exploiting the present instability to seek to destroy the Christian presence in the land where the Saviour Himself found shelter after his birth.

One of the churches under SMA care is very close to Ramses Square where hundreds of people lost their lives or were seriously injured in 2013. To protect the area the local people (Muslim and Christians) set up vigilante groups to keep out 'strangers'. Thankfully we benefit from such 'protection' but it is so sad to see that ordinary people are forced to protect themselves from all sides involved in the ongoing political struggle.

St Mark's Roman Catholic Cathedral in Choubra, Cairo, dates back to Palm Sunday, 8th



OLA Sisters Mryna (from Lebanon) and Gisele (Togo) speaking to women in Choubra parish

April 1894. Their first task was to build what is now the cathedral building which opened in 1910. Among the different services provided there today is a school for those with Special Needs, with 60 Christian and Muslim children and young adults attending.

An OLA Sister recently emailed a request for prayers for Egypt, for its people and particularly the Egyptian OLA Sisters whose families are suffering the effects of the unrest. For example, *"some who went to work last week were unable to return home in the evening as the roads were blocked and unsafe. Many had to sleep at their workplace."*

The OLA Sisters continue to welcome young women who want to give their lives to God as missionaries. During the 2013 uprising which resulted in the loss of so many innocent lives, two young Egyptian women took their First Vows in the OLA, arriving at St. Mark's, Choubra, at 6.30am, just one hour before the marches which led to so much bloodshed. It was a ray of sunshine on a dark landscape.

It is important to note the contribution of Irish SMA priests in Egypt, particularly in the field of education. St George's College, Héliopolis was one of the most important schools in the country. It is now part of the University of Alexandria. Among the Irish who ministered in Egypt were Fathers Maurice Slattery, Steven Kyne, Donal M O'Connor, Owen Maginn, Bob Hales and Gerry Forde. The last Irish SMA priest to work here, Fr Mattie McNeely (from Mulrany, Co Mayo), died while on holidays in Ireland in 2009.



Fr Jean-Paul Silué and Fr Wilson with Coptic Bishop Youssef Abol Kher

In the early years of the SMA, several Irish SMA priests were ordained in the SMA Choubra seminary (e.g. Steven Kyne (1896), Maurice Slattery, James O'Rafferty and Thomas Gibbons (1900).

And the tradition continued when Fr Jean-Paul Silué (from Cote d'Ivoire) was ordained a priest on 10 May 2013. Fr Jean-Paul is now leading the new SMA team ministering in Christ the King Coptic Rite Cathedral, Tahta City in Upper Egypt (cf. the African Missionary, Autumn / Winter 2016). He is accompanied by Indian SMA Fr Wilson Kodavantikanti.



# Have you ever wondered about these Islamic traditions?

## Why do Muslim women wear a headdress?

The Qur'an, the holy book of Islam, calls for men and women to 'cover and be modest'. It does not say that women must cover themselves wearing various headdresses or cover their bodies completely.

Some scholars, especially the more conservative ones, argue that it is a religious obligation. Others say it has become important for cultural rather than religious reasons depending on the areas of the world in which Islam is practised.

We tend to confuse the terms or names for women's dress. The **burqa** covers the entire body including the face while the **hijab** is the headscarf that covers the head and the neck but not the face. Finally, the **chador** is a full-length cloak worn by many Iranian women.

## Why do Muslims fast for a full month?

During the ninth month of the lunar calendar, the month of Ramadan, every Muslim (over the age of puberty) must fast during the daylight hours. This command to Muslims comes from the Qur'an 2:183. Many religious traditions believe in this practice, i.e. the Christian Lent or Yom Kippur for the Jews.

Islamic tradition feels that by fasting a Muslim is guarding one's self from evil and encouraging spiritual and moral

improvement. This promotes purity of heart and mind as well as cultivating self-discipline. It also makes a Muslim aware of those who are underprivileged and so encourages a degree of social consciousness.

## Why do Muslims go on Pilgrimage to Mecca?

This pilgrimage, known as the hajj, is an obligation on all Muslims to undertake once in their lifetime, only if they can afford it. The hajj is based on the story of Abraham and Ishmael we have in the Qu'ran. Muslims believe that Abraham's faith was tested when God commanded him to sacrifice his son Ishmael. This took place in Mecca and when the sacrifice was stopped both father and son built a shrine, called the Ka'aba, as a house of monotheistic worship.

While on the hajj, Muslims circle the Ka'aba counter-clockwise seven times while praying.

They also walk between two hills remembering Hagar, Ishmael's mother, who went looking between the hills for water for her son. Finally, they throw seven stones at a pillar. This pillar represents the devil who, it is believed, tried to talk Abraham out of submitting to God's will by sacrificing his son. The Grand Mosque in Mecca (the world's largest) encompasses both the Ka'aba and the two hills. Around two million pilgrims undertake this ritual each year.

# The work of mission in Kontagora, Nigeria

Father Emile Kouakou Appraboe was born in Côte d'Ivoire, west Africa in 1980. After his ordination in 2012 he was appointed to the Kontagora Vicariate in Nigeria. Fr Emile describes some aspects of his missionary life.

## People to evangelize

Kontagora Vicariate is an area of Primary Evangelization (i.e. many people have never heard of Jesus Christ). There are many ethnic groups (Kamberi, Gungawa, Dakarkari and Dukawa). There are also Hausa people who have settled in the area and control much of the local government (LGA) and civil service. In some LGA offices, due to discrimination, Christians will not get jobs.

Most Hausas are Muslim, while the others follow Traditional Religions and Christianity. We have been working here since the 1960's. Other Christian groups are also evangelizing in the area. Today, more than 30% of the population are Christian.

## The challenge of poverty

Kontagora is located in a very remote rural area of north-west Nigeria, lacking the basic infrastructure of tarred roads, running water and adequate education and medical facilities. Our climate is harsh with a long dry season and a short wet season. From January we have the Harmattan coming down from the Sahara desert (giving us a dry, windy and dusty period with, often, temperatures up to 42° Celsius).

The people are very poor and their life is difficult. Women must collect firewood from the countryside for cooking. Many local diseases are water-borne. Infant mortality rates are very high. As a result most parishes have well-digging teams to source clean water.

Farming is the main occupation. A good harvest depends on the length and quality of the wet season. Fertiliser is expensive and due to its high cost, the land is soon exhausted. The farmers must move on seeking new farmland.

## Family and education challenges

Young girls are promised in marriage from an early age, as parents seek a good husband for them. Many are polygamous (having a number of wives). This is a challenge for Christians and some will become Muslim in order to have two or more wives. Having multiple wives means a greater number of children to work the farm.

Parents are encouraged to send their children to school. We have a number of Catholic schools, from kindergarten to secondary school level, providing the opportunity to learn and know their rights and duties. Our schools welcome children of all faiths.

For those children who don't attend school we run a three-month school programme during the long dry season. Adults also attend these courses. It is the best time to gather them, because there is no farming work to be done. They are taught literacy, basic English, Hausa (the market language of the area as people speak their own language in the home and in the village), preventative medicine and child nutrition. The Vicariate Justice and Peace Commission gives presentations on Human Rights. The Christians are taught the Catechism.

## The Joy of Mission

Mission life in Kontagora, though difficult, is also enriching. As missionary priests, we adapt to the food, water, life style and we sow the love of Christ around us without discrimination. We share the word of God with them by preaching and a simple lifestyle, which is a source of joy for them and us. It is indeed a shared joy. We care for the people, body and soul.

We are grateful for the support we receive from the SMA and our co-workers in mission, our SMA supporters.

I will always have a good memory of my mission in Kontagora.

SMA Deacons ordained in Côte d'Ivoire earlier this year.



# PLANT A TREE - FOR IRELAND AND AFRICA - THE LAUDATO TREE PROJECT



The Laudato Tree project is an initiative of the Society of African Missions and has its' origins in the SMA Thumbprint Campaign for Climate Justice. The title "Laudato Tree" refers to the 2015 Letter of Pope Francis – Laudato Si' – which reminds us that our environment is fragile and that everything is interconnected and interdependent.

The Laudato Tree project encourages the planting of trees in Ireland (in partnership with the Tree Council of Ireland) and in Africa by supporting a United Nations Convention on Combatting Desertification (UNCCD) project – Great Green Wall – to combat the spread of the desert in Africa. The Great Green Wall project aims to plant a green "wall" right across the continent just south of the Sahara Desert. For information on the Great Green Wall, see [www.greatgreenwall.org](http://www.greatgreenwall.org)

The Aims and Objectives of the Project are:

- To increase awareness of climate change and how local activity can help to reverse its effects.



- To identify our collective responsibility to care for and protect our shared eco-system.
- To promote tree planting in Ireland for ecological benefits such as increased vegetative cover, particularly the planting of the most suitable trees for each location.
- To highlight global deforestation, particularly in Africa and South America, where the destruction of forests and trees causes major environmental, social and economic hardship.

With the donations we receive the Tree Council of Ireland will plant and maintain trees in "Laudato Tree" gardens and woods in Ireland.

The African part of it will see trees planted in Ghana and Burkina Faso. This project is partnered with the UNCCD and has the core objective of making a significant and sustainable contribution towards implementing Africa's Great Green Wall.





Donations can be made either through the [www.treecouncil.ie](http://www.treecouncil.ie) or [www.sma.ie](http://www.sma.ie) websites. (Note: The minimum on-line donation to the Tree Council of Ireland is €20).

Donations of any amount can also be made by cheque, payable to "SMA Justice Office" and posted to the SMA Justice Office, African Missions, Wilton, Cork.

For further information email [laudato.tree@sma.ie](mailto:laudato.tree@sma.ie) or visit <https://sma.ie/laudatotree/>

#### How Donations will be used

All donations, large or small, are welcome. A donation of €60 will provide €35 directly to the Great Green Wall Project on the borders of Ghana and Burkina Faso. This will allow the planting of at least five trees, expanded planting of crops and support the training of local people for sustainable business and employment.

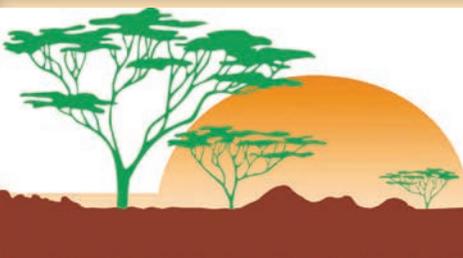
The remaining €25 will be used in Ireland to cover the cost of buying, transporting, planting and maintaining one tree for ten years as well as the administrative costs of the Tree Council of Ireland. Those who donate €60 or more will also receive a certificate to recognise their involvement with the project.



## CLIMATE CHANGE

- 46% of Africa's land is degraded, jeopardising the livelihoods of nearly 65% of the Continent's population.
- 20 million people are on the verge of starvation across the Sahel - drought is a major factor.
- 60 million people are people expected to leave degraded areas of Africa in the next 2 decades.
- By 2050 the Sahel's population is expected to rise from the current 100 million to 340 million - amplifying social risks.
- Temperatures in the Sahel are expected to rise between 3-5°C by the end of the century.

**The Great Green Wall has the potential to mitigate or even reverse these effects.**



**UNCCD**

### SUCCESS STORIES TO DATE

According to a report by the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) on the progress of the Great Green Wall in March 2018.

Ethiopia has restored 15 million hectares of land. Senegal has restored 4 million hectares and planted 12 million drought resistant trees. Niger has restored 5 million hectares of land, directly improving food security of 2.5 million people. Burkina Faso - 3 million hectares restored. Nigeria - 5 million hectares restored.

**Once complete, the Great Green Wall will stand as a true human wonder - a global symbol to inspire us all.**

# A TRANSITION YEAR EXPERIENCE IN SOUTH AFRICA

*Sean Walsh is a secondary school pupil in Co. Cork. An uncle, Fr Martin Walsh, is an SMA priest ministering in South Africa. As part of his Transition Year (2017-2018), Sean decided to spend some time with his uncle. The following is one part of an article he wrote for the African missionary magazine recoding some of his impressions of that visit. The second part will be published next year.*

Transition year was looming. We made

SMA Regional House in Bufflesfontein. After meeting the priests there and a short rest we had a further three-hour drive to Fr Martin's parish in Sesobe, in the North West Province, near the border with Botswana. Whilst it doesn't have dishwasher, Hoover etc. it is a comfortable home for Fr Martin.

One doesn't always measure distances by kilometres but by journey times. To



Parish church Sesobe

everyone in the Church, be it 10 or 250 people present. The singing continues until all have been greeted! I found this stressful because depending on whom I was shaking hands with, how old they were or their position in the hierarchy of the village, a certain type of handshake was required...and they were very quick to put me in my place if I got it wrong!

Imagine a Mass that lasted 90 minutes in Ireland... we complain if Mass goes beyond 30! Complaints too if the priest is late! In South Africa the people happily wait for Fr Martin if he is late. Time is not the most important issue for them.

On Sundays we're up at 6am to get to the first village for Mass. Some churches have few parishioners with one village, Dwarsberg, having a grand total of four! Martin celebrates Mass there in turn, encouraging more people to come to the church. Sometimes it is an hour's drive from one church to another. If Fr Martin spots somebody he hadn't seen at Mass the week before he'd pull in for a chat and encourage them to return to Mass. The first time I witnessed this I was shocked; it's not something a priest would dare do in Ireland. The man wasn't embarrassed or angry but was happy that Fr Martin had noticed his absence. With this encouragement they would most likely turn up at Mass the following week. This is one of the techniques that Fr Martin uses to get people back to the church. By doing this he increases the congregation from 60 people to 61 and



Sean (with hat) and Fr Martin Walsh SMA

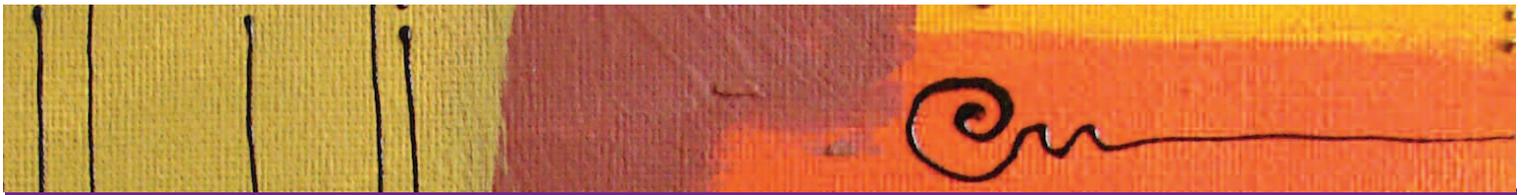
a family decision that I would work in my neighbour's cheese factory and would combine this with a trip to South Africa to visit my uncle, Fr. Martin Walsh, SMA, and see what he was doing out there. Martin suggested that I go for four to eight weeks so as to get the full South African experience! I decided to go for eight even though I had never been away from my family before.

I left Cork Airport on 1 March 2018 and, via Heathrow Airport and an eleven hour flight, arrived in Johannesburg, South Africa, two days later.

Fr Martin met me at the Airport and, after a two hour drive, we arrived at the

get from one end of Sesobe parish to the other takes two hours.

Sesobe parish has 10 outstation villages attached to it. Mass is celebrated every day in Sesobe. Mass, which lasts about 90 minutes with lots of singing and dancing, is celebrated in three outstations every Sunday. The whole church erupts into song and everyone dances along enthusiastically including Fr. Martin who does his own kind of a 'jig' at the altar. Dancing plays a big part in Church liturgies. People 'dance' to the Altar at Offertory and Communion times, with a two-step forward and one-step back dance. The Sign of Peace (just before receiving Holy Communion) is exchanged with



Sean Walsh and local transport

although it's slow, it is progress and eventually with perseverance Fr Martin hopes to gather more parishioners.

There was no electricity in the parish house when I arrived as thieves had come, cut through the wire fence and stolen the cable from Martin's house and other houses in the village. In South Africa the electricity company could easily take months to restore power. We wouldn't be happy with that in Ireland!

Thankfully our generator produces enough power to keep the fridge going which was essential as our food had to last us 3 weeks until the next visit to town for shopping, a four-hour drive away. The village people appreciate the work of Fr Martin. Most of the houses in Sesobe are made of tin. Tin walls and tin ceilings. Others are made of mud bricks which are made locally. Houses have bare floors, little furniture, no beds, no pictures. In size it might be equivalent to one large room in an Irish home. Cooking is done outside in black cauldrons like the ones used in Ireland years ago. Meat is very important to Africans. The women do the majority

of the cooking but it's the men who cook the meat as they are seen as more important. The men are the ones who butcher, cook and eat the choice cuts while the women work with what is left. Toilets are always outdoors in very small sheds, resembling portaloos, except they're made from tin or wood. The actual toilet is a hole in the ground

(similar to some toilets in Europe). When that hole is full, a second is dug elsewhere.

I met many lovely villagers. One, Kelebogile, gave me a live chicken. She made me feel very welcome. We planted tomato and pepper seeds when I arrived and when they were harvested I made sure to give her some.

Another woman, Ausie Pinkie, twice gave me a chicken which she had plucked and gutted. All we had to do was cook and eat it! Ausie is also one of the Church leaders in her village.

The village youths are a major focus of Fr Martin's plan to build up the church community (establishing youth groups and youth choirs). The De Brak village youth choir are beautiful natural singers; I could listen to them all day. They use an improvised drum (made from a bucket, a rubber sheet and bits of a pipe, wire and metal bottle caps). Just that drum and the choir, nothing fancy - no organ but the best singing I've ever heard.



Wet season road



Masebudule church, Sesobe parish. Made from local stone.

more girls in the junior classes than the senior ones. This is due to the high incidence of teen pregnancies. Very often as soon as a girl shows signs of pregnancy she will have to leave school. And after the birth she will have to stay at home to look after the baby. The same does not happen to the father of the child. This is an issue for many teenage girls. Once education stops their entire lives are seriously affected. Many will never be able to find a job due to the lack of a proper education.

There is a reliance on the elderly peoples' Government pension which does not sustain everyone in the extended family. It is extremely common for a family to consist of a single parent (mother) and several children. Sesobe has few job opportunities and so unemployment is high. Visiting the school was one of the most interesting experiences that I had on my trip for several reasons: it was a real eye opener as it made me realise how lucky I am to grow up in Ireland and have the benefit of a well-funded education system.

The younger children in the village were very friendly and it amazed me how happy they were without mobile phones, play stations and iPads that their Irish contemporaries would have to have!

(To be continued)

The Sesobe youths invited me to attend school with them. A bus came to collect them for school but it has to do many trips as there are several villages which it services. Some days the bus doesn't arrive. This seems to me to be a regular occurrence as the pupils were prepared to walk the 5kms to school and back. The day before I went to the school one of the students came to me at the house to tell me what to bring. That day was a 'reading day' when students would read aloud from different texts. She wasn't so sure I'd eat the school meal but I had no problem with it. There is no doubt that the apartheid regime of

the past inculcated a sense of inferiority in many of the people especially with regard to education and social standing. Hopefully, this will quickly disappear. At 7am I was waiting on the main road for our bus. At the start of the school Assembly I was brought up and introduced. I spent the day in one of the senior classes and the students were well able and attentive.

At lunch time, one boy, Olemaqan, brought me to the dining hall. It was rice, some canned fish and mashed squash. I thought it was grand, no complaints by me. There are many

## The souls of the virtuous are in the hands of God...

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

**Sr Joan Amor** (Chingford, England), served in Nigeria and Ireland, aged 91 years, on 2 June 2018.

**Fr Cornelius O'Leary** (Ballingeary, Co Cork), served in Nigeria, USA and Ireland, aged 88 years, on 26 August 2018.

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

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