

Biographical Profile of Archbishop Charles Heerey, CSSp., First Archbishop of Onitsha and Founder of the Religious Institute of the Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, Mother of Christ.

Archbishop Heerey CSSp was born on the 29th November 1890 in the village of Clonkeefy, County Cavan, in the diocese of Kilmore in Ireland. Born into a fervent Irish Catholic family, his parents, Patrick and Rose Anne Heerey baptized their little baby boy, Charles, a day after his birth, at St. Mary's Catholic Church, Castlerahan. It was in this parish Church that the boy Charles received his first Holy Communion and joined his colleagues to serve mass as altar server, while he was growing up. He did his primary school at Garry Ross National School and St. Mary's National School, all within proximity of St. Mary's Catholic Church, Castlerahan. He received his secondary education in the prestigious Blackrock College, Dublin. He entered the Novitiate of the Holy Ghost Fathers in November 1911, followed by the Senior Seminary Training from 1912-1921. At the end of his studies for priesthood, he was ordained priest on 24th September 1921 and was commissioned for mission in Nigeria on 29th June 1922. He sailed for Nigeria in November 1922.

On 23rd December 1922, Rev. Fr. Charles Heerey took up his first assignment as a missionary priest in Sacred Heart Catholic Mission, Calabar in Eastern Nigeria. As a young curate, he was assigned, with Rev. Fr. Tom Ronayne, to take charge of the Efik Christian community. He engaged himself diligently in the pastoral work. He took his turn to trek long distances through forests and hills and spent several weeks among the rural people of Ekoi district of Calabar administering the sacraments and supervising the education of children. He was moved with compassion towards the sick, especially the lepers. On one occasion, he was overjoyed to have administered the sacrament of baptism to a deteriorated and abandoned leper and catechumen, who died shortly after the incident. This marked the beginning of his ever burning zeal to bring Christ-like compassion to alleviate the suffering of the sick through the development of Catholic medical and health care services.

In December 1924, Fr. Charles Heerey was appointed the Rector of St. Pauls' Junior and Senior Seminary at Igbariam in Onitsha Province. He was the Rector and the sole teacher with one of the Senior Seminarians, John Anyogu, to assist him in teaching the junior seminarians. He quickly organized the young seminary, founded barely six months before his appointment as the second Rector. He drew up the programme and the time-table of study. He expressed his joys and hopes to have found himself training the future priests of Nigeria in the following terms:

With the help of my seminarians I had hoped to make that town (Igbariam) Christian and so I was happy to spend the rest of my life teaching the science of sciences to future priests of Nigeria and through them to bring God's message to the greatest possible number.

Fr. Charles Heerey was chosen and consecrated Co-adjutor Bishop of the Vicariate of Southern Nigeria on 29th May 1927. He was equally appointed the Religious Superior of the Holy Ghost Fathers in the Vicariate of Southern Nigeria. With zeal and devotion, he tirelessly travelled the vast territory of the Vicariate of Southern Nigeria on motorbike and canoe to administer the sacrament of confirmation and to perform other essential pastoral duties. He carried out regular and periodic canonical visitation of the communities of his confreres, encouraging members to live lives worthy of their vocation and assuring their spiritual and material well-being. When he was appointed the Director of Education and member of the Government Education Board, he worked closely with the Colonial government to ensure Catholic interest in Education. As Co-adjutor, Bishop Heerey lived and worked in close collaboration with Bishop Shanahan, his predecessor, for three years during which the latter made the following observations about him:

Dr. Heerey is getting along very well. He will be an excellent chief Shepherd whenever it pleases God to call me away. In this, there is for me a great consolation. He is a man of sterling spiritual value, that's everything (Shanahan to Fr. Edward Leen, 25th August, 1928).

Archbishop Charles Heerey served as the Bishop of the Vicariate of Southern Nigeria from 1931 to 1934; then as Bishop of the Vicariate of Onitsha-Owerri from 1934 to 1948; continued as Bishop of Vicariate of Onitsha from 1948 to 1950 and became the first Archbishop of Onitsha

and Metropolitan of Eastern Nigeria from 1950 till his death in 1967. During those long years of tending the flock of God in the Southeast Nigeria, Archbishop Heerey was undauntedly focused in advancing the kingdom of God by his actions, his teaching and by the example of his life. He was very sensitive to human suffering and did whatever was within his power to alleviate it with Christlike compassion. He had great passion for the sick and had a soft heart particularly for lepers.