A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN SIERRA LEONE

The history of the Catholic Church in Sierra Leone can be traced back to 1510 A.D. when the first Portuguese missionaries arrived. They belonged to the missionary society known as the “Order of Christ” which was sponsored by Prince Henry the Navigator. Later in 1532, Rome created the diocese of Santiago, Cape Verde and Upper Guinea, to which Sierra Leone and The Gambia belonged.

The members of the congregation of the “Order of Christ” played a historic role as they spearheaded the first phase of missionary activity in Sierra Leone. This phase was succeeded by the members of the Society of Jesus who also took the challenge of spreading the Good News in Sierra Leone. Their apostolate lasted from 1604 to 1720. They were led by Fr. Balthasar Barreira, a Spanish Jesuit. He baptised a number of Sierra Leonean chiefs or “kings” as they were called by then. Among them was Bai Farma II, king of the Temnes; and also king Torra and king Sesee, of the Sherbros. Fr. Barreira died in 1612 and was succeeded by Fr. Manuel Alvarez, who continued to work until 1617. He died in Lisbon in 1619. The last remaining Jesuit was an African by the name of Joseph. He lived on Mount Aureol and was credited with the establishment of a settlement in Kissy village where he preached the Gospel until his death in 1720.

The Spanish Capuchins arrived in 1617 to work alongside the Jesuits. The two Capuchins, Fr. Antonio and Fr. Seraphim lived on Tombo Island, where they built the St. Anthony’s church. They lived in Sierra Leone for twelve years. After the departure of the Capuchins, missionary activities came to a standstill for almost two hundred years. In the interim, about 1,200 former American slaves of African decent, who had fought on the British side in the American war of independence, arrived in Sierra Leone from Nova Scotia in Canada, first in 1787, and then in 1792. They had become Christians while in North America and brought their version of Christianity with them back to Africa. The “Nova Scotians”, as they became known, were later joined by the “Maroons” and then the “Recaptives”.

In 1808, Sierra Leone was declared a British Crown Colony, and Britain started sending governors and other colonial administrators. It was one of such governors, Charles McCarthy, a Catholic, who in 1823, brought in Reverend Mother Anne-Marie Javouhey, founder of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Cluny. She was the administrator of Connaught Hospital and resided at Leicester village. She became a victim of malaria and returned home.

However, by the 1850s there was a resurgence of missionary activities as a result of the appointment of the first Catholic bishop of Sierra Leone, since Sierra Leone was now a recognised ecclesiastical province. Bishop Marion de Bresillac, founder of the Society of African Missions (SMA) arrived in Freetown on May 16, 1859, with two of his companions. There were already three more SMA priests in the country when Bishop Bresillac arrived. Their stay was short-lived, as the bishop and four of his confreres died as a result of malaria. They were buried at the Circular Road cemetery. Bishop Bresillac’s body was later exhumed in 1927 and taken to France for reburial.

There was no missionary activity for over five years until the arrival of Fr. Edward Blanchet of the Holy Ghost Congregation in 1864. He was joined by Fr. Joseph Koeberle and together they transformed part of Freetown into a Catholic community. Fr. Blanchet built St. Edward primary school at Howe Street, the church of the Immaculate Conception in Murray Town, and the Sacred Heart of Jesus Cathedral on Howe Street.

In 1866, he witnessed the arrival of the St. Joseph of Cluny Sisters. He also witnessed the opening of the St. Patrick’s Mission on Bonthe Island in 1890. He retired in 1892 and died in 1896 in Senegal.

Fr Blanchet was succeeded by Fr. Brown, who arrived in 1893. During Fr. Brown’s tenure as Vicar Apostolic, the interior of Sierra Leone was declared a British Protectorate in 1896. He was also present when the Hut-tax war was fought between the British and the natives. Fr. Brown established St. Anthony’s Parish in 1900. He also opened St. Joseph’s Mission, Mobe in 1902. In the same year he opened St. Columba’s Church and built the Fathers’ house in Moyamba. He became ill on April 7, 1903 and died on April 22, of that same year.

Fr. Brown was succeeded by Bishop John O’Gorman, who was an Irish academic. He arrived in Freetown in 1904, and immediately signed an agreement with King George Cummings, the Mende tribal Headman in Freetown, for the purchase of land to construct St. Anthony’s Church at Brookfields. The Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament in Cornwell Heights in Pennsylvania helped to finance the purchase of the land.
It was also during Bishop O’Gorman’s time that the Missions at Serabu, Blama, Gerihun and Pujehun were opened. The Roman Catholic Primary school in Bo (now St. Francis Primary School), and the Immaculate Conception Church in Waterloo were also built by Bishop O’Gorman. He opened the St. Edward’s Secondary School in Freetown in 1922, and Fr. O’Connor (C.S.Sp.) was its first principal. Bishop O’Gorman died in Switzerland in 1935. He was succeeded by Bishop Bartholomew Wilson.

Bishop Wilson was also an Irish man. He arrived in Freetown in 1933. He opened Catholic Missions at Ngelehun (1934), Njala Komboya (1935) and Lunsar. He built the Bishop’s House at Brookfields. His stay in Sierra Leone was very short due to ill-health. He resigned in 1936 and died in 1938. He was succeeded by Bishop Ambrose Kelly C.S.Sp. Bishop Kelly was born in England. He first worked in St. Edward’s Secondary School and later served in Moyamba, Blama, and Bonthe parishes. It was during his time as bishop that the first Sierra Leonean Religious priest, Fr. Edward Hamelburg, returned home.

Bishop Kelly’s tenure also witnessed the holy pilgrimage to Rome. About one hundred West Africans, including the late father of Archbishop emeritus, Mr. J. T. Ganda, participated. Pope Pius XII was so impressed that he created the Diocese of Freetown and Bo, with Bishop Kelly as its first bishop. (Before then, Sierra Leone was just a Vicariate).

Bishop Kelly opened the Catholic Teachers Training College in Bo, (now merged with the Bo Teachers College, which is also now affiliated with Njala University, Sierra Leone) and the General and Maternity Clinic in Serabu, now known as the Serabu Community Hospital. He also constructed the Priests’ house in Bo (St. Francis Mission House).

In 1948, the Holy Rosary Sisters arrived, and in 1949, Bishop Kelly built a new school and church in Njala Komboya. He also extended the Catholic Mission to Makeni in the Northern Province and Pendembu in the Eastern Province.

Bishop Kelly developed problems with his health in 1951 and died on February 12, 1952. He was buried in the Kissy Road cemetery. His remains were later exhumed in 1987 and re-buried in the Sacred Heart Cathedral.

Bishop Thomas Brosnahan succeeded Bishop Kelly. Bishop Brosnahan was an Irish man and belonged to the Holy Ghost Congregation. He had first worked in Eastern Nigeria for twenty years before he was appointed bishop of Freetown and Bo. He arrived in Freetown in 1953. He ordained the first diocesan priest, Joseph Ganda in the Immaculate Heart Church in Bo on April 9, 1961.

Bishop Brosnahan became the first Archbishop of the Archdiocese of Freetown and Bo in 1971 and held the post until his retirement in 1980. He contributed immensely to the development of Catholic education in Sierra Leone. He founded Christ the King College in Bo in 1953. He also built Santanno House, the Archdiocesan Secretariat, on Howe Street in 1975. He retired in 1980 and was succeeded by Joseph Ganda, the first diocesan priest and the first bishop of the Diocese of Kenema.

Archbishop Joseph Ganda also contributed immensely to the development of the Catholic Church in Sierra Leone. He built the St. Paul’s Cathedral in Kenema together with the priests’ house in that parish. He founded several parishes and schools in that diocese. As archbishop of Freetown and Bo, he made giant strides in liturgical inculturation and indigenisation. He encouraged the vocation of native Sierra Leonian young men and women to the priesthood and the religious life. During his tenure, he ordained over forty-five Sierra Leonian men to the Priesthood. He also founded a local congregation of Sisters, “Sisters of Our Lady of the Visitation” (OLV) in the mid 1980s. This Congregation can today boast of about eleven professed Sisters.

In Freetown, the Archbishop built the Archbishop’s House at Thunder Hill, Kissy, where he resided for many years. He also established several new parishes in Freetown and in Bo, among them, St. Peter the Rock, Calaba Town, Holy Cross Parish, Kissy, Our Lady, Star of the Sea, Juba; St. Augustine’s, Dwarzak; St. George’s Murray Town and St. Charles Lwanga in Bo. One of his final major achievements was the establishment of the St. Paul’s Major Seminary in Regent, Freetown. He retired in March 2007, and he was succeeded by Archbishop Edward Tamba Charles, on May 14, 2008. Most Rev. Edward Tamba Charles is a man of great potential, there is no doubt that he will continue to build on what he has inherited.

The second diocese in Sierra Leone is the Diocese of Makeni. This Diocese was established by the Xaverian Missionaries who arrived in Sierra Leone in 1950. They were led by Monsignor Augustus Azzolini who later became the first bishop of the Diocese Makeni in 1962. Bishop Azzolini contributed to the development of
education in the Diocese Makeni and in the entire Northern Province. He established the St. Augustine’s Teachers’ College in Makeni, which is now known as The Northern Polytechnic. He also built the Our Lady of Fatima Cathedral and established the St. Francis Xavier Parish in Makeni.

He was succeeded by Bishop George Biguzzi. Bishop Biguzzi is well known for the Africanisation of the Church in the North. During his tenure he ordained many diocesan priests, many of whose capacity he also helped build by sending them for further studies. He has founded many parishes and schools; and recently, a new hospital, Holy Spirit Hospital, has been established. Under his administration the Fatima Institute was established, which has been upgraded to university status, now known as University of Makeni.

Bishop Biguzzi has many Religious Congregations working in his diocese, among them are the St. John of God Brothers who are running the Catholic Hospital in Lunsar; the Josephite Fathers, who are taking care of the technical and vocational education in his diocese; the Augustinian Recollect Fathers and Sisters; The Salesians of Don Bosco; Missionaries of Charity; Missionaries of Mary Immaculate, etc.

The third diocese is the Diocese of Kenema. It was established in 1970 as another Suffragan See of the ecclesiastical province of Freetown and Bo. Its first bishop was Archbishop emeritus Joseph Ganda. He was succeeded by Bishop John O’Riordan, C.S.Sp in 1984. Bishop O’Riordan ordained over twelve native priests. He retired in 2001 and was succeeded by Bishop Patrick Daniel Koroma in 2002.

Bishop Patrick Daniel Koroma has also ordained many diocesan priests and has contributed immensely to the rehabilitation and refurbishment of diocesan structures that were destroyed during the Sierra Leone civil war that lasted from 1991 to 2002.

In January 2011, the new Diocese of Bo was carved out of the then Archdiocese of Freetown and Bo; Most Rev. Charles A. M. Campbell was appointed Bishop of Bo. The Catholic Diocese of Bo is now the totality of the territory of the Southern Province of Sierra Leone, while the territory of the Archdiocese of Freetown is now the totality of the territory of the Western Area.