



OLA
SISTERS

OLA NIGERIA – BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE
BEGINNINGS

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OLA Beginnings in Nigeria

The history of the OLA presence in Nigeria is interesting. The Congregation was officially founded in 1876 but the oldest OLA Convent and School in Nigeria predates that by 3 years as St Mary's, Broad Street, Lagos was opened in 1873. How is this possible?

It is well documented that Fr Augustine Plangue, SMA, OLA Founder and Co-Founder of the SMA Society had great difficulty in securing Sisters for the mission in West Africa. From 1868, a group of Franciscan Sisters of Couzon, near Lyons in France collaborated with the SMA Fathers and opened a Convent in Dahomey. It was this same Congregation who opened in Lagos in 1873. But with the great needs the Missionaries were encountering, and the high death rate among the Missionaries, it was impossible for the Franciscan Sisters to sustain this collaboration with SMA. For the persistent Fr Planque, the advice was 'if you need Sisters, then make them!'. And so he founded the new OLA Congregation in 1876.

Of the 19 young women who volunteered for this new adventure, six were members of the Franciscans of Couzon who had already experienced life in West Africa, six others were from that same Congregation who were working in France and seven other young French and Irish women.

Important dates in Nigerian OLA history

1873 – St. Mary's Convent opened by the Franciscan Sisters of the Propagation of the Faith (Couzon)

1877 –The first OLA Sister - Sr Dominique O,Riordan (Ireland) arrives in Lagos in November and joins St Mary's Community.

1878 - Sr Felicite Kirwan (Ireland) joined Sr Dominique at St. Mary's Lagos. Both Sisters taught in the School started by their predecessors, the Franciscans in 1873. Sr Dominique is recorded as the first to have taught through the medium of English Language in the School. In May 1878, Sr Dominique died at the age of 30 while five months later in October 1878, Sr Felicite also died aged 29. Both Sisters are buried in Ikoyi Cemetery, Lagos.

St. Mary's Convent Broad Street

St. Mary's Convent, Broad Street was the first OLA Convent in Nigeria. It was opened in 1873 by the French Franciscan Sisters who assisted Fr Planque in the early years.

St. Mary's saw many young OLA Sisters come and also saw many of these young Sisters die at a tender age after a very short time in Lagos. Why? The country was very unhealthy for these Europeans unused to such tropical climates. As one Sister wrote about those early years, "The country was very unhealthy. Besides, we did not know how to look after ourselves; fathers and sisters fell ill so often and died so quickly, after one month, five months, six months, a year" (Sr Veronique).

Despite this high mortality rate, St Mary's Convent witnessed youthful, selfless and self-giving OLA missionaries who came to share their lives with African women in areas of evangelisation, education

and healthcare. In Lagos, Sisters visited homes, cared for the sick, the aged and the dying, for poor, abandoned and orphaned babies as well as running their first school in Nigeria.

In Lagos, the Sisters came in contact with the freed repatriated slaves from Brazil. These freed slaves were Catholics and they formed the first Catholic community in Lagos.

More Dates

1886 – Abeokuta OLA Convent was established. From St Mary's Convent, Broad Street, Lagos, the first OLA foundation outside Lagos was started by Sr Veronique and two other Sisters. They went by canoe through the Ogun river to Abeokuta. In that same year, Sr Veronique established a dispensary which later became the Sacred Heart Hospital, built by Fr Coquard in 1895. Later the Sisters started a boarding school for girls and a centre for informal education, training and Christian formation.

In the same year, 1886, the OLA Sisters sailed to Lokoja into the hinterland and opened a convent there – the SMA's having opened a mission there in 1884. In Lokoja, the ruling Muslim Lords were very hostile to the Missionaries and were totally opposed to the Sisters efforts to plant the Christian faith among the women. Despite this hostility and opposition, the Sisters carried out their usual works of providing care for the poorest and most abandoned and rescued some girls from slavery. Due to the difficult climatic conditions, tropical diseases and the opposition of the locals to the Sisters presence, the Sisters withdrew from Lokoja in 1891. Three Sisters died during the short time in Lokoja and a fourth returned home due to ill health.

1888 – Asaba. The OLA Sisters came to Asaba from Lagos. A remarkable feature of this move at the time was the welcome afforded to the Sisters by the local people in Asaba. The people were very friendly and accepted the Christian Faith wholeheartedly.

Here in Asaba, the Sisters established a boarding School for girls and also established a centre for informal education where adult education, home management, needlework, cookery and child-care were taught. The Sisters also visited the homes and provided a home-based health care service. In 1939 a maternity clinic was established which later became St Joseph's Hospital. A home for the aged was opened also in later years.

1892 – Topo Island

From St Mary's in Lagos, the Sisters moved to Topo Island where the SMA had established a large farm in 1884. The Sisters were to care for the women and girls in the Topo settlement. According to one of the early Sisters, "Many of the Topo girls were orphans and the Convent Boarding School was the only home they ever knew". The education of these girls was very practical – cookery, needlework and child-care – as well as basic Christian formation, indeed preparing them for their role as mothers in strong Christian families. Topo was a difficult place for the Sisters and the climate was very challenging. In spite of this the OLA Mission here continued until 1960. During the lifespan of Topo mission, nine Sisters had died and were buried there.

1896 – Oyo Convent

The SMA opened a mission in Oyo and since one of the reasons for the OLA Foundation was to collaborate with the SMA in their Mission of Evangelization, the OLA's opened their Convent in Oyo in 1896. However this was a very short mission experience for the OLA's as the local elders were totally opposed to female education at that time. In spite of the serious opposition, the Sisters persisted and founded a School. However, the response was extremely slow.

Together with their attempt to provide an education ministry, the Sisters also cared for orphaned and abandoned babies and visited the sick and elderly in their homes. Oyo proved to be a very difficult mission in every respect with the climate also particularly harsh. Five Sisters between the ages of 23 and 34 years died and were buried there. The Convent was eventually closed in 1912, just sixteen years after opening and the Sisters moved on to a new mission in Ibadan.

1898 Itolo. Lagos got its second girls school when a girls day school was started by Mother Samuel Kelly.

1908 Itolo. The existing Girls Day School was developed into Mount Carmel boarding and Day School.

1918 Ebute-Meta A new Mount Carmel School was built in Ebute Meta

1928 First OLA Teacher Training College First Catholic Women's Teacher Training College in Nigeria is opened when Mount Carmel Secondary evolves into the new ST. Agnes's Teacher Training College.

1928 Warri OLA Sisters went from Asaba to Warri in Niger Delta Region. A girls boarding school was started, not only to admit new students but also to provide a place for the many girls who had received admission to the boys schools.

1930 By 1930, the OLA's had established eleven Primary Boarding Schools and one Teacher Training College in Nigeria

1939 Establishment of Health Facilities Begins Apart from the Dispensary established in Abeokuta in 1886, it was difficult for OLA to establish formal health facilities. It was 1939 before they were in a position to officially open their first Health care facility which they did in Asaba when they opened the Maternity Clinic which is now St. Joseph's Hospital.

1939 Mission to the North First OLA's Cross the Niger and take the train to Northern Nigeria where they establish a Convent in Kaduna.

Development of Teacher Training Colleges

To meet the demands for teachers to teach in the established mission primary schools, it was imperative to train teachers to teach in these schools. The first women's Teacher Training College was developed from Mount Carmel Boarding School at Ebute-Meta in 1928. In 1933 it was moved to

Yaba as St. Agnes's Teachers Training College. It trained Catholic Female Teachers for Catholic Schools .

Table of Teachers Training Colleges

Dates	Name of Institution	Location
1928	Mount Carmel TTC(Women)	Ebute-Meta, Lagos
1944	Sacred Heart TTC (Women)	Ubiaja
1948	OLA Teacher Training College (Women)	Kaduna
1954	Maryfield TTC (Women)	Ughelli
1957	OLA TTC (Women)	Ibadan
1958	OLA TTC (Women)	Akwanga

Development of Secondary Schools

The first OLA Secondary School for Girls was St. Teresa's College which started in 1932. It began in the Compound of St Mary's in Broad Street, Lagos. In 1946, it was transferred to Oke Ado in Ibadan. St Teresa's College was to cater for the girls in the Southern part of Nigeria while in 1942, a similar secondary school, Queen of Apostles' College, was established in Kakuri-Kaduna to cater for the secondary education of girls in Northern Nigeria. The following table outlines the establishment of various Secondary Schools from that date, established for the evangelization, education and empowerment of women throughout Nigeria.

Table of Secondary Schools

Dates	Institution	Location
1932	St. Teresa's College	Ibadan
1942	Queen of Apostles College	Kakuri,Kaduna
1954	Marymount College	Agbor
1954	OLA Secondary School,	Yaba, Lagos
1954	OLA Secondary School,	Ijebu-Ode
1955	Queen of Apostles Secondary School	Ibadan
1957	Marywood Secondary Commercial School	Apapa, Lagos
1957	Mary Way Secondary Commercial	Ibadan
1962	St Maria Goretti Secondary School	Benin-City
1965	St Teresa's Girls Secondary	Ughelli
1965	St Mary's Girls Secondary	Iwo
1966	OLA Girls High School	Effurun
1967	St Brigid's Secondary School	Asaba
1969	Maryland Comprehensive School	Ikeja, Lagos

Development of OLA Health Care in Nigeria

As early as 1886, Sr Veronique and two Sisters cared for orphans, abandoned babies, the sick and infirm at Abeokuta. This health apostolate was carried out primarily by home visitation. To respond to growing needs, in this same year of 1886, the Sisters established the first Dispensary which later grew to become the Sacred Heart Hospital, Abeokuta, still managed to this day by OLA Sisters.

Because of the restrictions (from Rome) on Sisters training for medical work, the early days for Sisters working in the medical apostolate were done with very little formal training. However when the restrictions were relaxed in the 1930's many Sisters began to be trained as Nurses and Midwives with some few Doctors also. This made it possible for the foundation of many Health Care Centres with an emphasis on Primary Health Care and Maternity and Child Health Care.

Thus from 1939, the OLA Sisters started establishing Health Care centres while also including some secondary health care facilities, hospitals and Schools of Nursing, Midwifery and a School of Medical Laboratory Technology.

Health Care Professionals trained in these facilities were assets in staffing not only mission hospitals but in many private and government owned health care facilities and hospitals. The table below shows the development of Health care centres, Hospitals and maternity clinics established by OLA Sisters, in their attempt to address the health needs of the people of Nigeria.

Table of Development of OLA Health Care in Nigeria

Date	Name of Institution	Location
1886	Dispensary	Abeokuta
1898	Sacred Heart Hospital	Abeokuta
1939	Maternity Clinic(now St Joseph's Hospital)	Asaba
1943	St Philomena's Maternity Hospital	Benin-City
1943	OLA Hospital	Jos
1951	OLA Hospital	Zawan
1956	OLA Hospital	Ibadan
1956	St Gerard's Hospital	Kakuri, Kaduna
1958	St Mary's Hospital	Ogwashi-Uku
1958	OLA Orphanage	Zawan
1958	OLA Hospital	Akwanga
1962	Maternity Hospitals & 5 outreaches	Agbor
1972	St Brendan's Hospital	Bacita
1973	OLA Hospital	Ikire
1977	St John of God Dispensary & PHC	Papiri
2000	OLA Comprehensive Health Care Centre	Kwimu
2002	OLA Comprehensive Health Care Centre	Tafawa Balewa, Bauchi

